

The English Reformation[1] was the series of events in 16th-century England by which the Church of England broke away from the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church.

These events were, in part, associated with the wider process of the European Protestant Reformation, a religious and political movement which affected the practice of Christianity across most of Europe during this period. Many factors contributed to the process: the decline of feudalism and the rise of nationalism, the rise of the common law, the invention of the printing press and increased circulation of the Bible, the transmission of new knowledge and ideas among scholars and the upper and middle classes. However, the various phases of the English Reformation, which also covered Wales and Ireland, were largely driven by changes in government policy, to which public opinion gradually accommodated itself.

Based on Henry VIII's desire for an annulment of his marriage, the English Reformation was at the outset more of a political affair than a theological dispute. The reality of political differences between Rome and England allowed growing theological disputes to come to the fore.[2] Immediately before the break with Rome, it was the Pope and general councils of the church that decided doctrine. Church law was governed by the code of canon law with final jurisdiction in Rome. Church taxes were paid straight to Rome and it was the Pope who had the final say over the appointment of bishops. The split from Rome made the English monarch the Supreme Governor of the English church by "Royal Supremacy", thereby making the Church of England the established church of the nation. Doctrinal and legal disputes now rested with the monarch, and the papacy was deprived of revenue and the final say on the appointment of bishops.

The structure and theology of the church was a matter of fierce dispute for generations. These disputes were finally ended by a coup d'état (the "Glorious Revolution") in 1688, from which emerged a church polity with an established church and a number of non-conformist churches whose members at first suffered various civil disabilities which were only removed over time, as did the substantial minority who remained Roman Catholic in England, whose church organization remained illegal until the 19th century.

Henry VIII [1] ascended the English throne in 1509 at the age of 17. He made a dynastic marriage with Catherine of Aragon, widow of his brother Arthur, in June 1509, just before his coronation on Midsummer's Day. Unlike his father, who was secretive and conservative, the young Henry appeared to be the epitome of chivalry and sociability, seeking out the company of young men like himself; an observant Catholic, he heard up to five masses a day (except during the hunting season); of "powerful but unoriginal mind", he allowed himself to be influenced by his advisors from whom he was never apart, by night or day; he was thus susceptible to whoever had his ear.[3] Between his young contemporaries and the Lord Chancellor, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, there was thus a state of hostility. As long as Wolsey had his ear, Henry's Catholicism was secure: in 1521 he had defended the Catholic Church from Martin Luther's accusations of heresy in a book he wrote, probably with considerable help from Thomas More, entitled *The*

Defence of the Seven Sacraments, for which he was awarded the title "Defender of the Faith" (*Fidei Defensor*) by Pope Leo X. (Successive English and British monarchs have retained this title to the present, even after the Anglican Church broke away from Catholicism.) Wolsey's enemies at court included those who had been influenced by Lutheran ideas,[4] among whom was the attractive, charismatic Anne Boleyn.

Anne arrived at court in 1522, from years in France where she had been educated by Queen Claude of France, as maid of honour to Queen Catherine, a woman of "charm, style and wit, with will and savagery which made her a match for Henry".[5] By the late 1520s, Henry wanted to have his marriage to Catherine annulled. She had not produced a male heir who survived into adulthood and Henry wanted a son to secure the Tudor dynasty. Before Henry's father (Henry VII) ascended the throne, England had been beset by civil warfare over rival claims to the English crown and Henry wanted to avoid a similar uncertainty over the succession.[6] Catherine's only surviving child was Princess Mary.

Henry claimed that this lack of a male heir was because his marriage was "blighted in the eyes of God".[7] Catherine had been his late brother's wife, and it was therefore against biblical teachings for Henry to have married her (Leviticus 20:21);[8] a special dispensation from Pope Julius II had been needed to allow the wedding in the first place.[9] Henry argued that this had been wrong and that his marriage had never been valid. In 1527 Henry asked Pope Clement VII to annul the marriage, but the Pope refused. According to Canon Law the Pope cannot annul a marriage on the basis of a canonical impediment previously dispensed. Clement also feared the wrath of Catherine's nephew, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, whose troops earlier that year had sacked Rome and briefly taken the Pope prisoner.[10]

The combination of his "scruple of conscience" and his captivation by Anne Boleyn made his desire to rid himself of his Queen compelling.[11] The indictment of his chancellor Cardinal Wolsey in 1529 for praemunire (taking the authority of the Papacy above the Crown), and subsequent death in November 1530 on his way to London to answer a charge of high treason[12] left Henry open to the opposing influences of the supporters of the Queen and those who countenanced the abandonment of the Roman allegiance, for whom an annulment was but an opportunity.

1 The English Reformation by Professor Andrew Pettegree

2 Cf. "The Reformation must not be confused with the changes introduced into the Church of England during the 'Reformation Parliament' of 1529-36, which were of a political rather than a religious nature, designed to unite the secular and religious sources of authority within a single sovereign power: the Anglican Church did not until later make any substantial change in doctrine". Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (Macmillan, 1996), p. 470.

3 Susan Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds* (Allen Lane 2000) p. 109f. He "believed he that he could keep his own secrets... but he was often deceived and he deceived himself." (p. 103)

4 Brigden, p. 111

5 Brigden, p. 111. Her music book contained an illustration of a falcon pecking at a pomegranate: the falcon was her badge, the pomegranate, that of Granada, Catherine's badge.

6 Robert Lacey, *The Life and Times of Henry VIII*, (Book Club Associates, 1972), p. 70

7 Roderick Phillips, *Untying the Knot: A Short History of Divorce* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 20

8 John Fisher mischievously pointed out that, according to Deuteronomy, a man should marry his deceased brother's widow, rather than be prohibited from doing so; see also St. Mark 12:18 ff.

9 Robert Lacey, *The Life and Times of Henry VIII*, (Book Club Associates, 1972), p17

10 T. A. Morris, *Europe and England in the Sixteenth Century*, (Routledge 1998), p166

11 Brigden, p. 114

12 Christopher Haigh, p. 92f

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