



CLERICAL WILLS OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

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The English Reformation has been, for many years, a topic of considerable controversy among students of sixteenth and seventeenth century British history. Over the years scholars have referred to the Reformation as an act of state, an act of God, a process of Protestantization, a retreat from orthodoxy. More specifically, for many years, from Maurice Powicke to Christopher Hill, one school of thought has maintained that the English Reformation was a revolution from above, that the English church and the English people were acted upon.¹ Another point of view, which has gained increasing acceptance by scholars, is aimed primarily at seeing the Reformation not merely as an act of state, but also as the people's response to "a series of constitutional, social and religious changes."² The growing acceptance of this approach has enabled students of the period to examine various aspects of the Reformation in a specialized and detailed manner in the hope of assessing in depth the diverse elements which compose it. This method of appraisal has given rise to a considerable number of specialized and localized Reformation studies.³ The purpose of this study is to examine

¹Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution* (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), p. 32: "The Reformation in England was an act of state. The initiative came from Henry VIII, who wanted to solve his matrimonial problems . . . Some supporters of the Reformation were heretics; but the wide expansion of Protestantism in England was a consequence, not a cause, of the Reformation."

²A.G. Dickens, "The Reformation in England," in *The Reformation Crisis*, ed. Joel Hurstfield (London: Edmund Arnold Publishers, Ltd., 1965), p. 57.

³See, for example, G.A.J. Hodgett, "The Unpensioned Ex-religious in Tudor England," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 13 (1962), pp. 195-202. Margaret Bowker, *The Secular Clergy in Lincoln Diocese, 1495-1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968); J.E. Oxley, *The Reformation in Essex* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1965); Peter Heath, *English Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); A.G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York, 1509-1558* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1959); Lawrence S. Snell, *The Suppression of the Religious Foundations of Devon and Cornwall* (Penzance: Wordens of Cornwall, 1967), pp. 195-202.

EXPLORATIONS IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE

certain clerical wills of the Reformation period. While these wills are interesting in themselves, they also provide us with part of the clerical response to the crisis years of the Reformation.

This study is based upon some two hundred fifty clerical wills and inventories of the sixteenth-century diocese of Coventry and Lichfield. This midland diocese, up to 1541, was comprised of Staffordshire, Cheshire, parts of Warwickshire, Lancashire, Shropshire, Flintshire, and Denbighshire. In 1541, Henry VIII took Cheshire and the southern part of Lancashire from the See of Coventry and Lichfield in order to form the new See of Chester. This left the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield possessed of some 3,000 square miles and approximately 100,000 people of whom perhaps 6,500 were clerics. Among all the information available concerning this clerical class, none is more revealing of their lives than their wills. These last testaments represent virtually the only documentation from this period which affords us any personal insight into this key class during the crisis years of the Reformation. The great preponderance of the other surviving materials deals with what might be called the "state-imposed" responses to the religious changes of these years, i.e. pension lists, tax surveys, loyalty oaths, proceedings against the married clergy, and the like. From this latter type of documentation, we get a view of the clergy from the top down, as it were. We see these clerics, in other words, being acted upon, as the passive recipients of the State-Reformation strictures imposed, and opportunities offered by their sovereigns and by statute law. To understand more clearly Cardinal Wolsey's fatal involvement with "the King's great matter" and Reformation politics, we must go to the state papers. To gain some insight into the repercussions of such state matters, we may go to the will of William Ludam, ex-monk of the dissolved monastery of Kenilworth in Warwickshire.

In the almost total absence of clerical correspondence or diaries, the wills afford valuable information which makes these often obscure men come alive: the kinds of houses they lived in, "a hall, parlor, high chamber, inner chamber"⁴; the goods they left behind, "one picture of Lazarus, one map of England, one map of kings, emperors, and popes"⁵; the disposition of their books, "and that the said books be fastened with chains in the church of Staunton and there to remain."⁶

⁴Lichfield Joint Records Office, B/C/11, will of John Fenton, 1566.

⁵*LJRO, B/C/11*, will of Thomas Sanders, 1570.

⁶*LJRO, B/C/11*, will of William Lancashire, 1566.

CLERICAL WILLS OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

Even more revealing are the preambles to the wills, those first few lines in which the cleric commends his soul to the hereafter. These preambles serve almost as barometers of Catholic or Protestant tendencies. We are able to make a rather clear distinction between the so-called "traditional" or "Pre-Reformation" preamble, with its invocation to "god almyghte and to hys blesseye mader our lady sent Mary and to all the holy company of heaven"⁷, and the "non-traditional" or "Post-Reformation" preamble with the invocation to "almyghte god trustyng to be saved and enjoye the eternall blysse of heaven throughe his glorious pasyon and blood-shedyng."⁸ Although the "traditional" and the "non-traditional" preambles have been recognized, I have found that we must also be prepared to encounter what might be called the "transitional" preamble in which Catholic and Protestant terminologies are combined.

A good example of this mixture is found in the will of Sir Thomas Alen, Parson of Kingswinford, Staffordshire, dated 14 January, 3 and 4 Philip and Mary: "I bequeth my sowle to almyghty god of whome I axe marcye for all my sinnes trustinge faythe fully to be saved throuhe the deth and passione of our savior Jesue Christ prayenge the glorious virgine our Ladye St. Marye and all the saintes of god praye for me."⁹ In regard to these "transitional" preambles, we have to bear in mind, as these clerics had to bear in mind, the vicissitudes of these years. Henry VIII, though "the Defender of the Faith" and the author of the Six Articles, did dissolve the monasteries and the convents, some eight hundred twenty-five of them, thereby pensioning off some nine thousand religious.¹⁰ Edward VI through his regency determined upon a Protestant realm, legalized clerical marriage, anglicized the liturgy, and swept away the chantries, the guilds, and the collegiate churches. Mary Tudor did her utmost to restore the old faith, bringing her subjects once again under the jurisdiction of Rome. Elizabeth, with her famous Tudor tact, labelled her religious policy as ambiguously and as infrequently as possible. With all this in mind it is not surprising that many clerics were understandably unsure of the tenor of the times. And, in Reformation England, the wages of heresy, as of

⁷ *LJRO, B/C/11*, will of Thomas Meyre, 1542.

⁸ *LJRO, B/C/11*, will of John Hygyns, 1563.

⁹ *LJRO, B/C/11*, will of Thomas Alen, 1557.

¹⁰ G.W.O. Woodward, *Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London: Blandford Pub., 1966), p.2.

EXPLORATIONS IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE

sin, was death. Furthermore, might we not speculate that these clergymen were genuinely undecided as to the evolution of their own personal faiths?

A.G. Dickens has worked extensively with lay preambles in Yorkshire.¹¹ He finds a definite trend, beginning in the late 1530's and becoming steadily more marked in Edward's reign, away from the "traditional" and toward the "non-traditional" preamble. For 1538-40, he finds seventy "traditional" wills and nine "non-traditional" wills. By 1551, he counts twenty-one "traditional" wills and thirty-five "non-traditional" ones.¹² He finds it highly significant that such a trend is so readily discernible in the conservative North. I have examined one hundred and eight clerical wills from 1536 to 1570, hoping to find some sort of pattern. From 1536 to 1547, I have found forty-one "traditional" preambles, one "non-traditional" and one "transitional." From 1547 to 1553, I count six "traditional," one "non-traditional", and three "transitional" preambles. From 1553 to 1558, there are thirteen "traditional" preambles, three "non-traditional", and three "transitional" preambles. From 1559 to 1570, I have eight "traditional", twenty-eight "non-traditional", and seven "transitional" preambles.¹³ The farther one goes into Elizabeth's reign, the more "non-traditional" preambles occur. There is a pattern here, then, a discernible trend away from the Pre-Reformation preamble, with its suggestion of Roman Catholic proclivities, and a trend toward the Post-Reformation preamble, the language of which implies an acceptance of the new Protestant faith. It is interesting, though, that it is not until the reign of Elizabeth that the "non-traditional" preambles begin to outnumber the "traditional," ones. It would appear, then, that the clergy of Coventry and Lichfield might have been more conservative than the laymen of Yorkshire.

These clerical wills and inventories, located in the Lichfield Joint Record Office, in the seat of the diocese, represent a wide spectrum of the clerical community. Most of the above mentioned counties are represented, as is almost the entire range of the clerical hierarchy, with the exception of those higher clerics, cathedral dignitaries and royal administrators whose social and economic status necessitated the probating of their wills in Somerset House, London. The Lichfield wills run the gamut from ex-monks

¹¹A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

¹²Dickens, *English Reformation*, p. 192.

¹³It is interesting to note that it is not until 1547 that a "non-traditional" preamble occurs in my list of clerical wills.

CLERICAL WILLS OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

and chantry priests who apparently never found other livings after the dissolution to pluralist rectors and gentlemen farmers who, if they did not gain by, at least did not suffer from, the religious changes of these years. The will of George Cocks, late canon of the Premonstratensian Abbey of Dale, Derbyshire, is interesting. His worldly goods, as appraised upon his death in 1557, totaled £ 61. 11s. He left one black gown, two other gowns, two jackets, two doublets, two shirts, one featherbed, a mattress, two coverlets, one covering, three pairs of sheets, his books, and "my pension for our Lady Day the last, in arrears 50s." The will itself--very short, with no bequests--has an unremarkable preamble in which, simply, he commends his soul to Almighty God and his body to Christian burial.¹⁴ Interesting, too, is the last testament of John Bee, late chantry priest of the Blessed Trinity in Uttoxeter, Staffordshire. This will, dated 10 April 1555, is notable in that the preamble, *per se*, must be classified "non-traditional"; and yet in the body of the will he bequeaths his "beaste shorte gowns to a prieste to sing a trentall at trinitie altar in Uttoxeter beforeid for my sole and all Christen soles." He leaves books worth 5s. and the sum total of his inventory is £ 161. 4s. 8d.¹⁵

An interesting contrast may be found in the will of Robert Otwey, clerk, Parson of All Saints, Dalbury, dated 30 July 1566. He was ordained secular acolyte in 1532 and, though the records have been lost, probably proceeded to the priesthood within a year of that date.¹⁶ In 1546 he was instituted to the rectory of Dalbury, having been presented to that living by the king.¹⁷ In 1559 he subscribed to the Elizabethan Settlement.¹⁸ The preamble to his will is quite explicitly "non-traditional," and its language and form are assumed with increasing regularity by Elizabethan priests: "I do gyffe and bequithe my sowle to Almyghtie god my maker and redemar by whome I trust at the Daie of Judgment to be one of his Electe and my bodie to be buryed in chrysten mans buryall where hyt shall please Almighty god to take me forthe of this transitorye world." Among his interesting and varied

¹⁴LJRO, B/C/11, will of George Cocks, 1557.

¹⁵LJRO, B/C/11 will of John Bee, 1555.

¹⁶LJRO, B/A/1/14ii (unpaginated). There is no evidence that Otwey proceeded to the priesthood, but I have found that most secular acolytes did proceed to the priesthood within a year. This is generally not true of the regulars.

¹⁷LJRO, B/A/1/14i, Register of Bishop Geoffrey Blythe, f. 54v.

¹⁸Henry Gee, *The Elizabethan Clergy and the Settlement of Religion, 1558-64* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), p.123.

EXPLORATIONS IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE

bequests, we find “to my verye good maystar Sir Thomas gerarde Knight in token of remembrance my blacke mare that I dyd ryde Apon/And my verye good ladie my folye that I boght of the parson of Trusley/ . . . to William blode my bolocke that I Last boght and one cowe called rose . . . and yf I depart here I wyll my oste to have all charges paid and v s. in money.” The sum total of his inventory is £ 641. 13s. 4d. A postscript is added at the bottom of the manuscript: “I have more owynge by my friends above fourtie pounds which I do clealye forgive them all.”¹⁹ Another cleric who seems to have lived through these turbulent years with a minimum of discomfort is Sir Humphrey Stanley. He was the son of Sir Humphrey and Dame Ellen Stanley. He inherited lands in Stotfold, Aston-near-Stone, Burston, Stoke, Hylderstone, Sandon, Blakelow, Hardwick, and Podmore, Staffordshire.²⁰ Though untotaled, his inventory runs in excess of 4001. His preamble is “transitional” with emphasis upon both the saving merits of Christ’s “bloodshedding” and upon the hoped-for intercession of the Virgin and the saints.²¹ Obviously a priest of high degree, he desired burial in Westminster Abbey, certainly not an untoward request inasmuch as his master, i.e. patron, was Sir William Paulet, Lord High Treasurer of England.

Another value of these wills in contributing to our understanding of the Reformation period is in regard to the clerical response to priestly marriage. As mentioned above, Edward VI legalized marriage for all orders of the priesthood. We know from sources other than the wills that many Edwardian priests took advantage of this abolishing of clerical celibacy, but Lichfield has no example of this in its collection of clerical wills. Many of the clerics who married in Edward’s reign were forced, in Mary’s, into annulment or exile. Those who refused those alternatives were deprived of their livings and forbidden to exercise their priestly functions. Again, while we have documentation relating to the proceedings against the married clergy under Mary,²² we have no will of a married Marian priest. This is not surprising, however, for if the married cleric were determined to stay married and to remain in England, he would suffer deprivation (as many did) and would not, therefore, be included in a collection of clerical wills. It is in Elizabeth’s reign that we begin to see the steadily increasing occurrence of clerical marriage. It is interesting to note, however, that it is not until the late 1570’s and early

¹⁹*LJRO B/C/11*, will of Robert Otwey, 1566.

²⁰*Elizabethan Chancery Proceedings*, Series II, 1558-79, p. 44.

²¹*LJRO B/C/11*, will of Humphrey Stanley, 1557.

CLERICAL WILLS OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

1580's that the married priests begin to outnumber those clerics who make no mention of wives or children.²³

Still, there are problems in using these clerical wills as historical sources, and we should keep them in mind. In the first place, very, very many of them are lost, probably irrevocably. Only some two hundred and fifty remain.²⁴ In the second place, many of those which are preserved are mutilated, and many valuable sections are unreadable. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the wills reveal only a part of the clerical response to the Reformation. For instance, there was a Lollard movement in Coventry and Lichfield in the early sixteenth century.²⁵ The wills themselves give us very little idea of how widespread the movement was during the crisis years of the Reformation, though we know that between 1553 and 1557 five clerics and three lay people abjured and did purgation for their heresy.²⁶ We know that Coventry was, more or less, a hotbed of Protestantism, yet the extant Coventry wills give little evidence of this. A true picture, then, of the clerical response to the Reformation will have to await the compilation of an accurate and comprehensive biographical clergy list (*Liber Cleri*) for the entire diocese over at least a twenty-five year period.

On the other hand, the wills provide a very valuable service. They allow us to see these clerics as men, and not as obscure historical entities. These clerics emerge as people for whom these years were a time of change and conflict and personal crisis. It is important to get as close to these men as the passage of four hundred years will allow. In the few wills which remain to us, we see a clergy which Dickens has labelled "submissive."²⁷ We see them, basically, as conservative, holding on to the old faith as long as possible yet not involving themselves in the Pilgrimage of Grace or any other Catholic uprising. It might

²²British Museum Harleian Manuscript 421, ff. 55-91.

²³It is sometimes difficult to tell, however, what their positions on celibacy were. Consider, for example, the will of Nicholas Colleshawe, priest, dated 1543, in which he bequeaths to "Alice, my maydon a calffe and six schepe." A similar ambiguity may be found in the will of Sir William Launglyns, Parson of Seckyngton, Co. Warwick, dated 1559: "... to my boy Willaim Meryke one cow."

²⁴Dickens used some 560 wills in his analysis of Yorkshire preambles for only a thirteen year period.

²⁵John Fines, "Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, 1511-12," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 14 (1963), pp. 160-74.

²⁶British Museum Harleian Manuscript 421, ff. 69-91.

EXPLORATIONS IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE

well be that the non-volatile nature of the clergy of Coventry and Lichfield helped to contribute to the success of the Reformation in that diocese.

We have been overly preoccupied with the records of the state Reformation to the extent that we have at least minimized the reactions to that Reformation of the very men who made it an historical reality. In this sense, these clerical wills give us a personal insight into the period that Reformation historians badly need for a more balanced view of the English Reformation. A.G. Dickens has pointed out:

Generally speaking, historians have been satisfied to contemplate kings, popes, legates, archbishops, parliamentary statutes, prayer books, articles of religion, the famous documents, the facades of church and state; to contemplate everything except the religious and social history of the English people during the crisis of the Reformation. Indeed, if we persist in our absorption with the records of the State-Reformation, we shall naturally continue to see the Reformation as an act of State. The Reformation in Tudor England is well-documented at all levels and if we want to delve more deeply we shall not suffer unduly from lack of information.²⁸

We tend to forget sometimes that great movements in history involve, primarily, the people who live through them. These clerical wills give us an all too rare glimpse into at least a few of the people with whom, in the final analysis, lay the ultimate success or failure of the Protestantization of England.

²⁷ Dickens, *English Reformation*, p. 361n.

²⁸ Dickens, "The Reformation in England," in *The Reformation Crisis*,