Church History VI:
Suppression of the English Monasteries

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May 16, 1903[1]

Bibliography

The sources of information upon this subject are almost inexhaustible. Of course, all the writings of the period bear indirectly upon the topic. Of those documents which have been used by historians as sources of information the following are most important:

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[1] This is from a collection of manuscripts—mostly class papers—written while Davis was a student at Harvard Divinity School, 1902-1904. This manuscript is clearly for the Church History VI class he took during the 1902-03 academic year.

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This list is taken from the Bibliography arranged by R.B. Merriman in his *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell.*[3] They represent the gleanings of the study of State papers, letters and other material in the various archives, libraries and record offices of England and other countries.

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[2] I have been unable to confirm this entry. I did find *Statutes of the Realm from Original Records and Authentic Manuscripts,* Volume the Third, 1817, which includes "The Statutes of King Henry VIII." See https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Statutes_of_the_Realm/IiTDHUw6Wq4C?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Statutes+of+the+Realm,+A.+Linders&pg=PA13&printsec=frontcover&bshm=ncc/1.

[3] Roger Bigelow Merriman, 1902, *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell,* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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[4] There is some confusion in this entry. Better: Sander, Nicolas, *Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism, Published A.D. 1585, with a Continuation of the History by the Rev. Edward Rishton, B.A., of Brasenose College, Oxford.* Translated with Introduction and Notes by David Lewis. London: Burns and Oates, 1877.

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In addition to these books, there are many interesting and valuable things in the following books, which I have simply looked at.

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I. Reign of Henry VIII to year 1534.

> Henry VIII came to the throne in 1509. He inherited from his father a kingdom more firmly established than any king of England had reigned over for generations, and he duly estimated the value of his crown. His natural aristocratic tendencies were increased by a passionate and violent temper, which could brook no contradiction. (Häusser, p. 166)

Henry was also a man of some learning, and in 1521 (Perry, G.G., p. 34) he published a book in which he defended the Papacy and the doctrines of the Church against the attacks of Luther. In recognition of this defense, Pope Leo X gave him the title of "Defender of the Faith" (Wishart, p. 293). These three suggestions give us a hint of the conditions about the year 1523. In addition to the nature of Henry's character and the relation of Henry to the Papacy, one must bear in mind that the period in which these events happened was one of strange contradictions, and general unrest. By the year 1526 Henry VIII had tired of his Queen Catherine, and perhaps was beginning to feel dissatisfied because no male heir had been born. Added to

this, Henry had become infatuated with Anne Boleyn. Moeller says,

> The desire for a male heir to the throne, and his passion for Anne Boleyn (which showed itself in 1526) … suddenly caused him to feel scruples of conscience as to the legality of his marriage and the validity of the Papal dispensation; these were fostered by his ambitious minister Cardinal Wolsey for political reasons (in order to bring about a political alliance with France, in opposition to Charles V) and also from a desire to secure his own position. (Vol. 3, p. 201)[5]

So, in 1526 Wolsey began proceedings for a divorce of Henry and Catherine to be granted by the Pope. On account of political complications on the continent, the Pope did not see his way clear to granting the divorce. Wolsey's failure here brought upon him the displeasure of the King. Proceedings were begun against him under the Statures of Praemunire. On October 9th, 1529, Wolsey surrendered all his appointments and property (Wakeman, 210). On the 29th of November 1530, while on his way to the Tower under arrest, Wolsey died (Wakeman, 210). Activities in the direction of a divorce continued. In response to these Clement VII warns Henry VIII not to marry Anne Boleyn. This warning was on January 5th, 1531 (Sander, 347). Henry's activities continue in England and on March 22nd of the same year (Sander, 347) then entering of the wedge was made when the Convocation of Canterbury agreed to pay the King £100,000 and recognize his supremacy.

> In 1531, the English clergy were coerced into declaring that Henry was the "protector and the supreme head of the church and of the clergy of England" which absurd claim was slightly modified by the words, "in so far as it permitted by the law of Christ." (Wishart, 297).

This action was evidently taken in anticipation of the secret marriage of Henry to Anne Boleyn which took place sometime in November 1532, or in January 1533 (Wakeman, 217). From this time on, the trend of events is unmistakable. On March 30, 1533 (Sander, 348) Cranmer was consecrated to the Archbishopric of Canterbury to which office he had been appointed some time earlier. On April 10th the Act in Restraint of Appeals (24 Henry

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[5] Wilhelm Moeller, *History of the Christian Church, AD, 1517-1648,* 3 volumes, Edited by G. Kawerau. Translated by J.H. Freese. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1900. This entry does not appear in Davis' bibliography.

VIII, C. 12) was passed. This "took away the right of the Pope to hear certain cases on appeal from England." (Wakeman, 218). This was the second blow in the process of separation. This was followed on the 29th of May by the final blow, when Cranmer officially "set aside the marriage with Catherine as null and void and declared that with Anne Boleyn good and valid." (Wakeman, 219). The Papacy, of course, declared to the opposite opinion, but to no effect. The break between Henry and Rome was complete. The whole thing was clinched by the Supreme Head Act, passed by Parliament in 1534. This declared that the King should be accepted as the only supreme head on earth of the Church of England. (Wakeman, 223).

These events give us one line of influences which worked towards the suppression of the monasteries, and taken in connection with another series of events, show how this divorce case and the separation from the Papacy tended to bring about a feeling of strong opposition to the Monasteries. This other series of events is connected with the opposition which very naturally arose in England as a protest to Henry's high-handed ruling. One is not to suppose that such a radical change could be made in such a short period of time without causing a determined opposition.

The story of Elizabeth Barton, the Holy Maid of Kent, illustrates this opposition. It is useless to enter into the details of that story. She went into trances and under such conditions spoke in opposition to the divorce to Catherine and the marriage to Anne Boleyn. Cranmer writes in a letter,

> I think that she marvelously hindered the king's marriage, for she wrote to the pope charging him to stop it. She also had communication with my Lord Cardinal and with … my lord of Canterbury, my predecessor in the matter, and in mine opinion staid them very much in the matter. (Gasquet, V. I, p. 122[-3]; Calendar, vi, No. 1519).[6]

In July 1533 she was brought before Cromwell for examination. (Gasquet, 124, Vol I). Nothing worthy of punishment could be found. The proceedings against her were continued until May 5th, 1534, when,

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[6] Two references provided here. Calendar is found in a footnote in Gasquet.

> Elizabeth Barton and her companions were executed under this unjust act of attainder at Tyburn. Father Thomas Bourchier, an English Franciscan Observant, declares that the lives of his two brethren, Fathers Risby and Rich, were twice offered to them if they would accept Henry as the supreme head of the English Church. (Gasquet, Vol. I, 150).

This same attitude is shown towards the friars.

> To carry out his designs it became necessary for Henry to deal sternly and at once with the religious orders. (Gasquet, V. I., 155).

Many of the friars were imprisoned, and in some instances suffered death, because of their opposition to the King's conduct and the support of the Pope. (Gasquet, 169). This was a strong opposition which had developed in Henry's own country. One June 22nd, 1535, Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, was executed. (Wakeman, 237). July 6th Sir Thomas More met the same fate. (Wakeman, 238). All these events indicate clearly a feeling of strong opposition which was being developed side by side with Henry's policy. As these accounts indicate this opposition tended to center about the monastic houses. In short, at this period just previous to the suppression of the monasteries, we find that Henry had brought about a complete separation of the English church from the Papacy. This had given rise to a rather determined opposition to Henry which centered about the monasteries.

II. Financial conditions of Henry VIII.

It would be impossible to even touch the edges of the question of the suppression of the monasteries without referring to the financial side of the reign of Henry VIII. The personal and public extravagance of Henry VIII is manifest on all sides.

> Though Henry VIII was personally extravagant, and soon ran through this large sum (collected during the reign of his father) he had resources to draw upon which his father had left untouched…; it was left for the Defender of the Faith to appropriate the lands of the monasteries, and to eke out his resources by debasing the coinage. (Cunningham, Vol. 3, p. 432).

That this was one of the conditions which led to the suppression of the monasteries cannot be doubted. In fact, the disposal of

this wealth indicates that there must have been some strong property motive back of it.

> The king was granted the revenues of the monasteries. About half the money was expended in coast defenses and a new navy; and much of it was lavished upon his courtiers. With the exception of small pensions to the monks and the establishment of a few benefices, very little of the splendid revenue was ever devoted to religious or educational purposes. (Wishart, 330).

Even under Wolsey we see a tendency to use money thus gained for the establishment of colleges. In a letter written by the Abbot of Yorke to Cardinal Wolsey in the year 1528, the Abbot refers to the suppression of the small monastery of Romeburgh (Wright, 2). The letter reads, "by whose purporte I perceyve that your graces pleasure ys to suppress the said priory of Romeburgh." (Wright, 2).

In a letter from Cromwell to Wolsey written April 2, 1528, the same idea appears concerning the monastery at Wallingford.

> Sauyng only the euydences Which I sorted and conueyed vnto your colledge at Oxforde And the same delyvered vnto your Dean there. (Merriman, p. 318).

In the same letter he says,

> And now I do repayre into the Counties of Buck and Bedforde for offyces to be founde there aswell of such londes as apperteyne to the saide late monasterye of Wallingforde as also to the late monasterye of Praye besides saincte Albous. (Merriman, 319).

In fact, during the entire year of 1527 and 28 Cromwell was employed in doing just this kind of work. Wolsey was undoubtedly the first to hit upon this plan of raising money. In such men as Henry VIII and Cromwell, it does not seem very difficult to step from the idea of suppression of monasteries to raise funds for the establishment of colleges, to the idea of suppressing them for the sake of funds for other purposes. In short it seems apparent that this element must enter into the consideration of the question.

III. Visitation.

January 1535 marks rather a central date in the account of the suppression of the monasteries. During that month Thomas

Cromwell was announced as the King's Vicar General for the purpose of "undertaking a general visitation of churches and monasteries and clergy." (Merriman, 166). He was given the authority to transfer his powers to men who were to act as his agents. In connection with this announcement, there was issued a document consisting of a series of formal inquiries to be made "concerning the state of religious houses and royal injunctions for this reform." (Merriman, 166).

At this point a word ought to be said concerning Thomas Cromwell. He was a man of low birth, who had worked himself up to this position of highest importance in England by his keenness coupled with absolute lack of ethical principles. He was unscrupulous to the highest degree, and seemed to have but one ambition and that was to gain his own preferment. Gasquet says of Cromwell,

> He had plundered and murdered defenseless men and women; he had endeavored to rob the religious of their reputations as he had of their property; he had defrauded the people of their rights. (Gasquet, Vol I, p. 432)

While this is an extreme statement, it is probably quite true. Such, in short, is the man who had in hand the visitation of the monasteries.

By August 1535, Cromwell had appointed his commissioners, and they had begun their work. Thomas Legh, in a letter dated August 20th (probably 1535) says that he has visited several places,

> I have in all the places that I have ben at, according to myne instructions and to the kinges graces pleasure and yours, restrayned as well as the heddes and the masters of the same places as the brethern from going forth. (Wright, p. 56)

Also, he speaks in the same letter of the visitations of "doctor Laitone, August 9, 1535, Cromwell writes to the Earl of Rutland asking him to examine a certain warden and his friars. (Merriman, Vol I, 415). So early in August his system was beginning to work.

Just what instructions his commissioners had received is uncertain. But evidently the minds of Legh, Laitone and Rice, the appointees, had been instructed to find cause for complaint if possible. Legh was not unwilling to say in his letter to Cromwell that the things he had done were obnoxious to the monks

(Wright, 46). Again, in a letter from Dr. Layton[7] to Cromwell there appears evidences of [a] strong desire to find conditions of immorality,

> Whereas immediately descending from my horse, I sent Bartlett, your servant, with alle my servantes, to circumcept the abbey," (Wright, 75).

The whole tone of this letter suggests elation in finding a clear case of immorality in this monastery. Evidently, the commissioner is trying to feed the Vicar General with the things that he is looking for.

> As consernyng thes thyngs, I shall desyre your mastershyp of farder knowledge what I shall doo, and I shalle be redy to accomplyshe your mynde in thes and in all other thyngs with dylygens (Wright, 82-3, letter to Cromwell).

One is forced to conclude that in this visitation the commissioners had been given to understand that it would be very acceptable to the King and Cromwell to have as many reports of corruption as possible to come in. There is no good reason for doubting this, and one should bear it in mind that the reports have probably been exaggerated for the express purpose of meeting this desire of Cromwell.

This work of visitation and investigation continued. Reports implying all sorts of gross immorality and vice had been sent in. It is needless to say that there must have been some foundation, but undoubtedly, a good proportion of the reports greatly exaggerated. However, the evidence had been of such a nature that by the end of February 1536, Parliament passed the Act of Suppression. (Wright, 107). It provided that an account of the,

> manifest synne, vicious, carnal, and abhomynable lyvyng … to the high dyspleasour of Almyghty God, slaunder of good relygyon, and to the greate infamy of the kynges highness and the realme,

the monasteries and,

> premysses with all their rights, profyttes jurysdyccions and commodytyes

should be transferred,

> unto the kynges majestye

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[7] Evidently Laitone and Layton are alternative spellings for the same person.

forever. (Wright, 107-109). It provided for the suppression of the smaller monasteries whose income was less than £200 a year.

This act marks the bud of the first series of events, and the beginning of the second series in the suppression of the monasteries. In connection with it there are two points which ought to be noticed. The first is the line of demarcation between the smaller and larger monastic houses. To imagine that the moral condition of a monastery could in general be determined by the amount of yearly income is, on the face of it, suspicious. Political influences were undoubtedly responsible for this discrimination, and later events shows that the declaration that this larger monasteries "whose religion is right well-kept and observed" would be left without molestation, was simply a "blind" to keep opposition from becoming demonstrative.

The second point is in regard to the "Black Book." This supposedly contained a detailed statement of the condition of life in the monasteries. The fact is that it does not exist, and it is possible that it never did exists, although Burnet says,

> The full report of this visitation is lost, yet I have seen an extract of a part of it, concerning one hundred and forty-four houses, that contains abominations in it equal to any that were in Sodom. (Burnet, I, 307[-8]).

It makes little difference whether there ever was such a book or not. The fact remains that upon some kind of evidence, the Act of Suppression was passed, and the moral condition of the monasteries was made use of as justification for the Act. Just what the purpose of this reform movement was cannot be determined positively. To say that the work thus far done was done distinctively as a reformatory measure, would be to ignore many of the conditions which undoubtedly had a great, perhaps the preponderating, influence in the movement. There was indeed an atmosphere of dissatisfaction with [the] Catholic Church and the Papacy. This undoubtedly formed the background of the movement and made possible such a whole process of confiscation and spoilation as the Act of Supremacy inaugurated. To go beyond this statement and say that from the standpoint of Henry VIII it was an act of reform as such would be an exaggeration.

IV. Suppression of the Lesser Monasteries.

As soon as the Act of Suppression had been passed in the early part of 1536, the commissioners appointed by Cromwell began their rounds of spoilation. By an act of Parliament, a "Court of Augmentations" was established, which was as form than for any purpose of justice.

> The process of the surrender immediately followed the first visit of the commissioners. They sent in their reports to the Court of Augmentations, which then issued its final orders for the dissolution of the house, and its conversion to the King's use. A "receiver" was appointed to plunder the church, to sell the lead, bells, etc. (Merriman, V. I, p. 171).

This work of destruction and confiscation was continued through 1536 and 37. It was done in a high-handed, arrogant manner, and brought forth a storm of protest. In a letter from "The prioress and nuns of Legbourne to Cromwell" there appears one type of protest. In this letter Cromwell is addressed as "representative of its ffounder:"

> [T]hat whereas Almyghty God hath induced you [Cromwell] with just title ffounder of the pryory of Legbourne, … we doo and shall alweys submyt oure selfes to youre most rightuous commaundment and ordre. (Wright, 116)

Upon this claim, that Cromwell represents the founder of the house, they seek some special exemptions from the Act of Supremacy. On the other hand, the opposition shows itself among owners of estates, upon which priories of a semi-private type were maintained. In a letter from Sir Peter Edgecomb to Cromwell we read,

> But trew hyt ys, that I am by the kyngges ffather by hys graunt to my poare ffather made to hym and hys isue male, ffounder off the pryory off Tottenes and the nunry off Cornworthye in Devonsschyre. (Wright, 118).

Here again a special grant is made the basis of asking special consideration. This protest was undoubtedly very widespread and at times very bitter and violent. The Pilgrimage of Grace and insurrection, which occurred October 2, 1526, at Louth in Lincolnshire, is an illustration of the extreme type of protest. (Perry, 159). Several thousand men in the north were involved, and several executions were made by the King's authority in efforts to effectively suppress this rebellion. The valuables were taken from the houses, the monks were driven forth and the buildings demolished.

This work of confiscation and destruction continued until all the monasteries under £200 a year were destroyed. Of this work, one gets an idea in the following:

> The first great sweep of the houses under £200 a year, amounting in number to 376, produced, as is supposed, about £32,000 annual revenue to the Crown; and from the valuables, jewels, plates, lead, and bells, etc., about £100,000 was obtained. (Perry, 135).

This work was completed by 1538.

At the same time that the small monasteries were being demolished, the commissioners were reaching out beyond the powers specifically granted them by the Act of Suppression, not only did they demolish the smaller houses, but they robbed the larger houses, and in many instances the monks "were terrorized into submission" (Merriman, Vol. I, 175) and surrendered to the commissioners all their property. Often when they refused to submit, "attainder and death invariably followed." (Merriman, Vol. I, 175). A sample of this aspect of the work is seen in the following letter from "the commissioners to Cromwell:"

> Pleasith it your lordship to be advertysed, that wee have ben at saynt Edmondes Bury, where we founde a riche shryne whiche was very comberous to deface. We have taken in the sayd monastery in golde and sylver $m^1.m^1.m^1.m^1.m^1.$ markes, and above … dyvers and sundry stones of great value, and yet we have lefte the churche, abbott and convent very well ffurnished with plate of sylver necessary for the same. (Wright, 144).

This house was one of the largest and most wealthy of the English monasteries. It was visited at this time as the letter indicates for the purpose of confiscating its superstitious relics. This kind of work was carried on, in many instances, the basis of procedure was the complication of the monks in the "pilgrimage of grace."

V. Second Visitations and Final Work.

By degrees this became a second visitation, which was carried on under the excuse above mentioned of complication in the rebellion. We find a letter to Cromwell conceiving this second visitation to the larger monasteries in which the old commissioners ask to be reappointed for the service. (Wright,

156). This second visitation was to all intents and purposes a dissolution, for all means possible they forced the houses to surrender or demolished them for some plausible pretext.

> After the searching visitation of the commissioners sent round the country in 1538 only a few of the larger houses … remained unsuppressed. Some of the latter had been voluntarily surrendered, or confiscated by the attainder of their abbots. (Wright, 254).

The result of this visitation leads us to the session of Parliament in 1539. At this session the final act was passed giving the monastic states to the King. (Wright, 254). At the opening of Parliament in 1539, only 20 monasteries were represented. Of these 20, but three were directly represented. The remaining 17 were present by proxy (Wright, 254). This indicates how effectively the work of reformation along this line had been done. Of all the magnificent monastic system of England, only a few now remained at the beginning of this year 1539. Eleven years had passed since the work was begun under Wolsey in 1528. (Wright, 2). The Act of 1539 provided for the completion of the suppression. By the year 1545 the last house had been demolished. Monasticism in England was at an end.

> The total number of monasteries suppressed is variously estimated, but the following figures are approximately correct: monasteries, 616; colleges, 90; free chapels, 2,375; and hospitals, 110. The annual income was about £150,000, which was a smaller sum than was believed to be in the control of the monks. (Wishart, 321).

VI. Use of the Revenue.

Some notion as to the use of the revenue, which was thus received, is necessary in any presentation of this topic. A torrent of wealth had been poured in upon the Crown,

> such, says Hallam, has has seldom been equaled in any country by the confiscations following any subdued rebellion. (Merriman, Vol. I, 178).

It is rather a strange fact that evidence is very meagre upon this point. Some of the money, but almost too small a proportion for consideration, went to the pensions accorded to certain of the monks and nuns, who had been driven from their houses. How large a sum was thus disposed of one cannot say. The other natural channel was open to the use of the money. Burnet says,

> he designed to convert £18,000 into a revenue for eighteen bishoprics and cathedrals: but of these he only erected six, as shall be afterwards shown. (Burnet, Vol I., 432).

So, one has to claim rather general inferences as to what became of this money. That large sums of it were expended for national purposes is undoubtedly true. There is also ground for the assertion that a very large fraction of the money went to meet the current expenses of Henry's dissolute Court. It is needless to go in any description of this life, and the cost of maintaining it. The fact remains that the money was disposed of, and still remains unaccounted for. It is a natural and justifiable statement to say that a large share of the money was used by Henry for private purposes, and the satisfaction of his own desires for luxury and excess.

In connection with this, I think that one may say that this rather doubtful use of the money suggests one of the influences that worked together as an immediate cause of the suppression of the English monastic houses.

VII. Conclusion.

As one reviews the events of this movement, which has been variously described as the work of God, and the work of the devil, I think that one must come to the conclusion that, to assert that it was distinctively a movement of the reformation of the church in England, is to merely make an assertion which is unjustifiable. Such a claim would, I fancy, bring a knowing smile to the face of Henry or Cromwell. The most that we can say is that through the working out of events, which in themselves were very unimportant from the standpoint of national life, Henry found himself at odds with Rome. He was too strong a man to yield his point. His only method of procedure was to play a strong hand. He declared himself head of the Church in England. This aroused opposition, which turned his attention to the monasteries. Political and financial considerations led to the method pursued in the suppression of them.

All these events were in a way but incidents of the reformation. The background of reform spirit served as the moral support which ennobled Henry to carry out his plans. To say that the movements of Henry VIII were largely responsible for the

English reformation is of course foolish. The facts seem to be that he used the hidden forces of reform's spirit for the realization of his own ends. His early antagonism to Luther, and his later change to antagonism proclaim him rather the tool of the reformation, than in any great sense its leader.

The suppression of the monasteries is the result of the secular interests of Henry VIII's reign working themselves out with the background of Lollardism and tis spirit newly kindled by the Lutheran movement.