

THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
SETTING THE STAGE.....	2
On The European Continent .....	2
Within England .....	3
THE BREAKING AWAY .....	6
The Problem of Henry VIII's Marriage .....	6
The Efforts for Annulment .....	6
The Separation .....	7
CONCLUSION .....	8
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	9

## INTRODUCTION

“It is a gross error to suppose that matrimonial complications of Henry VIII were the cause of such reformation (as the breach of the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church). They are occasions which accelerated some of its attendant circumstances.”<sup>1</sup> It is the purpose of this paper to outline these “attendant circumstances” and show how they came together to create the transition between the Church in England to the Church of England.

No one can ascertain when the Gospel was first preached on this island we now call England. Speculation suggests that maybe the soldiers of the Roman invasion brought Christianity with them in approximately 55 A.D. It is known that in 596 A.D. a Benedictine monk by the name of Augustine, along with forty companions, went to England as missionaries and “by 664 (A.D.) the Roman type of Christianity became dominant.”<sup>2</sup> There seemed to be no great conflicts with this religion until the eleventh century when William I, though giving financial support to this church, refused to render fealty to the pope. From William I (d 1087) and Henry VII (d 1509) the kings of England alternated on the idea of obedience to the pope. One can see that the religion at this time was not stable and shall see how the stage was being set for some form of religious reformation in England.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. C. Arthur Lane, Illustrated Notes on English Church History, vol II, (London, 1894), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Baker, A Summary of Christian History (Nashville, TN, 1959), p. 230.

## SETTING THE STAGE

The atmosphere for English reformation came from many sources; from beyond England's boundaries as well as from within the country. A look at the European religious elements will show some reasons for the English Church's rebellion.

### On the European Continent

The largest religious problems in Europe at this time were to be found at the head of the Roman Catholic Church. The Babylonian captivity of the Catholic Church (in which the pope moved the headquarters of the Church to France – this having lasted seventy years) and its resulting papal schism were causing severe doubts in the minds of many people concerning the validity of papal and church claims. With three popes all claiming to be the true pope, how would the people know if the “right” one was chosen, and if not, how would they know? Anyone can see the doubt which could be brought on by such actions.

The practices initiated by the pope to increase his revenues also stirred the people for reform. Simony (the selling of church offices), sometimes in the form of expectancies (the selling of these offices to the highest bidder even before the person holding that office had vacated it), enraged the reformers. Other practices included annates (the relinquishing of a year's income by a newly appointed bishop or abbot),

collations (the moving of several bishops or abbots when a new position came open, thus increasing the annates), indulgences, dispensations, commendations, and others. They all brought the pope under the eye of disfavor among the common people. Luther described the Roman Curia as:

... a place where vows can be annulled, monks could get permission to leave their orders, priests could buy a dispensation to get married, the illegitimate might be legitimate, and where evil and disgrace were knighted and ennobled. In it is a buying and a selling, a changing, blustering and bargaining, cheating and lying, robbing and stealing, debauchery and villainy and all kinds of contempt of God that Antichrist could not reign worse.<sup>3</sup>

These disgraces within the highest structure of the Catholic Church naturally brought out many courageous men who voiced opposition to its corruption. As early as 1376 John Wycliffe, together with his poor priests, the Lollards, began active protest against papal defilement of principles set forth in the New Testament. Words of protest were also heard from John Huss in Bohemia, Desiderius Eramus in the Netherlands, Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, and of course Martin Luther and John Calvin in Germany and Switzerland, respectively. With all these men and other's) cries for reforms were echoed across the European continent for a period of over two hundred years. Europe, being in such an upcry would naturally infiltrate into England and stir the already glowing coals of discontent. Now for a look at England herself.

### Within England

Not only were there religious upheavals on the continent itself, but England was fast approaching the greatest religious showdown she was to ever face. This

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<sup>3</sup> Baker, p. 148.

“showdown” was caused by many factors within England herself, as well as those from without.

The period of Renaissance brought about a rising nationalism among men everywhere and this “rebirth” affected England no less than anywhere else. During this rise in nationalism two noteworthy statutes were passed: The Statute of Provisor (1351) and the Statute of Praemunire.<sup>4</sup> The first, with its 1390 revision, required the bishop of Rome to receive Crown approval before granting non-Englishmen the English benefices. The second stated that “appellants of Rome, and officials of the papal court (landing in England) could be severely punished and outlawed; their goods being confiscated to the State.”<sup>5</sup> The separation was carried a step farther in 1399, when Parliament declared that “the kingdom of England and the rights of its Crown had always been so free that neither the pope nor any other outside the kingdom might interfere therein.”<sup>6</sup>

Along with her rising nationalism, England was hit with a rising desire for religious reform. As mentioned earlier, Wycliffe began to violently protest the misconduct of the pope with the onset of the papal schism. While lecturing at Oxford, he brought forth his ideas of the need of any authority, including all forms of clergy, to be faithful to the tasks of his office, or forfeit his right to hold that office. 1383 marked the completion of the Bible which Wycliffe helped translate and which he used as final authority as he valiantly attacked the practices and doctrines of the

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<sup>4</sup> Two dates have been given as the dates of the Statute of Praemunire, 1353 and 1393.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, p. 9.

Roman Church. With the Lollards, Wycliffe spread his doctrines throughout England, bringing more unrest to these people who were ready for a change.

The books left by Wycliffe at Oxford found their way into the hands of Thomas Wosley who became a product of this “New Learning,” i.e. the way of thinking sparked by Wycliffe and his writings. Wosley became the Archbishop of York in 1514 and in the next year he became both lord high chancellor and cardinal. From his new position as chancellor, he proceeded to make a few reforms himself.

One step in Wosley's scheme of reform dealt with Oxford, the place from which he had started his ideas of reform. He took measures to reform the University's statues, which included the addition of a number of theological and classical courses. By including these new classes in the school's curriculum, the next generation of students, as well as those following after them, would be more educated. The added education was no doubt highly seasoned with the “New Learning” and with the preachers graduating with these ideas, England would be covered with the thoughts of reformation.

Another measure Wosley took in his efforts for reform was to gain papal bulls to call the Convocation of York and Canterbury for a joint synod (1523 A,D,). This synod formulated measurements which resulted in the suppression of forty monasteries (not all English) and their revenues given to learning institutions. The remaining monasteries were put under new disciplinary rules. By these measures Wosley not only boosted the cause of the reformers but also hurt the influence of the Catholic Church in England.

## THE BREAKING AWAY

With the stage for change thus set, the incident that was to precipitate the English Reformation came upon the scene.

### The Problem of Henry VIII's Marriage

Henry VIII, in an effort to strengthen the Tudor line's hold upon the English throne, arranged the marriage of Arthur (the older brother of Henry VIII) to Catherine, a daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Arthur died within six months of the wedding so it was then arranged for the younger Henry to marry her. Julius II, the pope, granted a dispensation and the marriage occurred in 1509 A.D. (Catherine later swore under oath that she had never really been Arthur's wife.)<sup>7</sup>

The marriage between Henry VIII and Catherine produced no male heir to inherit the throne. The only child to live past infancy was Princess Mary and there was uncertainty about the acceptance of a female ruler by the people.

### The Efforts for Annulment

Whether driven by religious convictions concerning the legitimacy of his marriage, the desire for a male heir to the throne, or the desire for the affections of Anne Boleyn, Henry sought measures to have his marriage annulled. He first sought

it from Wosley, who refused to grant it without papal consent. (Wosley had desired for the papal office and did not wish to ruin his opportunity in any way.) Henry had Wosley immediately expelled from his position. Then Henry carried his request directly to the pope. The pope, under pressure from Emperor Charles V of Spain (Catherine's nephew), delayed granting the annulment.

### The Separation

Enraged, Henry went to Parliament and requested action. This was around the year of 1529 A.D. and by 1534, had passed laws separating England to some extent from papal control and making the king the head of the churches in England. (It has been noted that the reforms passed by this session of Parliament had been handed down from the Convocations of York and Canterbury.)<sup>8</sup> Further measures were taken in 1537 when a statute (28 Henry VIII., c. 10) was approved and enforced which “terminated forever the pope's jurisdiction in England.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Baker, p. 232.

<sup>8</sup> Lane, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Lane, p. 30-31.

## CONCLUSION

The Church of England was now a part of the English culture. Although it was to face some opposition in the future from different monarchs, it was to persevere through the years to come. With the addition of the Ten Articles and the Six Articles by Henry VIII and Cranmer's Prayer Book (after its revision called the Book of Common Prayer), one finds the English Church to be practically as it is today.

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