

Which way heaven?

Although she was in the grave by the age of thirty-six, and on the throne of England for only three years (and that nearly 500 years ago), mention the name of Anne Boleyn today in any group of people and there will be a reaction from some. Why is this? Because she played a fundamental role in changing for millions the answer to the question—Which way heaven?

In 16th-century Europe there was a universal belief in heaven and hell—the debate was about how to reach one and avoid the other. In our modern Western world the afterlife might be an occasional and interesting dinner-table conversation, but back then your future destiny was all-important. More important, as Bill Shankly (former manager of Liverpool Football Club) once said, when speaking about football, than life and death.

For a thousand years Christendom believed what the Roman Catholic Church taught—that Christ's work on the cross, and all the favours of heaven, belonged to the Church; only the Church could administer the benefits of heaven through the sacramental system it had invented. These sacraments, it taught, were the means by which man received God's favour or 'grace', without which you were destined for hell.¹ Kings and queens, rich and poor, all had to come to the Church. Heaven was only entered through its gates; truly it had the keys to heaven and hell. And the issue went deeper. It did not affect only matters 'spiritual': the Church also believed that all earthly powers were ultimately subject to its authority.

In the year 1500 western Europe was still united in its Roman Catholicism—all paying homage to the pope at Rome. By the 1520s some German states were beginning to break away, but England, that distant outpost of Catholicism, remained loyal; indeed Henry VIII wrote a thesis in defence of the Church's teaching entitled *Assertion of the Seven Sacraments*, and was awarded the title 'Defender of the Faith' by the Pope in 1521, a title retained, ironically, right down to our own day by the British monarchy in its capacity as head of the Church of England. 1521 was the very year that Anne Boleyn returned to England from France bringing the heresy that Henry had condemned; by 1533 England had made its historic

break from Rome—a move that rocked Christendom. How had this happened? Henry VIII needed to defy the pope to marry Anne Boleyn, and he used the new teachings she had brought from France to achieve it. In a sense England has stood apart from continental Europe ever since.

What was this new way to heaven? Many able scholars, as they gained access to the text of the Bible, saw that entry to heaven was based on Christ's merits alone, and freely accessible to every man, woman, and child, without any earthly organization or system to intervene; that the Christian life is a life marked out by obedience to God's commands as taught in the Bible, summarized by Christ as firstly, loving God, and secondly, loving your neighbour.

In contrast the Roman Church taught that entry to heaven was based on receiving grace through its sacraments. For Christians finally to achieve heaven they needed a constant supply of that grace, received principally by a continuous observance of the Church's rituals. Great emphasis was also put on the lives of 'saints'—these were people who had in the past lived exemplary lives and after death had been 'beatified' by the Church. These saints were to be prayed to in order that they might grant specific requests, the supreme saint being Jesus' mother, Mary—whose worship was (and is) actively encouraged by the Catholic Church.

Grace could also be dispensed at shrines. They often house at least one 'relic'—items that are believed to have come from a saint, or one of the original apostles, or even Christ himself. Listed among the relics at Bury St Edmunds in 1535 were the coals with which St Laurence was toasted, the parings of St Edmund's nails, and St Thomas of Canterbury's penknife. Some of the bread used to feed the five thousand was claimed to be at Peterborough, along with even a feather of Gabriel's wing. These were all thought to have a sort of 'magic' property, so to touch, or even see, such an item might 'confer grace'. The concept is apiece with the belief that when the bread and wine are consecrated by the priest in the Church service known as the Mass, they actually become the body and blood of Christ—the supreme 'relic' that confers grace. Pilgrimages are similarly part of the system that helps a person on the way to heaven—if a journey is made to some particular shrine, or to see some relic, grace is in some way credited to his or her account.

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But it was the Church's practice of granting indulgences that was the spark to ignite the Reformation, as the movement against orthodox Catholic teaching came to be called. The Church believed that even when the sacramental system was carefully observed, on death, heaven was to be entered through a transitional phase—purgatory. In purgatory the remaining sin clinging to your life was 'purged' so that your soul would be sufficiently pure to enter heaven; the length of time you spent in this extremely unpleasant place depended on how much sin there was left to purge.

But there was hope of relief from this painful experience—you could call on the Church's saints for help to hasten your journey. Their 'excess' good works were deemed able to credit a kind of central spiritual merit account. The ordinary person could request that some of this merit be credited to his or her own, or someone else's, account; once in the specified account the pains of purgatory were eased for that person. When so applied the extra merit was called an indulgence. Who owned the merit account? It was, of course, the Church. It is not difficult to anticipate what happened next: the indulgence was sold by the Church, often to relatives, to ease the passing of a deceased loved one through purgatory.²

It was this practice that the monk and university lecturer Martin Luther took particular exception to, and his teachings (and that of other Reformers) began to spread widely. More and more people learned that the Church's system for reaching heaven was not in the Bible. They came across for the first time that foundational doctrine—'justification by faith'. They read that Christ had paid a sufficient sacrifice on Calvary's cross to pay for all sin. There was no purgatory. No further rituals, masses, penances—or even good works—were required to secure a place in heaven. All that any man, woman, or child needed was to receive by faith the gift of eternal life freely offered by Christ. Truly this was 'amazing grace': the demands of justice had been met by God himself. It is difficult to see how the Bible could have been clearer: 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.'³ Individuals are brought into a loving relationship with God because he first loved them; in response to that love they, by faith, receive the forgiveness that Christ freely offers. Here is the gospel, hidden for so long.

Surely Zahl is right when he states: ‘... Catholicism sought to objectify, or make concrete and palpable, the relation between God and humanity. ... The relationship between God and humanity is, like all relationships in life, unseen ... [Catholicism was] a system of “meritorious” actions and offerings and indulgences and pilgrimages and prostrations that did not reflect the authentic inwardness of life and love.’⁴

This new teaching was described as ‘new learning’, what today would be described as ‘evangelical’. People who held these views were often called ‘Protestant’, because they were seen to be protesting against Catholic teaching and practice. But it is not good for any group to be defined by what they do *not* believe in, and, what is more, Luther certainly did not simply protest against Catholicism, he fully grasped the wonder of the biblical gospel. His commentaries and hymns show this, including the following:

’Tis through thy love alone we gain
The pardon of our sin
The strictest life is but in vain,
Our works can nothing win ...
Wherefore my hope is in the Lord,
My works I count but dust
I build not there, but on his word
And in his goodness trust.⁵

Men and women could now have assurance of a life to come in heaven with their Saviour—based not on a creaking system of penances and good works of their own, or of some past saint, but rather on Jesus Christ’s own blood and sinless life. People gained their assurance not from the Church, but from Christ himself—whom they could now read about for themselves in ever-increasing numbers as the Bible began to be translated into the vernacular: first into German by Luther, then soon after into English by, most notably, William Tyndale.

Not only did this effect a profound spiritual change in the lives of many individuals, but there was also a corresponding psychological impact—everybody was now potentially free of the Church’s control. They could

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‘walk tall’ as men or women before God. They did not have to fear alienating the local priest or the Church hierarchy, but could go about their daily tasks endeavouring to please their Saviour, not a system. Their soul’s destiny was, in a sense, in their own hands, not in those of a ‘foreign’ potentate—as the Church had often seemed to be with its distant pope exercising ultimate control. Although the focus of most historical books has been necessarily on the more measurable impact of the Reformation on political and national life (and to an extent this book will be no exception), this new individual and personal dimension to faith also had an immense influence on the mindset of English people, a mindset they exported in many missionary endeavours in subsequent centuries, and which contributed much to making many English-speaking peoples what they are today.

At first the Church thought they could ignore Luther—there had been other heretics before and the Church had stood the test of time. But they had not counted on the 16th-century equivalent of the Internet age—the new German printing presses. The numbers holding to the new Reformed views rapidly increased; eventually the Church began to see a threat to its future. Its wealth and power base were rooted in its sacramental system and its claim to be able to intercede with God on man’s behalf—in direct contradiction to the Bible, in which thousands could now read for themselves such statements as: ‘For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.’⁶

The ‘new learning’ had laid an axe to the whole sacramental system. The scene was set for the religious (and consequently political) power struggles in England for the next 200 years; the subsequent changes have impacted national life right down to the 21st century.

It will be seen that Anne Boleyn, born at the dawn of what historians call the modern era, played a crucial role in this. But first an attempt will be made to catch a glimpse of her world—that lost world of medieval England.

Notes

1 See Appendix 2: The seven sacraments.

- 2 The Roman Catholic Church still believes in the whole system of indulgences; it is just the abuse of selling them that they have repudiated. See **Kreeft**, p. 346.
- 3 Ephesians 2:8–9.
- 4 **Zahl**, pp. 12–13.
- 5 **Rosman**, p. 20.
- 6 1 Timothy 2:5.