

A fabulous history of Henry VIII

Autor(en): **Lias, J.J.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Revue internationale de théologie = Internationale theologische Zeitschrift = International theological review**

Band (Jahr): **6 (1898)**

Heft 21

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403406>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern. Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

A FABULOUS HISTORY OF HENRY VIII.

M. Etienne Lamy has lately, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, made a statement to the following effect. Henry VIII, “gêné dans la liberté de ses adultères par la loi de l’Eglise, n’accepta pas la sentence pontificale; et parce qu’un roi voulait changer de femme, l’Angleterre changea de religion”. It is well known that “a lie believed for twenty-four hours may change the fate of kingdoms”. If that is the case, what must be the effect on the Continent of Europe of a lie believed for three centuries? For a lie this statement is, and a very mischievous lie too, though of course M. Lamy is quite unaware that he has been deceived by it. It has been spread abroad and believed on the Continent of Europe by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, ever since the time of Henry VIII. He was not a favourite with either party, and therefore both parties have combined to blacken his memory. And the story has further come to be believed here in England, through the cynical temper of historians at the close of the eighteenth, and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Such a lie is sure to die very hard. It is like the “Little Master” whom Sintram slew on Niflung’s heath, but who continually returned to life to plague his conqueror. I have tried to exterminate the fable in this review¹). But if a cat has nine lives, a fable like this has nine hundred and ninety-nine. And it may, and very probably will, linger on until the end of the twentieth century,

¹) See *Revue intern. de Théol.*, janvier-mars 1895, p. 31. I must ask the pardon of my readers for repeating here much that I have there said.

especially as it is a fable to the kind most dear to the Ultramontane conscience. Intelligent French writers, however, in a review destined for circulation in two worlds, should at least have learned by this time to give it decent burial.

For the passage I have quoted contains as many misstatements as it does lines. The first misstatement is that Henry VIII. was “géné dans la liberté de ses adultères par la loi de l’Eglise”. What foundation is there for such an assertion? When did the “law of the Church” in the sixteenth century interfere with the indulgence of their passions by crowned heads? Were Francis I., Charles V., Henry IV., or that excellent “eldest son of the Church” Philip II., “gênés dans la liberté de leurs adultères par la loi de l’Eglise”? Did not the Church and the Papacy condone their grossest immoralities, so long as they persecuted heretics and made war on Protestant princes? It does not seem to be generally known that in comparison with the other monarchs, and I may add a good many of the Popes of that age, Henry was remarkably pure in his morals. He was not, it is true, immaculate. But for many years—in fact up to about 1519—Henry had, I believe, been leading a perfectly chaste life. In 1519 Erasmus wrote to Sir Henry Guildford as follows (I quote from Froude’s translation, as I have not the original by me):

“Where in school or monastery will you find so many distinguished and accomplished men as from your English Court? Shame on us all! The tables of priests and divines run with wine, and echo with drunken noise and scurrilous jest, while in princes’ halls is heard only grave and modest conversation on points of morals or knowledge. Your king leads the rest by his example. In ordinary accomplishments he is above most and inferior to none. Where will you find a man so acute, so copious, so soundly judging, or so dignified in word and manner? Time was when I held off from royal courts. To such a court as yours I would transfer, myself and all that belongs to me, if age and health allowed. Who will say now that learning makes kings effeminate? Where is a finer soldier than your Henry VIII., where a sounder legislator? Who is keener in council, who a stricter administrator, who more careful in choosing his ministers or more anxious for the peace of the world? That king of yours may bring back the golden age,

though I shall not live to enjoy it, as my tale draws to an end.”¹⁾

This is a very favourable picture, no doubt. But drawn as it is by the most accomplished *genre* painter of that age, it is at least as worthy of attention as the hideous daubs with which later ages have replaced it. When the monstrous blotches have disappeared with which religious and political partisanship have disguised the portrait of Henry VIII., and the time has come for an impartial verdict, after a due consideration of the circumstances of his day, it will be seen that Henry, though intolerant of opposition, and unrelenting toward those who resisted his will, was nevertheless a wise, far-seeing, and politic monarch, and that the divorce, so far from being either morally or politically a crime, was the first step towards the realization of the “golden age” of which Erasmus speaks, the very cornerstone of that vast Empire which is now the envy of other lands²⁾.

It is not true that Henry sought a divorce because the law of the Church restrained him from committing adultery. He was tired of Katharine, very possibly, though to the end—putting aside for the moment the question of the propriety of the application for the divorce in itself—he treated her with the utmost courtesy and consideration. But if kings in those days desired to indulge their amorous propensities, there were very few difficulties in the way. The virtue of the light and frivolous Anne Boleyn was an obstacle which could very easily have been removed; and it would doubtless have been removed at once, had Anne Boleyn not been aware that the prospect of being Queen was open to her. The fact of Henry’s previous intrigue with Mary Bologn, Anne’s sister, confirms this view. The “law of the Church”, as we have already seen, presented no sort of obstacle to the “adulteries” or immoralities of monarchs, ecclesiastics, or even of Sovereign Pontiffs. And the

¹⁾ Ep. 418.

²⁾ It may be observed that every country which has broken with the Pope has ultimately attained a more commanding position than those of equal size which have lacked the spirit to do so. The ascendancy of France over Germany was simply due to German disunion. An united Germany is more than a match for France. A solid reason why France should enter in the path of religious reform, instead of glorifying the “law of the Church” as a safeguard against “adulteries”.

breach with the Pope, be it observed, when brought about, exposed Henry to some very serious dangers, which far less able men than he might very easily have foreseen. The peril was imminent in 1535—1536, when revolt in England was on the point of breaking out, and the Pope had succeeded in reconciling Charles and Francis, and proposed that they should dethrone Henry with the aid of his own subjects. Is it in the least likely that Henry would have run such risks, had he not had some far more serious object in view than the indulgence of his sinful passions?

What that object was, let Hume, who, if occasionally slipshod in dealing with details, possesses nevertheless an historical instinct which is almost unerring, tell us. I will not quote Froude, because he is unduly favourable to Henry VIII., although his view of the history, as distinct from that which he takes of the personal character of the King, appears to me to be the only reasonable one. Hume, however, after recounting the personal reasons which influenced the king in seeking a divorce, proceeds as follows :

“The succession, too, of the crown was a consideration which occurred to every one, whenever the lawfulness of Henry’s marriage was called in question; and it was apprehended that if doubts of Mary’s legitimacy concurred with the weakness of her sex, the king of Scots, the next heir, would advance his pretensions, and might throw the whole kingdom into confusion. The evils, as yet recent, of civil wars and convulsions arising from a disputed title, made great impression on the minds of men, and rendered the people universally desirous of any event which might obviate so irreparable a calamity. And the king was thus impelled, both by his private passions, and by motives of public interest, to seek the dissolution of his inauspicious, and as it was esteemed, unlawful marriage with Catherine.”

In this passage Hume, who as a sceptic had no religious prejudices to warp his judgement, has both overstated and understated the “motives of public interest” which actuated Henry and his subjects. He has overstated the strength of public opinion in favour of the divorce. Intelligent public opinion at that time there was none. The apprehensions for the future of the realm were confined to the most far-sighted of the nobles and statesmen of the day. But it is sufficient to say that they

were shared by men so capable as Wolsey and Sir Thomas More. And the ground for them was far more serious and far more deeply felt than Hume's very measured language implies. The wars of the Roses in the latter part of the fifteenth century had swept away two thirds of the old English nobility, and had caused rivers of English blood to flow. They had at last been brought to an end by the union of the Lancastrian king Henry Tudor, Henry VIII.'s father, with Elizabeth of York. But in 1525 it seemed that one frail life alone, that of Mary Tudor, and that life the issue of a very doubtful marriage, stood between the kingdom and the renewal of the fratricidal strife. Even were Mary to marry, it appeared almost certain that the strife would be rekindled the moment she ascended the throne. If she married the king of France, there was fear lest England should become a province of France, a state of things certain to be fiercely resented in this country. If the king of Scotland, the nation would be as bitterly opposed to union with a people whom they at once hated and despised. If she married an English noble, all the mutual jealousies of the nobility would have been at once unchained. As we know, she did actually marry the king of Spain. And we English know how unpopular the marriage was, what securities the nation took for its independence, and how near we were to being subjected to the Spanish yoke, and to the barbarities, the persecutions, the oppressions which drove the Low Countries into revolt or despair. Now, whatever the faults of the Tudors, they were at least monarchs who had the welfare of their country at heart. Even the least national of them, Mary, was so distressed by the disgrace involved in the loss of Calais that she said the word would be found engraven on her heart when she died. Henry VIII.'s whole career shews that, tyrant though he undoubtedly was, the honour and independence of the land over which he reigned was to him a matter of supreme importance. From this point of view neither he nor his leading statesmen could regard the prospect before them in 1525 without the most serious apprehension. There were therefore sound reasons of state in favour of asking for a divorce. I next proceed to inquire how far the "law of the Church" as it existed in those times was calculated to restrain monarchs in their "adulteries". If any statement of the case

be more absurd than any other, it is that which pictures to us an immaculate Pope curbing the immoralities of an abandoned monarch. The Popes of the earlier part of the sixteenth century were, as I have already hinted, hardly men to “cast the first stone” at Henry VIII. on the score of morality. More than this, the circumstances with which they were asked to deal were of their own creation. It was on the strength of the claim on the part of a Pope to set aside what was at that time universally believed to be the law of God that Henry had been induced to marry his sister-in-law. And many of the best divines of that day were of opinion that the Pope had no power to dispense with the observance of the law Divine, as distinguished from the law ecclesiastical. Then, again, how did the Pope deal with this shameless application for leave to commit “adulteries”? Did the holy Father repulse the dishonourable proposal with pious horror? Did he threaten excommunication to the offender who had dared thus to violate the decencies of life? On the contrary he entertained the demand; he dallied with it for seven years; he sent his legates to try the case; he admitted that if the divorce were not granted it might cost England a hundred thousand lives; and there can be little doubt that Henry’s request would ultimately have been granted had the Pope been a free agent. But the sack of Rome by the Constable of Bourbon in 1527 had made the Pope virtually a captive in the hands of Charles V.; and Charles V. had both personal and political reasons for opposing Henry’s wishes. Katharine was a Spanish princess, and aunt to the Emperor (who was also, we must not forget, king of Spain); and it was Charles’ interest to keep England weak and disunited. Thus it was not the principles of the Pope, but his interests, which made him refuse Henry’s request. Divorces, or to speak more correctly, decrees of nullity of marriage—for Rome does not allow divorce—were not, be it remembered, in the least uncommon in those days. On the contrary, they were as plentiful as blackberries. The Papal Court did not discourage them, but, for obvious reasons, encouraged them as far as possible; that is to say whenever those who applied for them were able and willing to pay for them. The present Bishop of London, one of the greatest living authorities for the ecclesiastical history of the period we are considering, has written a book lately on Papal

divorces, and it will prove very instructive reading to those writers who permit themselves to speak of the “law of the Church” as forbidding divorce and restraining the “adulteries” of the monarchs of past times. A Frenchman, too, might have remembered that even in the present century Josephine was repudiated by Napoleon I., with the consent of the Pope, simply because she had no children by him, and that the “law of the Church” was thus successfully invoked to sanction Napoleon’s “adulteries” with Marie Louise. And as Froude tells us, Henry’s sister sought and obtained a decree of nullity of marriage from the Pope on the most frivolous and mendacious grounds, at the very time when Henry himself, for the gravest reasons of state, was seeking in vain a release from a marriage which the Pope ought never to have allowed him to contract, and which he could not have contracted without the Pope’s special permission. What wonder if the best blood of England was aflame at the thought that the dearest interests of this country lay at the mercy of a band of foreign conspirators against her independence? What wonder if the cry, *Inghilterra farà da se* had power to arouse the spirit of the noblest and bravest of the nation, and to set it upon a path of progress which has never since been relinquished?

But we have not yet done with M. Etienne Lamy. Not only was not Henry VIII. “gêné dans ses adultères” by “la loi de l’Eglise”; not only did “la loi de l’Eglise” interpose no obstacles to any number of “adultères” which it pleased the Pope to sanction, but it is also absolutely untrue that “England changed her religion” because her king “changed his wife”. A writer in the *Revue des Deux-Mondes* should know, if no one else out of England does, that there was *no change of religion whatever in the reign of Henry VIII.*, unless our “religion” at that time consisted in unqualified submission to the Pope, and in nothing else. Beyond the striking the name of Archbishop Thomas Becket out of some of the service books, there was no alteration in the ritual of the Church. And in her doctrines—of which Papal Supremacy was not one—no change whatever was made, so that it is one of the common-places of English history that men were drawn to execution on the same hurdle for denying Transubstantiation and for affirming the Supremacy of the Pope. It is true that,

when the yoke of the Papacy was once cast off, the English people found themselves free, just as certain Catholics on the Continent of Europe have found themselves free since the Vatican Council, to revise their service books, and to repudiate mediaeval corruptions. But that took place in the reign of Edward VI., who “changed” no “wife” for the simple reason that he had no “wife” to “change”. No doubt the original quarrel which thus set the hands of Englishmen free, arose about the divorce. But it was not because Henry was resolved to “change his wife”, and because the Pope, with a holy zeal for the sanctity of marriage, intervened to prevent him, that the quarrel arose. It was because Henry, out of patience with the Papal delays, called upon the Archbishop of Canterbury to do what the Pope would very willingly have done himself, had it suited his convenience to do so.

There is a further aspect of the question which very often fails to strike those who accept a view of history which has unfortunately become traditional. Among the other enormities committed by Henry VIII., the greatest, in some eyes, is the fact that after his breach with the Pope he called himself Supreme Head on earth of the Church of England. But those who blame him for doing so utterly misconceive his position. It was not his intention to claim for himself any spiritual authority, properly so called¹). He repeatedly disclaimed any such intention. He claimed, and rightly claimed to be the sole fountain of legal and temporal jurisdiction in this country. It is not generally understood that the separation of the ecclesiastical and civil jurisdiction by William I. had ultimately resulted in handing over a great deal of civil authority to the servants of a foreign potentate. As long as William lived, he took care to prevent this. He refused to do homage to the Pope for his kingdom. He refused to allow Papal bulls or canons to be circulated in this country without his permission. He refused to allow clergymen or bishops to leave the country without

¹) He does, it is true, speak of “spiritual authority and jurisdiction” in the Act of Supremacy. But the words evidently refer to *legal* or coercive jurisdiction in ecclesiastical matters. Queen Elizabeth, in her Injunctions of 1559, indignantly denies that either her father or brother “challenged authority and power of ministry of Divine service in the Church”, or any authority, in fact, which was not “of ancient time due to the Imperial Crown of this realm”.

his sanction. But under weaker monarchs the Bishops had obtained considerable temporal authority, which they wielded without the slightest reference to the laws of the land. Henry II. was unable, through the prevalence of superstition, and the scandal which was caused by the murder of Becket, to carry out the Constitutions legally promulgated at the Council of Clarendon, which gave much the same power to Henry II. as was claimed by Henry VIII., and this although they were acknowledged on all hands to be the ancient customs of the kingdom. And he had previously failed to extort from Becket the deference which, as the King put it, "the greatest of his predecessors have paid to the least of mine". In subsequent ages things had gone from bad to worse. And the Parliament of 1529, which gave expression to a lay revolt against clerical pretensions—a revolt favoured by so sound a Catholic as Sir Thomas More—protested very strongly against the existing conflict between the laws of the Church and the laws of the State, a conflict which often caused sore inconvenience and distress to his Majesty's lieges. In an address presented by this Parliament to the King complaints are made (1) that the commons of the land are compelled to obey laws which have never been published in the English language, and which were made by the clergy in their Convocations without the King's knowledge or consent; (2) that in the ecclesiastical Courts laymen were often unable to obtain counsel; (3) that they were consequently often convicted and fined without proper trial; (4) that the fees on the probate of wills and the like—wills were under the ecclesiastical, not under the civil law—were excessive, and (5) that the parish priests, instead of administering the Sacraments of the Church without charge, were accustomed to exact fees for their administration. The Bishops, when asked to answer the complaints of this petition, told the king with great *naïveté* that it was true that there was a divergence between the ecclesiastical and the civil law, and that this being the case, the sooner the King and Parliament altered their laws so as to be in unison with those of the Church, the better it would be for all parties! It was the claim to reform abuses such as these, as well as the desire to make the Church of England independent of Rome, not the claim to settle disputed doctrines, or to perform the rites and celebrate the Sacraments

of the Church himself, or to ordain or consecrate others to do so, which was involved in the assumption by Henry of the title Supreme Head on earth of the Church of England¹). In all this there was no “change of religion”; there was only a change in the fountain of civil jurisdiction. Though the right to reform all kinds of abuses was claimed, there was no assumption of powers properly spiritual; there was only the assertion of the civil and coercive authority to which every king has an exclusive right. If the Pope excommunicated Henry for asserting his independence of Rome as a civil governor, and his right, through the Archbishop of Canterbury, to dissolve a marriage which no Pope had ever the right to authorize him to contract, he, and not Henry, was responsible for the breach between them. And if the English people refused to submit to an usurped authority; if the English Church determined henceforth to go her own way and manage her own affairs without interference from without; neither has denied any article of the Catholic faith, neither has broken any law of the Catholic Church by so doing. And to all appearance, if we judge by the history of the last three centuries and a half, the English Church and people have had the Divine blessing on the course they elected to pursue.

J. J. LIAS.

¹) It may not be superfluous to add that the “Submission of the Clergy”, in which they undertook to promulgate no new canons without the King’s knowledge and consent (1) was but a return to the laws of William the Conqueror and to the Constitutions of Clarendon, and (2) it was made, not in the Archiepiscopate of Cranmer, but in that of his predecessor Warham, who died unrebuked by the Holy See, and *before the Divorce*. And the proceedings which brought it about were taken under the Præmunire Act, passed in 1393. Another proof that England did not “change her religion” because the King “changed his wife”.
