

Cranmer, a Man under Authority: An Introduction

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Maurice Elliott

In the assessment of any individual it ought to be important to give some appraisal of their attitude towards external structures. For the most part an individual person is shaped by his or her interaction with other people, whether higher or lower in the social hierarchy, and with other institutions. In view of this a key aspect of anyone's life must surely be that person's understanding of authority. Were they excessively submissive to the authorities which were placed over them by society and other agencies? Did they seek to overthrow such structures and gather power for themselves? Was there a consistent, and perhaps even normal, pattern of behaviour towards such structures? The answers to questions such as these will go a long way towards an appreciation of the individual's character, their objectives in life and their lasting achievements.

This is the introduction to the first of a series of four articles built around the conviction that it is possible to survey the life of Thomas Cranmer only on the precise basis of his view of authority. We are able to access the man himself only as we endeavour to probe his attitudes to those over him, under him, around him and against him. In due course the discussion will settle into four clearly identifiable areas: Cranmer's attitudes to the Bible, the Papacy, the Monarchy and the Church. It was Cranmer's conduct with regard to these aspects of authority which made him the man he was. In progressing through these areas we shall touch upon every major incident of Cranmer's life, and in that sense this survey is historical. However, in assessing the contribution of one who spent some twenty-three years as Archbishop of Canterbury in the midst of a turbulent century such as the sixteenth, it is inevitable that the focus be as much theological.

The primary source for this essay is the collected *Works of Archbishop Cranmer*.¹ These texts fall into two categories, Cranmer's *Remains* such as speeches, sermons, treatises and published works, and his *Letters* dating from as early as 1531 and continuing until his death in 1556. From these emerges the recurrent impression that Cranmer was a man for whom the nature and observance of authority was of paramount importance. It will be profitable to clarify this at the very beginning of our discussion.

For example, a preliminary glance at one of Cranmer's extant letters permits the introduction of his attitude to the particular outside authorities which will concern us. In 1537 Cranmer was involved in a lengthy correspondence with an unnamed Justice in the diocese of Canterbury, and from this his preoccupations are abundantly clear. Cranmer has evidently been at pains to convince the Justice of his own reformed view. Thus he commences:

. . . I have moved, exhorted, and in as much as in me was, allured you to alter your judgment, minding to bring you to favour the word of God and the knowledge thereof, to the intent that by your good ensample the king's subjects within my diocese might the rather be obedient and willing to conceive and apply themselves to the observation of such ordinances, as by the king's majesty and his learned counsel in the laws of God should from time to time be set forth and published, concerning the abolishment and extirpation of superstition, as also of the bishop of Rome's erroneous doctrine . . .²

There could be no more helpful way in to our treatment of Cranmer's view of authority, and indeed to the order in which we shall address the areas covered by it. Here in this one sentence are the primary sources of that authority. First and foremost there was 'the word of God', by which of course Cranmer intended the Bible. This authority had to be fundamental to every other aspect. Over against the Bible was 'the bishop of Rome's erroneous doctrine', a rejection of which was necessitated by acceptance of the rule of Scripture. Thirdly, as far as Cranmer was concerned, came the 'the king's majesty' since the embracing of Scripture and the denial of the Papacy was largely undertaken by means of, as well as on behalf of, the reigning monarch. It will become clear that Cranmer firmly believed his attitude to the monarchy to be grounded in Biblical teaching. As we shall see, however, it was equally dictated by the era in which he lived.

The progression which Cranmer underwent in regard to these three aspects of authority, coupled with the ambivalent interplay which he in practice adopted, will form the core of this discussion. The fourth and final aspect, that of the authority of the Church, and more especially of the episcopate within the Church, is not made explicit in this text. Nevertheless it does underlie Cranmer's writing at this and every point in that he himself was a bishop and was quite ready to exercise his own authority. The letter to the Justice continues with a threat which is far from veiled:

But inasmuch as it is better for me . . . to be plain with you . . . I will at this time open fully my mind to you, and eftsoons exhort you either to be in such opinion and faith as is by the word of God and the king's ordinances prescribed . . . or else I cannot see the contrary but of necessity I must be constrained to complain to the king's majesty of you in that behalf, which I were very loth to do, and it is contrary to my mind and usage hitherto; nevertheless, if you overmuch constrain me, I will not fail to do it.³

In addition to this somewhat negative deployment of his own authority, a great number of Cranmer's extant letters reveal him as someone who very often attempted to wield his personal influence as Archbishop of Canterbury on behalf of other people. To take but one example of this, in 1534 he wrote to the Convent of Newesham for the preferment of one Thomas Donkester to the post of Abbot:

I therefore pray you . . . to bear your favours and good minds to my friend of old acquaintance sir Thomas Donkester, your brother and prior, that he, by your favourable means and assistance, may be preferred to that vacant room for my sake afore any other.⁴

It is evident that Cranmer was prepared to invoke his archiepiscopal authority as a means of exerting influence. He was fully aware of the innate privileges of his own position and did not shy away from employing these to their fullest potential.

Cranmer was in every sense both a man under authority and a man of authority. As a final contribution to these introductory thoughts, it is worth turning to a brief consideration of his own background, for here we gain insight into some of the factors which may have moulded him.

Thomas Cranmer was born on 2 July 1489 at Aslockton in Nottinghamshire.⁵ His father was a gentleman and, even allowing for the fact that he had at least two brothers and five sisters, the young Cranmer was given a better than average upbringing. His father, a keen archer and horseman, died in 1501, but it is a matter of pure psychological conjecture as to what effect

this might have had upon his twelve year old son. Of more interest is the attested fact that Cranmer started school around the age of seven.

His first teacher is described by an anonymous biographer as a 'rude parish clerk'⁶ and his grammar schoolmaster is summed up by Ralph Morice, Cranmer's secretary, as 'marvellous severe and cruel'.⁷ A brutal approach in the classroom was entirely typical of the age, and as such both men were clearly built for the task. From the point of view of our immediate discussion, however, it is prudent to note a much later comment by Cranmer to Morice. In this he related that the schoolteacher, an obvious figure of authority in the young man's life, had inspired more in the way of hate for literature than enjoyment of it. As Jasper Ridley asserts, 'the treatment which he had received at school had permanently damaged both the good memory and the natural audacity with which he had been endowed as a small child'.⁸ Could it be, therefore, that Cranmer, even as early as his schooldays, developed an imbalanced understanding of the nature and function of authority which was to remain with him? Moreover, is it possible to infer from Ridley's suggestion that, on account of this unfortunate educational experience, he himself was inclined to be unassertive in the face of authority? Both of these aspects will certainly recur in the course of this survey, albeit in connection with the other sources of authority which have already been outlined.

In 1503 Cranmer entered Jesus College, Cambridge and in 1511 he was admitted to the degree of Bachelor of Arts. All the commentators are agreed that he was by no means an outstanding scholar. In fact he was listed thirty-second out of a class of forty-two, and, as a matter of comparison, Hugh Latimer, who would later become one of his fellow-reformers and fellow-martyrs, was eighth on the same list.⁹ Three years later he obtained his Master of Arts, became a fellow of Jesus College and was quite deliberately aiming for the ordained ministry of the church. All his plans collapsed, however, when he fell for a young woman by the name of Joan who was resident at the Dolphin Inn in Cambridge.¹⁰ The striking thing about this acquaintance is that Cranmer dealt with it in the only honourable way, namely marriage. It would have been perfectly acceptable, given the social mores of the time, for the young scholar to take Joan as a concubine and proceed with ordination. In that sense we can interpret him as someone who was fastidiously concerned with toeing the line of morality. Alternatively we might see him as one who was prepared to swim against the secular tide. Whatever the conclusion, we cannot but be impressed by Cranmer's readiness to forsake his career. There was undoubtedly no lack of integrity in his character at this vital juncture. The same was not to be the case in the face of later pressure and adversity.

Had Joan not died in 1515 it is conceivable that Cranmer would never again have featured on the map of sixteenth century England. However, die she did, and Cranmer was quickly restored to both his academic and ecclesiastical aspirations. He was ordained as a priest in 1520, completing his Bachelor of Divinity in 1521. The way was now open for his progress in biblical studies within the University, and in due course for his enlisting by Henry VIII to facilitate the royal divorce. The initial encounter with the King may have been by chance at Waltham in 1529, but Cranmer, having alluded to the possibility of justifying Henry's wishes from the pages of the Bible no less, was immediately set upon a path that would lift him from obscurity into the full public eye. It should not be overlooked that from the very beginning it was for Cranmer just as much the path of dutiful obedience to his sovereign.

This then sets the scene for our survey of Cranmer's interaction with the four major areas of authority which have been suggested. As we might expect, the mature man was for the most part a product of those factors which had influenced him in his earlier life. Cranmer's

childhood and adolescence were formative, and his later teenage years and early twenties consolidated this formation. It is at this stage in his development that we enter a more detailed discussion of Cranmer's attitude to authority. Our appraisal of his attitude to the Bible awaits.

MAURICE ELLIOTT is curate at St Patrick's Church, Coleraine

Endnotes:

- 1) J E Cox ed *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge 1846). Further references from this volume will be abbreviated to CW (Cranmer's Works).
- 2) CW p 349
- 3) CW p 350
- 4) CW p 291
- 5) Bibliographical details from J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p 13ff and M Johnson ed *Thomas Cranmer: Essays in Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of his Birth* (Contributors 1990) p 1ff
- 6) J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p 14
- 7) J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p 14
- 8) J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p 14
- 9) G Cheeseman *Thomas Cranmer: The Triumph of Grace* (Author 1989) p 9
- 10) Cranmer's opponents later accused him of marrying Joan not by choice, but out of necessity because she was pregnant by him. The debate has raged over her social position and her dubious morals; hence she is also referred to as 'Black Joan of the Dolphin'.