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The Reformation

The Reformation in England

[60] In the sixteenth century, the history of the church is the history of England. In the seventeenth century, the relations of the church to the state and society, contributed, with political causes, to convulse the kingdom with civil wars and revolutions. And in later and more settled times, they formed no inconsiderable part of the political annals of the country. The struggles, the controversies, the polity, and the laws of one age, are the inheritance of another. Henry VIII. and Elizabeth bequeathed to their successors ecclesiastical strifes which have disturbed every subsequent reign; and, after three centuries, the results of the Reformation have not yet been fully developed.

A brief review of the leading incidents and consequences of that momentous event will serve to elucidate the later history of the church and other religious bodies, in their relations to the state.

For centuries, the Catholic church had been at [61] once the church of the state, and the church of the people. All the subjects of the crown acknowledged her authority, accepted her doctrines, participated in her offices, and worshipped at her consecrated shrines. In her relations to the state she approached the ideal of Hooker, wherein the church and the commonwealth were identified: no one being a member of the one, who was not also a member of the other.(1) But under the shadow of this majestic unity grew ignorance, errors, superstition, imperious authority and pretensions, excessive wealth, and scandalous corruption. Freedom of thought was proscribed. To doubt the infallible judgment of the church was heresy,—a mortal sin, for which the atonement was recantation or death. From the time of Wickliffe to the Reformation, heresies and schisms were rife: the authority of the church and the influence of her clergy were gradually impaired; and at length, she was overpowered by the ecclesiastical revolution of Henry VIII. With her supremacy, perished the semblance of religious union in England.

So vast a change as the Reformation, in the religious faith and habitudes of a people, could not have been effected, at any time, without wide and permanent dissensions. When men were first invited to think, it was not probable that they [62] should think alike. But the time and circumstances of the Reformation were such as to aggravate theological schisms, and to embitter the contentions of religious parties. It was an age in which power was wielded with a rough hand. and the reform of the church was accompanied with plunder and persecution. The confiscation of church property evened the religious antipathies of the Catholic clergy: the cruel and capricious rigour with which every communion was, in turn, oppressed, estranged and divided the laity. The changes of faith and policy,—sometimes progressive, sometimes reactionary,—which marked the long and painful throes of the Reformation, from its inception under Henry VIII. to its final consummation under Elizabeth, left no party without its wrongs and sufferings.

Toleration and liberty of conscience were unknown. Catholics and Protestants alike recognised the duty of the state to uphold truth and repress error. In this conviction, reforming prelates concurred with popes and Roman divines. The Reformed church, owing her very life to the right of private judgment, assumed the same authority, in matters of doctrine, as the church of Rome, which pretended to infallibility. Not to accept the doctrines or ceremonies of the state church, for the time being, was a crime; and conformity with the new faith as with

the old, was enforced by the dungeon, the scaffold, the gibbet, and the torch.(2)

The Religious Policy of Elizabeth

[63] The Reformed church being at length established under Elizabeth, the policy of her reign demands especial notice. Finding her fair realm distracted by the religious convulsions of the last three reigns, she insisted upon absolute unity. She exacted a strait conformity of doctrine and observance, denied liberty of conscience to all her subjects, and attached civil disabilities to dissent from the state church. By the first act of her reign, the oath of supremacy was required to be taken as a qualification for every ecclesiastical benefice, or civil office under the crown. The act of uniformity enforced, with severe penalties, conformity with the ritual of the established church, and attendance upon its services. A few years later, the oath of supremacy was, for the first time, required to be taken by every member of the House of Commons.

The Catholics were not only hostile to the state church, but disaffected to the queen herself. They contested her right to the crown; and despairing of the restoration of the ancient faith, or even of toleration, during her life, they plotted against her throne. Hence the Catholic religion was associated with treason; and the measures adopted for its repression were designed as well for the safety of the state, as for the discouragement of an obnoxious faith.

To punish popish recusants, penalties for [64] non-attendance upon the services of the church were multiplied, and enforced with merciless rigour. The Catholic religion was utterly proscribed: its priests were banished, or hiding as traitors: its adherents constrained to attend the services of a church which they spurned as schismatic and heretical.

While Catholics were thus proscribed, the ritual and polity of the Reformed church were narrowing the foundations of the Protestant establishment. The doctrinal modifications of the Roman creed were cautious and moderate. The new ritual, founded on that of the Catholic church, was simple, eloquent, and devotional. The patent errors and superstitions of Rome were renounced: but otherwise her doctrines and ceremonies were respected. The extreme tenets of Rome, on the one side, and of Geneva on the other, were avoided. The design of Reformers was to restore the primitive church, rather than to settle controversies already arising among Protestants. Such moderation,—due rather to the predilections of Lutheran Reformers, and the leaning of some of them to the Roman faith, than to a profound policy,—[65] was calculated to secure a wide conformity. The respect shown to the ritual, and many of the observances of the Church of Rome, made the change of religion less abrupt and violent to the great body of the people. But extreme parties were not to be reconciled. The more faithful Catholics refused to renounce the supremacy of the Pope, and other cherished doctrines and traditions of their church. Neither conciliated by concessions, nor coerced by intimidation, they remained true to the ancient faith.

The Puritans

On the other hand, these very concessions to Romanism repelled the Calvinistic Reformers, who spurned every vestige of the Roman ritual, and repudiated the form of church government, which, with the exception of the Papal supremacy, was maintained in its ancient integrity. They condemned every ceremony of the church of Rome as idolatrous and superstitious;(3) they abhorred episcopacy, and favoured the Presbyterian form of government in the church. Toleration might have softened the asperities of theological controversy, until time had reconciled many of the differences springing from the Reformation. A few enlightened statesmen would gladly have practised it; but the imperious temper of the queen, (4) and the bigoted zeal of her [66] ruling churchmen, would not suffer the least liberty of conscience. Not even waiting for outward signs of departure from the standard of the church, they jealously enforced subscription to the articles of religion; and addressed searching

interrogatories to the clergy, in order to extort confessions of doubt or nonconformity. Even the oath of supremacy, designed to discover Catholics, was also a stumbling-block to many Puritans. The former denied the queen's supremacy, because they still owned that of the Pope; many of the latter hesitated to acknowledge it, as irreconcilable with their own church polity. One party were known to be disloyal: the other were faithful subjects of the crown. But conformity with the reformed ritual, and attendance upon the services of the church, were enforced against both, with indiscriminating rigour. In aiming at unity, the church fostered dissent.

The early Puritans had no desire to separate from the national church: but were deprived of their benefices, and cast forth by persecution. They sought further to reform her polity and ceremonies, upon the Calvinistic model; and claimed greater latitude in their own conformity. They objected to clerical vestments, and other forms, rather than to matters of faith and doctrine; and were [67] slow to form a distinct communion. They met secretly for prayer and worship, hoping that truth and pure religion would ultimately prevail in the church, according to their cherished principles, as Protestantism had prevailed over the errors of Rome. The ideal of the Presbyterians was a national church, to which they clung through all their sufferings: but they were driven out, with stripes, from the church of England. The Independents, claiming self-government for each congregation, repelling an ecclesiastical polity, and renouncing all connection with the state, naturally favoured secession from the establishment. Separation and isolation were the very foundation of their creed; and before the death of Elizabeth they had spread themselves widely through the country, being chiefly known as Brownists.(5) Protestant nonconformity had taken root in the land; and its growth was momentous to the future destinies of church and state.

Church and State

While the Reformed church lost from her fold considerable numbers of the people, her connection with the state was far more intimate than that of the church of Rome. There was no longer a divided authority. The crown was supreme in church and state alike. The Reformed church was the creation of Parliament: her polity and ritual, and even her doctrines, were prescribed by statutes. She could lay no claim [68] to ecclesiastical independence. Convocation was restrained from exercising any of its functions without the king's licence.(6) No canons had force without his assent; and even the subsidies granted by the clergy, in convocation, were henceforward confirmed by Parliament. Bishops, dignitaries and clergy looked up to the crown, as the only source of power within the realm. Laymen administered justice in the ecclesiastical courts; and expounded the doctrines of the church. Lay patronage placed the greater part of the benefices at the disposal of the crown, the barons, and the landowners. The constitution of the church was identified with that of the state; and their union was political as well as religious. The church leaned to the government, rather than to the people; and, on her side, became a powerful auxiliary in maintaining the ascendancy of the crown, and the aristocracy. The union of ecclesiastical supremacy with prerogatives, already excessive, dangerously enlarged the power of the crown over the civil and religious liberties of the people. Authority had too strong a fulcrum; and threatened the realm with absolute subjection: but the wrongs of Puritans produced a spirit of resistance, which eventually won for Englishmen a surer freedom.

The Reformation in Scotland

Meanwhile, the Reformation had taken a different course in Scotland. The Calvinists had triumphed. They had overthrown episcopacy, and established a Presbyterian church, upon [69] their own cherished model. Their creed and polity suited the tastes of the people, and were accepted with enthusiasm. The Catholic faith was renounced everywhere but in some parts of the Highlands; and the Reformed establishment at once assumed the comprehensive character

of a national church. But while supported by the people, it was in constant antagonism to the state. Its rulers repudiated the supremacy of the crown: (7) resisted the jurisdiction of the civil courts; and set up pretensions to spiritual authority and independence, not unworthy of the church they had lately overthrown.(8) They would not suffer temporal power to intrude upon the spiritual church of Christ.(9)

The constitution of the Scottish church was republican: her power at once spiritual and popular. Instead of being governed by [70] courtly prelates and an impotent convocation, she was represented by the general assembly,—an ecclesiastical Parliament of wide jurisdiction, little controlled by the civil power. The leaders of that assembly were bold and earnest men, with high notions of ecclesiastical authority, a democratic temper, and habitual reliance upon popular support. A church so constituted was, indeed, endowed and acknowledged by the state: but was more likely to withstand the power of the crown and aristocracy, than to uphold it.

The formal connection of the church with the state was, nevertheless, maintained with scarcely less strictness than in England. The new establishment was the work of the legislature; the Protestant religion was originally adopted; the church's confession of faith ratified; and the entire Presbyterian polity established by statute. And further, the crown was represented in her assembly, by the Lord High Commissioner.

And in Ireland

The Reformation had also been extended to Ireland: but in a manner the most extraordinary and exceptional. In England and Scotland, the clergy and people had unquestionably been predisposed to changes in the Catholic church; and the reforms effected were more or less the expression of the national will. But in Ireland, the Reformation was forced upon an unyielding priesthood and a half-conquered people. The priests were driven from their churches and homes, by [71] ministers of the new faith;—generally Englishmen or strangers,—who were ignorant of the language of their flocks, and indifferent to their conversion or teaching. Conformity was exacted in obedience to the law, and under severe penalties: not sought by appeals to the reason and conscience of a subject race. Who can wonder that the Reformation never took root in Ireland? It was accepted by the majority of the English colonists: but many who abjured the Catholic faith, declined to join the new establishment, and founded Presbyterian communions of their own. The Reformation added a new element of discord between the colonists and the natives: embittered the chronic discontents against the government; and founded a foreign church, with few communicants, in the midst of a hostile and rebellious people. It was a state church: but, in no sense, the church of the nation.

Footnotes.

1. Book viii., [2] Keble's Ed. iii. 411. Bishop Gardiner had already expressed the same theory: 'the realm and the church consist of the same persons; and as the king is the head of the realm, he must, therefore, be head of the church.'—Gilpin, ii. 29.—See also Gladstone's *State and Church*, 4th Ed., i. 9-31.
2. 'A prince being God's deputy, ought to punish impieties against God,' said Archbishop Cranmer to Edward VI.—Burnet's *Hist.*, i. 111.
3. In matters of ceremonial they objected to the wearing of the surplice, the sign of the cross and the office of sponsors in baptism; the use of the ring in the marriage ceremony, kneeling at the sacrament, the bowing at the name of Jesus, and music in the services of the church. They also objected to the ordination of priests without a call by their flocks.—Heylyn's *Hist. of the Presbyterians*, 259.
4. Elizabeth's policy may be described in her own words: 'She would suppress the papistical religion, that it should not grow; but would root out puritanism, and the favourers thereof.'—Strype's *Eccl. Annals*, iv. 242.

5. The act 35 Eliz. c. 1, was passed to suppress them.
6. 25 Hen. VIII. c. 19; Froude's Hist., ii. 193-198, 325, iv. 479.
7. In the Book of Polity, it is laid down that 'the power ecclesiastical flows immediately from God and the Mediator Jesus Christ, and is spiritual, not having a temporal head on earth, but only Christ, the only spiritual governor and head of his kirk.'
8. Mr. Cunningham. comparing the churches of Rome and Scotland, says: 'With both there has been the same union and energy of action, the same assumption of spiritual supremacy, the same defiance of law courts, parliaments, and kings.'—Pref. to Church Hist. of Scotland.
9. 'When the church was Roman, it was the duty of the magistrate to reform it, When the church was Protestant: it was impiety in the magistrate to touch it.'—Cunningham's Church Hist., i. 537.

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