

Marek Smoluk\*

## THE DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES AND ITS IMPACT ON EDUCATION IN TUDOR TIMES

**ABSTRACT:** In 1536 the English Parliament under pressure from Henry VIII and the Lord Chancellor, Thomas Cromwell, gave its consent for the dissolution of the lesser monasteries and abbeys in the king's realm, and three years later with the sanction of MPs some of the greater religious houses also suffered the same fate. The principal aim of this paper is to assess the importance of this political decision with a view to examining the progress being made in the field of education in England in the middle of the sixteenth century resultant upon this dissolution. The evaluation of the merits and demerits originating from the suppression of the English monasteries is made in terms of both primary and academic education. The answers to these key questions are preceded by a short analysis of the reputation monasteries and abbeys had acquired by that time. Also on a selective basis, some opinions have been presented here to provide an overall picture of the standing of the monks and nuns and their concomitant activities, as perceived through the eyes of English society; the eminent scholars and humanists in particular. Subsequently, before assessing the consequences resulting from the dissolution of the religious houses in England, some consideration is given to the reasoning and rationale which lay behind both Henry VIII and his Lord Chancellor's political decisions.

**KEY WORDS:** the reign of Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, the dissolution of the monasteries, Tudor education

By the beginning of the sixteenth century most English monasteries had become exceptionally wealthy due to their location along a number of wool trading routes. The monks had been able to amass huge fortunes thanks to their devotion to business activities i.e. the wool trade and the acquisition of large parcels of land and chattels. By becoming increasingly prosperous with the additional possession of vast lands, the monks

---

\* Zielona Góra University, Al. Wojska Polskiego 71a, 65-762 Zielona Góra, Poland.  
E-mail: M.Smoluk@in.uz.zgora.pl

thrust their way to the for-front of public affairs in the kingdom. Ownership turned out to have been a ticket for thirty senior abbots to take up seats in the House of Lords. The heads of the monasteries, engaged in forging their careers and occupying themselves with accumulating greater wealth, paid little, if no, attention to the spiritual development of either themselves or the monks, who they were supposed to look after and serve as an example. Instead, they would have preferred to lead the life of a lord, hunting and dining lavishly away from their monasteries (*Henry VIII and the English Monasteries*, passim). Besides, at the beginning of the sixteenth century the monasteries and abbeys were no longer monopolists of educational and cultural centres, where future generations were taught and manuscripts produced. Although the monks still performed their original functions of providing hospitality to travellers and charity for the poor, these activities were not sufficient to redeem them in the eyes of English society when set against their grandiose lifestyle, coupled with corruption and debauchery. The monks' evils were commonly known to the public therefore at the beginning of the sixteenth century the English bishops decided on conducting visits to several monasteries in the hope that some disreputable practices could be rooted out. As one would expect, the visits proved that there was much immorality within the walls of English monasteries, but brought no tangible change or improvement in the matters under discussion.

In the 1520s the monks' lifestyle was so scandalous that it was arousing nationwide indignation. Leading humanists both from the continental mainland and England began to write on monasticism with contempt. For instance Erasmus, who strongly supported Church unity and peace there-in, was sarcastic about monasteries and abbeys and publicly scourged monastic vice, hypocrisy and immorality. According to him, monasticism could only be associated with obscurantism, false faith and materialism (Lecler 149). The English monasteries came in for severe criticism in both his private correspondence with other European humanists and also in his published works such as *Colloquia*. However, it is *The Praise of Folly* which is considered to have been Erasmus' most scathing denunciation of monastic scandalous practices. On almost every other page the author blackens reputations and taunts the monks about "observing with punctilious scrupulosity a lot of silly ceremonies and paltry traditional rules" (Trevelyan 117). Erasmus used his literary talents not only to ridicule the monks' lifestyle, but also to gibe at their intellectual capabilities (Desiderius 111).

Also, some English scholars were no longer able to tolerate the monks' abuses and follies, and eagerly set to writing tracts similar in

tone to those written by Erasmus. For instance, Simon Fish, a popular pamphleteer, composed his work entitled *Supplication for the Beggars*, in which he suggested that friars' houses should be closed down. *Supplication for the Beggars* was produced in the form of a letter addressed to the monarch, where between the lines the author wrote:

In the times of your noble predecessors past, craftily crept into this your realm [...] of strong, puisant and counterfeit, holy and idle beggars and vagabonds [...] the Bishops, Abbots, Priors, Deacons, Archdeacons, Suffragans, Priests, Monks, Canons, Friars, Pardoners, Sommoners. . . . The goodliest lordships, manors, lands, and territories, are theirs. (Trevelyan 117)

Thomas Starkey in his work *Dialogue of Pole and Lupset* wrote on the aggravation of population decline through deliberate celibacy, comparing clergymen withdrawn from society with sailors afraid to leave the port in case of storms (passim). This, like many other opinions expressed in numerous humanistic works of the decade, was highly critical of the monastic lifestyle. These orthodox humanists, who on one hand were holding sincere religious beliefs, on the other hand objected to the monks' upholding scholastic philosophy and forbidding the studies of the Testament. To the same extent, Erasmus and his English colleagues were appalled by the clergymen's leech-like practices of "sponging off" the poor and ignorant. In their works, therefore, the scholars attempted to suggest explicitly the taking of a new approach to religion, which should be based not on contemplation but on true and profound love of others.

At the beginning of 1535 Thomas Cromwell was authorised by Henry VIII to carry out a series of visits to all churches, monasteries, convents, abbeys and other religious houses throughout the king's realm. The evidence acquired during these inspections pointed to the shocking irregularities and disorder within the church as an institution, in particular monasteries, convents and abbeys. This, however, served the king only as a pretext rather than a real reason when arriving at the decision on the dissolution of the monasteries in England. In fact, Henry VIII was driven by his greed coupled with bankruptcy when confiscating the monastic land and properties.<sup>1</sup> The king's greed certainly played a part in Henry's decision to liquidate the monasteries, but was this also an opportunity to assert his power over Church and combat those who dared to question him being the Head of the Anglican Church.

The parliamentary Act for the Dissolution set the whole machinery in motion and upon completing the enterprise meant that the king had

---

<sup>1</sup> G. M. Trevelyan argues that if the monarch's financial needs had not been so pressing, he might never have considered dissolving the monasteries at all.

come into possession of vast lands and huge wealth, which the monks and friars had accumulated over the centuries. Everyone had a stake in the dissolution; Henry simply craved money, his Parliament hoped to be able to raise money without being compelled to impose taxes, humanists believed that the wealth should be invested in national education, the nobility saw an opportunity to enlarge their already huge estates, whilst the merchant middle class in return for their loyalty hoped to be granted newly confiscated lands and become gentry themselves.

As the monasteries were indeed rich, there was much to divide in order to satisfy all parties. Most of the revenues and possessions of the houses came directly to the crown, and then were sold to wealthy gentry. A substantial amount of this wealth became a source of cheap materials for local residents. The greatest beneficiary of the Suppression was, however, the new class of gentry to whom the king either granted or sold the lands. The king's generosity was not gratuitous because with this rise in status and wealth the new class became a guarantee for Henry VIII in opposing the restoration of the Pope's authority in the kingdom. Last but not least important beneficiaries were the educational institutions in the king's realm. There, certain but limited success was achieved by those who hoped to divert monastic property to the endowment of learning.

In the 1520s Thomas Wolsey and John Fisher had dissolved some small and dilapidated monasteries in order to use the lands and revenues for the foundation of St John's College in Cambridge and Cardinal College in Oxford (renamed Christ Church College in 1546). In view of all this it was natural to hope that money and property released by the Dissolution of the fifteen thirties would be devoted at least in part, to a number of educational necessities.

One of the consequences resulting from the dissolution of the monasteries in England was the creation of a plan according to which new bishoprics were to be founded on the sites of the old religious houses. The bill was drawn up by the King himself and then was put forward for approval to the Houses of Parliament. This parliamentary Act-which was brought into force immediately-reflected Henry's intention to replace the slothful and ungodly religious houses with new sees and cathedrals:

wherby Gods worde might the better be setforth, Children brought upp in lerning, Clerkes nourished in the Unversyties . . . Reders of Grece, Ebrewre, and Latten to have good stipend. (Shadwell 124)

Several projects for new bishoprics were drafted, including one drawn up by the King, which allowed for thirteen sees in the kingdom. Eventually only six bishoprics came into existence: Bristol, Chester,

Gloucester, Peterborough, Oxford and Westminster. The last-named see was made accountable for finding funds to cover the salaries of six professors employed at both Oxford and Cambridge. In addition, the bishopric of Westminster was obliged to guarantee a scholarship for twenty students studying at either of the two universities and to maintain a grammar school which would remain under its auspices (Shadwell 130-131).

It is noteworthy that whilst making proposals for new bishoprics neither Henry VIII nor his Lord Chancellor put forward any scheme which would guarantee that both the old and newly founded sees would take on the responsibility of devoting some of their revenue to the endowment of education. The lack of precise definition in the legal system according to which bishoprics were to be held accountable for the standards of learning in their dioceses, meant that heads of the old and new sees did not give the development of learning any priority. Consequently, the common practice was that the foundation of schools and their maintenance was dependent on the goodwill of individual bishops and the generosity of private patrons. Thus humanists' endeavours to reform the national education and make the new learning flourish under the reign of Henry VIII were varied in achievements. This is best illustrated by Simon Heynes' example. This man, who by appointment was Dean of Exeter, believed that various educational reforms were needed at his Cathedral and of his own accord, he prepared certain proposals; including for example the foundation of a free grammar school and the establishment of grants for twelve poor students from his region at the two universities. Heynes' strove in vain since his proposals never came to fruition (Searle 201-6).

Similarly, Thomas Cranmer's reformatory attempts ended in failure. He devoted a lot of time and effort in attempting to abolish altogether the posts of prebendaries at Cambridge. In his view, these cathedral priests were no more than sluggish voracious eaters, unable to contribute to the religious and cultural life at Cambridge. Archbishop Cranmer was convinced that instead of employing these useless workers, their prebends would be sufficient to maintain twenty students of theology and forty studying either foreign languages or other humanistic courses (Simon 183-6). Although it was a noble idea, the Lord Chancellor did not share his point of view. Not surprisingly, failure to gain approval of this reform from Thomas Cromwell meant that no further action was taken in this respect.

Archbishop Cranmer could sometimes be successful. Unquestionably, Thomas Cranmer must be credited with the implementation of the 'new learning' at his cathedral school at Cambridge. Thanks to his

efforts, a stipulation was introduced that only those fluent in foreign languages and had qualifications as an able teacher, could apply for a post of headmaster at this school. The first applicant who fulfilled the new requirements and successfully went through the interview was John Twine, a former student of Juan Vives' from Oxford. The archbishop also stipulated that candidates wishing to study at this school had to meet specific requirements before admission viz. they were expected to know by heart Decalogue, pater noster and the creed. The curriculum devised for the school guaranteed that students would be instructed in a variety of courses and modules. For instance, the syllabus of the literature course included the analyses of both ancient and modern works. The long list of compulsory readings ranged from Cicero to Erasmus. Thomas Cranmer's greatest concern, though, was that the cathedral school was open not only to students whose parents could afford to pay the fees, but also to fifty poor ones, who could put in for grants (Nichols 273-5).

Apart from Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer was another bishop prominent in the promotion of elementary humanistic education in his diocese. In October 1538 this bishop of Worcester requested the Lord Chancellor to help him obtain the king's financial support in maintaining the guild school of the town. After the dissolution of the monasteries, the school found itself in a financial crisis and the bishop, despite his own poverty, did his utmost to support it. His perseverance in helping the schoolmaster get through difficult times stemmed from his strong conviction that he "was honest and was bringing up children as best as he could" (Corrie 403). The bishop also believed the Lord Chancellor's mediation with Henry VIII would persuade the monarch to grant the town the lands and property after the suppression of the local monasteries of the Franciscans and Dominicans. This, in turn, would make it possible to maintain the school. The king did grant the town the right to use the properties after the monasteries, but at the same time established his own school in town, which was modelled on Cranmer's cathedral school at Canterbury. Despite the financial problems, the guild school survived and continued its educational work-independently of the king's school-thanks to Hugh Latimer's continuous support (Simon 186).

F. J. Furnivall in his work entitled *Manner and Meals in Olden Time* claims that between the years 1541-1547 fourteen schools were founded. These were either new cathedral schools or new educational centres which were set up on the grounds of the old monastic schools (53-4). Converting monastic property or collegiate churches into new educational institutions was dependent on the initiative of local communities, both clergy and laymen. For instance, as the result of the bishop of Llandaff Robert Holgate's efforts, two secondary schools were founded in the

county of Yorkshire on monastic properties. It is noteworthy that education in these Yorkshire schools was provided free of charge for all the pupils and the emphasis of instruction was put on the teaching of humanistic courses and foreign languages such as Greek, Latin and Hebrew especially. Similarly, John Hales from Coventry was authorised to hand back old monastic lands to the town council and assist the councillors in establishing a new educational institution, which was named after the reigning monarch. Whilst on his own initiative, the Duke of Norfolk set about replacing an old collegiate school with a new one modelled on the school set up earlier in Stroke-by-Clare (Strype, *The Life and Acts of Matthew Parker* 25).

During the period of the suppression of the monasteries not all the monks gave up their residence and work. Some of them endeavoured to use property released by the dissolution to set up schools and continued to teach the youth in their localities. Robert Witgift, prior of Wellow, serves as an example of a friar who preferred his teaching career to entering office within the regular church. After the dissolution he still continued to teach the sons of local country folk in the convent buildings. Other monks, such as Thomas Coventree from Evesham, did not stop research work and continued their studies in the tongues (Simon 181).

The dissolution of the monasteries and abbeys created a unique opportunity to establish new teaching institutions replacing monastic property. The shortage of official regulations, which would control the setting up of new educational endowments, meant that the progress in this field was unsystematic and hinged on the goodwill and dedication of the local representatives of Church and community. A varying degree of participation in these matters can best be illustrated by the example of the bishoprics: the dioceses of Westminster and Worcester maintained forty scholars respectively, Ely and Chester twenty four, Rochester and Peterborough twenty and Durham eighteen (186). These dioceses can be contrasted with the bishopric of Norwich, which did not have even a cathedral school, whilst the dioceses of Gloucester and Bristol showed little concern for educational endowments in their lands (186).

The king's court neither made nor even drafted a national educational reform bill to regulate the criteria of such educational enterprises. Neither did the government create a set of obligations and responsibilities of local boroughs for the utilisation of monastic property in respect of the development of elementary education. In this light, the presentation of Henry VIII as the greatest reformer and founder of schools seems groundless and overestimated (Dickens 211). In the fifteen twenties Thomas Wolsey, who had been setting up new educational centres and implementing changes in the national education, had at least acted in

accordance with some semblance of a scheme. Twenty years later, the king's court, being engaged in the suppression of the monasteries, could have seized this opportunity to carry out far-reaching educational reform. The king and his Lord Chancellor confined themselves, however, to only a few symbolic and uncoordinated changes and in practice, the only group of people keenly interested in the problem, were evangelical adherents of whom only Thomas Cranmer and Hugh Latimer were well-known figures in humanist and reformer circles.

Similarly, no policy was formulated highlighting the monastic librarian resources which could be utilised for further use, either in new educational institutions or at the king's court. In the early thirties Henry VIII had commissioned John Leland to make an inventory of the manuscripts and books available in the monastic libraries throughout the realm (*Ecclesiastical Memorials* 483-488). The aim of this task was probably to compile a catalogue, which could later enable the monarch to select the most valuable items for his own library. This is, however, pure speculation since no evidence has survived to either support or refute this theory.

Soon after the dissolution of the monasteries the most valuable works were collected at random and unsystematically. Neither was the royal library augmented to any significant extent, with new items. The collection of books in St Augustine's library at Canterbury amounted to 1800 volumes of different sizes, but only a dozen of them found their way to the king's library. The king's librarian's resources were enriched with only four items due to the confiscation of the monastic library in Reading (Dickens 209-10). It is impossible to estimate what losses English culture suffered as the result of the Dissolution. A great number of monastic libraries full of priceless manuscripts were destroyed with little or no regard to their value. The whereabouts of some manuscripts remains unexplained up to the present and it can only be surmised that those which were not burnt, having been purloined from monastic libraries may have fallen into the hands of private collectors (Dickens 209-10).

When comparing gains with losses in the suppression of the English monasteries against considerations of the national education at both primary and secondary levels, the outcome seems to show that the demerits definitely outweighed the merits i.e. comparatively little was achieved on behalf of elementary learning within the kingdom.

Soon after the king's court embarked on the suppression of the monasteries, the university authorities at Cambridge hastened to submit a petition to Henry VIII pointing out their impoverishment, in the hope that at least some of the confiscated religious houses would be converted



to educational institutions; where the new learning and truly Christian faith would be propagated (Mullinger 156). Their request was justified by the explanation that for the last nine years university expenses had been higher than its income. The petition emphasised the financial difficulties the university had been labouring under in recent years, using as an example the lecturers who had frequently had to give up one third of their allowances in order to cover the wages of visiting professors. The situation, of the already insufficiently financed university, had worsened since the court's decision taken several years earlier, on the basis of which the university had had to hand over some of their lands to the adjoining monastery. That had been justified then by stating: "It was then thought to be a dede more meritorious and acceptable to God to gyve suche landes to religious persons then to students in the uniuersitie" (Mullinger 156).

All the arguments presented in the petition must have been convincing enough because upon receipt of this letter, Henry himself guaranteed that in future university properties would never be interfered with or taken away unlawfully (Shadwell 128). In response to the petition, Cambridge gained in additional ways viz. the king's court took over the university's financial obligations and promised to pay out all stipends to the lecturers and readers for the classes that had been run and not paid for (Cooper 403). Furthermore, in 1542 Buckingham College was re-founded as Magdalene College.

It must be remembered that the dissolution of the monasteries did not only mean a series of advantages from the universities' viewpoint. By the year 1536 it had become common practice that candidates applying for a place at university, had at the same time to join monasteries. The suppression of the religious houses caused a drastic decrease in the number of applicants wishing to study at universities. This can be explained by fact that they had been deprived of accommodation and full board, which those monasteries had previously guaranteed. For example, Oxford university authorities complained in their letter to Thomas Cromwell of a 50% fall in applicants after the dissolution (Simon 203).

Meanwhile, there was a threat that the monarch may well have been considering eventually closing down the universities in England. In 1545 an Act of Parliament was passed on the basis of which English universities were to be liquidated and the accumulated wealth belonging to Oxford and Cambridge passed on to the Crown. The motive for making such plans must be sought in Henry VIII's financial embarrassments.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> G. M Trevelyan claims that the monarch's financial problems resulted from "profligate finance and foolish wars in France that had emptied his treasury."

Possibly, the monarch was prompted by his closest advisors to suppress the universities, who saw in both of these universities mainly valuable lands rather than leading education centres in the king's realm (Bruce and Perowne 34). It appears somewhat unlikely that Henry VIII intended to do away with the universities in the same way as he had got rid of the monasteries. Nonetheless, between March and November 1546 three Oxford colleges surrendered to the Crown. In January 1546 after the appointment of the royal commissioners, who were accountable for conducting surveys at all colleges, both universities threw themselves on the king's mercy. At the same time the authorities controlling higher education in the kingdom embarked on a search for those sympathisers at the king's court willing to provide support in the event of their suppression.

The uncertainty which worried the university authorities and scholars in those days was dispelled by Queen Catherine Parr, who in her missive of February 1546 to Cambridge wrote among other matters:

notwithstanding hys Majesties propertie and intrest through the consent of the high court of Parlement, hys Hyeghness, being such a patron to good lernyng, he woll rather advance and erect new occasion therefor, than confound those your colleges: so that lernyng may hereafter ascribe her very original . . . (Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials* 337).

It is of note that the king appointed the commissioners whom he had singled out from the academic world, for example the university Vice-Chancellors and other academics rather than hostile inspectors from the court. Therefore the above analysis as well as the Queen's letter conveys explicitly that Henry VIII's intentions must have been misinterpreted and that the fears of the authorities of both Oxford and Cambridge universities were groundless. Eventually, after heated debates and expressed doubts concerning the fate of higher education, the alterations resulting from the dissolution of the monasteries were undoubtedly advantageous for the universities in England.

Similarly, changes for the better were to be seen at Cambridge. Trinity College was established on the site and with the revenues of Michaelhouse and King's Hall.<sup>3</sup> The merging of these two old colleges gave rise to a number of further alterations. Thanks to the permission granted by the monarch to found Trinity College, sixty lecturers and canons gained employment at this new education centre. The university Vice-Chancellor also obtained special funds from the court. This money

---

<sup>3</sup> Michael house was founded in 1324 and King's Hall was set up by Edward II in 1317.

was to be invested in building new and refurbishing the old academic buildings (Venn 10-19).

For the last ten years of the reign of Henry VIII a number of distinct improvements were brought about in both national education and culture, in contrast to the irretrievable losses suffered in these fields. It is beyond any question that the suppression of the monasteries did not help to improve education on the elementary level. To the same extent, the other great loser during the period of dissolution was the national culture; numerous priceless illuminated manuscripts, which had previously enriched the monastic libraries, were either destroyed or lost. The period under discussion was produced a much more favourable climate for higher education to flower in the kingdom. The newly founded Trinity College at Cambridge and Christ Church at Oxford continued the tradition which earlier colleges had created, and from the very start embarked on educating their students in the style of humanism. As with the colleges founded at the beginning of Henry's reign viz. John Fisher's St John's College at Cambridge and Richard Fox's Corpus Christi at Oxford-the two established at the end of this period-also organised public lectures in humanities. The financial problems had been sorted out, and at long last the universities had at their disposal funds for developing their infrastructure and enough subsidies to guarantee stipends for lecturers in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. Clearly, at the conclusion of Henry VIII's reign, adequate conditions were created at higher education level, so that the new humanistic learning could flourish when the king's daughter-Elizabeth I ascended the throne.

### Works Cited

- Bruce John, Perowne Thomas. *Correspondence of Matthew Parker*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1853.
- Cooper, Charles Henry. *Annals of Cambridge*. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Warwick & Co., 1842-1908.
- Corrie, George Elwes. *Sermons and remains of Hugh Latimer*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1845.
- Desiderius, Erasmus Roterodamus. *Pochwała głupoty*. Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1953.
- Dickens, Arthur Geoffrey. *English Reformation*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.
- Fish, Simon. *A Supplication for the Beggars*. London: Southgate, 1878.
- Furnivall, Frederick J., *Manners and Meals in Olden Time*. London: Early English Society, 1868.
- Gasquet, Francis Aidan. *Henry VIII and the English monasteries*. London: John C. Nimmo, 1899.
- Lecler, Joseph. *Historia tolerancji w wieku reformacji*. Vol. 1. Warszawa: Pax, 1964.

- Mullinger, James Bass. *A History of the University of Cambridge*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1873.
- Nichols, John Gough. *Narratives of the Days of the Reformation*. London: Camden Society, 1859.
- Searle, William George. *History of the Queens' College*. Cambridge: Deighton, Bell & Co., 1867-71.
- Shadwell, Lionel Lancelot. *Enactments in Parliament Specially Concerning the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, the Colleges and Hall therein, and the Colleges of Winchester, Eton and Westminster*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912.
- Simon, Joan. *Education and Society in Tudor England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966.
- Starkey, Thomas. *Dialogue of Pole and Lupset*. London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, University College London, 1989.
- Strype, John. *The Life and Acts of Matthew Parker, the First Archbishop of Canterbury in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth [...]*. London: Clarendon Press, 1821.
- . *Ecclesiastical memorials: relating chiefly to religion, and its reformation, under the reigns of King Henry VIII. King Edward VI. And Queen Mary the First: with the appendixes containing the original papers, records, etc.* London: Printed for Samuel Bagster, 1816.
- Thompson, Henry. *Christ Church*. London: University of Oxford College Histories, 1900.
- Trevelyan, George Macaulay. *English Social History: a Survey of Six Centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria English*. London: Penguin, 1967.
- Venn, John Archibald, Ball, Rouse W. W. *Admissions to Trinity College*. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1911-16.