

I

A Cambridge don,¹ Thomas Cranmer is said to have come to the attention of Henry VIII in 1529 by suggesting that the King might advance the annulment of his marriage to Katharine of Aragon by collecting favourable opinions from the universities. Cranmer was sent to Rome in 1530 to argue the King's case and in 1532 was Henry's ambassador to Emperor Charles V. In 1533 Henry named him Archbishop of Canterbury. On papal confirmation of Cranmer's appointment, he declared Henry's marriage to Katharine to be invalid and crowned Anne Boleyn as Queen.

This essay seeks to assess the contribution of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer to the reformation of the English church. The English reformation was complex and unique, not replicating all features of European reformation. For example, the English church retained the episcopacy and adherence to the concept of the apostolic succession - some argued that this diminished its reform achievement. This essay first looks at Cranmer's role under several broad headings - the introduction of the English Bible, and reform to church institutions, doctrine and liturgy. It then comments on Cranmer's contribution as a reformed theologian and the durability of his accomplishments.

II

The English Bible

Cranmer favoured widespread access to the Scriptures in English. Commitment to the use of the Bible was fundamental to his religious thinking.² By 1534 Henry VIII's earlier opposition to Biblical translators and translations, provoked by Tyndale, had declined. Influenced by Cranmer and Cromwell, the Convocation of Canterbury petitioned Henry that Scripture be translated and made available for the instruction of all. Coverdale's translation was the first complete Bible to be printed in English.³ Financially and politically sponsored by ecclesiastical Vice-regent Thomas

¹ Born in 1489 to a gentry family in Nottinghamshire, Cranmer studied at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he became a Fellow, took orders, and became a Doctor of Divinity in 1526.

² Cranmer's attitude to the Bible is exemplified by instructions he issued to the Worcester Cathedral Priory in 1535. The first item in the instructions told the monks to organize and attend a Scripture reading for an hour daily throughout the year and to cover the whole of the Bible from start to finish. He ordered that the Scripture should be expounded in English "according to the pure sense of meaning" of the text.

³ A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*. - 2nd edn. University Park: Pennsylvania State Uni. Pr., 1989, p. 152.

Cromwell and endorsed by Cranmer, the 'Great Bible' appeared in April 1539 and by the end of 1541 had been through five further editions.⁴ The importance of Cranmer's contribution to the successful publication of the Bible is disputed, though he contributed a preface to the second edition. In his study of Cranmer as a theologian, G.W. Bromley declares that, "Of all his achievements in the earlier period, the introduction of the English Bible was perhaps the most far-reaching and influential".⁵ Cranmer was able to contain attacks made by his adversaries against the English Bible. Nonetheless, an Act of 1543 was to exclude many on a class-basis from the privilege of reading the Bible.⁶

III

Institutional reform

Henry's break with the papacy required theoretical justification if the King were to carry his catholic nation into schism. Humanist writers criticised the papacy and some aspects of the old cults, such as papal indulgences. The ten articles of 1536 and the two sets of injunctions of 1536 and 1538, together with the *Bishops' Book* of 1537, sought to strip away many of the festivals, relic-cults, shrines, and parts of the service for the dead. These changes, however, were directed to reform of the church and providing a rationale for a break with Rome. They were not based on positively stated Protestant doctrine. The dissolution of monasteries and appropriation of their property in 1535 and 1536 similarly had little explicitly doctrinal rationale and was directed to institutional reform and Henry's financial and political needs.⁷ A.G. Dickens portrays Thomas Cromwell, rather than Cranmer, as the principal reforming force in the years before Cromwell's fall from grace and execution in 1540.

Especially during Edward's reign, Cranmer was strongly disposed to link England with international Protestantism by consulting governments and scholars abroad. For Cranmer, true catholicism was to be found in the scattered churches of the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁵ G.W. Bromley., *Thomas Cranmer: theologian*. - London: Lutterworth, 1956, p. xiv.

⁶ On Christmas Eve 1545, Henry famously complained to Parliament that the "most precious jewel, the word of God, is disputed, rhymed, sung and jangled in every ale house and tavern." - Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 213

⁷ The dissolution of the monasteries and the management of ex-monastic lands by the Court of Augmentations established in April 1536 by Thomas Cromwell was not particularly Cranmer's policy. According to Dickens, the division and purchase of the monastic lands was undertaken not by men of the new faith but by their opponents, Henrican Catholics who were in time to become pillars of the Catholic reaction under Mary. - Dickens, *op. cit.*, p.172.

reformation. He therefore desired to show their unity as a symbol of their catholicity.⁸ But Cranmer failed to persuade any representative leader of the Lutherans to visit England.⁹ Foreign influence upon the English reformation became increasingly Calvinist and Zwinglian. Notable among the foreigners welcomed in England was Martin Bucer. In the reforms of Edward VI's reign, Cranmer was also assisted and influenced by other English clerics - Hooper and Ridley and Holgate were among those of importance.¹⁰

Cranmer also sought to revise and codify the canon law. The task was arduous. The canon law was somewhat shambolic and had many foes who preferred that it fall into disuse and be replaced by civil law. Cranmer's *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* remained unpublished until some time after his death. It proposed wide-ranging revisions, as well as annual diocesan conferences attended by laymen in addition to clergy. Had they been instituted, such conferences may have avoided later difficulties, but none of Cranmer's proposed reforms to canon law were enacted.¹¹

IV

Doctrinal reform

At first Cranmer held to a belief in transubstantiation, but later came to believe that Christ was only spiritually present in the bread and wine, while continuing to hold the sacrament in great reverence. Henry VIII remained staunchly Catholic in doctrine and the doctrine of transubstantiation was enforced. A number of early English Lutherans were burned as heretics. The King detested Luther and loathed the Swiss 'heresies' against the presence of Christ in the sacrament.¹² It was only Henry's personal protection that ensured Cranmer's survival.¹³

Evidence of Cranmer's changing views came when in 1534 he made Hugh Latimer royal chaplain. Latimer had been converted to reformed doctrines in 1524.

⁸ Dairmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: a life*. - New Haven: Yale, 1996, p. 617.

⁹ Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

¹⁰ See Dickens, *op. cit.*, pp. 270ff.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.279-280.

¹² The *Bishops' Book* clearly upheld transubstantiation, made no distinction between scriptural and non-scriptural sacraments and condemned the ministry of communion in both kinds to the laity. (Yet it was also critical of papal corruption.) - *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹³ Gardiner, commanded an easy majority in Convocation and Cranmer had few episcopal supporters. When a group of Canterbury canons made charges of heresy against their Archbishop, Henry (though possibly agreeing with substance of the charges) placed Cranmer in charge of the enquiry against himself. - Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

Dickens suggests that Cranmer was the main English exponent of the 'true presence' belief agreed between Calvin and Bullinger in the Zurich agreement of 1549.¹⁴

During 1539-1543, certain catholic beliefs and practices were reaffirmed, heretics were burned, and Bible reading restricted. Cranmer opposed the 1539 *Act of Six Articles* which, among other things, reinstated clerical celibacy, forcing him to send away his wife. Though, as MacCulloch puts it, "the King's own theology became a moving target during the 1530s,"¹⁵ as long as Henry VIII lived, the archbishop could not openly promote significant doctrinal changes.

In Cranmer's view, Christian doctrine was to be formulated in close conformity with Scripture, proclaimed by the Christian monarch in Parliament and accepted without opinionated haggling over the details.¹⁶ Cranmer came to see the sovereign as God's instrument to be obeyed even with respect to the Church, and thus he rejected papal supremacy.

The possibility of doctrinal reform changed with the accession in 1547 of the young Edward VI. Cranmer issued definitively Protestant works, notably the first *Book of homilies*, a set of twelve official model sermons, some of which Cranmer wrote himself. A code of doctrine appeared as the forty-two *Articles of Religion* in 1553. The *Homilies* were amplified and reissued under Elizabeth. Cranmer's Articles led eventually to the Elizabethan thirty-nine Articles, which Dickens describes as forming "a decisively Protestant interpretation of the faith,"¹⁷ still deserving of serious study.¹⁸

V

Liturgical reform

From 1540 onwards, Cranmer became concerned with revision of the English liturgy and, as with the Bible, making it more accessible through the use of the vernacular. Henry gave Cranmer authority to promote his own *English litany* while

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁵ MacCulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 613.

¹⁶ Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 282. Dickens goes on to comment that, "Despite the bargaining which seems to underlie them, the Articles cannot justly be dismissed as mere timid compromise; their flexibility represents at least the dawning of the notion that honest doubt, alternative solutions and agreements to differ had their places in the doctrinal sphere." The authors of the Articles, "cannot be blamed if at later times misguided people took them as

suppressing liturgical projects such as the 1543 *Rationale of ceremonial* produced by a committee of Conservative bishops. Henry did not envisage doctrinal change when he permitted Cranmer to plan a modification of the mass by the insertion of devotional passages in English. Yet this early work embodied a radical change of purpose for the mass, with infrequent lay communion and the private masses of medieval custom to be replaced by regular congregational services.

Henry died in 1547. Cranmer's first version of the *Book of Common Prayer* issued in 1549 under the new regime was conservative. Yet it provoked rebellion in South-Western England. (Dyson Hague makes the interesting point that the very titles used in the prayer book, "The Supper of the Lord" and "Holy Communion", would have seemed strange to those accustomed to the mass.¹⁹) Cranmer's most explicitly Protestant liturgical document was the 1552 second version of the *Book of Common Prayer*. It had Zwinglian tendency: the mass became communion, tables replaced altars, and surplices replaced Eucharist vestments. The 1552 book was to be the basis of Elizabeth's prayer book of 1559. The 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, still widely used, also has Cranmer's second version as its ancestor - though its eucharistic liturgy makes some "catholic" compromises.²⁰ (MacCulloch suggests that Cranmer may have looked askance at the "delicate subversion"²¹ of his eucharist by the 1662 revisers.)

Parliamentary Acts of uniformity enforced liturgical conformity with the books of *common prayer*. In the 1549 Act, Parliament established a precedent by itself authorising doctrine and liturgy, which had been a royal preserve since 1534.

According to Dickens, little is known of the genesis of the second prayer book but its literary qualities derive from Cranmer's book of 1549.²² Scholars have differed on Cranmer's personal intentions for the book and on the degree of his personal

something which Protestantism of its very nature cannot and must not suppose itself capable - an immutable, obligatory and comprehensive code of beliefs."

¹⁹ Dyson Hague, *The story of the English prayer book*. - 3rd edn. - London: Church Book Room, 1949, p. 133.

²⁰ For example, and importantly, the 1549 Prayer Book has at the administration of the sacrament, "The body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life", whereas the 1552 book has, "Take and eat this, in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving." The 1662 words are an amalgamation of *both* texts. See *Prayers of the Eucharist: early and reformed* / edited by R.C.D. Jasper and G.J. Cuming. - 3rd edn. - Collegeville: Liturgical Pr., 1990, pp. 232-249.

²¹ MacCulloch, *op.cit.*, p. 628.

²² Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

responsibility for its more advanced features, though it seems he drew on many written sources and on conversations with contemporary advisers.²³

A rich part of Cranmer's liturgical legacy is the daily office as it appears in Morning and Evening Prayer. No longer was the office the exclusive province of the religious and the clergy. However, MacCulloch maintains, Cranmer would not have cared for the Cathedral tradition of Evensong with its complex music. Nor, MacCulloch argues, would Cranmer have approved of an evensong where a little depth of commitment is required of the worshipper.²⁴ MacCulloch nonetheless says that Cranmer left us a liturgical vehicle, in which we can "look beyond the surface of events and say that there is more to human life and creation than the obvious, the everyday."²⁵

Cranmer defended his prayer book and its contents, refusing the Council's demand that he modify the rubric directing that people receive Communion while kneeling, though he could not prevent insertion of the so-called "black rubric", which denied any intention to adore the elements.²⁶

Cranmer also consulted his contemporaries in making his 1550 revision of the Ordinal, the alleged imperfections of which were later to form a basis for rejection by Rome of Anglican orders. Yet this first ordinal was a conservative document, modeled on medieval sources, though restricting the orders to those of bishop, priest and deacon. It preserved the custom of delivering a paten and chalice to newly ordained priests and a pastoral staff to bishops. But in the case of priests, Cranmer added the Bible, to indicate their preaching function. When a further revision of the Ordinal was incorporated with the 1552 prayer book, Cranmer made the Bible the only 'instrument' delivered to bishops and priests alike.²⁷

²³ Dickens concludes that there is little direct evidence on this (*op. cit.*, p. 278). R.T. Beckwith asserts that the prayer books were very largely Cranmer's work. (R.T. Beckwith, "Thomas Cranmer and the Prayer Book" in *The study of liturgy*. - Rev. edn / edited by Cheslyn Jones and others. - London: SPCK, 1992, pp. 101-5, at p. 102.). Others seem to show that Cranmer drew on many written sources in compiling the 1552 prayer book, as well as discussions with contemporaries including Bucer, Vermigli and Hooper. For a detailed analysis, see Samuel Leuneberger, *Archbishop Cranmer's immortal bequest*. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, pp. 13-127. MacCulloch (*op. cit.*) follows Cranmer through the composition, the sources used and how Cranmer used them.

²⁴ MacCulloch, *op.cit.*, p. 630.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 630.

²⁶ Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.270.

VI

Liturgy and language

Cranmer improved the accessibility of the liturgy, bringing all that was necessary together in one book in the common tongue. It is doubtful that he intended his services to be used for 400 years. They were, however, intended for repeated and relatively frequent use. Cranmer's text, whether or not a patchwork of other sources, has long been appreciated as from a writer with an ear for formal English prose.

Contemporary scholarship indicates the fundamental importance of the structure of language to our lives and culture. If, as MacCulloch asserts, "Cranmer's language lies at the heart of our English-speaking culture",²⁸ Cranmer's contributions to our language may be his greatest monument. But such an assessment has its critics.²⁹ One might also comment that a contribution to English religious literature is not *ipso facto* a contribution to religious reformation.

VII

Cranmer as theologian

While there is widespread acknowledgement of Cranmer's gift for liturgical language, his status as a theologian is more debated. Yet his use of his gifts to frame a theologically reformed liturgy is as important, or more important, than simply the literary quality of his prose. Dickens describes Cranmer's liturgical work as, "a solid basis for Elizabeth's resumption of the Edwardian experiment".

More than any factor this work gave a distinctive and unique flavour to the national church. Cranmer bequeathed to the latter a liturgy too politically and emotionally attractive to be displaced by Calvinist or other continental models; he also preserved some catholic elements which half a century later attained a new importance ...³⁰

²⁸ MacCulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 632.

²⁹ One view is that, partly memorised by many, Cranmer's liturgies have become part of English literary heritage and have influenced the religious thinking of many English-speaking people. On the other hand, Donald Gray comments tellingly that,

It is all too easy to idealize any historic connection between Anglican liturgy and society. In England, although claims can be made, and often are, for the integral place of the book of Common Prayer in the life, consciousness and culture of the nation, on careful examination they can be seen to be, to a certain extent, elitist claims made by and for section of the society in which there was both the time and the opportunity for worship. There were huge areas of England ... where the writ of the Prayer Book did not run, and ignorance of its contents and provisions were widespread.

- Donald C. Gray, "Liturgy and society" in *The identity of Anglican worship* / edited by Kenneth Stevenson and Bryan Spinks. - Harrisburg: Moorehouse, 1991, pp. 135-143, at p. 135.

³⁰ Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

Colin Buchanan, in a study of Cranmer's theology based on his eucharistic liturgies, makes the point that, "Cranmer the disputing theologian and the writer of new liturgy are bound together in the one person. He was still the theologian when he was the writer of the liturgy..."³¹ Except for its literary style alone, Cranmer's liturgy cannot be valued apart from the theology it embodies. G.W. Bromiley, concluding an assessment of Cranmer as a theologian, finds him to be, "a capable and well-read theologian" who had "a vast store of biblical and patristic knowledge upon which he could draw at once in his handling of any point at issue."³² Cranmer's main strength was in scholarship, Bromiley concludes, rather than creative theology. But Cranmer's statements were clear, well supported, and argued with acumen.

The *Articles of Religion*, largely Cranmer's work despite revisions, are comprehensive but not excessively generalised or vague. Cranmer was concerned to ensure that the reforms of his day were well grounded in Scripture and in patristic thought. In his teaching, the incarnation assumes an importance that remains influential in Anglicanism and he had a strong appreciation of the action of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Yet,

these positive insights are present in Cranmer only in what we might describe as embryonic form. Cranmer himself was too confined by controversial requirements to develop with any richness an alternative doctrine.³³

On the other hand, Euan Cameron says of Cranmer that, "his diffidence in theological controversy has denied him the status of a founding reformer."³⁴ Cranmer seems to have had a but a troubled humility, intense loyalty to the Crown, and a preference for very gradual change. Cranmer had an ability to see his opponent's point of view - not a common attribute during the Reformation. He was tolerant towards conservative opponents, whom he thought to win over by gradualism and persuasion.³⁵

We do not know why, after half a lifetime of quiet conformity, from 1533 onwards Cranmer began to write with increasing bitterness against the Catholic

³¹ Colin Buchanan, *What did Cranmer think he was doing?* - 2nd. ed. - Bramcote: Grove, 1982, p. 3.

³² Bromiley, *op.cit.*, p. 97.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

³⁴ Euan Cameron, "Cranmer, Thomas (1489-1556)" in *The Oxford companion to British history.* / edited by John Cannon. - Oxford Uni. Pr, 1997, p. 258.

³⁵ However, despite Cranmer's natural humanity, just over three months into his time as Archbishop, John Frith was burned at Smithfield on July 1533 for denying that purgatory and transubstantiation were necessary dogmas. It was not Cranmer who called for the sentence, but he did not apparently intervene to prevent it.

Church.³⁶ There is, MacCulloch says, a sense of a sharp break in Cranmer's views in 1531. "It was a remarkable step to take in middle life, from a man who was temperamentally and habitually disposed to caution ... "³⁷ "In latter life his courage rose in fits and starts, yet he gave more evidence of that virtue than did the majority of men in high office."³⁸

In studying the doctrinal debates of Cranmer's time, historians have the difficulty of understanding what was, for example, the meaning of the Eucharist as opposed to our own understandings.³⁹ Cranmer was a theologian for his day, as every theologian should be to some degree. He showed clear and bold understanding of the themes that were his primary concern. His work distinguished between things essential to faith and salvation and things not essential (*adiaphora*). He could see both sides of a vexed issue and was not so dogmatic as to be unwilling to change his views in the light of fresh understanding.

VIII

How durable was Cranmer's contribution?

Edward VI's youth was a symbol of hope. There was a mood of optimism and fervour in the church, and rapid momentous change. MacCulloch⁴⁰ shows that as the truth liberated the populace, many came to love the Bible. Iconoclasm, the ending of religious processions and the discarding of Latin service books gained widespread approval. The Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the beatitudes and other Scriptures were displayed on the walls of churches.

Following Mary's accession to the throne, Cranmer was imprisoned and persuaded under duress to sign recantations accepting key Catholic doctrines. He publicly withdrew the recantations shortly before he was burned as a heretic on 21 March 1556. His execution became a propaganda disaster for the Catholic cause.⁴¹

³⁶ MacCulloch, *op.cit.*, p. 613.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 612.

³⁸ Dickens, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

³⁹ "We find the reformation disputes about the Eucharist baffling because the meaning of the service has shifted for Catholic and Protestant alike. For modern Western Christians it is primarily the service of the living ... For the late medieval Church the mass had become as much something for the dead as for the living... a gigantic consumer demand of the dead fuelled the services of the church. It was to change this that the reformers struggled. Insisting that the just shall live by faith alone ... " - MacCulloch, *op. cit.*, pp. 613-4.

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*

⁴¹ For detail of these complex events, see David Loades, *Cranmer and the English Reformation*. - Bangor: Headstart, 1991, pp. 24-40.

The Elizabethan Settlement returned to the outward form of the Edwardian church, but its spirit was weakened. Elizabeth broke with continental Calvinism by preserving the rule and dignity of bishops. Reformist preaching was discouraged. Elizabeth's religious policy established a version of the church as it had been in September 1552. She declined to revive Cranmer's scheme for reform of canon law.⁴² For good or ill, Elizabeth nullified some of Cranmer's reforms, and the ultimate effect of his contribution was to that extent lessened. There remained those who detested Cranmer's prayer book - whether Catholic on one hand or puritan on the other, and Elizabeth faced a difficult task in finding a middle path.⁴³

Nevertheless, as we have noted, the prayer book, ordinal and articles enacted by Elizabeth's parliament were in large measure Cranmer's. Had the Edwardian formularies not been available as a resource, the eventual Elizabethan outcome may well have been more conservative. The theology of these formularies was sufficiently sound that the Church of England and its daughter churches adopted and retained the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, together with the ordinal and articles, as their doctrinal standard.⁴⁴

MacCulloch argues that Cranmer was driving the Church of England to a renewed catholicity, avoiding on the one hand Papistry, and on the other hand Anabaptism, both equally 'sects' in his eyes.⁴⁵ In later centuries, Cranmerian religion was to have a succession of critics, particularly from the Catholic tradition. The Church of England as a whole never returned to a reformed stance as strong as that embodied in the late Edwardian formularies. Yet it seems reasonable to agree with MacCulloch that, "the Church of England was in fact permanently shaped by the reign of Edward VI; and the responsibility for that shaping was in the hands of the one man who remained at the centre of religious policy throughout Edward's reign, Thomas Cranmer."⁴⁶

⁴² MacCulloch, *op. cit.*, p. 620.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.625.

⁴⁴ The durability of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* as a doctrinal standard is evidenced by its continuing use by evangelicals in particular to defend their positions. For example, a report by the Diocese of Sydney's Doctrine Commission, finding that *A Prayer Book for Australia* diverged unacceptably from the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, was influential in that Diocese's decision not to use *A Prayer Book for Australia*.

⁴⁵ MacCulloch, *op.cit.*, p. 617.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 629.

Cranmer's most important reforming achievements are embodied in the great documents he produced. The access to the Bible and adherence to its teachings that he fostered was also significant. Cranmer did much more than write liturgy and doctrine. But had he not done these things as well as he did, the accomplishments of the sixteenth century English reformation may have been less enduring than they have been.

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