

## *The English Reformation and the Formation of Anglicanism*

The Anglican tradition, which in the United States is known as the Episcopal church, was explicitly forged in the context of English history, so much so that it is necessary to speak of an "English Reformation." There were, to be sure, important influences from the Continent, but both in the break with Rome and in the pattern of reform, the English movement was distinctive. More than any other of the churches with a Reformation history, Anglicanism bears the marks of a national church. In order to understand the ethos and development characterized as central Anglicanism, it is necessary to look briefly at the events of the English Reformation, with its unique intertwining of affairs of state and church.

### From Reforming Activities to the Elizabethan Settlement

In England, as on the Continent, there were signs of unrest before the Reformation. We have already noted the activities of Wycliffe (see Ch. I). While the Lollard tradition had been suppressed, much of its reforming spirit and outlook survived. There were other religious associations also, such as the "Christian brethren" or "known men." In addition, the Renaissance humanist tradition was strong. One need only recall the names of such men as John Colet, the dean of St. Paul's, and Sir Thomas More, author of the famous *Utopia*. Moreover, it was in England that the outlook of Erasmus was found to be most congenial.

More explosive than the foregoing was the relation of the English nation to both papacy and foreign political powers. The suppression by the papacy of some of the English monasteries (a practice later adopted by Henry VIII on a much wider scale and also mainly for financial reasons), with the revenue from sale of the properties going to Rome, raised the ire of many English on the scene. The assignment of Italian priests, many of whom were unable to speak English, was a further source of offense. In general, the English were tired of domination and interference by foreign power.

The spark which lit the fire was the refusal of the papacy to annul the marriage of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. Although the papacy had waived canon law to permit Henry to marry the widow of his brother, it was unwilling to annul the marriage, primarily because

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the Continental reformers who in this period found refuge in England. Among these were Martin Bucer, the Strasbourg reformer, and Peter Martyr, one of the early Lutheran theologians. It was during this period that the English Reformation was closest to that of the Continent. During the first protectorate, a general Lutheran outlook prevailed, and during the second, views reflecting the Reformed tradition. The two prayer books of Edward's reign represent the two traditions. Although these views did not prevail, permanent changes dating from this period center in the abolition of considerable medieval ceremony and liturgical practice. Rome was declared wrong in faith, transubstantiation was decisively rejected, marriage of the clergy was permitted, auricular confession was abolished, and communion was administered to the people with both bread and wine. But during this period when the continental influence was at its highest, the episcopacy was accepted without question and pains were taken to guarantee adequate succession.

Edward, always in poor health, died after only six years on the throne and was succeeded by his older sister Mary, the Roman Catholic daughter of Henry's first wife. It was only natural that policy should be reversed. Many who leaned toward the continental reforms, including Cranmer, were burned at the stake. A ruthless attempt was undertaken to reestablish Roman Catholicism. However, a full Roman Catholic approach to life no longer seemed possible for the English nation. But after five years, Mary died and was followed by Elizabeth, daughter of Henry and Anne Boleyn.

It was under Elizabeth's forty-five-year reign that a religious settlement was made which still gives form to Anglicanism today. Her motivations were undoubtedly colored as much by the desire for order and peace in the church as a way to political stability as by definite religious convictions. She decided against Roman Catholicism and for a broad Protestantism, far from the hopes of the Marian exiles who had returned from the Continent. The extremes of both Rome and the continental Reformation were rejected. While holding a firm grip, Elizabeth seemed even to relax control by the state by taking the title of "supreme governor" rather than "supreme head" of the Church of England. Only in worship did uniformity appear essential, and that for the well-being of both church and state. Nevertheless, there was some demand for minimal doctrinal statements. The promulgation of the Thirty-nine Articles, which were accepted primarily as a guide/rather than as a binding rule of faith, served this purpose. These are broadly Protestant in tenor, with stress at various points on the positive use of the tradition of the church. The sufficiency of Scripture for salvation and the authority of the church are equally stressed. The church has the duty of settling both ceremonial matters and controversies in faith, though in no case dare it decide upon a course contrary to

of the risk of finally alienating the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, Charles V (nephew of Catherine), upon whose good will the papacy had to depend at this time. Henry's concern for the continuation of his line and the stability of England had been expressed long before his fascination with Anne Boleyn. Since severe civil strife had been occasioned in an earlier time by lack of a male descendant for the throne, he was much exercised over the increasingly unlikely prospect of a male heir issuing from his marriage to Catherine. In order to effect an annulment, Henry broke the ties with Rome by a series of bold acts. Having deposed Cardinal Wolsey, he forbadepapal appeals to Rome without the King's consent, and required through Parliamentary act that the clergy continue to function despite possible papal excommunication. In Thomas Cranmer, who had been sympathetic to the annulment and had suggested a university rather than canon law decision, the King found a ready Archbishop of Canterbury who might be the primate of all England. But the top position Henry reserved for himself. The Act of Supremacy (1534) declared: "The King's majesty justly and rightly is and ought to be and shall be reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England called *"Anglicana Ecclesia."* Nevertheless, he was not a priest. He appointed, but could not consecrate, bishops; he could defend the faith, but he could not declare dogma. But he was head of a new national church. Under Henry, however, "reformation" in practice or doctrine was not very extensive. He insisted on a Bible in every parish, with a chapter to be read each Sunday. The Ten Articles of Religion of 1536 made reference to the authority of the Bible and justification by faith, but made these no more central than in the medieval church generally. In fact, Henry himself approved of the use of images, invocations to the departed saints, the concept of purgatory and masses for those who still sojourned there, transubstantiation together with and auricular confessions. With this outlook, it may seem startling that Henry destroyed images, turned into revenue those made of precious materials, and confiscated the properties of the monasteries. Given the aversion of the English to the alleged idleness and opulence of monastic life among those who lived with Lollard memories, Henry had little opposition to his practice of turning these assets to the advantage of the national treasury.

The views of Henry were not shared by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, whose influence reached its height in the reign of Edward VI, only son of Henry VIII. Edward was still a young boy at the time of his accession (1547), and the regime was first under the protectorate of the Duke of Somerset, and then of the Duke of Northumberland. In both instances, the affairs of church and state were dominated by Cranmer and his associates, including many of

God's Word. The church, therefore, has a responsibility for the Bible and its proper interpretation. The papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and the veneration of the images and relics are rejected as unwarranted by Scripture and contrary to the Word of God. On the theological side, justification by faith is affirmed as against works, and the concept of single predestination is affirmed for the comfort of good persons and believers. On the Lord's Supper, transubstantiation is rejected, but the real presence of the body of Christ "after an heavenly and spiritual manner" is affirmed. The church is defined (as also by the continental reformers) as an institution in which the Word is properly preached and the sacraments rightly administered.

At the most, the Thirty-nine Articles have had a relative authority. Anglicanism has no doctrinal tests, and the Articles are viewed as but the setting forth of minimal aspects of the faith for the sake of direction in a period of history when foundations had to be laid. Even the enforced subscription to the Articles by clergy in the time of Elizabeth were based on this sort of consideration. The words of John Bramhall are instructive:

We do not suffer any man 'to reject' the Thirty-nine articles of the Church of England 'at his pleasure'; yet neither do we look upon them as essentials of saving faith or 'legacies of Christ and of His Apostles'; but in a mean, as pious opinions fitted for the preservation of unity. Neither do we oblige any man to believe them, but only not to contradict them.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Articles are included in the Prayer Book and have been revised from time to time, Anglicans have thought of them as an adequate expression of the faith in the particular historical context rather than as a binding rule of faith for the church. The Nicene Creed and Apostles' Creed, which are affirmed in the Articles, are considered more truly normative. But even these are not thought of as complete and exclusive dogmatic statements. Rather they are accepted as precise and concise summaries of the broad dimensions of biblical faith, more adequately understood in intention through recitation or song than in exegesis or analysis.

And so the process continued even to the present. The revised Book of Common Prayer for the Episcopal Church in the United States, approved in 1979, includes the Thirty-nine Articles among Historical Documents of the Church, along with a section from the Council of Chalcedon on the union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ, the Creed of Saint Athanasius, the Preface to the First Book of Common Prayer of 1549, statements adopted

<sup>4</sup> John Bramhall, *Schism Guarded*, in More and Cross, *Anglicanism* (London, 1935), p. 186.

by the House of Bishops in connection with the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of 1888, and Resolution ii of the Lambeth Conference, the latter dealing with the basis upon which reunion of the churches would be possible. This conference resolution, reflecting worldwide Anglicanism, states the basis as follows: "a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as 'containing all things necessary to salvation,' and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith; b) The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith; c) The two sacraments ordained by Christ Himself — Baptism and the Supper of the Lord — ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him; d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church." Hence, even in this 1979 collection of statements, the aim is to provide necessary benchmarks, but not to define them too scrupulously.

The Book of Common Prayer itself was of far greater significance than the Thirty-nine Articles, both for the Elizabethan settlement and for subsequent Anglicanism. Like the Articles, the Prayer Book was based on similar documents formulated under the previous reign but was given its distinctive form in the time of Elizabeth. It reflects the tendency to combine much of the ancient tradition of the church with some of the Reformation insights. Sometimes, the two aspects lie side by side, as in the following sentences from an early communion service: "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith, with thanksgiving." Nothing less than the genuine presence of Christ in the elements is combined with the Zwinglian concept of remembrance. The Communion service also retains the concept of sacrifice, but Christ is an oblation once offered.

The Prayer Book contains prayers and liturgical forms dating from the early history of the church. These were adapted to the new situation, and practices considered contrary to the Word were abandoned in true Reformation form. The whole work reflects an unmistakable biblical basis. Each service encompasses the full sweep of the gospel message. Moreover, through prescribed collects and Scripture readings for each service, full coverage of the various aspects of the faith is guaranteed year after year. In this way a prescribed form is combined with wholeness and variety of content. No single religious idea is singled out for emphasis. The totality of faith is represented in dramatic form.

Through the Thirty-nine Articles, the Prayer Book, and further steps taken by Elizabeth to insure the episcopal succession, the main lines for Anglicanism were definitely established. The Elizabethan settlement was in many ways the thought and practice of the Edwardian

in which the church completed and fulfilled the natural order. Continuity, rather than discontinuity, marked the relation of God and the world. But Hooker's view of redemption in relation to the church was nearer to that of the Reformation bodies than to the Roman concept. Thus Hooker looked to an essential tradition of which neither the Reformation bodies nor the Roman church was the true descendant.

This general position was further elaborated in the seventeenth century by the group of distinguished preachers and writers known as the Caroline divines (e.g., Lancelot Andrewes, Thomas Barlow, William Beveridge, John Bramhall, Gilbert Burnet, William Laud, Robert Sanderson, Jeremy Taylor, John Wilkins, and John Woolton). These leaders considered themselves neither merely Protestant nor Roman Catholic, but those who held the "Middle Way," as John Donne expressed it, or those who held "the mean between two extremes," as Sanderson put it. Certainly the Caroline divines did not agree with each other on all points. But they represented a common perspective, and a faith in the distinctive character of Anglicanism as at once "Protestant and Reformed according to the Ancient Catholic Church." They denied the authority of Rome because they considered it tyrannical, and the emphasis on the Bible of the Puritans because they considered it bibliolatry and an offense against reason. Hence, like Hooker, they insisted upon scripture, tradition, and reason. They were united in a studied *via media*. Theologically, this meant an emphasis upon the early fathers of the church (and occasionally the implication that the early period was a kind of golden age of the church). Aquinas was quoted extensively and when stripped of the distinctively Roman aspects, he was considered more congenial than Luther or Calvin. But the reformers, too, were quoted. The Caroline divines were interested in a balanced religious outlook, related to the practical concerns of life. If they did not usually push any religious affirmation to its logical conclusion or always relate it successfully to others, this was a defect of their virtue of insisting that the totality of the life of the church was more important than great emphasis upon one religious concept. Their goal was a theology comprehensive in scope, conducive to morality, and always related to the life of the church.

For many, the Caroline divines represent the central stream of Anglicanism. This is perhaps easier to see in retrospect than it was in their own time, since most of the writers worked in a period of political and religious upheaval. In the civil strife of the mid-seventeenth century, the whole concept of the English church was threatened, though the restoration of the monarchy safely reestablished Anglicanism with greater strength than ever. This reestablishment was only slightly modified in the revolution of 1688 by the granting of greater privileges to dissenters.

period, but modified in the direction of greater stress on the traditions and forms which had developed in the history of the church. It was a broad Catholicism, qualified by inclusion of central Reformation concerns. The settlement was formalized by the Act of Supremacy, which reaffirmed the place of the Crown in matters of state and church against all foreign pressures, and the Act of Uniformity, which assured uniformity of worship and practice.

## Further Development of Anglican Self-Understanding

If the general direction of Anglicanism was settled during the early years of Elizabeth's reign, the full meaning of the new development had yet to be explored. Undoubtedly, Anglicans would have reflected on the implications of their distinctive community in any case, but this process was speeded by the appearance and rapid growth of a competing group, the Puritans (see Ch. V). The challenge of Puritanism, beginning during Elizabeth's time, led Anglican thinkers to an acute awareness that their new experiment was rooted in a very old tradition and could be justified on various grounds.

Foremost among such thinkers was Richard Hooker (d. 1600) whose *Ecclesiastical Policy* was written with the Puritans in mind. The immediate question at issue was the primacy of the episcopacy and episcopal succession. At first the episcopacy had more or less been taken for granted in the new English church. But the Puritans could find no basis for it in the Bible. Many Anglicans thought they could. Hooker, too, was convinced that a case could be made for the primacy of bishops in the New Testament; but he also admitted the possibility of reading the record in another way, as the Puritan Cartwright and his followers had done. In contrast to the Puritans, he did not rest his case upon the New Testament alone. Tradition and reason, too, were criteria for the church and when they were added to the New Testament, the argument seemed incontrovertible. For over fifteen hundred years, argued Hooker, episcopacy had been the dominant form of church government. Moreover, it was reasonable. It made for decent and proper order in the church, and what made good sense was worth having.

Behind the defense of the episcopacy lay more than immediately meets the eye. It involved a different understanding of the gospel and its relation to church than that held by either the Puritans or the reformed bodies on the Continent. But this was also quite different from the Roman views.

Hooker's concept of law and reason drew much from the medieval

first with the rise of the Latitudinarians. The term *Latitudinarian* was a nickname for theological liberals who emphasized tolerance and the primary role of reason in the theological enterprise. They were convinced that theology based upon reason could be demonstrated to be not at all contrary to revealed religion, and that, in fact, the religion of the Bible could be defended by appeal to reason.

The Latitudinarians made ascendant one element of the triumvirate of New Testament, tradition, and reason, thereby distorting the other two. The historical justification for their effort was the need to be creative in a period calling for readjustment. The new scientific discoveries demanded attention in the thinking of the churches and the Latitudinarians sought to relate the new knowledge to Christian faith by appeal to a common rational framework. They were liberals in a period when religion was not noted for that characteristic. They were among the first to advocate a genuine toleration which eventually triumphed in the English scene.

At the same time, however, men such as Stillingfleet and Tillotson reflected scarcely any of the evangelical outlook of the New Testament with its offer of mercy to sinful people. Both Latitudinarianism and the later more extreme accent upon the "reasonableness of religion," as presented by Locke, belong to a basic pattern in which the "rational" threatened the religious. By the second decade of the eighteenth century, the stress upon reason had made such inroads into Anglicanism that the Christian evangelical witness had all but disappeared. The fluid tradition had spread so thin that the waters no longer ran deep. Moreover, it appeared to many that the ecclesiastical machinery fostered rather than changed this situation. Thus, the eighteenth century saw the rise of the Wesleyan Movement as an attempt to recapture for the English church the living experience of redemption from sin (see Ch. VI). And in the nineteenth century, the Oxford Movement sought to recall the church to its Catholic heritage (in contrast both to an individualistic evangelicalism and a liberalism largely indifferent to the claims of gospel and church) while at the same time rejecting Roman interpretations of Catholicism.

In sum, Anglicanism is best understood as a broad stream, guided by a sense of order and tradition as guaranteed by the episcopacy and the Prayer Book. It asks no particular theological understanding, and has never been a theological church. Seldom has it had theological giants. It surmounted the crises of Reformation influences in its battles with Puritanism, and of Roman claims in connection with the Oxford Movement. It lost much of its vitality in the Latitudinarian Movement, but managed under pressure to regain it. For many, these three instances at least raise the question of how far the vitality of Anglicanism is dependent upon more tightly knit religious groups which basically challenge its interpretation of the role of the church.

In spite of this, Anglicanism can claim to represent a tattered but never broken tradition of the entire church. It reads its history as one which antedates the Reformation and preserves the significant elements in the life of the church since its inception. It claims, too, that in England the church was under the rule of Rome for a shorter period of time than on the Continent and that it stands, therefore, for the genuine tradition in contrast both to the Roman church, which distorted the tradition, and to the Protestants, who too rashly broke it.

For Anglicanism, the episcopal succession is the symbol and guarantee of the continuity of the faith in the life of the church. Anglicans differ as to whether the continuity is to be considered a continuity of the gospel symbolized by the line of bishops, or whether the succession of bishops is itself the continuity (through the laying on of hands since the time of the Apostles). The difference between the two ways of viewing succession is enormous. Nevertheless, the agreement that the church is one in its continuity makes it possible for individuals who so differ to remain together in a bond of fellowship. The sense of belonging to the communion of saints throughout the ages makes it possible for people of diverse outlook to live in the same church.

Anglicanism belongs to the history of the Reformation and to the history of Protestantism. But few Anglicans accept either the Reformation on the Continent or the English Reformation as normative. They prefer to think of themselves as belonging to a total history, purified from time to time through various reformations. Most think of themselves as Protestant and truly Catholic at the same time. In accord with the *via media*, they consider themselves Protestant in respect to continual re-formation and Catholic in the sense of the tradition and continuity of the church. Having ventured these general remarks, it is safest, nevertheless, to leave the question of whether Anglicanism is Protestant to the self-understanding of each Anglican, though for most Anglicans, the question is neither relevant nor vital.