

3 Cranmer and the Protestant revolution

How significant was Cranmer's role in promoting the Reformation?

The accession of Edward VI, who had been educated as a Protestant, convinced English reformers that there would be a swing towards more Lutheran, and possibly Calvinist, doctrines. Somerset's appointment as Lord Protector in 1547 established the reform party firmly in power, and the man to whom the reformers turned to guide the Church towards the Protestant faith was Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.

Thomas Cranmer

Thomas Cranmer was the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury. He was consecrated on 30 March 1533 and had been in this post for nearly fourteen years when Edward VI succeeded to the throne. During the time Cranmer served Henry VIII he was widely believed to be either a Lutheran or a Lutheran sympathiser. Although his views fluctuated over the period as the influences on him changed, it is clear that he was always more of a Protestant than the king would have liked.

Nevertheless, he served Henry with utmost loyalty which was reciprocated by the king, who trusted him implicitly. It is said that when he was appointed Henry's chaplain in 1531 he took a private oath not to let any other oath come between him and his duty to his king.

Cranmer distinguished between his personal faith (which he openly declared to the king) and the policies he was helping to implement. Thus, he was prepared to pass judgements of heresy (leading to death by burning) on individuals whose beliefs were no different from his own when the king instructed him so to do. This apparent inconsistency in his behaviour led to his being charged with hypocrisy. Indeed, history has not been kind to the founder of the Protestant revolution since he has been variously described as a timid time-server and a coward. However, recent research by Diarmaid MacCulloch has served to revise our opinion of a man whom he describes as a 'hesitant hero with a tangled life story' who deserves to be remembered as the 'architect of

the Anglican Book of Common Prayer'. Indeed, it may be argued that whereas Cranmer's influence on the Henrician Reformation was minimal in comparison to that of Cromwell and Henry, his impact on the Edwardian Reformation was considerable.

Shaping future Reformation 1540–53

After Cromwell's execution, Cranmer emerged as one of the leading reform-minded councillors. With the king's support, Cranmer survived plots to oust him and was allowed to promote his own **English Litany** and *King's Prymer*. The death of Henry VIII and the succession of Edward VI and elevation to power of Somerset had a profound effect on Cranmer. He was by inclination a reformer but only within the parameters which the king laid down. Freed from the restraints put on him by the late king, Cranmer was able to explore, review and revise his personal religious convictions. According to his own testimony it was not until 1548 that he finally completed his conversion to Protestantism by abandoning the traditional doctrine of transubstantiation.

Infused with the spirit of reform, Cranmer issued his *Book of Homilies*, a set of official model sermons, followed by his English prayer book. Issued in March 1549, Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* has been described as his greatest achievement, but it was too conservative for the progressives and too radical for the conservatives – it even provoked the Western Rebellion. This was a rebellion of commoners and some landowners in Cornwall and Devon who were protesting about the religious changes. Undaunted, Cranmer set to work on a more radical edition of his prayer book which he issued in 1552. The second *Book of Common Prayer* was explicitly anti-Catholic and was adapted and adopted by the Elizabethan regime to become the standard work available to an increasingly Protestant clergy.

Swing towards Protestantism

Somerset was a moderate Protestant, but although he was devout, he had no real interest in theology. He was religiously tolerant and favoured a cautious approach towards reform. Although he is reputed to have had Calvinist leanings, and, certainly, exchanged letters with John

Calvin (see page 137), there is little evidence of such influences when he was in power. The progressives, Cranmer prominent among them, were in the majority in the Privy Council. However, among the bishops, there was no agreement. Although the majority of them fully supported the royal supremacy and the separation from Rome, they remained hopelessly divided on the issue of religious reform. For example, of the 27 leading clerics in the Church:

- Nine bishops, led by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of Rochester, supported reform (the progressives).
- Ten bishops, led by Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, and Edmund Bonner, Bishop of London, opposed reform (the conservatives).
- Eight bishops were undecided on doctrinal issues.

With such an even balance of opinion among the bishops, Somerset and the Privy Council moved very cautiously on matters of religious reform. In these circumstances the Privy Council decided to review the state of the Church of England, and to introduce some moderate Protestant reforms. Such a policy was opposed by the conservatives, prompted by Gardiner, who maintained that under the terms of Henry VIII's will, no religious changes could be made until Edward VI came of age. In spite of Gardiner's vigorous opposition, royal commissioners were sent to visit all the bishoprics. They were instructed to compile a report on the state of the clergy and the doctrines and practices to be found in every diocese. To help the spread of Protestant ideas, every parish was ordered to obtain a copy of Cranmer's *Book of Homilies* and *Paraphrases* by Erasmus.

An injunction was issued to the bishops ordering them to instruct their clergy to conduct services in English, provide an English Bible for each parish and preach a sermon every Sunday. Finally, the bishops were told to remove all superstitious statues and images from their churches.

Pressure from Protestant radicals

These modest moves towards religious reform did not satisfy the more vocal Protestant activists. The amount of anti-Catholic protest was increased by the presence of Protestant exiles who had returned from

the Continent after the death of Henry VIII. The problem for the Privy Council was that, while it did not wish to introduce reforms too quickly for fear of provoking a Catholic reaction, it was anxious not to prevent religious debate by taking repressive measures. As a result, the Henrician treason, heresy and censorship laws were not enforced and a vigorous debate over religion developed.

The more radical reformers launched a strong attack through a pamphlet campaign on both the Catholic Church and the bishops, who were accused of being self-seeking royal servants and not true pastors. Other pamphlets attacked the wealth of the Church, superstitious rituals and, in particular, the **Eucharist**. However, there was no agreement among the protesters about the form of Protestant doctrine that should be adopted. With the government refusing to take any firm lead there was growing frustration.

In London, East Anglia, Essex and Lincolnshire, where large numbers of Protestant refugees from the Continent were settling, riots broke out. These frequently included outbreaks of iconoclasm, in which stained glass windows, statues and other superstitious images were destroyed. In some cases gold and silver candlesticks and other church plate were seized and sold, with the money being donated to the poor. Although the Privy Council was alarmed by the violence, it refused to take any action against the demonstrators. This inaction enraged the more conservative bishops such as Bishop Bonner, who was so strong in his opposition to the government that he was imprisoned for two months.

SOURCE E

? Study Source E. What impact might this destruction have had on the religious experience of the people?

The following extracts relate to the news and the events of 1547–52. Adapted from J.G. Nichols, editor, *Chronicle of the Grey Friars of London, Camden Society, 1852.*

5 September 1547: The king's visitation of St. Paul's where all the images

were pulled down. At this same time was pulled up all the tombs, great stones, all the altars, with the stalls and walls of the choir and altars in the church that was the Grey Friars.

1548: In this year all the chantries were put down.

25 October 1552: saw the plucking down of all the altars and chapels in St. Paul's church with all the tombs, at the commandment of the Bishop, Nicholas Ridley, and all the goodly stonework that stood behind the high altar and so it was all made plain as it appears.

First steps towards reform and introducing Protestant doctrine

When Parliament and Convocation were summoned in November 1547, both assemblies were broadly in favour of reform. Yet the Privy Council was still reluctant to make any decisive move towards religious reform. The reason for this was that the new regime still felt insecure, fearing that any major changes to doctrine might provoke even more unrest and possibly lead to the fall of the government.

The two major pieces of legislation, the Chantries Act and the Treason Act, did little to resolve the doctrinal uncertainties:

- The Chantries Act (see pages [137–8](#)). By closing the chantries, this Act not only confirmed legislation already passed in 1545 but went further in its confiscation of wealth and property. Although, as in 1545, the main purpose of the Act was to raise money to continue the war with France and Scotland, the reason given was that the chantries were centres of superstition.
- The Treason Act. This Act effectively repealed the Henrician treason, heresy and censorship laws. This measure served to increase the freedom with which the Protestant activists could discuss and demand radical doctrinal reforms. The immediate result was a renewed spate of pamphlets demanding that the Bible should be recognised as the only true authority for religious belief. At the same time English translations of the writings of Luther and Calvin were being widely circulated.

In January 1548 the Privy Council issued a series of proclamations to try

to calm the situation. However, the proclamations indicated no clear policy, and so only added to the confusion. Justices of the Peace and churchwardens were ordered to enforce the existing doctrines of the Church of England, including transubstantiation. On the other hand, instructions were issued to speed up the removal of Catholic images from churches. Such indecision infuriated both reformers and conservatives alike. Finally, in September, the Council forbade all public preaching in the hope of stifling debate.

Act of Uniformity and the first *Book of Common Prayer*

When Parliament reassembled in November 1548, Somerset and the Council felt secure enough to take a more positive approach to religious reform. Their objective was to end the uncertainty over religious doctrine. It was hoped that the new law, known as the First Edwardian Act of Uniformity, passed in January 1549, would achieve this.

The Act officially ordered all the clergy of England and Wales to adopt Protestant practices in their daily worship:

- Holy communion (the mass), matins and evensong were to be conducted in English.
- The sacraments were now defined as communion, baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial.
- New prayers were added to the old communion service so that the clergy and the laity could take both the sacramental bread and the wine. Clerical marriage was made lawful.
- The worship of saints, although not banned, was to be discouraged, while the removal of statues, paintings and other images was encouraged.
- The practice of singing masses for the souls of the dead was no longer approved.

Many of the traditional Catholic rituals, which the Protestant reformers considered to be superstitious, disappeared. However, no change was made to the doctrine of the Eucharist, which was still defined in the Catholic terms of transubstantiation. This was a fundamental point that angered many of the more radical reformers, who continued to urge the government to adopt a more Protestant definition of the sacrament of

communion.

The Privy Council hoped that these cautious measures would satisfy the majority of moderate reformers, without outraging the Catholic conservatives. Bishops were instructed to carry out visitations to encourage the adoption of the new services, and to test whether parishioners could recite the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English. The effectiveness of the reform legislation depended on whether the bishops and ruling elites would enforce them. There was opposition in Cornwall, Devon, Dorset and Yorkshire. However, most of the country seems to have followed the lead of the aristocracy and gentry in accepting moderate Protestantism.

A further swing of the pendulum towards radical Protestantism

When Northumberland gained power in 1549–50 religious reform became more radical. The conservatives were driven out of office and Gardiner, the most able of the pro-Catholics, along with Bishop Bonner of London, was imprisoned in the Tower of London. At the same time active reformers were appointed as bishops of Rochester, Chichester, Norwich, Exeter and Durham. These changes cleared the way for more sweeping religious reforms.

It is perhaps ironic that in view of Northumberland's reconversion to Catholicism before his execution in 1553, many historians do not think it likely that Northumberland was a genuine religious reformer. Other historians feel that his support for such a Protestant enthusiast as **John Hooper** against Cranmer and Nicholas Ridley, the newly appointed Bishop of London, in the doctrinal dispute during the autumn of 1550 does show that he was interested in religious reform. Whatever the truth of the matter, there is no doubt that under Northumberland there was a move to introduce more radical Protestantism.

KEY FIGURE

John Hooper (1495–1555)

A radical Protestant priest. His radicalism made him enemies at the court of Henry VIII so he fled to the Continent. During the reign of

Edward VI he returned to England and was promoted to the bishopric of Gloucester. He served as chaplain to both Somerset and Northumberland, whose patronage enabled him to promote his radical religious policies. Executed during the reign of Mary.

The first signs of this radical shift in thinking came in London, where Bishop Ridley ordered all altars to be removed and replaced by communion tables in line with the teachings of the Calvinists. In other dioceses the destruction of altars proceeded unevenly, and depended on the attitudes of the local ruling elites and clergy. At the same time, the parliamentary commission's proposals to change the form of the ordination of priests were introduced, and instructions were issued to enforce the first Act of Uniformity.

The new form of ordination, which was basically Lutheran, soon caused controversy. It removed the supposedly superstitious references to sacrifice, purgatory and prayers for the souls of the dead. However, it did not please some of the more extreme reformers, because it made no attempt to remove from usage any of the ceremonial vestments normally worn by bishops and priests while conducting services. These were regarded as superstitious by those clergy who wore plain surplices.

Hooper's dispute with Ridley

John Hooper, who had been invited to become Bishop of Gloucester, complained that the form of ordination was still too Catholic and started a fierce dispute with Ridley over the question of vestments. As a result he refused the offered bishopric, and in July began a campaign of preaching against the new proposals. At first it appeared that Northumberland was sympathetic and supported Hooper, but in October he was ordered to stop preaching, and in January 1551 he was imprisoned for failing to comply. Finally, he was persuaded to compromise and was made Bishop of Gloucester, where he introduced a vigorous policy of education and reform. But he complained that both laity and clergy were slow to respond.

Doctrinal changes and the second *Book of Common Prayer*

Parliament was assembled in January 1552 and the government

embarked on a comprehensive programme of reform. In order to strengthen the power of the Church of England to enforce doctrinal uniformity, a new Treason Act was passed. This made it an offence to question the royal supremacy or any of the articles of faith of the English Church.

In March the second Act of Uniformity was passed. Under the new Act it became an offence for both clergy and laity not to attend Church of England services, and offenders were to be fined and imprisoned. Cranmer's new *Book of Common Prayer* became the official basis for church services, and had to be used by both clergy and laity. All traces of Catholicism and the mass had been removed, and the Eucharist was clearly defined in terms of consubstantiation.

While these measures were being introduced, the government began a further attack on Church wealth. In 1552 a survey of the temporal wealth of the bishops and all senior clergy was undertaken. The resultant report estimated that these lands had a capital value of £1,087,000, and steps were taken to transfer some of this property to the Crown.

At the same time, commissioners had been sent out to draw up inventories and to begin the removal of all the gold and silver plate still held by parish churches, and to list any items illegally removed since 1547. The commissioners had only just begun their work of confiscation when the king died and the operation was brought to an end, but not before some churches had lost their medieval plate.

Assessment of the Edwardian Church

The death of Edward VI and the fall of Northumberland brought this phase of the English Reformation to an abrupt end. The Forty-two Articles which had been drawn up to list the doctrines of the new Protestant Church of England never became law. It is generally agreed that by 1553 the Edwardian Reformation had resulted in a Church of England that was thoroughly Protestant. There is less agreement over whether its doctrines were basically Lutheran, or to what extent they were influenced by **Zwinglian** or Calvinist ideas.

It is clear that although the doctrines of the Church of England had been

revolutionised, the political and administrative structure of the Church had remained unchanged. There is equal agreement that there is insufficient evidence at present to decide whether the people of England had wholeheartedly embraced the Protestant religion. Although a majority of the landed elites and those in government circles seemed to favour moderate Protestantism, only a few of them found it impossible to conform under the rule of Mary I.

Many of the lower clergy and a majority of the population seem to have been largely indifferent to the religious debate. Only in London, and the counties encircling London and East Anglia, does there appear to have been any widespread enthusiasm for the Protestant religion. Even there, a study of the county of Essex indicates more enthusiasm among the authorities in enforcing Protestantism than among the general public in accepting it. Earlier interpretations which indicated wild enthusiasm for either Protestantism or Catholicism are now treated with caution. It is considered that Protestantism, if not widely opposed, received only lukewarm acceptance.

Summary diagram: Cranmer and the Protestant revolution

