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## The Church Reform of Henry VIII a Product of the Rennissance

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## The Church Reform of Henry VIII a Product of the Renaissance.<sup>1)</sup>

A conference paper.

This paper is very frankly an attempt — an attempt to show, by an example taken from history, what kind of reformation the forces of the Renaissance were capable of producing and thus to illustrate, and help to establish, the truth of our assertion, so frequently made and rightly insisted on, that a real and actual reformation of the Church could not be produced by the Renaissance.

It is to-day the commonly accepted explanation of the Reformation, including the Protestant revolt, as the Lutheran Reformation in Germany is usually called, that it was purely a product of natural development, arising from the various currents of the Renaissance. It is the view taken by most historians, though not always expressed in plain words: The Reformation was the natural result of movements active partly within, partly outside of, the Church, which began centuries before that great upheaval and caused it, at least up to that point where unfortunately Luther lost his temper and separated from the old Church. — A few quotations.

James Harvey Robinson, *Introduction to the History of Western Europe*, Vol. I, 459: "There had been many attempts before Luther's appearance to better the clergy and remedy the evils in the Church without altering its organization or teachings. Hopeful progress toward such a conservative reform had been made even before the Protestants threw off their allegiance to the Pope. Their revolt inevitably hastened and stimulated the reform of the ancient Church." Again, speaking of the Counter-Reformation (I, 460, note): "Protestant writers commonly call the reformation of the medieval Catholic Church the 'Counter-Reformation' or 'Catholic reaction,' as if Protestantism were entirely responsible for it. It is clear, however, that the conservative reform began some time before the Protestants revolted. Their secession from the Church only stimulated a movement already well under way."

Preserved Smith, *The Age of the Reformation*, 26. 27: "Had the forces already at work within the Church been allowed to operate,

1) BIBLIOGRAPHY. — Gee, H., and Hardy, W. J.: *Documents Illustrative of English Church History*. London, 1921. — Fisher, H. A. L.: *The History of England, from the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of Henry VIII*. Vol. V of Hunt and Poole, *The Political History of England*. London, 1913. — Gairdner, James: *The English Church in the Sixteenth Century*. Vol. IV of Stephens and Hunt, *A History of the English Church*. London, 1904. — Pollard, A. F.: *Henry VIII*. London, 1919. — Jacobs, H. E.: *The Lutheran Movement in England*. Philadelphia, 1908. — Lindsay, T. M.: *A History of the Reformation*, Vol. II. New York, 1925.



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probably much of the moral reform desired by the best Catholics would have been accomplished quietly, without the violent rending of Christian unity that actually took place."

*Cambridge Modern History*, I, 18, p. 691: "Why have the abuses which in the sixteenth century could only be cured by rending the Church in twain, to so large an extent disappeared since the Reformation, leading many enthusiasts to feel regret that the venerable ecclesiastical structure was not purified from within, — that reform was not adopted in place of schism? The abuses under which Christendom groaned were too inveterate, too firmly entrenched, and too profitable to be removed by any but the sternest and sharpest remedies." In other words, the forces moving toward reform were there, but only by this stern method of a cleavage was the Catholic Church forced to consent to a reform as it has now come about in her midst. Again (p. 621): The Counter-Reformation "was merely a development of principles or a more effectual realization of them, whose beginnings are discernible long before Trent"; but the Popes (622) "would not dedicate themselves to the long-sought reformation in head and members, although they allowed its necessity again and again in the most emphatic terms. . . . They declined to take those measures without which no lasting improvement of the Curia was to be anticipated. They were loath to summon a representative council; they refused to cross the Alps and meet the German people or to listen when it drew up its grievances in formal array. Had the Fifth of Lateran<sup>2)</sup> fulfilled its task, instead of leaving it to the Council of Trent half a century later, the Diet of Worms might have never met, and Luther would perhaps have lingered out his years in a cell at Wittenberg."

The fundamental mistake lies, of course, in the prevalent interpretation of the Reformation; it is, in the opinion of these writers, that which the Catholic Church accomplished at Trent and since then, and they fail to see that to this day there has been no real reformation in the Catholic Church; that therefore the forces which were active before the Reformation, producing the movement commonly called the Renaissance, could not produce a real reformation, though they prepared the way for its success; and had not God opened the eyes of Luther to the true evil in the Church and then shown him the true cure, all the forces behind, and resulting from, the Renaissance would never have reformed the Church. They would have brought about a reform of a kind, but not the real, the necessary reformation of the Church.

Now, all this is not mere speculation. We have, I think, a concrete example of a reformation caused by the Renaissance; and examining this and comparing it with its counterpart, Luther's Ref-

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2) 1512—1517.



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ormation, we may judge whether that would have answered the purpose or not. It is the English Reformation under Henry VIII. In various ways this Reformation differs from the reform movements on the Continent, from that in Germany as well as from those in Switzerland and France. Not the least important difference is this, that here in England we have a reform that was altogether, or at least almost altogether, a result of the new thought of the period. The continental Reformation was doctrinal in nature, though Zwingli began with social reform and his work never quite lost that tinge; the reform movement in England under Henry was not doctrinal at all—I hesitate to use the term religious; Henry's Reformation, too, is called religious because, after all, its object was the Church, though it was only the organization of the Church and its temporal power that was affected. Doctrine entered the movement only after the death of Henry, under Edward and Elizabeth.

It may be well to recall here what the Renaissance was. It is a rather common delusion to limit it to art, to painting and sculpture and architecture, or at the most to include a revival of classical studies (Smith, *Age of the Reformation*, p. 373). That holds true only of the Renaissance in Italy, which was little more than a revival of the art, the literature, and chiefly the philosophy of life of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The result was that especially intellectual Italy was paganized, and hence the Renaissance of Italy was directly hostile to the Reformation. If, however, the Renaissance meant nothing more than that, then there was no Renaissance in England, very little in Germany and the Netherlands.

But this view is a mistake. The Renaissance means more than that "people put pictures of naked cupids into their bathrooms and statues of naked women into their gardens and went into ecstasies over the discovery of a new manuscript of a Greek classic." The Renaissance was a change of thought, and it affected every phase of human life, economic, social, political, religious life. Schevill (*History of Europe*, pp. 30. 63): "Medieval Europe lived its life in the great shadow cast by religion and the Church. . . . The Renaissance declared that for better or worse European civilization was not to be held under the authoritative direction of the Church in a fixed and predetermined mold." It was "an entirely new outlook on the world, in which emphasis was laid on its present life" and which therefore dealt chiefly with things of this life and even looked at religion and the Church as a factor in this life which affected their temporal existence rather than the future life. Hence it "brought with it a searching criticism of all medieval standards and, most of all, of medieval religion."

This change of thought led to various discoveries: the discovery of the globe, not by a few scholars,—they had long known that the



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earth was a globe, — but by the crowd, the great mass of the people; of the universe, the great number of stars surrounding the earth; of a new theory of planetary movement, which, whether right or wrong, was accepted by most of the leading minds and totally revolutionized previous concepts; a discovery of man himself, the anatomy of the body; of the substance of the earth, the chemicals and their action; above all, the history of the past was rediscovered, — and what was the result? That antiquity had known a great many things that the Middle Ages had lost, in literature, in art, in medicine, and law; why, Erasmus showed that they had even lost parts of the Bible. On the other hand, they found that they had believed many things for which there was no foundation; Lorenzo Valla proved that the Isidorian Decretals were false and that the Apostles' Creed was not written by the apostles; Latin was not a peculiarly sacred language; it was not even the original Christian language; no reason why worship should be couched in Latin.

The effect of all this on religious thinking can hardly be over-estimated. People began to put two and two together and found it made four. If the Pope had not succeeded in preserving all of these things, what were the chances of his having preserved the way of salvation aright? The many discoveries and inventions bred a monstrous opinion of human knowledge and accomplishments. Knowledge was power; they had discovered so much that they expected ever more; nothing was beyond their powers; a positive yearning for the unknown developed, a readiness to go anywhere, to look into every intellectual idea; restlessness, recklessness. Robinson has coined the phrase "questioning of authority, heavenly and earthly," for that movement which reached its culmination in rationalism and the French Revolution; it began with the Renaissance, its discoveries and its resultant new mode of thinking.

The scholarship of the Renaissance forms the background for the English Reformation. England was indeed not great in production, but it was very receptive. The number of editors and printers in England at the time was large. Caxton set up his printing-press in Westminster in 1476, and the number of books printed was so great that copies of a later date than 1500 have no market value to-day. And the people read. The downward spread of education was remarkable.

Abuses in the Church and the Papacy do not play a large rôle in English reform. Indulgences that were so great a talking-point in Germany existed in England, but not to the same extent as on the Continent. There were other abuses, but they were not greater than before, and so they were hardly regarded as an outrage. There was no particular personal feeling against the Pope. Tales of Alexander VI shocked England, but there had been bad Popes before.



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To be sure, the Pope did some peculiarly shocking things at this time. He made an alliance with the Turk.<sup>3)</sup> That the Pope sent an army against Venice was accepted as quite the regular thing; but that Pope and Turk in union should fight against Venetian Christians, that was going a bit too far. A head of John the Baptist was shown, and the Pope was asked to declare it genuine; but there were two heads of John already; nevertheless the Pope declared the third one genuine, too. But the objection was chiefly that such relics were historically absurd; the intelligence of the people was outraged by the Pope. When Henry had the shrines abolished, miracle-working statues, etc., destroyed, there was no evidence of any objection, not even of any public demonstration against it, rather some for it.

More: Historical research showed that the Papacy was not the Church of St. Peter. In the first place, there was no evidence that the early Church recognized a Pope; evidence was accumulating that the Donation of Constantine, many alleged decrees of early Popes, were forgeries. And then, a comparison between the Papacy of 1500 and the early Church showed that the Papacy was no longer that Church; luxury was too great. Too much English money was wasted. The no doubt inspired petition of Parliament for restraint of annates<sup>4)</sup> states that since the second year of Henry VII, 1486, "to the present time," 1532, "the sum of eight hundred thousand ducats, amounting in sterling money at the least to eight score thousand pounds," has been paid, "besides other great and intolerable sums, which have yearly been conveyed to the said court of Rome by many other ways and means, to the great impoverishment of this realm"; and they figure out "because that divers prelates of this realm be now in extreme age and in other debilities of their bodies, so that of likelihood bodily death in short time shall or may succeed unto them; by reason whereof great sums of money shall shortly after their deaths be conveyed unto the court of Rome, for the unreasonable and uncharitable causes above said, to the universal damage, prejudice, and impoverishment of this realm, if speedy remedy be not in due time provided."

Pertinent questions were asked: Why should the Pope have a greater palace than others and hang it with costly paintings, none too decorous at that? Why should the faithful be taxed to carry on the Pope's wars, above all wars against other Christians? Anyway, why should the Church have temporal power? It was not so in the beginning. This Papacy, which had become a temporal power, holding great feudal possessions, keeping a large standing army, much larger than England, involved in politics, making alliances and waging wars

3) J. A. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Age of the Despot*, ed. 1907, p. 325 f.

4) Gee and Hardy, p. 178 ff.



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like all other states, setting up a court to which appeal might be made from any other court in the land, a sort of supreme court for all the world, evidently this Papacy was not the Church of the early centuries. The foreign policy of the Papacy had become particularly flagrant in the fifteenth century; think of Julian II and his wars. It was a great offense to the English people.

In this respect the divorce of Henry was no doubt a great test case. Here was a moral question: Was Henry's marriage valid? And the Pope decided it purely on temporal grounds; his answer was dictated by Charles V. If, then, the Pope was a temporal ruler, why pay English money to a foreign prince? Why permit a foreign court any jurisdiction in England? It is rather evident that the English people favored Catherine of Aragon and did not like to see her set aside;<sup>5)</sup> but when the Pope ordered Henry to come to Rome for trial, that was a different story. Cardinal Wolsey judged the situation aright; to the English delegates at Rome he wrote (almost the last thing he wrote in office):<sup>6)</sup> "If the king be cited to appear in Rome in person or by proxy and his prerogative be interfered with, none of his subjects will tolerate it. If he appears in Italy, it will be at the head of a formidable army. . . . A citation of the king to Rome or threat of excommunication is no more tolerable than the whole loss of the king's dignity; they shall urge that his [the Pope's] desire to please the emperor at all hazards will alienate this realm from the Holy See." A late biographer of Henry (Chamberlin), rather vulgarly, but strikingly, comments thereon: "This was the crux of the whole matter so far as the Englishman in the street was concerned. He did not like the cut of Anne Boleyn's jib. He did not approve of his king marrying anybody below royal blood; and between Catherine, the daughter of the most powerful monarch on earth, and Anne Boleyn there was a very big gulf; but he was prepared to be damned before any 'spaghetti-eating dago' was going to *compel* a king of England to appear before him in Rome. The Pope had run counter to one of the peculiarities of the Anglo-Saxon race."

Nor was this feeling something recent. For centuries the English had more or less insisted on England's independence from Rome. Back in 1066 William the Conqueror had insisted that no one in England must acknowledge as apostolic the Pontiff in Rome or receive any letter from him without the king's consent.<sup>7)</sup> Henry II, in the Constitutions of Clarendon, 1164, ordains that no appeal be made beyond the king without his consent.<sup>8)</sup> When in 1301 Boniface VIII claimed Scotland as a fief of Rome, forbidding Edward I to molest the Scots, the barons sent a letter to the Pope in which they, 104 of

5) Fisher, p. 287.

7) Gee and Hardy, p. 59.

6) Pollard, p. 251.

8) Gee and Hardy, p. 69.



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them, devoutly kiss his blessed feet, but then go on to say that the Pope's letter had been read to them, "which being heard and diligently considered, we have heard matters therein contained as well astonishing to our feelings as before unheard of"; and they decide "that our aforesaid lord, the king, . . . shall in no wise answer judicially before you nor undergo judgment in any matter whatsoever; . . . neither shall he send into your presence proctors or nuncios for that purpose. . . . Neither do we permit, nor in any way will we permit, as we neither can nor ought, that our aforementioned lord, the king, even if he should wish it, should do, or in any wise attempt the premises so unusual, undutiful, prejudicial, and otherwise unheard of, . . . which we will maintain with all our power and will defend with all our strength, by God's help."<sup>9)</sup> In 1353 followed the Statutes of Provisors<sup>10)</sup> and Praemunire,<sup>11)</sup> the first making it illegal for the Pope to appoint church officials in England, the second making it a penal offense to recognize such officials or to endeavor to enforce the authority of papal bulls and provisions in England. For diplomatic reasons, of course, these statutes were often suspended. Wyclif, 1366, began his activities with a protest against the payment of the annual papal tribute, demanded (and sometimes paid) since John Lackland. It is an interesting speculation what might have happened had the kings at that time supported that antipapal movement instead of currying the favor of the clergy to support their tottering throne. Hence, while it is not true that the English Church was never subject to the Pope, as it is sometimes alleged, it is true that the Pope was less powerful and more resisted and disregarded in England than elsewhere; the English Church was subject less to the Pope and more to the crown than in other countries.

Moreover, the Church in England was not that strong, coherent organization it is sometimes pictured. In the first place, there is no strong relation between the English Church and Rome. The movement going on in all countries to nationalize the Church, which led to the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges in France and the Acceptation of Mainz in Germany, was especially strong in England; so the clergy of England supported the denial of the Pope's power of appeals and taxation; that would add to their own power and wealth. Then there was no unity in the Church itself. There were fights between bishops and archbishops, between the regular and the secular clergy; there was notable jealousy between the northern archbishopric of York and the much more powerful archbishopric of Canterbury. So Henry was dealing with a Church at odds with itself. In their struggles the clergy sought the king's help against the Pope and the Pope's help

9) Gee and Hardy, p. 89.

11) Gee and Hardy, p. 103.

10) Gee and Hardy, p. 113.



against the king; but the Pope was far off; the king was right there; he had the advantage.

That explains in part the evident fact that on the whole the clergy of England accepted Henry's changes willingly. Of course, the change was effected with a certain measure of deceit. It is fairly clear that the clergy consented to the first submission, 1532, partly, of course, because they were obviously guilty under the Statute of Praemunire, but partly because they expected to succeed to the Pope's power in England; but when it was too late, when the breach with Rome was certain, then Henry, quite unexpectedly, deprived the English clergy of their power; the second submission of the clergy, 1534, includes the stipulation that Convocation is to make no new laws, that their old laws are to be examined, and that both old and new laws must have the consent of the king. Very deftly Henry had placed himself in the Pope's place, and he could push this measure through Parliament because he had the enthusiastic backing of nobles and commons against the clergy. But even then there is no real opposition. Why should there be? Many of the new bishops owed their living to Henry; most of the abbots of the dissolved monasteries were made bishops; the other bishops kept their places. There was no denial of the Pope's supremacy in spiritual things; he was shorn only of his temporal power. The parish priests went right on in the old accustomed service; the Mass was not changed; none of the sacraments were changed. The entire sacramental and doctrinal edifice of the Church remained unchanged.

THEO. HOYER.

(To be continued.)

## Sermon Study on Heb. 10, 32—39.

(Eisenach Epistle-lesson for the 25th Sunday after Trinity.)

Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, is the theme so masterfully, so thoroughly, discussed in such classic language by the unknown author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. While his style in the first part, chap. 1—10, 18, is chiefly didactic, though with many a practical exhortation interspersed, beginning with 10, 19 the author assumes a tone prevaillingly hortatory, though occasional doctrinal passages of exquisite beauty are found. He draws the practical conclusion from his long doctrinal discourse, *viz.*, to accept Jesus as the one High Priest, 10, 22; to remain faithful, v. 23; to help one another in retaining their faith and faithfulness, 24, 25. In order to make his admonition the more impressive, he shows the dire consequences of wilful rejection of Jesus, the *only* High Priest, 26—31. In the lesson under consideration, 32—39, he directs the view of his readers backward, to their past experiences of the justifying, sanctifying, strength-