Why the religious changes of the mid-Tudor period did not lead to crisis

CHAPTER 11

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THE SUCCESS OF CONCILIAR GOVERNMENT

Under Edward

When looked at altogether the rapid series of contradictory religious changes in the Mid-Tudor period were quite unprecedented. How was it that Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation did not lead to a serious crisis in England? Partly it was to do with the success of conciliar government in this period.

During the reigns of Edward and Mary, monarchical government of the type exercised by Henry VII and Henry VIII was no longer possible. Edward was only a boy, who was not involved in the important decisions of his reign, while Mary is seen as rather remote from government, except for her clear objectives in religious policy. In this situation, the Royal Council, nurtured by Cromwell in the 1530s and tempered by the faction fighting of the 1540s became the centrepiece of effective government in mid-Tudor England.

The overthrow of Somerset, who tried to rule without the Council demonstrates its collective power. Paget’s letter to Somerset in July 1549 made the point but his advice was ignored. Paget (see page 00) claimed that, ‘every man of the Council mislikes your proceedings and wishes it otherwise’.

Somerset had tried to rule autocratically (alone) as Lord Protector but when the failure of his policies at home and abroad became obvious in the autumn of 1549, it was the Council, for so long ignored, which stepped in to overthrow him.

Northumberland’s decision to rule as Lord President of the Council shows that he had learnt this lesson well. Whereas Somerset had pushed through only modest religious reform because the Council still contained powerful conservatives like Arundel, Tunstall, Rich and Brown, Northumberland
could enact more radical reforms and secure his position, because he brought more reformers into the Council. During the period of intense faction fighting after Somerset’s fall, Northumberland was under attack from Wriothesley (see page 00) and other conservatives. He secured his pre-eminence by getting friends appointed to Edward’s Privy Chamber and, with their support, got Edward to agree to the appointment of four more reforming Councillors. These men then tipped the balance in the Council in favour of the reformers and Northumberland emerged as Lord President. Once in power, he realised that he could retain that power only by controlling the Council. He then assumed the King’s power to appoint new Councillors and appointed twelve of his own men to the Council after February 1550.

Now secure, Northumberland revived conciliar government. As most of the Councillors were in favour of religious reform and as Northumberland realised that this would win favour with Edward, reform was duly delivered. Backed by the King and Council, the more radical reforms of the Second Prayer Book and the 42 Articles excited little opposition, unlike the more modest reforms under the autocratic Somerset.

Under Mary
It is often claimed that Mary’s Council of some 43 members was unwieldy. However, at the instigation of the experienced Paget, the number of councillors was cut in 1554 and a ‘select Council’ was established in 1555. Even when there were 43 councillors, an inner circle of important men soon developed which made decisions and directed the others. Meanwhile the ‘surplus’ councillors were often employed to link the Council to the shires. Each councillor was expected to govern in his shire using the added prestige of his office and to report back to the Council in London. Improved communication between the centre and the shires had also been achieved under Northumberland. The Lord Lieutenants, appointed temporarily in certain shires during the troubled months of 1549, were now made permanent and given statutory authority in November of that year. One was appointed in

**KEY IDEAS**

Win favour with Edward. Edward VI had been educated by reforming tutors and Somerset and Northumberland would have re-enforced these views. However, because of his youth, it is unlikely that he had any decisive influence on events.
every county and told to give political oversight and report back any matters of importance to the Council.

**THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF PARLIAMENT**

**Disagreements over religion**

After 1529 Parliament played a more significant role in government and was instrumental in all the great changes (reforming and conservative) in religion, as well as in a host of other areas of central and local government. The House of Lords consisted of the great men of the realm and the purging of the 29 abbots after the dissolution of the monasteries meant that the House now had a lay majority. The Commons, usually the junior partner, was now seen as an equal partner with the Lords in the passing of new laws, due to procedural changes. Because of the many changes of regime and the changing religious complexion of the mid-Tudor period, Parliament continued to be called frequently and to enact vast quantities of legislation. It is clear that Parliament’s authority, combined with the authority of the Council, ensured that there was only limited opposition to the many changes introduced. The tradition of acquiescence and conformity, noted in relation to the many and contradictory religious reforms under Edward and Mary, stemmed from the fact that most had statutory authority. Under Henry VIII, Parliament had always been overshadowed by the King. Then, during a royal minority and afterwards under a female ruler, Parliament came into its own. Somerset’s Rule by proclamation had failed and subsequent changes would need parliamentary sanction. With that sanction, the realm was freed from domestic upheaval.

Traditionally, it has been thought that there was a Protestant ascendancy in Parliament which meant harmony under Edward and conflict under Mary. In fact both reigns saw opposition to government measures in Parliament. The Chantries Bill in 1547 ran into difficulties, while the attempt to use Parliament to deprive Tunstall of his bishopric was defeated. The repeal of Edward VI’s religious laws was, of course, opposed by 23 per cent of the House of Commons – some 80 MPs – which is not surprising as
the House, in terms of membership, was not dissimilar to the one which had passed the legislation just a few years earlier. In the light of this it is surely more notable that 75 per cent of the MPs did agree!

Also under Edward there was serious opposition to most of the religious changes in the House of Lords. Here, Catholic bishops and peers had the special right to formally register their opposition to a new Act. In 1547 the Bishops of London, Norwich, Hereford, Worcester and Chichester registered their disapproval of a bill allowing the Sacrament in both kinds to the laity. The Earls of Derby and Shrewsbury as well as Lords Dacre, Wharton, Windsor and Mounteagle also made use of this lordly privilege, to register their disapproval. Meanwhile the Bill allowing the marriage of priests took two months to pass the House of Lords.

It was a similar picture under Mary. In 1555, the Bill to restore First Fruits and Tenths to the Pope was passed after disagreements in the House, while a Bill to confiscate the property of Protestant exiles failed, not because Parliament was pro-Protestant but because, once again, it saw itself as the defender of property rights. Henry VIII of course would probably just have confiscated the property and it is a measure of more settled times that Parliament’s consent was sought and that, when it was not forthcoming, the government accepted the decision. Finally the Act to re-unite England with Rome took two weeks to get through Parliament, not because the MPs were opposed in principle but because they insisted that the Papal dispensation allowing men to retain ex-monastic lands should be part of the new law. Only parliamentary statute could give security of tenure.

Given the apparent importance of all the changes in religion during this period, it is surprising that there was not more opposition. Parliament acted as a kind of safety valve. It allowed for arguments and disagreements among the ruling class to be aired but it also ensured that decisions then arrived at in Parliament would be respected and conformed with in the shires. On the other hand, Parliament’s importance should not be exaggerated. It did
not initiate the changes in religion but its support added real authority and legitimacy to the new order.

WHY RELIGIOUS CHANGE DID NOT LEAD TO CRISIS

Acceptance of religious reforms
In April 1557, Ralph Allerton, a Protestant of Much Bentley in Essex was interrogated by the Catholic Bishop Bonner. With a typical show of assurance, he told the bishop that there were currently three religions in England: ‘The first is that which you hold, the second is clear contrary to the same and the third is neuter, being indifferent, that is to say observing all things that are commanded outwardly as though they were of your party, his heart being set against the same.’ Allerton clearly exaggerated the number of Protestants to suit his purpose but he may have hit the nail pretty much on the head. There was little opposition to the religious changes and no signs of a long-term crisis because so many English men and women became neutral and conformist. John Jewel a leading Protestant, writing at the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign, made much the same point in more direct fashion: ‘Many will believe neither side, whatsoever they allege. Bring they truth, bring they falsehood, teach they Christ, teach they Antichrist: they will believe neither, they have so hardened their hearts.’

Protestant howls of woe are familiar enough to any student of the period but Jewel’s analysis rings true of the English situation. Faced with contradictory and increasingly opposed religious messages, many people slumped into apathy or indifference. How could they decide what was right if their governors and betters disagreed among themselves? Others, who were less clearly apathetic, decided it was best to go along with whatever changes were being suggested. Opposition was dangerous and conformity might bring reward.

In reality, from the moment of Henry VIII’s death, the religious future looked uncertain and this encouraged conformism rather than opposition. While Edward was inclined to reform, his heir, everyone knew, was a Catholic.
While Mary brought back the old Church, her heir was Anne Boleyn’s daughter. Elizabeth herself never married and for nearly thirty years, her heir seemed to be the Catholic, Mary, Queen of Scots. For an unprecedented 40 years all was uncertainty and people soon appreciated that religious settlements could soon be changed in ways which were legally binding upon subjects, with severe penalties for non-conformity.

Even before Edward was crowned, the English people were aware that religious change was not permanent. In the late 1530s, after all, Henry VIII had moved decisively away from Protestant reform and used Parliament to frame and enforce the change of direction. What Parliament had enacted by way of settlement, one day, could easily, it seemed, be repealed by a later Parliament. To identify too closely with one side or the other would be dangerous.

Thus the changes in religion in the mid-Tudor period did not lead to crisis and confusion but to apathy and conformism. Robert Whiting, at the end of his highly illuminating study of the south-west during the Reformation, concludes that the Reformation process was ‘less a transition from Catholic to Protestant than a decline from religious commitment into conformism or indifference’.

Problems of Protestantism
The lack of crisis over religion during this period was also caused by problems and weaknesses within Protestantism. Since Protestantism was weak it could not launch an effective and rapid assault on traditional Catholicism which in turn might have led to crisis and confusion. Many leading Protestants gave up in the face of hostility from the State, rather than fighting to establish their faith, so religious confrontation was kept to a minimum. It is clear that there was little serious conflict over religion at parish level. Leading Protestants went into exile after 1553 rather than face persecution. In addition, Protestants who stayed in England had not developed convincing theories of resistance to a God-given Catholic monarch, so the Marian Counter-Reformation was accepted by the Protestant community.
Meanwhile, the Protestant leadership proved unwilling to mount serious opposition to the re-introduction of Catholic ceremonies and services. Cranmer, after all, was a loyalist. His reforming ideas had always developed slowly in the 1530s and 1540s and he always conformed to the wishes of Henry VIII. He stayed on after the passing of the Catholic Act of Six Articles in 1539, while keener Protestant bishops resigned their sees. Given more room to manoeuvre under Somerset and Northumberland, Cranmer's ideas still developed slowly and in deference to his political masters. When Mary came to the throne, his reaction was typical of his deferential attitude: ‘O good Lord be merciful unto us for we have been too remiss in punishing offenders, and many things we have winked at.’ He would have agreed with Hooper that Mary had been sent, ‘by reason of our sins’. While the firebrand John Knox denounced the monstrous regiment (rule) of women, Cranmer was confused and upset by this turn of events, trying to make sense of God's purpose. He was desperately torn between loyalty to his God-given sovereign and loyalty to his faith. He recanted six times before his execution in 1555. Neither he nor Hooper, nor any of the other Protestant Bishops gave the Protestant community a clear and dynamic lead in times of trouble. No wonder most conformed!

The limitations of Cranmer as a Protestant leader mirrored the divisions of Protestantism in mid-century as at all other times in the sixteenth century. Above all, Protestants were men of the Book, they relied on the Bible as the inspired Word of God and the ideas which they drew from it could be very varied and contradictory. Protestantism was far from being a clearly defined set of theological beliefs and thus it could neither impose a coherent creed in favourable circumstances, nor provide a secure refuge in times of trouble. John Foxe, in his *Book of Martyrs* tended to lump together all dissenters as good Protestants in order to lengthen the roll call of the Godly. In fact, Hooper and Ridley disagreed with Cranmer's notions of 'things indifferent'. Hugh Latimer was a more radical Protestant than Cranmer and refused to take up the duties of bishop a second time as he preferred to preach. Preachers, both licensed and unlicensed, always made governments
nervous. In 1549 Protector Somerset issued clear warnings to unlicensed preachers:

_In order that the King's subjects should not, by evil and unlearned preachers, be brought into superstition, error, or evil doctrine, and be made stubborn and disobedient to the King's Godly Proceedings; the King, by our advice, has thought it right to inhibit all manner of unlicensed preachers. They shall not be allowed to preach or stir the people...the people being tossed to and fro with seditious and contentious preaching, with every man going about to set out his own fantasy and to draw the people into his own opinion._

But how could the authorities be sure about who was a Godly preacher and who was ungodly? John Knox, the fiery Scots minister who had drunk deep of the Gospel in Calvin's Geneva, was established in Newcastle by late 1550 and was even preaching at Court in 1552.

While looking at the problems of preaching from the authorities' point of view, it is worth remembering that preaching and a number of other Protestant practices was not necessarily attractive. For the mass of people who were still illiterate, Protestantism's more intellectual approach to matters of faith did not have universal appeal. Many people disliked sermons and preaching and preferred the comforting and traditional ceremonies of the old Church. Many Protestant preachers commented on the unwillingness of people to listen to the message and their willingness to _harden their hearts_.

**Emergence of Protestant separatists**

English Protestantism was also weakened in mid-century by the emergence of Protestant separatists, who would break away from the Protestant mainstream. This was a pre-echo of the separatism which would develop further during the reign of Elizabeth. In 1550, for example, Henry Hart and his group of followers were arrested in Bocking in Essex. Hart had his own version of Protestant theology which included opposition to the idea of predestination. Disagreement over this would divide Protestants for the next century and beyond. Hart had also drawn up certain articles of faith which were to be observed by his
‘company’, suggesting that the group had cut itself off from the Church of England. During Edward’s reign there were also many foreign dissenters who came to England to seek asylum from persecution at home. We know of several congregations of Zwinglians and Calvinists established in and around London in this way and we know that there were a number of Anabaptists in England. Joan Boucher was burnt as an Anabaptist in 1551 and claimed that there were a thousand of her sect in London. Bishop Hooper became embarrassed by the fact that foreign and English Anabaptists were often called Protestants and thus gave the movement a bad name. For the same reason, several of Cranmer’s Forty-two Articles of 1553 were designed to distance the Godly from the errors of Anabaptism. English Protestants were fighting to establish their identity and fighting a war on two fronts, against Catholics on the one side and against Protestant Radicals on the other.

One other feature of English Protestantism helped to keep religious conflict and confrontation to a minimum during the mid-Tudor period. This was that official English Protestantism did not tend to persecute its religious opponents. Clearly, a wave of persecution by Protestants might have set off long-running and escalating violence. Instead, English Protestantism, when it had government support, executed very few people for their religious beliefs. No one was executed on such a basis under Somerset and only two Anabaptists – George van Paris and Joan Boucher – under Northumberland: Paris for denying that Christ was human and Boucher for denying that Christ was God!

**Moderation of Catholicism**

The large numbers of Protestants burnt during Mary’s reign later seen as un-English because it appeared in stark contrast to the occasional execution of religious dissidents in previous reigns. Nonetheless, not everything done by Catholics and the Catholic authorities was quite so drastic and it is the more moderate aspects of the Catholic reaction that also explain the absence of religious crisis at this time. Catholic devotional publications of the time, such as *A profitable and necessary doctrine or A plain and Godly treatise concerning the Mass and the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar*, were often moderate rather than
confrontational in tone. They showed that the Protestants did not have a monopoly on the word Godly or on the Word of God. They quoted from the Scriptures in English and stressed the need for informed and pious Catholics to participate in the sacraments. Saints and images, so loathed by more extreme Protestants, were mentioned but not made central, while references to the Pope were fairly minimal. In other words, the Catholicism on offer during Mary’s reign was not militant and papalist but moderate and English, based on the Erasmian Catholicism of the 1520s which was so much part of Pole’s Catholic upbringing and on the time-honoured traditions of the old English Church.

Nor was there a crisis in the number of ordinations to the Catholic clergy. In the diocese of Chester, there were no new ordinands during Edward’s reign but there were 12 in 1555, 17 in 1557 and no less than 70 in 1558. The number of new priests in the diocese of London makes the same point – the average figure per year under Edward was between 25 and 30; under Mary it was 48. Meanwhile the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge – crucial centres for the education of clergy – were cleaned up for Catholicism, and Protestantism withered.

When comparing Catholic and Protestant ideas and practices, it would be well perhaps to not make too much of the divisions between the two. Radicals on both sides denounced their opponents with vigour and stressed the differences in theology and religious practice, but the broad mass of the people would have been hard pressed to understand complex theology.

Historians have too often allowed the Protestants to monopolise terms such as ‘godly’ and ‘reformer’ to imply that Catholics were ‘un-godly’ and ‘non-reforming’. The reality was that Catholicism was learning from the continental Reformation. Men like Pole wanted a dynamic, caring and spiritually uplifting Catholicism which mediated with compassion between men and women and the Almighty. The likes of Bishop Gardiner, who had accommodated Henry VIII’s Supremacy with some ease, wished to see a revived Catholicism established within the
framework of an English, rather than a Papal, Church. In other words the notions of Christian religious revival appealed to both Protestants and Catholics and we should see many of them as engaged in a common struggle against materialism and apathy.

**PERIOD STUDY QUESTIONS**

1) How far-reaching were the religious changes during the reign of Edward VI?

2) To what extent were the uprisings of 1549 inspired by opposition to religious change?

3) How much opposition was there to the Marian Counter-reformation?

4) How important was Pole’s contribution to the restoration of the old religion in the reign of Queen Mary?