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Henry VIII & William III: how the Protestant Reformation freed the British mind for greatness

by **Ralph Ellis**

Introduction

The Reformation was the vital transformation in social thought and understanding which underpins our modern society, and our science and technology, which was made possible by courageous opposition to those who would suppress freedom of thought. The agent of repression in this era was the Roman Catholic Church, which controlled the religious, social and political power-levers of Europe; while the mighty opposing force that brought the Church to its knees was a simple nail and a ragged piece of paper.

But the pen was not always as mighty as the sword and this great revolution took another 170 years of intermittent strife and bloodshed until the forces of oppression were forced to admit defeat. Almost immediately after this capitulation there was an explosion of new ideas, thinking, science and technology; and the modern world we know today had begun to take shape. We had entered what is known as the Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, an age in which logic and reason could triumph over blind faith and Church dogma.

The mighty paper and nail

If there was ever a pivotal moment in the history of Western civilisation it was 31st October 1517, when a priest named Martin Luther nailed a letter of protest – called *The Ninety-five Theses* – to the doors of Wittenberg church, in Saxony (central Germany). The main complaints in this long letter concerned the Catholic Church's sale of *indulgences* (the selling of divine or god's forgiveness for cash); *simony* (the selling of Church offices or jobs); and the formal licensing and legalisation of prostitutes. The complaints Martin Luther made were scholarly and reasoned, but they were considered heretical (against the Church) by Catholic leaders because they challenged the authority and wisdom of the pope (the Catholic Church's leader).

Martin Luther was not the first to have made this kind of complaint, as there had been many who had previously protested about Church corruption and the abuse of its many powers, but these complaints grew much louder during the late 14th century, when the Papacy was controlled by the Borgia family. The Borgias were considered to be especially debauched and corrupt popes, with Alexander VI being variously accused of nepotism, adultery, theft, rape, bribery, incest and even murder during the 1490s. Given the low opinion of the Papacy at this time, Martin Luther's letter, pinned to the doors of Wittenberg church, happened to be the spark that ignited the Protestant

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Revolution – an uncoordinated enterprise that hoped to reduce or counter the power of the Catholic Church.

Martin Luther's campaign was greatly helped by the recent invention of the printing press, which spread copies of his letter all over Europe. News was able to spread much quicker than before. William Tyndale also used the printing press to translate large parts of the Bible into English. The popes did not like this, as it meant that common people could at last read the Bible themselves and bypass the rule and interpretations of the priests. As a punishment for these heresies, Martin Luther was X excommunicated (expelled from the Church) by Pope Leo X in 1521, while William Tyndale was burned at the stake near Brussels after being strangled.

The parallel revolution in England

King Henry VIII (1509 - 1547) was one of England's greatest monarchs; and both he and his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, were Catholics. But Catherine, a Spanish princess, had not managed to produce a male heir for Henry. Her only child was a daughter, Mary. Advisors to the king blamed this upon Catherine, who had been wife of Henry's late brother, a union which might have been against Church teachings. Catherine's four stillborn sons were a sure sign of God's displeasure. Other close royal advisors – like Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer, who had already been influenced by the writings of Luther and Tyndale – were making secret plans behind the king's back to influence his thinking; and so they brought a beautiful young Protestant aristocratic lady to court in 1522, by the name of Anne Boleyn, who greatly charmed the king. It was reputedly Anne who introduced King Henry to Tyndale's 'heretical' printed pamphlets.

At this time the kings of Europe were governed by the Roman Catholic Church, but Protestant reformers like Thomas Cromwell wanted to assert what they called Royal Supremacy. If the reformers could boost the power of their king it would simultaneously reduce the power of the Catholic Church, just as Martin Luther had urged five or so years earlier. It is not clear if Henry was a willing participant in this scheme or whether he was being manipulated from behind, but he was happy enough to summon a Parliament (the law-making body) in 1529 to rule on the annulment (cancellation) of his marriage to Catherine, and likewise on his proposed marriage to Anne Boleyn. Pope Clement VII forbade this annulment, however, and so the Protestant reformers urged the king to use his own powers, under the old law of Praemunire (royal rule), a law which attempted to limit the pope's power over the kings of England.

Henry did just that and in 1531 he demanded royal authority over the Catholic Church in England. This was swiftly followed by many laws and edicts that changed the face of the Church in England, so that it was no longer Catholic. This was the beginnings of the Church of England – a new, simpler Christian Church which was ultimately governed by the English monarch, rather than the popes of Rome. This culminated in the dissolution (the closing) of the monasteries (enclaves and mansions of priests). The monasteries were not only bastions of traditional Catholic thinking, they were also rather rich, and King Henry was persuaded that they should be closed down. In 1536, on the pretext of the discovery of immoral goings-on between monks and nuns, the great monasteries of England were destroyed and their great wealth and power was transferred to the king himself.

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The three Christian Churches

Europe now had three kinds of Christian Church. There was the Orthodox Church of Greece, which had spread up into Russia. There was the Roman Catholic Church, which dominated Europe's south, including Italy, southern Germany, France and Spain (and Ireland). And now there was the Protestant Church of the north, spread across northern Germany, Denmark, Holland, Scandinavia and England. In England the Church was called the Church of England or the Anglican Church: because the English people were originally called the Angle people, a name that came from Holland and Denmark. It is from the Angle-ish that we derive Engle-ish.

These three interpretations of the teachings of Jesus Christ were very different. The Greek Orthodox Church still does the majority of its ritual in secret, behind closed doors; so the people have no idea what is going on and what they are supposed to believe in. The Orthodox and Catholic cathedrals and churches are festooned with imagery and statues, including statues of the saints and of Jesus and Mary. But, as the Protestants pointed out, the Ten Commandments, the primary laws of Christianity, forbade such statues or idols (graven images). How could a Christian Church endorse what was expressly forbidden by the Bible itself (in Deuteronomy 5:8)? In addition, and more seriously, the Catholic sacrament included the Eucharist, a reenactment of the Last Supper of Jesus. But the Catholics said (and still say) that the bread and wine in this ritual were turned into the real flesh and blood of Jesus (through transubstantiation). The Protestants said that this was cannibalism, an old pre-civilised rite, and this Last Supper ritual should only be seen as symbolic.

While these were insurmountable doctrinal differences between these Churches, perhaps the biggest difference between them was freedom of thought. In order to hold onto its power the Catholic Church had assumed that it knew everything and it could control everyone. Thus freedom of thought was effectively banned. When Nicolaus Copernicus wrote a book called *De Revolutionibus* in 1543, which said that the Earth orbited the Sun, the Catholic Church banned it – for they knew better than any scientist. When Galileo Galilei (a name that curiously means 'revolution') proved in 1632 that Copernicus was right, in his book called *Dialogue*, by observing the moons of Jupiter and the phases of Venus (like the phases of the Moon), Pope Urban VIII placed him under house arrest, forced him to recant (apologise), and his book was banned.

Clearly, science and modernity were not going to progress under the suffocating blanket of Catholic oppression. Many free-thinkers, philosophers and Freemasons knew this, and were continually pressing behind the scenes for greater freedom of thought. They discovered their ideal champion in the Protestant revolution, for the priesthood of the new Protestant Church were much more relaxed about ultimate truths, thought control and oppressive power over the people. If a scientist wanted to investigate why Venus waxed and waned like the Moon, that was no business of the Protestant Church – God would not punish those seeking to understand His grand design.

Henry's legacy

After Henry VIII's death in 1547, the continuation of these Protestant reforms in England was by no means certain. Edward VI, Henry's young son by his third wife, Jane Seymour, was a Protestant prince, but it is often said that he had always been a

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sickly child. Whatever the case, he died in 1553 of a fever, aged just 15. This left the Protestant revolution in England exposed, for the next monarch was to be Henry's daughter by his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, called Mary. Like Catherine, Mary was a devout Catholic, and during her short reign she attempted to steer the nation back towards the Catholic Church. The heresy laws were reinstated and many Protestants were burned alive for their beliefs, which is why Mary became known to history as Bloody Mary. Luckily, her reign was short, and Mary died while suffering from a 'phantom pregnancy' (possibly a tumour) in 1558, aged just 42.

Mary was succeeded by Elizabeth I, Henry's younger daughter by his second wife, Anne Boleyn – the lady who had been pivotal in starting the English Protestant Reformation back in 1531. Being a daughter of Boleyn, Elizabeth was staunchly Protestant and immediately set out to undo the damage and divisions caused by Mary's reign. This culminated in 1559 with the Act of Supremacy, which reestablished the English monarch as the head of the Church of England; and the Act of Uniformity, which instituted a new prayer book and regularised Church of England worship for all citizens. These may seem like peripheral issues, but under these new enlightened social reforms, the 44-year reign of Elizabeth's blossomed into a glorious era of peace and prosperity.

The English Civil (and Religious) War

But dark, oppressive clouds were brewing on the horizon once more. Elizabeth had no children and upon her death in 1603 the Scottish King James VI was invited to become monarch of a united England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales; so he was renamed as James I of Britain. This is why the Union Jack (the British flag) was designed. Under James I the cross or flag of St Andrew of Scotland was merged with the cross of St George of England to form the first Union Flag. The addition of the cross of St Patrick of Ireland, to form the modern Union Jack, had to wait until 1801. James I of Britain (England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales) was nominally Protestant and continued the reforms of Elizabeth and the nation prospered accordingly. But upon the accession of his son King Charles I in 1625 the situation deteriorated rapidly. Charles I took a French wife, a Catholic Bourbon princess named Henrietta, and this raised the prospect of his children becoming Catholics at a time when the horrors of Bloody Mary's reign still loomed large in people's memories. Charles also wanted money for various military expeditions and this caused constant disputes with Parliament; and the combination of these problems caused the English Civil War to erupt. The factions split along essentially religious lines, with the royalists being predominantly Catholic and the Protestants uniting under the command of Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell was eventually victorious and King Charles I was beheaded for treason in 1649.

Cromwell did away with the monarchy and ruled the nation via Parliament, with both legislative (law-making) and executive (management) powers. However, the defeated Catholic forces of Charles had regrouped in Catholic Ireland and so Cromwell immediately led an expedition to defeat them. This was one of many forays into Ireland which were caused by Ireland harbouring forces that were intent on destabilising or invading England or Scotland. At home Cromwell set about healing a divided nation and its shattered economy. This included the right of Jews to return to England, after previous Catholic persecutions, as the Jews had been at the forefront of successful monetary reforms in Holland. Cromwell was offered the throne as king of

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Britain but preferred the title of Lord Protector instead, and under his guidance the nation did indeed begin to heal and prosper. However, on the death of Cromwell in 1658, public sentiment was for a restoration of the monarchy and so King Charles II, the son of Charles I, eventually became king in 1660.

Both Charles II and his brother, who eventually became King James II, were nominally Protestant and so James's daughter Mary married William of Orange, the Protestant prince of the Netherlands. But the Protestant leanings of James II had only been a sham; he refused to give an anti-Catholic oath and on becoming king in 1685 his policies were overtly Catholic. It was for this reason that the compulsory Protestant oath for all future British monarchs was initiated, to ensure that no further Catholics tried to rule Britain and place the nation back under the oppressive shackles of Rome.

These were indeed troubling times. The Protestant aristocracy of England was worried, as yet another damaging civil war was in prospect. But they did not necessarily wish another dictator like Oliver Cromwell to surface so, to prosecute this new rebellion and to keep the Protestant revolution alive, some leading luminaries in London appealed for the assistance of William of Orange, the Dutch king. William's wife was the daughter of King James II, and since there were those who considered that royal inheritance ran through the female line, in traditional biblical fashion, the offspring of King William of Orange would be true British monarchs. William landed in England in 1688. His Dutch army numbered 14,000, but it was the defection of wave after wave of Protestant officers and their men that really sank James. James fled the country without a fight and William was crowned William III of England in February 1689. William was not one to squander time and in March of the same year he was out in Ireland in hot pursuit of James. An historic battle was about to be fought – on Irish soil.

Revolution in Europe

This was the domestic picture in Britain but there was a wider political environment within which these skirmishes were being fought. The problem in Europe was again religious, with the bitter dispute between the Protestant north and the Catholic south still raging, even after all this time. In northern Europe the *League of Augsburg* or the *Grand Alliance* comprised the Habsburg Empire of Eastern Europe, together with the princes of Netherlands, Saxony and Sweden, under the nominal command of William of Orange. Ranged against them in this dispute were the Bourbons, led by Louis XIV of France and a mixed bag of southern Catholic principalities. But the Habsburgs also had an eastern border dispute with the Muslim Turks, so Louis XIV thought that the Catholic James II of England could keep the Protestant states in the Netherlands busy, while he marched his army into Germany to confront the Habsburgs head-on. The Catholic Bourbon dynasty would soon be the masters of Europe, and the Protestant Reformation would be extinguished forever. All the sacrifices of the Protestant Revolution and the many hundreds of thousands who had died in these wars would have been in vain.

But the revolution prevailed and survived, just. As we have just seen, King James II lost the support of the population of England and King William of Orange was invited to become the new British monarch, so James had to flee to Catholic Ireland. Louis XIV was rapidly losing control of his north-western flank, so in desperation he

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committed valuable troops to the support of King James in Ireland, a decision that weakened his ability to attack the Habsburgs in Germany. James planned to regain England by using Ireland as a springboard, with the ultimate goal being the invasion of the Netherlands and Saxony. But William of Orange, now king of England and Scotland, saw the gambit and moved to cut off James' support at its roots – in Ireland.

The final battle in Ireland

The looming battle in Ireland had nothing to do with Ireland itself; it was a minor skirmish in a much larger struggle for religious and political control over the people of Europe. This was a stark choice between the old tyranny and oppression of Roman Catholicism, versus the relative intellectual freedom of the new Protestant creed. It was a political squabble that saw, even at the domestic level, James II fighting against his son-in-law William and his own daughter Mary.

The situation came to a climax on the river Boyne, north of Dublin, in 1690. Arranged in this most European of battles was James II, on the south bank of the Boyne, with 7,000 regular French troops and 14,000 Irish. The Irish were mostly untrained infantry, as many of the best Irish regiments had already been squandered by James in other battles on the English mainland. On the other side of the river was William of Orange, who had some 35,000 regulars at his disposal. Underlining the true international nature of this dispute, William's forces comprised the Dutch Blue Guard, two divisions of French Huguenots, many English and Scottish regiments, the Danish and Prussian infantry and, bringing up the rear, a smattering of Finns and Swiss.

This battle has been commemorated for centuries in Irish history, as being the English oppressing the poor Irish once more, yet it was anything but. This was a battle for the future of the Protestant Reformation, the bold move by the intellectual elite to prise freedom of speech, expression and thought from the vice-like grip of the old Catholic hierarchy. It was a bitter, century-long struggle to open the soul of the European peoples, a struggle that saw many hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides. But it was most definitely a cause worth fighting for, as this religious crusade heralded the modern era.

Industrial Revolution

It is of no coincidence that as soon as Protestantism became established the first Masonic lodges were opened in 1646, in Cheshire by Elias Ashmole; and the Royal Society, Britain's premiere scientific institution, was established in 1660. It was the areligious (without religion), freethinking Freemasonic guilds which so influenced George Washington and Benjamin Franklin during the American Revolution and Declaration of Independence of 1775 and 1776; which is why America became a secular (without religion) nation. Likewise, the Royal Society was also an areligious body, something that would have been unthinkable only 50 years previously. The society was originally called the Occult College (Invisible College), and it was founded by famous figures like Robert Moray, Robert Hooke, Christopher Wren, William Petty, and Robert Boyle; and their scientific methodology was largely based upon the radical ideas of the English philosopher, Francis Bacon. It cannot be overstressed that the Roman Catholic Church would have regarded Bacon's ideas and the goals of the Royal Society as being deeply heretical. Science was trying to

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research and understand the workings of the Universe, the supposed designs and creations of the great god himself. This simply would not have been allowed under the oppressive Catholic regime, and these 'heretical' scientists would have been imprisoned or murdered, all in the name of peace, love and forgiveness. The scientific revolution that was ushered in by the Royal Society and Grand Lodge could not have happened were it not for the great sacrifice of the many thousands of men and women who laid down their lives during the Protestant Reformation for the great goal of intellectual freedom.

Yet this revolution was not prosecuted just so that a few dozen philosophers could ruminate on the meaning of nature – it also ushered in a complete new civilisation, way of life and standard of living. This new freedom of thought brought in new methodologies, new techniques, new understandings and new technologies. In short, it ushered in the Industrial Revolution. Just about everything we use in the Western world today, every piece of technology and machinery, has been brought about because a few philosophers were at last allowed to dream dreams of the impossible. What glues matter together? What is the difference between liquids and solids? What makes things light or heavy? What agent carries disease? What makes a man a man and a woman a woman? The modern world was created on a dream, a dream that was only made safe and possible by the Protestant Reformation; and so we must cherish and protect this marvellous creation from any fundamentalist religious or political forces that would imprison our thoughts once more and take us back to the Dark Ages.

Ralph Ellis is the author of a number of books on religious history and has a long-standing interest in the history of ideas