The Reign Of Edward VI Essay, Research Paper

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The reign of Edward VI saw great religious upheaval from a Protestant

religion that was Catholic in nature to a more clearly defined and radical

quasi-Calvinism. In that sense religious policy hardened. But the policies and

ideal never became deeply entrenched and accepted throughout the country and

often only existed to serve the interests of those who enacted them, and not the

future stance of the church. Under Somerset the changes involved merely creating

a Protestant facelift, and only under Northumberland did sweeping radical

changes emerge. However, policy never hardened enough, or became accepted enough,

to prevent it being disintegrated when Mary came to power in 1553.

The religious situation was highly unstable at the time of Edward’s

ascendance. Although Henry had allowed Protestant leaning clerics to predominate

in the later year of his reign, most religious statutes remained orthodox, and

conservative. But under Somerset Protestants who had previously fled to Europe

after the six articles, such as Hooper, Becon, and Turner, all returned. Many

were writers banned under Henry VIII, along with Luther and other European

Protestants. Guy points out that 159 out of 394 new books printed during the

Protectorate were written by Protestant reformers.

Reformers predominated the Privy council under Somerset, and reform was

popular amongst the gentry of the time. But outside London and East Anglia

Protestantism was not a major force. In terms of religious hardening, it is

unlikely that the surge of Protestantism had any particular long term impact

outside these areas. It was only in these areas that violent iconoclasm took

place. Elsewhere far more moderate reforms such as vernacular Bibles and

services were introduced.

The legislation of the Somerset era also did little to aid a definite

hardening of religious policy. The Privy council remained reluctant to make any

radical moves. The Council, parliament, and the convocation all wanted reform,

but not of the type that would firmly thrust the country into radical

Protestantism. Moderate leanings were all that was desired, and this was

reflected in the two major pieces of legislation, the Chantries Act and the

Treason Act, which both did little to resolve doctrinal uncertainties. The new

book of common prayer also trod a careful path between Protestantism and

Catholicism.

Jordan states that ?These years … were characterised by patience with

the bishops, almost half of whom were conservative in their views and Catholic

in their doctrinal sympathies, though all, trained as they were in the reign of

Henry VIII, lent complete support to the Act Supremacy in all its constitutional

and political implications … the lesser clergy and the laity were with few

exceptions under no considerable pressure to conform, even after the passage of

the Act establishing the first Book of Common Prayer.?

Guy suggests that the Protestant stance was only ever introduced by

Somerset to promote his own interests. ?Although accurate figures are lacking,

roughly one fifth of Londoners were Protestant by 1547 … but elsewhere

Protestantism had barely progressed. Yet London activists had a disproportionate

influence on official policy … secret cells of ?Christian brethren’ existed to

spread the word; links were forged with Lollard congregations , the Protestant

book trade established … Since so many of Somerset’s supporters were radical,

he had an incentive to assimilate the supremacy to their interests. The danger

was that religious opinion would polarise and lead to civil discord; uniformity

was the linchpin of order.?

Bush argues that due to the political motivation behind reform, real

religious zeal was not apparent, the apparent hardening Protestantism only a

token gesture. ?The outstanding characteristic of the settlement was its

moderate enforcement. Victims were relatively few, martyrs at the stake were

non-existent, and the conservative bishops tumbled from office in any number

only after Somerset’s fall … the regime certainly showed a noticeable leniency

in the persecution of religious dissent within the context of the age.?

Northumberland presided over moves to a far more radical religion.

Ridley was appointed Bishop of London and Hooper Bishop of Gloucester.

Protestantism had already been hardened through doctrine and procedural changes.

By Northumberland’s fall, communion tables had been moved into the centre of the

church, and second new prayer book was issued in 1552. Communion no longer

resembled mass. Only plain surpluses were allowed, and the 1553 42 articles

produced far more Protestant doctrinal changes than had been seen before. The

new vernacular bible was reinforced by the new style of service. Also, the

number of priests marrying under the new Protestant rule created a vested

interest within the church for the prolongment of Protestantism. In the long

term, this undoubtedly helped harden Protestant values at the grass roots level

within the church.

Such changes enacted a hardening of Protestantism in statute only.

Throughout the country many middle class and gentry resented the stricter brand

of Protestantism, and the erosion of Catholicism.

The balance of the Privy council swung far more heavily to radical

reformers under Northumberland, and this is probably reflected n the hardening

of religious policy seen. Conservatives were quickly driven from office.

Gairdiner was imprisoned in the Tower of London, Bishop Bonner of London was

retired and deprived of his diocese, to be replaced by reformer Ridley.

Reformers were subsequently installed into the bishoprics of Rochester,

Chichester, Norwich, Exeter and Durham.

Parliament was recalled in January 1552 and presented with a substantial

program or religious reform. The new Treason Act, the Act of Uniformity, the

limiting of Holy days to 25, the new and almost Calvinist Book of Common Prayer,

the redefining of the Eucharist and a vestments ban were all introduced.

However, it is unclear as to whether the intention was to secure a

hardening of Protestantism. If it was, it didn’t succeed. At the fall of

Northumberland Protestantism was accepted but not widely supported. In the

country Catholicism was still somewhat endearing. Certainly, there was little

evidence that Protestantism was increasing in popularity in the country, or any

evidence of a long term appeal. Jordan states that: ?the thrust of

Northumberland’s policy had been n the direction of an evangelical Protestant

party … whose theological preferences were Zwinglian or Calvinistic, whose

view of faith and worship displayed no nostalgia whatever for the ancient church,

and whose principle interest it was that all remaining Roman survivals be swept

away and that a pure, an undefiled, Protestantism be vigorously preached and

enforced throughout the realm.? That is what Northumberland preached, but it

also poses significant doctrinal problems. Calvinism and Zwinglism were

intrinsically different and could not be merged into some Protestant cocktail,

yet Northumberland allowed both views to predominate. And more alarmingly, as

Jordan reveals, ?Northumberland died in 1553 a professed and a communicating

Roman Catholic, making the staggering statement that his sympathies had been

secretly Catholic during the whole of the Edwardian era.?

The government’s subsequent pillaging of church wealth therefore

presents a more likely incentive for religious zeal. In 1552 an exhaustive

survey of church wealth was conducted, estimating a total value of over ?1m.

Northumberland then attacked the church to gain control of as much of this

wealth as possible. For example the Bishopric of Durham was halved, inventories

of gold and silver plate were conducted and removed.

There is however, much evidence that Protestant religious policy was

hardened during Edward’s reign. In 1547 Somerset succeeded in making Parliament

permit communion of both kinds, and to repeal the heresy laws, including the Act

of Six Articles. The new Injunctions also strengthened the Protestant stance of

the church.In 1549 the new Protestant prayer book merged traditional catholic

ideal with more radical Lutheran notions, and by the time of the prayer book of

1552 Protestantism was even more evident. Priests were subsequently allowed to

marry. The new prayer book was declared a monopoly, all previous edition were

ordered to be destroyed. A new ordination rite was created that denied the full

priesthood to ministers. Mass was reduced to little more than a token procedure

and church monasteries and chapels were all dissolved during Edward’s reign. The

prayer book of 1552 was enforced by a new Act of Uniformity and the Forty Two

Articles of 1553. At this stage religious policy had been hardened in that there

was a distinct policy – the country was officially Protestant, in doctrine and

in law. Previously there had been no such clear policy and the country as a

whole had not known definitively where it stood.

Only the appearances were beginning to change considerably. Catholic

religious groups, chantries, educational establishments such as chantry schools

seemed to remain untouched, except for their now increasing Protestant teaching.

Such was the hardening of Protestantism in England, moderate Lutheran

influences had given way to the more radical church-state ideals of Calvin and

Zwingli by the end of the reign, ideals that would never have been tolerated

under Henry VIII.

Dickens suggests this led to the ?reorientation from the Saxon to the

Swiss emphasis becoming decisive.? He continues, claiming, ?when Cranmer sought

to call a conference to unite European Protestants he was rebuffed by the

unimaginative Lutherans. On the other hand, thousands of religious refugees, the

great majority of them owing no direct allegiance to Luther’s Wittenburg, came

to settle in England. Martin Bucer and several other eminent foreign theologians

occupied key posts in the universities, while the great company of foreigners in

London were given the Austin Friars and there allowed by Cranmer to organise

their congregations along Swiss lines.?

One way in which religious policy was arguably hardened was the way in

which personal supremacy was undermined. Elton claims that ?in the first place,

the Edwardian Acts of Uniformity went a long way towards resting the liturgy and

ceremonial of the church on the authority of Parliament; the second act could

speak of the first Prayer Book as a ?very godly order set forth by authority of

Parliament’ and the second as annexed to the act. Instead of merely enforcing,

by penalties, personal decree of the supreme head, Parliament thus fully

participated in the ultimate exercise of his power, the definition of true faith.

It could be argued that the hardened religious position was not a result

of Protestantism but simply to strengthen the power of factions at court. Loades

suggest: ?the Edwardian church was every bit as much an instrument of government

propaganda as that of Henry had been. Sermons, homilies and exhortation of every

kind urged the sacred duty of obedience to the Prince, terming rebellion ? .

..the puddle and sink of all sins against God and man.’ So obvious was the

alliance of convenience between the Protestant divines and the secular

politicians that the conservative regarded the reservations of the former with

pardonable suspicion … the sincerity and religious conviction which actually

inspired them became evident only when political power had been stripped away.?

In conclusion, the reign of Edward VI did see a hardening of religious

policy in that such policy was clearly defined. Protestant ideals and ideas were

strengthened, but not necessarily for devotional or theological motives. The key

protagonist of radical change, Northumberland, still proclaimed his Catholisism

on his death-bed. Also, the country as a whole did not view Protestantism as a

great religious advancement, and only in London and East Anglia can local level

religious policy be said to have hardened. Another factor is that none of the

religious policy became steadfast or hardened to the extent that it could not be

swept away even more quickly than it had been enacted.

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?The reign of Edward VI saw a definite hardening of religious policy.? Do you

agree?

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