



44: Is the Church of England Catholic or Protestant?

It all depends, as a famous broadcaster once said, on what you mean by 'Catholic' and 'Protestant'. Henry VIII originally broke with Rome for political rather than religious reasons. The King wanted his marriage to the Spanish princess Catherine annulled, as she seemed unable to provide him with a male heir.

The Church had sometimes bent Canon Law to oblige monarchs in the past, but this time there was a complication. Rome was occupied by the troops of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, Catherine's nephew. The Pope, Clement VII, was in his power and most reluctant to offend him. Thomas Cranmer, a cleric and a Cambridge don, had been influenced by the arguments of Luther and the other Reformers.

He persuaded the King that the Pope's claims to be the universal final authority in matters of religion were unsupported by Scripture. What a Tudor monarch wanted, he (or she) got. At Henry's bidding, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, effectively abolishing the Pope's jurisdiction in England and making the King Supreme Head of the Church in England 'as far as the law of Christ allows'.

Henry had no thought of founding a new Church. Mass continued to be celebrated as before, in Latin. But changes there were. Henry was very short of money. Monasteries and nunneries were suppressed, in two stages, and their wealth seized by the Crown.

Having gained the King's confidence, Cranmer persuaded him to allow a copy of an English translation of the Bible to be placed in every church. However, he had to move cautiously - an order was subsequently issued that servants and women were not to be allowed to read it. It was not until after Henry's death that the Latin Mass was suppressed and a complete English Prayer Book was issued. This was for the most part a translation of the Latin 'Sarum Use' previously used in many English dioceses.

Cranmer was still in touch with the Continental reformers, and in 1552, the last year of the reign of Edward VI, a rather more Protestant version of the liturgy was published. Altars were moved from the East end of churches, and placed lengthways in the

nave or chancel to serve as 'holy tables' for the administration of Communion.

However, on the young king's death, he was succeeded by his older sister Mary, Queen Catherine's daughter. Fiercely loyal to the memory of her mother, and the Roman Catholic faith, she set to work to restore the link with Rome and stamp out all trace of Protestantism. Many of Cranmer's changes had been unpopular in the country, though not everywhere, and at first people welcomed the new policy. But the numerous burnings of 'heretics' caused a revulsion. Mary died in 1558, and was succeeded by her half-sister Elizabeth.

Elizabeth wished to restore, as far as possible, the Church of England as it had been at the death of her father. But she hoped to maintain religious peace. A new Act of Supremacy proclaimed her only 'Supreme Governor' of the Church in England.

In 1562, she reissued Cranmer's second Prayer Book, with some minor alterations rowing back slightly from the Reformed position. But this was unacceptable to those clergy who had fled to the Continent from Mary, and now returned having absorbed the Calvinist teaching of the more advanced Protestants.

These were the famous 'Puritans'. They did not want to break away into a separate denomination, however - that would have been illegal. They wanted the Church of England to come round to their way of thinking. The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, issued in 1571, proclaimed a doctrinal position somewhere between Luther and Calvin. The Articles deny the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament (which Luther accepted), and teach justification by faith alone, but not that God predestines people to salvation or damnation.

The Puritans had great hopes when Elizabeth was succeeded by James of Scotland, who had had a strict Calvinist upbringing from which he escaped with relief. He refused to change the Church in the way the Puritans wanted. Thinkers like Richard Hooker had declared the Church of England offered as 'via media' between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

James' son, Charles I, went further; his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, tried to restrain the Puritans and to reintroduce some of the more traditional practices. The holy table to be restored to the East end of churches and railed off, worshippers should face East to pray and recite the Creeds, bow at the name of Jesus, etc. These changes were denounced as superstitious, unscriptural preparations to reinstate Popery, and, when the Civil War broke out, Laud paid for them with his life.

With the Parliamentary victory, the traditional Church of England went into suspense. Those clergy who could not stomach Puritanism fled overseas in their turn. However, the Puritans who wanted the Church to become Presbyterian were disappointed. Oliver Cromwell was an Independent - what we would now call Congregationalist.

It could indeed be argued that much of the C. of E. has remained Independent ever since. But extreme Puritan attitudes were not acceptable to the broad mass of English people. The rule of the 'Saints', with such nonsenses as the banning of mince pies at Christmas, was detested in the country. When Oliver Cromwell died in 1660, the restoration of the monarchy was accepted by most people with weary relief.

Charles II hoped for religious peace and reconciliation. He was disappointed. The returning Cavaliers, and their clergy, were determined on revenge. The Prayer Book of Elizabeth was reissued, with minor amendments, and those Puritan ministers who were not prepared to accept it were ejected. Ministers who refused to conform and swear loyalty to the King were forbidden from preaching within five miles of any town. Charles' efforts to promote toleration were denounced as a sell-out to Popery. Indeed, Charles did have leanings towards Rome (it is claimed he converted on his deathbed) and his brother James II was a Roman Catholic, a fact that led to his overthrow.

He was succeeded by William III, a Dutch Calvinist, married to James' daughter Mary. This caused a crisis of conscience for many of the best clergy in the Church of England, who were now required to swear allegiance to William and Mary. They had previously sworn to be faithful to James II, though he was a Roman Catholic. Many refused to break their oath of allegiance, and had to give up their livings.

These were called 'Non-Jurors'; among them was the famous spiritual writer, William Law.

After the death of Mary's sister Anne, the crown passed to the Hanoverian Georges, descended from James I's daughter Elizabeth. So at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Church of England had an Episcopalian form of government, but a body of doctrine and liturgy now firmly under the control of a Parliament that was strongly anti-Catholic. This led to a paralysis within the Church that was to have serious consequences. But at the time, if you had asked any ordinary Englishman whether he was Catholic or Protestant, he would have replied firmly 'A Protestant, thank God!' But that was not to be the end of the story.

(The story will be continued)