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JAN LASKI (John à Lasco) 1499-1560 – Polish Migrant Reformer

By David Hilton

Early Life

Jan Laski (1456-1531) was both Chancellor and Primate of Poland. He saw that his three nephews, Jaroslav, Jan and Stanislas, had the best education for diplomatic careers. Jan was intended for a career as a clergyman in Poland's Roman Catholic Church.

In 1524 young Jan visited Basle, where he spent some months as a guest of Erasmus (1466-1536). While in Basle, Laski also befriended Protestant scholars, Conrad Pellikan, Beatus Rhenanus and especially Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531), the city's leading reformer. Laski accepted Oecolampadius's spiritual interpretation of Christ's presence in the eucharist.

Laski left Basle and returned to Poland, a land then willing to accept a follower of Erasmus, but not of Luther or Zwingli. His appointment in 1538 as Archdeacon of Warsaw, seems to have caused Laski to re-assess his spiritual allegiance.

Decision Time

In 1539 Laski visited Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) in Leipzig. Because of his moderation, Laski felt a greater affinity for Melanchthon than he did with the more belligerent Luther. Laski then obtained King Sigismund's permission to leave Poland, and go to Frankfurt, which had recently accepted the Reformation.

In 1540 Laski went to Louvain, lodging with a widow, Antoinette van Rosmers, in whose home a small company of people gathered for Bible studies. In this group, Jan found a wife. Marriage was virtually a declaration of Protestantism when publicly entered into by a Catholic priest such as Laski. News of the marriage reaching Poland led to the offer of a bishopric being withdrawn and Laski being denounced as a 'heretic.'

Reformer in Emden

Laski and his new wife moved to Emden, in Frisia, which had recently become Protestant. Laski spent some time in private studying the writings of the Reformers. Being a trained, experienced diplomat, Laski believed that he had a special talent for church organisation and administration.

Laski had the difficult task of bringing harmony between Reformed, Lutheran and Anabaptist preachers, practising a toleration unusual in that age. Laski's church leadership as Superintendent of Emden made his reputation with other Reformers.

The English botanist, William Turner, from Morpeth in Northumberland, spent some time in Emden. Turner, would later become Dean of Wells. He spoke highly of Laski to Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), on his return to England.

Laski's contribution to the English Reformation

Cranmer wrote to Laski: '*We are desirous of setting forth in our churches the true doctrine of God.*' Charles V's 'Interim' was about to be enforced in Emden, so evading imperial officials who were looking for him, Laski, in disguise, crossed to England from Calais. Laski enjoyed Cranmer's hospitality at Lambeth Palace, where he became friends with William Cecil and with Sir John Cheke, one of Edward VI's tutors.

In May 1550 Laski's family joined him in England. Edward VI granted them the right of residence and citizenship in England.

In July 1550 Laski was granted the use of the church of the Austin Friars in London for a congregation of Protestant refugees from Germany, Holland, Belgium and France. Laski became 'Superintendent' of this Church of the 'Strangers.'

Laski was given a free hand in preaching, teaching, worship and discipline, and was not accountable to the Bishop of London, Nicholas Ridley (1500-1555). The refugees chose their own ministers, a liberty not always granted to refugee congregations elsewhere in Europe.

Ridley believed the refugee congregations' different from of worship and church government from that of the Church of England was subversive to Anglican interests, since it would attract discontented English people who might prefer the refugee pattern of worship to the Prayer Book service. The King's Council prevented the bishops from imposing the Book of Common Prayer on Laski's congregations.

The later Elizabethan Presbyterian movement did not view Laski's order as a precedent for their own Presbyterianism. They were more influenced by Theodore Beza (1519-1605) in Geneva. Laski's Superintendancy role and the Congregational pattern of his churches would not have been acceptable to them.

Laski was the only Continental exile in England who supported Bishops Hooper's unavailing opposition to vestments and some Prayer Book ceremonies. Bucer and Peter Martyr Vermigli supported Cranmer.

Laski's writings do resemble later Puritanism in their stress on the law as the basis for Christian ethics. Laski stressed the need of the 'indwelling spirit' to enlighten us.

Laski's first wife died towards the end of 1552. Some months later he married an English girl to look after his children and to care for him, since his health was now in decline.

Final Days

In July 1553 when Mary Tudor became queen, Laski, now 54, left England with his family, and the majority from his congregation. Due to earlier clashes between Laski and Lutherans such as Westphal over the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Laski and his party were not welcomed in Lutheran territories.

Encouraged by a letter from the King of Poland, Laski returned there with his family in April 1556. Laski helped the Reformed church in southern Poland under its superintendant, Felix Cruciger. Laski died in January 1560.

Laski was not a major Reformed theologian like Bucer, Bullinger and Calvin. He was a gifted leader and organizer of churches, combining the best elements of Episcopacy, Presbyterianism and Congregationalism.

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Further Reading:

Basil Hall: 'John à Lasco 1499-1560' – A Pole in Reformation England.' Dr Williams's Library Lecture 1971.

Basil Hall: pages 171-207 of 'Humanists and Protestants.' T & T Clarke 1990.