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THE
"POLYTYQUE CHURCHE"

Religion and Early Tudor
Political Culture,
1485-1516

PETER IVER KAUFMAN



INTRODUCTION

This is a book about the interpenetration of religion and political culture in England from the accession of Henry VII in 1485 to the appointment of Thomas Wolsey as the realm's chancellor thirty years later. It is not a book that busies itself with the biographies of churchmen who entered government service. Neither is it an exhaustive analysis of three decades of parliamentary initiatives and statutes. *The "Polytyque Church"* is an interpretative essay on Christianity's coalition with the new dynasty and an attempt to retrieve conditions that made possible the redistribution of power and influence within the church and in political culture.

For nearly five centuries readers have been treated to a one-sided view of the late-medieval English church, and that one, uncomplimentary side has been permitted to stand for the whole. The first chapter, a history of the history of earliest Tudor religion and politics, chronicles the deception. The second chapter takes another look at late-medieval complaints about ecclesiastical improprieties and clerical worldliness—complaints that were often emphasized and exploited by historical literature. It finds that many of the most damaging accusations say more about the critics' uncompromising idealism than about the "polytyque church's" political realism. Fresh perspectives on the religious dimensions of public service and on the political characters and consequences of ecclesiastical administration develop through the first two chapters but fully crystallize in the third, with scenes from clerical life that offer illustrations of the interpenetration of religion and political culture.

To the extent that omissions in the historical literature have minimized clerical contributions to the Tudor dynasty's first and formative years, what follows is a step toward restoration. To the extent that idealistic critics' censures have been mistaken for the fruits of impartial, accurate, investigative reporting, what follows is also a reconsideration of the rhetoric of discontent as well as a suggestion for the Tudor church's rehabilitation. Obviously, this requires that some discussion of the Tudor usurpation and of the trajectories of Tudor policy be incorporated into these chapters. But for readers unfamiliar with late-medieval English history, the remainder of the introduction reviews developments.

* * *

*Ah, was it not enough, that mutuall rage,
In deadly battels should this race ingage,
Till by their blowes themselves they fewer make,*

*and pillers fall, which France could never shake?
 But must this crooked Monster now be found,
 to lay rough hands on that unclosed wound?
 His secret plots have much increast the flood,
 He with his brothers, and his nephews blood,
 Hath stain'd the brightnesse of his Fathers flowres,
 and made his owne white Rose as red as ours.
 This is the day, whose splendour puts to flight
 Obscuring clouds, and brings an age to light.*

Medievalists have been accustomed to quincennial celebrations. The anniversary of *this day*, however, is unlikely to cause much of a stir. Summer 1985 will have arrived and passed by the time this introduction reaches readers and few persons, save for a scattering of specialists, will recall that much of the summer and autumn of 1485 was spent completing the transition from York to Tudor that was effected on 22 August by the battle near Market Bosworth. *This day* is Bosworth.

The bard was John Beaumont, who reduced the clash between rival nobilities to a great cluster of couplets more than a century after the battle. The "mutuall rage," which he deeply deplored, refers to decades of civil war—"obscuring clouds" that made the end of the Middle Ages seem as barbaric as their beginning. England was sparsely populated in the fifteenth century: slightly more than two million inhabitants worked the land or wandered the streets of the realm's few cities. Many citizens were only dimly aware of the baronial quarrels and wars, the fallout from Henry VI's long minority and ill-fated reign (1421-1471). Nonetheless, Beaumont was probably right about the aristocracy's devastation: "and pillers fall, which France could never shake." Henry VI (the final Lancastrian and unquestionably the least competent) and his councilors dissipated Crown lands, squandered wealth, lost control of most continental possessions, and provoked many leading proprietors. Their indignation set the territory on the road to Bosworth.¹

Things fall apart when the center does not hold. In Henry VI's realm, "things" not only fell apart, they fell into competing parties that disrupted political culture for two generations. Edward IV twice wrested power from the Lancastrians, but divisions in the nobility prevented him

¹Excerpts from Beaumont's "Bosworth Field" are taken from Roger D. Sell's critical edition, *The Shorter Poems of Sir John Beaumont* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1974) 66-83. John Gillingham's analysis of Bosworth is among the most penetrating; see *The Wars of the Roses* (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1981) 233-46. Elsewhere in the volume, Gillingham shows some disdain for familiar landmarks, and his remarks on "cosy" England and fifteenth-century conflicts (1-31, 51-75, 136-55, 256-57) are best checked against received opinion. For example, review J. R. Lander, *The War of the Roses* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1965); and K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

from finally consolidating his family's authority; indeed, during the last years of his own reign (1480-1483), Edward himself hastened the renewal of civil war. His wife's relations, the Woodvilles, were unpopular. Older and more established families were distressed when the king appeared particularly solicitous of Woodville fortunes. Henry Stafford, duke of Buckingham, was all but ostracized from court, perhaps at the Woodvilles' prompting, for Stafford was their chief rival for authority in Wales. The queen had also marked William, Lord Hastings, as an enemy because she resented his orchestration of the king's whoring.

An anti-Woodville faction had taken definite shape by the time Edward IV died and partisans realized that custody of the young heir, Edward V, would give their adversaries an insuperable advantage. Fortunately for Stafford, Hastings, and their allies, Richard, duke of Gloucester, the king's only surviving brother, was named protector. Richard had not been at court for years, and his return as protector may have been engineered for the sake of reconciliation. But he swiftly sided with the Woodvilles' enemies, placed Edward V in the tower, teased his other nephew from the queen, disputed the legitimacy of both boys, and apparently had them murdered. Had Beaumont's "crooked Monster" been granted a longer reign, his accomplishments might have overshadowed his crimes. Richard III demonstrated administrative talents and instincts that surpassed those of his immediate predecessors. Within thirty months of Richard's coup d'état, however, Henry, earl of Richmond, had landed at Milford Haven, marched through Wales, and made his way to Bosworth where the last York would give way before the first Tudor king of England.

* * *

*See what a guide these Fugitives have chose
who bred among the French our ancient foes
Forgets the English language and the ground
And knows not what our drums and trumpets sound.*

Royal proclamations against Henry were freighted with charges that the would-be king had sold England to France in order to finance his invasions. Thus the lines that Beaumont scripted for Richard III have some basis in late-medieval Francophobia. Henry, of course, had been "bred" across the channel. He and his uncle fled to Brittany soon after Lancastrian fortunes collapsed for the final time in 1471. Several years later Edward IV promised to treat Henry handsomely should he return and his host, Duke Francis II, be persuaded to release him. But the Tudors feared the worst and prevailed upon the Bretons to rescue their candidate for

the Crown before Edward's agents were able to escort him back to England.²

Nine years later Henry Tudor did set sail. Stafford, the duke of Buckingham, had betrayed Richard III and raised troops to unseat the king and to prepare a warm welcome for Richard's rival. Edward and Peter Courtenay collected an army in Cornwall and Devonshire for the same purposes. But, in this instance, Richard proved more cunning than the rebels, and before the Tudor fleet reached the English shore, he had mastered the situation. Moreover, the weather was uncooperative, and Henry had only two ships under his command when he was within sight of Plymouth. Yorkist loyalists pretended to be rebels and tried to get the cautious commander to disembark, but Henry smelled a rat and returned first to Normandy and then to Brittany. Duke Francis received his disappointed guests, who were consoled only by the fact that the abortive revolution had increased the number of refugees who might soon be assembled for a second assault. The fugitives were summoned to Rennes where plans were sealed on Christmas day, 1483, in the cathedral. Henry vowed to marry Edward IV's eldest daughter and thereby to resolve dynastic controversies once he had removed Richard III.³ Breton officials, for their part, promised to subsidize another expedition. The final thrust, however, was delayed for fifteen months, during which time Richard naturally conspired to have the earl of Richmond delivered into his hands.

Richard's navy harassed Breton shipping. Eventually the king offered to trade peace in the Channel and support against France for the Tudor fugitives. Henry heard that he was soon to be surrendered, so incognito he left for France. In England, precautions against a second invasion amounted to general commissions of array, for Richard's chances rested principally on his ability to raise an army rapidly and proceed against intruders before they could attract local troops to their cause and their "king." But on 7 August Henry landed at Milford Haven and advanced unchallenged for two weeks. Welsh recruits joined his forces, which Charles VIII, the king of France, had previously augmented with Norman soldiers. Richard's company still outnumbered his opponent's, but Richard suffered defections before and during the battle at Bosworth. The loss of Stanley's support at a crucial moment cost him the contest and the Crown; a rather reckless charge at Henry cost him his life. Suddenly En-

²The rescue was imaginatively reconceived by Rosemary Anne Sisson in her recent, clever staging of Henry VII's early career, *The Dark Horse* (London: French, 1979). Stanley Bertram Chrimes, *Henry VII* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) will remain for the foreseeable future the definitive biography, but also note J. D. Mackie, *The Earlier Tudors, 1485-1558* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); and Michael Van Cleave Alexander, *The First of the Tudors* (Totowa NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1980).

³Ellis, *Three Books*, 203.

gland had a new dynasty. Yet a king by conquest can hardly be considered secure unless his claim stands on more solid ground.

Yorkists had effectively cleared the field of Lancastrian candidates: no serious challenge was expected from that quarter. Still, Henry's pedigree left something to be desired. His great-grandfather was illegitimate, and thus technically his connections with Edward III were impeachable. Marriage to Edward IV's daughter, Elizabeth, would fortify his claims to the Crown, though it doubtlessly occurred to Henry that his rule would be questioned should his wife predecease him. Fulfillment of the wedding pledge made at Rennes in 1483 would therefore have to be postponed until Henry was himself crowned. In the last analysis, Henry VII's right to rule would depend on his exercise of rule—on his government's ability to reconcile countrymen to the Tudor regime. The challenge would be to leave Henry's heir a more harmonious and prosperous realm than the one taken from Richard.

* * *

*For Richmond boldly doth himselfe oppose
Against the King, and gives him blowes for blowes,
Who now confesseth with an angry frowne,
His Rivall not unworthy of the Crowne*

The "blowes for blowes" account of individual combat is fictional. Beaumont nevertheless used Richard to foreshadow an appraisal of the first Tudor that became commonplace soon after the king's twenty-five-year reign concluded.

To be sure, there was dissent. During Henry's last years his deputies' single-minded pursuit of royal advantage led to strict enforcement of subjects' obligations to the Crown, and this led to resentment. Penalties and forfeitures enriched the government and some of its most vigorous agents. But this was not a radical deviation from the policy pursued for the first fifteen years after Bosworth, which witnessed "an enormous enlargement of prerogative rights."⁴ The barons' jealousies and ambitions, which ignited and perpetuated the civil wars, were to be extinguished. Along the borders or "marches," aristocratic control was tempered by the appointment of churchmen to survey the king's prerogatives and to oversee local affairs. William Smyth, the bishop of Lincoln, dominated the king's council for Welsh affairs after the death of Henry's uncle. Smyth was succeeded in 1512 by the bishop of Coventry and Litchfield. In the north the bishops of Carlisle and Durham shared authority with one another and with several laymen nominated from time to time for special purposes. Conciliar government *in remotis* was nothing new, though as-

⁴Elton, *Studies*, 1:45-65.

signments awarded to "new men" reflected Henry VII's desires to keep the peace and to reduce the threat of insurrection. Disorder generally favored the prospects of the proprietors, whose armed retainers prosecuted their particular territorial interests. While the government often had to rely on the goodwill of these powerful nobles, greater advantages to the king followed if commissioners directly responsible and responsive to him and his council were placed in charge. This strategy along with the manipulation of attainders and their reversals, a shrewd form of intimidation, assured that most of the aristocracy remained relatively tractable and tame.⁵

For a time, however, the persistence of pretenders enlivened the possibility that England might again be rent by civil war. Lambert Simnel posed first as one and then the other of Edward IV's slain sons, and nearly all the nobility and higher clergy of Ireland conspired in the trick. Walter Fitzsimmons, archbishop of Dublin, presided over Simnel's coronation in 1487. But Simnel and his chief sponsor, Richard Simon, were quickly captured and within five years England's territories in Ireland were largely purged of Yorkist sentiment. Perkin Warbeck was a more serious rival. He also posed as Edward IV's true heir and received considerable encouragement from Yorkists in Burgundy. It is incomprehensible that the imposture fooled anyone, yet James IV, king of Scotland, welcomed Warbeck in November 1495, selected a Scots noblewoman as a bride for his "royal" guest, and allocated him a generous pension. Not long after Warbeck's arrival, guest and host invaded England.

The invasion ended badly for Warbeck and James, who retreated when they learned that an army had quickly gathered to oppose them. Soon thereafter, James either tired of his English king-in-residence or coaxed him to open a second front. Warbeck was sent to Ireland in the summer of 1497 to collect fresh troops for a landing in the southwest of England. He must have had little success with recruitment since only two vessels sailed for Land's End in Cornwall. Warbeck expected that the region would welcome him, and his numbers increased during the month that he roamed through the territory. Citizens in Cornwall had earlier objected to taxes, the revenue from which was earmarked for defense against Scotland, and they carried their protest to London. The king had little difficulty crushing this makeshift rebellion, but Warbeck imagined that he could fan hostilities still smoldering in Cornwall into a more serious offensive.

He was wrong. Exeter denied him entry, and though his company of followers had grown, it was still too risky to attempt battle in October,

⁵See especially J. R. Lander, "Attainder and Forfeiture, 1453-1509," *HJ* 4 (1961): 121, 134-41; Wilhelm Busch, *England under the Tudors: Henry VII*, trans. Alice M. Todd (New York: Burt Franklin, 1895) 291-304; and Alexander, *First of the Tudors*, 126-28.

when Henry VII appeared ready for the engagement. Warbeck himself deserted and sought sanctuary in Beaulieu, a few miles from the Channel. Henry wanted to prevent Warbeck's escape, yet he preferred not to violate sanctuary. The king promised clemency, and Warbeck voluntarily surrendered and made a full confession of the hoax. Two years later, after escape and recapture, Warbeck was executed along with the last bona fide Yorkist heir, Edward, earl of Warwick, who had been imprisoned since Bosworth.

What is most impressive about Warbeck's adventures is not the impostor's stubborn pursuit of the Crown, but rather the nobility's reluctance to get involved. For the most part, leading proprietors joined without hesitation against James in the north and against Warbeck in the south. Allusions to the realm's new order and to the hard-won tranquility were not without foundation.

The aristocracy's acquiescence to this new order, such as it was, did not depend exclusively on intimidation and on emergency or counterinsurgency measures. Political influence of the realm's leading families steadily eroded when it became clear that Henry meant to govern from the center. The government's appeals to the king's prerogative rights were, in essence, a programmatic reassertion of Henry's "personal rule" in most every policy decision. Intensely interested in revenues and disbursements, the king became very much his bookkeepers' keeper, as a robust chamber system, under his auspices, drained considerable business from the exchequer. This was akin to taking the country's treasury into the sovereign's household. Possibly haunted by the specter of Lancastrian insolvency, the first Tudor left little to chance, and the consensus is that "the deliberate intent to ferret out and exploit to the full the financial rights of the king arising from tenorial obligations was unquestionably a major feature of Henry VII's financial policy."⁶

Parliamentary subservience reflected general acceptance of centralization. Legislation endorsed and facilitated government regulation of the realm's economic life. For his part, the king relied less and less on his assemblies' imprimaturs. Once the threat of foreign war had subsided and Warbeck was in custody, he let seven years pass before calling legislators back into session. No interval since the middle of the thirteenth century was as long as the one between Henry's sixth (1497) and last (1504) parliaments. One can be forgiven, then, for suggesting that the king and his closest advisers ruled "absolutely," notwithstanding the fact that evidence for conciliar deliberations falls far short of what would be necessary to corroborate this (or any contrary) conclusion. A glance at foreign affairs adds little, for with respect to most negotiations, Henry VII seemed in complete control of his closely watched advisers and, quite in charac-

⁶Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 129. Also consult B. P. Wolffe, *The Royal Demesne in English History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1971) 202-203, 214-16.

ter, he seemed always in pursuit of objectives that would give his realm decided commercial advantages in Northern European markets and that would increase the Crown's customs revenues. The king's greatest diplomatic feat can best be phrased negatively: English armies were not mired in continental conflicts. Trade agreements and marriage contracts marked England's reentry into Europe after decades of civil wars had virtually guaranteed the island's isolation.

Of course, there were some conspicuous failures. Proprietors had so caged certain privileges that the Crown could not get at them. Landholders nominally alienated their property in order to spare their heirs the medieval equivalent of inheritance taxes, and they resisted Henry's efforts to close the loophole. The government enlarged the role of local justices of the peace and tried to discipline their performance, but the proliferation of regulatory statutes confirms that the problem of law enforcement was complex and that the regime was unable to solve it with sweeping gestures. Nevertheless, G. R. Elton's verdict on earliest Tudor administration stands without considerable qualification: Henry VII's government was more energetic and more efficient than that of Henry VIII before 1530.⁷

* * *

Henry VIII was an adventurer, a cautious father's somewhat reckless son. "Overseas" initiatives during the second Tudor's reign, as J. J. Scarisbrick has pointed out, amounted to a "forward continental policy" and a virtual renewal of the so-called "Hundred Years' War" with France.⁸ At first, Henry VIII retained his father's appointees. When Bishop Fox and Archbishop Warham retired, Fox's apprentice, Thomas Wolsey, emerged as the king's closest adviser and, some have said, the king's master. Wolsey is certainly the late-medieval church's most notorious statesman. Wrapped snugly by Polydore Vergil in a villain's cloak, Wolsey has come to epitomize clerical greed, self-indulgence, and worldliness. Vergil insisted that the church paid a high price for Wolsey's political successes and influence, and it should be noted that the earliest Tudor church continues to pay inasmuch as the stain easily spread from Wolsey to his predecessors.⁹ Did those predecessors victimize the church? Were leading ecclesiastical civil servants wholly self-serving and hopelessly corrupt? And if the "polytyque churche" was something less loathsome and more complex than a den of thieves, what is to be made of the chorus of earliest

⁷Chrimes, *Henry VII*, 166-71, for the judicature; Joel Hurstfield, "The Revival of Feudalism in Early Tudor England," *History* 37 (1952): 137-39, for feudal incidents of inheritance. For Elton's pronouncement, see *Studies*, 1:65.

⁸See Scarisbrick's *Henry VIII* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1968) 40-64.

⁹AH, notably 195, 209, 225, 257.

Tudor criticisms and complaints? For now, one may remove Wolsey's condemnation and the prospects for his rehabilitation from the docket. I shall not go beyond 1516, the year of Fox's resignation and the year that Thomas More published his *Utopia*, an excellent summary and a reevaluation of the idealistic critics' case against clerical worldliness. Between 1485 and 1516 the English church underwent no significant changes. It was dominated by no single person. Still, there are interpretative problems to transcend and discoveries to be made about the abiding coalition between church and government and the hybrid passions this generated. This introductory sketch of late-medieval and earliest Tudor political culture adds nothing to received opinion, yet it should prepare one to reassess some of those passions, to ponder the eclipse of the "polytyque church," and to attempt a partial recovery.