

“Your majesty is God’s vice-regent and Christ’s vicar within your own dominions, and to see, with your predecessor Josiah, God truly worshipped, and idolatry destroyed, the tyranny of the bishops of Rome banished from your subjects, and images removed”.

- Thomas Cranmer to Edward VI on his coronation¹

‘Woe to you O land, when your king is a child’.

- Ecclesiastes 10:16

As set out succinctly by Edward’s Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, the accession of the new boy king in 1547 was seen as a watershed moment for the evangelical party in England to continue the work of Reform. Despite the factional nature of government under the various regimes of Edward’s reign, both Somerset and Northumberland were devoted to destroying one Church and building another.² Much like the Old Testament king Josiah, who tore down the temples of Baal and fully established the worship of God as the single deity of Israel, Edward and his government would tear down the mummery of the Catholic Church and restore the pure worship of God in the new Protestant polity of England. This essay will argue that the three key components of planting this Protestant polity in the reign of Edward VI can be categorised as the interconnected elements of: reforming Church doctrine, reforming Church structure and reforming the physical expression of religion in England. To avoid the stylistic trap of simply listing Edward’s reforms, each section will follow a dual structure. Firstly, the importance of each component to planting a Protestant

¹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580*, (New Haven, 2022), p. 448.

² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation*, (London, 2001), p. 57.

polity will be analysed, then examples of each component will be shown to demonstrate the importance of that component to the Edwardian government. Finally, at the end of the essay, the connections between the components will be analysed to show how they supported and reinforced each other.

Beginning with the first of these, one of the primary components of planting a Protestant polity was removing Roman Catholic practices from the theology and doctrine of the Church of England and replacing them with Reformed doctrines. Edward's father Henry VIII had been a man of complex religious opinions, and the debate over his theological beliefs continues to this day.³ Nonetheless, the end of Henry's reign was characterised by the violent and unstable struggle between conservatives and evangelicals at court and the old king had always kept to a conservative line in many matters of faith such as a sacramental church as exemplified by the Mass.⁴ In order to avoid these quarrels and domestic unrest more generally, the new regime was determined to extirpate the remaining elements of traditional religion in England and replace them with Protestant doctrines root and branch. Many of the components of traditional religion had already been removed in the reign of Henry VIII, such as the concept of Purgatory and many of the most important saints of England, (chief amongst them that symbol of resistance to tyrannical royal authority, St Thomas Becket).⁵ However, the programme under Edward VI was of considerably greater scope and depth, even notwithstanding the short reign of the New Josiah, as shown by the repeal of the conservative Six Articles in Edward's very first parliament.⁶ Another piece of evidence for the extent by which the Edwardian governments changed the doctrine of the Church of

³ Richard Rex, 'The Religion of Henry VIII', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1, (March 2014), pp. 1-2.

⁴ G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church*, (London, 2005), pp. 238-239.

⁵ Alan Jacobs, *The Book of Common Prayer: A Biography*, (Princeton, 2013), p. 11.

⁶ Barrett L. Beer, *Rebellion and Riot: Popular Disorder in England during the Reign of Edward VI*, (Kent, Ohio, 1982), p. 31.

England is the belief of the Churchwardens of Stanford in the Vale that the schism from Rome only began in the “second yer of Kyng Edward the syxt”.⁷

One example of these doctrinal reforms was emphasising the supremacy of Scripture and its font as the basis of Henrician and Edwardian assaults on the traditional religion of England by replacing the Mass with a Protestant celebration of the Lord’s Supper.⁸ This supremacy of Scripture was predicated upon a strong and abiding antipapal sentiment in order to emphasise the new and distinct source of religious authority in the new Protestant polity and the replacement of the Mass was a clear break from the sacramental conservatism of Henry VIII’s reign.⁹ While conservative bishops and clerics like Stephen Gardiner defended the Mass and transubstantiation on traditional Catholic grounds, evangelicals like Cranmer penned attacks against the Sacrament and the royal government supported these tracts materially by elevating the evangelical literature and obstructing the publication of conservative literature.¹⁰ For the evangelicals, the Mass was one of the greatest symbols of the power of the Bishop of Rome and his abuse of Scripture.¹¹ Therefore, to further weaken the power of this Italian cleric and elevate the power of the Word, the Mass and its associated doctrines would have to be replaced with a service that emphasised the primacy of Scripture and the memorialisation of the Last Supper. This was duly accomplished by the 1549 edition of the Book of Common Prayer which replaced most of the elements of the Sacrament with Protestant rites (although the common name of the Mass was retained to avoid an open schism with the conservative bishops). Cranmer, as one of the primary voices of Edwardian reform, also began to more forcefully and clearly articulate his newly Reformed ideas about

⁷ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 462.

⁸ Catherine Davis, *A Religion of the Word: The Defence of the Reformation in the Reign of Edward VI*, (Manchester, 2002), p. 87.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹⁰ Thomas Cranmer, *An Answer to a Crafty and Sophistical Cavillation by Stephen Gardiner*, (London, 1551), p. 2.

¹¹ Stephen Alford, *Kingship and Politics in the Reign of Edward VI*, (Cambridge, 2008), p. 37.

the Mass and the Words of Institution.¹² Since this was a clear development of the English Church moving to a Reformed view of the Eucharist and rejection of both transubstantiation and the Lutheran conceptualisation of the Real Presence, this reform was even extensive enough to prove the Reformed credentials of the new English polity to Continental reformers like Martin Bucer.¹³

Moving onto the second component of planting a Protestant polity, reforming the structure of the Church. Under the Edwardian government, a concerted effort was made to reform the structures of the Church in England to become more consciously Protestant through the introduction of more lay governance. This was predicated upon a belief that the structure of the Church should more effectively and accurately represent primitive Christianity. One example of this belief in wider English society was the actions of the radical bishop John Hooper who, under the influence of Heinrich Bullinger and Swiss ideas, rejected the wearing of previously Catholic clerical vestments.¹⁴ However, in complement to this theologically driven idea, Edwardian structural reform of the Church was also undertaken to elevate and reinforce the royal supremacy as the whole Edwardian Reformation was “defined and promoted by royal authority”.¹⁵ Therefore, reforming the structures of the Church to emphasise the sermonising and pastoral rather than governmental role of the cleric and to buttress the royal supremacy was seen as a necessary element for the spiritual transformation of English society into a new Protestant polity. This was because the godly magistrate was the lynchpin of the Christian commonwealth. Accordingly, if the Edwardian government wished to achieve the planting of this new Protestant polity, then the Reformation would

¹² John Scofield, ‘The lost Reformation: why Lutheranism failed in England during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI’ (PhD Thesis, University of Newcastle, 2003), p. 292.

¹³ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, (New Haven, 2005), p. 412.

¹⁴ Brent James Brodie, ‘Constructing a Godly society: the template for a Reformed community in the writings of John Hooper (c.1500-1555)’, (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2017), p. iv.

¹⁵ Alford, *Kingship and Politics*, p. 101.

necessarily have to be undertaken from above through the reformation of Church structures by a layman, namely the king.¹⁶

Therefore, one demonstration of this important component was the increased role of laymen in the governance of the Church. For example, the Royal Commission of 1551 (which had the aim to “purify the Church of the filth of Antichrist”) explicitly laid out that it should be composed of “8 bishops, 8 divines, 8 civil lawyers, and 8 common lawyers”.¹⁷ Whereas the Catholic church was almost exclusively staffed and controlled by clerics (although some papal administrators could be clerics without being ordained priests), the new Protestant polity of England would have a much greater role for erudite laymen. This is exemplified by the inclusion of John a Lasco and Peter Vermigli alongside churchmen such as the aforementioned John Hooper.¹⁸ The increasing lay influence was also accompanied by a less sacramental role of the priest, a man who in the new structure would read the Word of God to the congregation and not much more. Another example of the changes to church structure by the Edwardian government was the continuation and intensification of Henrician policies of the royal supremacy. As shown by Cranmer’s *Homilies* at the beginning of Edwards reign in 1547, the royal supremacy was a foundational element of planting a Protestant polity and ensuring that true religion was established in England because the maintenance of this altered structure would permanently sever the bonds of England to Rome both in matters of doctrine, law and obedience.¹⁹ From the very earliest moments of Edward’s reign the royal supremacy was enforced and emphasised to a greater degree than in the later years of Henry VIII, as shown by the royal visitation of August 1547.²⁰ This visitation was the most extreme and

¹⁶ Davis, *A Religion of the Word*, p. 146.

¹⁷ Torrance Kirby, ‘Lay Supremacy: Reform of the canon law of England from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I (1529–1571)’, *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, Vol. 8, Issue 3, (January, 2006), p. 357.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Aysha Pollnitz, *Princely Education in Early Modern Britain*, (Cambridge 2015), p. 166.

²⁰ MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant*, p. 69.

destructive since the ascendancy of Thomas Cromwell. Many bishops found themselves bludgeoned into subservience and their dioceses like Lincoln alongside Bath and Wells plundered for the Protector's purposes.²¹ All this notwithstanding, this particular visitation was merely one particular example of the weakened position of the prelates in English society in the reign of Edward VI and how the royal supremacy was necessary for implementing the reformation of Church structures, a process by which the clerics of the Church moved towards the position of civil servants.²²

Continuing to the last component of planting a Protestant polity, reforming the physical expression of worship in England. This component would be important because, much as reforming the Church structure was an external expression of doctrinal change, so too would reforming the physical environment of the English be necessary for the maintenance of the new Protestant polity to survive beyond its attraction as a novelty.²³ Iconoclasm and the remoulding of the built environment more generally were integral parts of the Continental Reformation both in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions.²⁴ The idiosyncratic approaches of each tradition are key elements that distinguish them from each other and from the Catholic Church. Due to the close connections between Edward VI's Reformation and the Reformed tradition with its roots in Zürich and Geneva rather than the more iconophilic Lutheran tradition, in the reign of Edward VI, iconoclasm was an important component of planting a durable Protestant polity in England. This was by ensuring the built environment reflected both reformation in doctrine and reformation in Church structure.

²¹ Jennifer Loach, *Edward VI*, (London, 1999), p. 48.

²² Michael A. R. Graves, *The House of Lords in the Parliaments of Edward VI and Mary I: An Institutional Study*, (Cambridge, 1981), p. 27.

²³ Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, (Cambridge, 2003), p. 271.

²⁴ Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel*, (Cambridge, 1995), p. 5.

Therefore, while one of Cranmer's great maxims was to make haste slowly, make haste he nonetheless did, the English Reformation continuing the process of destroying the physical expressions of traditional religion and replacing them with new means of focussing the population towards Protestant ideas.²⁵ In the first few years of Edward's reign for example, Cranmer supported seemingly spontaneous outbreaks of iconoclasm to transform the physical characteristics of religious life in England such as the 1547 riots in London.²⁶ This continued across the geographical breadth of England as the government started to produce a flood of legislation reshaping the physical characteristics of churches all over the kingdom. For example, injunctions were produced against: burning candles in front of statues, stained glass windows that were the recipients of devotion, religious processions and eventually the great roads themselves.²⁷ These iconoclastic reforms were strongest in London and other radical areas where the population was of a more evangelical bent and the hand of the government was strongest, but they penetrated more remote areas too. For example, one well-studied demonstration of the importance placed on reforming the physical religious landscape of Tudor England was the transformation of the community of Morebath in Devon. This was a deeply rural community which took part in the famous 1549 Prayer Book Rebellion against the Edwardian government.²⁸ This uprising was perhaps the natural result of the pace of change under Edward as the government sought ensure they planted a resistant Protestant polity that would not blow away in the winds of change. However, what is striking about the timing of the revolt was that it was in response to the 1549 edition of the Book of Common Prayer which as previously discussed was not the most doctrinally reformatory of publications. Nonetheless, what was radical about the 1549 book, was the extent to which it

²⁵ MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, p. 411.

²⁶ Loach, *Edward VI*, pp. 48 – 49.

²⁷ MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant*, p.71.

²⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, (London, 2003), p. xiv.

stripped ceremonies from the practice of religion in England.²⁹ For example, over the brief reign of Edward VI, the village of Morebath saw the destruction of its traditional feast of St George alongside all the cult of the saints, an act which at a stroke deprived the community of two decades of fundraising.³⁰

In conclusion, all three components were important in reinforcing each other and planting a Protestant polity. For example, the doctrine of replacing the Mass and the Sacrament with Reformed doctrines of the Lord's Supper (and therefore the supremacy of Scripture) provided the intellectual basis for further reform of Church structures such as the more pastoral role of bishops and the primacy of preaching in church.³¹ The new doctrinal basis of the ecclesiastical regime was also profoundly connected to changing the physical expression of worship in England. This was shown by the importance placed by the Edwardian government on improving Biblical literacy among the people in order to reorientate the religious life of England towards a Scriptural focus rather than the mechanistic and intercessory worship of traditional religion. This removal of images, statues and the connected paraphernalia of an intercessory understanding of worship ensured that the new doctrines became more firmly established in the English mind. In addition, for example, the reformation of the Church structure was in many cases the outward expression of the new doctrines. In addition to the previously mentioned new role of the Lord's Supper, another example of this is the increasing influence of the laity over the Church, being the external reflection of new Reformed doctrines of anti-clericalism, the internal power of God's Living Word and the corresponding importance of God's written word.³² The reformation of the Church structure was also deeply connected to the reformation of the physical nature of worship as shown by

²⁹ Loach, *Edward VI*, p.51.

³⁰ Duffy, *Voices of Morebath*, p. 141.

³¹ Patrick Ferry, 'Preaching, preachers, and the English Reformation under Edward VI: 1547-1553', *Concordia Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (October 1992), p. 365.

³² Peter Opitz, 'Heinrich Bullinger und Martin Luther: Gemeinsamkeiten und Differenzen', *Evangelische Theologie*, Vol. 64, Issue 2, (2004), p. 106.

the greater control exercised by the royal government to regulate physical characteristics of churches through a constant stream of ceremonial prohibitions, iconoclastic exhortations and confiscatory decrees.

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