Cranmer's Attitude to the Monarchy: Royal Absolutism and the Godly Prince

MAURICE ELLIOTT

This is the third of four articles by Maurice Elliott concerning Cranmer's view of authority.

In broaching this subject we have come to the very core of our discussion. The fact that Cranmer's attitude to the monarchy led him into inconsistencies of thought and practice has already been mentioned. In this present article these ideas will emerge even more forcefully. In the course of his career Cranmer interacted with two kings and one queen of England and the most natural way in which to unravel his understanding of their authority is on the basis of this threefold division. Towards the very end of his life the Archbishop's attitude was to shift markedly, but it is necessary to begin by defining him quite simply as a product of his own era.

The Contemporary View

The sixteenth century attitude to the State was dominated by Erastianism.[1] By this it was understood that the needs of the church and of the state had become fused within the overarching concept of the Christian Commonwealth, and such an outlook was typical of all the Reformers.[2] The background to this thinking was, as we might expect, both Scripture and the Patristic period. From the pages of the Bible, especially the Old

1 The term itself derives from the thinking of Thomas Erastus (1524–83), although attempts to explain the roles of Church and State go back to the beginning of the Christian era. Erastianism is defined as 'the type of relationship between church and state whereby the former is subjected to the latter': J Macquarrie *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (London 1986).

2 'There can be no doubt that the rediscovery in the historical books of the Old Testament of "the godly prince", and the argument therefrom *a fortiori* to the authority of the Christian sovereign, was one of the most important and significant themes of the Reformers, alike Lutheran, Calvinist and Anglican.' Quoted in P D L Avis *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (London 1981) p 131.

Testament, the Reformers developed their notion of the 'godly prince' who had been divinely appointed, and who, as a result, had to be obeyed.[3] It was the monarch who must somehow be upheld as the 'vicar of God'.[4] Along with this was their rediscovery of the great Emperor Constantine, who has first proclaimed Christianity to be the state religion after his conversion in 313.[5] It is fair to say that for Cranmer this Erastianism had become idealised to the extent that the needs of both Church and State could be provided by the Prince alone:

> All Christian princes have committed unto them immediately of God the whole cure of all their subjects, as well concerning the administration of God's word for the cure of souls, as concerning the ministration of things political and civil governance.[6]

However, as Bernard Reardon remarks, 'to blame Cranmer for being an Erastian [in the first place] is as reasonable as to blame him for living in the first half of the sixteenth century'.[7]

Perhaps another reason in Cranmer's mind for exalting the monarchy to such a degree was his misgivings regarding insurrection of the masses. In *A Homily Against Rebellion* from his later life the Archbishop commented:

> Civil war is the greatest scourge that can be, and most certain argument of God's indignation against us for our ingratitude . . . The remedies to avert God's indignation from us is to receive his word, and to live according thereunto . . . or else surely more grievous affliction shall follow, if more grievous may be than civil war among ourselves.[8]

As we noted earlier, Cranmer had gathered these convictions during his time at Ratisbon. The disorder which he witnessed there in the aftermath of the Peasants' War persuaded him 'that Protestantism must be introduced by the Prince, not by the people'.[9] This then gives us a framework within which to investigate Cranmer's attitude to the authority of the monarch, beginning with his relationship towards Henry.

3 For a discussion of the OT understanding of 'Kingship' see *New Bible Dictionary* F F Bruce and J I Packer edd (Leicester: IVP 1982) pp 654–6.
4 J E Cox ed *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: CUP 1846) p 127. Further references from this book will be abbreviated to CW (Cranmer's Works).
5 Details about Constantine from *The Oxford History of Christianity* J McManners ed (Oxford: OUP 1990) p 55ff.
6 CW p 116
7 B M G Reardon *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (London 1981) p 252
8 CW p 189
9 J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 12

Cranmer and Henry

Henry VIII was indubitably a hugely formidable character. It would not be overstressing the point to assert that he was a ruthless tyrant. It is therefore not surprising to discover that Cranmer did reveal himself to be pliable and, at times, indecisive.

The problems started when Henry was made Supreme Head of the Church in England. This was the inevitable consequence of the break with Rome in 1534. The Papacy had carried with it temporal as well as spiritual authority, and this had to be replaced within the English structures. In a letter to Henry in 1536 Cranmer expressed his understanding of this supremacy:

> Your grace commanded all the prelates of your realm, that they . . . fully persuade your people of the bishop of Rome his authority, that it is but a false and unjust usurpation, and that your grace, of very right and by God's law, is the supreme head of this church of England, next immediately unto God.[10]

Evidently Cranmer was clear in his own mind as to precisely what he intended by Henry's supreme headship. For him there had to be a distinction drawn between the visible and the invisible aspects of the Church, and naturally the King was head in the former only, for otherwise only Christ himself was the head. His first problem, however, arose from the fact that he nowhere gave sufficient public explanation of this. Much later it was on account of this that he became vulnerable to his opponents. During his examination before Brokes the whole issue was one of central importance. When Doctor Martin asked who was Supreme Head of the Church of England, he replied without hesitation, 'Marry, Christ is the head of this member, as he is of the whole body of the universal church'. The dialogue continued:

> Martin – Why, you made king Henry the eighth supreme head of the church.
>
> Cranmer – Yea, of all the people of England, as well ecclesiastical as temporal.
>
> M – And not of the church?
>
> C – No, for Christ is only head of his church, and of the faith and religion of the same. The king is head and governor of his people, which are the visible church.

10 CW p 236

> M – What! you never durst tell the king so.
>
> C – Yes, that I durst, and did, in the publication of his style, wherein he was named supreme head of the church; there was never other thing meant.[11]

There could be no clearer indication of Cranmer's extreme Erastianism and the ambiguity which it created. The interests of Church and State were conflated in the person of the King, and as a result of this Henry was to be obeyed in matters spiritual as well as temporal. That is not to say that the Archbishop could not, and did not, disagree with the King, and even criticise him on occasions. Cranmer's duty as a loyal counsellor was to offer the best advice he could to the King, even if that might mean harming his own personal interests. If Henry then rejected the advice, Cranmer's Christian obligation at once became deference to the King's decision and the enforcing of royal policies despite the fact that he disapproved of them. As Jasper Ridley observes, 'Cranmer was an agent of Henry's despotism, not through fear of his Prince, but through fear of damnation [by God] if he disobeyed his Prince.'[12]

Cranmer's view was one of royal absolutism and this in turn was rooted in his interpretation of the biblical programme for Christian living. His belief was that the Christian's primary duty was to strength the power of the King, and Cranmer himself was prepared to sacrifice all other doctrines in order to accomplish this. In theory the only exception to this overriding principle might be when the monarch commanded the subject to sin; in practice however this was exceedingly difficult to implement, not least under an authority such as Henry. It has been argued that Cranmer placed his devotion to his King before even his devotion to Scripture, and there are undoubtedly numerous instances of his conduct which would support this view. Perhaps the most glaring example is his abandonment of his fellow Reformer, Thomas Cromwell, in 1540. Although at the last minute Cranmer did intercede to some extent for the Vicar-General (who also held the office of Vicegerent), Cromwell's execution represents a damning indictment of the Archbishops's inconsistency of character in that Cromwell stood for all the same beliefs as he himself did.[13] It was 'a cowardly act of betrayal'[14] and indeed the same conclusion might be drawn from Cranmer's handling of the case of Anne Boleyn, where, in obeying the wishes of the King, he was technically guilty of high treason.[15]

11 CW p 224

12 J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 66

13 Ridley even suggests that Cromwell had taken more initiative than Cranmer in the English Reformation (p 160).

14 Ridley p 203

15 'The Act of Succession of 1534 had made it high treason to do anything to the "prejudice, slander, disturbance or derogation" of Henry's marriage to Anne.' (Ridley p 111). Thus Cranmer was guilty because he sanctioned the divorce. Added to this Anne herself was a keen Protestant.

In Cranmer's mind the King was the means of reformation par excellence. This emerges strongly from his *Oath to the King for his Temporalities* of 1534 wherein the entire Section VI is given to 'Some Considerations offered to the King to induce him to proceed to further Reformation'.[16] In his particular situation, however, matters were intensely complicated by the fact that Henry remained somewhat ambivalent in his own theological attitudes. At one level, through his rejection of the Papacy, the King had apparently embraced the authority of the Bible, and yet his own leanings were at times very much in favour of the old Roman ways. This can be noted especially from the period of the Six Articles in 1539. The content of these was generally Romanist, especially in regard to their theology of the sacraments. Again Cranmer was not true to the full extent of his own beliefs. Although not entitled to resist his Prince, the Christian subject, in a case like this, was under a duty to disobey him and to suffer martyrdom. It should be noted that one of Cranmer's fellow Reforming bishops, Hugh Latimer, did resign his see as a protest during this period. Against this background, as Jasper Ridley remarks, 'to those who believed that the Six Articles were sinful, Cranmer's conduct was shameful, and many of the Reformers thought that Cranmer had betrayed the Reformation'.[17] Cranmer did oppose the Bill until Henry himself appeared in Parliament, at which point the Archbishop's resistance crumbled. We may assume that his reason for climbing down was quite simply because the Articles carried Henry's endorsement.

A further cause of Cranmer's evident weakness regarding the monarchy was without doubt his inability to speak and act consistently in both public and private domains. Thus while he could stand up to Henry in private, the evidence suggests that he never once carried such opposition into the public eye. One of the best examples of his secret action is his annotations to *The Bishops' Book*, Henry's *Institution of a Christian Man* of 1537.[18] This extensive body of material shows time and again (as many as eighty-two times out of two hundred and fifty alterations) that the Archbishop was willing to correct the King in areas of misunderstanding. For example, in commenting on Henry's treatment of the first and second commandments, where he had inserted the words 'Or honour them as God or Gods', Cranmer quite directly asserts:

> We may not thus add to the words of Scripture, but set them out first plainly and surely, even as they be, and after expound and declare them.[19]

It appears, however, that such resilience never came to the attention of those outside the immediate debate.

16 CW p 466
17 J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 187
18 CW pp 83–114
19 CW p 100

Cranmer's complete subservience to Henry in questions of religious doctrine is perhaps best summarised by the famous postscript to his *Answers concerning the Sacraments and the Appointment and Power of Bishops and Priests* of 1540:

> This is mine opinion and sentence at this present, which I do not temerariously define, and do remit the judgment thereof wholly unto your majesty.[20]

The contents of the document itself have a narrow focus which will be looked at in more detail in the next article. Of significance for us at this point is the clear principle of the Church's subordination to the King which is elucidated.

The weakness of Cranmer's position with regard to Henry is all too evident, and in many areas, not least his treatment of fellow Protestants, the Archbishop's personal integrity must be called into question. In drawing this section to a close, however, it is worth pondering the possible merits of Cranmer's attitude to the monarchy. It is a remarkable feat that Cranmer himself survived under Henry – there were around 72,000 hangings during the reign – and clearly this had to do with the monarch's favour towards him. Cranmer continued in office throughout Henry's reign neither on account of being utterly submissive, not because of his outstanding virtues, but simply because he was advantageous to Henry in Convocation and on the Council. Here again Jasper Ridley is helpful:

> Cranmer remained in office not because he was exceptionally subservient, but because he was a learned reformer who was sufficiently subservient to make it possible for Henry to retain his services.[21]

The two men were in fact committed to each other and this is easily demonstrated. For instance, when Cranmer was severely under attack from his opponents in 1543 for being a 'a pastor of heretics',[22] Henry, having been forewarned of this, gave the Archbishop his own ring which guaranteed him the privilege of both royal appeal and protection. His accusers were utterly confounded. On the other hand it is known that Cranmer, having ministered to Henry even on his death-bed, never again shaved thereafter, the growing of a beard being a genuine mark of sorrow and respect. It may have been that Cranmer somehow sensed this commitment from Henry and felt justified in compromising on occasions

20 CW p 117
21 J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 213
22 J H Merle d'Aubigné *The Reformation in England* Vol II (London: Banner of Truth Trust 1962) p 436

in the wider interests of the English Reformation. He was only too aware that this must continue even after Henry's reign. Nevertheless we shall leave the last word to John Foxe who declares that Henry's monarchy was 'not a reformation, but a deformation'.[23] If that is the case, then Cranmer, on account of his attitude to the King, is firmly implicated.

Cranmer and Edward

Edward VI was crowned by Cranmer on 20 February 1547, and during the ceremony the Archbishop made a telling speech. Having begun by rehearsing some familiar sentiments about the Bishop of Rome, Cranmer then referred to the King's sword as both spiritual and temporal. Already in this we can detect an echo of precisely that which Cranmer claimed to have rejected in the Papacy. Could it be that the English Reformer had merely replaced one institution of absolute authority with another? This idea emerges to an even greater extent as Cranmer, in his capacity as 'a messenger from [his] Saviour Jesus Christ', proceeded to outline the office of the monarch:

> Your majesty is God's vicegerent and Christ's vicar within your own dominions.[24]

As with Henry, so now also with Edward, the King was by implication the Supreme Head of the Church, next only unto God. In a letter to the King of 1548 Cranmer made this explicit in ascribing to Edward the titles 'defender of the faith, and in earth of the church of England and Ireland immediately under God supreme head'.[25] Of particular interest in the speech, however, is his description of the monarch as 'Christ's vicar'. These words were often used with reference to the Papacy and so we can again notice how Cranmer's attitude to the King was in effect to make of him a new quasi-pope.[26]

The other noteworthy feature of this speech is the use which it makes of the Old Testament model of kingship. Cranmer moves on to address the duties of the King and in order to do so he refers to Edward's Biblical forbear, King Josiah:

> You majesty is . . . to see, with your predecessor Josiah, God is truly worshipped, and idolatry destroyed, the tyranny of the bishops of

23 Quoted in J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 257
24 CW p 127
25 CW p 418
26 The description of the Pope as the 'vicar of God' can be traced back to the early successors of the apostle Peter, to whom Christ had addressed the words 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (Matt 16:18 RSV). He was the first to occupy the see of Rome and all who followed him were thus considered to hold the position vicariously.

> Rome banished from your subjects, and images removed. These acts be signs of a second Josiah, who reformed the church of God in his days.[27]

Here we can actually see Cranmer attempting to bring together the three sources of authority which we have considered thus far, namely the Bible, the Papacy and the Monarchy. What emerges very clearly is that, for Cranmer, the King of England was just as divinely appointed as had been the King of Israel. Again it is apposite to our discussion to realise that this was a further contributory factor to his inconsistency and apparent lack of integrity. In the last analysis the King had to be obeyed simply because the biblical teaching said so.

However, there was also a choice which the monarch had to make and again this is vital for our full appreciation of Cranmer's attitude, for it begins to open up the possibility of a move away from total absolutism. Israel had produced both good kings and bad kings depending upon their adherence to the divine commandments, and Edward faced the same decision. Were he to fulfil his duty 'to reward virtue, to revenge sin, to justify the innocent, to relieve the poor, to procure peace, to repress violence, and to execute justice throughout the realm',[28] God would reward him. If he were negligent, he and his nation would be judged accordingly.

In commenting on the Devon Rebellion of 1549 Cranmer again showed that he may have begun subtly to alter his position regarding the monarchy. Although he had been completely devoted to Henry, as we have seen, he was nevertheless prepared to blame him for these new disturbances. The revolt had come about as a consequence of evil living during Henry's reign. It was a form of punishment. Such an assertion was indeed radical coming from the mouth of a believer in the royal supremacy such as Cranmer, and it will be of crucial importance to bear this distinction between a worthy and an unworthy monarch in mind as we move toward Cranmer's interaction with Mary.

As a final point of Cranmer's dealings under Edward we may note that the Archbishop again expected his clergy to observe a similar understanding to his own with regard to the monarchy. From the Canterbury diocesan visitation of 1548 we read in Item 2:

> Whether they have preached and declared likewise four times in the year at the least, that the king's majesty's power, authority, and pre-

27 CW p 127
28 CW p 127

> eminence, within his realms and dominions, is the highest power under God.[29]

Cranmer and Mary

Under Edward the programme for reform progressed rapidly. Cranmer spent more and more time in matters of liturgy and especially in defending his Protestant doctrine of the sacrament. For as long as the monarch was favourably disposed towards the objectives of the Reformation, Cranmer's conscience could remain reasonably clear in upholding the royal supremacy. With Mary's accession to the throne he was faced with a dilemma in that the new Queen immediately set about undoing many of the changes which had been introduced.

Cranmer was arrested on a charge of High Treason because he had signed a Bill of the Council before Edward's death endeavouring to oust both Mary and her sister, Elizabeth, from their rightful succession. Cranmer is said to have subscribed to this with some reluctance, but did so in obedience to the Prince. What is interesting is that this action may have inadvertently opened his eyes to a slightly different way of looking at the monarchy.

We have suggested that Cranmer, even before the end of Edward's reign, was beginning subtly to shift his position. The evidence of his actions towards Mary, even allowing for his reticence, might suggest that he had begun to view wider theological considerations as of more importance than those which had to do solely with the royal supremacy. In that Cranmer was only too aware of Mary's Catholic tendencies, his evident desire to prevent her from acceding could be construed as showing that his concern for the furtherence of the Protestant cause, in and of itself, was beginning to outweigh his lifelong principle of devotion to the sovereign.

Initially, however, there was little apparent change. In 1553 Cranmer wrote to Mary from prison attempting to explain and excuse his actions surrounding her accession. The tone of the letter was grovelling to say the least, and its thrust was to appeal to the Queen for clemency:

> Most lamentably mourning and moaning himself unto your highness, Thomas Cranmer, although unworthy either to write or speak unto your highness, yet . . . knowing your pitiful ears ready to hear all pitiful complaints . . . am now constrained most lamentably, and with most penitent and sorrowful heart, to ask mercy and pardon

29 CW p 154

> for heinous folly and offence, in consenting and following the testament and last will of our late sovereign lord king Edward VI, your grace's brother.[30]

Even at that, however, the fact that Cranmer was now prepared to admit that obeying Edward had been a mistake represented a further step along the road to a completely different interpretation of the role of the monarch.

At her coronation Mary had sworn an oath of obedience to the Pope. Later in the autumn of 1554, with the Archbishop safely out of the way in prison, she reaffirmed papal supremacy in England. Having been consecrated in a technical sense by the authority of the Papacy, Cranmer had to be legally deprived of his title by the same Papacy and thus he faced his examination at the hands of Brokes, Martin and Storey. It was after this that he wrote the first of two further important letters to Mary.

From the start it should be noticed that Cranmer's tone of address to the monarch is significantly different in this letter. There is no overpowering ascription as there had been to Edward. His opening words demonstrate much more resilience:

> It may please your majesty to pardon my presumption, that I dare be so bold to write to your highness; but very necessity constraineth me, that your majesty may know my mind rather by mine own writing, than by other men's reports.[31]

There was a new assertiveness in Cranmer's approach to the Queen. While retaining respect for her person, he manifested much less deference.

The lengthy content of the letter was essentially Cranmer's defence of his Reformed views concerning the sacrament, his insistence on the vernacular, and his rejection of papal authority. This last formed the heart of his complaint for he clearly believed that he ought to be tried in England and not before the Pope. The intriguing thing here, however, is that his attack on the Papacy was by the same token an attempt to win Mary over to his own Reformed opinions. He suggests for example that, by having submitted England to the papal supremacy once again, Mary has made herself no better than a subject in her own realm; she has abrogated her own dominion. Moreover, in Cranmer's view, the authority of the Pope was actually subverting the laws of the realm and the position of Parliament:

> Now by these laws, if the Bishop of Rome's authority, which he claimeth by God, be lawful, all your grace's laws and customs of

30 CW pp 442–
31 CW p 447

> your realm, being contrary to the pope's laws, be naught: and as well your majesty, as your judges, justices, and all other executors of the same, stand accursed among heretics; which God forbid! . . . And to be short, the laws of this realm do agree with the pope's laws like fire and water.[32]

Again, as Cranmer builds up his argument with no little determination, the Papacy subverted not only the authority of the monarch and the authority of the state, but also the very authority of God himself:

> He hath made himself as it were a god . . . [with the result that] . . . whosoever be under his authority, he suffereth them not to be under Christ's religion purely, as Christ did command.[33]

The Archbishop was treading familiar ground. All these points had been made before, but now there was a remarkable sense of urgency in Cranmer's tone, especially in view of the fact that he was writing to the reigning Queen. He was evidently highly perplexed by Mary's espousal, as monarch, of Romanism and his desire was to convince her of her folly. Cranmer makes it clear that he was not speaking thus for fear of punishment, but rather because he saw it as his duty.

In the second letter to Mary of September 1555 Cranmer emerges as even more forthright. There is still respect for the Queen's person, but he now goes as far as to suggest quite openly that she was in error, albeit that others might have been responsible:

> But I fear me that there be contradictions in your oaths [to the Pope and to the Crown] and that those which should have informed your grace thoroughly, did not their duties therein. And if your majesty ponder the two oaths diligently, I think you shall perceive you were deceived; and then your highness may use the matter as God shall put in your heart.[34]

Cranmer's attitude to the monarchy was by this stage casting him into utter turmoil. On the one hand he was still devoted in principle to the royal supremacy as a biblical injunction. Against this he was now faced with a monarch who had quite deliberately rejected all the scriptural reform measures and submitted her realm afresh to the Papacy. He was willing to be persuaded as to the error of his own thinking, but until that should happen, which in any case he doubted, he was left in an irresolvable dilemma. He had become the victim of his own principles concerning the

32 CW p 448
33 CW p 449
34 CW p 454

royal supremacy. What possible escape could there be? Did his view of the need to obey the Queen mean that he should abandon his Protestant opinions?

Initially, at any rate, this would appear to be the conclusion Cranmer drew. Through his prolonged imprisonment, and with watching, literally, as both Ridley and Latimer went to the stake, his own strength of character began to fail him. Hence the signing of the recantations, which we have already considered. The turning-point came after he had signed his fifth recantation and apparently resulted from a dream.[35] In this Cranmer saw two kings contending with each other for his soul. One of the kings was Henry and the other was Jesus. It appears that Cranmer was at last able to understand that service to his earthly master was not always compatible with service to his heavenly Lord, particularly if the monarch had patently failed in implementing his or her biblical duty to the subjects of the realm. Despite a few further hiccups we may assume that this new revelation remained with the Archbishop until the day of his execution and it was his final brave stroke of genius from the perspective of the Reformation. He had finally broken free of a belief which, although intended to release him from the oppressive authority of the Papacy, had become a veritable millstone around his neck.

Cranmer's attitude to the monarchy makes for an intriguing study and it is somewhat difficult to summarise. He inevitably began from the point of view of royal supremacy, since such thinking was fundamental to the sixteenth century understanding of the State. Under Henry, however, this was idealised by Cranmer, whether intentionally or simply because of Henry's tyrannical method of government, to the extent that the monarch became the new Pope within his own realm. For Cranmer's purposes of reform this was advantageous for as long as the monarch continued to be supportive, as was the case with Edward. Mary's accession changed everything and it took the Archbishop quite some time to realise that it might be possible, and indeed preferable, to take a substantially different view. In the end he came to see that the temporal authority of the monarchy was not an end in itself, but rather a means toward the end of ordering society according to the will of God.

MAURICE ELLIOTT is Curate at St Patrick's Church, Coleraine.

35 The dream is discussed in J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 399.