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Did the Protestant Reformation Have a Greater Religious or Political Influence in Early Modern England?

The Religion of the English Reformation

In 1517, Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses, a list of questions that were written in non-vernacular and put up for debate (Luther). The Roman Catholic Church believed that faith and good deeds were needed for salvation, and that purchasing the Pope’s indulgence papers would reduce the time a soul spent in a place that souls would suffer to atone for mortal sins, a place which was called ‘Purgatory’ (Doran). Catholic believers also had to perform many rituals, known as the seven sacraments. To help with performing religious practices, the sabbath day was on Saturday, and it was a day allocated for worship (The Holy Bible). Misbehaving on the sabbath day, as in using the sabbath day to work or to sin, was illegal (Sharpe). Each of the seven sacraments were challenged by other denominations of Christianity because of the Protestant Reformation (Doran). An example of this would be Anabaptism, the belief in adult baptism instead of infant baptism. The 95 Theses contained ideas that were considered radical at the time, such as the idea that only faith was required for salvation and led to people finding out facts about the Bible such as the lack of mentions of a purgatory, the sale of indulgences, and the existence of Popes (Luther). These questions were not made with the intent to wreak havoc, but Martin Luther’s 95 Theses caused many significant religious and political changes and conflicts throughout Europe. The Protestant Reformation and holy wars such as the Thirty Years’ War occurred. The sale of indulgences – more so intended by the Roman Catholic Church to make profit than to pardon people – plummeted, and so did the formerly colossal profits of the Roman Catholic Church. England was greatly affected by the Protestant Reformation, having its ‘English Reformation.’ But was the English Reformation’s impact in Early Modern England more Religious or Political? This paper will be arguing that the English Reformation’s religious impact was greater than its political impact in terms of the new beliefs and denominations that were founded, the constantly changing justice system in accordance with new interpretations of the Bible, and King Henry VIII’s religious and political influence in Early Modern England.

Body  
 In Early Modern England, many aspects of Christianity changed because of the Protestant Reformation. Churches had often believed in one denomination and changed most of the practices and beliefs, but certain aspects of Roman Catholicism remained in the different Churches. The Popes were the highest power in all of England, higher even than the Kings, but with the Act of Supremacy, King Henry VIII and future heirs to the throne became the Supreme Heads of the Church. The act stated, “be it enacted by authority of this present Parliament that the King our sovereign lord, his heirs and successors kings of this realm, shall be taken, accepted and reputed the only Supreme Head in earth of the Church of England (Henry VIII).” This had given significant religious connotations about monarchs of England, such as the fact that the common people of England would look toward the Kings and Queens for all the political and religious affairs in the country instead of the Pope (Henry VIII). Within the Churches of England, the English Reformation reintroduced the practice of singing and music in the Church for the choir, a practice which had its popularity and quality skyrocket in the Tudor period. (“Martin Luther Posts”). An instance of this would be the Anglican Church having its first organ adapted to play background music instead of the main part in Wetheringsett in the English county of Suffolk (Johnstone). In the governmental side of Early Modern England, many changes were being made toward religious change. In 1548, the government banned many traditional religious ceremonies (Doran). The inability to participate in certain rituals is a significant religious change because the oppression of these practices made people less eager to practice. During Edward VI’s rule England was officially becoming Protestant (Doran). In 1549 Parliament permitted clerics to marry. Clerics were meant to be devout, ordained religious figures who proved this devoutness by remaining unmarried (Doran). This new permission may have caused people to view clerics with a different religious perspective. In 1552 Parliament endorsed an English Book of Common Prayer by Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury (Doran). The book being written in vernacular makes it so that people can read and interpret this Book of Common Prayer as people did interpret the Bible during the Protestant Reformation. This Book of Common Prayer was quite radical. It caused quite a few changes to be made in the Church of England without the help of law enforcement. The word “mass” was no longer used at communion service (Doran). Regular bread replaced the special decorated wafer at the Eucharist (Doran). The same archbishop who authored an English Book of Common Prayer also presented the Forty-Two articles, which condemned many of the Roman Catholic doctrines, such as good works and purgatory (Doran). These writings made by Cranmer helped to shift most of England towards the Protestant side of Christianity, but Roman Catholicism was not entirely eradicated. For example, the cross in baptism and the ring in marriage were traditions of Catholicism that were still performed even in many Protestant denominations (Doran). These changes go to show that the religious aspects of the Church of England received many changes throughout the English Reformation.

How did justice get affected by the English Reformation, though? Early Modern England had quite a flawed and corruptible justice system. The system was reviewed and had received multiple changes with newly arising interpretations of the Christian Bible during and after the English Reformation. The first significant change was that of King Henry VIII’s Act of Supremacy, which made it so that Popes could no longer pardon people through the sale of indulgence letters (Henry VIII). This meant that people had to find different, more dubious methods of spending money to avoid punishment. Another significant change from Henry VIII was the power granted to the concurrent King and all the King’s heirs: the power to divorce (Henry VIII). If a King were to divorce the respective queen without papal permission, the king would be excommunicated and lose everything, but after King Henry VIII cut ties with the Roman Catholic Church and became the Supreme Head of the Church, approval from the Pope was no longer required for Henry VIII could provide self-approval for the divorce (Henry VIII). In the executive area of Early Modern England, cases of homicide would be reviewed by coroners who were paid by case instead of paychecks (Sharpe). The issue with this payment system was that it encouraged the coroners to find as many cases as possible, which led to the bearing of false witness (Sharpe). There were also the informers, who were often random individuals who were willing to report offenders, and thus were entitled to about half of the fine paid upon conviction (Sharpe). Other than the possibly malicious accusations that occurred, informers would often ‘turn a blind eye’ toward the accused, on the condition that the convicted pay a sum of money in return (Sharpe). When making laws, the Bible would often be used as a moral compass in the process of making legislation in Early Modern England. The actions of the informers and the coroners were extra-legal because it went against the ninth amendment of the Bible (The Holy Bible). The rate of which these crimes of bearing false witness would likely have decreased since the official publishing of a vernacular bible in the 1530s (Rex). To combat regulative offences, Parliament began passing a series of acts that focused on the issue from the mid-Tudor period and on (Sharpe). On top of these acts passed by Parliament, the Church courts began a campaign against those who held heterodox views, those who performed sexual immorality, and those who worked or misbehaved on sabbath (Sharpe). Because of the acts that were being passed by Parliament and the campaign led by the Church courts, local government officers had become increasingly involved in prosecuting people for crimes that were not very serious, such as what was listed about the campaign, “keeping an unlicensed alehouse,” and the “failure to repair roads (Sharpe).” These decisions of the Church and Parliament were likely influenced by the new surge of Biblical interpretation caused by the English Reformation, showing how the religious changes in Early Modern England influenced when and how justice was carried out. But what about the victims of the crimes? When people fell victim to crimes in Early Modern England, more often than not the case was that there was not much that could be done about it (Sharpe). Of course, the victims could report the crime to the local justice and prosecute the offender in trial, which was quite the reliable but costly option, and so only those with money could use this option and the poor would have to find alternatives (Sharpe). These alternatives included a financial settlement between the offender and the victim outside of court, and a public promise and apology (Sharpe). Despite the fact that the alternatives were a lot cheaper than simply taking the offender to court, there were still so many crimes that did get to court regardless (Sharpe). This fact was likely influenced by the recently published vernacular Bible making people desire to enforce the eighth commandment, which was “You shall not steal (The Holy Bible).” This goes to show how the English Reformation’s religious influence influenced how justice was dealt in Early Modern England.

If the English Reformation had a greater religious impact on Early Modern England, then which Kings or Queens of England caused the greatest religious changes in Early Modern England society? King Henry VIII, though more colloquially known to have made political change in Early Modern England, made quite a few, yet significant religious changes and laid the foundations for even more religious change in Early Modern England. Firstly, King Henry VIII ‘demoted’ Pope Clemet VII to bishop of Rome through the Act of Supremacy and the passing of some additional Parliamentary legislation (Doran). Though the means of this change were more political, this change caused and allowed many significant religious changes to come. For instance, King Henry VIII founded England’s very own Church, called the Anglican Church (Rex). This Church had shared quite a lot of beliefs with that of the Roman Catholic Church, with its few differences being that the Pope was not the Supreme Head of the Church, and that a King could divorce the Queen. The ability for a King to divorce a Queen at a whim was a significant religious change, and one that was very heterodox to Roman Catholicism. In Matthew 19:2-9 of the Bible, it says, “What therefore God has joined together, let man not separate (The Holy Bible).” The context for this quote was that any marriage was one of God, one in holy matrimony, one that should not be ended by anything but death (The Holy Bible). The ability for Kings to end marriage by means that were not death was simply a very significant doctrinal change. On the topic of the Bible, King Henry VIII was the first to officially publish the Bible in the vernacular language (Rex). This was arguably the most significant religious change that King Henry VIII had caused directly because it allowed for people to make individual interpretations of the Bible, and to create new Christian denominations and doctrines. An example of this change’s religious change would be its hand in Calvinism becoming the Elizabethan Church’s dominant philosophy (Doran).

CONCLUSION

Despite King Henry VIII’s incentives for cutting ties with the Roman Catholic Church being more political than religious, the English Reformation had a greater religious than political influence in Early Modern England. This was due to many factors. Firstly, new beliefs and denominations were founded, and these new denominations each had differing doctrines from one another; The Anglican Church allowed kings to divorce at a whim, which contrasted with the Roman Catholic Church requiring approval from the Pope. Secondly, the means of which justice would be delivered changed quite a lot because of the English Reformation. One of the most important examples of this was the Pope no longer being able to pardon sinners since there was no longer a Pope. A third significant factor for why the English Reformation had a greater religious than political impact was King Henry VIII. Significant changes by King Henry VIII both directly and indirectly influenced religious change in Early Modern England. An example of a significant indirect change by King Henry VIII was the Act of Supremacy, which granted the power for future monarchs to make significant religious changes at a whim, which the future monarchs did.

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