

This year we commemorate the fifth centenary of the protestant reformation. It is 500 years since Martin Luther publicized his Ninety-Five Theses, a series of not-particularly novel criticisms of the Catholic Church's pastoral practices.

Luther was not the first, and certainly not the only, person in the early sixteenth century who was highly critical of the theology and institutions of the late medieval Church. Indeed, one of the striking characteristics of the Early Reformation is the lack of clarity and agreement about the nature and extent of the reforms that were being sought by the church's very numerous critics.

Certainly there was no clear division between 'Protestants' and 'Catholics'. In fact, the real battle lines only began to emerge towards the middle of the sixteenth century. By then, princes and other rulers, town authorities, scholars, clergy and ordinary people from Strasbourg to Stockholm, had begun to forge a sense of religious identity resting on shared confessional values—whether based on the teachings of Luther, or his Swiss contemporaries, Zwingli and Bullinger, or—slightly later—John Calvin.

In England, of course, the timing and form of the reformation was directly shaped by the anxieties and ambitions of one man: King Henry VIII. Having failed, after 20 years of marriage to produce a male heir, Henry wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon. If the Pope would not accept that Henry's marriage to Catherine had been a sinful flouting of Biblical injunction, then other means had to be found to remarry in a way that would ensure that the king's future heirs would be regarded as legitimate by his subjects.

The solution, as most of you will know, was the drastic one of dissolving the link between the English Church and the Pope: henceforth Henry VIII would be the ruler—or 'Supreme Head'—of the church in England. But did this mean that the English church, clergy and people ceased to be part of the Catholic Church? And what were the spiritual implications of this schism from Rome?

To one New College man, this was an issue that would define the last years of his career. William Warham was created a Fellow of New College in 1475, but left the college to pursue a career in diplomacy and government. Made Bishop of London in 1501, he was promoted to the Archbishopric of Canterbury.

The Warden of New College since 1526, John London, like many of the Fellows, appears to have had no difficulty accepting the Royal Supremacy over the Church. And indeed, the crown's initiatives, following after the Act of Supremacy, to reform some of the institutions and structures of the church, were seen by many as responsible, conservative stewardship, rather than the thin end of a protestant wedge.

It was in this belief that Warden London was willing to act from 1536 as one of the Royal Visitors to the English monasteries; a process that led by rapid stages to their wholesale dissolution—a decidedly un-conservative outcome. But for the Warden and Fellows, the theological haziness o

This militantly Catholic intellectual life reshaped New College: the protestant Warden Skinner resigned in the first year of Mary's reign, and a further seven protestant Fellows were removed; fifteen new appointments gave an even more strongly catholic character to the College by the end of Mary's reign. Had Mary survived there is little doubt that New College and its Fellows would have continued to play a major role in providing intellectual and polemical support for catholic revival.

However with her death in 1558 and Elizabeth's accession, Mary's catholic restoration was emphatically repudiated. The Fellowship of New College and its Catholic Warden, Thomas White, could hardly be worse-placed in the eyes of the government authorities who were seeking to pick up the threads of the protestant reformation. A number of the Catholic Fellowship fled abroad; some, like the Harpsfield brothers, were imprisoned for refusing the Act of Royal Supremacy.

The majority, including the Warden, waited nervously for further developments: they accepted Elizabeth as head of the Church while wondering how extreme the shift back towards Protestantism would be. The answer of course was that the Elizabethan settlement was every bit as doctrinally protestant as that of Edward VI, even if Elizabeth's own wishes may have ensured the retention of some forms of traditional religious practice. Most notably of course for us sitting