

Reflections on the English Reformation

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Perhaps no single country has so affected the life of modern Protestant Christianity as has England. Paralleling the worldwide expansion of the British Empire, English has become the international language, and no book has received such wide circulation as did the King James Version of the Bible. It was through the efforts of William Carey, an Englishman who became known as the father of modern missions, that in the nineteenth century—the great “mission century”—Protestant Christianity would enter its most expansive period of international growth.

While Germany is known for its scholarly theologians, English divines and philosophers have spearheaded major trends of modern thought, such as eighteenth-century empiricism and deism. Affected by the spirituality of their times, English writers—whether Shakespeare in drama, Milton in epic poetry, the Romantics in lyric poetry, Dickens in the novel, or Woolf in feminist themes—have influenced the public around the world.

To set the stage for this remarkable story, we go back to the time of the English Reformation. It is impossible to capture the many and complex strands of this history in a single work, much less in an essay of this sort. Moreover, it is a history that is constantly being rewritten and revised, with ongoing debates over unresolved issues such as how quickly or slowly the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism actually took place.¹ It

¹ See, for example, Margot Todd, Introduction, Margo Todd, ed. *Reformation to Revolution: Politics and Religion in Early Modern England*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-10. The book is part of Routledge's *Rewriting History* series.

is not our intent to settle such debates, but rather to outline with broad and, at the same time, historically accurate strokes the main themes of the Reformation and how they have had an effect on subsequent history. To that end, we shall review the history, the theology, and the legacy of the Reformation in England.

The History of the English Reformation

The history of the English Reformation is a complex mixture of church and state relations. It involved politics, personal ambition, intrigue, and, seemingly almost as an afterthought, some theology as well. In the final analysis, its inception is more the story of Henry VIII and his ambitions than of doctrinal disputes. This history unfolds through the drama of the reigns of the last four Tudor rulers, Henry VIII and his children, Edward, Mary, and Elizabeth.

Henry VIII (1509-47)

On the eve of the English Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church in England was a powerful institution, with some 12,000 monks and nuns in a population of 3 million people. The church also owned a quarter of the land and was a part of everyone's life: "Men with tonsures, a shaved patch on the top of their heads indicating their religious calling, were a very visible part of any community, a sign of the ubiquitous presence of the church."² No one would have guessed that this solidly Catholic country was soon to break with Rome.

Moreover, its ruler was a staunch defender of Roman Catholicism. Henry VIII was surrounded by a court of which Erasmus of Rotterdam said, "[There are] more men of

² Doreen Rosman, *From Catholic to Protestant: Religion and the People in Tudor England* (London: University College Press, 1996), 11.

learning at the English court than in any university.”³ The king soaked in much of that learning, and amid the turmoil following the dissemination of Luther’s *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517, he became a defender of Catholic orthodoxy. England forbade the importation of Lutheran books, and Cardinal Wolsey held two “well-publicized book burnings.”⁴ In spite of that, Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) did manage to get into England and into the hands of Henry. With its attack on the church’s sacramental system, the book struck at the heart of Roman theology. By July 1521, Henry’s personal response was in print.⁵

A gold-bound copy of *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* was sent to Pope Leo X, and English editions (*An Assertion of the Seven Sacraments*) were made available for the people. Against the most venomous serpent Luther, Henry called readers to put on the twofold armor of God: true celestial doctrine and terrestrial punishment of heretics. Pope Leo X enthusiastically gave Henry the honorary title of *Defensor Fidei*, Defender of the Faith, and added “[We] command all Christians, that they name your majesty by this title.”⁶ In spite of this, Protestantism established a precarious toehold in England.

In the 1530s the defender of the faith and the pope would part ways. The split arose from Henry’s desire to divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon, to whom he had been married since 1509 and by whom he was unable to have a male heir. Henry argued that the marriage was not legitimate in the first place since she was the widow of his older brother Arthur. Henry wanted to divorce her and marry Anne Boleyn, a lady of the court.

³ Quoted in Neelak S. Tjernagel, *Henry VIII and the Lutherans: a Study in Anglo-Lutheran Relations from 1521 to 1547* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ From the time of its publication, there have been questions as to how much of the *Assertio* Henry himself wrote. Yet he himself staunchly defended his authorship, and scholars have tended to agree with that contention. The evidence, then, indicates that Henry possessed some insight into theological issues.

⁶ Tjernagel, *Henry VIII and the Lutherans*, 10.

The pope, at this time Clement VII, was not inclined to grant the divorce lest he offend the Emperor Charles V, who was Catherine's nephew.

Exasperated by waiting for a papal dispensation that might never come, the king eventually took matters into his own hands. He secretly married Anne and in 1534, the same year Elizabeth was born to Anne, Henry broke with Rome and declared himself the religious authority of England. This was the Act of Supremacy, which the Parliament obligingly passed: "the king's majesty justly and rightfully is and ought to be the supreme head of the Church of England."⁷ Thus began the English Reformation. It was a reformation from the top down, involving church-state politics and Henry's lust.

One of the questions of the Reformation is how, if Catholicism was so entrenched, Henry was able so blatantly to defy the pope. Some historians, such as David Cody in the following entry, have argued that the stage was set:

There was, however, widespread discontent both at the extent of corruption within the English Catholic Church and at its lack of spiritual vitality. A pervasive anti-clerical attitude on the part of the population as a whole and in Parliament in particular made it possible for Henry VIII to obtain an annulment in 1533 of his first marriage (to Catherine of Aragon) in the face of papal opposition, and in 1534 the Act of Supremacy transferred papal supremacy over the English Church to the crown.⁸

Others, such as Eamon Duffy, have argued that point. In his monumental *The Stripping of the Altars*, Duffy contends that contrary to much historical thought, England was not ripe

⁷ Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, second edition. (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 227.

⁸ David Cody, "The Church of England," *The Victorian Web: literature, history, & culture in the age of Victoria*. <<http://65.107.211.206/religion/denom1.html>>

for ecclesiastical change. Rather, he says, English Roman Catholic spiritual life was vigorous and the shift toward Protestantism was not inevitable.⁹

In either case, there were other factors that help explain why there was no outcry against Henry. Three of them bear mentioning. For one thing, there was historical precedent for controversy and reform, and medieval Catholicism was not so monolithic as is popularly supposed. Doctrinal discussion and debate were ongoing activities, at times leading to change and acceptance, at other times to charges of heresy and suppression. One of the notable English examples was John Wyclif (†1384), who had translated the Bible into English and called for changes. Moreover, perennial pilgrimages to Canterbury and the shrine of Thomas Becket (†1170)¹⁰ were a constant reminder that English church-state relations had a less than perfectly harmonious record.

A second factor was the sheer strength of Henry's personality. To set himself against pope and emperor, he had to have a strong will. Henry was confident of his control over the English clergy, and he appointed Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1535. As second in command to Henry, Cranmer (1489-1156) felt conscience bound in his loyalty to the ruler. He was agreeable to Henry's reform and in doing so "was largely responsible for shaping the Protestant Church in England."¹¹ It seems that most people were either comfortable with Henry's changes—which, as we shall see, initially kept many Roman practices—or were willing to live with them.

⁹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ In 1538 Henry destroyed the magnificent shrine, "as that of a rebel against royal authority," and confiscated its treasures. Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949), 2:401.

¹¹ James Atkinson, "Thomas Cranmer," in Tim Dowley, ed., *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 1978), 390.

The third factor was the dissolution of the monasteries and nunneries. First Henry dissolved the smaller monasteries (376 in 1536); then in 1539 he dissolved the rest. With as much as twenty percent of the land having belonged to monasteries, this was a blow from which the Catholic Church in England could not recover: “[T]he loss of the monastic properties so weakened the Catholic Church in England that no effective resistance to the English Reformation was to come from that source.”¹²

Between the appointment of Cranmer in 1535 and Henry’s death a dozen years later, the king would enact much more that had bearing on the church in England. He also entered four more marriages. Anne was accused of adultery and treason, imprisoned in the Tower of London, and beheaded. The next day, Henry married Jane Seymour, who died shortly after bearing him a son, Edward. Next came Anne of Cleves, a German princess, whom Henry divorced. Wife number five was Catherine Howard, who was executed for adultery. Catherine Parr, a supporter of reformation, was Henry’s last wife. When the willful defender-of-the-faith-turned-reformer died, his passing was “unwept, unhonored, and unsung.”¹³

Just how Protestant was England at the end of Henry’s reign? That question is not unlike asking how solidly Catholic it was at the beginning. Again, there is debate. Many Catholic doctrines and practices remained in place. Yet, again, the picture is more complicated. Had Henry been devoted to Catholic doctrine, it is unlikely he would have left his son in the hands of Protestant protectors. This fact insured the transformation of English Catholicism into Anglicanism.

¹² Neelak S. Tjernagel, *The Reformation Era* (St. Louis: Concordia: 1968), 65.

¹³ Gene Gurney, *Kingdoms of Europe: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Ruling Monarchs from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Crown, 1981), 174.

Edward VI (1547-53)

Edward VI was only twelve years old when he succeeded his father. His reign is more the story of his tutors or advisors than of his own views. Along with Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer played significant roles, as did the continental Reformers Martin Bucer from Strasbourg, Peter Martyr from Italy, and John à Lasco from Poland.¹⁴

During the brief reign of the boy king, Protestantism established a more secure beachhead on British shores as the English Church became Protestant in doctrine and ritual. An example of this is the dropping of marriage as a sacrament, as it had been—and remains—in Catholicism. The service became simpler, and theology took on a stronger Reformed Calvinist tint. In 1548, the English Order of the Communion was added to the Latin Mass, and the following year saw the publication of the first edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*. While the English Ordinal of 1550 preserved much from the medieval church, it also made significant changes, such as dropping the old reference to purgatory.

A second edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* appeared in 1552 with Edward's royal assent, further instilling Protestant thought into English worship. The *Forty-Two Articles*, completed shortly before his death, discredited the Catholic doctrines of Roman primacy, infallibility of general councils, scholastic accretions to theology, transubstantiation, and the mass as a sacrifice.¹⁵ These articles, largely the work of Cranmer, became the basis for the *Thirty-Nine Articles* that under Elizabeth would definitively shape Anglican theology.

¹⁴ See Dowley, *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 386-7.

¹⁵ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 253.

With the death of the young king of tuberculosis in 1553, there were no males left in the Tudor dynasty to ascend to the throne. While his transitional reign marked a strong shift toward Protestantism, the church remained traditional in organization.

Mary (1553-58)

Like her mother Catherine of Aragon, Mary Tudor was a Catholic, and during her brief reign she did what she could to reintroduce Catholicism. From the beginning, Mary made mistakes that were to alienate her from her own subjects. The first was the execution of the innocent Lady Jane Grey, who had been proposed as queen. A more serious error was the queen's marriage to her cousin, Philip II the king of Spain, who would spend little time in England. Since anti-Spanish sentiment was growing among the English people, this powerful endorsement of a pro-Spanish policy could hardly have come at a worse time, especially coming as it did from a queen who unashamedly "scorned to be English and boasted her descent from Spain."¹⁶

In her pro-Catholic program, the queen again forced the clergy to give up their wives. She also had Latin reintroduced into worship. Most of the intellectual Protestant elite fled to the Continent; a few hundred people—about 300—were killed under "Bloody Mary." Among that number were Edward's theologians Latimer, Ridley, and Cranmer, who after wavering and recanting boldly confessed his faith and was burned at the stake in 1556.

Nevertheless, Mary was unable to take back the church lands. Nor was she able to stem the Protestant tide.

Elizabeth (1558-1603)

¹⁶ Ibid., 261.

Ascending to the throne on November 17, 1558, Elizabeth I, Anne's daughter, was to enjoy a long, glorious reign and become one of the most renowned sovereigns in history. The queen began her rule decisively, and by the end of 1558, Elizabeth's Act of Supremacy was in place. Much more would follow in the church-state arena, as Elizabeth would stamp upon English religion the features that were to endure.

While Elizabeth's religious convictions are not known for sure, she was most likely Protestant like her mother. Under Elizabeth, the Marian exiles who had escaped to Geneva during Mary's reign returned. Back also came the wives of the clergy, while a few staunch Catholics returned to the Continent.

After ridding her realm of recalcitrant Romanists, she developed a moderate Protestant church, as she perceived it to have been under her father. For Elizabeth, theology was secondary to politics, and in every respect the Church of England under the Elizabethan Settlement took the *via media*, the middle way. Whereas Henry had been Supreme Head, Elizabeth took the somewhat more conciliatory title Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity called for a revised, inclusive version of the *Book of Common Prayer* (1559). This was the third revision and remained in use much longer than either of its predecessors, until the Long Parliament of 1645 outlawed it during the Puritan Revolution. Meanwhile the church's official statement of doctrine, the *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1562), also sought to steer the middle way in regard to sacraments and the doctrine of predestination.

In 1570, the pope excommunicated Elizabeth. Referring to himself as "chief over all nations and over all kingdoms," Pius V declared her "to be deprived of her pretended

right to the aforesaid realm, and from all dominion, dignity and privilege whatsoever.”¹⁷

Among those who took the injunction seriously was Elizabeth’s erstwhile brother-in-law and suitor, Philip II of Spain. In 1588, this champion of the Counter Reformation assembled the “invincible” Armada, only to be defeated by the English fleet and Protestant winds. The threat of any Catholic invasion from abroad had passed.

The Theology of the English Reformation

From the time of Henry VIII’s personal and politically motivated break with Rome, various theologies were to feed into the making of the new church, producing what we know as the Church of England and some of the offspring it has spawned. We shall focus on four of them that represent the main currents of the English Reformation and its subsequent theology.

Roman Catholic Tradition

In spite of breaking with Rome and setting his country on a new religious course, Henry VIII had not completely severed ties with Roman Catholic doctrine. The rupture was more a working out of the medieval church-state issue than it was a matter of doctrine.

Even with the publication of the first *Book of Common Prayer* under Edward, the service retained Catholic elements, such as the commemoration of the Blessed Virgin and prayers for the dead.¹⁸ And after years of Protestant teaching, one minister reported in 1559 that most of his parishioners still believed “that a man might be saved by his own weldoing” rather than through the work of Christ.¹⁹ In much of England, Catholic

¹⁷ Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 240-1.

¹⁸ Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1947), 135.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53. Many pastors would still say that today after centuries of Protestant teaching; Lutheran theology refers to the *opinio legis*—the religion of law, the idea of salvation by works—as the natural,

practices such as Easter communion persisted, with only 1.3 percent of the eligible population of London not partaking in 1603.²⁰

Well beyond Elizabeth's time, English Catholics kept their faith. Some, the "church papists," outwardly conformed and attended Protestant services. Others who were landowners were able to maintain priests on their property. Still others, the "recusants," openly refused to attend Protestant worship and suffered fines or loss of property.²¹

The Anglican Church is unique among Protestant churches in that it never broke with the basic organization of Catholicism, but kept its diocesan and episcopal structure. To this day, the Church of England has retained the concept of apostolic succession, claiming that its hierarchy traces its origins back to the apostles by way of the severed Roman Catholic connection.

Lutheran Form

Most historians, even the eminent Roland Bainton, have tended to dismiss any Lutheran influence on the English Reformation.²² A fairly recent popularly written history of Henry's court is typical of that dismissal, noting that after the initial exchange with Luther, Henry delegated the anti-Luther polemics to More and others, "who all very ably refuted the reformer's arguments."²³ Nevertheless, several scholars, notably Neelak Tjernagel, have carefully researched the issue and found otherwise.²⁴

innate religion of man, from which he only with difficulty emerges and into which he readily relapses. (See, for example, Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* [St. Louis: Concordia, 1950], 1:8-9.) Nevertheless, the example is striking given the explicit changes taking place in the English Church.

²⁰ Rosman, *From Catholic to Protestant*, 51.

²¹ Diana Newton, *Papists, Protestants and Puritans 1559-1714* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10. Later, in the eighteenth century non-Anglicans, such as the Roman Catholic Alexander Pope (1688-1744), were unable to attend Oxford or Cambridge, an indication of the persistence of both Catholicism and anti-Catholic attitudes in England.

²² Tjernagel, *Henry VIII and the Lutherans*, 249.

²³ Alison Weir, *Henry VIII: The King and His Court* (New York: Ballantine, 2001), 232.

²⁴ See Tjernagel's works cited in the footnotes, especially *Henry VIII and the Lutherans*, 249-306.

In spite of Henry's desires to the contrary, Lutheran ideas had been the first to infiltrate across the Channel. Several key factors linked England and Germany in the early years of the Reformation. That common interest began with Erasmus's Greek New Testament in 1516, a book that was vital to German and English scholars alike. For political reasons, Henry had more to gain in an attachment to Germany, which chafed under the rule of his rival Charles V, than to either Charles' Spain or the France of his other great rival, Francis I. Moreover, Tjernagel points out that for Henry's purposes, "Lutherans were reprehensible neither for Anabaptist anarchy nor for Zwinglian theocracy."²⁵

There were many German and Lutheran connections, especially during Henry's reign. William Tyndale trained at Oxford and Cambridge, but also studied with Luther in Wittenberg. His 1525 translation of the Bible into English was printed in Germany and became a model for the King James Bible of 1611.²⁶ Other key English Bible translators, Rogers and Coverdale,²⁷ served parishes in Germany. The prominent figure in the Lutheran-English conferences of 1536 and 1538, Robert Barnes, spent three years there.

Thomas Cranmer, the single most influential figure in shaping Protestantism in England, was "Lutheran in his theology."²⁸ In compiling the *Book of Common Prayer*, Cranmer drew heavily from Lutheran catechisms and liturgies. One historian of liturgy notes:

Archbishop Cranmer was the leading spirit of the commission which prepared the *Book of Common Prayer* . . . Relations between the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Lutheran Liturgy have been close and consequential . . . The English Litany

²⁵ Ibid., 250.

²⁶ See Lewis Foster, *Selecting a Translation of the Bible* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1978), 20.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Dowley, *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 390.

followed closely Luther's revision through Hermann of Cologne . . . The orders for baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial reveal extensive indebtedness to Lutheran sources.²⁹

Well into Henry's reign, then, scholars had been interested in Lutheran ideas and developed their worship services in English, just as Germans were worshiping in the vernacular. For a time, Thomas Cromwell urged Henry to join a federation with Lutherans, but Germans would not condone his divorce, and he was not willing to accept the Augsburg Confession with its vigorous presentation of Lutheran doctrine.

In 1540, Henry's chaplain Robert Barnes and secretary Thomas Cromwell were executed (for political more than theological reasons), thus dissipating much of the impact that Lutheranism might have had in England. Tjernagel comments, "When Barnes died England lost its most effective opponent of the Zwinglian and Sacramentarian tendencies which were so strong in the Antwerp circle of William Tyndale, and in the English centers where Lollardy had survived into the sixteenth century."³⁰ Following Luther's death in 1546, Germans were less inclined to accept English refugees for fear of Charles V. Ultimately, Charles' defeat of the Germans destroyed the increasingly fragile connection.

Yet Lutheran influence lived on, as evidenced in the wording of the *Forty-Two* and *Thirty-Nine Articles*, which reflect the Augsburg Confession in clearly asserting, for instance, justification "by only faith in Jesus Christ."³¹ Lutheran wording and forms, in particular in the *Book of Common Prayer*, remained.

Calvinist Rationalism

²⁹ Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, 128.

³⁰ Neelak S. Tjernagel, *Lutheran Martyr* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982), 168.

³¹ Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 252.

In 1529, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and other German theologians met with Hulrich Zwingli, John Oecolampadius, Martin Bucer, and other Swiss and southern German reformers at the castle of Marburg, which belonged to the Lutheran Prince Philip of Hesse. While at first glance the Marburg Colloquy seems far removed from the English Reformation, two facets of the meeting relate closely to what was or would be taking place in England.

The first has to do with Zwingli's position at Marburg. Although the two parties agreed on a number of issues, they were unable to agree on the meaning of Christ's words in the Eucharist. Zwingli's side advanced the argument that a body could not be in two places at once and that Christ was using a figure of speech when he spoke of his physical presence in the sacrament. Luther had written *Hoc est corpus meum* ("This is my body") on the table where they sat, pulled back the tablecloth to reveal the words, and demanded what figure of speech was involved.³² What lay behind this stalemate at Marburg was the issue of rationalism over against an acceptance of the words of institution. The position of Zwingli and his followers has been expressed in the words, *Finitum non est capax infiniti*—that is, the finite is not capable of containing the infinite. The tendency toward rationalism was what would distinguish subsequent Reformed theology from Catholic and Lutheran thought.

The other significant aspect of Marburg was that one of the participants was Martin Bucer of Strasbourg. A mediator, conciliator, and a Zwinglian at heart, Bucer had tried to bring the two sides together. During the reign of Edward VI, Bucer was invited to

³² For a transcription of the Marburg Colloquy, see Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977) 151-238.

England, where he gave Cranmer much advice regarding the 1552 prayer book.³³ The second edition of *Book of Common Prayer* shows a Reformed influence. In the section on communion the wording was ambiguous so as to allow for either a representational or actual presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist.

Two years after Marburg, Zwingli's life was cut short by Catholic troops at the battle of Kappel. His name was soon to be overshadowed by that of another theologian who found his home in Switzerland, John Calvin. This reformer, who had studied under Bucer, was to have a immense impact on English theology. Many of the Marian exiles went to Geneva—where the Scottish reformer John Knox had learned his theology from Calvin—and returned to England as Calvinists.

Calvinist theology is reflected in the circumspect wording of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, in which the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation is rejected, while any reference to a real physical presence of Christ in the sacrament is vague. More than that, Calvinism is evident in the general tendency toward rationalism that would mark English thought.

Arminian Humanism

Arminianism goes back to the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (Jacob or James Harmensen, 1560-1609). His life spans the struggles of the Low Countries for independence from Spanish rule. The outcome of those struggles was that in 1607 three new countries were formed: Protestant Netherlands in the north, and Catholic Belgium and Luxemburg in the south. Both the northern and southern regions would play a part in English church history.

³³ Rosman, *From Catholic to Protestant*, 55-6.

Arminius had studied under John Calvin's successor Theodore Beza in Geneva. Upon returning to Holland he became a prominent pastor and professor until he felt conscience bound to side with the heretical—that is, anti-Calvinist—side of a debate concerning the doctrine of predestination. In order to understand his doctrines and his influence on Calvinism, it helps to grasp the three basic views of salvation as espoused by Calvinism, Catholicism, and Lutheranism.

Centuries before the Reformation, Augustine had refuted the teachings of Pelagius, who had attributed to human beings the ability to work out their own salvation.³⁴ Over the centuries, however, Roman theology had adopted a sort of semi-Pelagianism—crediting to God the initial infusion of grace, but leaving it to man to complete the project of salvation. In his rediscovery of the gospel, the good news of full and free salvation, Luther came to see salvation from beginning to end as entirely God's work, a free gift of grace that we receive through faith, which is also a gift.³⁵ If, on the other hand, we are lost, it is our own doing, a rejection of God's grace. The Council of Trent (1546-63) had anathematized this concept of the justification of sinners before God, pointing out the human responsibility both in salvation and damnation.

Calvin, and more particularly his followers, had developed a logically consistent schema. Emphasizing God's sovereignty, Calvinism came to see salvation and its opposite as entirely the work of God. This is the well-known double predestination dogma. God predestines some for salvation, others for damnation.

³⁴ For a helpful discussion of these doctrinal issues from a historical-theological perspective, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

³⁵ Luther wrote his in monumental *The Bondage of the Will*, a response to Erasmus's *A Diatribe or Discourse concerning Free Choice*, that this was at the heart of the entire controversy with Rome, *Luther's Works*, volume 34, ed. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

It was against this dogma, the “horrible decretum” of election, that Arminius took a stand. He argued that God predestined to salvation those who he foresaw would remain steadfast in the faith.³⁶ It was a shift back toward the concept of salvation through works. Arminius was accused of Pelagianism,³⁷ and the Synod of Dort posthumously condemned his teaching and developed the famous five points of strict Calvinism, with the appropriate English acronym TULIP:

T	total depravity (of sinful human nature)
U	unconditional election (without merit or achievement)
L	limited atonement (Christ died only for the elect)
I	irresistible grace (the elect are infallibly called)
P	perseverance of the saints (those predestined can in no way fall away)

The debate continued long after the death of Arminius (his followers were called the Remonstrants), and it had profound effects in England. Arminianism came to represent such tendencies as liberalism, the propensity to attribute some sort of innate goodness to human nature, an emphasis on man’s free will, an inclination toward an intellectualized interpretation of Scripture, and a leaning toward Rome.

The theological connections between England and the Netherlands were many,³⁸ and Arminianism found an early fertile field among English humanists, known as the Cambridge Platonists.³⁹ It also found a sympathetic ear among certain eminent English divines; and in the days of the Puritans it was favored by Anglican authorities against the Puritans, who held to a stricter Calvinism. John Milton, himself a Puritan, imbibed

³⁶ See Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, volume 2: *The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985, 179-83; McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 465-70.

³⁷ Already during his lifetime, Arminius was charged with Pelagianism; Gerald O. McCulloh, ed. *Man’s Faith and Freedom: The Theological Influence of Jacobus Arminius* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 17.

³⁸ David W. Davies, *Dutch Influences on English Culture 1558-1625* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 9-13.

³⁹ Rosalie L. Colie, *Light and Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

Arminianism. Charles I had strong Arminian leanings and excluded Calvinist bishops from the royal counsels, while protecting the Arminian writer Richard Montagu.⁴⁰ After the Restoration, the trend continued, as Rosalie Colie notes: “Arminianism penetrated everywhere in England, except of course among the Presbyterians, true Calvinists almost to a man . . . the reconstructed church after 1660 became increasingly so, until in 1688 the technical triumph of Arminianism was complete.”⁴¹

John Wesley’s parents were Arminians, and his mother wrote to him: “The Doctrine of Predestination as maintained by rigid Calvinists is very shocking, and ought to be abhorred; because it charges the most holy God with being the author of Sin.”⁴² Wesley had the letter printed in the first issue of *The Arminian Magazine*. For many, the slogan was to become, “Since Wesley we are all Arminians.”⁴³

Today Jacob Arminius, the “grand old man of modernism,”⁴⁴ is little known. Nevertheless, his influence on English and Protestant theology has been vast.

The Legacy of the English Reformation

The influence of the English Reformation on subsequent English and American history has been tremendous, not to mention the ripples that continue throughout the world. The unsettled nature of English theology created an atmosphere that was consistently open to new ideas and change. Here again, four features enter the picture.

The Puritan Revolution

⁴⁰ Nicholas Tyacke, “Puritanism, Arminianism and Counter-Revolution,” in Todd, *Reformation to Revolution*, 65.

⁴¹ Colie, *Light and Enlightenment*, 21, 14, 23, et passim.

⁴² Quoted in McCulloh, *Man’s Faith and Freedom*, 57.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

The persecutions under Mary had helped instill among the English a profound and lasting distrust of Catholicism. Nevertheless, with the passing of time, some Anglican clerics began to feel an affinity with Rome, in particular through the episcopacy. Whereas previous English churchmen had thought of themselves as Protestants, these clergymen were in a sense the first “Anglicans,” viewing themselves as part of a unique organization with strong connections to Rome. This was also the beginning of the High Church.⁴⁵

The propensity of Charles I toward Arminianism—and its connections with Catholicism—exacerbated a tense situation and was a major factor in the outbreak of the English Civil War, also known as the English or Puritan Revolution. Charles saw to it that Calvinist doctrines, such as that of predestination, were condemned and declared illegal and dangerous.⁴⁶ The king’s intransigence led to a civil war, and it cost him his head in 1649. It also led to the complete dissolution of the English monarchy for a dozen years, until the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660.

Tired of fighting over religious issues, many clergy took an attitude of indifference. Yet there was more to the Revolution than fighting and its aftermath. Dickens points out some of the positive aspects of the Civil War, such as “an independence of outlook [and] a confidence that the future belongs to God.”⁴⁷ Nonetheless, from this time on, the tendency of English Christianity toward rationalism would gain momentum. The Puritan Revolution left in its wake a doctrinal apathy that would become known as latitudinarianism.

The Glorious Revolution

⁴⁵ See Jean Comby, *How to Read Church History*, volume 2, *From the Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 54-5.

⁴⁶ Newton, *Papists, Protestants and Puritans*, 38.

⁴⁷ Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 271.

In this bloodless Revolution (1688-89), England rid itself of the closet-Catholic King James II. Following the Glorious Revolution, Anglicanism became shot through with latitudinarianism, and the Church of England sunk into a stupor, failing to care for the souls of its people. Against this backdrop of unconcern, the Wesleyan revivals showed that Bible preaching was still alive and well in England.

The evangelical movement that followed upon the Glorious Revolution instilled into society a sense of morality that would carry well into the Victorian Age.⁴⁸ Politically involved Evangelicals such as William Wilberforce (1759-1833) spearheaded the abolition of the English slave trade and the end to slavery in English colonies.

Rather than the hoped for unity within Anglicanism, the Glorious Revolution in effect saw just the opposite. Instead of two major blocks—Conformists and Non-Conformists—a “third party” now gained considerable influence. The Toleration Act of 1689 gave Dissenters the right to form congregations and build churches. With this freedom and with the internal threat of Catholic rule gone, Puritanism splintered into numerous dissenting sects, while the High Church element grew in strength.

Overseas Connections

The worldwide spread of the British Empire meant that its influence would encircle the globe and would include the transplanting of British religion in America and Britain’s role in the rise of modern Protestant missions.

The 1559 *Book of Common Prayer* served not only the England of Elizabeth I and her Stuart successors, but it was the first Protestant prayer book used in America, brought by the Jamestown settlers and others in the early 1600s.

⁴⁸ See Herbert Schlossberg, *The Silent Revolution and the Making of Victorian England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000).

While Catholicism and Lutheranism have found their way in America, Calvinism, especially of the Arminian brand, left an especially noticeable imprint on the country. This is evident in the First Great Awakening (1730s-40s) initiated by Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and the Wesleys. Paralleling the Evangelical awakening in England toward the end of the eighteenth century, the Second Great Awakening (1795-1810) also made an impact in America. The evangelist Charles Finney took Arminian theology to new levels with his high pressure style of having people make decisions for Christ.

The Episcopal Church is the American version of Anglicanism. In 1789, the first edition of the *Book of Common Prayer according to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* appeared.

On the rest of the worldwide front, it suffices to mention but one name, that of William Carey (1761-1834). Fired by the scriptural injunction to bring the gospel to all the world, this cobbler and self-made missionary set out for India in 1793. In so doing, he ignited a century of missions that would surpass all others: “His spirit was contagious, and it was his vision more than any other that excited the whole international Christian community to a world missionary endeavor. His ideas and his model of missions in India . . . spearheaded the greatest advance of missions in the history of Christianity.”⁴⁹

Intellectual Developments

Earthly institutions, including the church in its various outward forms, have the tendency to age and become rigid, and then begin to break down and decay. Within the Christian Church in England, several tendencies we have noted were to become dominant as time went on.

⁴⁹ Francis M. DuBose, ed., *Classics of Christian Missions* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 24.

From the days of Henry VIII, the English Church was closely bound to the English government. With Anglicanism's tendency to be little more than an arm of the government and to allow for doctrinal disparity, latitudinarianism was a natural outcome. Into the nineteenth century the Anglican Church remained a middle way, but had to widen its doctrines considerably. This process was facilitated to a considerable degree because many upper-class Anglicans, tired of doctrinal disputes, wanted only a rational, moderate, practical religion.

Nor is it surprising that rationalism and deism were nurtured in English soil. Lord Edward Herbert (1588-1648), brother of the posthumously famous poet-minister George Herbert, became the father of English deism. The English emphasis on morality over doctrine provides a natural segue into rationalism. In discussing John Locke and the latitudinarians, Hennig Graf Reventlow points out that when faith is understood in a purely rational way and is conceived of simply as "holding a dogmatic statement to be true," then "rationalism and moralism are closely connected."⁵⁰ Such rationalism arose not only among the philosophers, but found roots in the legacy of the radical reformers as well, and resulted in a "massive outburst of popular skepticism between 1640 and 1660."⁵¹

The English Reformation was a blend of many and conflicting elements. It began that way, and that was its legacy.

⁵⁰ Hennig Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 264.

⁵¹ R. J. Acheson, *Radical Puritans in England 1550-1660* (London and New York: Longman, 1990), 78.

A Final Word

It is ironic that three centuries after the Reformation, Catholicism was finally and fully accepted back into England with the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829. This act emancipated Catholics, and many high church Anglicans, most notably John Henry Newman and his followers, defected to Catholicism. A century later, T. S. Eliot would turn to Anglo-Catholicism to find his spiritual bearing. Had history come full cycle? Hardly. At least not in a return to its Catholic heritage. If anything, modern England has returned to its pre-Christian pagan roots, as witchcraft and the occult flourish while the Christian churches are all but empty.⁵² But that is another story.

In our overview of the English Reformation, we have seen that it was a complicated mixture of numerous elements. In many ways, theology played a secondary role to politics and as decades gave way to centuries it dissolved into the lowest common denominators of latitudinarianism, deism, rationalism, and unbelief. Already in the early years of the Reformation, the seeds of what became a generally consistent movement away from biblical Christianity were sown. At times that movement was slowed and even broken, most notably during the Wesleyan revivals and the subsequent evangelical spirituality and moral vigor of early Victorianism.

Nevertheless, even though the seeds were present and grew into the widespread unbelief of the twentieth century, Christianity was the main spiritual force animating the English people during the most glorious years of their history. Is it merely coincidental that the rise and fall of the British Empire should parallel the rise and fall of English

⁵² See, for example, David W. Hoover, who contends, "In Great Britain it is estimated that 50 percent of the people are involved in some way with the occult. In contrast to this, about 2 percent attend church." *How to Respond to the Occult* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977), 8.

Reformation theology? In describing the Empire as it approached its pinnacle, Lawrence James spells out the factors that contributed to British greatness, concluding, “There was also, and this was continually announced from the pulpit and set down in tracts and editorials, that inner strength and purposefulness that individuals derived from a Christian faith which set a high store on personal integrity, hard work and a dedication to the general welfare of mankind.”⁵³

For many people today, allusions to empire and religion in the same breath bring to mind everything they find wrong with the world. It is striking that England’s chief claim to fame in the late twentieth century should have fallen into the hands of a pop music group called the Beatles, one of whom would envision in song a world bereft of nations and of religion:

Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace . . . ⁵⁴

For others of us, this is not the solution. Rather, it is a matter of what kind of religion we have and what kind of nations we build. Like the British Empire, the Christian Church in England is but a shadow of its former self, yet its legacy lives on in other places.

⁵³ Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994), 169-70.

⁵⁴ John Lennon, “Imagine,” Bagism: John Lennon Discography,
<<http://www.bagism.com/lyrics/imagine-lyrics.html#Imagine>>