**Religious Divisiveness Comes to England**

*What Came Before: Unity, the Renaissance, and the Reformation*

Europe’s long history has been marked by a struggle between forces that are centralizing and others that are localizing. In the year 1500 a great unifying force, Christianity, bound Europeans together foremost as Christians. The forces seeking to empower localities had been growing though beneath the veneer of Christian unity. Few could have predicted that for the all the seeming stability of the Catholic Church Europe in 1500 was on the precipice of profound religious upheaval that would shatter a unified Christendom that had endured for centuries. What would follow was a new era that would see Christianity fractured and the nation-state rise in prominence.

The first stirrings of what would mature into the Reformation, the movement in the 16th Century that would precipitate the splintering of Christianity, first emerged in Italy, in city-states such as Florence, in the 14th Century in what became known as the Renaissance. The intellectual forces of the Renaissance, drawing upon the work of Greek and Roman philosophers, were championed by scholars, such as Petrarch and Boccaccio, who hoped to harness the forces of intellectual inquiry to reinvigorate the Faith. Their pursuit, spanning fields from the arts to the sciences, had as its underlying assumption that greater knowledge of the world would reveal a greater extent of God’s majesty in the world and deepen the Faith; knowledge and religion were seen as mutually reinforcing rather than inherently in conflict.

As the learned began to translate ancient texts and enter into a dialogue with each other about the history of these texts and the merits of the arguments of in them the emphasis on scrutiny, persuasion, and argumentation, all derived from a perspective of doubt, became increasingly prominent. Slowly but surely, man, the practitioner of these arts associated with inquiry became elevated in importance. Over time as a mindset grounded in this approach spread from a few to many in the elite, a mindset began to take hold in which the world increasingly seemed dynamic with man as an agent of inquiry and change, questioning and learning, rather than one in which the world was static with God at its center, of enduring infallible truth, revealed and then unquestioned. It would be these Renaissance forces unleashed and sustained that would in the long-term bring forth modernity but, along the way, they matured into an assault on authority in profound and unexpected ways that would divide Christendom and marginalize, slowly but surely, religion as a force in the lives of Europeans.

The Reformation, which emerged in the 16th Century, focused the attitude of empowered scholarship, now more widespread among the elite, on Church practices that were abusing the faithful. Efforts of the Renaissance to strength the Faith that were hopeful, optimistic but somewhat tentative had become by 1500 more skeptical, critical, and assertive by the time Martin Luther in 1517 offered cogent criticisms of Church practices, arguing that the Church was betraying the true Faith called for in the Bible. The Reformation quickly gathered pace, propelled by intellectual currents born of the Renaissance, but also by local leaders who supported the critics as a means to enhance their own power. A confluence of forces from the application of a scholastic approach to the Bible, the renewed, enriched forces of localism, and rampant Church abuses all converged with dramatic consequences to quickly lead to a deepening divide among Christians who had been unified for centuries.

The ancient Church and its critics tried but failed to reconcile as bitter recriminations precipitated events that spiraled out of control leading to a schism that not even Luther and his supporters had sought. As divisiveness spread, forcing all believers to choose, the choices became increasingly stark, moderation marginalized in the midst of more and more determined efforts to vindicate one side or the other. In only a few decades, what had started as a theological challenge had become a full-fledged assault, with political and economic dimensions, on a host of institutions that precipitated a century of intermittent and bloody warfare that ended only in 1648 when all sides were completely exhausted and large sections of central Europe completely devastated.

*Religious Divisiveness comes to England*

As religiously inspired warfare began to engulf the Continent in the 1520s England remained peaceful, a staunchly Catholic country under the reign of Henry VIII who had earned special recognition from the Pope as a Defender of the Catholic Faith for his firm rejection of Luther’s theology. Peace and stability would nonetheless prove short-lived for Henry; struggles, at first having nothing to do with the emerging Protestant-Catholic divide would draw him and his realm into the divisive battles increasingly shaping the Continent in ways few could have foreseen.

Henry’s problem was that at age thirty-four he had no legitimate sons to inherit his throne. He sensed his passing from youth to middle-age and his marriage, even if it had produced seven pregnancies, had failed to produce sons who lived beyond a few days and the prospects of his wife, Catherine of Aragon, delivering him an heir were diminishing rapidly as she approached forty. (As he spoke openly of *Catherine’s* failure to deliver him sons little did he know that the fault was almost surely *his*; various theories have been proposed to explain the large numbers of miscarriages and still births had by Henry’s wives, the most compelling of which is that his blood type was a very rare one that greatly increased miscarriages and stillborn children.)

Henry’s solution that became evident by 1527 was to annul his marriage to Catherine, marry Anne Boleyn, a lady in waiting he coveted, and have male children born of their marriage succeed him. His plan though depended upon the Pope granting him approval to divorce. It would be this request that would bring the religious divisiveness engulfing the Continent to Henry’s realm.

Henry’s plea to the Pope in 1527 was poorly handled from the beginning and only served to complicate his plans to marry Anne. Instead of making a plea through private diplomatic channels, he made his request for an annulment public which humiliated Catherine, infuriated her nephew, the powerful King of Spain, and suddenly made Henry’s request for a divorce a matter of imperial struggle battled over in the Vatican. As weeks turned to months, as English emissaries and Papal functionaries slowly addressed the various theological challenges raised by Henry’s request, the diplomatic maneuvering grew more complex as France became a party in the dispute. Henry grew impatient and fulminated. He began to reduce the nature of the exchange with the Pope to a fundamental question whose answer was obvious from Henry’s perspective once posed: Was the Pope superior to a Christian King in his own realm? Put more bluntly, who was in charge in his realm, Henry or the Pope? For Henry, intelligent, brash, and confident, the answers were obvious and for England the consequences profound.

As political machinations continued to intensify and the Papacy moved from vacillation to intransigence, Henry’s patience ran out. He orchestrated an Act of Parliament in 1534 that declared that England was no longer in the Catholic realm and that Henry was the head of the Church in England. He moved swiftly to have his marriage to Anne Boleyn sanctioned and to push Catherine aside, consequences be damned. By simply decreeing that the Church was Anglican Henry was relieved of having to obtain the Pope’s permission for divorce but it left undecided the larger questions roiling Christianity about the proper path of salvation for Christians.

In fact, his decision now invited his subjects to have an opinion about these matters that, once remote, now seemed imminent. These questions were now suddenly relevant to English subjects in the wake of Henry’s decision and they opened up possibilities, clear and fraught with danger for Henry and his realm, that were already playing out on the Continent in an era of religiously motivated warfare. Those favoring any degree of the Reformation reforms proposed by Luther now were effectively invited to hope that Henry’s decision was a harbinger of change in the nature of the religious practices of the English; they felt empowered and energized to press for their views with Henry and in the Anglican Church hierarchy. Others, more conservative, saw in Henry’s decision a personal choice of a monarch who, they hoped, still preferred tradition, history, and the long established practices that undergird a society’s hierarchical nature and protected order and stability, many of which were rooted in Catholic religious practice. For them Henry’s actions didn’t necessitate a Protestant awakening in England.

Here two large camps now struggled for supremacy by vying for Henry’s support in a struggle that can seem arcane and abstruse today, such as the appropriate regalia for priests to wear, until we realize that it was a profoundly cultural struggle over the future nature of English society with significant implications. Those drawn to Luther’s ideas focused on the Bible, personal faith, and ridding the church of popish features and practices. Conservatives on the other hand focused on holding firm to traditional views of worship, sacraments, and Church authority regardless of what the Church was named. Those of evangelical sympathies sought a rebirth of faith and a restoration of the true Church that was focused on the interpretation of words, notions of love, and personal repenting of sins that well might lead to more far-reaching changes in English society. The other camp, more conservative, sought to adhere to an ancient, familiar, beautiful, mysterious yet magical form of worship that gave comfort and hope to its believers. Their faith was grounded in the enactment of rituals, charity, and doing penance in a social structure that had provided stabilized for English society. The struggle more generally was between a more Protestant view of Christianity based upon emotion, introversion, and guilt as opposed to a Catholic view of Christianity that was grounded in performance, extroversion, and shame. The former did more to empower individuals; the latter did more to knit people together within a society. Henry’s actions created a divergence. The question was how deeply this divergence would cleave society.

Impatience and bold decision-making had brought Henry a new wife but at the price of the prospect of a divided realm that, in similar circumstances on the Continent, had led to protracted warfare. He realized that he could not harmonize the views of his subjects in an era of religious divisiveness by royal declaration so instead of choosing clearly between one camp or the other he struck a tempered position that clearly favored neither camp while also not completely alienating either. He was willing to sanction the burning of Lutherans but he rejected papal authority; he tolerated some spasms of violence against Catholics but he limited proposed evangelical reforms of the Anglican clergy. Moderation and equivocation seemed the safer course and would remain his ad hoc policy on religious matters for the remainder of his reign.

Henry died after years of ill health in 1547 married to his *sixth* wife. Anne and Henry’s union lasted only three years before more upheaval in Henry’s household led him to have her beheaded. Anne though did give Henry a male heir but their son, Edward, who succeeded Henry, was frail and died prematurely after a brief six-year reign. Two of Henry’s daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, long overlooked, proved to be capable Queens with Elizabeth becoming one of England’s greatest monarchs, greater than Henry.

One of Henry’s primary legacies that he bequeathed to his successors was an Anglican Church that proclaimed that it was the *via media*—the middle way—the irony of which was that this notion of a path between extremes was drawn from Aristotelian philosophy, the renewed study of which centuries before had unleashed forces that eventually fractured Christianity in the first place. The *via media* remains the pronounced theological place of Anglicanism even today.

*Questions for further consideration:*

1. So what was the legacy of Henry’s decision for religion in England?
2. How did other countries such as France, Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands handle the divisiveness?
3. What was the consequence of Henry’s decision for those of devout faith in England?
4. How would Henry’s decision shape colonization?