

Anglican Claims and the Old Religion

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PART II THE MEDIAEVAL CHURCH CHAPTER I THE CHURCH IN NORMAN AND ANGLICAN ENGLAND

The normal Anglican view of the preReformation English Church has been summed up by the eminent historian Bishop Creighton. "There was never a time in England," he says, "when the papal authority was not resented; and really, the final act of the repudiation of that authority followed quite naturally as the result of a long series of similar acts which had taken place from the earliest times." Here, then, is the thesis. Papal authority existed - but by violence, resisted by kings and people when possible; finally overthrown with general approval.

It may be well to observe, first, that a spiritual authority such as that of the Papacy can only exist in virtue of consent. Even if it is backed by the temporal power, the ruler must be able to secure a general acquiescence in the authority so imposed if he is to succeed. In the Middle Ages, the modern machinery for imposing the will of the Government did not exist, there were no great propaganda organisations, no police force, no national education under State control. How, then - one may ask - could Papal authority have been made effective in face of any considerable resentment against its principle - especially if kings and people had been in agreement in this opposition?

Apart, however, from this general reflection there is - as Gairdner has pointed out - simply no evidence for the continuous protest asserted by Creighton. The most popular saint in mediaeval England was the "Holy Blissful Martyr" to whose Canterbury shrine pilgrims flocked in Chaucer's day: St. Thomas Becket, who, having died to save the rights of the Popes and Church from Royal usurpation, was regarded as the champion of liberty - the liberty of the spiritual against the temporal power. It is significant that one of the earliest actions of Henry VIII, after his usurpation of Papal supremacy, was to degrade publicly the name of the public hero as "disloyal," and to desecrate his tomb.

CHURCH QUARRELS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

To speak of a "national" opposition to the Papacy during a great part of the Middle Ages is to ignore the whole character of mediaeval civilisation. The modern national way of life and thought had not yet appeared. For three hundred years after the Conquest, England was governed by a French-speaking aristocracy, while the plain folk spoke varied dialects. Literature was almost exclusively written in Latin - the language of Christian culture, science and philosophy. The independent authority of a supranational body, the Church, with the Holy See as its supreme earthly Governor, was simply assumed. No English King, however powerful, claimed to be lord of the spirituality. The disputes were not between the State and "disloyal" clerics who appealed to a "foreign Bishop" - they were about the legal limits of the sphere of spiritual and temporal jurisdictions, where they affected the same set of people; or about the administrative and financial claims of the Papal Court.

Bishops, for instance, were subject to the Pope as regards their spiritual authority: that was undeniable. But they were also administrators of great lands within the kingdom, exercising princely temporal power as barons. Had not the king, therefore, a claim on their allegiance? Must he not be able to secure himself against the appointment of his enemies to these great public offices? This was the heart of the "Investiture" controversy, which was going on during the Norman period - a conflict which ended in a compromise securing the essential rights of both parties. "Spiritual matters," to quote Bishop Grosseteste of Lincoln, "should be in the hands of ecclesiastical and spiritual persons, and secular matters in those of lay people." As the national states developed side by side with the Centralised Papal administrative system there were inevitable tensions and collisions - but neither, during the Middle Ages, denied the rights of the other within its own sphere. It was simply a matter of where the lines should be drawn.

Both English kings and clergy again and again assert the supremacy of the Papacy in spirituals, as founded on the promise of Christ to St. Peter. The Papal intervention in English Church Government is not exceptional, but normal; as to doctrine the Roman Church's teaching is always the accepted standard of orthodoxy. The great doctor of the fourteenth century, Scotus, whose theology dominated English universities, taught that "It is of faith that the Holy Roman Church... admits no error and teaches the truth." In her beliefs, laws and customs the English Church was an integral part of

LANFRANC AND ST. ANSELM

Let us now examine some of the conflicts which arose between the Papacy and English rulers in the Middle Ages, and notice the issues.

The thorough reform of the Church after the Conquest was chiefly the work of an Italian, Lanfranc, whom William I made his Archbishop of Canterbury. Lanfranc was famous as a defender of transubstantiation - a doctrine categorically denied in the Anglican prayer book- against Berengarius. He began his work in England by a Synod held at Winchester, over which Papal Legates presided. King William had a brush with Rome over two matters - the arrears due for "Peter's Pence" (hardly a doctrinal question!) and a claim made by the Pope that he should do homage for England - as the Norman kings did for Sicily and Naples - as a fief of the Holy See. The first claim the king acknowledged, the second he refused - while declaring his filial obedience to the spiritual power of the Pope, and begging for his prayers.

The second Primate, St. Anselm - another Italian - refused to submit to a claim made by William Rufus, that he had the right to decide which of two claimants to the Papacy was to be acknowledged in England. Under Henry I the dispute was over the right assumed hitherto by kings in Europe and England, of investing bishops with ring and crozier. The Pope, afraid lest this ceremony should be misconstrued as giving the temporal ruler power over the spirituality, insisted that it should be discontinued and that the Papacy alone should invest. The compromise settled upon in England - investitures by the Papacy, homage to the King - was ultimately accepted on the Continent also.

ST. THOMAS AND HENRY II

The cause of trouble under Henry II - the first Plantagenet - was the claim of the king to assume jurisdiction over clerics in certain cases. The Royal demand was that the temporal courts should have the right of deciding, after a preliminary hearing, what causes were to go to the Church courts. The king also claimed power to prevent the clergy from leaving England, or appealing to Rome without his permission. The effect of such an arrangement would have been to give the temporal power a predominance over the ecclesiastical, which had always been regarded as by its nature superior. The Church would have been brought under a Royal despotism, and deprived of the possibility of independent action. The popular attitude in this dispute is significant, especially as in Norman times the masses generally supported the monarchy in its conflict with the baronage. St. Thomas, however, had their fullest sympathy in his battle for the rights of the spirituality - and, as we have seen, when he attained victory by martyrdom his shrine became the most famous centre of pilgrimage in the whole West.

ENGLAND A PAPAL FIEF

The high tide of Papal authority in England was reached under Henry II's son, King John, and his grandson, Henry III. John began a conflict with Pope Innocent III - perhaps the greatest of Papal rulers - by refusing to accept his nomination to the See of Canterbury, made to settle a dispute. The king confiscated the possessions of the Cathedral monastery, driving the monks overseas - whereupon the Pope placed the country under an Interdict. The king seized the goods of the clergy and suffered excommunication; and, since he remained obstinate, the Pope threatened to release his subjects from allegiance to a rule which was a tyranny opposed to the laws of God and man. The King of France was preparing to enforce the Papal sentence when John saved his throne by submission - agreeing not only to accept the Pope's terms, but also to recognise him as his feudal overlord.

There is no evidence as to the general opinion in England about this act. It was nothing startlingly new in Christendom - for Portugal, the Spanish Kingdoms, and Naples-Sicily were Papal fiefs, indeed, it might be claimed that John was only confirming his father's surrender to the Pope after the murder of St. Thomas. In any case, it was no more humiliating than his brother Richard I's allegiance to the German-Roman Emperor, which is almost forgotten. The barons, in their fight for the great Charter, found Innocent III's support of the king a grave inconvenience - for the Pope never realised the villainy and deceit of his "beloved son," and even Cardinal Langton, of Canterbury, his own nominee, was involved in censure for his part in the revolt. In despair, a section of the Baronage turned to France - an act difficult to reconcile with the theory of their strong English patriotism - and when John suddenly died it looked as if Prince Louis's accession would make the country a French dependency. That this did not happen was due largely to the Papal Legate, Gualo, who took

control of the affairs of the child Henry III. He wisely accepted the Charter in the Pope's name, and rallied an increasing number of the barons to the Plantagenet cause. In fact, in this crisis it may be claimed that the Papacy played a leading part in saving the independence of the English monarchy.

HENRY III AND THE CHURCH

During the long reign of Henry III the Roman controversy assumed a new character. The feudal overlordship of Rome led to an alliance of Pope and king, as - a result of which the Church was fleeced by Papal and Royal taxgatherers, in order to provide the war-chest for the long struggle of the Papacy with the Emperor Frederick II, and to support Henry's schemes for winning new kingdoms for his relatives. English benefices, too, were used to provide salaries or rewards for Papal bureaucrats.

Naturally, indignation ran high among clergy and laity alike; and it was led by some of the best and most upright among them. They complained - with justice - of the misuse of endowments granted for the feeding of Christ's flock in England. But the resistance never touched the spiritual authority of the Holy See. Its greatest leader, Bishop Grosseteste of Lincoln, even in his last letter to Pope Innocent IV - refusing to execute a Papal provision - professes his complete devotion to the Holy See "as to both parents." "In a filial and obedient spirit" he cries, "I do not obey - I refuse and I rebel." The authority was not denied; only its abuse was the cause of protest.

PROVISORS AND PRAEMUNIRE

King Edward I repudiated the Pope's feudal authority, but remained his obedient spiritual son. The disputes in this reign are about the Royal taxation of Church lands: they led, at one time, to an "outlawing" of the clergy by the king in order to overcome the resistance of Archbishop Winchelsea.

Under Edward III, two acts, "Provisors" and "Praemunire" were passed - aiming once again at the heavy taxation which the Papacy - now resident at Avignon in France - was levying in order to make up for the loss of its Italian revenues. The fees charged for Papal "provisions" - or appointments to Church benefices - were a serious burden on the clergy. Both fees and provisions, therefore, were abolished by "Provisors," while "Praemunire" laid severe penalties on those procuring these Papal grants from abroad. These laws were never fully applied - the king dispensing with them when he chose by private arrangement with the Papacy. It is obvious that they had nothing whatever to do with the recognition of the Pope's spiritual authority in England.

These disputes, then, have no reference to "national" claims as against the unity of Catholic Christendom. They never for a moment affected belief in the rights of the Holy See, inherited from St. Peter, to act as shepherd of Christ's flock. The feeling of the plain people varied with the matter at issue. Under Henry II they favoured the cause of St. Thomas; under Henry III they opposed the Papal exactions. But of "resentment" concerning the Roman claim to supremacy there is no sign at all. When not quietly assumed, it was clearly asserted - often by the very men who are opposing the political action of Rome.

Catholic bishops, assembled at the General Council of Constance in the fifteenth century, paid a tribute to this loyalty of the English to the Holy See. "The Kingdom of England," they declared, "has never swerved from its obedience to the Roman Church; it has never tried to rend the seamless coat of Our Lord; it has never endeavoured to shake off its loyalty to the Roman pontiffs."

CHAPTER II ENGLISH LOLLARDY

Before concluding our account of the pre-Reformation Church, a word ought to be said about the "Lollard" movement. "Lollardy" flourished in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century in England, and was introduced into Central Europe by Hus, to become the standard of Slav revolt against the German rulers of Bohemia. It is one of the curious features of Anglicanism that some of those who claim "continuity" with the English Church of the Middle Ages are equally ready to claim connection with the Lollard sectaries whom that Church condemned, persecuted and ultimately crushed, with the help of the Catholic rulers of the time. This is indeed to "run with the hare and hunt with the hounds"!

It has been commonly maintained that John Wyclif, the founder of Lollardy, was the "Morning Star" of the Reformation that the mind of England was turned to the pure Gospel by his revolt, which was a popular movement; that, though apparently crushed, heresy survived underground, preparing the minds of the people for the great change of the sixteenth century, when a growing swell of public feeling strengthened the national revolt against "Papalism." We must now see how much truth there is in this theory.

THE BLACK DEATH AND THE GREAT SCHISM

In 1349 and the years following, England, in common with the rest of Europe, was swept by the most destructive pestilence in recorded history - the Black Death. It is reckoned that a full half of the English nation was wiped out. The marvel is that the mediaeval social system survived at all - not that it suffered a shock from which it never fully recovered. There was, very naturally, a terrific mortality among the clergy - especially the best of them, who were most devoted in bringing spiritual succour to the sick and dying victims. To fill up vacancies, too many young and unlearned and unworthy were ordained - so that the quality of the clerical body suffered throughout Christendom.

Moreover, the Church of the time was afflicted by many scandalous evils. The Papacy - now established at Avignon - had come under powerful French influence, losing much reputation and loyalty thereby. After the ending of the "captivity" at Avignon, the Pope's return to Rome, a worse evil yet came with the Great Schism, in which the right of the Chair and authority of Peter were disputed between two and later three claimants. The kings of Europe took sides with one or another as it served their purpose. The discipline of the Church fell into chaos: the keystone of the arch, it seemed, was lost. The long duration of this apparent fission in the Papacy led men, for the first time in the West, to question whether there could be some other basis of Church organisation than the authority of the Holy See; and the claims made at the Council of Constance led to a confusion about Papal power which was only finally ended by the definition of Infallibility in 1870.

The power of the rulers of rising national States became increased in Church matters - for who else could maintain order in the existing ecclesiastical chaos? Churches began to assume the new "national" complexion, even while the Faith of Europe was still one. In both England and France, the higher Church offices tended to become a preserve of the great aristocratic houses, so that the hierarchy became detached from the lower clergy and people, and was involved in the rising unpopularity of the ruling class. In the economic conflict between peasants and their feudal lords, which followed the Black Death, culminating in England in the rising of 1331, the bishops were attacked - too often with good reason - as lordly oppressors of the poor. Meanwhile, the lay barons themselves hoped to increase their power and wealth by taking advantage of the weakness of the Church, to plunder it for their own profit.

JOHN WYCLIF

It was in this disturbed atmosphere that John Wyclif set forth some new and revolutionary religious opinions at Oxford, which obtained a good deal of support. Like many modern philosophers, he was very susceptible to the trend of contemporary political thought; and he tried - without conspicuous success - to base it on philosophic foundations. He argued that the Church had no need of wealth. Christ and His Apostles had been poor; and riches were a cause of spiritual corruption. Moreover, the political influence of the Church was an abuse, since such things belonged to Caesar - this argument has a curiously modern ring. But there followed a piece of absurdity which it is difficult to take seriously - that of "Dominion founded on Grace." All civil dominion being derived from God, was conditional upon being in a "State of Grace" - that is free from grave sin!

This - Wyclif was careful to explain - did not justify a general attack on the property of ungodly men: but apparently it did justify an attack on the wealth of the Church by the civil power. The king should seize it, and use it for improving the social and military position of the kingdom.

Such teaching - which was revolutionary, while not strictly heretical - appealed much to the great lords covetous for more wealth. Wyclif found a patron in John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, whose dominion was certainly not founded on grace. When the doctor was haled before the Convocation of Canterbury, Gaunt protected him, though he was nearly lynched by a London mob aroused not so much by his heterodoxy as by hatred of his princely protector. After a second enquiry at Lambeth - again broken up by mob violence - he retired to Oxford.

WYCLIF'S HERESIES

Inspired, apparently, by the model of St. Francis of Assisi - whom he admired - Wyclif began to send out a number of disciples, the "poor priests," to preach their master's doctrine. These men were under no real discipline, and their sermons soon assumed a social-revolutionary character which secured their popularity with a discontented peasantry. Meanwhile the doctor began a translation of the Scriptures - a work not yet done in English, whose literary development was in its childhood. His mind progressed rapidly towards dogmatic heresy, and his views began to assume what we may call a "Protestant" complexion. He found in the Bible, privately interpreted, a sufficient guide to life. He denounced pilgrimages and also Indulgences - which were, indeed, grossly abused by the operations of fraudulent "Pardoners," and repudiated the veneration of holy images and prayer to the Saints. He regarded sacramental grace as a secondary matter, and the hierarchy of the Church as a doubtful blessing. Finally, he denied the very cornerstone of the Catholic system - the doctrine of Transubstantiation in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

Wyclif's powerful supporters began to drop away as soon as he became definitely heretical: and since, in the Peasant Rising of 1381, the new Lollard view of property had inspired some of the leaders, his adherents were expelled from the universities. He himself retired into obscurity at Lutterworth. He was summoned to Rome, but died in the same year, 1384. His immunity was probably due largely to the state of confusion in the Papacy, and the Catholic world, resulting from the "Great Schism."

THE LOLLARDS

The movement in Oxford was broken - and after Wyclif's death his following was chiefly among the lower middle class, and was confined to certain regions, mainly of Eastern England, and to London. Its spread in Continental Europe - owing to the connection of Bohemia and England through King Richard II's marriage - does not concern us here. Richard himself opposed Lollardy, but was reluctant to persecute; indeed, this reluctance served as a handle to his enemies. With his overthrow, and the usurpation of Henry IV of Lancaster, the work of repression began in earnest. It was undertaken - be it noted - by an Act of Parliament. Judgment on heresy was given in the Bishops' Courts, but the delinquent was to be burnt if he refused to abjure, by the State authority. The persecution policy was dictated, probably, by panic at the revolutionary Lollard views about property rather than by their purely religious theories. Comparatively few, however, were burnt, the vast majority recanting as soon as they were brought to trial.

During the first thirty years of the fifteenth century, Lollardy continued to be of some importance: the extent of its spread is somewhat difficult to ascertain, because Conservatives of the period have a habit of using the term "Lollard" to describe anti-clericals and radicals of all sorts - just as "Commo" and "Bolshie" are loosely used today. When we read, for instance, that in Leicestershire "every second man" was a Lollard, it really tells us very little of the extent to which real heresy prevailed.

THE DECLINE OF LOLLARDY

Under King Henry V Lollardy began to become definitely unpopular with plain folk, owing to the opposition of its chief exponent, Sir John Oldcastle, to the rising spirit of patriotic loyalty to the warrior king. Oldcastle was executed for treason at the time of the French War, and thereafter the Lollards no longer appear in the forefront of English history. Lollardy was weakened, too, by its complete lack of organisation, and by the "cranky" views of many of its adherents. After the Council of Constance, the Schism was healed and the Hussite rebels suppressed in Europe; and by the reign of Henry VII, the first Tudor, heresy only survived among small groups of ignorant and obscure men. Occasionally heresy trials indicate that it was not entirely extinguished, but in 1520 it had exercised no influence for a half century or more. The remnants of English Lollardy combined with the later rising tide of Protestantism under Henry VIII, but they contributed little to the flood, it seems. There is no evidence that any of the prominent early reformers had been Lollards before they became Protestants.

The discontent with clerical wealth and clerical abuses continued; but under Henry VII and Henry VIII a movement of Catholic reform was active within the Church, promoted by such men as Morton, Colet, St. John Fisher and the great St. Thomas More. This work had already begun to produce good results in a revival both of learning and Christian spirit in the clergy, when it was broken in upon by a revolution managed not from below, but from above; a revolution whose chief motive power was the same one which had inspired Gaunt's support of Wyclif in his first days - the lust of rich men for the Church's wealth.

THE EVE OF THE REFORMATION

The parish records of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; the fact that the monastic bodies, though not in their first fervour, were still flourishing; the general veneration, above all, for the Blessed Sacrament, and for the great shrines of the Saints - such as St. Thomas of Canterbury and Our Lady of Walsingham - all these combine to show that the English nation of that epoch was as fully Catholic as any other part of the West. Even those who were most dissatisfied with the political absorption of the Papacy and the spiritual torpor of Christendom would never have dreamt that the best way to reform the Church was to destroy its whole organisation.

English Protestantism, in fact, owes nothing to a spontaneous revulsion of the nation from "Popery." The revolution came into being by gradual stages - originating in the violence, greed and lust of a king, at a time when kingly authority was most worshipped and the spiritual tone of the Papacy had fallen to a low level. The triumph of the Reform in England was no more "inevitable" than its failure in Spain or France. Henry VIII stood at one of those turning points in history in which a straw can deflect the current of its stream: and it was a straw that did so. To contributing causes - servility, corruption, indifference, discontent - we can allow full weight; but the divorce of Queen Catharine of Aragon by Henry VIII was the deciding factor.

In 1521 the old English Church's loyalty to the Catholic Faith was declared by the Bishop who presented King Henry's own work against Luther to the Pope. England he declared, yielded to no other nation, not even to Rome itself, in the service of God and the Faith and in obedience to the Roman Church; "Even as there is no nation which more opposes, more condemns, more loathes this monster (Protestantism) and the heresies which spring from it." He expressed, undoubtedly, the general feeling of the Englishmen of his time towards the new doctrines.