

**Our Freedom is the King's Pleasure?:  
Henry VIII, Religious Liberty, and the English Reformation**

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*“[T]he English regard and practice their religion only insofar as it relates to their duty as subjects of the king. They live as he lives and believe as he believes; indeed, they do everything he commands.... [T]hey would accept Mohammedanism [sic] or Judaism if the king believed it, and told them also to believe in it.”—Giovanni Micheli, Venetian Ambassador to England<sup>1</sup>*

Mention the Tudors and you might expect a wide array of responses. For some, the vision of Holbein's strapping, no-nonsense Henry VIII pops into their imagination; others might prefer to conjure up the pale and angular, but most impressive Queen Elizabeth I. Those more aesthetically inclined might dwell on that pleasing architectural style common among preeminent late-nineteenth century American universities, while the more culturally hip might think of the recent Showtime series of dubious historical quality (think *Downtown Abbey* with women in stays and men in tights). The Tudors certainly were a genetically intriguing family, capable of producing both full-blooded types like Henry VII and Elizabeth I, as well as the scrawny, sickly types, like Edward or Arthur, the Man Who Would Never Be King of the Britons. Perhaps the most notorious and most controversial member of this dynasty was Henry VIII, a man of many talents, yet about whom even the English had little good to say until three hundred years after his death. Not only was Henry quite the character, but many of the choices he made in consultation with his advisors and his Parliaments would have significant consequences on English history; certainly none have been more discussed and debated than his decisions concerning the religious upheaval going on in Europe at that time.

Much like the Tudors, any discussion of the sixteenth-century Reformations brings about an incredible diversity not only of opinions but of strong emotional attachment as well. They

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Micheli, quoted in DeLamar Jensen, *Reformation Europe. Age of Reform and Revolution*. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992), 174.

represent an exciting period for undergraduates gripped by intense theological debates, a source of pride and contention for most Western Christian confessions, the birthing of the modern world for secularists, and proof for those like the late Christopher Hitchens that the only thing Christians really like doing apparently is killing each other in the name of Jesus. Put these two together and you have (barring a boring pedant) quite a volatile mixture, a mixture out of which a peculiarly English understanding of religious and political liberty was to emerge, although many of the issues raised during this era were not resolved until over 150 years later.

Taking the Reformations as our starting point, it does little good to sugarcoat the reality of religious violence. Rather than being content merely to let such an idea shock our modern sensibilities, creating feelings of horror or of gratitude that we do not live in such times or have such un-Christian ideas, we should be motivated and impelled by some curiosity to ask the question “why?” Why does something that seems so obvious to us today—the principle of never forcing our religious beliefs on others, certainly not killing others for their privately held convictions—seem so contrary to the early-modern way of life? Why did so few people, if any, see the need to change their ways for so long? It is with the hope of sparking some of that curiosity that we will begin.

In the sixteenth century, the typical term used to describe a political society was “commonwealth,” meaning, quite literally, that which was for the benefit of all. Another phrase, slightly more archaic though widely circulated, envisioned society in more organic terms: “the body politic.” This concept, much like “the body of Christ,” meant more to Europeans than just a pretty turn of phrase or figure of speech. It represented a *correspondence*: a mathematic or scientific parallel that linked the human world (the cosmos) to both the natural world (the macrocosm) and the human figure (the microcosm). Since God was the creator of all three

worlds, pre-modern societies would use these correspondences as tools to help find divinely sanctioned solutions to troublesome issues, such as what the best form of government was, or how a king ought to behave toward his subjects.

Believing society to be organically conceived as a body carried with it a number of ramifications. Of first importance, this idea stood as the source of people's identity. Englishmen in the Tudor Age did not chiefly think of themselves as autonomous individuals (figures such as Martin Luther, uttering defiant phrases like "Here I Stand," have been wildly distorted by moderns looking for a prototype of themselves). Rather, they assumed that they entered life as members of natural communities, their existence predicated on "we," not "I." Building on the correspondence with the human body, it goes without saying that *naturally*, all parts of the body work together: as the hand moves, individual muscles and nerves are at work in the fingers. This correspondence also leads to the self-evident truth that all members of the body are not created equally (your heart is more important than your toes—try living without one for awhile), nor do they perform similar functions. Yet *because* of this, each member of the body possesses and demands a special respect.

To give an example: farmers and peasants were routinely perceived of as the feet in the body politic. They were lowly, as was Jesus in his humiliation, but the lowest elements are often the most essential—see how firm a foundation Jesus turned out to be! By recognizing agricultural laborers as foundational to the survival and flourishing of a kingdom, no early modern sovereign in his right mind would behave like the Disney version of Prince John, taxing the poor to give to the rich. It would be as if someone thought he could stand taller and walk faster if he blew off his own toes or amputated his feet.

Finally, understanding oneself as part of a larger body fundamentally alters the definition of liberty. What is freedom for an eyeball after all? When are our eyes free? Surely it is when they are open, when there is enough blood rushing into veins and enough current running through our optic nerves, empowering them to see. Body parts are free only when they are supported by others, and ought to use that freedom to help other members of the body, telling the toes for instance “don’t walk there!” or the hands, “don’t touch that!” Freedom, therefore, cannot be based on individual choice as we understand it. The origins and purpose of liberty comes rather from our society and its particular needs. We are free only because of what others are, have done, and are continually doing for us—without them we would not be free. Moreover, the only appropriate response to this must be a working out of duty (ideally with a thankful heart), if not to those whom we rely on, then certainly to our dependents, so that this liberating motion may continue. An Englishman’s freedom consisted not in boundless choice but in direction; not in pursuing an individualized conception of happiness, but delighting in building up other members of the body politic, even if that might mean occasionally denying his wants.

Now all bodies have souls and in the Tudor worldview, the soul corresponded to Christian ministers. Just as man’s chief concern in this life involves his soul and his eternal destination, authorities in civil society were expected to direct their greatest efforts and resources to preserving the health of religion in their community. Above all, this meant preserving the unity of the faith. Far from perceiving religious diversity as something desirable, Europeans saw it as a cancerous growth that, if tolerated and allowed to spread, had the potential to destroy the body politic. For monarchs such as Henry VIII, attempting to enhance and solidify their political power, religious diversity could spell the end of all these efforts. In general, religious diversity only existed in weak monarchical or republican systems—Poland, Hungary, the Netherlands—

and furthermore, were seen as *causing* the political weakness of those regimes. The best treatment for religious diversity, as we practice in cancer treatments today, was burning: a spiritual radiation treatment to purge the particularly vicious cells lest the whole body die.

I would like to be clear that what follows is not intended to serve as an apologia for using state power to enforce religious conformity, nor a suggestion that Henry VIII's approach to religion is in any way more Christian than say, that of Barack Obama's. Rather I hope that we might take this time to try and walk, as much as possible, in another man's shoes, to borrow the phrase of Atticus Finch. As we examine Henry's policies, we need to be careful not to critique them solely from our modern understanding of an individualized liberty of choice, since many of his decisions will seem completely anathema. We must also work to see how, given Henry's conception of an organic society with natural duties incumbent upon all its members, especially the king, these policies *could* be seen as liberating, destroying barriers and encumbrances so that the body could run the race marked out for it.

One of the main triumphs of the Reformation from a modern Protestant perspective was the power to print the Bible in a language that the people could read, freeing them from submitting to arbitrary interpretations by priests, and allowing them the liberty to read the Scriptures whenever they saw fit. How did Henry VIII do on this score? Like all monarchs of the period he maintained a strict censorship, licensing very few printers in London and even fewer outside the capital. Moreover, he and his ministers sponsored public burnings of Lutheran works and other illicit material beginning in 1521, and continuing throughout his reign.

Henry rigorously enforced the 1408 Oxford Constitutions that prohibited the Bible from being translated without the approval of a church council or a local bishop. He even went so far as to hire agents to trap William Tyndale (an Englishman who had sought to translate the Bible

in the 1520s but whose plea had been rejected by Bishop Tunstall of London), while the latter was hiding in the Netherlands, turning him over to the authorities to be executed. On the other hand in 1537, just a few months after Tyndale's death, Henry extended his blessing to Thomas Mathew's and Miles Coverdale's translation that borrowed extensively from Tyndale, a project that culminated in the Great Bible, printed in March 1539. A second edition came out the next year, and in 1541, Henry ordered that a copy be chained in every parish church in the realm—chained not to prevent theft so much as to discourage individualized reading without a priest nearby to consult. The last piece of legislation on this matter came in 1543, with the Act of Advancement of True Religion, forbidding lower orders and all women under the rank of gentlewomen from reading the Scriptures.

Before determining whether these decisions compromised rather than expanded English liberties, a little context would be appropriate. First, dealing with translations, the 1408 constitution was designed to prohibit amateur scholars from producing a work that could jeopardize a reader's salvation without some oversight from those whose job it was to care for souls. Next, when considering reading and interpretation, we must bear in mind that over 80% of the English population at this time was illiterate, and most were farmers which meant much of their day was spent in hard labor, with very little time for leisure. Even if Bibles were printed in English and distributed freely, there was very little chance Susie Dairymaid or Piers Plowman could read it—they would have to rely on somebody else's interpretation anyway. In addition, the laws prohibiting both when and who could read emerged in the aftermath of one of the most tumultuous events of the early Reformation, the seizure of Münster in 1534 by radical Anabaptists convinced through their own private interpretation of the Bible that the end of the world was near, that first a baker, and then a tailor were the reincarnation of the Messiah, and

that God required they fight all who opposed them. When seen in this light, Henry's laws remind us that individuals, even literate ones, do not always know what's right, that all students need teachers, and in the absence of good teachers, we ought to be careful letting merely the loudest, the sweetest, or the slyest voice dominate conversations.

The second big issue affected by the king's reforms concerned the liberty of religious expression. In the spring of 1534, shortly after the Act of Supremacy declaring the king to be the head of the Church in England, Henry's chancellor, Thomas Cromwell revoked all preaching licenses, requiring a special process for those who wanted them reissued to ensure that ministers would comply with the royal edict. The next year, Cromwell began ordering bishops and priests to preach in support of royal supremacy, imprisoning those who refused. In July 1536, an act simply entitled The Ten Articles prohibited the "improper use" of images, incense, and "excessive" rites and ceremonies in church. Images of saints were still allowed in churches, but bishops and priests were required to teach the laity their proper use. Special licenses were given to reform-minded individuals so they could travel from parish to parish, instructing the people. In addition several holy days were suppressed, taking away the public celebrations greatly prized by many local guilds.

The implementation of the Ten Articles provoked the largest reaction to Henrician reforms in the Pilgrimage of Grace, beginning in October 1536 and lasting until mid-March 1537. Led by a lawyer, Robert Aske, from an old Yorkshire family, as many as 40,000 rebels occupied York, restoring Catholic worship and planning to "make pilgrimage" on London to lay complaints before the king. Aske was granted a personal audience with the king who promised to suspend the dissolution of monasteries and to be lenient against those who attacked evangelical heresies. Unfortunately for Aske, the northern rebels grew impatient with his long visit and

became more violent as the spring wore on. This time Henry's response was not so gracious. Aske was captured, tried, and executed as a rebel, and after a few other notable examples were made, the rebellion petered out. On the whole, however, the Pilgrimage was remarkable for its lack of violence, either by the rebels or by the crown in response.

The final issue addressed in Henry's reforms could fall under the category "freedom of property," specifically the monasteries, abbeys, and churches of England. Even before the Act of Supremacy, Henry VIII had been quite concerned about the moral quality of the English clergy. He sent out royal agents in the 1520s, to visit parishes and monastic houses, to assess their material wealth and moral rectitude. Another commission, created by the Lord Chancellor, Thomas Cromwell in 1535, was more thorough, and Cromwell determined that most of them were no longer religiously sound. These monks had departed from their high calling, and therefore, the king was entitled to shut them down, especially since these orders owed allegiance to "foreign princes" (to use language from the Act of Supremacy). This information would later be used to close down the smaller monasteries the following year, although Henry was adamant this would *only* apply to houses valued at less than £200 yearly earnings, on the basis that they could not be doing anything productive or religious with that small amount. Interestingly, 67 of the 204 houses slated to be dissolved were able to obtain a postponement of their fate (some by paying a fee, others, apparently on the whim of Henry or Cromwell). But that postponement quickly evaporated. In 1537, many of the small monasteries and even some of the greater ones "voluntarily surrendered" their property to the king. Within two years, in 1539, Parliament ordered the suppression of all the big abbeys, with the last one caving in four years later. Most of the wealth went directly to royal coffers although some properties would be resold to noble families. As for the monks, some were given stipends, much smaller than the ones they had been



used to, but not leaving them in abject poverty. Some re-entered lay life without the stipend, while others became secular clergy, used by Henry and Cromwell to remind audiences throughout the kingdom of the error of their ways.

What, if anything did it accomplish? Is there liberty here in practice, apart from the legislation? Despite the number of royal edicts or pieces of Parliamentary legislation, their effects varied widely throughout English shires: Sometimes this is connected to the distance from London (and thus, the enforcement of the laws); sometimes connected to a distance from international communities (Cambridge, much closer to the North Sea and German traders was more evangelical than insular Oxfordshire); or dependent on local conditions. Thus, London, and the southern and eastern shires were often in the forefront of evangelical reforms, while the northern and western shires (Yorkshire, Lancashire, Lincolnshire) were more conservative. And yet, as scholar Peter Marshall concludes, from early 1530s onward, “the dictates of Henry’s conscience became normative for the nation as a whole.”

Reactions to Henry’s reforms were quite muted compared not only to his contemporaries but even to his own children when they, in turn, imposed particular standards on their subjects. Despite royal pressure on press and pulpit to get Henry’s message across, these vehicles were largely unsuccessful. England remained a religiously-divided kingdom: Indeed many doubt whether there were any Englishmen who perfectly conformed to the king’s reforming agenda apart from Henry himself!

What were the consequences for those who resisted the king’s policies? For a few unfortunates, their disagreement ended in their own destruction. Around 60 of the 130 people executed under Henry’s 38-year reign were condemned for religious reasons. Lutherans and Anabaptists would be burned for heresy, while Roman Catholics were hung as traitors for

“serving a foreign dignitary and not the king,” to borrow a phrase from Cardinal Wolsey’s indictment. Apart from these dozens, however, violent death was rare, even at a popular level. Few acts of individual brutality have been recorded during this period, neither were there coordinated assassinations or massacres as in France. Even the Northern Rebellions of 1536-37 were relatively bloodless.

A far more common fate was self-imposed exile. Between 1533-1546, at least 127 Roman Catholics and 37 evangelicals left the country, numbers that again pale in comparison to the hundreds who fled England during the reigns of all three of Henry’s children. Many Catholics departed for Scotland, while others chose France or even Rome. Evangelicals, on the other hand, generally wound up in Switzerland where exposure to Calvin’s teachings produced a more radical and intentional opposition upon their return.

What, then, are we to make of these figures, quite low by comparison to Henry’s contemporaries and his own children? Were the English overwhelmingly content with these reforms? Were they merely confused? Increasingly scholars such as Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie incline toward the second explanation, observing that the king’s religious experiences have all the aspects of a man on a journey, yet still unsure of himself. Even Henry’s chief spiritual advisor, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, had his doubts through the king’s last day, when, without being able to speak anymore, monarch and prelate squeezed hands over the issue of justification by faith. Understanding Henry’s confused and wandering state might help explain his frequent hesitations and reluctance to enforce a great many points. He knew quite clearly what practices and beliefs he did *not* like. But what he did like appeared to fluctuate, depending to some degree on his willingness to listen to Cromwell, Cranmer, one of his wives, or how his subjects were responding.

The violence provoked by political, social, and religious turmoil in the sixteenth century, although rare in England, was by far the common lot for most Europeans. Yet it could not be sustained indefinitely. By the end of the 1500s, a new principle had begun to manifest itself in the war-ravaged communities of France and the Holy Roman Empire: the principle of religious toleration. It is important here to distinguish early modern acts of toleration from our modern conception of religious tolerance. Edicts of toleration, such as the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and the Edict of Nantes (1598), were stop-gap measures, intended to set parameters for peaceful living while at the same time exploring ways to convert the non-believer. The sought-after objective—religious uniformity—was still the same, only these so-called *politique* monarchs took the longer, less disruptive road. The only sovereign to obtain this goal was Louis XIV when he revoked Nantes with the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1685. That this revocation crippled France's economy in both the short-and-long term was a fact rarely disputed even in the Sun King's own time. Yet contemporaries also were quite explicit in affirming that economic considerations were of secondary importance compared to establishing religious unity. Many, including the Enlightenment philosophe Voltaire, praised Louis for his action, believing that it further strengthened the strongest country in Europe. Only a minority, and most of those exiled Huguenots, begged to differ.

The event that began turning European minds away from toleration toward a policy of religious tolerance, which implicitly rejects the notion of a single true faith, or which has religious beliefs so broad as to be accommodating to most other faiths, came with the arrival of Deism in the Enlightenment. By stressing the inherent rationality of their beliefs, and by plundering quite freely from the basic principles of monotheism as well as Christian and pagan vocabulary, Deists were able to accommodate a broader spectrum of believers than had ever

before been seen on the continent, at least since the days of the Roman Empire. Moreover, by privileging the inward nature of religious experience over outward form, the Enlightenment also began turning religion into a private affair between the individual (not communities) and some deity, while at the same time, divorcing morality from needing a particular (as opposed to a general) divine or religious impulse. Such a focus on the inner man also played into developing ideas of liberty, which revolved more around the assumption that man's natural and normative identity was found in himself and not in a community. Freedom then becomes a matter of choice; with some legal restrictions, it matters not what you or I choose, so long as we are the ones doing the choosing. Good works, therefore, could be done, and were done, by anybody regardless of their particular beliefs about God, while those who held particularly exclusive ideas were themselves to be increasingly excluded as holding irrational, backward, and socially divisive beliefs. Nowhere does this find clearer expression than in the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau (two gentlemen who agreed on precious little) and in the events of the French Revolution, when first the Jacobins and later Napoleon established this new standard and began acquiring the means to enforce it.

Our modern understanding of liberty and religious tolerance encourages individuals to believe whatever they want to believe, so long as it is understood that those beliefs are chiefly intellectual and ought to be private. Public expressions, especially those that make the public uncomfortable, have to be curtailed, if not by the offending party, then by the collective power of the community expressed through the state. While such ideas were initially limited to revolutionary France, in the last decades it has become increasingly the norm in England. There may be quite troubling signs that America too is gradually adopting this revolutionary understanding of religious freedom, when one considers the forced closing of Boston's century-

old Roman Catholic adoption agency as a result of the church's obstinate refusal to recognize the legitimacy of homosexual relationships. More recently, there is Obamacare's insistence that any organization of Christians not specifically a church is thereby not a "religious" organization, and must pay for health policies that run contrary to their moral principles.

As this secular Iron Curtain descends upon the public sphere, stifling those who wish to express and practice an exclusive orthodoxy, we may do well to consider the past and mark where our future is trending. Assuming those assembled are members of different Christian denominations, we may have gained quite a deal of civil and religious liberty by not living under a Henry VIII-inspired government that imposes a particular set of beliefs and practices upon us. It certainly is nice not to live in fear of being tried and burned for my faith. But what have we lost as a consequence? How important is religion to our communities, and even to ourselves, if the stakes are no longer so high? The more we consider "the body politic" as quaint and outdated, the more we conceive ourselves as the chief building block of reality; what does that do to social cohesion, or even a spirit of thankfulness? Is it any coincidence that our national Thanksgiving holiday increasingly seems to be less about being thankful to anyone and more about gratifying an individual's materialist desires? When religion becomes something intensely private or characterized by "random acts of kindness," have we begun to destroy the compass that had given us direction as a society? And is this loss of our bearings, allowing us to turn any way with the knowledge that it will be the right one, freeing or freezing?

We appear to have come to a crossroads—the proverbial fork in the road, and unlike Yogi Berra, we can't simply "take it." There is a choice to be made, but without this understanding of society as an organic unit making demands upon its debtor-citizens, where true

freedom is found only in loving service that, in turn, only really flows from a Divine Lover—are we really free to ponder, free to choose, free to live?

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