

Cranmer's Attitude to the Papacy: 'And as for the Pope, I refuse him as Christ's enemy'¹

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This is the second of four articles by Maurice Elliott concerning Cranmer's view of authority.

In setting up the Bible as authoritative for the life of the Church, Cranmer inevitably ran into difficulties with the authority of the Papacy. Claims for the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome had started with Tertullian in the third century, and in the ages following the history of the Papacy was quite simply one of grasping after the 'two swords' of temporal, political power and spiritual jurisdiction. As touching the former there are numerous instances of tension between the Popes and secular rulers – for example, the power struggle between Gregory VII and Henry IV in the late eleventh century. The latter aspect was brought to a head by the Conciliar controversy in the fifteenth century which confirmed the superiority of the Pope over the General Councils.² In terms of the sixteenth century the ball was first set in motion by Luther. Although his Ninety-Five Theses of 1517 were for the most part a vigorous critique of the practice of indulgences, they equally marked a concerted attack on the Papacy. It was to this school of thought that Cranmer added his weight.

Our survey of this aspect of authority, and indeed of Cranmer's rejection of it, provides the necessary flipside to his commitment to the authority of Scripture. In the last analysis these two sources were diametrically opposed. Having considered all this by way of introduction, we may now open the discussion under four headings which will take us chronologically through the four critical phases of Cranmer's entire life.

The Early Years

During his years in Cambridge it appears that Cranmer had no strong views concerning the Papacy. On account of its financial exactions, particularly from the clergy, the Papacy had become increasingly unpopular in England. There are those who assert that even in 1525 Cranmer was already secretly praying for the overthrow of papal power. However the evidence here is slender. For instance, in 1536 he wrote to Henry that for 'many years' he had been praying for the overthrow of papal power in England. It is doubtful whether this may refer back any earlier than 1529, by which stage the young cleric had been set to work upon the royal divorce case. Later, in 1543, a Canterbury bricklayer claimed that, in the course of a diocesan investigation, Cranmer had prayed for the end of the Pope's authority in England as early as 1526, a full seven years before it was cast off in 1533. Again the case made must be viewed as tenuous to say the least.³

Whatever the opinions Cranmer had formed, perhaps purely as a result of national consciousness and hostility, we may assume that these were significantly developed during his exposure to Lutheranism at the court of Charles V. Here he was able to gain insight into a system of government which had firmly rejected papal authority yet which continued to flourish.

The decade ended with Cranmer acting at Henry's request as Grand Penitentiary in Rome itself. His purpose here was 'to obtain the opinions of the Universities in favour of Henry's

divorce'.⁴ Again we have no detail of Cranmer's views regarding the Papacy, but it may be assumed that such proximity to the heart of the Roman institution must have influenced his later decision to reject the Pope's authority.

The 1530s

The fact that the Pope reached a different conclusion concerning the validity of Henry's marriage to Catherine, when Cranmer had deliberately sought to base his entire case upon scriptural texts, may have been a further catalyst for the denial of papal supremacy which would soon follow. In any event the first explicit indication of Cranmer's thinking in this whole area is found in his handling of the episcopal oaths on coming to the see of Canterbury. Henry's appointment of such a relatively young man as Primate in 1532 was a surprise to some, but it was not by any means preposterous. Cranmer was the acting Archdeacon of Taunton, he was esteemed as a royal chaplain and he had resided at Court. What did provoke comment was the Archbishop-designate's reluctance to accept. At his trial in 1555 Cranmer spoke of this:

I protest before you all, there was never a man came more unwillingly to a bishopric than I did to that.⁵

For this reason he deliberately travelled home from Austria as slowly as possible, 'thinking that [the king] would be forgetful of [him] in the mean time'.⁶ Of even more significance was the sequence of events surrounding the consecration itself on 30 March 1533. Although the Pope had still to pronounce judgment in Henry's divorce case with Catherine, he was persuaded to issue the necessary Bulls authorising Cranmer's appointment. In due course this was to be of immense importance for it ensured in a technical sense that the new Archbishop had met with the requisite papal approval. The break with Rome which followed in 1534 may have already been very much to the fore in Henry's thinking, and naturally it was to his advantage that a properly consecrated Primate of England should be the one to see it through. When it came to the consecration, however, Cranmer declared three times that he would not in any circumstances swear an oath of allegiance to the Pope which might bind him against the law of God, namely Scripture, or against the authority of the King:

If my representative with the Pope has taken in my name an oath contrary to my duty, I declare that he has done so without my knowledge, and that the said oath shall be null.⁷

Cranmer had nailed his colours to the mast. He had managed to circumvent the authority of the Pope while at the same time using it to his own ends. Later at his trial these declarations became a source of much controversy for there were those who then asserted that his actions were tantamount to perjury. Be that as it may, we are bound to conclude that Cranmer was merely coming clean on an attitude which he had held privately for some time; this is borne out by the substance of a speech which he delivered in the House of Lords, also in 1534, as recorded in Burnet's *History of the Reformation*.⁸

The text itself is not extant. The message, however, could not be more lucid, nor the case itself better constructed. Cranmer evidently began by alluding to the deception of the court of Rome:

[They] had destroyed so many ancient writings, and hid the rest, having carefully preserved everything that was of advantage to them, that it was not easy to discover what they had so artificially concealed.⁹

He then proceeded to question the Petrine origins of the Papacy since ‘it was not certain that he was ever in Rome’,¹⁰ and therefore whatever headship he did possess was not intended simply for the sake of Rome. In Cranmer’s view the present Pope was ‘corrupt ... both in his person and government’,¹¹ and the whole concept of the Papacy, as it had come to exist, ‘flowed only from the laws of men, so [that] there was now a good cause to repeal these’.¹² The Pope must be subject to the authority of the General Councils, not vice versa. Moreover ‘the standard of the council’s definitions should only be taken from the scriptures, and not from men’s traditions’.¹³ Such cogent arguments must surely have been the result of many long hours of studious reflection.

In 1536, after England’s decisive break with Rome, Cranmer is again to be heard on the same theme and with even greater voracity. In a letter to Lord Lisle he writes:

It is not the person of the bishop of Rome, which usurpeth the name of the pope, that is so much to be detested, but the very papacy and the see of Rome, which hath by their laws suppressed Christ, and set up the bishop of that see as a God of this world. And where the word of God was adversary and against his authority, pomp, covetousness, idolatry, and superstitious doctrine, he spying this became adversary unto the word of God, falsifying it, extorting it out of the true sense, and suppressing it . . .¹⁴

Here for Cranmer was the heart of the matter. Here we listen to him address the two opposing systems of papal domination and biblical truth. The Pope’s authority was a completely usurped authority, and all its extravagances merely served to emphasise this underlying fact. The Church of which he claimed to be Head was consequently a Church in error, and the decision of the Church in England to remove itself from this jurisdiction was entirely justified. In a sermon on 6 February 1536 Cranmer eventually took this line of thought to its natural, even if dangerous, conclusion, namely that the Pope represented the fulfilment of the prophetic Antichrist.¹⁵

From other correspondence of this period we are left with the distinct impression that much of Cranmer’s time and energy was devoted to developing and promoting these ideas. The 1530s were undoubtedly the years in which his outright rejection of the Papacy was consolidated. The question remained as to who might replace him as the Head of the Church in England, and this, along with the ambivalence which Cranmer showed in implementing his ideas, will occupy us more fully in the next article.

The Protestant Ascendancy

For a further assessment of Cranmer’s attitude to the Pope’s authority we turn to the later 1540s. The intervening years had witnessed numerous religious and political recriminations, many of which were both bitter and bloody. It is clear that Cranmer did not shrink from employing his own archiepiscopal authority to advance the cause of the Reformation, and there were many who suffered execution for their heretical beliefs. The Primate at no time altered his opinions concerning the Papacy, although it should be said that under Henry he did have to exercise a degree of caution. With the accession of Edward to the throne, the landscape was suddenly transformed, and the reform movement was able to progress with greater alacrity. The extant sources from this period testify to Cranmer’s continuing staunch opposition to the institution of the Papacy, its beliefs and its adherents.

A good example of his insistence upon the complete overthrow of the Romanist religion can again be seen in his articles for the episcopal visitation of the diocese of Canterbury in 1548. As early as Item 1 Cranmer quite deliberately sets out his stall:

First, whether parsons, vicars, and curates, and every one of them, have purely and sincerely, without colour or dissimulation, four times in the year at least, preached against the usurped power, pretended authority and jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome.¹⁶

The Archbishop clearly expected all his clergy to toe the line in this matter of rejecting Papism. Cranmer's opponents often concluded from this insistent wielding of authority that he had set himself up as 'a new pope'.¹⁷

The following year Cranmer made his *Answers to the Fifteen Articles of the Devon Rebels*,¹⁸ and this represents an even deeper defence of Protestantism. As part of his earlier European experience Cranmer had witnessed the Peasant War of 1524-1526 and its aftermath. As a result he had a deep-seated fear of anything remotely insurrectionist. His view of any uprising was that it indicated a punishment because of evil living, and it is fair to suggest that Cranmer would have preferred the defeat of the entire Reformation to a successful rebellion. In dealing with these west country rebels he is determined to respond to their requests with absolute firmness. Thus he begins:

When I first read your request, O ignorant men of Devonshire and Cornwall, straightways came to my mind a request, which James and John made unto Christ; to whom Christ answered: 'You ask you wot not what'. Even so thought I of you ... that you were deceived by some crafty papist.¹⁹

The objectives of the rebels were the restoration of Romanist practices such as the Six Articles, the Latin Mass, the veneration of the sacrament, communion in one kind only and praying for the departed. What is striking is that at virtually every stage Cranmer explicitly connects these dogmas with the name of the Bishop of Rome. To take but one example, concerning the hanging of the sacrament over the altar:

Is this the holy catholic faith, that the sacrament should be hanged over the altar and worshipped? ... Who made this faith? Any other but the bishops of Rome? and that more than a thousand years after the faith of Christ was full and perfect.²⁰

Again the appeal is to the essential catholicity of the Reformed faith as opposed to the relatively recent divergence from true orthodoxy of the Romanists. Moreover in this lengthy treatise we observe yet again Cranmer's fundamental conviction that the way of Scripture and the way of the Papacy were pulling in opposite directions. Thus, in his reply to the rebels' Article 10, asking for the retraction of the Bible in English, he writes:

What christian heart would not be grieved to see you so ignorant . . . that you refuse Christ, and join yourselves with antichrist? You refuse the holy bible . . . and the bishop of Rome's decrees you will have advanced and observed. I may well say to you as Christ said to Peter, 'Turn back again, for you savour not godly things'.²¹

The demands of the Devonshire rebels had been occasioned by the introduction of the new Prayer Book in 1549 and this issue is the final area for this period to which we turn. From developments in the domain of the liturgy Cranmer's opposition to the Papacy emerges at once subtly and with vehemence.

The 1549 Prayer Book was revolutionary. A great number of the old ceremonies were omitted and the Bible was restored at the centre of all the services. Of particular interest is one part of the Litany for these services. In this Cranmer gave vent to the full extent of his misgivings regarding the Pope and thus he included a prayer for deliverance 'from the tyranny of the Bishop of Rome, and all his detestable enormities'.²²

However, when Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester, subsequently claimed that it was possible to defend Roman practices on the basis of the new book, it soon emerged that this was but an initial step along the path of reform. When the second Prayer Book was issued in 1552, any potential for abuse by the papist party had been entirely negated. For instance, non-communicating attendance was no longer permitted, and neither were bell-ringing (except before the service), prayers for the dead and other scenic ceremonies. It was this book which 'registered the high-water mark of revolt from Rome'.²³

The Trial and Recantations

As a result of Cranmer's actions around the time of Edward's death in 1553 he was later arrested on a charge of high treason. The precise issues here will be treated more fully in the following article. With Mary's decree in 1554 that the realm of England be subject once again to papal supremacy, Cranmer's worst fears were being rapidly realised. This in turn paved the way for a further, charge of heresy to be brought against him. For our immediate discussion what matters is the way in which the State handled the trial of an Archbishop who had been consecrated with the Pope's full compliance, and how Cranmer himself sought to justify both his doctrines and his reforming policies.

Since the Pope had appointed Cranmer, it had to fall to the Pope to deprive him. Rome therefore appointed James Brokes, the Bishop of Gloucester, to act as the papal subdelegate, and he set about examining Cranmer on 12 September 1555. Cranmer listened to the oration which was against him and then began his response by reciting the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. He continued:

This I do profess as touching my faith, and make my protestation, which I desire you to note. I will never consent that the bishop of Rome shall have any jurisdiction within this realm.²⁴

Cranmer's defence was a bold restatement of all the aspects of his attitude to the Papacy which we have already noted. The Pope was 'contrary to God', he represented the Antichrist and he '[would] dispense with the old and new testament'.²⁵ That said, however, we can also detect in this dialogue the difficulties which Cranmer had begun to discover in his overall schema regarding the place of the monarch. We have contended thus far that he had replaced the authority of the Papacy with the authority of the Bible. Now it emerges quite forcefully that Cranmer's new authority might properly be construed as a dual authority, namely the Bible and the King together:

I will never consent to the bishop of Rome; for then I should give myself to the devil: for I have made an oath to the king, and I must obey the king by God's laws. By the scripture the king is chief, and no foreign person in his own realm above him. There is no subject but to a king . . . The pope is contrary to the crown.²⁶

Later in the trial Doctor Martin, a commissioner acting on behalf of the Queen, latched on to this evident weakness, and it will be profitable for our purposes to cite the entire debate at this juncture:

M. – Now sir, as touching the last part of your oration, you denied that the pope's holiness was supreme head of the church of Christ.

C. – I did so.

M. – Who say you then is supreme head?

C. – Christ.

M. – But whom hath Christ left here in earth his vicar and head of his church?

C. – Nobody.

M. – Ah! why told you not king Henry this, when you made him supreme head? and now nobody is. This is treason against his own person, as you then made him.

C. – I mean not but every king in his own realm and dominion is supreme head, and so was he supreme head of the church of Christ in England.

M. – Is this always true? and was it ever so in Christ's church?

C. – It was so.

M. – Then what say you by Nero? He was the mightiest prince of earth, after Christ was ascended. Was he head of Christ's church?

C. – Nero was Peter's head.

M. – I ask, whether Nero was head of the church, or no? If he were not, it is false that you said before, that all princes be, and ever were, heads of the church within their realms.

C. – Nay, it is true, for Nero was head of the church, that is, in worldly respect of the temporal bodies of men, of whom the church consisteth; for so he beheaded Peter and the apostles. And the Turk too is head of the church of Turkey.

M. – Then he that beheaded the heads of the church, and crucified the apostles, was head of Christ's church; and he that was never member of the church, is head of the church, by your new found understanding of God's word.²⁷

It goes without saying that Cranmer was in difficulty at this point in the proceedings. He was adamant about his rejection of the Papacy. His problem consisted in the precise and full replacement of papal supremacy within his theological framework. His apparent attempt to draw a distinction between the visible and invisible natures of the Church was a step in the right direction, but it is so insufficiently developed as to be utterly lacking in persuasion. The only excuse for Cranmer in this instance may be that the official records have been altered

and do not include the full text of all his replies. The possibility of censorship or tampering for the purposes of propaganda cannot be discounted in an age when feelings about religion ran so deep. This is certainly the explanation favoured by John Foxe for Cranmer's apparent ineffectiveness in countering his opponents.²⁸

The final aspect to be considered is that of Cranmer's recantations. In total he made five official recantations of his position during the last weeks of his life, and yet at the same time he could remain just as resolutely Protestant as ever. The entire period portrays him at his most ambivalent. As Jasper Ridley rightly observes, 'we should have to know many facts about his personality which could only have been known to his most intimate friends [in order] to explain this',²⁹ and naturally such knowledge died with any one who might have been aware of the real truth. We are left with the impression of a man who buckled under pressure at one moment, but later managed to recover some of the ground which he had lost. Of course in all this it should not be forgotten that Cranmer had been in complete isolation since Ridley and Latimer had died some months earlier.

The recantations declare, with increasing force, his acceptance of papal authority. Initially he attempted to connect this explicitly with the decision made by the Queen:

Forasmuch as the king and queen's majesties, by consent of their parliament, have received the pope's authority within this realm, I am content to submit myself to their laws herein, and to take the pope for chief head of this church of England, so far as God's laws, and the laws and customs of this realm will pennit.³⁰

Realising that this would not avail him a pardon, he then went further:

I, Thomas Cranmer, doctor in divinity, do submit myself to the catholic church of Christ, and to the pope, supreme head of the same church, and unto the king and the queen's majesties, and unto all their laws and ordinances.³¹

Not long after this Cranmer somehow regained his nerve. The Archbishop had been accorded the customary eighty days within which to appeal in person to the Pope. This, however, was a hypocritical formality because Mary had no intention of allowing him out of the jail in Oxford and at his Degradation on 14 February 1556 Cranmer made reference to this illegality. It is possible to interpret this as meaning that he would have gone to Rome had he been allowed. It is more likely that by this stage he was merely trying to embarrass the state authorities as much as possible, since the remainder of his speech was a typically forthright oration against the Pope.

More recantations ensued, but then at the very end, in St Mary's Church on the day of his execution no less, he retracted all of these as false:

And now I come to the great thing which so much troubleth my conscience ... and that is setting abroad of a writing contrary to the truth; which now here I renounce and refuse as things written with my hand contrary to the truth which I thought in my heart, and written for fear of death, and to save my life if it might be. And that is all such bills and papers which I have written or signed with my hand since my degradation, wherein I have written many things untrue ... And as for the Pope, I refuse him as Christ's enemy and Antichrist, with all his false doctrine.³²

Cranmer the Protestant and Reformer was to have the last word. For whatever reasons he may have wavered, the convictions which had possessed him and driven him for many years finally returned. He had been subjected to all manner of emotional, physical and psychological pressure, and in addition he had put himself through much unnecessary torture. In spite of this his Reformed beliefs were sufficiently well-engrained not to desert him in his hour of crisis and in the face of death. The *coup de théâtre* itself, however, may have owed as much to a fundamental change in his attitude to the monarch, and it is this whole area which we shall explore in the next article.

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Endnotes:

- 1) Part of Cranmer's Protestant version of his last recantation as cited in J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p407.
- 2) Details from J W Charley 'The Papacy' *New Dictionary of Theology* D F Wright and Sinclair B Ferguson edd (Leicester: IVP 1988).
- 3) Details from J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p21ff
- 4) J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p31
- 5) J E Cox ed *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: CUP 1846) p216. Further references from this book will be abbreviated to CW (Cranmer's Works).
- 6) CW p216
- 7) Quoted in J H Merle d'Aubigné *The Reformation in England* Vol II (London: Banner of Truth Trust 1962) p111.
- 8) CW pp76-78
- 9) CW p76
- 10) CW p76
- 11) CW p77
- 12) CW p77
- 13) CW p77
- 14) CW p322
- 15) The sermon was one of seven preached at Paul's Cross in London. Details from J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p98.
- 16) CW p154

- 17) One example of this is a comment of Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester. See J H Merle d'Aubigné *The Reformation in England* Vol II (London: Banner of Truth Trust 1962) pp212-213.
- 18) CW pp163-187
- 19) CW p163
- 20) CW p172
- 21) CW p183
- 22) Quoted in T W Drury and R T Beckwith *How We Got Our Prayer Book* (Oxford: Latimer 1986) p24.
- 23) T W Drury and R T Beckwith *How We Got Our Prayer Book* (Oxford: Latimer 1986) p17
- 24) CW p212
- 25) CW p213
- 26) CW p213
- 27) CW p219
- 28) This idea is discussed more fully by J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p376.
- 29) J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) p389
- 30) CW p563
- 31) CW p563
- 32) As quoted in J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford 1966) pp402-403.