

New College and the Reformation
(Sermon given by David Parrott on Sunday 29 October 2017, Founder's Day)

This year we commemorate the fifth centenary of the protestant reformation. It is 500 years since Martin Luther publicized his Ninety-Five Theses, a series of not-particularly novel criticisms of the Catholic Church's pastoral practices.

Luther was not the first, and certainly not the only, person in the early sixteenth century who was highly critical of the theology and institutions of the late medieval Church. Indeed, one of the striking characteristics of the Early Reformation is the lack of clarity and agreement about the nature and extent of the reforms that were being sought by the church's very numerous critics.

Certainly there was no clear division between 'Protestants' and 'Catholics'. In fact, the real battle lines only began to emerge towards the middle of the sixteenth century. By then, princes and other rulers, town authorities, scholars, clergy and ordinary people from Strasbourg to Stockholm, had begun to forge a sense of religious identity resting on shared confessional values—whether based on the teachings of Luther, or his Swiss contemporaries, Zwingli and Bullinger, or—slightly later—John Calvin.

In England, of course, the timing and form of the reformation was directly shaped by the anxieties and ambitions of one man: King Henry VIII. Having failed, after 20 years of marriage to produce a male heir, Henry wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon. If the Pope would not accept that Henry's marriage to Catherine had been a sinful flouting of Biblical injunction, then other means had to be found to remarry in a way that would ensure that the king's future heirs would be regarded as legitimate by his subjects.

The solution, as most of you will know, was the drastic one of dissolving the link between the English Church and the Pope: henceforth Henry VIII would be the ruler—or 'Supreme Head'—of the church in England. But did this mean that the English church, clergy and people ceased to be part of the Catholic Church? And what *were* the spiritual implications of this schism from Rome?

To one New College man, this was an issue that would define the last years of his career. William Warham was created a Fellow of New College in 1475, but left the college to pursue a career in diplomacy and government. Made Bishop of London in 1501, he was promoted to the Archbishopric of Canterbury in 1503.

As the issue of the King's divorce gathered momentum in the late 1520s, Warham, like his close friend and Catholic martyr, Bishop John Fisher, believed that a schismatic English church would bring into question its theological legitimacy, thus threatening its ability to teach true doctrine and to offer the means of salvation to the laity.

Warham was torn between his duty of obedience to Henry VIII and his religious conscience throughout the two crucial years of 1531 and 1532. As Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the church, his decisions had momentous consequences.

In 1531, Warham led the bishops in resisting Henry's claim to be recognized outright as head of the English church, by imposing the proviso 'insofar as the law of Christ allows'—a pretty comprehensive exclusion clause in matters theological. Yet in May 1532 in the face of ever-increasing royal pressure, he backed down, conceding the submission of the clergy to Henry's authority.

Warham died in August 1532, and so we can only speculate how he would have responded to the King's subsequent demands. But there's no doubt that the submission had weakened the ability of the Church to resist Henry's formal break from Rome in 1534, and his establishment as Supreme Head of the Church. Warham, a deeply reluctant actor on this stage, had nonetheless played a critical role in the English Reformation.

Back in Oxford, the changes that were initiated by Henry VIII's break with Rome provoked ambivalent responses amongst the Fellows of New College. Henry's schism did not mean the adoption of Lutheran, or indeed any other type of Protestant theology.

The Warden of New College since 1526, John London, like many of the Fellows, appears to have had no difficulty accepting the Royal Supremacy over the Church. And indeed, the crown's initiatives, following after the Act of Supremacy, to reform some of the institutions and structures of the church, were seen by many as responsible, conservative stewardship, rather than the thin end of a protestant wedge.

It was in this belief that Warden London was willing to act from 1536 as one of the Royal Visitors to the English monasteries; a process that led by rapid stages to their wholesale dissolution—a decidedly un-conservative outcome. But for the Warden and Fellows, the theological haziness of what was going on in the 1530s and early 1540s gave them little sense that they were in the midst of the great changes that were coming to divide Europe into opposing confessional camps.

All this changed with the reign of the boy-king Edward VI from 1547. Clearly-defined protestant ideas—not in fact those of Luther, but those of the Swiss reformers, notably Heinrich Bullinger—had taken root in England in the major cities, and in the government and the church. Those around Edward, especially his uncle, the duke of Somerset, were fully committed to using government authority to take the whole English church in a clearly protestant direction. The 1549 Royal Visitation to Oxford, began a much more uncompromising assertion of protestant doctrine and practice on the University.

In the face of this, the Fellows of New College emerged as clear traditionalists. Faced by the demands of the Visitors, they employed a blend of outward compliance and some carefully modulated resistance. Both the 1549 and 1552 protestant and vernacular Books of Common Prayer were purchased for the Chapel. Whether they were actually used is another matter: the College, like all Oxbridge Foundations, retained the right to conduct services in Latin, on the reasonable grounds that in sixteenth-century Oxford, Latin *was* the vernacular.

And the Fellows warded off the Visitors' demands for the destruction of the medieval stained glass in Chapel and Antechapel, using what was to become a time-honoured excuse: pleading that the college could not at present afford their replacement with plain glass.

The blurred theological lines which had allowed doctrinal conservatives to continue within their college Fellowships were becoming more difficult to maintain. The conservatives remained a majority; but a faction of College Fellows fully committed to Protestantism emerged; in 1551 they were able to achieve the election of Ralph Skinner as an active protestant and first married Warden of the College.

But this was a very brief victory for the Protestant faction. In 1553 the fifteen-year old Edward VI died, and was succeeded by his elder sister, Queen Mary. Mary instigated a Catholic reaction which brought about England's return to Roman authority, and the restoration of all the ceremonies, rituals and practices of a Catholicism—Catholicism that was itself in the midst of a massive process of reform and reinvigoration.

At this point the theological divisions in the Fellowship which had been successfully—if not particularly amicably—contained, burst into the open. New College became a power-house of the Catholic reformation: a group of Fellows established their reputations not merely as Catholic teachers but as public polemicists: Nicholas Saunders, lecturer in Canon Law, became a willing disputant in theological controversies against foreign protestants; as did his colleague, the Fellow and Professor of Hebrew, Thomas Harding.

The most prolific and effective authors of pro-Catholic tracts and polemics were the brothers, Nicholas and John Harpsfield. Both were Fellows of New College, though Nicholas became Archdeacon of Canterbury in 1554. Nicholas wrote one of the earliest biographies—in this case hagiography—of Thomas More; John Harpsfield's writings included a series of widely printed sermons on Catholic religious practice. These included the sermon that he preached at the ceremony of the Protestant Thomas Cranmer's disgradation from the Archbishopric of Canterbury: a few steps in the grim ritual before Cranmer's death as one of the three protestant bishop-martyrs, burnt in Oxford on 21 March 1556.

This militantly Catholic intellectual life reshaped New College: the protestant Warden Skinner resigned in the first year of Mary's reign, and a further seven protestant Fellows were removed; fifteen new appointments gave an even more strongly catholic character to the College by the end of Mary's reign. Had Mary survived there is little doubt that New College and its Fellows would have continued to play a major role in providing intellectual and polemical support for catholic revival.

However with her death in 1558 and Elizabeth's accession, Mary's catholic restoration was emphatically repudiated. The Fellowship of New College and its Catholic Warden, Thomas White, could hardly be worse-placed in the eyes of the government authorities who were seeking to pick up the threads of the protestant reformation. A number of the Catholic Fellowship fled abroad; some, like the Harpsfield brothers, were imprisoned for refusing the Act of Royal Supremacy.

The majority, including the Warden, waited nervously for further developments: they accepted Elizabeth as head of the Church while wondering how extreme the shift back towards Protestantism would be. The answer of course was that the Elizabethan settlement was every bit as doctrinally protestant as that of Edward VI, even if Elizabeth's own wishes may have ensured the retention of some forms of traditional religious practice. Most notably of course for us sitting here today in New College Chapel, these included the preservation of the musical foundations of the Cathedrals and Collegiate Chapels in England.

An extensive set of visitations to New College began in 1561, aiming to root out residual catholic sympathies, and to investigate the general academic and disciplinary state of the College. By 1568, 38 Fellows of the College (out of seventy) had been removed. It seems clear that in losing its distinct identity as a seedbed of Marian catholic revival, New College also lost a sense of academic focus and discipline in the first decades of Elizabeth's reign.

Only gradually was a sense of direction and purpose regained. It's fair to say that the century following 1560 was not New College's finest hour, either within the Fellowship, or in its links with the world beyond Oxford. For the return of the College to significance and leadership in the Anglican Church we need to wait until the appearance of figures like Thomas Ken and Thomas Manningham in the later seventeenth century. But to look at that period would require a different set of centenary commemorations.

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