

INTRODUCTION

The alliance between ecclesiastical and secular authority is almost as old as Christianity itself. What started as a purely spiritual commitment to a vision of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, had become by the fourth century inextricably entangled with the politics of the Empire. The support of Constantine and his successors converted bishops into imperial administrators, and the prayers of the faithful recognized and upheld the imperial authority.¹ When the Empire in the West collapsed, the Church survived, and carried the concept of *romanitas* forward into a world of successor kingdoms, which often enough showed little political continuity, but were ambitious to preserve the ideal. The Pope was the Bishop of Rome, and based his claim to authority on that fact, an authority which was allowed to transcend that of the secular kingdoms and lordships because of what it symbolized.² What these kingdoms sought above all else was authenticity, a validity which transcended the exploits of warlords and conferred upon their kings some echo of the imperial authority. It was this that the Church conferred. In creating dioceses and founding monasteries, rulers were entering into a compact with the Church, which in return for this material superstructure, recognized their power and interceded for them with God. The doctrine that this world is a mere antechamber to the next gave the Church an unchallenged cultural ascendancy which more than compensated for its lack of military muscle. Priests did not fight, they prayed, and prayer was as potent as the sword.³ As the Church expanded into hitherto pagan lands beyond the reach of the Empire, it was usually with the assistance of temporal lords who recognized the benefits which this alliance could confer upon themselves. It was by such means that the Roman Church embraced Anglo-Saxon England in the sixth and seventh centuries.⁴

After the Norman conquest, relations between Rome and the Crown of England had fluctuated, but the one thing which no king could afford to do to the Church was to ignore it. Because of its Latin heritage, the Church had a virtual monopoly of literacy, at least in northern Europe, and the clerks who staffed the king's Chancery and his Exchequer were nearly all in holy orders. The colleges which provided higher education were ecclesiastical foundations, which dou-

bled as chantries, offering prayers for the souls of their founders and their kin.⁵ In so far as aristocratic education extended beyond the martial arts and ‘courtesy’, it was a clerical monopoly. How far this cultural grip extended down the social scale is a matter for some speculation, because the written records, as far as they exist, were either produced in the service of the Crown or for the information of educated monks and priests. The chronicles reflect everyday life only at second hand. By the thirteenth century the parish system covered the whole of England, and every adult was supposed in theory to worship in his or her parish church, to be baptized and to receive the sacraments. Most probably did so, but with what degree of understanding it is difficult to say.⁶ The Church had long since learned to compromise with the deeply rooted customs of the rural year – so the winter solstice became Christmas and the spring festival of re-birth became Easter. This did not mean that the faith which they expressed was any less genuine, but the conformity of the ecclesiastical calendar to existing patterns undoubtedly made the transition to Christianity easier. By 1300 paganism was residual, even in the more remote parts of the country, and the Church’s projection of its own intercessory role was generally accepted. Even those with very little in the way of worldly goods would bestow what they could on the well-being of their souls in the afterlife, and the rituals performed by the priest were accepted as the gateway to salvation. The more elaborate the ritual, the more effective it was perceived to be, and the Church flourished both culturally and materially on this acceptance of its indispensable intercessory function.⁷

Human nature being what it is, however, dissent was never totally absent. No doubt at first there were sullen pagans whose conformity to the newly established order was purely nominal, and there had been more or less sophisticated heresies in the Church from its very early days.⁸ Doubts were expressed about the closeness of the relationship between the Church and the feudal hierarchy. Should bishops and abbots really double as temporal lords? What was the justification for tithes? Should the clergy really enjoy so much jurisdiction on the pretext of their spiritual functions? Heretical groups sprang up, even at the height of the Church’s power. The Waldensians questioned ecclesiastical wealth and the extent to which it claimed moral jurisdiction.⁹ The Albigensians or Cathars were Gnostics, who questioned the whole foundation of the faith, and other smaller groups cast doubt on particular teachings; on the efficacy of penance, for example, or the Church’s extremely negative attitude to sexuality.¹⁰ As far as England was concerned, these doubts were conveniently focused in the teachings of one man – John Wycliffe, the eccentric Oxford don. His followers, and others whose dissent owed little to his teachings, were collectively and contemptuously dubbed ‘Lollards’, and were persecuted in the early fifteenth century.¹¹

None of this would have had very much to do with the Crown if it had not been for the vagaries of English politics. This was the time of the papal schism,

with Urban VI and Boniface IX in Rome squaring up to Clement VII and Benedict XIII in Avignon. Richard II inevitably supported Boniface against the French backed Benedict, and hoped to gain some autonomy for the English Church in consequence. Benedict, however, was under other pressures and would not concede. The result was the statutes of Provisors and Praemunire, culminating in 1393. This made it unlawful for the Pope to provide to any benefice in England without the king's licence, or for any ecclesiastical jurisdiction to be exercised without his consent.¹² In principle this Act could have made the English Church completely independent, but it was never understood in that sense, either at the time or after. There was no intention of withholding the royal licence under normal circumstances, but it was intended as a warning to Rome that the kings of England reserved their rights when it came to dealings with the Church. That was why successive popes pressed unsuccessfully for many years to have it repealed. At first it did not matter very much, because in 1399 Richard was deposed in questionable circumstances by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, and Henry thereafter needed all the support that he could get. Both he and his son, Henry V, were conspicuous for their conventional piety and generous patrons of religious establishments. They persecuted Lollards and supported papal jubilees.¹³ Good relations with Rome were restored – but the Act of Praemunire remained on the statute book – unused but still a potential threat.

In spite of the Lollards, traditional piety flourished in fifteenth-century England. This may have been partly due to the devastation which had been wrought, and was still being wrought, by bubonic plague. Between about 1340 and 1420 the population collapsed from nearly six million to a little over two million. This had all sorts of consequences which do not concern us here, but one result was an acute awareness of the presence of death and of the need for strategies to cope with it. Purgatory became something of an obsession and intercessory prayer rose in importance.¹⁴ At the same time the Church's teaching on good works became increasingly emphasized. The two things went together, because the more works a person had performed in their lifetime, the easier the task of the intercessors became. A kind of calculus developed, not among theologians but in the popular mind. Every person must render account for their lives, and this came to be taken literally – so many good deeds on the credit side of the ledger, so many sins on the debit side – and the prayers of friends and kindred to tip the balance.¹⁵ Under the impact of this preoccupation, fashions in piety changed. The monasteries, which had offered the *opus dei* on behalf of all Christian souls, became seen as distant – almost irrelevant, and even the great houses struggled to recover from the effects of plague.¹⁶ The benefactions of the faithful became increasingly channelled into schools, colleges and almshouses, which constituted social benefits with intercessory overtones – good for the souls and bodies of all concerned. Numerous straightforward chantries were endowed, a significant

number of them in perpetuity, and the friars, those famously 'hands on' preachers and healers, did particularly well, taking up many of the vocations which in a previous generation would have gone to the monasteries.¹⁷ Never had the sacramental functions of the clergy seemed to be more relevant, or urgent, and the mass in particular developed a huge variety of exotic forms, some of purely local significance.¹⁸ This piety both Edward IV and Henry VII were happy to exploit, and their relations with the Holy See benefited in consequence. Edward revived the Order of the Garter as the symbol of his Christian chivalry and Henry supported the Pope to such good purpose that he was able to abolish most of the Church's rights of sanctuary without protest.¹⁹ Meanwhile the Act of Praemunire remained unrepealed.

Nevertheless behind this façade of enthusiastic unity, dissent increasingly lurked. Lollardy, driven underground by the persecution of the earlier part of the century, resurfaced about the beginning of Henry VIII's reign. Concerted episcopal investigations in 1511 revealed a disturbing number of individuals infected with one or other of these heresies. Statistically they may have been insignificant, but in some areas, such as the Cotswolds, they formed a measurable fraction of the population.²⁰ For the most part they recanted, and the Church's grip on popular piety was not seriously challenged, but they were a worrying sign to the perceptive. More importantly, at a sophisticated educational level, questions were being asked with which the Church was not well equipped to deal. Humanist scholarship had originated in Italy, in a renewed interest in the writings of the pagan Greeks and Latins. This not only raised the curtain on a world view which antedated the appearance of Christianity, it also awakened linguistic curiosity. Behind St Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible were original documents in Greek and Hebrew, which represented the authentic voice of the Holy Spirit. How accurately had that voice been rendered?²¹ The papacy had at first welcomed these questionings, because they appeared to lend authenticity to the Church's message. However, conservative voices were soon pointing out that if the Church conceded errors in the Vulgate text, it cast doubt upon its whole claim to infallible leadership. If the Universal Church, as represented by its General Councils, could have been mistaken about an issue so fundamental to the faith, where did its sacramental authority lie?²² For the most part the humanists had no desire to challenge that authority, but they were very committed to the authentic text of the scriptures and some began to claim that all Christians had a right of access to the Bible in their own tongue. Henry VIII was brought up in this humanist tradition and, although that did not at first affect his somewhat unreflective piety, it sowed the seeds for a dramatic shift of emphasis in later life.

The jolts which derailed Henry's acceptance of the Church's claims and pretensions were political rather than theological, but their impact was to be profound. The first warning shot had been fired in 1514, when, in the untidy

aftermath of the death of Richard Hunne, he had declared that he did not recognize any superior authority on earth.²³ This did not represent a considered position and was interpreted at the time as a rejection of papal claims to feudal suzerainty – claims which went back to the rather desperate attempts of King John to escape interdict. In any case, Pope Leo X was looking the other way and Anglo-papal relations continued to be good. When the King ‘ghosted’ the *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* against Luther in 1521, he was rewarded with the title *Defensor Fidei*. What disrupted this amicable situation, and transformed Henry’s relations with the Church, was his obstinate insistence on annulling his first marriage. In nearly twenty years of cohabitation, Catherine had given him no son, and since this could not possibly be any reflection upon him, it followed that their union was displeasing to God.²⁴ There had been doubts about it from the beginning and these could now be seen to have been well founded. Being Bible-learned he knew (or thought that he knew) that the Book of Leviticus forbade such marriages.²⁵ When Pope Clement VII refused to accept his arguments, he became obstinate and pertinacious. Catherine’s defence of her marriage, and Henry’s infatuation with Anne Boleyn, hardened attitudes on both sides, and by 1533 an impasse had been reached. This the King broke in the only way which was open to him. He used his own legislature – the parliament – first to prohibit appeals to the Holy See, and then to declare him to be ‘the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England, called the *Anglicana Ecclesia*’.²⁶ He set aside Catherine, married Anne and proceeded to adjust the practices of the Church to suit his own tastes.

He had sworn in his coronation oath to uphold its liberties, and was soon being reminded that his current proceedings were not quite what the clergy had had in mind. Nevertheless the King’s need for a son was real and urgent. He had a daughter, but there had never been a Queen Regnant in England and if (or when) she married a foreign king was in prospect. Such a thought was abhorrent, not only to Henry but to most of his subjects as well.²⁷ Consequently, although the country became bitterly divided, the King gained more support than the religious profile of England in 1534 might have suggested. Attempts were made to disguise the radical nature of what had happened. The parliament had not (of course) created the Royal Supremacy, but recognized an existing authority, reinforcing it to ‘repress and extirp all errors, heresies and other enormities and abuses hereto fore used’. Henry was a loyal son of the Church; it was the Pope who had gone astray, claiming and usurping a jurisdiction which did not properly belong to his office.²⁸ How far anyone was convinced by these arguments we do not know, but the King got his own way. High-profile dissidents like John Fisher and Thomas More were executed for treason, and that powerful but muddled and self-contradictory movement known as the Pilgrimage of Grace was defeated.²⁹ At the same time doctrinal orthodoxy was upheld, and heretics like

Robert Barnes and John Lambert went to the stake – the latter on the King’s personal insistence. There was much grumbling, particularly among the conservative clergy, and especially when the King authorized an English translation of the Bible, but the way in which this grumbling was denounced reveals a substantial body of support for Henry’s idiosyncratic policies.³⁰

The English Bible provides a useful test. The reformers, of course, welcomed it, and the underground remnants of the Lollards rejoiced. The King insisted on its use, but in fact it seems to have been far more widely accepted than one might imagine given the prevailing climate of religious conservatism.³¹ This was partly because there had been a steep increase in lay literacy over the previous half century, thanks to the founding of many new schools and the availability of books created by the printing press. But it was also partly because intelligent laymen were aware that Christianity was a religion of the book and they wanted to access it for themselves. This did not necessarily express any hostility to the clergy, but more people were asking questions, and expecting answers. Conservative clergy (who had probably received very little education themselves) might be appalled at this prospect, but the more alert welcomed it as tending to the strengthening of the faith.³² Henry certainly did not see it as encouraging heresy – rather the reverse. By the end of Henry’s reign a *modus vivendi* had been found. Most of his subjects had not cared much about the Pope anyway. He was part of the furniture, but his interventions were few and had little impact on the regular routines of worship. It was not difficult to represent him as an interfering foreigner rather than a father in God. For centuries kings had claimed a special place in the divinely ordained hierarchy. Coronations had made them the Lord’s Anointed, and God’s approval, or disapproval, was reflected in their well-being. They had largely endowed the Church and continued to control such things as the bishops’ temporalities. It was therefore relatively easy, within the existing religious culture, to think of Henry as Supreme Head of the Church of England. This was particularly the case when he continued to be the most strenuous upholder of the sacraments and to persecute anyone who could be accused of holding Lutheran or sacramentarian views.³³

There was dismay in some quarters when the King used his authority to dissolve the monasteries. They had existed for a thousand years, and were a comfortable feature of the religious landscape. However, the fashion for the *opus dei* had long since departed and when measured against contemporary standards of usefulness they did not score highly. Moreover their lands were immense and their disappearance opened the way for the greatest shake up which the property market had seen since the Conquest.³⁴ Nostalgia, or even piety, could not compete with this appetite, which reached far down the social scale to the yeoman farmer wishing to round off a modest estate. The monks were pensioned, and many were rapidly absorbed into the parochial system. The servants mostly stayed put to serve new

masters and consciences, if they became officious, were easily pacified. The King took the monasteries' valuables, and the cultural vandalism represented by the destruction of their libraries was lamented by few.³⁵ The piety of the vast majority focused on their parish churches, where the regular orders impinged but seldom, even when they were the patrons. It made little difference to the churchwardens, or even to the incumbent, whether their advowson belonged to the local Benedictines or to the gentleman who had purchased the rights.

'Religion as King Henry left it' seemed a sensible compromise, and in any case, if the King had got it wrong with God, that was his affair. His subjects were absolved of responsibility by the divinely enjoined duty of obedience. Not everyone, of course, shared this comfortable vision. There were still quite a lot of clergy (and many ex-religious) who hankered after the security of the Universal Church, from which Henry had been unceremoniously expelled, although they were wise enough to keep their opinions to themselves. At the same time there were evangelicals, particularly among the educated laity, who believed that the King had been guilty of half measures. These were men and women who shared the King's humanist credentials, his enthusiasm for the English Bible and his aversion to the regular orders, but were not repelled by Lutheran teachings such as justification by faith alone. They were Henry's natural allies against both the Pope and the monasteries, but were sceptical of the *potestas ordinis* and unhappy with many aspects of the prevailing religious culture. They were strong in the court and in close proximity to the King, but they were also circumspect about making their views known.³⁶ At the time of Henry's death the official Church was an idiosyncratic blend which reflected nothing but the King's personal preferences. The Act of Six Articles, which had been only slackly enforced since 1543, was strictly orthodox and anyone who defied its teachings on the mass, as Anne Askew did, was liable to meet an unpleasant fate. The King's Book was much less conventional, setting aside such popular teaching as that on purgatory, and opening the door to dissent on the sacrament of penance.³⁷ At the same time, for reasons which had nothing to do with doctrine, but a great deal to do with the King's suspicious nature, the most important conservatives in the court were disgraced. Stephen Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester, was rusticated and excluded from the number of the King's executors, while the Duke of Norfolk was imprisoned, tried for treason and condemned to death.³⁸

In the last months of his life, Henry's main concerns were to protect the Royal Supremacy, to defend Boulogne and to finish his business with Scotland. The first presented the most difficult problem, because it was obvious that his son and heir would succeed as a minor. Edward was only nine, and there was no way the King was going to live another nine years. In spite of its parliamentary endorsement, the Supremacy was personal to the King, and so Henry had conceived it from the start. To sustain it in the hands of a child therefore presented problems, and

Henry felt that he could trust only the most committed anti-papalists to achieve that.³⁹ This meant that he placed Edward's education in the hands of evangelicals such as John Cheke and Richard Cox, and promoted like-minded courtiers such as the Earl of Hertford and Viscount Lisle to the leading positions among his executors. Above all, he trusted his Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, about whose unorthodox views he was already well informed.⁴⁰ It may well be that he deceived himself about the extent to which some of these men had already crossed the shadowy divide which separated evangelicalism from Protestantism. Cranmer, at any rate, was still orthodox on the mass, which was central to the King's spirituality, and that may have been sufficient. However, it was as a result of these dispositions, made by Henry at the end of his life, that the Church of England was to become Protestant in the two years after his death. Without the Royal Supremacy there would have been no Protestant settlement, because although Protestants (of a sort) were in a majority among the King's executors and strong in the court, they were a tiny minority in the country as a whole.⁴¹ There were quite a few among the better-educated clergy and among the urban elites of towns such as London, Bristol and Norwich. They even controlled some parishes, and in London a few churchwardens rushed headlong into reform as soon as news of the old King's death was confirmed.⁴² But the prevailing religious culture was conservative, particularly in its devotion to the sacraments. Both the mass and penance retained their pre-eminence, and with them the mystique of the *potestas ordinis* – the unique intercessory function of priesthood. However, it soon transpired that the strongest cult of all was that of obedience to the Crown. It was to be argued later that parliament had been coerced into endorsing the Royal Supremacy, but the Lord Protector was in no position to apply such pressure in 1548/9. Nevertheless chantries and obits were abolished in 1547, the clergy were permitted to marry and the First Prayer Book was introduced in 1549, all by statute.⁴³ The Act against chantries was a much more severe blow against popular piety than either the abolition of the papacy or the dissolution of the abbeys. Unlike those earlier measures, this came right inside the parish church, abolishing those small pieties which had (apparently) meant so much to so many. Endowments of a few shillings to pay a mass priest for month's minds; a cow, the sale of whose milk was to pay for prayers; and the funds of those modest associations known as fraternities, which paid for the funerals of indigent brethren; all were confiscated by the Crown.⁴⁴ Intercessory prayer was dubbed superstitious and disappeared from the new vernacular liturgy.

Given the radical nature of these changes, and the level at which they operated, the lack of overt resistance is remarkable. Many parishes adopted strategies to cope. Some urban parishes bought back their endowments and converted them to the use of a school or almshouses with no 'superstitious' overtones.⁴⁵ Some resorted to concealment, often unsuccessfully. Most grumbled, but the

council seems to have had no difficulty in recruiting the commissioners necessary to enforce the changes, and it is natural to suppose that a fair proportion of the profits stuck to their fingers. In the summer of 1549, there was resistance in the context of a general discontent with the Protector's policies. In some places, notably in Oxfordshire and Devon, religion was high on the malcontents' agenda. In both places conservative clergy were prominent among the leaders, and in the south-west they drew up the lists of the rebels' demands.⁴⁶ Conservative parishes, like Morebath, sent small contingents to join the rebel forces, but the scale of the problem had more to do with the government's hesitant response than with the actual power or numbers of the rebels.⁴⁷ The biggest disturbances took place in East Anglia and had nothing to do with either the Prayer Book or the chantries. No doubt in parishes with a strong conservative consensus, and that would have embraced the majority, especially in the north and west, conformity was kept to a minimum. The Communion Service in the 1549 Prayer Book could be made to look, and sound, very much like the mass if the rubric about a 'loud and distinct voice' was ignored, and it was relatively easy to disguise intercessory prayer. However, such duplicity depended upon consent. A few humble dissidents might lack the confidence to denounce their incumbent or might have other reasons for keeping quiet. However, it only needed a few Protestants among the richer members of the community to ensure that the attention of the authorities was attracted.⁴⁸ Such quarrels within parishes became frequent and it would be safe to say that the government's policies were deeply divisive. At the level of national politics, some may have hoped that these divisions would cease with the fall of the Protector in October 1549, but the Earl of Warwick, who took over his role (although not his title) had other ideas. He knew that the King, now aged twelve, had convictions of his own and showed clear signs of growing into a zealous, not to say bigoted, reformer. Warwick had every intention of serving the adult King in a few years' time, and knew what that would require.⁴⁹

So the Protestant reformation remained on track. Cranmer revised the Prayer Book, removing conservative ambiguities, and drew up a confession of faith similar to the Lutheran Confession of Augsburg.⁵⁰ Images were removed from parish churches on the grounds of 'superstitious abuse' and in 1552 commissions were sent out to inventory and confiscate 'superfluous' church plate, vestments and other ornaments which were no longer required by the minimal liturgies of the second Prayer Book.⁵¹ Again there seems to have been no difficulty in recruiting gentlemen to serve on these commissions and, although there was a great deal of grumbling and concealment, there was no concerted resistance. In some places there was sullen defiance, and in others scuffles broke out, but by and large the council imposed its will successfully. All of which raises fundamental questions about what was going on. At the higher political level, voices were raised protesting against this misuse of the Royal Supremacy during a royal minority.

Both Bishop Stephen Gardiner and the Princess Mary argued forcibly that the Supremacy was personal to the King, and could only be exercised in an administrative capacity while Edward was a child.⁵² Gardiner seems to have taken the view that Henry VIII's settlement was definitive and should not be altered in any circumstances, but Mary professed herself willing to obey her brother in all things – when he came of age. These were dangerous arguments, because they could cast doubt upon other aspects of the minority government. Could the King's consent to legislation be taken seriously while he was a minor? Or did all such laws as were passed need to be ratified once Edward had reached the age of eighteen – and if so, were they valid in the meantime?⁵³ Quite apart from its ideological preoccupations, it is not surprising that the council rejected all such arguments and pressed ahead with its legislative programme. Protestantism became a touchstone of the legitimacy of the minority government. At a lower level, there are signs of similar arguments, particularly among the better-educated conservatives, but they do not feature among the Articles of the south-western rebellion. These were all about demanding a return to the old ways, and not at all about the legitimacy of the changes.⁵⁴ They amounted to a complete rejection of the whole reforming programme but did not anywhere question the King's authority except by implication. Grass-roots conservatives faced a dilemma which they did not want to recognize. They had accepted the Royal Supremacy as being consistent with the law of God, but they did not like the way in which it was being used. Should they argue that the old faith was the only true one – and if they did, where did that leave King Henry VIII? No one knew that Edward was going to die at the age of fifteen, so they were not waiting for better times. On the whole they accepted that the King's will took priority over any other consideration, even if he was a child. No doubt many of them hoped and prayed that he would change his mind when he came to man's estate.⁵⁵

Obedience was thus a prime feature of the popular culture of mid-sixteenth-century England. In a sense there was nothing new about this, because a duty to observe the king's laws had been recognized in subjects since well before the Norman Conquest. However, law had slowly changed its nature. Firstly Pleas of the Crown had become recognized as distinct, and to be pleaded only in the king's courts, except where that jurisdiction was delegated to the holder of a defined franchise or liberty.⁵⁶ Those laws which dealt with most aspects of everyday life, such as land use and straying beasts, were dubbed customary and were dealt with in the lords' courts of manor and honour. Other aspects of human behaviour, such as sexuality, matrimony and probate; or anything which involved oaths (such as contract) were designated as spiritual and were dealt with by the Church courts.⁵⁷ If you lived in a corporate town, much of your life was controlled by the mayor and council, who exercised jurisdiction by the terms of their charters. If you were a member of a guild or livery company, then

you were expected to obey its rules. Obedience was expected, the procedures of the courts were well understood and the laws which they enforced were (or were supposed to be) congruent. You would not get into trouble with the king's courts by observing the custom of the manor, nor with the spiritual courts by observing the laws of the king. The fact that all these laws were regularly broken, and penalties imposed, did not affect the general culture of allegiance. Traditionally, where problems had arisen, these had involved loyalty rather than the law. If a lord summoned his affinity in arms, it was a part of their obligation to obey; but suppose he summoned them in defiance of the king? It was high treason to obey, and petty treason to refuse.⁵⁸ Suppose the king himself was accused of breaking the law? Did the subject's allegiance lie with the king's laws, or the king's person? Such problems had arisen in the reigns of John, Edward II and Richard II, and the solution in each case had been political rather than legal.⁵⁹

However, the reign of Henry VIII had seen new problems arise, which had centred on the authority of parliament. It was generally recognized that an Act which had been duly processed and had received the consent of King, Lords and Commons had the force of law; but suppose that Act contravened law which had been accepted for centuries, but did not have a recognized legislative basis? It was blandly assumed that the law of statute and the law of God were consistent, but that was not how it appeared to everyone.⁶⁰ In purely temporal matters, like the abolition of franchises, it was no contest, because it had always been recognized that those liberties were royal creations; it was just that no law hitherto had provided for their removal. Even in quasi-temporal matters, such as the dissolution of the monasteries, the authority of statute was accepted.⁶¹ But over purely spiritual issues, like the Act of Supremacy or the Act of Six Articles, there was more room for dispute. As we have seen, the King won; partly by coercion, partly by force of habit, but mostly because his chosen course was acceptable to most of his subjects. The Church which King Henry created was, broadly speaking, a popular church, and the more so because it was an identifiable aspect of the realm of England. The Englishman knew that he was not French, or German, or Scottish, and he was proud of that fact. He was proud of his distinctive laws and customs, even if he had no means of comparing them with other lands, and he was proud of his king for having defied a whole raft of beastly foreigners, Francis I, Charles V and even the Pope.⁶² Very few understood, or cared about, the implications of this declaration of independence. The fact that Henry had also defied Martin Luther was not wasted upon some of his subjects either. Opposition to the 'King's proceedings' had been strong as long as Anne Boleyn was alive, but had faltered thereafter. This was partly because of what she stood for in terms of marital infidelity, and partly out of loyalty to Catherine. It did not come to a head because Thomas Cromwell was diligent to frustrate it, but also because it was assumed that it represented a passing mood. Once Catherine and

Anne were both dead, it was widely assumed that Henry would renegotiate his relations with the papacy and effectively start again. Both Paul III and Charles V believed this, and there was little point in running the appalling risks of high treason to resist a temporary aberration.⁶³ Once it had become clear that the King believed his own propaganda, it was too late to turn the clock back – a fact which the fate of the Pilgrimage of Grace made clear.

So the Royal Supremacy was the will of the King; but it was also the will of God. There were, of course, those who resisted any such suggestion, but most of them, like Reginald Pole, had taken refuge in exile, and it should not be assumed that they spoke for a large constituency. The popular culture of the Church in England was Henrician, and that was not simply ‘Catholicism without the Pope’. Not only were there no regular orders in England, but the calendar of the Church had been extensively modified, many traditional saint’s days having been removed and the consequent holidays abrogated. The English Bible was set up in every church, along with Erasmus’s *Paraphrases* for the benefit of the better educated, and doubts had been cast upon the doctrine of purgatory.⁶⁴ The clergy were under the authority of the King, and the highest ecclesiastical court was that of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Pope’s name was omitted from the standard franchises, and every schoolboy knew that the Roman jurisdiction was usurped. On the other hand the traditional sacraments were strenuously defended, particularly the mass, and intercessory prayer continued to be enjoined. The role of the clergy in this latter practice was not in any way diminished, and the role of good works in the attaining of salvation was vigorously maintained. Such Lutheran doctrines as justification by faith alone, and the more radical Swiss notions about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, were heresy and still carried the full penalties. The statute *De Haeretico Comburendo* remained in force, and Anne Askew was tortured and burned alive as late as 1546.⁶⁵ This was not the result of any confusion in the King’s mind. He knew exactly what he wanted his Church to believe and had even laid quite a lot of it down by statute. Unfortunately, it did not correspond exactly to anyone else’s agenda. Among the conservatives there were those who hankered after the security of the Universal Church, and on the evangelical side were many who believed that the King’s defence of the sacraments was simply wrong. However, it should be emphasized that the majority, even among the educated elite, did not share these doubts. Their comfort lay in the presence of their redeemer in the host, and in the timeless rituals of Easter, Pentecost, Corpus Christi and Michaelmas. They said their prayers, paid their dues, went through the rites of passage and provided for their souls in the afterlife. Those who disagreed with them – if there were any – and who tended to ‘the new ways’, were regarded with deep suspicion and probably ostracized.⁶⁶ They did not much care who ran the

Church. Their king was a Christian prince, was he not? The faith was just as safe in his hands as in those of some distant foreigner.

However, precisely because it was such an idiosyncratic balance, Henry's Church was unsustainable. The reasons why it was tipped in a Protestant direction under the minority council were purely political and had nothing to do with religious consensus. Thinking to strengthen their position, the council virtually abandoned censorship of the press, and the predictable result was a spate of radical literature, including ribald attacks upon the mass.⁶⁷ Those who produced such works must have been expecting to make a profit from their sale, because that was the nature of the printing business, and that in turn raises an interesting point about the strength of conformity. These works would have been deeply offensive to anyone of a conservative mentality, and yet the market was deemed to be big enough to justify the risk. The answer probably lies in the unusual ideological balance of London. London had a population of about 150,000 at this stage, ten times the size of any other city in England, and embraced religious views of all kinds.⁶⁸ Some parishes had certainly accepted radical ideas by this time, and were waiting for the end of Henry's repressive regime to express themselves. In some places this was due to Continental influences, in some to survivals of radical Lollardy and in others to the convictions of individual clergy. Neighbouring parishes might at the same time be deeply conservative, but on balance the climate of London was sympathetic to reform, and that was where the majority of the market lay. Thousands of copies of these leaflets must have been shifted in the first eighteen months of the reign, and the Bishop of London, Edmund Bonner, was deeply perturbed. The issue became one of discipline. The council had every intention of reforming the liturgy, but realized that due process would be essential to its chances of preserving order. If it did not check the freelance radicals, they would destabilize the whole process, at least in London. A statute was therefore passed in November 1547 prohibiting disputes on the Eucharist, and that was followed up at the end of December with a proclamation of enforcement.⁶⁹ Some parishes which had abandoned the mass were made to restore it, 'until further order be taken'.

The law was clearly very important in what followed. There is very little sign of enthusiasm for the first Prayer Book of 1549. Conservatives derided it as 'a Christmas game', and radicals were disappointed at its moderation, but it was validated by statute, and that meant that it represented the will of King, Lords and Commons. Where it was rejected, as it was by some in Devon and Cornwall, it was in the context of open rebellion.⁷⁰ More typical was the reaction of Henry Machyn, a wealthy and conservative citizen of London who began to keep a journal during these years. Machyn rejoiced in all the ceremonies of the old faith, but passed without comment over the reforming measures which he found distasteful. There is no suggestion that he objected more forcibly, because he was a good

citizen and knew his duty.⁷¹ When the council ordered a royal visitation in the summer of 1547, the clergy were specifically instructed to ‘preach and declare that the King’s majesty’s power, authority and pre-eminence is, within this realm and the dominions of the same, the most supreme and highest under God.’⁷² This was strictly in accordance with recent precedent, but it made a meaningful statement about the minority government, to which Bishops Gardiner and Bonner objected. They were sent to the Fleet, and other objections were not articulated. The will of the King as Supreme Head was paraded, but what mattered during the minority was the will of parliament, and every religious change of any consequence was authorized by statute. In other words it became a part of the law of England, and recruited all the habits of obedience which that implied. The minority government of Edward VI did command the services of modest numbers of German and Spanish mercenaries, but they would have been powerless if the levies and the retinues of the aristocracy had not supported the established order. We know from what happened subsequently that many nobles were deeply suspicious of the reformers and their practices, but upholding the Church order had become a seamless part of maintaining social and political discipline – and that took priority over any other consideration.⁷³

Wills are notoriously unreliable guides to the convictions of testators, but the uncertainties introduced first by Henry’s changes and then by the legislated reformation did have an impact upon preambles. First bequests to religious orders disappeared; references to ‘the Virgin Mary and the whole company of heaven’ became less frequent; and the establishment of obits and lights with an intercessory intention almost disappeared.⁷⁴ Purgatory had become an uncertain hypothesis well before the Chantries Act of 1548. Before 1547, it was a brave (or foolish) man who used the typically Protestant formula of expressing exclusive faith in the saving grace of Christ; probation might have been refused. However, by 1549 such expressions were not uncommon, especially among the urban elite. They still represented only a tiny fraction of the wills proved, but they are an indication, like the actions of radical London churchwardens, that the policies of Edward’s government were not without support.⁷⁵ Protestant Bishops like John Hooper despaired at their failure to make better progress in converting their flocks, but even Hooper faced no violent resistance; and when Nicholas Ridley set out to remove altars and images from the parish churches of his diocese in 1550, he encountered little overt opposition.⁷⁶ We should probably conclude that ‘religion as King Henry left it’ was the popular cry, but also that there was also a general tendency to tarry for the magistrate, and if King Edward had lived a natural span, England would have become a genuinely reformed country within twenty years.

However, he died on 6 July 1553, without ever achieving his majority, and what happened thereafter provides a good test of the religious and political culture which prevailed. The King’s half-sister, Mary, had resisted his Protestant reforma-

tion to the best of her ability, every step of the way. She had done this not on the grounds of defending the true faith but because it broke her father's settlement. This, she claimed, the council was not entitled to do while the King was a child, and in this she received strong diplomatic support from the Emperor.⁷⁷ Charles was not interested in Henry's settlement, but he was interested in embarrassing and obstructing a heretical government. Within England, Mary's intransigence achieved two things. It convinced the conservative majority that her heart was in the right place, and it persuaded the King that she must not succeed to the throne. When he was convinced that he was terminally ill, Edward insisted on an instrument being drawn up settling the succession on his Protestant cousin, Jane Dudley.⁷⁸ In this he was strongly supported by the Duke of Northumberland (who was Jane's father-in-law) and by a minority of his fellow councillors. Most, however, obeyed his orders very reluctantly, because although Mary was only Henry VIII's illegitimate daughter, she had been placed after Edward in the King's last succession Act, and in his will which that Act validated. In other words, she was the lawful heir unless or until that Act was repealed, something which the rapid advance of Edward's illness made it impossible to achieve in time.⁷⁹ Mary may have been secretly convinced that she was legitimate, but she had long since accepted her father's judgement on that point, and when she proclaimed herself Queen on 8 or 9 July, she did so on the basis of the law. When her proclamation was repeated on 19 July, it spoke of her 'just and lawful' possession of the Crown, and made no reference to Henry.⁸⁰ What had happened in the meantime baffled foreign observers and has fascinated historians ever since. When it came to the point, the Duke of Northumberland's resources simply disappeared. His men deserted and the ships which he had sent to the east coast to intercept any possible flight to the Continent defected.⁸¹ Those with an affinity to Mary had immediately rallied to her, and perhaps that was to be expected, but others flocked to join her who had no previous association. Most remarkably of all, the Protestants divided. Some, like Nicholas Ridley and (more reluctantly) Thomas Cranmer, recognized Jane, but others, including the outstandingly godly John Hooper, openly supported Mary as the lawful heir, irrespective of her known religious conservatism.⁸² As this situation rapidly unfolded, between 10 and 19 July, the council similarly divided. The majority made haste to Mary's headquarters at Framlingham and those who were too slow, or too deeply compromised, found themselves isolated. Within ten days, Mary had won a total and bloodless victory. Simon Renard, the spokesman for the imperial ambassadors, watched these events in disbelief. As late as 10 July he had believed that Northumberland would win, because of his established position and command of resources, and had withheld any advice from Mary in accordance with his instructions.⁸³ The outcome, he declared, was nothing short of a miracle.

What these events demonstrated was not the rightness, or otherwise, of Mary's religious convictions, but the culture of obedience to the law. Edward had not been a king in the full sense, and his will was not therefore pitted against the statute. If it had been the outcome might have been different, but that we do not know. When Northumberland and his associates were put on trial, they were not accused of any offence committed before 6 July, because it was tacitly accepted that it could not be high treason to obey the commands of a living king, even if he was a child, and even if his commands were unlawful.⁸⁴ That was an issue which would not be resolved for almost another century. Meanwhile, England had a lawful Queen; a *femme seul* in possession of her private lordship, and a champion, it was believed, of her father's Church. On 18 August she issued a proclamation confirming her allegiance to the old faith and promising to refrain from any coercion until further order was taken, which everyone (rightly) assumed to refer to parliament.⁸⁵ What her loving subjects, and even her council, did not know was that she had committed herself to the restoration of the papal jurisdiction and that she was seriously thinking of marrying a Spaniard. When her first parliament, in its second session, repealed Edward's religious legislation, abrogating the Prayer Book and restoring the mass, there was a general sense of relief. It no longer had to be pretended that Protestantism represented the law of God. But where did that leave the similar legislation of King Henry VIII?⁸⁶ For the time being Mary continued to act as Supreme Head of the Church, but by the time that her marriage to Philip was settled in January 1554, there were many who were wondering how much longer that would last. There was an obvious case for the Queen to use the Ecclesiastical Supremacy as her father and brother had used it, to extend and support her temporal authority – to recruit God onto her council. However, there was another way to achieve that goal, and one which was better recognized outside England, and that was to settle with the papacy and re-enter the Universal Church. That had not been an option for Edward, but it had been for Henry and was again for his daughter. As a ruling Queen, the extra support would be welcome, and might settle any lingering doubts about her rights when she became *femme couvert*.⁸⁷ It was also an obvious course for the daughter-in-law of the Holy Roman Emperor. The drawback was that it blurred the distinction between heresy and political opposition until the two became indistinguishable. No heretic could be a loyal subject, and that, as John Hooper had demonstrated, did not correspond to reality.