

Corrupt institutions 500 years ago

By Nick Child

Centuries ago there was without question a God and a place for religion and its many institutions. Religion influenced everything - monarchy, society, philosophy, politics and government. Long before the reason and science of enlightenment, the shape and principles of law at that time were the strongest force for reason and justice.

The not quite powerful enough Tudor monarch, Henry VIII¹, had added personal reasons to change the religious power structure to make himself all powerful. For love or a son, no life would stand in his way to change one wife for another. Breaking his marital bonds required breaking ties with Europe - an early version perhaps of Brexit. That meant revising his and his country's loyalty to God and the all-powerful religion then ruled - not from Brussels but - by the Pope in Rome.

How did Henry defeat a whole system to get what he wanted? He had a 'kitchen cabinet' to help him. Thomas Cromwell, a lawyer, employed his quiet brilliance and personality to get in with the powerful and to 'serve' them. As Hilary Mantel² portrays it in her novel *Wolf Hall*³ this one man became Henry's kitchen cabinet. In 1530, before he got going on the dissolution of the monasteries⁴, Henry probes this enigmatic man: Devoted to a Cardinal (Wolsey), it was said that Cromwell loathed religious life. Henry craves more than Thomas's enticing one-liners. Hilary Mantel gives Thomas this (for him) very long and highly strategic speech (p 219):

"If you ask me about the monks, I speak from experience, not prejudice, and though I have no doubt that some foundations are well governed, my experience has been of waste and corruption. May I suggest to Your Majesty that, if you wish to see a parade of the seven deadly sins, you do not organise a masque at court but call without notice at a monastery? I have seen monks who live like great lords, on the offering of poor people who would rather buy a blessing than buy bread, and that is not Christian conduct. Nor do I take the monasteries to be the repositories of learning some believe they are. Was Grocyn⁵ a monk, or Colet⁶, or Linacre⁷, or any of our great scholars? They were university men. The monks take in children and use them as servants, they don't even teach them dog Latin. I don't grudge them some bodily comforts. It cannot always be Lent. What I cannot stomach is hypocrisy, fraud, idleness - their worn-out relics, their threadbare worship, and their lack of invention. When did anything good last come from a monastery? They do not invent, they only repeat, and what they repeat is corrupt. For hundreds of years the monks have held the pen, and what they have written is what we take to be our history, but I do not believe it really is. I believe they have suppressed the history they don't like, and written one that is favourable to Rome."

... So, persuaded against religion by a secular lawyer using secular university thinkers, Henry dissolves the monasteries. OK, this is historical fiction. Yes, there were personal reasons for Henry wanting to destroy the Catholic church in England. But this picture of the monks rings with truth. Mantel's Cromwell has his own principled reasons to take a rotten institution apart, not just his role of finding ways for his king to change a wife.

Later, Mantel's Cromwell says (p 250):

"There are some strange cold people in this world. It is priests, I think. ... Training themselves out of natural feeling. They mean it for the best, of course."

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_VIII_of_England

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilary_Mantel

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolf_Hall

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissolution_of_the_Monasteries

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Grocyn

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Colet

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Linacre