

## Reformation in The British Isles

No one is quite certain how the Christian religion came to the British Isles. Legend has it that Joseph of Arimathea was so dissatisfied with the trial of Christ by the Sanhedrin that he removed his family and his whole entourage to the farthest end of civilization. Another legend says that when St. Paul went to the farthest tip of the then known world he touched on the British Isles. Still another legend states that when the Roman Legions were dispersed throughout the world perhaps some of them, who had been converted to Christianity, started a small cult in the British Isles. At any rate, in the year 314 A.D., at the Council of Arles, in France, there is historical evidence that the travel expenses were paid for several bishops from The British Isles.

In the year 597 A.D., Augustine was commissioned by the Bishop of Rome to go to The British Isles for the purpose of Christianizing the people there. Augustine found that these people were already Christian, but seemingly different from those on the Continent of Europe. This was the Celtic Church, with an entirely different calendar than that used by the mainstream of Christianity, with a list of saints unknown to the Catholic Church, and seemingly not even aware of the Church on the Continent. When Augustine reported all this to the Bishop of Rome, he was asked to return to the Isles for the purpose of bringing this branch of the Christian Church under the aegis of the mainstream of Christianity on the Continent. In the year of 664 A.D., at the little town of Whitby in England, the Council of the Celtic Church agreed to become a part of the Church on the mainland and come under the rule and jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome. It is easy to see how, when the Church split in the year 1054, the Church in The British Isles became a part of the western stream of the Catholic Church, inasmuch as there had been little or no contact with the eastern branch of the Church.

As a matter of fact, perhaps one of the best known missionaries from the Eastern Orthodox Church to the Isles of The British Isles was St. Patrick. However, he was so isolated from his own community that the Western Church succeeded in converting him first to the Church of Rome, then to the Church of England; and he vacillated between the three so frequently that to this day there is some doubt expressed as to just what he was when he died.

After the power struggle and doctrinal differences between the Church in the East and the Church in the West resulted in a permanent cleavage in the year 1054 A.D., the King of England issued proclamations (in the year 1184 A.D.) which became known as the Constitutions of Clarendon. Chief among these proclamations was the one stating that the Crown would codify English law. The monarch reasoned that all before him had issued some dictates that were binding on the people, and all of these should be put together so that a more orderly form of government could be achieved. This was fought bitterly by the Church. It reasoned that every person was a child of God and received his liberties from God his Father. If anyone wished to know just what he was supposed to do, then the Church as the Vicar of Christ on earth, would tell him. This was the beginning of a long and bloody struggle between the Church and the Crown as to who should have control of the subjects of the king; and it marks the beginning of nationalism in the British Isles. Those of you who have seen any plays or films depicting the life

of Becket, have seen a representation of the struggle that went on between the king and the Church over the Constitutions of Clarendon.

In the year 1213 A.D., John I of England gave the whole country as a fief to the Roman Catholic Church. The people in Britain have always considered this such a shocking and dastardly act that never again has any monarch on the throne ever taken the name of John. In the year 1215 A.D., the peasants of England forced the king and the nobility to sign the Magna Charta, commonly known as the first Bill of Rights for man. This established the fact that every man had certain inalienable rights which were his merely by virtue of his birth, and that he did not have to apply either to the Church or to the king in order to obtain them. The Church claimed that this was open rebellion and amounted to religious heresy, and threatened all who had signed the Magna Charta with excommunication unless it was immediately revoked. The people, perhaps for the first time in history, refused to recognize the excommunication, and insisted that the Charter was valid and binding. It is interesting to note that the first laws of the Magna Carta were to the effect that the English Church would be free to govern itself.

In the year 1279, there was the establishment of Parliament. At first this was nothing but a rubberstamp, and Parliament was permitted to do only what the king told it to do. Nevertheless, it brought together representatives from every corner of the British Isles and gave strength to the rise of nationalism. This was fought by the Church on the theory that a universality had already been established by the people everywhere under the Catholic religion.

In the year of 1285, again over the stern disapproval of the Church, there was the establishment for the first time anywhere-of civil courts. Not that this was much of an improvement over the ecclesiastical courts, because both courts were as crooked as pretzels. In the beginning the two lived side by side; a person could be tried in the Church courts only if he had some official standing in the Church; he could be tried in the civil courts only if he had no rank or title in the Church. This led to the practice of immediately going to the Church and accepting a minor Order when one fell out of favor with the Crown, so that he could not be tried in the civil courts. Likewise, if one in the Church was to be tried in the ecclesiastical courts it was considered the politic thing to do to leave the Church and immediately accept office under the Crown so that he could only come to trial in the civil courts.

From here on, almost from year to year, various laws were passed which clipped the authority of the Pope in the British Isles and which were designed to cut down the power of the Pope to tax British subjects. In the year 1307, there was the Statute of Carlisle, which stated that no religious house could send money overseas. In the year 1353, it was ruled that the ecclesiastical courts in Britain could no longer send any cases of appeal to Rome. All such cases would be decided by the Crown. In the year 1365, "Peter's Pence" was suspended by the Crown on all British subjects. And so on until the year 1400, when we see that all schools and colleges in the British Isles are now under the Crown and no longer under the Church.

This was a bitter blow to the Church, for whoever controls the mind of the youth controls the nation. When all schools were under the Church it became relatively easy for the Church to control the family through the young people. Now that this had been taken away it tended to give

the king the upper-hand. Let us never underestimate the power of youth. Who was it that prevented former President Eisenhower from making a political journey to Japan? This journey had the approval of the Japanese government and other high officials, but when the youth of Japan started snake-dancing in the streets in protest of the visit, the Japanese government finally had to admit it could not control this and suggested that perhaps Eisenhower had better not come. And who was it that prevented the House Un-American Activities Committee from functioning in the State of California? The students of UCLA and Berkeley. And later, was it not the students of Princeton and Harvard that prevented Dean Rusk from speaking in their area of the nation? It is well for us to remember that whoever controls the mind of youth may well control the nation.

In the year 1532, the English Crown had ruled that it was no longer necessary for any newly elected bishop or archbishop to purchase a pall from the Bishop of Rome. The ruling was to the effect that it was necessary only for that dignitary to be recognized by the Crown in order to take his new office. Of course it can be seen that the real purpose of this was two-fold: first, to keep the money within the British Isles; second, to show that the Bishop of Rome did not have complete authority over the Church in England.

The year 1532 is further significant because Henry VIII was on the throne of England. Now Henry was a rascal who loved two things equally with a passion—the Church and the ladies. His was the only Court that opened everyday with a Church Service and it was mandatory that all the nobility attached to the Court attend. Further, Henry, himself, translated the Litany and some of the Psalms from Latin into English in order that members of the nobility might have more of a part in the Service.

Henry was married to Catherine of Aragon, but his mistress at this time was Anne Boleyn. Henry desired greatly to divorce Catherine and marry Anne. And so he applied to the Pope to have his marriage annulled. Henry used the oriental argument that inasmuch as Catherine had not given him a male heir to the throne, then she should be replaced by another who would. This same argument had been successfully used some twenty-five years before by Philip of France. More recently King Farouk divorced several of his wives for precisely this reason, as did the Shah of Iran.

Now Catherine of Aragon was the aunt of Charles V of Spain, who at this time was the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Empire was falling apart, due to the rise of nationalism, and Charles V of Spain, because he commanded the strongest forces still loyal to the Pope, had become more powerful than any other emperor since Charlemagne. As a matter of fact, he had almost reached the point where he could dictate to the Church. Catherine of Aragon appealed to her nephew not to let the Pope decide in favor of Henry, and Charles promptly interceded on behalf of his aunt.

Upon refusal of the annulment, in 1533, Henry appealed to the British Parliament for a civil decree of divorcement, which was promptly granted. In 1534, when the Church and Crown in England decided it could elect its own bishops and consecrate the same, the Pope thought that matters had gone too far and that the situation in England was getting out of control. Excommunication was threatened unless these acts were rescinded and Henry renounce his

divorce; for after all, this act was in open defiance of the ruling of the Church. When Henry refused, then the Church in England became the Church of England.

Excommunication did not follow immediately. Almost fifty years later Cardinal Pohl, the greatest Church statesman of the Roman Church, was sent to England to determine whether or not reconciliation was possible. After laboring there for several years among a generation of people who had been free of Papal influence he was forced to notify the Bishop of Rome that the task was an impossible one. Excommunication of the Church of England then took place in the year 1570. Let us briefly summarize what we have seen happen. On the Continent of Europe, the Reformation was a doctrinal one that came about because of differences in theology. Never once was there any dispute in Britain over the doctrinal policies of the Church, for most all differences and disputes arose out of the beginnings of nationalism in the British Isles and the welding together of these various islands into one nation. As compared to the outcome of the Reformation on continental Europe, that resulted in the three-legged milking stool that became the basic tenets of Protestantism, we find something different emerging from the Reformation in the British Isles. As a matter of fact, the monarchs of England would not allow any doctrinal differences to develop and Henry VIII won for himself the title of "Defender of the Faith" (one of the titles still retained by the English sovereign) by putting to the stake and otherwise killing all of the followers of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin that dared to set foot on the British Isles.

What did emerge was as follows:

1. A change from a universal Church State to that of a national state, with a State Church; and the papacy with all that it represented becoming an "alien" Church.
2. A constitutional form of government that held for both the Church and the State.
3. A definite change in Church-State relationships brought about by
  - a) the emergence of civil courts versus ecclesiastical courts; and the establishment of English civil law
  - b) the emerging idea of the Church being for the State and not versus the State, which resulted in a Church of the people and one not alien to the people

Taking all of this into consideration, let it never be said that Henry VIII started the Church of England.

[Tertullian](#) (AD 155–222) wrote in *Adversus Judaeos* that Britain had already received and accepted the Gospel in his lifetime, writing, "all the limits of the Spains, and the diverse nations of the Gauls, and the haunts of the Britons—inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ."<sup>14</sup>

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