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*Thomas Cranmer was born on July 2, 1489, and died on March 21, 1556. He significantly contributed to the English Reformation as the Archbishop of Canterbury.*

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Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury during England's religious evolution, had a profound influence on the Anglican tradition and Western Christianity. His creation, the Book of Common Prayer, brought church rituals and language into everyday English and greatly affected Christian life.

Cranmer's time was marked by political and religious upheaval. His close relationship with Henry VIII and Edward VI made him instrumental in England's break with Rome and the establishment of the Church of England. However, his political involvement often overshadowed his religious work.

In this chapter, we explore the complex narrative of Cranmer, who left a lasting mark on Christianity. His role in the English Reformation and the creation of the Book of Common Prayer exemplifies the interplay of faith, power, and compromise in Christendom. His influence under secular authority shaped the beliefs and practices of millions.

## CRANMER'S EARLY LIFE AND RISE TO PROMINENCE

### BACKGROUND: EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Thomas Cranmer was born in Aslockton, England, living a typical rural life with a classical education. His studies led him to attend Cambridge University, a journey of 80 miles. Cambridge accepted students for law, theology, or medicine, with admission usually recommended by local Catholic schools. Latin was essential, as it was the language of the university.

Cranmer was exposed to the humanist ideas of the 16th Century at the university. Unlike today's secular humanism, Renaissance humanism aimed at individual moral and intellectual development through classical texts and culture. It highlighted human potential, reason, and classical texts for moral and intellectual guidance, attempting to reconcile the classics with Christian theology. This era was more liberal arts-oriented than the preceding scholastic era.

### ASCENSION TO CANTERBURY

For centuries, the Archbishopric of Canterbury was the leading Roman Catholic position in English religious affairs, influencing politics and society. Archbishop Cranmer is best known for separating Canterbury from Papal control, akin to Martin Luther, though under different circumstances.

The reasons for Cranmer's break from Rome are unclear. It could be his education, which may have led him to question Roman theology, or his relationship with King Henry VIII.

Cranmer's role became crucial when Henry VIII sought an annulment from his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Despite the papacy's refusal to grant an annulment, Cranmer, a respected scholar and expert in canon law, suggested Henry consult scholars instead of just religious authorities. This proposal gained him favor with the King and set him on a path to fundamentally change the Christian landscape.

### RAPID RISE TO POWER

When Bishop of Canterbury, William Warham, died in 1532, Henry nominated Thomas Cranmer for the position. Despite initial opposition, Pope Clement VII approved for political reasons, due to the tense religious climate and need for kingdom-church cooperation. Thus, Cranmer, previously a university scholar, became the Bishop of Canterbury, swiftly

ordained as priest and bishop. Despite accusations of political expediency, in 1532, the King and Pope's decisions were uncontested, making Cranmer a key player in Canterbury.

## THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IS BORN

### THE ANNULMENT (1533)

In 1533, Cranmer led a court to review King Henry VIII's 24-year marriage to Catherine of Aragon, which the King deemed sinful due to her prior marriage to his brother. Catherine, estranged and living separately, didn't participate in the trial held at Dunstable Priory, outside London. The court, likely packed with English church leaders and Canon Law experts, lacked Papal representatives. In May 1533, Cranmer declared the King's marriage "null and void." Anne Boleyn, secretly wed to the King in January, was pronounced Queen. Catherine passed away a few years later.

### THE ACT OF SUPREMACY (1534)

The annulment caused further tension between King Henry and the Papacy, leading to the creation of the Act of Supremacy in 1534. This act, passed by Parliament, declared King Henry VIII and his successors as heads of the Church of England, stripping the Pope of religious authority in England and transferring church properties to the kingdom.

This act, while freeing England from Papal control, required citizens to pledge loyalty to the monarch, leading to treason charges and executions for refusal. The citizens transitioned from one spiritual dictatorship to another, both claiming Biblical "orthodoxy".

This act was repealed and reinstated several times, reflecting England's fluctuating separation from Rome under different monarchs.

### CRANMER'S INFLUENCE

Thomas Cranmer, a trusted advisor to the King and the Archbishop of Canterbury, played a crucial role in establishing the Act of Supremacy. He advocated for the Bible in the common tongue, challenging the Catholic Church's insistence on Latin, which helped politically to denounce the Roman Church and remove commoners from Papal control. He also provided theological justification for the King's supremacy over the Church, using passages from the Bible. As archbishop, he used his influence to garner support for these changes. His work was aided by the social climate of reform and the power of the printing press.

## THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

In 1549, during Edward VI's reign, Cranmer unified the Christian community in the Kingdom by creating the Book of Common Prayer, after Henry VIII's death. This book, containing prayers and instructions for religious duties, standardized worship practices which were previously fragmented. The Act of Uniformity was enforced by Parliament, instituting punishment for non-compliance. Theologically, the book leaned towards Protestant Christianity, while stylistically retaining traditional Catholic elements, except that services were in English. Today's "proper" religious worship traces back to Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer.

- In weddings:
  - Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...
  - Speak now, or forever hold your peace
  - To have and to hold from this day forward
- In funerals:
  - "I commend thy soul to God the Father Almighty, and thy body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus

Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be like his glorious body, according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things to himself.”

In baptismal doctrine, the Church of England retained that which was standard belief among the Roman church and was, at least at the time, retained in Protestantism as well. Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer had this opening remark that was to be given by the priest at the baptism of a child

- “Dear beloved, inasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin, and that no man born in sin can enter into the kingdom of God (except he be regenerated, and born anew of water and the Holy Ghost), I beseech you to call upon God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he will grant to these children that which by nature they cannot have, that is to say, they may be baptized with the Holy Ghost, and received into Christ's holy Church, and be made lively members of the same.”

Cranmer adopted the reformed view on the Eucharist, believing it provided the recipient with a divine or spiritual presence of God's Son.

## DOWNFALL AND LEGACY

Edward IV, son of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour, died at 15 in 1553. Raised Protestant, he was succeeded by his Catholic half-sister Mary, who was determined to reverse England's Protestant shifts. She repealed the Act of Supremacy and Act of Uniformity, restoring Catholicism in 1554.

Upon her ascension, Mary had Cranmer, creator of the Book of Common Prayer, arrested for heresy and treason. Despite multiple recantations, possibly coerced, he was sentenced to death. Executed by burning in 1556, he recanted his recantations and affirmed his Protestant beliefs, becoming a symbol of Protestant resistance.

## CONCLUSION

Thomas Cranmer, a complex figure in Christendom, was a scholar, theologian, and opportunist. Despite recanting his Protestantism, he died a martyr under Mary I. Elizabeth I later restored Protestantism in England.

Cranmer's life, a blend of religion and politics, greatly influenced modern Christianity. His work, the Book of Common Prayer, shaped Colonial American history and modern religious language. However, his leadership persecuted those in the "radical reformation", who favored individual faith over royal sovereignty.