

The Influence of Martin Bucer on the English Reformation¹

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Introduction

Bucer, a master in Theological Studies and a Strasbourg Reformer, left behind no Bucerianism and no church or sect. His city forced him into exile for resisting the Imperial Interim Settlement (1548) thus England for a few years became a place of refuge. On his arrival in April 1549 as Cranmer's guest, he became Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, where he was to die in March 1551. Yet in under two years and despite failing health, Bucer was to have a profound effect on the liturgical and doctrinal development of the Church of England. Bucer is now emerging with increasing clarity as a Reformer of distinction just as important and relevant as Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli. In our ecumenical century Bucer has been rediscovered as above all a peace-loving and peace-making Reformer, pursuing ceaselessly the goal of Protestant unity and even that hardly less elusive objective of a concord between Catholic and Protestant Germany. Generations have admired Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and Cranmer but few people have ever looked to Bucer, even though the three traditions of Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed owe much to his work. Gordon Rupp describes him as the 'greatest ecclesiastical spin bowler of the age'.²

Bucer and the Book of Common Prayer

Bucer's arrival in England in 1549 coincided with the publication of the First Edwardian Prayer Book, an event which was a critical point in the history of the English Reformation. The Strasbourg Reformer was given a welcome greater than the previous Lutheran delegation, a state of affairs partly explained by the decision taken by the English Reformers towards Protestantism. The *Censura* was a critical review of the Book of Common Prayer (1549), and there is no doubt that Bucer's criticisms played a role in the liturgical and doctrinal development of the Second Prayer Book in 1552, and but for his death in 1551 he might have caused a more effective *rapprochement* towards the Continental schools of thought. Though it is all too easy to exaggerate the changes brought about by Bucer's *Censura*, it cannot be denied that the Second Edwardian Prayer Book, which was followed by the 1662 Book, has many traces of Bucer's theological mind and heart, both in what it includes and what it excludes.

The arrival of Bucer on the scene provided Cranmer with both welcome advice and unwelcome criticism of his programme. While Bucer could theorise theologically, Cranmer had to be more of an English pragmatist. The scale of Cranmer's thinking was both national and international³, presenting him and his supporters in Northumberland's and Somerset's government with a multiplicity of problems. On the national level he did not want to cause major violence and a social revolution from those who had no sympathy with his Reformation stance. On the international level he had to try and keep the support of Charles V of France, an English ally by tradition, while still pursuing his efforts at building an International Protestantism. Cranmer's appreciation of the need to be cautious if he was not to endanger the whole of the English Reformation baffled and infuriated English Protestants and some Continental Reformers. To the horror of 'advanced' Protestants, Cranmer so

constructed the 1549 Prayer Book that the old vestments, and much of the old ceremonial could be used with it, despite the radical shift in the underlying theology.

Bucer's first reactions to the 1549 Communion Office were positive, 'for excepting a few words and signs I perceive nothing in it at all which may not be drawn out of Holy Scriptures.'⁴ Bucer however soon became like other reformers critical, and wished for further revision. However he was not against ancient church traditions as long as they were not 'Papist superstitions'; thus he disagreed with the Radicals and the Puritan Party of the Reformation who wished to disregard ancient tradition and continuity. Although mainstream Reformers held to the principle of *Sola Scriptura* there were problems with the doctrine because it led to Biblical literalism of some of the Radicals like the Anabaptists, so men like Bucer were forced to reaffirm the value of tradition in interpreting the text.

In the efforts of establishing Bucer's role in this aspect of the English Reformation, we must not over glorify him just because historians and theologians have tended to forget him in the past. Cummings in a recent history of Anglican Liturgy writes 'Bucer submitted approximately 60 criticisms, of which certainly 23, perhaps 25 were embodied in the book and an equal number were ignored.'⁵ However situations where Bucer's ideas were included are the Service of Baptism of 1552, in which the use of a chrism, unction, and the blessing of the water is omitted; and in the Communion Service, the signing of crosses over the bread and wine; the references to the Departed in the Prayer for the Church; and the ministry of angels in the Prayer of Oblation have been removed. The prayer for the Church Militant in the 1549 version contains a petition for the souls of the departed. The phrase 'which nowe do reste in the slepe of peace'⁶ was considered superstitious. Thus it needed to be struck out and was changed in the 1552 version. In considering such issues it is necessary to remember that Bucer laid his emphasis on looking at the Reformation as an entity, and was not interested on the whole in specific minor points, appealing constantly to the Reformers to understand the essence and substance of the Reformation.

At the same time that altars were being demolished in 1550 and replaced by wooden tables, Cranmer published a new Ordinal. There are signs of connexion between the Ordinal of the Church of England and Bucer's *De Ordinatione Legitima Ministrorum Ecclesiae Revocanda* but it is still an open question due to the problem of dating Bucer's Treaty whether his work was produced before or after the Anglican draft was completed. Whether, in other words, Bucer wrote knowing the Ordinal and was thus offering a Revised Version. However, there is no doubt that the English Reformers kept their independence as regard their doctrinal conception of Ordination.

Bucer and the Lord's Supper

Bucer has an important third Protestant theory on the Eucharist, which is complementary with Zwinglianism and Lutheranism. His doctrine is complicated and not wholly comprehensible, perhaps not even to himself! However underlying his writings is a simplicity; the insistence on Faith seems to be the touchstone, Christ is really present, *by faith*, and we feed on him, *by faith*.

There is in fact a close comparison between Bucer and Cranmer, enjoying a harmony of viewpoints. Cranmer on the whole gives an impression of having a greater reserve than Bucer in speaking about the Sacraments as an instrument of Divine Grace, and of the elements as Signs that do not merely represent, but actually convey, and deliver Christ's body and blood to us. The reason for the slightly different emphasis is perhaps political rather than religious.

Cranmer in England was chiefly fighting the representatives of the Catholic school, whereas Bucer's form of doctrine had matured over decades of Inter-Protestant debate where different sorts of problems were being examined. Bucer's conciliatory spirit was more akin to the English than the more strident thought of the Continent. At Bucer's death Haddon is saddened that the Church is now lacking a mind which contained the wisdom to avoid petty theological disputes, which proved fatal for Church Unity. He was certainly the least dogmatic of the Reformers, believing that outside primary beliefs there were many points on which differences remained inevitable and perfectly tolerable.

Bucer's *The Kingdom of Christ*

This was Bucer's last great work. *The Kingdom of Christ* is a detailed charter to guide his vision of a Christian Republic in England. Bucer sketched a scheme of social reconstruction for a Christian prince. Dickens describes the treatise *De Regno Christi* as 'at once a retrospect and forerunner of Puritan idealism'.⁷ However, King Edward's death and the subsequent enthronement of Mary and her anti-Protestant policies meant the neglect of this most comprehensive book. The Reformation, Bucer believed, must deal with the whole, economic, social, and ecclesiastical, system of Church and State. The way forward was thus to outline a church discipline structure, with sound doctrines as well as clear standards for Christians to follow. In a sense the practical reform of abuses was more important than the framing of more Prayer Books and Articles of Religion.

The first half of *The Reign of Christ* concerns the issue of how to create a Christian State, a kind of Christian Utopia. In the second half Bucer is more pragmatic, facing real issues of how in reality a Christian state might occur knowing what we do about human and English circumstances. His main interest was the creation of Christian discipline and the moral society. A good relationship between Church and State, he believed, could only be achieved if Christianity is not left to the Church on its own. It must penetrate the political and secular life of the nation as that is where many important decisions are taken. This stress on practical and moral reforms is a chief characteristic of the English Reformation in comparison with the more theoretical and doctrinal emphasis of the Reformers on the Continent.

Bucer's thoughts on marriage and divorce were probably too advanced for the time to make much of an impact on English law. He supported the case for divorce and remarriage in the case of desertion, but condemned it in other circumstances. Burcher regarded Bucer's views as 'licentious', describing him, as 'either becoming childish or is almost in his dotage'.⁸ The role played by Bucer in the divorce of Henry VIII and in the Bigamy of the Landgrave of Hesse was known to Cranmer, and the revolutionary stance of *Reformatio Legum* on divorce and remarriage was supported by Bucer. John Milton used his work on Marriage and Divorce, finding him an ally and authority. Furthermore, the chapters on the 'relief of the poor' possibly left their mark on the Poor Laws of Elizabeth's reign.

The Vestment Controversy

John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester, refused to be installed in certain vestments which he considered a relic of Papist superstition, provoking a most vociferous controversy in which everybody had the pleasure of adding much noise and little wisdom to the tumult. Bucer expresses a common sense answer that vestments in themselves made little difference, but it was a sin to waste so much time in strife over an unimportant matter instead of advancing Christ's Kingdom. However, he objected to their superstitious use, but would have preferred them not to be used.

The knowledge of Bucer's views which were akin to those of the English Church probably induced Cranmer to write to him. If this judgment is correct, we are justified in seeing Bucer as the one who took the part of the Church which believed in continuity and tradition, even at the risk of alienating himself from those who, in disregarding the external functions of the Church, and the ancient traditions, favoured arguments for the future rigidity of Puritanism. Cranmer, with wise anticipation, addressed his letter to one whom he knew to be on his side. Bucer writes to William Bill, Master of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge:

it is wrong to say because those things have been abused that they cannot be used piously by Christians. For the abuse does not depend on those things, but depends on the attitude of those who abuse them.⁹

Hooper approaches the issue from the other angle. Reduce the use of vestments by all means, but the aim of abolishing them, without attacking more serious abuses, is wrong. In the future Archbishops Parker and Whitgift were keen to publish Bucer's correspondence and circulate it as vindication of the strength of the Church's policy under Elizabeth against the Puritans. It is surely, as Hopf says, not unreasonable to attribute in part to Bucer's influence 'the retention of the custom of using vestments in the Church of England.'¹⁰

Finally, the relationship between Bucer's Latin Psalter of 1529, which was translated into English, and the First English Bible, edited by Coverdale, is another aspect of his influence on the English scene. The question of what is the place of Bucer's work and its relation to the English Bible is difficult. However the idea that Coverdale read Bucer's Commentary does not seem without foundation, especially as Coverdale in his later years met Bucer and had admiration for his work. Psalms were read in English and read by congregations, who used the translation of Bucer's Latin Psalter which provided England with the first English version. Surely Coverdale knew his translation, seeing that it was an actual worship book in church. There are striking similarities between Bucer and Coverdale, but Coverdale never took over an entire psalm in Bucer's version. The Psalms also found their way into various editions of English Primers, and the Psalter in Matthew's Bible in its notes and superscriptions of the Psalms is strongly influenced by Bucer's Commentary. With regard to the superscriptions it is entirely dependent on him. Thus surely Bucer's Psalter was consulted by those responsible for the creation of the English Bible as his Psalter was known by the version in the Primers and by Matthew's Bible.

Conclusion

In these different aspects we can see Bucer's influence on the Reformation. Even though his conservatism disappointed some of the most radical Reformers at Cambridge, his personality and sense of purpose sealed the triumph of Protestantism, in that important issues had now been faced. He was successful in destroying parts of the 'old devotional world' that existed in England. Though in the past theologians and historians have obscured his influence, his personality and writings shine out, for Bucer a moderate and reasonable man was a good friend to the English Reformation, working well with Cranmer. The pre-Reformation world was supported as Diarmid MacCulloch suggests by two pillars, all that was involved in the devotional pattern centred around the power of the Mass, and the unity given to the Church by the Papacy. However, though in England there was a definite repudiation of Papal power and influence, the old devotional work was treated more ambiguously, perhaps to a certain extent because Henry VIII was a doctrinal Catholic. Hence the two supports of Roman Catholicism did not fall together in England. Cranmer with the help of men like Bucer built a Protestant Church but it has 'remained haunted by its Catholic past'.¹¹ Thus even with the

staunchly Protestant Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Homilies, and Ordinal, the Church in reality has never been quite as theologically tidy as it would at first seem to be.

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Endnotes:

- 1) A longer version of this paper was awarded a prize by the Protestant Truth Society and is published here by permission.
- 2) Rupp, G., *Patterns of Reformation*, Epworth Press, 1969.
- 3) MacCulloch, D., *The Later Reformation in England 1547-1603*. Macmillan 1990, p. 14.
- 4) *Censura* p. 465.
- 5) Cummings, *A History of Anglican Liturgy*, p. 100.
- 6) Cardwell, E., *The Two Books of Common Prayer*, Oxford University Press, p. 296.
- 7) Dickens, A. G., *The English Reformation*, Fontana, 1964, p. 321.
- 8) Robinson, H., *Original Letters*, The Parker Society, Cambridge University Press, 1846 Vol. 2, p. 666.
- 9) Bucer to Bill Nov 17th 1550.
- 10) Hopf, C., *Martin Bucer*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1946, p. 146.
- 11) MacCulloch, D., *The Later Reformation in England 1547-1603*, Macmillan, 1990, p. 6.

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