

Lecture 5: The British Reformation and After

1. "History Belongs to the Victors"

In this first part of our account of the British Reformation we are not going to rehearse its historical progress through the 16th and 17th centuries from the King's "Great Matter" - his divorce of Catherine of Aragon - to the end of the Stuarts and the definitive installation of a Protestant monarch in 1688. This story is well known, or if not, it can easily be researched.¹ Instead we shall grapple with the different interpretations of this history which, otherwise and unexamined, might prejudice our own Orthodox assessment and then move on to consider the evolving forms of British Protestant religion from 1559² onwards.

Although Sir Winston Churchill cannot be proven to have coined the phrase, it is often attributed to him and many certainly take it as a truism that:- "*history belongs to the victors.*" The outcome of the British Reformation, or perhaps one should say "outcomes," are claimed as different sorts of victory by competing parties within the Anglican tradition, (these being largely incompatible narratives of triumph); only victories in very limited and qualified terms by Puritans and their successors in England, (for whom the English Reformation did not go far enough), and, of course, by Roman Catholics as a series of unmitigated disasters. Over the centuries, historians belonging to all schools have published their own conformist and revisionist histories, most of them conditioned by both subtle, and some not so subtle, ideological and faith-based biases. The historian Norman Jones³ has caricatured these competing historiographies as follows:-

¹ Good overviews of both centuries can be acquired from articles on these two BBC web sites:-

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/reformation_overview_01.shtml

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/overview_civil_war_revolution_01.shtml

² The date of the Elizabethan Settlement when the first attempt was made to settle the religion of England.

³ Norman Jones: "The English Reformation: Religion and Cultural Adaption" (Blackwell, Oxford, 2002) p. 1

“Once upon a time the people of England were happy medieval Catholics, visiting their holy wells, attending frequent masses and deeply respectful of purgatory and afraid of hell. Then lustful King Henry forced them to abandon their religion. England was never merry again. Alternatively, once upon a time the people of England were oppressed by corrupt churchmen. They yearned for the liberty of the Gospel. Then, Good King Harry gave them the Protestant nation for which they longed.”

There is enough truth in this gentle and amusing caricature to account for centuries of divergent interpretations. In recent times, scholarly revisionism has inclined to a more Roman Catholic view, namely that the Reformation lacked popular support and had to be enforced, largely from above, (Duffy⁴, MacCulloch⁵, Haigh⁶). Certainly the Pilgrimage of Grace, the Lincolnshire Uprising⁷ and the persistence of recusant Catholicism⁸ - largely in the north of England - belies the tale that all ordinary folk welcomed Protestantism with open arms. Clearly, many of them did not and these still cherished the “old religion” whilst having to conform outwardly to the new and especially after the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559⁹ when penalties for non-compliance became much more severe. By then and indeed after the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder Plot to overthrow Parliament, Rome and the Papacy definitely became Public Enemy No. 1.

However, there are other accounts of the Reformation in Britain and elsewhere in Europe fashioned after the so-called Whig version of history which sees an onward march of freedom against tyranny in *all* matters ecclesiastical. Jones omits these secular historians

⁴ Eamon Duffy, *“The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580”* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2nd. ed. 2005)

⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch *“The Myth of the English Reformation”* (Journal of British Studies Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 1991), pp. 1-19 Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of The North American Conference on British Studies) Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175735>

⁶ Christopher Haigh, *“English Reformations”* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)

⁷ For both rebellions, see here:- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilgrimage_of_Grace

⁸ For recusancy, see here:- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recusancy>

⁹ For the Settlement see:- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabethan_Religious_Settlement

from his pithy introduction, but in truth they are a subset of the Protestant narrative, inheritors of the Puritan mind-set. These scholars marginalise theology and spirituality in favour of a theory that the monarchs of the emergent super-states of modern Europe were bound to confront the papacy and enlist Protestant dissent to their cause of establishing their political supremacy. The Tudor historian, Geoffrey Elton,¹⁰ gave 'credit' for this not so much to Henry but to Thomas Cromwell, his "fixer" in the reform of politics and the dissolution of the monasteries. Cromwell established a secure, vested interest in the Reformation (at the behest of the King) by bribing the aristocracy with appropriated monastic lands in return for political favours. With the middle management compliant, Henry was now able to consolidate his independence from Rome.

It is true of course that Luther would have achieved little without the German princes, Cranmer nothing without the patronage of Henry, but monarchy was not to everyone's liking. An absolute monarchy was no more acceptable to the Puritans than an absolute papacy. Before long the Puritan truce with monarchy died with the death of the Protestant Virgin Queen Elizabeth. It was well and truly buried when the Catholic-inclined counter-revolutionary Stuarts were perceived as rolling back hard won Reformation gains. England was then plunged into a Civil War ... only to react against Puritanism, re-embrace the monarchy and then face a new crisis with the accession of the Catholic James II. Thereafter the Protestant Succession was sealed in the so-called "Glorious Revolution" of 1688.¹¹

So, which version of history does one accept?¹² Can scholarship ever be truly objective and agenda-free? I think it can. Most recent revisionist analysis has concentrated on

¹⁰ Geoffrey Elton, "The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII" (Cambridge University Press, 1953).

¹¹ James was ousted and a foreign Protestant monarch, William of Orange was imported from Holland.

¹² Sadly in this overview we have had to pass over Scotland, which embraced a more thorough going Calvinism and Presbyterianism under the influence and leadership of John Knox, Wales which generally conformed and Ireland which resisted more, particularly in the dissolution of the monasteries.

documentary evidence from parishes concerning common peoples' behaviours and attitudes. The picture revealed, however, is complex. Adherents of the old faith were not always principled (there were many "Vicars of Bray"¹³) and sometimes Catholics looted and vandalised with the worst of the iconoclasts. Some accepted political realities and appeared to embrace change whilst leaving tantalising hints of secret dissent, (Shakespeare a secret Roman Catholic?¹⁴). These "ground level" researches enable us to glean a fairer and more accurate picture of British Christianity during the Reformation period. Neither does one have to choose between a political and a religious account of the Reformation. Both factors are undoubtedly in play. It doubtful, however, that without the State enforcing its will, popular religion would have of its own accord simply drifted into a more Protestant expression. In this period of British history the faith of both Monarchs and Lord Protectors of England really did determine how things turned out, on the long view at least.

Without getting too distracted by the detailed and complex history of the interplay between religious and political factors we shall now examine the evolution of Christian believing once Protestantism had really taken hold, as most scholars would agree, after the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559¹⁵ whereby the Virgin Queen tried to bring peace to her troubled realm. Elizabeth did this by trying to combine Calvinist doctrine and piety with episcopacy, monarchy and liturgical worship. Aidan Nichols¹⁶ has persuasively argued that this did little more than paper over the cracks rather than establish a consistent, coherent Anglican identity. Ambiguity may sometimes serve unity but it cannot hold people together in times of religious and political stress. The Civil War revealed this if nothing else. Party spirit and internal factions have never been too far removed from the Anglican enterprise.

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Vicar_of_Bray

¹⁴ For a summary of the debate go here:- <http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xCatholic.html>

¹⁵ For an overview of the Settlement see here:- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabethan_Religious_Settlement

¹⁶ Aidan Nichols, *"The Panther and the Hind – A Theological History of Anglicanism,"* (Edinburg, T & T Clark Ltd.) 1993

2. Anglicans – Reform, Revival and Reason

The tension then outright hostility between Monarchical / Episcopal and Republican / Presbyterian polities in the 17th century defined for good what became known as Anglicanism and Non-Conformity. Sometimes the law and the gun became as prominent as the pen and the pulpit. What emerged after the Restoration of the Monarchy was a two strand, two speed Reformation. First, we find a Church of England, still avowedly Calvinist in its formularies and doctrine, but less so in its retention of a relatively elaborate liturgical worship. This co-existed uneasily with other more hard-line Calvinist and Radical Reformers who rejected the new Prayer Book of 1662 and cleaved to their own assemblies and the Westminster Confession of Faith. Both strands were essentially conservative and restorationist. Neither tolerated the Anabaptists and the Radical Reformers who threatened the established order with their communes and exclusivist independence from the State. In Scotland the Puritans prevailed, in England, the Monarchical Episcopalians.

a. The Catholic Party

In England there were those (such as Archbishop Laud,¹⁷ Bishop Lancelot Andrewes¹⁸) who, whilst accepting without reservation the King's Sovereignty and the break with Rome, tried to hang on to a more Catholic doctrine and worship. These found ready support amongst the Stuarts but were deprived during the Commonwealth. When the Stuarts fell in 1688 their successors went once more into exile and became known as the Non-Jurors for their refusal to swear an oath of allegiance to King William, the imported Protestant usurper monarch of what they might have restyled as the IN-Glorious "Revolution" of 1688. These Non-Jurors, some 400 priests and nine bishops entered into formal talks with the Orthodox Church,¹⁹ principally, the Church of Russia in order to explore whether an act of union

¹⁷ For Laud, see:- <http://www.british-civil-wars.co.uk/biog/laud.htm> Archbishop Laud tried to consolidate a more catholic profile for the Church of England before being beheaded by the Puritans 3 years into the English Civil War (1645)

¹⁸ For Andrewes see:- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lancelot_Andrewes Bishop Andrewes oversaw the preparation and publication of the King James Bible, the Authorised Version. He was a humble man, highly respected and a defender of the Church of England's claim to uphold the catholic faith.

¹⁹ The correspondence between the Non Juring Anglican bishops and the Orthodox Church between 1716 and 1725 may be found here:- <http://pages.uoregon.edu/sshoemak/325/texts/nonjurors.htm>

might be possible. The Non-Juror movement, however, was disunited, being a company of those who wanted no change in the faith and life of the English Church as enshrined in the 1662 Prayer Book and others who were more amenable to reforms that would place them closer to the Orthodox. The tragedy of the failure of the Non-Jurors to be reconciled to Orthodoxy is a microcosm of the continuing problems of modern ecumenical dialogue with Anglicans. The cries goes up, both from the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches (usually of course in private, not publically):- “Which Church of England are we talking to?!”

Those who resisted Puritanism in the Church of England in the 17th century set a trend for subsequent periods of Anglicanism in which the fortunes of their inheritors waxed and waned according to the theological and political circumstances of each era. A self-sustaining myth arose in this catholic tradition that, notwithstanding the accepted influence of John Calvin, the Church of England was not Protestant at all but simply the Reformed Catholic Church of the British Isles. The Cambridge Camden Society²⁰ and the Oxford Movement²¹ of the 19th Centuries propagated this myth and managed to transform the High Church party of William Laud into a popular Anglo-Catholic movement. Often in conflict with a more Protestant establishment, and indeed the law, this so-called Tractarian movement produced many great Christian minds that varied in their religious sensibilities between remaining “Prayer Book” and Anglican and others who looked either to Rome or the Christian East for inspiration. However, this author believes with MacCulloch²² that the myth of this Anglican Catholic / Orthodox identity was and is delusional in that it was never the position of the whole of Anglicanism; nor could it be for a Church so imperfectly stitched together by the Elizabethan Settlement. All ecumenical dialogue has been made more difficult by these internal Anglican weaknesses. It might often *appear* that progress is being made but so often what Anglicanism does (the classic example being the ordination of women) contradicts prior agreements reached with ecumenical partners.

²⁰ For this Camden Society, see here:- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Camden_Society

²¹ For the Oxford Movement see here:- <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11370a.htm>

²² Ibid ⁵

b. The Rise of the Evangelicals

The inheritors of the Radical Reformation had not been entirely side-lined and repressed in the 17th century. Arguably the First English revival can be attributed to them and especially to those who became known as the Quakers on account of the high emotionalism associated with their meetings and preachings. Initially legally persecuted they were emancipated under the Act of Toleration of 1689.²³ The Quakers and Anabaptists were largely anti-clerical. They operated entirely outside the Church of England. Other revivalists would have more to do with the Established Church as we shall now see.

The departure of the Non-Jurors handed over the leadership of the Church of England, not to the Calvinist Puritans but to others influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism, being the stronger trend in the Establishment at the time. Often Deist²⁴ in theology and indifferent to the particulars of doctrine and worship, these so-called Latitudinarian clergy often cared more about their own position, good order and respectability than truth or mission.

18th century English Christianity, however, was moulded not by these often flagrantly heterodox modernists but by the leaders of the Second English Revival, the Methodists. Methodism was an offshoot from the Church of England and developed in parallel with and intersected the First Great Awakening in America. Methodists in England as in America operated from, largely, Calvinist or Arminian precepts. George Whitefield represented the former tradition, John Wesley the latter. Both were active in different ways on both sides of the Atlantic. In England Methodism saw the advent of a broader Evangelical movement that outlasted its founders. It has often been observed that Methodism and other variants of Evangelicalism made up for the Church of England's deficit in reaching out with the

²³ This did not of course apply to Roman Catholics who were socially disadvantaged until Catholic Emancipation became progressively enshrined in English law, first in 1778, 1782, 1791 and finally in 1829. The Act of Settlement of 1701 preventing a Roman Catholic from ascending the throne has, shamefully, not to this day been repealed.

²⁴ Deism is the doctrine that God is Creator but not Someone who subsequently intervenes in the created order. Rather He imparts to Creation laws that govern its autonomous existence and behaviour. Christ is simply taken as an ethical and spiritual teacher of the Kingdom of God. Reason and evidence constitute the sole criteria of truth seeking. In so far as Deism cannot accept, revelation, divine intervention, miracles and effective intercessory prayer, it is incompatible with Christianity.

gospel to the urban poor. It also inspired a reforming zeal in society and in Parliament in the 19th century. Together with the Oxford Movement, which shared similar ideals of progressivism and the common good, these revivals eventually fathered the Labour movement and thereby arguably averted any subsequent Marxist revolution in the 20th Century. Although Anglicanism remained dominant in the 19th century, Protestant Christianity became a lot more diverse at this time, especially after Catholic Emancipation.

c. The Challenge of Modernity

The 18th Century Latitudinarians morphed into something quite different in the 19th. A liberal tradition developed both in Anglicanism and the Protestant churches that was both learned and serious. It took many of its precepts from the Enlightenment and became committed to a rational account of faith that would engage with contemporary society. A key moment in growth in this significant movement was the controversial publishing in 1860 of "*Essays and Reviews*"²⁵ and collection of seven articles by prominent churchmen who sought to embrace the theses of higher biblical criticism and science. The "Broad" or "Liberal" Church movement *Essays and Reviews* inspired came to dominate British Protestant Christianity in the 20th Century. From the 1960's it became strongly associated with the Human Rights Movement and increasingly sceptical of the tenets of traditional Christianity. It has often caused serious problems in ecumenical dialogues. Nonetheless, its influence, perhaps disproportionate to its popular support, remains dominant within English speaking Christianity today. More traditionally minded Christians regard its triumph as contributing to the terminal decline of Liberal Protestant Christianity in the west.

²⁵ The 7 essays were as follows:-

1. *The Education of the World* by Frederick Temple—"a warmed-over sermon urging the free study of the Bible"
2. *Bunsen's Biblical Researches* by Rowland Williams—"denying the predictive character of Old Testament prophecies"
3. *On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity* by Baden Powell—"flatly denied the possibility of miracles"
4. *Séances Historiques de Genève. The National Church* by Henry Bristow Wilson—"gave the widest possible latitude to the Thirty-nine Articles and questioned the eternity of damnation"
5. *On the Mosaic Cosmogony* by C. W. Goodwin—"a critique of the attempted 'Harmonies' between Genesis and geology"
6. *Tendencies of Religious Thought in England, 1688-1750* by Mark Pattison—"a learned and cold study of the evidential theologians of the eighteenth century"
7. *On the Interpretation of Scripture* by Benjamin Jowett—"in which he urged that the Bible be read 'like any other book' and made an impassioned plea for freedom of scholarship"

3. Whither Christianity Now in Britain? – an Orthodox Perspective

Research conducted by Dr. Peter Brierley²⁶ shows that there were 340 Christian denominations in the UK in 2010 (as against 275 four years earlier), with 50,700 churches or congregations (2% more than in 2005), served by 36,600 ministers (4% up on 2005), and with 5,515,000 members. Church membership in 2010 was equivalent to 11% of the population, the proportion having declined fairly consistently since 1900 (when Brierley reckons it as 33%). There has been a UK-wide fall of 6% since 2005. Membership has been static in England between 2005 and 2010, increases in the New Churches, Orthodox churches and Pentecostal churches offsetting decreases in the traditional mainline denominations (with Methodists shrinking fastest).²⁷ By way of contrast, membership in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland fell by 15% during 2005-2010, largely due to decreases in the Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic Church in Northern Ireland.

On any reading these are sobering statistics. They may be interpreted as follows. All or none may apply. No prizes for guessing the Orthodox response(s).

- The nation is in revolt against God. No Christian should be disheartened but rather take comfort from He who is the just Judge of all.
- The nation is alienated from Christianity because those who historically have been charged with evangelisation have been and are:- (i) out of touch (ii) alienating (iii) spiritually moribund or heretical or both.
- The nation is not disbelieving but rather rejecting what it suspects to be inauthentic. Only Orthodoxy can deliver that which will really reverse the long term national decline amongst the heterodox.

²⁶ *UK Church Statistics, 2005-2015* (Tonbridge: ADBC Publishers, 2011, 136pp., ISBN 978-0-9566577-2-5). Post-dated references to 2015 refer to the fact that Dr. Brierley offers projections based on historical data.

²⁷ See the **Appendix** to this lecture for comparative charts on the decline of Christianity in Britain.
Source:- http://www.whychurch.org.uk/denom_trends.php

When we address the response of Orthodoxy to this parlous situation, however, the scale of the challenge that lies before us becomes very clear. Fr. Andrew Philips has provided some additional interesting statistics on this matter. These are consistent with other sources at this author's disposal and the other ecumenically garnered data²⁸:-

The population of the Isles (Great Britain and Ireland) is approximately 65 million. About 61.75 million or 95% of the population is of native stock and 48.5 million or 75% of these are English with 13 million or 20% being Celtic (Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Cornish and Manx). Of the 95% native population, a mere 2,000 (0.0003%) are members of the Orthodox Church and the vast majority of these are English. Celtic Orthodox are virtually invisible. Approximately 3.25 million or 5% of the total population are immigrants or descendants of immigrants born here (Eastern European, Indian, Pakistani, Caribbean, African, Bangladeshi etc). Of the 5% immigrant population, about 325,000 or 10% are nominally Orthodox. Of these approximately 63,000 (2% of the immigrant population or nearly 0.1% of the total population) are 'Orthodox', inasmuch as they practise their faith at least once a year. The total number of 'practising' Orthodox, immigrant and native together, is then approximately 65,000 or 0.1% of the total population. That is to say that one in a thousand of the total population of the Isles practises the Orthodox Faith at least once a year. However, most of these are concentrated in the large urban areas, above all in the London area. Here the figure for 'practising' Orthodox may be as high as 40,000 or 0.33% of the 12 million population of that area. This means that in the rest of the Isles, out of a population of 53 million, only 25,000 or approx. 0.05% are practising Orthodox.

There are no shortcuts to the re-evangelisation of Britain by the Orthodox. It took hundreds of years to make the isles Christian in the First Millennium. As heterodoxy now collapses on the cusp of the Third we need to hunker down for the long haul; but first we need to listen to the Divine Word, all-Orthodox together that is, in unity and truth.

²⁸ See here:- <http://orthodoxengland.org.uk/identity.htm>