

The Scholar

From the time that he left Cambridge Cranmer was necessarily entangled in a good deal of administrative activity. He had his wider responsibilities as a member of the Council and a leader in Convocation and the House of Lords. He also had the not inconsiderable day to day business of his own diocese and household. In the circumstances it is not surprising that he made no very direct or more strictly academic contribution to theological scholarship, or that his attainments as a scholar could be almost forgotten by his younger contemporaries. Indeed, the ability with which he espoused the 1549 Prayer Book came as something of a surprise to the new generation: "The palm rests with our friends, but especially with the Archbishop of Canterbury, whom they till now were wont to traduce as a man ignorant of theology, and as being conversant only with matters of government."¹ It has to be remembered, of course, that those who had put out this opinion were his ecclesiastical opponents, and at bottom it was a rejection of his theology rather than a criticism of his attainments. Vilification is often a more potent weapon than argument. On the other hand, even the more militant reforming group expressed their impatience in a similar way when Cranmer translated the catechism of Justus Jonas: "This Thomas hath fallen into so heavy a slumber that we entertain but a very cold hope that he will be aroused even by your most learned letter."² In other words, if Cranmer had been a sound and alert theologian he would obviously have held the same views as we do.

Of course, after twenty years' absence from the direct life of the schools it was hardly surprising that the earlier academic record should have been forgotten or that Cranmer should be regarded as a back number. Yet in his own day Cranmer had certainly been one of the ablest and most promising of the

1. *Original Letters*, II, pp. 469-470.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 380-381.

younger Cambridge theologians. His college had thought sufficiently highly of his attainments not only to give him a fellowship but to recall him to it after the death of his first wife, although normally the statutes were interpreted to exclude widowers as well as married men. During the years which followed he had not only proceeded to his doctorate but had become an examiner in the theological faculty. He did not have the means or influence to move quickly to high honour or distinction, but he was obviously making his way by solid merit and achievement, and Wolsey would have liked him for his new foundation at Oxford. Against the twenty years of administration we have to balance the twenty years of theological scholarship which preceded them. And we have to remember that the years devoted to theology were the most active and the most formative.

A further point is that Cranmer's methods of study were calculated to stand him in good stead when he did not have the same leisure for detailed reading. By the standards of his day he was always an omnivorous reader. He amassed a private library which was larger than the whole university library of his undergraduate days, although of course we must not forget that printing was a comparatively recent invention and the rapid multiplication of books was only just beginning in the early sixteenth century. In addition to the Greek New Testament and two Hebrew Bibles Cranmer's collection contained a fairly complete set of the fathers, many of the school-men, and all the leading writers of his own century. He seems to have read slowly, but he had the habit of careful annotation, for "he seldom read without pen in hand, and whatsoever made either for the one part or the other of things being in controversy, he wrote it out if it were short, or, at the least, noted the author and the place, that he might find it, and write it out by leisure"³ By this means he gathered a large store of readily accessible knowledge which enabled him to weigh every side of a controverted issue and to come always to an informed and responsible judgment.

But even in his years as archbishop Cranmer did not rely

3. *Narratives of the Reformation*, p. 219.

only on his past acquisition of knowledge. His opportunities for reading were more limited, but by a methodical arrangement of his daily time-table he made the most of the time available. If Foxe's account is correct,⁴ he normally devoted the first four hours of every day, from 5 o'clock to 9, to prayer and reading. After that, he committed the business of the day to the various officers of his household, and then whenever possible "associated with learned men, for the sifting and boulding out one matter or another". The afternoon and evening were often claimed for outside business, but any time that could be spared was given to reading and discussion, so that the habits formed at Cambridge were carried forward into the new and very different circumstances.

Indeed, in spite of the greater distractions, Cranmer had certain advantages in the new life. On the purely mechanical side, he now had the assistance of a secretary, so that he could continue his method of annotation with greater speed and less drudgery. The latter common-place books have come down to us and can be consulted in the British Museum. They are in the hand of Cranmer's secretary Morice, with various notes made directly by Cranmer himself. They give clear evidence not only of the methodical nature but also of the breadth and depth of Cranmer's reading even during his tenure of the archbishopric. There is also the further point that his contacts widened considerably with his advancement. In Cambridge, it is true, he had had the society of scholars and the assistance of books and a bookish atmosphere. But at Lambeth he was in constant touch with some of the best minds of the age, and he entered into direct communication with many of the leading continental scholars. During the reign of Edward especially, Lambeth became a kind of clearing-house of theologians and theological discussion, and Cranmer's own thinking took on a new liveliness and conviction. It was also his duty as archbishop to be a patron of younger scholars. Ridley in particular was a protégé of Cranmer, but so too were Bradford, Grindal, Jewel⁵ and Parker.⁶ In many respects Cranmer was the giver

4. P.S., I, p. xi.

5. His final letter to Peter Martyr is thought to have been taken by Jewel.
Cf. P.S., II, p. 457.

6. Cf. P.S., II, pp. 418, 425.

in this relationship, and the later Elizabethan leaders all show clear evidence of Cranmer's influence. On the other hand, the traffic was not all one way. Ridley in particular exercised a strong and on the whole perhaps beneficial influence on his more cautious if no less erudite colleague and patron, and the younger men generally helped to keep him open and alert in his thinking and approach.

The testimony of those who knew Cranmer is interesting if not altogether consistent. On the one side, it seemed to be a settled policy of his opponents to decry the scholarship of the archbishop. This emerges very clearly in the reply of Stephen Gardiner, who time and again suggests that there is nothing original in his work, but that he is deriving his ideas and arguments from Peter Martyr: "He doth but as it were translate Peter Martyr, saving he roveth at solutions, as liketh his phantasy".⁷ It is also emphasized in the examination, when he is accused of a feeble vacillation in the matter of the eucharist, and Ridley is charged with the main responsibility for Edwardian teaching.⁸ In the case of Gardiner, it seems evident that there was a good deal of personal animosity. By a mere stroke of fate his less prominent Cambridge contemporary had suddenly outstripped him in honour and influence. But on the traditionalist side generally it was easier to discount Cranmer as an ignoramus than to give a solid answer to his teaching.

As against the denigration of opponents, the opinion of Henry VIII is useful and not altogether irrelevant. Henry had a considerable taste for theology – more, perhaps, than he had for ethics. He enjoyed theological disputation, and could take part in it with unruffled patience and temper. For his own part, he inclined strongly to traditionalist positions, but he was never a bigot in controversy, and if he enforced external uniformity he welcomed the interplay of private opinions. On disputed issues he seems to have leaned heavily on Cranmer's learning, even though he did not always follow his judgment: "At all times when the King's Majesty would be resolved in

7. P.S., I, p. 195.

8. P.S., II, pp. 217-218; but cf. the tribute of Ridley (P.S.), p. 161.

any doubt or question, he would but send word to my Lord overnight, and by the next day the King should have in writing brief notes of the doctors' minds, with a conclusion of his own mind, which he could never get in such readiness of none, no, not of all his clergy and chaplains about him, in so short a time."⁹ This quotation is very revealing. It not only displays the confidence of the King. It also shows us that Cranmer's judgments were based always on a solid foundation of knowledge, and that if he sometimes hesitated, it was not because of weakness but because of his grasp and appreciation of more than one side of a question. In our own day as in Cranmer's the greatest cocksureness is often a mask for the profoundest ignorance. A bold novelty is easy when the lessons of the past are not known. The originality of idea or utterance has to replace a solidity of learning and information. Set in the light of past discussion the novelty is soon shown to be superficial. Henry, at any rate, recognized the genuine scholarship of the archbishop. As he is once said to have put it to Stephen Gardiner when they were arguing a question with Cranmer: "My Lord of Canterbury is too old a truant for us twain."¹⁰

The learning of Cranmer was also appreciated by his contemporaries abroad. In some cases the tributes paid were merely conventional, as when Erasmus referred to him as "a most upright man of spotless life". In letters from Bucer, Bullinger and Calvin we find similar protestations of respect,¹¹ but these can hardly be accepted as solid evidence. Again, when Bucer and Fagius were enjoying the hospitality of Lambeth and dependent upon the protection of the archbishop it is hardly surprising that they should describe him as "that most benevolent and kind father of the churches and of godly men".¹² The scholar who had the highest opinion of Cranmer, and who probably knew him best, was Peter Martyr. Like Cranmer, Martyr was very well versed in the fathers, and his cast of mind and thought seems to have been very similar to that of the

9. *Narratives of the Reformation*, p. 249.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

11. Cf. *Original Letters*, II, p. 711.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 535.

archbishop. He obviously had a very great admiration for Cranmer: "But now, believe me, he has shown himself so mighty a theologian against them, as they would rather not have proof of, and they are compelled, against their inclination, to acknowledge his learning, and power and dexterity in debate."¹³ Martyr, of course, seems to have had a thorough understanding of the difficulties which faced the archbishop, so that he could not approve the impatient criticisms of those extremer foreigners who boosted Hooper as their English champion. His letters refer constantly to the bitterness of the opposition: "The perverseness of the bishops is incredible; they oppose us with all their might." But the weight of hostility only enhances the pertinacity of the archbishop: "The labour of the most reverend the archbishop of Canterbury is not to be expressed. For whatever has hitherto been wrested from we have acquired solely by the industry, and activity, and importunity of this prelate."¹⁴ For Martyr Cranmer was a "standard-bearer" among the bishops "not ill-inclined" to reform.¹⁵ The general impression from Martyr's letters is one of a deep sympathy and understanding which inspired a high admiration for Cranmer's endowment and tenacity. He was able to inspire his pupils with something of the same enthusiasm, for at first John ab Ulmis had been a severe critic of the archbishop,¹⁶ but he later wrote: "The Archbishop of Canterbury, a man of singular worth and learning, has contrary to the general expectation, delivered his opinion upon this subject learnedly, correctly, orderly, and clearly; and by the weight of his character, and the dignity of his language and sentiments, easily drew over all his hearers to our way of thinking."¹⁷ But perhaps by this time ab Ulmis realized that Martyr and Cranmer stood for what was substantially his own position.

One thing is clear. Cranmer did not make any very considerable contribution in theological writing. When we survey even his total literary remains, it is astonishing how small is the quantity compared with the vast bulk of Luther or Calvin

13. *Ibid.*, p. 470.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 480.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 482.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 380-381.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 388.

or the lesser but impressive tomes of Zwingli. It is true, of course, that the two volumes of the Parker Society edition are both substantial and run to several hundred pages. But when we examine them, we find that there is not a great deal of direct theology. The main treatise is the *True and Catholic Doctrine* and the more detailed and scattered *Defence*, which together comprise the first volume. There is also a work on Scripture and Tradition, although this seems to have been put together and augmented by a Marian editor. For the rest we are dependent upon various papers and fragments and writings which are only indirectly theological. The preoccupation with ecclesiastical business is no doubt responsible in the main for this paucity of theological utterance. But there may be, perhaps, another and a deeper reason. The temperament of Cranmer was more that of the pure scholar than the independent thinker. His primary impulse was to amass knowledge rather than to state or discuss it.

Yet that is not the whole truth, for Cranmer is responsible for a tremendous amount of what we are forced to describe as indirect theology. For example, he had a hand in several confessions of faith, from the Ten Articles of 1536 to the Forty-Two Articles of 1553. Again, he was interested in the successive statements of doctrine which were issued for instructional purposes: the *Bishops' Book*, the *King's Book*, *Cranmer's Catechism* and possibly the Catechism issued with the Forty-Two Articles and usually ascribed to Ponet. We have to be careful, of course, that we do not appeal too confidently to these writings as an expression of Cranmer's own opinions, for there is no doubt that he did not like the *King's Book*, and it is doubtful whether he was really satisfied with its predecessor. More important from this standpoint is the first book of *Homilies* issued early in the reign of Edward, for Cranmer has always been regarded as the author of the great series on justification to which there is still a reference in the article (11). By their very nature the *Homilies* have a pronounced homiletical tendency, but all the same they have a definite doctrinal importance and Cranmer had a fairly free hand in their composition.

Even the Prayer Books are theological in an indirect sense,

for at the most important points the changes in the form and structure of worship were determined on dogmatic rather than strictly liturgical grounds. This was particularly true in the case of the communion service, but in varying degrees it is true of all the services. The consecration of the baptismal water was not omitted merely because it is a dispensable ceremony, but because of underlying dogmatic implications. Similarly, prayers for the dead have to be excluded to safeguard a true doctrine of redemption by Jesus Christ, and the introduction of a general confession instead of the “sacrament” of penance is governed entirely by dogmatic and not liturgical considerations. It is for this reason that the Prayer Book is so often regarded, and with partial justification, as a supplementary confession of faith. We have to be careful, of course, not to read the liturgies merely as doctrinal statements. Obviously the language of piety cannot have the same precision as that of dogmatics, and the former ought to be interpreted in terms of the latter rather than *vice versa*. From 1549 to the present day the Church of England has suffered from an inveterate and apparently ineradicable tendency to treat the Prayer Book as a primary and even an autonomous confessional utterance. On the other hand, there is an evident inter-action, which Cranmer himself realized, between liturgy and doctrine, and from first to last the revision of the services, like every achievement of Cranmer, was regarded as a theological task.

Indeed, the more closely we consider his work, the more we see that it was dominated by a theological aim and method. He had no primary interest in the practical reformation of the church, which he was content for the most part to leave to the civil authorities. The concern of the archbishop was not merely that this or that abuse should be remedied or arrangement improved. It went a good deal deeper. It was a concern that the medieval system as a whole should give way to a reformed and therefore as he saw it a scriptural and a truly catholic system. To accomplish this task all sorts of practical measures had to be taken and Cranmer was ready to bring such pressure as he could where something vital was at stake. But his own positive contribution was primarily in the less

tangible field of the word and sacrament. He gave to his church a Bible, biblical preaching, a catechism, a Prayer Book and a confession of faith. If he has nothing much to offer in the way of dogmatic treatises, the reforms for which he himself was in the main responsible are all at the theological level.

But he also had a theological strategy, for like Luther himself he believed and foresaw that this deeper reformation by the word would issue in a more thorough-going reformation of practice and conduct. Of course, Cranmer was far too much of a theologian to regard doctrinal preaching and instruction merely as the means to a practical or ecclesiastical end. It is a primary aim in itself. But he was also far too much of a theologian to think that the theological or religious world is an isolated one which does not have a very profound effect on affairs in general. If the people could be systematically indoctrinated in evangelical truth, the more mundane problems of the church and nation would necessarily solve themselves. It was for this reason, or better perhaps, with this necessary byproduct also in view, that Cranmer concentrated upon the preaching and teaching of the Gospel, disseminating the Scriptures, introducing exhortations into all possible services, insisting upon instruction in the Creed, Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments, ordering the preaching of sermons or homilies, publishing catechisms and taking care for the proclamation of sound scriptural and catholic doctrine. The attempted development of schools and colleges was also an integral part of the basic strategic programme.

In two respects, it may be, Cranmer miscalculated. For one thing, he thought of his own task rather too narrowly as theological, leaving the more practical arrangements much too readily to the civil powers. Theoretically, of course, the proclamation of the word was to influence and inspire the civil rulers, but in practice it did not altogether work out that way, and in England as in Lutheran Germany the thoroughgoing reformation by the Word of God was never accomplished. Far too often the arrangements which were left to the civil powers were determined by purely practical or even selfish rather than theological or spiritual factors, and Cranmer's sharp

separation of spiritual and temporal functions proved an obstacle rather than a help to his own ultimate objective. At this point Zwingli and Calvin saw deeper than Luther and Cranmer, for they realized that theological responsibility does not cease with proclamation and instruction, but has to see to a practical outworking in the life of church and nation.

But second, Cranmer had not reckoned on the fact that even the theological programme could not be carried out properly without practical measures of ecclesiastical reform. It is one thing to insist on a definite policy of preaching and teaching, but this policy can be put into effect only if there is a properly qualified, deployed and disciplined ministry. In sixteenth-century England this meant that there would have to be more and better schools and a thorough reorganization of diocesan and parochial life. The vast endowments of monasteries and chantries could have supplied this need and Cranmer and his fellow-reformers did their best to secure as much of the endowments as possible for educational and ecclesiastical projects. But for the most part their efforts were unsuccessful, and the failure in practical reform meant inevitably a partial failure in the theological. Because of the practical breakdown there was cumulative obstruction where there might otherwise have been cumulative development. The circle of inter-action was turning the wrong way.

The fact remains, however, that by impulse, aim and strategy, Cranmer worked as a theologian rather than an administrator, and that in spite of every obstacle he achieved a fair measure of success even in his own century, quite apart from the almost incalculable influence of his work on the centuries which followed. It is the theological character of his activity which makes it so difficult to form an impartial judgment of Cranmer. If we try to assess him by administrative standards, we shall be tempted to write him off as almost a complete failure: which would, of course, be quite unjust. Again, if we do not share or at least understand his theological outlook and teaching, his achievements will be real enough but distasteful or even disastrous. Because he operated at the deep level of the Word and the Spirit, Cranmer's greatness has

necessarily an enigmatic quality, which is also apostolic. His weapons were not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. His accomplishments were not the striking successes of administration, but the unnoticed, intangible, incalculable things which in the long run have often the most decisive and enduring consequences.

SAMPLE