ABSTRACT. This article takes issue with the influential recent interpretation of Henry VIII’s religious position as consistently ‘Erasmian’. Bringing to the discussion not only a re-evaluation of much familiar evidence but also a considerable quantity of hitherto unknown or little-known material, it proposes instead that Henry’s religious position, until the 1530s, sat squarely within the parameters of ‘traditional religion’ and that the subsequent changes in his attitudes to the cult of the saints, monasticism, and papal primacy were so significant as to be understood and described by Henry himself in terms of a veritable religious ‘conversion’. This conversion, which was very much sui generis, is not easily to be fitted within the confessional frameworks of other sixteenth-century religious movements (though it was by no means unaffected by them). It hinged upon Henry’s new understanding of kingship as a supreme spiritual responsibility entrusted to kings by the Word of God, but long hidden from them by the machinations of the papacy. His own providential deliverance from blindness was, he believed, but the beginning of a more general spiritual enlightenment.

Historians have found it surprisingly difficult to reach a just estimate of the history of Henry VIII’s religious beliefs. The assumption, still common in popular culture, that he started out a Catholic and ended a Protestant has never commanded much assent among professional historians—and rightly so. Whatever else he was, Henry was never a Protestant. However, once conversion to ‘Protestantism’ has been eliminated from the discussion, historians have tended to fall back on the assumption that Henry’s religious views never really changed at all. This position can take two rather different forms. The prevalent one has been the idea of ‘Catholicism without the pope’, a cliché attached as readily to Henry himself as to the Church of England of which he caused
himself to be declared supreme head. But more recently, Professor G. W. Bernard has taken up James McConica’s interpretation of the Henrician Reformation as an essentially ‘Erasmian’ process, and has combined it with the thesis of an underlying consistency in Henry’s own views to suggest that Henry was a lifelong Erasmian. Of course, if the king did not really change his mind, then the notion that those around the king succeeded, through lobbying and influence, in changing his mind is ruled out of court prima facie. An important implication of Bernard’s thesis, therefore, is that Henry was the unmoved mover of religious policy in his reign.

The aim of this article is to review the evidence for Henry VIII’s religious attitudes and practices in order to test the thesis of his essentially unchanging ‘Erasmianism’. It will argue that there was in his own time a consensus, to which he subscribed, on the fact that his religious beliefs underwent significant changes in the 1530s. Prior to the break with Rome, his religious beliefs and practices stood squarely within the parameters of ‘traditional religion’, with little if any indication that Erasmus’s influence had undermined his commitment to or investment in it. Subsequently, even though he was often at pains to emphasize the Catholicism of his Church of England in doctrinal essentials, he departed from traditional religion in some dramatic ways by suppressing the monasteries, pruning the cult of the saints, and publishing the Bible in English. These changes, it will be argued, illustrate not the outward expression of a long-standing inner ‘Erasmianism’, but the influence on the king of those around him as they sought to align his religious agenda with theirs. Fortunately, there is a substantial body of source-material through which to reconstitute and analyse Henry’s religious development: his own writings; other texts written under his supervision; texts authorized by him; and contemporary descriptions and assessments of his religious beliefs and practices.


Bernard’s view that Henry never really changed his mind on religious matters is based on an interpretation of the king’s position as ‘Erasmian’. There is some merit in this. The young Henry had met Erasmus even before he became king, and controversial works of Erasmus’s, such as the *Novum instrumentum*, were defended in his presence by Thomas More among others. Henry acted on several occasions to promote the interests of Erasmian humanism at Oxford and Cambridge, and his academic and ecclesiastical patronage was bestowed upon many friends or admirers of Erasmus, such as Richard Pace, Cuthbert Tunstall, Stephen Gardiner, and John Stokesley. Even before the break with Rome, Henry, like Erasmus, had declared himself favourable in principle to the vernacular Bible: ‘I do not deny that it is good that the holy scripture be read in whatever language.’ And, as Bernard has emphasized, Henry wrote to tell Erasmus how greatly he admired his efforts to promote the Christian faith, and how much he himself shared his passion for religious reform and renewal. Once his Reformation began to unfold in the 1530s, the deployment of translations of Erasmus’s writings was an obvious enough tactic in seeking to generate consensus behind it.

In making this argument Bernard seeks not to explain away the policy changes of the 1530s but simply to explain them: Henry, he argues, was always sympathetic to the Erasmian critique of many elements in late medieval Catholic popular devotion and scholastic theology; but it was only the new situation brought about by the break with Rome that allowed these sympathies and attitudes to be transformed into public policy. In particular, Bernard picks out Erasmus’s critique of monasticism and his ‘lack of enthusiasm for certain features of late medieval piety’ as lying behind Henry’s policies in the 1530s. That ‘lack of enthusiasm’ is, of course, notorious, and it was voiced by Erasmus in a variety of genres: the spiritual counsel of the *Enchiridion militis christianae*, the complex irony of the *Encomium moriae*, the bellettristic essays of the *Adagia*, and the frankly comic exchanges of the *Colloquia*. In the early *Enchiridion* (1503), he urged Christians to rise from the visible to the invisible, to transcend

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7 See Henry’s letter to the dukes of Saxony, 20 Jan. 1523, in *Assertio septem sacramentorum*, ed. P. Fraenkel (Münster, 1992), p. 239: ‘Nam ut bonum esse non negem in quavis lingua legi scripturam sacram.’ This concession is made in the course of warning the dukes to prevent Luther from disseminating his distorted version of the scriptures.


the rituals and ceremonies of the church in striving for spiritual life on a higher plane. Ceremonies were to an extent disparaged, and the veneration of the saints was said to reside in following their example rather than in the pursuit of relics and images through pilgrimage. He relativized monasticism, declining to identify it with piety per se, and insisting that it might suit some people but not others. The Erasmian approach to religion was all set out here, along with the caveats that he was attacking abuses and excesses, not principles. There was certainly no call for dissolution of the monasteries or for the suppression of shrines and pilgrimage. When this is placed in the additional context of Erasmus’s distaste for dogmatic disputation, his commitment to peace rather than war, his disquiet at the execution of heretics, and his concern for maintaining the unity of the church, one can only conclude that, if Henry was an Erasmian, his Erasmianism was both highly selective and utterly devoid of the master’s subtlety and nuance. There is a danger, however, in seeking to read consistency into Henry’s religious history. Henry himself would certainly not have recognized as valid any account of his religious history that flattened out the watershed of the 1530s, which he described in terms of a personal conversion experience. Nothing would have been more surprising to him or his contemporaries than the suggestion of a fundamental and lifelong consistency in his religious views. Richard Morison, one of the loudest of official voices of the 1530s, made this plain early in 1539 in his *Invente ayenste the great and detestable vice, treason*, published at one of the most delicate junctures in the 1530s as a response to the ‘Exeter conspiracy’: ‘Of all the miracles and wonders of our time, I take the change of our soueraygne lordes opinion on matters concerninge Religion, to be euen the gretest.’ Expressed in a pamphlet designed to bolster the loyalty of the English people in the midst of the acute political anxiety consequent upon the papal excommunication of the king, this view probably reflects Henry’s self-image, for there was nothing to be gained from accentuating change at a time when ‘innovation’, especially in matters of religion, was still predominantly a term of

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11 Ibid., pp. 62 and 66–7 (theology), 81–3 (peace), 176–8 (heretics), and 180–2 (unity).

abuse. To proclaim at such a moment, in a pamphlet manifestly issued with the full backing of the regime, that Henry had changed his mind about religious truth would have been insanely risky unless it had been not only acceptable to the king but even desirable for him to let this be known. Nor should the description of this change as a ‘miracle’ be thought casual, for it ascribes Henry’s change of opinion to an intervention of divine grace. After the king’s death, another English reformer, William Thomas, observed rather more brusquely that ‘the King himself, till God opened his eyes, was as blind and obstinate as the rest’. As we shall see, there is a good deal of evidence to support the view that it was not only Henry’s religious policies but also his religious beliefs that changed in the 1530s.

Henry was unusual, both as a layman and as a king, for his genuine and profound interest in questions of religion and theology. The earliest evidence we have of this is his exchange with John Colet on the legitimacy of war against France, reported some years later in Erasmus’s brief memoir of Colet. Almost on the eve of Henry’s invasion of France in 1513, John Colet, the dean of St Paul’s, preached at court on the moral hazards of war, and was interpreted, or misinterpreted, as questioning even the possibility of a just war. Henry’s response to this was masterly: not the aggrieved ranting of the tyrant, but a moderate exchange of views with his critic, in the spirit of free speech in counsel. He took Colet aside for a long chat in the convent garden at Greenwich, and Colet clarified his own adherence to the concept of the just war in principle and to the justice of Henry’s proposed war in particular. The casus belli for that particular war was the defence of the Holy See against the schismatic challenges of the king of France, and the Holy Father at that time was none other than the militaristic Julius II, whose prospects in the afterlife were notoriously satirized in the dialogue Julius exclusus. This episode shows us several characteristics of the king: his knack for yoking conscience to self-interest; his determination to secure not merely the outward obedience but the conscientious consent of those he admired; and his interest in theological minutiae – here, the theology of the just war. It does not show us an Erasmian.

13 For the pejorative connotations of novelty and innovation in Henry VIII’s reign, especially in matters of religion, see R. Rex, ‘The new learning’, Journal of Ecclesiastical History, 44 (1994), pp. 26–44. For an example of this, see Gardiner to the duke of Somerset, 21 May 1547, in J. A. Muller, ed., The letters of Stephen Gardiner (Cambridge, 1933), p. 278, ‘your Grace tolde me you wold suffer no innovacion ... it were pity to troble it with any innovacion’. There was always an element of ambivalence about the concept of novelty, and its positive connotations gradually strengthened over the next two centuries. For detailed consideration of this process see P. Withington, Society in early modern England: the vernacular origins of some powerful ideas (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 73–101.


15 Erasmus to Justus Jonas, 13 June 1521, ep. 1211, CWE, viii, pp. 225–44, at pp. 242–3. The pacifist sentiments of Erasmus’s essay on the adage Dulce bellum inexpertis (first published in 1515) were entirely alien to Henry.
Erasmus is our chief source for another of Henry’s ventures into theological disputation. Early in 1543, perhaps during Lent, Henry had a disputation with various royal chaplains about the relative merits of vocal and mental prayer, and this was the occasion of a letter of his on this subject to John Claymond (president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford) and John Roper (first Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford), to whom he referred the debate for definitive resolution. Henry himself advanced a preference for mental prayer, and was able to cite Thomas Aquinas in making his case. Commenting on the same episode in a letter to Duke George of Saxony a few years later, Erasmus observed that Henry ‘enjoys the discussion of some theological point even over his wine’. The same taste for argument is still evident after the break with Rome. Henry and Anne Boleyn would discuss religious questions with their chaplains. And after the king’s death, Stephen Gardiner reminded Thomas Cranmer of the disputes over justification by faith alone in 1543, at the time when the ‘King’s Book’ was approaching completion and its legal status was being decided. In the end, Cranmer had taken up the debate with Henry in private, and the king ‘dysussed yt thorowly and travailed in yt with you, unto whome fynally your Grace cessyd [i.e. yielded], which he, lyke a prince of muche clemencie, most gently reaceyved’. In a similar vein, Gardiner recalled Cranmer’s private discussions with the king on the subject of images and idolatry. The most spectacular manifestation of the royal taste for debate, of course, came in 1538, when Henry presided at the trial for heresy of John Lambert. After his bishops had failed to win Lambert over, Henry himself took the floor, though with no greater success. Personally presiding at Lambert’s condemnation to burn at the stake—the king deputed the sentencing itself to Thomas Cromwell, his vicar general in spiritual matters—was not Henry’s most Erasmian moment.

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16 *CWE*, vi, ep. 964, pp. 356–62, Erasmus to Henry VIII, 15 May 1519 (Antwerp), refers to this disputation as having been ‘lately conducted’ (pp. 360–1).
20 See below, n. 85.
21 Edward Hall, *The Union of the two noble and illustrate famelies of Lancastre & Yorke* (London: Grafton, 1548; STC 12721), ‘The triumphaunt reigne of Kyng Henry the .VIII.’, fo. cccxxixv; John Foxe, *Acts and monuments* (1563 recension), pp. 531–7. See p. 534 for Henry’s white clothing (references to the first edition via Foxe’s *Book of martyrs variorum edition online*, found at www.hrionline.ac.uk/johnfoxe/). Henry may have been emulating the royal predecessor for whom he had the most admiration, Henry V, who, as prince of Wales, had presided at the burning of the Lollard John Badby, and had sought to persuade that unfortunate man to recant.
The best test case for Bernard’s theory of Erasmian continuity in Henry VIII’s religious outlook is furnished by the king’s engagement throughout his life with that key feature of late medieval Catholicism, the cult of the saints. As Bernard interprets it, the decisive public campaign against pilgrimage, relics, and particular images in the late 1530s should be seen as the realization, under the new powers of the royal supremacy, of an Erasmian distaste for such aspects of traditional religion that had been evident from Henry’s earliest years. Thus he observes that on only one occasion ‘can Henry reasonably confidently be presumed to have gone deliberately and out of his way on pilgrimage, namely to Walsingham in January 1510 [sic] on the birth of his short-lived son’. From this he infers a degree of suspicion, if not outright repudiation, of that practice, and severe disenchantment with Walsingham in particular: ‘It is very striking that he did not go there again.’ Yet neither inference is entirely secure. It would of course be tendentious to argue for any special devotion on Henry’s part from his continuance of time-honoured annual payments to the shrine at Walsingham for maintenance of a votive candle there. But the fact that in the years following his pilgrimage the king donated over £40 towards the costs of glazing the pilgrimage chapel at Walsingham suggests a rather warmer regard for the shrine than Bernard allows, especially as Henry was not much given to generosity on this scale for such purposes. Moreover, one of the payments was made to the king’s glazier, Barnard Flower, which indicates a real royal engagement with the project. In any case, Henry seems to have made at least one more purposeful pilgrimage to Walsingham, in October 1522, when Sir Thomas Lestrange and other Norfolk gentry met him en route.

The claim that Henry explicitly went on pilgrimage only once is thus not strictly true. As David Starkey has shown, in 1511 Henry went not only to Walsingham (immediately after his first son’s birth, in January) but also, in July, to the shrine of John Schorne at North Marston in Buckinghamshire, to which he returned once more in May 1521, to give thanks for his recovery from a

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22 Bernard, *King’s Reformation*, p. 233. Henry made this pilgrimage in Jan. 1511. Hall, *Vnion of ... Lancaster & Yorke*, ‘Henry VIII’, fo. xix, notes the birth of Prince Henry in January 1511, adding that ‘Shortly after, and before the Quenes churchinge, the kyng rode to Walsingham’. The King’s Book of Payments (LP 2.ii. p. 1449) records an offering of £1 19s 4d at Walsingham in Jan. 1511. It also records that Henry was at the house of Sir Robert Cotton on 14 and 26 Jan. 1511. Sir Robert Cotton’s seat was at Landwade, just outside Newmarket, on one route from London to Walsingham.

23 *LP* 2.ii. pp. 1451 (£20 in June 1511) and 1458 (Barnard Flower, £23 11s 4d in Nov. 1512). Bernard notes these payments but sees no further significance in the fact that it was Walsingham that benefited from what he rightly observes was Henry’s rather limited expenditure on ‘religious buildings or ornamentation’ (*King’s Reformation*, p. 234).

particularly severe fever. Henry’s devotion to John Schorne, who had not been formally canonized, and whose cult had taken off only from the middle of the fifteenth century, is particularly telling, in that it bespeaks a participation in genuinely popular ‘popular religion’. That said, his own familiarity with the cult doubtless derived from the fact that it was promoted primarily from the royal chapel of St George’s, Windsor, which not only housed John Schorne’s relics but also held the rectory of North Marston. Still more tellingly, the king visited the very new shrine of Our Lady at Ipswich on 9 October 1522, following in the footsteps of Cardinal Wolsey and Catherine of Aragon. This shrine had been rendered notorious by the miraculous healing there of the ‘Maid of Ipswich’ in 1516. While at Ipswich Henry was staying with Robert, Lord Curson, who had composed an eye-witness account of events and had clearly played an important part in the revival of the pilgrimage there. For Henry to grace this shrine with his presence was to give a very powerful endorsement to the burgeoning cult and to the miracle story which had inspired it. His secretary at that time, Thomas More, publicly showed his confidence in the validity of the miracle of Ipswich by paraphrasing Curson’s account a few years later in his Dialogue concerning heresies. Both the king and his secretary were admirers of Erasmus, but neither of them seems to have displayed the sort of quizzical scepticism which he would almost certainly have brought to this case.

In addition to these pilgrimages undertaken specifically ‘for religion’s sake’, we know of numerous other occasions on which Henry participated in the devotional practices associated with pilgrimage. In the first ten years of his reign, he made offerings at the shrines of St Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey, Our Lady of Grace in Southampton, St Osmund in Salisbury, the Rood of St Margaret Pattens in London, Our Lady at the Tower in Coventry, the Rood of the Wall and Our Lady of Grace in Northampton, Our Lady at Caversham, St Swithin at Winchester, the Rood of Grace at Boxley, St Bridget at Syon, and Good King Henry at Windsor. Bernard is of course Starkey, Henry: virtuous prince, p. 198 and n. 3 (pp. 389–4). Wolsey’s letter to Sir Richard Jerningham of 20 May 1521 reports Henry’s illness, recovery, and pilgrimage, as well as the duke of Buckingham’s treason and execution (LP 3.i.1293). For John Schorne and his cult, see R. G. Davies, ‘Schorne, John (d. in or before 1315)’, (ODNB). I must thank Alec Corio and Eamon Duffy for bringing to my attention the link between the cult of John Schorne and the royal chapel at Windsor. For Henry’s visit to the shrine at Ipswich, see J. Blatchly and D. MacCulloch, Miracles in Lady Lane: the Ipswich shrine at the Westgate (Ipswich, 2013), p. 25. For a transcript of Curson’s account, see pp. 60–74; and for a discussion of it, see pp. 20 and 23–4. I owe this fascinating material to the kindness of the anonymous reader for Historical Journal.

The complete works of St Thomas More, VI: A Dialogue concerning heresies, ed. T. M. C. Lawler et al. (2 vols. New Haven and London, 1981), i, pp. 93–4. Thomas More was with the king on his summer progress that year. See LP 3.ii.2544 and 2555, letters from More to Wolsey sent from Newhall (Essex) on 14 and 21 Sept. 1522.

Offerings made at shrines and recorded in the ‘King’s Book of Payments’ on various occasions in the years 1509–18 (LP 2.ii. pp. 1441–80), summarizing the information in TNA E36/215 and E36/216.
entirely aware of these visits, but suggests that they were merely routine gestures of politeness made when passing through on other business. In most cases, there is obviously some truth in this, though it is less obvious that this information should therefore be discounted in assessing Henry’s devotional tastes and inclinations. But it is evident that his visit to the rood in the parish of St Margaret Pattens in London just after Candlemas 1511 was made either in thanksgiving for the delivery of his first-born son or in hope of his recovery from illness (Prince Henry was to die before the end of the month). There were too many shrines in and around London for this to be a matter of paying polite respects in passing.

Other evidence confirms Henry’s respect for the concept of pilgrimage. At Coventry, on 1 September 1511, King Henry presented a chapelry in his gift to one Henry Lofte, a hermit of St Paul who had made an immense pilgrimage to Jerusalem and back, via Rhodes and Rome, returning with a copious supply of papal indulgences. The letters patent recite Lofte’s pious endeavours in such a way as to indicate that the grant is obviously a reward for them. Henry thus chose to reward religion of the most traditional kind in a very public way. Admittedly, Erasmus’s Praise of Folly had only been in print for a few weeks at this time, so it is highly unlikely that Henry was yet acquainted with the misgivings about pilgrimage voiced in that text (though he may well have been aware of Erasmus’s Enchiridion militis christianaee, which had first appeared in 1503, and expressed similar misgivings). If Henry had read it, his reward to Lofte scarcely reflects Folly’s critique of excessive pilgrimage; but even if, as is more probable, Lofte’s pilgrimage was rewarded before Henry had heard Folly speak, then at the very least we must mitigate the notion of the king’s consistent Erasmianism.

The king’s generosity to Henry Lofte is just one of many indications that Henry VIII was, before the break with Rome, entirely happy with the doctrine and practice of indulgences. It is notorious that Henry defended indulgences in his book against Martin Luther—and if his defence is but perfunctory, so too was the attack on them in Luther’s Babylonian captivity, to which he was

31 TNA E3/6/215, p. 104, entry under the week commencing 2 Feb. 1511.
32 LP 1.i.885, f.7.
33 Erasmus had written this jeu d’esprit in 1509, and dedicated it to Thomas More, so it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a copy might have reached Henry’s court in manuscript. For the composition of the work see D. Erasmus, The praise of Folly, translated with an introduction and commentary by C. H. Miller (New Haven and London, 1979), pp. ix–x. Note Folly’s comment (p. 78) that ‘Some man will go to Jerusalem, Rome, or St. James of Compostella, where he has no business, abandoning his wife and children at home.’ There is no copy of Encomium moriae recorded in the inventory of Henry VIII’s library, but one suspects that this is because he had a copy and then threw it out in the 1530s on account of its close connection with Thomas More (none of More’s printed works are found in the inventory either). The library included several copies of the Enchiridion. See J. P. Carley, ed., The libraries of King Henry VIII (London, 2000), Westminster, items 181, 182, 183, and 194.
responding. Visits to shrines usually earned pilgrims indulgences, and in some cases we can infer that Henry was visiting a shrine for that specific purpose. Thus, while he was staying at Windsor in October 1511, he went to St George’s Chapel on the feast day of St Edward the Confessor (13 October), and made an offering ‘at the pardon’, thus availing himself of the plenary indulgence which, since 1479, had been available on that specific day (and which was probably connected with veneration of relics of the saint). St Edward the Confessor may indeed have been a favourite saint of Henry’s. Although it would be tendentious to make much of his offerings at St Edward’s shrine in Westminster Abbey at the opening of parliament, since these religious observances were evidently part of that customary political ritual, there is more significance in some of his other visits there. His visit one afternoon in the week beginning Sunday 12 May 1510 is explained by a similar visit just over a year later, in early June 1511. This visit was ‘for taking of the pardon there at Ascencion tyde’: Henry’s father had procured a plenary indulgence for those who visited the Lady Chapel at Ascensiontide to pray for his soul. Henry’s offering there on Friday 28 May 1512 was likewise made ‘at pardon’, and was accompanied by a further offering ‘at the pardon chapel’. This refers to the scala coeli chapel in the abbey that had been established there at Henry VII’s request in 1504. As late as 1524, Henry is found expressing proper gratitude for a plenary indulgence, this time bestowed upon him and Catherine of Aragon by Clement VII along with the golden rose. The condition for benefiting from the indulgence was the performance of an annual pilgrimage to one of three shrines – St Thomas at Canterbury, Our Lady of Walsingham, or Bury St Edmund’s, and the king and queen were also allowed to extend this privileged indulgence to up to twenty

36 See e.g. TNA E36/215, p. 161, for an offering at St Edward’s shrine on Wednesday 4 Feb. 1512, at the votive mass of the Holy Spirit for the opening of parliament.
39 Henry VIII to Clement VII, 10 Oct. 1524, in State papers (11 vols., London, 1830–52), vi, no. ci, p. 353. The golden rose had been presented to Henry at St George’s, Windsor, on 8 Sept. 1524, the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. See Hall, Union of ... Lancaster & Yorke, ‘Henry VIII’, fo. cxxxv.
other people. A brief as specific as this could only have been granted on petition, not *motu proprio*, which almost certainly means that it was expressly requested by the king himself.

Henry’s commitment to the cult of the saints remained evident through the first twenty years of his reign. When Charles V visited England on his way back to Spain from the Low Countries in 1522, he and Henry prayed together at the shrine of St Thomas in the course of the solemnities and festivities for the emperor’s reception at Canterbury. Henry may have turned against Thomas in the later 1530s, but there is no sign in the first part of his reign of anything other than filial loyalty to the premier English saint. He had made an offering at St Thomas of Canterbury in September 1514. Moreover, whenever he crossed the Channel, he made the accustomed offerings to travellers’ shrines at Dover, Calais, or Boulogne. The record for his offering to Our Lady in the Rock at Dover on his arrival back from France on 14 November 1532 tells us that the cash was ‘paid to the kinges owne handes for his offering’. This pointed reference to his personal handling of the payment suggests that, pace Bernard, this was no merely conventional gesture (it may perhaps reflect a rather rough crossing!). And Edward Hall reports that Henry made his offering at Boulogne on that occasion, alongside Francis I of France. Only on his final crossing, in the invasion of 1544, does it seem that he omitted these traditional gestures. By this time his church had been fulminating against statues of saints as idols for half a dozen years. The image of Our Lady of Boulogne (a figure of the Virgin Mary in a boat) was taken back to England as booty, while its chapel was razed on Henry’s personal instructions to make way for some defensive works. Royal expenditure accounts indicate that customary payments for the maintenance of ostentatious votive candles and for the performance of regular intercessory masses at such shrines as Doncaster, Walsingham, and Windsor continued right up to the moment that, in 1538, Henry banned the practice.

40 *LP* 4.i.652, John Clerk to Wolsey, Rome, 12 Sept. 1524, summarizing the papal brief.
41 King’s Book of Payments, *LP* 2.ii.1465.
43 Bernard, *King’s Reformation*, p. 643 n. 40, argues that these offerings do not constitute evidence against his interpretation of Henry VIII’s devotional inclinations. In doing so, he sets a very high bar for pilgrims to vault. Henry’s visits to shrines *en passant*, he declares, are not ‘devotional travel, undertaken in the spirit of pilgrimage to a particular shrine, making a special journey, going out of one’s way’ (p. 233). But visiting shrines, even *en passant*, still qualifies for the spiritual benefits of pilgrimage.
45 Ibid., fo. clxix: Henry ‘commanded that our Lady Churche of Bullein, should be defaced and plucked doun, where he appoointed a Mount to be made, for the greate force and strength of the toune’. See Alain Lottin (dir.), *Histoire de Boulogne-sur-Mer* (Lille, 1983), for the thirteenth-century origin of the cult of Our Lady of Boulogne (p. 77), for some pilgrims’ badges (p. 79), for Henry’s sack of the shrine (p. 107), and for the eventual return of the image in 1551 (p. 108).
46 The King’s Payments, *LP* 13.ii.1280. Compare, e.g., pp. 529 and 535 for the cessation of the payments at Walsingham between Lady Day and Michaelmas 1538.
It is of course possible to dismiss all this as merely ‘routine’ behaviour, but, arguably, it is just because the behaviour was routine that it matters. For the observation that Henry’s participation in the cult of the saints was routine is precisely what makes it impossible to sustain an ‘Erasmian’ interpretation of his religious position. For Erasmus, routine devotional gestures could easily degenerate into emptiness or hypocrisy, and he sought to replace or revivify them with ethical and mindful religious practices based on what he called the *philosophia Christi*, a knowledge of Christ as presented in the gospels. Erasmianism was unconventional. Conventional religious performance was per se the antithesis of Erasmianism. The thesis that Henry’s pre-Reformation piety was essentially conventional can hardly be refuted by pointing out that the evidence for this consists of conventionally pious acts.

Conventional behaviour is still, to a certain extent, subject to choice, and the choice to subscribe to convention or to break with it is in itself highly significant. In the same year that he personally gave money to the Channel crossing shrines at Dover and Calais, Henry ostentatiously refrained from visiting the shrines at Christ Church Cathedral and St Augustine’s in Canterbury (and no donations are recorded on that occasion). Bernard cites the Observant Franciscan Hugh Rich’s scandalized comment upon this omission as if it demonstrates that the king had never cared much for shrines and pilgrimage, but this is to miss the point. For on previous visits to Canterbury, Henry had indeed paid the accustomed honours at these shrines. It was precisely the unusual nature of his refusal to do so on this occasion that scandalized Rich. Henry’s deliberate public slight to the sacred sites of Canterbury doubtless reflected the city’s status at that moment as the centre of operations of the Holy Maid of Kent – his most vocal critic. Henry had not gone off pilgrimage: he had gone off Canterbury.

There are, moreover, indications on several occasions in Henry’s life of special devotion to particular saints. We have already noted hints of a particular interest in St Edward the Confessor. Of his devotion to St George, there can be no doubt. St George figured prominently in the propaganda of Henry’s early wars. When James IV of Scotland announced in 1513, his readiness to enter the war on behalf of France, Henry’s defiant reply emphasized not only the ‘rightwiseness of our causes’ against ‘the malice of all schismatics’, but also his confidence, if it came to battle, in ‘the help of our Lord God and our patron

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50 *LP* 2.ii. p. 1465, Sept. 1514.
Saint George’. In 1513 he seems to have made some preparations with a view to establishing a chantry in St George’s Chapel at Windsor (where he was indeed to be buried in 1547 and where a chantry should have been founded in due course under the terms of his last will). There is other evidence of a genuine personal devotion to this saint. An inventory of royal jewels that were in the custody of Sir William Compton in October 1519 includes some artefact relating to St George, described as ‘full of reliques’. As Compton was head of the privy chamber, these relics were kept close to the king and presumably travelled around with him. A similar inventory from 1528 details a ‘blew harte of seint george full of Reliques’, which is probably the same object. This latter inventory may well be recording items that Henry took with him on his flight from the ‘sweat’ in the summer of 1528, in which case the substantial number of votive objects may reflect a reliance on intercession, as well as isolation and preventive medicine, in the bid to evade infection: among much else, there is a brooch of St Roch, one of the ‘holy helpers’ invoked against the plague. Henry took considerable trouble over reforming the statutes of the order of the Garter, but his labours in this regard present a profound and revealing contrast to those of his son. Where Henry worked entirely within the framework of a traditional devotion to a saint (i.e. St George), with prayers, masses, and processions, the young Edward sought to purge the order of superstition and idolatry, erasing references to medieval devotional practices and proposing to substitute the ‘defence of the truth wholly contained in scripture’ for the dedication to St George. St George’s status among Henry’s patron saints was confirmed at the king’s funeral, for the sacred banners displayed at the corners of his hearse were those of the Holy Trinity, Our Lady, Saint George, and King Henry VI.

This last figure is of particular interest, as his appearance in this context shows that he was being treated as a heavenly helper and that ‘Good King Henry’ was

52 LP 1.ii.2330, g. 4.4 Sept. 1513, stipulates that lands from Lady Margaret Beaufort’s estates are to be granted to Windsor in accordance with the king’s will, with a mortmain licence. It is likely that the provision this will proposed was much the same as that in his final will.
53 See LP 3.i.463, item 3; and LP 4.ii.5114. Both inventories include several images of St George. The page with the entry from 1519 is very badly damaged (TNA SP1/19, fos. 42r–67v, at 62r), and the missing words might well confirm the identification of this object with that in the 1528 list (TNA SP1/52, fos. 23r–37v, at 23r).
54 Bernard argues that Henry’s approach to the epidemic of 1528 was ‘entirely secular’. See Bernard, ‘Piety of Henry VIII’, p. 76. The evidence presented here and elsewhere in this article suggests otherwise.
the saint after whom Henry VIII himself was named. Henry’s father had initiated the cause of Good King Henry’s canonization. The cause seems to have languished at Rome during Henry VIII’s reign, although its reactivation was mooted in the later 1520s at a time when the prospect of the considerable fees generated by canonizations might have seemed the sort of douceur likely to lubricate Henry’s divorce proceedings at Rome. But even if this delay shows that Henry was less than enthusiastic for the formal procedures (and this is far from clear, as the process of canonization was by this time rarely rapid), he seems to have shared the devotion that was making Good King Henry one of the most popular saints in Tudor England. Royal accounts show that Henry regularly made personal offerings at the tomb of Henry VI and the shrine of St George at Windsor. In his early years, at least, it was his custom to make offerings to St George and King Henry both on arrival at Windsor and again on departure.

Other offerings there are noted in May 1520, in June and October 1529, and in June 1530. An inventory of royal jewels that seems to date from 1528 includes references to ‘a payer of gloves and ij payer of knyves’, as well as a ‘maser’, that had belonged to ‘good king Henry’ and are annotated as having been ‘deliuered to the dean of Wynsor’—presumably as secondary relics to stir the devotion of pilgrims. Henry VIII’s will of 1546 includes a request to his executors to embellish Henry VI’s tomb to a standard fit for a king. There may be further evidence for royal interest in the cult of Henry VI in a little book of Latin poems published by the king’s Latin secretary, Andreas Ammonius, in 1511, which includes a lengthy hymn to Henry VI in Horatian

57. R. Axton, ‘Lord Morley’s funeral’, in M. Axton and J. P. Carley, eds., Triumphs of English: Henry Parker, Lord Morley, translator to the Tudor court (London, 2000), pp. 213–24, at p. 218, notes that from Henry VII’s time, the use of a fourth banner representing the ‘advourer’ of the deceased had been customary at noble funerals. The banner of Good King Henry was also used at Lord Morley’s funeral in 1556. Diarmaid MacCulloch has suggested that the use of this banner at Henry’s funeral might be connected to the coronation pageants laid on by city of London for Edward soon afterwards, which were based on those which Lydgate had composed for Henry VI’s entry into London in 1432. See MacCulloch, Tudor church militant, pp. 62–3. However, while it may indeed have suited the regime to play up continuity with the past through the use of the Lydgate pageants, the appearance of Good King Henry’s banner at the royal funeral seems most likely simply to reflect Henry VIII’s devotion, or at least the fact that Henry VI was his name-saint.


59. See e.g. TNA E36/215, pp. 68–9 (July 1510); E36/316, pp. 95 (27 May 1519) and 105 (July 1519, departure, offerings by proxy).

60. King’s Book of Payments, LP 3 ii., p. 1536 (1520); Chamber accounts, LP 5, pp. 315 and 319 (1529–30). These offerings are distinct from the scheduled offerings at those shrines which were made on his behalf by his servants.

61. LP 4 ii. 511 (TNA SP 1/52, fo. 311).

metre.\textsuperscript{65} The occasion of this composition is unknown, but its appearance in a collection intended by the poet to celebrate his appointment indicates that this kind of pious sentiment was not out of place at the court of Henry VIII.\textsuperscript{64}

Henry’s attitude towards relics suggests that it was his Erasmianism that was ‘conventional’, in the sense of merely modish. Erasmus’s gibe that there were enough fragments of the true cross in circulation to fill a cargo ship was already notorious by 1533, the year in which Henry chose to present ‘a piece of the wood of Christ’s cross’ to the chapel royal at Windsor.\textsuperscript{65} The presentation of such a highly regarded relic to one of the finest churches in the land, the very chapel which Henry selected for his own burial, speaks volumes about his piety. Nor was Henry’s respect for the true cross unusual. He had kissed another relic of the true cross when he visited Canterbury Cathedral with Charles V in May 1520.\textsuperscript{66} Even after the break with Rome, he made an exception from the general order to ‘deface’ relics from suppressed monasteries in the case of a relic of the true cross from the monastery of Stratford-at-Bow. This was personally handed over to the king by Thomas Cromwell on 19 June 1537, and was then given to Thomas Heneage, the head of the privy chamber, a man who was high in Henry’s favour and would soon be knighted.\textsuperscript{67} Perhaps we should not assume too much about his response to the fine bundle of relics that was sent him from Rome in autumn 1540, which included pieces of the holy sepulchre and of the pillar at which Jesus was scourged, as well as of the sponge from which he drank on the cross and of the bowl in which he washed the apostles’ feet! These were obviously diplomatic gifts designed to cement anglo-papal relations.\textsuperscript{68} But it is difficult to see as a thorough-going Erasmian a monarch who twice within a year, in 1530 and 1531, rewarded those who brought him ‘relic water’. This came from two shrines, Windsor and Chertsey, that were both connected with Henry VI. Given Good King Henry’s association

\textsuperscript{65} Andreae Ammonii carmina omnia, ed. Clemente Pizzi (Florence, 1958), pp. 35–40.

\textsuperscript{64} A similar inference might be drawn regarding Bernard André’s Hymni Christiani (Paris: Bade, 1517), which was dedicated to Henry VIII, although many of the verses therein had doubtless been composed in Henry VII’s reign.

\textsuperscript{65} S. Bond, ed., The chapter acts of the dean and canons of Windsor, 1430, 1523–1672 (Windsor, 1966), p. 10. For Erasmus’s comment, see In novum testamentum … adnotationes (4th edn, Basel: Froben, 1527), pp. 87–8. It is also worth noting that the shrine of Our Lady of Ipswich, which had been absorbed into the Wolsey family business in 1525, when Wolsey’s son Thomas Winter was presented to the rectory of St Matthew in which the shrine chapel stood, not only survived Wolsey’s fall in 1529 but was granted, along with that rectory and other Wolsey spoils, to the dean and chapter of Windsor by a royal grant of 27 Sept. 1532 (LP5.1531). Henry still seems to have been willing to endow the royal chapel with spiritual capital of an entirely traditional character.


\textsuperscript{67} Eighth report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts. Appendix part II (London, 1881), p. 21, an annotated warrant to Thomas Pope, dated 28 May 1537.

\textsuperscript{68} Francis, bishop of Famagusta, to Henry VIII, from Rome, 8 Oct. 1512, introducing the bearer, one Peter de Silva of Famagusta, and listing the gifts he was carrying. See LP1.i.1429, and BL MS Cotton Vitellius B.ii.30.
with ailments of the head, the likely inference is that the king was suffering from severe headaches at the time.\(^6\)

Nor was Henry’s original attitude to devotional images particularly Erasmian, for he possessed large numbers of devotional images himself. The inventory of his moveable property taken on his death is still laden with religious images and items bearing religious decoration. Many of the sacred images he possessed, of course, had other than merely devotional purposes. His new year’s gift to Anne Boleyn in 1531, a diamond to be set in a brooch of Our Lady of Boulogne, was meant to impress chiefly as an item of conspicuous value, but it is nonetheless revealing that its distinctive and traditional depiction of the Blessed Virgin was thought inappropriate neither to the donor nor to the recipient.\(^7\)

While the gift is obviously symbolic of the diplomatic turn away from Spain and towards France that was bound up with the king’s quest for a divorce, the choice of a well-known devotional image for this purpose speaks eloquently against the argument that Henry had little commitment to the cult of the saints.\(^8\) Much of the imagery recorded at his death may have constituted bullion or conspicuous display rather than devotional apparatus, though the fact that so much had not been stripped or smelted down suggests that we should not rush to write off the role of devotion in their preservation. Thus among the silver gilt crucifixes was one adorned ‘with vj aungelles dead mens heddes bones and wormes closed within a pale’. It had been presented to the king as a new year’s gift in 1537 by the bishop of Durham, Cuthbert Tunstall, who two years later preached a Palm Sunday sermon before the king in which he emphasized the value of the sign of the cross as ‘an arche triumphal ageinst the deuyll’ – just a few weeks after Henry had issued a proclamation reaffirming such traditional ceremonies as creeping to the cross.\(^9\)

Images of St George, predictably enough, appear regularly, from a golden statue to a ‘Table [i.e. painting] with the picture of Saincte George on horsbacke of clothe of golde tissued with siluer with a curteyne of yellowe and white Sarceonette’. This latter was evidently part of the

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\(^6\) Nicolas, ed., *Privy purse expences*, pp. 67 (8 Aug. 1530, from Windsor) and 148 (22 July 1531, from Chertsey). Chertsey had been Henry VI’s resting place before his remains were transferred to Windsor. Relic water was water that had been specially hallowed by contact with relics or reliquaries, and thus lay well towards the ‘superstitious’ end of the spectrum of medieval piety.

\(^7\) TNA SP1/66, fo. 27v (*LP 5:276*), in accounts relating to the King’s Jewels for the period Aug. 1530–May 1531. The entry for ‘a dyamond in the broche of our lady of Bologne’ follows an entry dated Christmas Day. See above, n. 45, for Our Lady of Boulogne.

\(^8\) There may also have been an element of punning wit in the choice of ‘Our Lady of Boulogne’ to celebrate Lady Anne Boleyn. See above, n. 45, for ‘Bullein’ as a spelling of Boulogne. Anne’s family name was usually rendered as ‘Bullen’ or ‘Bullan’ in sixteenth-century documents.

collection of ‘working’ pictures displayed in Westminster Palace.\textsuperscript{73} The similarly
curtained picture of St Jerome in the long gallery of Hampton Court, near a
picture of Prince Edward and the famous image of the four evangelists stoning
the pope, was clearly also one that Henry liked to contemplate.\textsuperscript{74}

In 1528 the king was horrified to learn of the beheading of a statue of the
Blessed Virgin in Paris that summer, though he was relieved to hear about the
French king’s decisive response: Francis I personally took part in expiatory
processions. Henry expounded the whole episode to the gentlemen of his privy
chamber, in a discourse in which he

mervelously commendeth the Frenche Kings vertuous and religious demeanor used
in the ceremonies on Corpus Christi day, and the other day, against the damnable
and scelerate demeanor of those worse then Jues that wolde do suche dispite to the
blessed Images where they can not do it to the thing self.\textsuperscript{75}

The claim that iconoclasm was surrogate violence against those depicted in
images entirely fails, of course, to appreciate the motivations of those engaged
in this kind of iconoclasm, but it is nonetheless revealing of Henry’s own
attitudes. For the assumption that what is done to sacred images is to be
properly referred to what those images depict was integral to the Catholic
defence of the veneration of images from the charge of idolatry.\textsuperscript{76} Neither this
line nor the iconoclasm for which he exchanged it in the later 1530s can be
plausibly characterized as Erasmian. Erasmus himself deprecated excessive
devotion to images, but deplored iconoclasm. For him, both extremes
represented a focus on the external trappings rather than the interior truths
of religion. Within ten years of describing iconoclasts as ‘worse than Jues’,
Henry was authorizing iconoclasm on a massive scale. This was a dramatic volte
face, in which he had leapt right over Erasmus.

The assault on relics which was a major element in the pruning of traditional
religious practices in the later 1530s provides us with clear evidence both of the
decisive change in Henry’s mind that took place in that decade and of the way
in which those around Henry worked upon him to influence his opinions. One
of Tudor England’s best-known relics was the holy blood of Hailes, supposedly
a quantity of the blood of Christ preserved in a crystal phial and displayed for
veneration at the abbey of Hailes in Gloucestershire. Hugh Latimer commented
in the 1530s on the crowds who could be seen making their way thither along

\textsuperscript{73} Starkey, ed., \textit{Inventory of Henry VIII}, pp. 6 and 238 (item 10653). The Westminster pictures
(pp. 237–40) include pictures of contemporary princes as well as some programmatic pictures
symbolizing Henry’s overthrow of the papacy.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p. 288, items 12310 (Edward), 12321 (stoning the pope: now known as Girolamo
da Treviso’s Protestant allegory), and 12337 (Jerome).

\textsuperscript{75} H. Ellis, ed., \textit{Original letters illustrative of English history} (11 vols., London, 1825–46), i.i.293.

\textsuperscript{76} See e. g. \textit{The complete works of St Thomas More}, VIII: \textit{The confutation of Tyndale’s answer}, ed.
the Fosse Way any fine day. In 1538 a commission was appointed to investigate the relic, and concluded that it was some kind of fraud. This was no surprise – the committee was headed by the Protestant Hugh Latimer in his new capacity as bishop of Worcester, and it included among its few members Richard Tracy, the son of that William Tracy whose profoundly Protestant last will and testament had been a cause célèbre in 1530. What is interesting, though, is the background, on which again we owe our information to Latimer. In a later look back to the 1530s, he emphasized that Henry could be persuaded only with great difficulty that the blood of Hailes was spurious: ‘What ado there was to bring this out of the king’s head! This great abomination, of the blood of Hayles, could not be taken a great while out of his mind.’ As a quasi-eucharistic relic, the blood of Hailes played to Henry’s lifelong devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. Another Latymer, William (no relation), tells us a little more about this. In the life of Anne Boleyn that he wrote for Queen Elizabeth, he relates how, on the royal progress in 1535, Henry, Anne, her uncle James, and one or two other court chaplains would sit around after dinner of an evening discussing theology – Henry always fancied himself a theological expert. On one occasion, he reports, Henry and James Boleyn argued against Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Shaxton, and afterwards the parties continued their exchange by correspondence. Unfortunately, we are not told the subject of this particular debate, nor do the letters survive. But it was doubtless in the course of such discussions that pressure was put upon Henry to adopt a more hostile attitude towards relics. William Latymer, one of Anne Boleyn’s chaplains, testifies to this. Although his account either misdates or mistakes the eventual fate of the blood of Hailes, he tells us that ‘hir highnes being throughly enformid [about the relic] never stayed, but made meanes to the

78 For the events and politics surrounding this, see Peter Marshall, ‘The Rood of Boxley, the blood of Hailes and the defence of the Henrician Church’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 46 (1995), pp. 689–96.
79 Latimer, *Sermons and remains*, p. 407 n. 5. Although it is sometimes said that Richard Tracy was rewarded with a grant of the abbey property after its dissolution, and adapted its buildings to furnish himself with a fine house, that property did not in fact come into the hands of the Tracy family until the seventeenth century. For the fate of the abbey site, see W. St C. Baddeley, *A Cottewold shrine* (Gloucester, 1908). At first, it formed part of a monastic property portfolio held by Robert Acton (p. 121), but after his mismanagement was exposed (pp. 125–6), the lands were successively granted to Katherine Parr, to her husband Thomas Seymour (Lord Sudeley), and to her brother William (marquis of Northampton), before reverting to the crown (p. 124), and were successively occupied on leasehold by Henry Hodgkyns (p. 126) and his son-in-law William Hoby (p. 133), before coming into the hands of Sir John Tracy after Hoby’s death in 1603 (p. 143).
81 For Henry’s commitment to the mass and its associated doctrines, see Bernard, *King’s Reformation*, pp. 238–9 and 492–4.

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king his majestie that this ydolatrous abuse might be taken awaye. And she optayned so that he caused the same ymediatly to be plucked downe.\textsuperscript{83}

Henry’s mind was undoubtedly being turned against relics in the years following the break with Rome. In May 1537 he authorized Sir Thomas Pope, treasurer of the Court of Augmentations, to ‘deface’ all relics among the possessions of the religious houses suppressed during the first phase of the dissolution of the monasteries.\textsuperscript{84} Yet the king’s shift in attitudes was not as radical as it might seem, for he certainly did not buy into the sweeping condemnation of religious and devotional images which had been adopted by many English evangelicals, including some of his bishops, from the writings of Swiss and Rhineland theologians such as Zwingli and Bucer. In his efforts to drive back the rising tide of iconoclasm in 1547, Stephen Gardiner told the duke of Somerset about discussion he had witnessed between Henry and Cranmer over the proper use of images at the royal palace of New Hall (a discussion which, incidentally, testifies to the sense among those close to the king that he was open to persuasion), during which Henry had, by Gardiner’s account, decisively refuted Cranmer’s argument that the second commandment forbade all religious images.\textsuperscript{85} While evidently accepting the new numbering of the commandments, which separated out the commandment concerning graven images from the commandment to have but one God, Henry insisted on an idiosyncratically literal reading of the commandment: the prohibition was restricted to images in three dimensions (‘graven’) which were the subject of worship (and not purely decorative) – except for the crucifix, veneration of which was still explicitly required and provided for in the church’s liturgy, and ostentatiously practised by the king himself.\textsuperscript{86} This is not a reading

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., pp. 60–1. The relic was not destroyed until two years after Anne’s execution. However, the appearances of Latymer’s claim may be preserved if we speculate that the meaning of the relic’s having been ‘plucked downe’ in 1535 was not that it was destroyed, but simply that it was removed from public display. Some chronological confusion may be forgiven in a memoir written more than twenty years later, and is no reason to reject outright this testimony to Anne’s intervention.

\textsuperscript{84} Eighth report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, p. 21, an annotated warrant to Thomas Pope, dated 28 May 1537.

\textsuperscript{85} Gardiner to the duke of Somerset, 6 June 1547, in Muller, ed., Letters of Stephen Gardiner, pp. 286–96, at p. 290.

\textsuperscript{86} It might be argued that Henry’s position on images reflected that of the Orthodox churches of the East, which venerated two-dimensional images – icons – while eschewing those in three dimensions. But his continued insistence on the place of the three-dimensional crucifix in worship makes his solution to this particular theological problem unique, as far as I know. While the Greek tradition also includes veneration of the cross, the image of Christ upon it is itself usually two-dimensional, rather than three-dimensional as in the Latin tradition. Nor is there clear evidence that all three-dimensional images were removed, or meant to be removed, from English churches under the terms of the Injunctions of 1538: only those that were the objects of superstitious worship. For Henry’s creeping to the cross on Good Friday 1539, see John Worth to Lord Lisle, 15 May 1539, in M. St. C. Byrne, ed., The Lisle letters (6 vols. Chicago, IL, 1981), v. p. 478.}
that seems to have owed anything to Erasmus, although there was an Erasmian element in the emphasis in Henrician justifications of religious imagery in terms of ‘layfolk’s books’, encouraging the illiterate, in particular, to imitation of Christ and his saints.\footnote{87}

II

The dissolution of the monasteries in the later 1530s was perhaps the most striking consequence of the break with Rome. Bernard seeks to explain the emergence of this policy by suggesting that Henry had never really liked monks that much; in fact, that he shared Erasmus's sardonic scepticism about what was commonly called the ‘religious life’.\footnote{88} Yet there are problems with this argument. The religious order against which Henry moved first, fastest, and most decisively was precisely that to which he had most publicly affiliated himself earlier in his reign. In 1534 he abruptly suppressed the English Province of the Observant Franciscans. Yet in 1514 he had written to Pope Leo X seeking favour for that same order, which had convents next door to the royal palaces (indeed, effectively as parts of the palace complexes) at Greenwich and Richmond. That letter speaks in the highest possible terms of their poverty, sincerity, charity, devotion, and pastoral zeal, and professes the king’s ‘peculiar devotion and most fervent zeal for the holy family of Friars Minor of the Observance’.\footnote{89} His first confessor as king was Stephen Baron, provincial father of the Observants in England.\footnote{90} Of course, some of Henry’s affection for them

\footnote{87} See the expositions of the second commandment in the ‘Bishops’ Book’ (1537) and the ‘King’s Book’ (1543): The institution of a Christen man (London: Berthelet, 1537; STC 5164), fo. 57v–58r; and T. A. Lacey, ed., The King’s Book; or, A necessary doctrine and erudition for any Christian man (Oxford, 1825; repr. London, 1932), pp. 87–8. See also Aston, England’s iconoclasts, pp. 239–40 and 371–81.

\footnote{88} Bernard, ‘Piety of Henry VIII’, p. 73: ‘Henry VIII was never much committed to monasteries’.

\footnote{89} Ellis, ed., Original letters, iii.i.166; LPi.i.2715, 12 Mar. 1514. By a bull dated 2 Jan. 1514, Leo X allowed the Observant Franciscans of England to enjoy the use, though not the formal ownership, of ‘substantial buildings and magnificent ecclesiastical ornaments’ (domos amplas; & magnifica ornamenta Ecclesiastica), confirming a concession said to have been previously granted by Julius II at the specific request of the queen of England (i.e. Catherine of Aragon). See Magnum bullarium romanum (19 vols., Luxembourg, 1727–58), i, pp. 542–3. In 1517 Leo enacted the formal separation of the Observant and Conventual Franciscans, referring to petitions for this from several monarchs, including Henry VIII (ibid., i, pp. 583–6, esp. p. 584). Henry’s letter to this effect is calendared at LP 1.i.1740, 13 Apr. 1511.

\footnote{90} Stephen Baron, Sermones declamati coram alma vniversitate Cantibrigiensi (London: Wynkyn de Worde, n.d. [c. 1509?]; STC 1497), title page, refers to himself as confessor to the king. It is
may have reflected that of his wife, Catherine of Aragon. More intriguingly, it is worth noting that Erasmus himself wrote a brief encomium of the Observant Franciscan Jean Vitrier, for whose holiness of life he had nothing but admiration, and that he was careful not to let his critique of contemporary monasticism extend to an outright condemnation of monasticism as such. All this militates strongly against the theory that Henry shared some supposedly Erasmian scepticism towards monasticism and mendicancy in general at that time.

The Observants were especially committed and active supporters of Catherine throughout the years of the divorce controversy, and when Henry finally turned against them in 1534, there is more reason to see this as a change of heart than as the long-delayed germination of some Erasmian seed. When William Peto took the opportunity afforded by the king’s presence in the friars’ chapel at Greenwich on Easter Day 1532 to deliver a few home truths on the subject of the divorce, Henry reacted with quiet fury. Royal irritation will have been all the more intense in that the pulpit had only been installed one year previously – at Henry’s expense. The episode was redolent of Colet’s sermon before the king in 1512, but it did not end the same way. Peto was not won round. It was he who was busy peddling the scandalous story that Henry had ‘meddled’ not only with Anne Boleyn’s sister but also with her mother, and in due course he found it wise to flee the country; while Henry’s immediate response was to put up one of his chaplains, Richard Curwen, to preach a contrary sermon from the same pulpit a week later, in defiance of the warden of the house. This contretemps in itself did not kill his long-standing affection for the Observants. In late summer 1532 the king sent a generous alms of

only fair to point out, however, that Henry VIII soon became the first English king for a century or two whose confessor was not a friar. William Atwater was described as his confessor in a papal letter providing him to the bishopric of Lincoln. See A. P. Fuller, ed., Calendar of entries in the papal registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland: papal letters, xx: 1513–1521 (Dublin, 2005), no. 379, 15 Sept. 1514. His successor as bishop of Lincoln, John Longland, was Henry’s confessor in the 1520s.


92 Rummel, Erasmus, pp. 43–7, offers a sensitive summary of Erasmus’s views on monasticism. For Erasmus’s memoir of Jean Vitrier, given in the same letter as his memoir of Colet, see Erasmus to Justus Jonas, 13 June 1521, ep. 1211, CWE, viii, pp. 225–44, at pp. 226–32. Even here, though, Erasmus snipes at aspects of life in a religious order.


95 Chapuys to Charles V, 16 Apr. 1532, LP 5.941.
£6 13 s 4d to their provincial chapter at Richmond. But the fact that this gift was delivered by the hands of the court’s latest rising star, Thomas Cromwell, at the very moment when the death of Archbishop Warham had opened the way to a unilateral English resolution to the divorce crisis, shows that it was a political gift.\(^96\) The order had to decide whether Peto was a lone voice or a spokesman. Their answer can presumably be seen in John Forest’s Paul’s Cross sermon of 3 November.\(^97\) It was doubtless the growing evidence of support for the Holy Maid of Kent among numerous leading Observants that turned royal love to hatred. His sudden revulsion against them was just the sort of deeply personal reaction which characterizes all his dealings: few kings of England were more ready to reclassify a friend as an enemy should the need arise. He turned against the Observants, as he turned against the pope, because, having thought them his friends, he resented their refusal to give him what he wanted. Henry VIII had the ungrateful man’s characteristically acute sense of the gratitude due to him from others.

Even when he had commenced the systematic suppression of lesser monasteries in 1536, Henry showed every sign of continued attachment to the monastic principle. It is difficult to put any other construction on the fact that in 1537 he proceeded to endow two new monasteries—admittedly, out of the spoils of those already suppressed—to pray for himself and for his new wife, Jane Seymour. Bernard has argued that Henry VIII’s two monastic foundations were motivated by nothing more than the practical necessity of housing otherwise homeless monks and nuns, and that they therefore differ only formally from the licences which were granted to many dissolved houses allowing them to remain in existence. While this interpretation cannot be definitively refuted, it is important to note first that it is an interpretation placed upon the events—not an observation drawn from the sources—and secondly that there are many reasons to resist it. Not only were the houses named after the king himself, to be known in perpetuity as ‘the new monastery of King Henry VIII of Stixwold’ and ‘the new monastery of the Holy Trinity of King Henry VIII of Bisham’, but their founding charters give every indication of genuine piety. The houses were dedicated, like most of his subsequent cathedral foundations, to Christ and the Blessed Virgin, and their charters proclaimed his special devotion to Our Lady.\(^98\) If the foundations were merely

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\(^96\) *LP* 5.1346 accounts for this gift on 26 Sept. 1532. But the chapter itself seems to have been held in August. John Lawrence OFM Obs. wrote to Henry VIII on 29 Aug. 1532 from Richmond reporting on its proceedings (*LP* 5.1259). Warham had died on 22 Aug. 1532.

\(^97\) *LP* 5.1525, Richard Lyst OFM Obs. to Cromwell, 7 Nov. 1532, reporting on Forest’s sermon the previous Sunday. Along with John Lawrence, Lyst was acting as an inside man and informer for Thomas Cromwell.

\(^98\) Bernard, *King’s Reformation*, pp. 442–5. His observation that the ‘supposed’ refoundations were merely ‘technical’ expedients that implied no ‘supposed continuing commitment to monasticism’ nor ‘any special religious fervour’ (p. 445) is made without reference to the affirmation in the charters of Henry’s ‘devotion’ to the Blessed Virgin or to the use of Henry’s own name in the titles of the new houses. See R. Rex and C. D. C. Armstrong, ‘Henry VIII’s
technical expedients, their charters gave hostages to fortune. While, of course, his requirement that these houses pray for the welfare and souls of Henry, Jane, and their descendants was ‘entirely conventional’, that is again precisely the point: gratitude to God for the wife who had given him a son is a highly conventional, and therefore highly convincing, motive for a religious foundation.  

The king’s treatment of the Franciscan house at Greenwich shows how long it took for him to lose all faith in the religious ideals of monasticism and mendicancy. Although the Observant Franciscans were suppressed in 1534, their houses were at that point simply entrusted to other orders: in the case of Greenwich, to the Conventual Franciscans. Royal accounts from 1537–8 show that Henry was financing them to the tune of £100 a year, in quarterly payments which had presumably commenced when the house was put under new management and which stopped when it was finally closed late in 1538. This was a prodigious sum. (Compare the £10 a year which Henry had formerly paid to the Dominicans of Guildford.) One reason for this generosity is that the Observant house was part of the palace complex. Although the palace had its own chapel, it seems to have been the friars’ church that was used for grander ceremonial occasions, presumably because it was more spacious. Mary was christened there on 20 February 1516, as was Elizabeth on 10 September 1533. The royal connotations of the chapel were emphasized by its great west window, decorated to Henry VII’s specifications with an array of royal saints

ecclesiastical and collegiate foundations’, Historical Research, 75 (2002), pp. 390–407, at p. 397. Bernard refers to this article, but does not address its argument on these two points. For an early sign of Henry’s devotion, see Pace to Wolsey, 9 Sept. 1521, reporting that, on the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, Henry had ‘differryde … to write unto yow his letters off his own hande, for the seyngye of hys matens in honorem Divae Virginis’ (State papers, 1, no. xxxiv, p. 51).  

99 The citation is from Bernard, King’s Reformation, p. 444.

100 The King’s Payments, LP 13.ii.128o. A quarterly payment of £25 is listed at Lady Day 1538 (p. 528), but had stopped by Christmas that year (p. 537). This account book begins only in 1537–8, so it is not certain when the payments had begun.

101 Nicolas, ed., Privy purse expenses, p. 150 (July 1531).

102 Martin, Franciscan architecture in England, pp. 234–9, on Greenwich. See also p. 24 for the proximity of the Richmond and Greenwich Observant houses to the royal palaces there. H. W. Colvin, ed., The history of the king’s works (6 vols., London, 1963–82), iv, pp. 105–6, discusses the Observant house and church at Greenwich, and reports that there was a separate royal chapel at the other (west) end of the complex. The royal chapel must have been splendid, as a warrant of 22 Oct. 1519 authorized delivery of £200 to Thomas Forster (Controller of the King’s Works) for works at Greenwich which included ‘gylding and paynting of our Chapell’ (LP 3.i.1483; SP 1/19, fo. 74r). The friars’ church is clearly visible (with its roof intact and in good repair) in the views of the palace drawn by Anton van den Wyngaerde c. 1544 and 1558. See Colvin, ed., History of the king’s works, iv, plates 4 and 5, for the 1558 views; and A. van den Wyngaerde, The panorama of London circa 1544, ed. H. Colvin and S. Foister (London, 1996), drawing xiii, for 1544. In the 1544 view, Wyngaerde seems to have the perspective wrong, as the church is shown perpendicular to the Thames rather than parallel, as in the 1558 views.

103 LP 2.i.1573 for Mary’s christening; and LP 6.1111 for Elizabeth’s. Both accounts state explicitly that the ceremony was performed in the friars’ church.
watching over the royal family.\textsuperscript{104} But the continued presence of conventual Franciscan friars at Greenwich was hardly an indispensable condition of keeping the chapel going: the money could easily have been spent on chantry priests (and the chapel seems to have been kept open after the friary was suppressed in 1538). Nor was there any need in the mid-1530s to rehouse homeless Franciscans, as no conventual Franciscan houses had yet been suppressed. There is nothing in the sources to counter the natural conclusion that Henry paid to have Franciscans at Greenwich because he wanted Franciscans at Greenwich, a wish which most likely reflected devotional preferences. It would be quite fair to point out that none of the religious houses Henry founded or supported lasted very long. But that very fact is all the more plausibly interpreted as a serious and even sudden change of heart.

As Hugh Latimer pointed out in 1536, in an effort to turn the king’s mind more decisively towards an evangelical Reformation, while the ‘founding of monasteries argued purgatory to be; so the putting of them down argueth it not to be’.\textsuperscript{105} If so, then Henry’s foundations at Stixwold and Bisham show that at this point he was still inclined to accept the existence of purgatory, even if the Ten Articles promulgated in summer 1536 air certain reservations about the doctrine. Yet by the end of that year there is clear evidence of doubts about purgatory and of hesitation over prayers for the dead.\textsuperscript{106} But these doubts and hesitations postdate the break with Rome. The name ‘purgatory’ was in due course expunged from the English religious vocabulary, along with the associated doctrine of indulgences, but prayer for the dead remained, albeit now contested to some degree. Thus the ‘King’s Book’ of 1543 emphatically reaffirmed prayer for the dead even as it prohibited talk of ‘purgatory’.\textsuperscript{107} This ambiguity is seen in the fact that while on the one hand Henry amended the statutes of the order of the Garter in 1540 so that the offerings made for the souls of deceased knights would be spent on charitable works rather than on requiem masses, on the other he provided in his will for a perpetual chantry for his own soul.\textsuperscript{108} However, no such doubts or hesitations are to be seen in the

\textsuperscript{104} Martin, 	extit{Franciscan architecture in England}, p. 238, referring to BL Egerton MS 2341 A and B (two paper rolls, probably originally one) for this decorative programme. Every figure in the window was of royal blood. MS 2341 A claims to describe five great panes, but only four are now described, focusing respectively on Queen Elizabeth, Henry VII, Lady Margaret Beaufort, and Princess Margaret. It would seem that the description of the first pane is now lost. It would have stood at the head of the roll, and presumably focused on Prince Arthur.

\textsuperscript{105} Latimer, 	extit{Sermons and remains}, p. 249.

\textsuperscript{106} Both the Ten Articles of 1536 and the ‘Bishops’ Book’ of 1537 still employ the name and concept of ‘purgatory’ although they call for the eradication of the ‘abuses’ connected with it, namely ‘the bysshop of Romes pardons’ (i.e. papal indulgences). See G. Bray, ed., 	extit{Documents of the English Reformation} (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 173–4; and 	extit{The institution of a Christen man} (STC 5164), fos. 96v–97r (for the words cited).

\textsuperscript{107} See ‘Of prayer for souls departed’, in Lacey, ed., 	extit{King’s Book}, p. 163, ‘it is a very good and charitable deed to pray for souls departed’; and p. 164, ‘it is much necessary … that we therefore abstain from the name of purgatory, and no more dispute nor reason thereof’.

\textsuperscript{108} Jefferson, ‘Statutes of the order’, p. 67.
first twenty-five years of his reign. In 1511, in response to a petition from the churchwardens of St James, Dadlington, he urged his subjects to give generously to a chantry chapel there in memory of the slain of Bosworth Field, avowing that ‘charyte’ had moved him to consider ‘howe gracious howe merytorious & howe plesande a dede it is to almighty god and what greate rewarde they shall haue of god for it that prayth for the soules of them that weyr sleyne at bosworth feelde’.\(^{109}\) Although this was an action undertaken at the instance of others, the production by the king’s printer of the letters of confraternity appealing to Henry’s charitable consideration was a gesture that affiliated the king in a very public way with this central practice of late medieval English religion. His instincts seem to have remained the same in the 1530s. When Jane Seymour died from the complications of her difficult labour, Henry had 1,200 masses said for her soul in the city of London.\(^{110}\) And even in the 1540s, daily prayers for Queen Jane’s soul were among the duties imposed in the statutes which the king issued for the cathedrals founded or refounded in place of former monasteries or cathedral priories.\(^{111}\) Jane was, after all, the only one of his wives (apart from Catherine Parr) whom he still reckoned truly to have been his wife, and she was in any case the only wife whom he recognized as having borne him a legitimate child. His abiding concern for the welfare of her soul was certainly sincere and is even somewhat touching. Thus, there was a continuing commitment to intercessory prayer for the souls of the faithful departed even amidst the hesitations over doctrinal minutiae that became apparent from the mid-1530s onwards. And until then, Henry had given no reason whatsoever to believe that he was anything other than wholeheartedly committed to traditional beliefs and practices regarding prayer for the dead.

III

Irrespective of whether Henry VIII’s growing hostility towards traditional religion in the later 1530s reflected a change in his religious opinions or merely the expression of inclinations long held, there is no doubt that what made it all possible was the break with Rome, the defining feature of his religious history. Yet even this watershed can be misleadingly flattened out in some accounts of the English Reformation, when it is set in the perspective of late medieval disputes over temporal and spiritual jurisdiction and of notions about the ecclesiastical responsibilities of kings. It is important to understand this

\(^{109}\) STC 14077637, letter of confraternity, printed by Richard Pynson, presumably in 1511. See LP I.1,857, g. 18 for the letters patent granted to the churchwardens by Henry on 24 Aug. 1511 while he was at Nottingham Castle

\(^{110}\) LP 12.ii.1042, Richard Gresham to Cromwell, 8 Nov. 1537.

background correctly in order to appreciate the distinctive character of the royal supremacy.

The idea that the king had a certain moral responsibility for the spiritual as well as the material welfare of his subjects was deeply entrenched in medieval attitudes. As has recently been emphasized by Steven Gunn, Edmund Dudley’s *Tree of commonwealth* drew attention to this spiritual dimension of kingship.\(^{112}\) Henry himself spelled it out in his open letter to Luther of 1526:

> It hath semed to us alwayes our entierly beloved people that lykewise as it apperteyneth to the offyce and estate of a kyng dilygently to procure the temporall welth and commodyte of his subiectes: So dothe it of dewtie more especially belonge to the parte and offyce of a christen kynge over and besydes his labour payne and traveyle bestowed upon the provysyon of worldly welth and quyete for his people: farre yet more fervently to labour travayle and studye by all the meanes and wayes to hym possible howe he maye surely kepe establysshe and confyrme and spyritually set forthe and forther the hertes and myndes of his subiectes in the right relygion of god and trewe faythe of Christ by whose highe provydence and especiall bounte they were for that purpose chefely committed unto his governaunce.\(^{113}\)

This is of course an expression of essentially Augustinian politics which might, *mutatis mutandis*, have come straight out of Augustine’s letter to Count Boniface. As it stands, it might have been uttered by any Christian sovereign of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. It was certainly not inconsistent with a commitment to the papacy, for even the two most illustrious victims of Henry’s break with Rome subscribed to it. In an unfinished psalm commentary that he wrote for Henry VIII, John Fisher remarked that Psalm 19 ‘could be understood of both kings and priests’, adding that it was ‘on the vigilance of these two groups that the welfare or downfall of the Christian Republic chiefly depends’. Thomas More linked kingship to priesthood as ‘those two moste emynent orders, that god hath here ordayed in erth/the two great orders I mene of speciall consecrate personys, the sacred prynces and prestes’. Given More’s closeness to the king in the mid-1520s, especially in the campaign against the Reformation, he may well have been involved in the drafting of Henry’s letter to Luther, in which case the resemblance between their views might be less than coincidental.\(^{114}\)

It was this sense of responsibility that lay behind Henry’s decision to enter the lists against Luther in 1521. And it was on show in 1515 in his role in the


\(^{113}\) A copy of the letters wherin the most redouted & mighty prince… Henry VIII… made answere unto a certayne letter of Martyn Luther (London: R. Pynson, n.d. [1528]; STC 19087), sig. A2r.

reconciliation of the conflicting interests of the clergy and the laity after the Richard Hunne affair; and even in his intervention in the dispute among some of his senior bishops over probate jurisdiction, a particularly vexed issue early in his reign.\footnote{Bernard, ‘Piety of Henry VIII’, pp. 62–88, at p. 65.} Yet such episodes should not be read as the royal supremacy avant la lettre. It was none other than Pope Julius II who urged Henry to broker a deal between the rival jurisdictions of Canterbury and Winchester.\footnote{LP 1.1.1094, 13 Mar. 1512.} The position of the king in the medieval mind as the ‘strong right arm’ of the church always had the risky potential (from the point of view of the clergy) of allowing that strong right arm to get a stranglehold on the rest of the body. But the solutions to these problems were reached with pragmatic compromises or demarcation agreements that respected both reality and ideal, granting kings the powers they felt they needed while allowing the clergy to retain – in theory – the ‘liberties of the church’ upon which they insisted.

Nevertheless, some scholars are still tempted to read Henry’s change of policy towards the papacy in the 1530s as the actualization of a potential evident in his earlier words and deeds. T. F. Mayer, among others, has noted how, in the controversy over ecclesiastical liberties in 1515, Henry VIII declared that ‘by the ordinance and sufferance of God we are king of England, and the kings of England in time past have never had any superior but God alone’.\footnote{T. F. Mayer, ‘On the road to 1534: the occupation of Tournai and the Henry VIII’s theory of sovereignty’, in D. Hoak, ed., Tudor political culture (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 11–30, at pp. 13 and 21.} Again, in 1517, he criticized Pope Leo X for infringing his ‘supreme power as lord and king in the regality of Tournai’, which Henry claimed to hold ‘without recognition of any superior’.\footnote{Henry VIII to the bishop of Worcester, c. Jan. 1517, in J. O. Halliwell, ed., Letters of the kings of England (2 vols., London, 1846), i, pp. 235–44, at p. 237.} Bernard rightly warns against reading such statements as tantamount to the doctrine of royal supremacy, yet he still hankers after an interpretation that reads greater significance into them.\footnote{Bernard, ‘Piety of Henry VIII’, pp. 63–5, esp. p. 65, ‘And yet, and yet, the letter does reveal a frame of mind … that could … ultimately lead to a chain of events culminating in a renunciation of papal authority.’} The drift of these claims might seem to be that Henry never acknowledged any kind of papal supremacy over kings. But both these disputes concerned temporal matters (in the earlier case, at most the placing of the boundary between temporal and spiritual matters). And on both occasions, this was made very clear. Neither Mayer nor most of the others who cite the apparently sweeping claim that ‘the kings of England in time past have never had any superior but God alone’ continue with the words that follow: ‘Wherefore know you well that we shall maintain the right of our crown and of our temporal jurisdiction as well in this point as in all others.’\footnote{See e.g. G. R. Elton, Reform and Reformation: England, 1509–1558 (London, 1977), p. 56; Jasper Ridley, Henry VIII (London, 1984), p. 104 (which cites more of the text, but silently
'temporal' jurisdiction, Henry is precisely acknowledging the reality of papal spiritual jurisdiction, and mounting no challenge to it. Likewise, in the case of Tournai, the point of the word 'regality' is to emphasize the temporal nature of the claim, and the whole dispute was about the episcopal temporalities. In another comment on the case, Henry complained that the pope had 'exceeded his ordinary power'. There is nothing implausible in the idea that Henry might have simultaneously entertained contradictory ideas about papal and royal power: 'cognitive dissonance' is hardly rare. But, in this case, there is no need for such a supposition, as Henry specifically confined his complaints to an alleged infringement of his 'regality', which lay outside papal 'ordinary' (i.e. not 'absolute') power. In neither case was Henry’s claim envisaged as a claim to spiritual jurisdiction, which is the essence of the royal supremacy and the grounds for repudiating papal primacy.

On the contrary, throughout the period in which he constantly asserted his temporal sovereignty and vigorously defended his regalian rights, Henry repeatedly and consistently affirmed the ecclesiastical and spiritual supremacy of the papacy within the church of which he protested himself ever a faithful son. We have already noted that Henry’s first war with France, in 1512–13, was conceived and justified in terms of a crusade in defence of ‘Holy Mother Church’ and the Holy Father, the pope, which was exactly how Henry chose to represent it to his people. In June 1513, the king’s painter was paid for producing ‘divers of the Pope’s arms in divers colors’, perhaps for use as standards in battle. Henry went even further in other writings. In a letter to Cardinal Bainbridge of April 1513, acknowledging the news of Leo X’s election, Henry wrote of James IV, decrying the contempt the Scottish king had shown of the papacy within the church of which he protested himself ever a faithful son. We have already noted that Henry’s first war with France, in 1512–13, was conceived and justified in terms of a crusade in defence of ‘Holy Mother Church’ and the Holy Father, the pope, which was exactly how Henry chose to represent it to his people. In June 1513, the king’s painter was paid for producing ‘divers of the Pope’s arms in divers colors’, perhaps for use as standards in battle. Henry went even further in other writings. In a letter to Cardinal Bainbridge of April 1513, acknowledging the news of Leo X’s election, Henry wrote of James IV, decrying the contempt the Scottish king had shown of the papacy within the church of which he protested himself ever a faithful son. We have already noted that Henry’s first war with France, in 1512–13, was conceived and justified in terms of a crusade in defence of ‘Holy Mother Church’ and the Holy Father, the pope, which was exactly how Henry chose to represent it to his people.


See e.g. STC 25947–7, a Latin flysheet publishing Julius II’s bull reciting Louis XII’s offences against the church, excommuning him, and releasing his subjects from their allegiance. In this case, even the temporal power of the papacy was acceptable to Henry!

King’s Book of Payments, LP 2.ii, p. 1461.
the head of our religion’. At the same time, he reiterated his own concern ‘to defend the church, and free it from the savage tyranny of the king of the French’, and ‘to defend the Church of God and the honour of the Apostolic See’.

Henry’s regard for the papacy remained warm through the kaleidoscopic diplomatic manoeuvres of the decade. In July 1515 he told Venetian ambassadors that he was the pope’s ‘good son, and shall always be with his Holiness and with the Church, from which I never mean to depart’. There is in retrospect an ominous ring to his further comment, ‘I think I have sufficient power with the Pope to warrant hopes of my making him adhere to whichever side I choose.’ He put it even more strongly a couple of years later: ‘The Pope is mine.’ His confidence that he could bend the pope to his will remained firm until well into the crisis over his ‘great matter’ in the later 1520s. Henry had every expectation, when he found himself in dire need of a favour from the pope in the later 1520s, that his previous record of political and theological support would secure it for him. The charge of ingratitude was one of the first to be flung in the pope’s teeth when it became clear that a prompt annulment would not be forthcoming. In the meantime, nothing could have been clearer than his comments to Luther in 1521:

I have no intention of insulting the pope by discussing his prerogative as though it were a matter of doubt ... Luther can hardly deny that all the churches accept and revere the holy Roman see as mother and ruler of the faithful as long as they are not cut off from her by distance or dangers ... He forgets the warning in Deuteronomy that whoever arrogantly refuses obedience to the priest who ministers to the Lord his God must be condemned to death. How much more deserving of death is someone who will not obey the highest priest of all and the supreme judge on earth!

He was just as explicit in his open letter to Luther five years later. In the English translation, published even as the quest for the divorce was getting under way, Henry described Luther as a ‘perpetual enemy to the Pope’, adding in parenthesis, ‘to whose highnesse I well knowe howe farre the estate of a kyng is inferyour’.

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125 R. Brown et al., eds., Calendar of state papers and manuscripts, relating to English affairs ... in ... Venice, and ... Northern Italy (London, 1864–), ii, no. 633, p. 252, report of Venetian ambassadors, 3 July 1515.
126 Ibid., no. 876, p. 381, report of Sebastian Giustinian, 23 Apr. 1517 (‘Pontifex est meus’).
129 A copy of the letters ... Martyn Luther, sig. F2v. The original Latin reads ‘cuius fastigio, haud nescio quam longo reges intervallo sint impares’. See Henry VIII, Literarum, quibus ... Henricus octauus ... respondit, ad quandam epistolam Martini Lutheri (London: Pynson, 1526; STC 19084), sig. F6v.
grateful papacy would find a solution to his problem), he expostulated against the ‘insolence’ and ‘inhumanity’ with which imperial troops had treated ‘the most sacred person of our holy Lord, the true and only vicar of Jesus Christ upon earth’. 130

There is no need to detail the startling change that came over royal rhetoric concerning the papacy in the 1530s. By October 1530, the sabre was being rattled very loudly. 131 The crucial question for this argument is whether that new rhetoric reflected the realization or the reversal of Henry’s earlier beliefs. Ultimately, it is to the king himself that we would wish to go for an answer, and, fortunately, Henry commented on several occasions on the significance of the events of the 1530s—in ways which show that he saw them in terms of the road to Damascus. He described his new posture towards the papacy not merely as a change of mind but in the vocabulary of religious conversion. From the vantage point of the later 1530s, obviously alluding to the very words of his own earlier letter against Luther, he informs us that he had changed his mind about the papacy: ‘We princis wrote our selfes, to be inferiours to popes: as longe as we thought so, we obeyde them as our superiours. Nowe, we wryte not as we dyd, and therfore they haue noo great cause to meruayle, if we hereafter do nat as we dyd.’ 132 But there was more to it than a purely intellectual event. Perhaps the earliest hint of this was in a conversation with the papal nuncio in September 1532, which we know secondhand from a despatch of Charles V’s ambassador, Eustace Chapuys. He reported Henry’s furious threat to ‘open the eyes of other princes, who, not being learned as he was on such subjects, were in absolute ignorance of the fact that the Pope’s true and legitimate power was very small in comparison with that which he had tyrannically usurped’. 133

The opening of eyes and the shining of the light were to be recurring themes in the royal rhetoric of the 1530s. As far as Henry VIII was concerned, the royal supremacy was not an expedient but an enlightenment. He instructed his ambassador in Scotland, Ralph Sadler, to advise James V ‘to leane unto the pure worde of God, and to passe light uppon dreames of men abused by superstition,

130 Henry VIII to Cardinal Cibo (i.e. Innocenzo Cybo, 1491–1550), 10 July 1527, Halliwell, ed., Letters of the kings of England, i, pp. 286–9, at p. 287. This letter also laments the indignities those troops inflicted upon ‘the precious reliques of God and his holy saints’ (p. 287) and the consecrated eucharistic elements (p. 288).

131 Henry VIII to his ambassadors at Rome, 7 Oct. 1530, warning that the pope would not like his claims to authority to be subjected to scrutiny, and deploying to new effect his own claim to recognize ‘no superior on earth’. TNA SP1/58, fo. 108v (LP 4 iii.667).

132 Henry VIII, A Protestation made for the most mighty and mooste redoubted kyng of Englane (London: Berthelet, 1538; STC 13090), sig. C4v. Tracey Sowerby has argued compellingly for Richard Morison’s responsibility for this treatise. See Sowerby, Renaissance and reform in Tudor England, pp. 67–9. This does not detract from the significance of what is here said in the king’s name. As Sowerby shows, this treatise was a high royal priority in 1537–8. I should like to thank Mr C. D. C. Armstrong for bringing Sowerby’s work on this to my attention.

As we have seen, William Thomas spoke of God as having ‘opened his [the king’s] eyes’. Those who wrote for the king’s attention knew the kind of thing he liked to hear. For John Shepreve, Henry had restored ‘the true light of the gospel’. Henry Parker, Lord Morley, excelled himself in his commentary on Psalm 93, identifying Henry himself with the ‘Beatus vir’ of the psalm in question:

Blessed art thou, whome God hath taught, to espie out the peryllous doctrine of the byshop of Rome, wherby the people of England are brought from darkenes to lyght, from errore to the hygh way of righte knowledge, from daunger of dethe eternall, to life that never endeth, to be shorte, even from hel to heven.

Henry had undergone a conversion. God had opened his eyes to the truth about royal power, and it was now his role to open everybody else’s. The final version of the oath to the succession, which had to be sworn by all who took office in the church or under the crown, imposed upon all who took it that same sense of conversion: ‘I, A. B. havinge nowe the vayle of darknes of the usurped power auctoritie and jurisdiccon of the See and Bishoppes of Rome clerely taken awaye from myne eyes.’

The break with Rome was a theological, even a spiritual matter, for Henry. On one occasion, he told the French ambassador of the ‘ease and repose of conscience in which he presently stands, having entirely put away and thrown off subjection to Rome’. This was a phrase which at that time had a distinctly evangelical ring to it. ‘Peace of conscience’ (pax conscientiae) was, precisely, the psychological benefit that Luther and his followers identified as the fruit of the experience of certainty of divine grace which was integral to their doctrine of justification by faith alone. Henry’s conscience was often called into the public arena in this way during the hectic years of the Reformation. William Paget’s instructions, when he was sent on an embassy to the Lutheran princes of the Schmalkaldic League in 1534, were to assure them of Henry’s conscientious objections to his first marriage on the grounds of divine law. We can surely hear Henry’s own voice in the coda to this, that ‘the same court of his conscience’ was ‘enlightened and instructed by the Spirit of God, who possesses and directs the hearts of princes’ (Proverbs 21:1). After the break with Rome he took an increasingly literal view of the divine direction of the hearts of kings, avowing the divine inspiration of his own religious position. On his deathbed, he

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134 State papers, v, pt iv, no. cccxx, p. 85.
135 Thomas, The pilgrim, p. 38. However, Thomas was not satisfied with the extent of Henry’s conversion, going on to suggest that Henry ‘did see with but one eye’ (p. 80).
136 BL Royal MS C.xvi. fo. 179r.
137 Henry Parker, Lord Morley, The exposition and declaration of the psalme, Deus ultionum dominus (London, 1539), sig. B5r.
134 LP7.148.
reminded the bystanders ‘that, where others were in extremities, he had ben
directed in the mean way of trewh, and therefore was mete to be arbiter
between th’others to reduce them to the trewh’. The Act for the
Advancement of True Religion, passed in 1543, observed that Henry had
made the Bible available in English to his ‘loving Subjectes, to thintent that they
might therbye the better knowe theyre duetie to Almightye God and to his
Majestie, and allso increase in vertue’. The traditional Christian axis of God
and neighbour was transformed by Henry VIII into a triad: God, king, and
neighbour. Picking out the person of the king in this way was an emphatic
assertion of his divine qualities. By the end of his reign, Henry was complacently
referring to himself as one ‘whom God hath appoynted his Vicare, and high
minister’, an evidently quasi-papal appellation. It was, reportedly, William Tyndale’s
dying prayer in 1536 that God might open the king of England’s eyes. In fact, that prayer
first appears in the woodcut illustrating John Foxe’s account of Tyndale’s martyrdom in 1563, graduating to
the text itself only in 1570. Tellingly, it seems as though the words there put
into Tyndale’s mouth reflect the way that Henry expected his subjects to talk
about his royal religious experience. Henry himself would have reckoned the
prayer wasted breath: as far as he was concerned, God had already opened
his eyes.

141 Gardiner to Cranmer, c. 12 June 1547, in Muller, ed., Letters of Stephen Gardiner,
143 R. Rex, ‘The crisis of obedience: God’s word and Henry’s Reformation’, Historical Journal,
145 John Foxe, Acts and monuments [1570 recension], p. 1229, ‘Lorde open the Kyng of
Englanedes eyes.’ This prayer is not found in the text of the 1563 recension, pp. 517–26, but
appears in the woodcut on p. 523 (references taken from Foxe’s Book of martyrs variorum edition
online, found at www.hrionline.ac.uk/johnfoxe/).