

The Humanists and the Eve of the Reformation.

THE Eve of the Reformation in the reign of Henry VIII is a period of much interest, and the consideration of it may well appeal to thoughtful readers. From time to time during the preceding centuries there had been symptoms of coming revolution in Church affairs and ere long the suppressed reforms were to break through the crust of established order. Henry VIII had written against Luther, and had earned from the Pope the title of "Defender of the Faith," but after a while, though not from conscientious motives, he was to disestablish for ever the Papal power in England.

In the earlier part of Henry's reign, when he himself was a student of theology, an intellectual movement had occurred which presaged religious reform. It was encouraged by the energy of the *Humanists* and among their leaders, in Oxford especially, were Dean Colet, Erasmus and Sir Thomas More. These thoughtful men held a middle position between the obstructives who resented any discussion of reform; and the more eager spirits that sympathized with the Lollards and the foreign advocates of change.

On the obstructive side we find the less enlightened of the monks, many of the higher clergy and above all the Papal Court. At Rome even if there was a Pope anxious for reform, he was thwarted by his Cardinals. There was a good deal to be said for the position of Colet, Erasmus and More. They desired to retain all that was best and most venerable in the old system, but to get rid of more recent abuses. They pointed to the great essentials, to the vital truths of Christianity, to the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour, to renew the soul's life, to the importance of having the mind of Christ—"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus"; they deprecated the excessive and overgrown ceremonial, the undue veneration of saints and their relics, the getting money out of superstitious pilgrims to their shrines. They objected to pardons bought for money, knowing that the man in the street could not grasp the elaborate theory by which these were defended. But they had no thought of secession, of abandoning the one great Catholic Church. They felt it to be a real advantage that a Christian man could pass from his own into any other Western country, and though a stranger in race and tongue, could find himself every-

where a welcomed citizen of the one great Church, joining in the same Sacraments, administered everywhere with the same solemn rites, in the one august language of Christendom. Moreover they did not desire to displace the Pope from his supremacy, though they might not approve of all his proceedings. We could not ourselves regard their ideas as adequate, but we can admit that this might well seem to them a reasonable programme, avoiding the break up of Catholic unity and escaping the risks of drifting into uncertain sectarianism.

Besides these considerations, we must bear in mind that in the Roman Church the doctrines of the Gospel, though clouded by superstitious observances, shone out with real lustre from time to time, and of this Colet and his friends were well aware. Colet indeed when Dean of St. Paul's was a notable preacher of the doctrine of that Apostle, so that even Lollards, seeking the salvation through Christ which St. Paul had taught, came to listen eagerly to his sermons. We may also remind our readers that Luther as a young Augustinian monk, and anxious about the forgiveness of his sins, had his attention drawn by the superintendent of the novices to the teaching of St. Bernard, where he insists on the importance of simple faith in God's forgiveness in Christ and appeals to the words of St. Paul that man is justified by grace through faith. Moreover, from the Vicar-General of his order, Staupitz, the young Luther derived much true guidance and comfort. He taught Luther that for peace with God he must not look to his own resolutions, but must begin by trusting in God's forgiving mercy, shown through the loving Saviour, for that "His eternal purpose shines clearly in the wounds of Christ." We see therefore that Gospel truth was not first discovered at the Reformation, but it was disinterred, dug out from the overlying heaps of rites and ceremonies and penances.

In harmony with these facts it is that we find that at first in his zeal for reform Luther was not contemplating disruption, but was goaded into it gradually by the obstinacy of the Papal Court. That high authority on the history of this time, Bishop Creighton, lays the blame on the Papacy, because Leo X refused to allow a discussion of the theses which Luther had placed on the Church door at Wittenberg. This document was simply an invitation to hold a disputation, in which Luther meant to argue against the validity of indulgences. Disputations had been usual academic exercises,

they did not necessarily involve a serious quarrel. Leo, in most respects broadminded, despised the obscure monk, and, by declining to allow a discussion, brought on the last thing that he expected, the break up of the Latin Church. No thought of separation had at first occurred to Luther. Before the eventual crisis came, Dean Colet had passed away. He and his friend Erasmus had desired, as has been just said, a reform of abuses. They would certainly not have approved of the offhand methods of Tetzels and his sale of indulgences, but they hoped that a more enlightened policy might be entered upon, so as to remedy such evils.

While we acknowledge that from the point of view of that day there was much to be said for their mental attitude, it is yet evident to us their reform would have been inadequate. The belief in transubstantiation "which overthroweth the nature of a sacrament," as our Article declares, the prayers to saints asking their intercession, which implies a divine ubiquity, the performance of masses for souls in purgatory, the unique claim for a sacerdotal order, and the requirement of clerical celibacy, though Peter the chief of the Apostles was a married man, all those errors we could not have retained, and we have experienced more fully in the lapse of time that the Papacy can never renounce a doctrine that it has once sanctioned.

We will now give an instance of the contempt of relics by Colet and Erasmus, of which the latter has written an amusing account in one of his Colloquies. The two thoughtful men make a pilgrimage to Canterbury to the idolized shrine of St. Thomas à Becket.

Colet is represented in the Colloquy by the feigned name Gratianus Pullus and his somewhat hasty temper and words are contrasted with the assumed conciliatory attitude of Erasmus, who professes to console the showman of the relics by his apologies for his companion. Gratianus gets wearied by the multitude of relics, and after they kiss some of these with real reverence he expresses to the custodian his doubts about the fitness of the rich offerings of gold and silver in the following questions: He inquires whether Thomas was in his lifetime very good to the poor? Receiving an affirmative reply, he asks whether if a poor woman for her starving children or sick husband were to take some little item of this gold and silver with prayer to St. Thomas, to regard it as a gift or loan, the holy man would not approve her action, and adds, "I for my part am quite sure that the saint would even rejoice to be the means,

in death as in life, of relieving by his riches the destitution of the poor." Upon this the attendant glared at them. Eventually, after much more inspection of the store of relics by the two travellers, the prior himself, hearing that Gratianus is a person of high standing, appears on the scene and offers to give him a sacred rag that had belonged to the martyr and with which he was believed to have wiped his nose. Gratianus, alas, makes a contemptuous face, and Erasmus remarks in his witty way, "I was distracted between shame and fear." Happily the worthy prior affected to take no notice. The whole of the Colloquy, of which this is only a fraction, is well worth reading, and shows how vital religion had become hidden behind a load of superstition. Yet we cannot but shudder at the remembrance that this wonderful shrine should so soon afterwards have been desecrated for ever by the tyrant king.

Another instance of the flagrant misconception of true religion is related in connexion with a visit of Sir Thomas More to Coventry. A friar had settled there who was teaching the people that any one who repeated the Rosary fifteen times a day would not be lost, no matter how he conducted himself. This doctrine delighted his hearers, and when the priest of the parish uttered warnings, the people ridiculed and opposed him. At this juncture More happened to visit Coventry and he was at once invited to an important dinner. The friar appeared and made a lengthy address on his favourite thesis. More refrained at first with modest reticence from replying to him, but when asked his opinion he gave it, and exposed the fallacy maintained by the friar. More was laughed at while the friar was extolled. This instance shows how deeply superstitious observances had obscured the moral sense. The remedies desired by Colet and his friends were not easily to be had, but bad as Henry VIII was in conduct, he understood the need of restraining superstition, and in his subsequent enactments, and in the book authorized by him, called the *Necessary Eruditions of any Christian Man*, usually called the *King's Book*, and founded on his own notes, he endeavoured to enforce the more spiritual doctrines of the Church.

The King also published a book of prayers for use in private called the *Primer*, in which the Hours of the Virgin were omitted, and it had a preface called the *King's Injunction*, with devotions on the Passion.

These steps in the right direction offered some hope of success

to the aspirations of Colet, Erasmus and More. But Henry had now thrown over the Pope, who had so long figured as the key-stone of the ecclesiastical arch, and who could tell what might follow? His restoration under Queen Mary proved only temporary, and the favourite doctrines of the Roman Church, as well as its superstitious practices, were soon to be swept away by the Great Reformation in our Northern homes.

Another element of change and reform was now at hand. A wonderful intellectual advance, not unfavourable to a dawning Protestantism, was coming over Western Christendom. The revival of the knowledge of Greek was to bring with it the original of the New Testament in printed form, and to open out the writings of the Greek Fathers. Some knowledge of Greek had been carried to Italy in the previous century, but the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 by the Turks drove numbers of scholars to Italy, bearing with them the treasures of the ancient literature. In one point of view this result was a discovery, in another it was a revival. Greek had been the written language of the early Church in Rome. Greek had been studied in the sixth century in Ireland. But in the middle ages it had long ago fallen into the background. Grosseteste, the great Bishop of Lincoln, had been one of the few Greek scholars. The Greek Testament was not in use. But all this was now to be changed. The keen-witted and eager Italians welcomed the new revelation of the old Greek culture, and became more devoted students than the Byzantines who instructed them.

English scholars travelling in Italy were taught to read the Greek classics. Selling, the prior of Canterbury, conveyed some of the manuscripts to his monastery. Grocyn and Linacre (the latter known as the founder of the College of Physicians) and Lily, afterwards headmaster of Colet's school, were among the supporters of the new learning. Colet, Erasmus and More threw their energies into the extension of it and it was favoured by Henry VIII and Wolsey. Those who promoted the classical revival of the Renaissance were called *Humanists* from the meaning of the word "*humanus*" in the old Roman days. Ever since then classical studies have been regarded as the best material for education, and the classical examinations at Oxford still bear the name of "*Literæ Humaniores*." But the new studies were of their greatest value as regards the reform of religion. The Fathers of the Church who had

written in Greek had not been known or had sunk into oblivion in the West, and now revealed by the editions of Erasmus their writings breathed a freshening and liberal influence over the arid opinions of the age.

Erasmus had long been preparing to edit the text of the Greek Testament, and it was brought out for him at Basle by the famous printer Froben in 1516. A similar effort by Cardinal Ximenes in Spain, completed in 1522, was called the *Complutensian Polyglot*. Some of the old-fashioned clergy were shocked at these proceedings. They declared that the Greek Testament was heretical, and that the Latin Vulgate was really the inspired volume. Obstruction was also offered to the treasures of Greek classical literature. Grocyn was teaching Greek at Oxford, but so strong was the opposition that riots occurred, the maintainers of Latin only being called Trojans, and the others Greeks. The undergraduates on either side indulged in street fights, and so serious was the quarrel that Sir Thomas More as Chancellor addressed a letter of remonstrance to the University. Henry VIII and Archbishop Warham supported the new learning, and Wolsey intended his new College to advance the humanistic studies. Bishop Fox of Winchester, in founding his College of Corpus Christi, desired to promote the knowledge of Greek. A translation from the Greek of the New Testament was made by Tyndale, and his work was so admirable that it has influenced all our subsequent translations, including that of the Authorized Version in the reign of James I.

Tyndale had been at Oxford when Erasmus was there, and he was already preparing for his translation of the New Testament from the Greek. Thence Tyndale went to Hamburg and Wittenberg, where he met Luther, who had just been rendering the Bible into German. At Wittenberg Tyndale is stated to have finished his translation, and in 1534 he sent out a revised edition. King Henry had not yet become convinced of the necessity of yielding to the popular desire for the Scriptures, and Tonstall, Bishop of London, secured all the copies of Tyndale's translation that did not remain hidden and had them burnt. It is sad to relate that Sir Thomas More was of the same mind as the Bishop, and wrote a bitter attack on the translation, accusing Tyndale of many errors in the work and alleging that Luther had incited him to this mischievous effort. Tyndale was hunted down, and taking refuge in Holland was event-

ually betrayed by a friend and strangled and his body thrown into the flames. A further version was made by Coverdale, and later on Cranmer being anxious for the circulation of the Bible, the King sanctioned a translation to come out under his authority. This was called the Great Bible, and was a revised edition of the translations of Tyndale and Coverdale.

It must strike readers of the present day as extraordinary that the authorities of the Roman Church should have set themselves so strongly against the people at large reading the Word of God, and this for so many ages. What were the reasons? We know that medical men are averse to their patients studying medical books on their own account, lest they should be led into mistakes injurious to their recovery. Thus the priests held that it would be risky for souls sick with sin to seek a cure by the application of Bible words, without resorting to their aid. But there was more than this; we cannot acquit the priesthood of a natural, yet unworthy jealousy. They wished to retain their authority over an ignorant laity, and to maintain the belief that they were the appointed intermediaries between God and man. Therefore persons who were so bold as to read the Scriptures as an open book were to be persecuted and burnt to death. Happily this narrow-minded and very injurious view was not universally held even before the Reformation. It is a remarkable though little known fact that in Holland the Society called the Brothers of the Common Life, who were thoroughly orthodox Catholics, had in the previous century desired that the Bible should be open to all readers. These earnest men wished to see the Scriptures spread among the people, not by anticipation of Protestant changes but simply because the reading of them would contribute to the salvation of their souls, and had been referred to as a duty by our Lord Himself. Such arguments were brought forward in very racy terms by one of the Brothers named Gerard Zerbolt, also called Gerard of Zutphen, who lived between 1367 and 1398. He was Librarian of the Brotherhood at Deventer. In a treatise written by him he argued that the Bible and other devotional books should be accessible to the laity in the vulgar tongue.

“ Christ Himself and the Saints and Fathers of the Church had bidden the people to search the Scriptures. Gregory, Augustine and other teachers of the Church frequently encourage the laity to study the sacred writings, which they certainly would not have done if they had held it improper or unallow-

able. . . . Holy Scripture is given for the support of the natural law written in the heart; this is apt to be darkened by worldly affairs, and it is most important that laymen returning from their occupations should be able to see where they had gone wrong, looking at themselves in the mirror of Holy Writ. Moreover laymen frequently read and learn worldly and devilish poetry, and read books in the vernacular tongue about the Trojan war, about Roland, or about the beauty of Diana, etc., and yet literary and intelligent men do not blame them for such reading or prohibit it, and it would be most unreasonable that laymen should be forbidden the sacred Scriptures rather than such fables and stories as these. Those who find fault with the laity for reading religious books in their own language would be much better occupied in encouraging them to have such books to read rather than to be drinking in taverns and spending their time uselessly. Again the books of the Bible were written in the language then understood of the people, and it is unreasonable that the Bible should only be read in Latin, and not in whatever idioms the reader can best understand. Further, the Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew and in Greek, and they are more authentic in them than in the Latin Version."

Such is the racy comment of a Brother of the Common Life on the prevailing intolerance. As regards the edition of the Testament, and its translations, that vivid historian Antony Froude speaks of the contents of the Bible being revealed to "an astonished world." This, however, is only a half truth, portions of Scripture had been read in the Church Services, and it is very necessary to warn the reader that, though perhaps little known to the people at large, there had been translations before this period. As early as the days of King Alfred the four Gospels had been translated into the Anglo-Saxon vernacular, and in the tenth century Abbot Ælfric had rendered parts of the Scriptures into the same for the use of some of the Saxon thanes. A French translation had been made in the thirteenth century by Gujars des Moulins, and Wiclif had brought out his well-known version in the fourteenth. An Italian translation had appeared in 1477, there had been a German translation printed at Mayence in 1462, and Gieseler tells us (Vol. V., p. 74) that this was again printed fourteen times before the Reformation. But he adds, "Among the great mass of the people they would find less acceptance as the hierarchy was constantly opposed to all translations of the Holy Scriptures into the vulgar tongue." And even the broadminded and spiritual Gerson is quoted as having remarked, "The translation of the sacred books of the Bible should be prohibited, especially all that is outside moral instruction and history." But happily our Reformation was to dispose for ever after of any restraints on the reading of the Word of

God, and for every Englishman and every English woman who has an earnest heart it was henceforth to be a "lamp unto their feet, and a light unto their path."

In closing this short article on a wide subject it may be well to quote the view of the liberal Erasmus on the subject of opening the Scriptures to the laity. Erasmus was decidedly in favour of the laity reading the Scriptures. He remarks :

"I differ altogether from those who are unwilling that the Scriptures should be translated into the vulgar tongue, and should be read by the unlearned. . . . Christ wished His mysteries to be published as widely as possible. I wish even the most ignorant woman to read the Gospels and the Epistles of St. Paul. I wish that they were translated into all languages, so that they might be read and understood, not only by the Scotch and Irish, but even by the Turks and Saracens. . . . If any pretend to show us the foot-prints of Christ, how devoutly we fall down and adore them? Why do we not rather worship His living and breathing image in these books?"

With a view to enabling the reader better to understand the New Testament he published a Paraphrase of it. This was in Latin, but all persons of education read Latin in those days, in the countries of the West, and he may reasonably have expected that translations into the vernacular would be made by others.

Strype informs us that the Paraphrase on the Four Gospels was translated and published in English at the charge and direction of the amiable and learned Queen Catherine Parr, who employed Nicholas Udal, master of Eton School, and others in that work, and is supposed to have done part of it herself. Cranmer got it authorized by the King, and it was to be placed along with the Bible in our churches for public use. In the present day copies may occasionally be seen chained to their desks.

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