

*Is not Tyndale also among the Prophets?**

David Keep

[p.57]

This article portrays Tyndale, in both churchmanship and doctrine, as a radical in the tradition of the Lollards.

WILLIAM TYNDALE has been for four hundred and fifty years the chief martyr of the early English reformation and the hero of missionary translators. The flames which consumed his body outside the Imperial castle at Vilvorde were a lamp not only to the King of England but to a biblical protestantism which was to spread by leaps and bounds and come near to world conquest. Of Tyndale's life we know little: the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his death could be the half-millennium of his birth somewhere on the banks of the Severn in Gloucestershire. We have glimpses of his life and work in Oxford, Cambridge, Bristol, London, probably at Wittenberg and in the cities of the Rhine and Flanders.¹ The man himself eludes us apart from his urgent pen translating so far as he could from the original and, where he could not, cribbing from Luther. It is as the English Luther that his nineteenth-century admirers were inclined to hail him: one of the great losses to the English church; his work is given a prominent place in Quentin Skinner's monumental study of the development of political thought in which he gives full weight to the meetings at *The White Horse*. 'Tyndale was only one amongst a considerable group of young Cambridge scholars who were attracted in a similar way from humanism to the Lutheran church.'² I want to suggest in this paper that this is not strictly correct; that Tyndale's attitude to the authority of scripture and the state was distinct from that of Luther

[p.58]

and made him a successor of the lollards and a precursor of English independents rather than the erastians.

Nothing I may argue in this paper can touch Tyndale's remarkable achievement in translating the New Testament and most of the Old, and doing it in such a way that his vocabulary permeates the Authorised Version. Some of the key terms rejected in 1611 have been restored to modern versions. It may indeed be argued that Tyndale's concern was solely with translation and that it is inappropriate to search his works for systematic theology, but he did rebel against the church and must have had some inkling of what reformation by the Word of God would involve. The dilemma is clearly stated in Gervase Duffield's introduction to a reissue of some of his works. Duffield quoted *The Times Literary Supplement* of 4 June 1925: 'He was the father, not indeed of the Puritans who leaned on Calvin, but on those other Puritans who produced the Family of Love, Brownists, and Anabaptists' and commented 'Tyndale would have been horrified to be linked with these folk, who are now generally all classed as Anabaptists'...³ I am far from convinced by this. Uneasy lay the head that wore the mitre in the church of Henry and his son. It is hard to imagine Tyndale as a Cranmer or a

* A communication read to the Ecclesiastical History Society at Oxford in July 1985.

¹ The main source for Tyndale's life is Foxe, together with an autobiographical passage in his preface to *The fyrst boke of Moses* (Ed. J.I. Mombert, William Tyndale) *The Pentateuch* (Fontwell 1967) pp.3-5. The possible visit to Wittenberg and the negotiations with Vaughan are discussed in R. Demaus 1871; J.F. Mozley 1937; C.H. Williams 1969 and B.H. Edwards *God's Outlaw*, Welwyn 1976.

² Quentin Skinner, *The foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge 1978, vol.2, pp.32-3.

³ G.E. Duffield, *The Work of William Tyndale*, Appleford 1964, p.xiii.

Ridley, or indeed as a Hooper or a Coverdale. I shall attempt to demonstrate that his churchmanship was in the radical tradition of the lollards, that he refused to join the reformers at the English court, and that what we may discern of his doctrine was at least veering toward the radical alternatives.

Gordon Rupp suggested that Tyndale was supported by lollards. As he put it in his incomparable way:

There are mysterious references to a 'Society of Christian Brethren' which has been described as a kind of 'Forbidden Book of the Month Club'. It seems to have been an organised sodality with its own accounts and auditors. It subsidized scholars like William Tyndale, and it underwrote the dangerous but not unprofitable godly trade of smuggling into this country the works of the Reformers from 1520 onwards, and then from about 1526 a whole spate of English religious literature.⁴

This, of course, makes considerable assumptions in order to achieve clarity and coherence, but it does make sense of Tyndale's reception by Humphrey Monmouth in London, and the merchant's later defence of him that he was a strict and disciplined priest. It accounts for his dangerous lodgings in the catholic cities of the Rhine and his final home in the English merchants' house in Antwerp. Although Foxe is not specific on this point, it is likely that he preached and argued on College Green in Bristol. He can hardly have provoked the diocesan Chancellor's condemnation solely for his tart comments at the meal-table at Little Sodbury Manor. His final capture was in the course of one of his pastoral walks in the alleys of Antwerp where he used to visit the members of the English congregation.

Tyndale in his exile shared fellowship in what was later to be defined as the 'gathered church'. Lay groups meeting for prayer and bible study had preserved the lollard Bible and were the foundation of the English reformation. Exiles on the continent formed 'strangers' churches, as the beautiful Beguinhof in Amsterdam reminds us. In times of persecution both catholic and protestant took advantage of diplomatic courtesy, if not immunity, to

[p.59]

worship with foreign residents in London. When Grindal was compelled to suppress prophesyings, the puritans naturally reverted to secret meetings in warehouses and hulks, as their successors, 'undenominational but still the church of God', continue to do. Tyndale compared Wycliffe (and Gildas) to Jonah: the preacher's duty was to call men to repentance. He was very specific on the authority of the preacher and on the duty of every believer to preach:

Every man then may be a common preacher, thou wilt say, and preach every where by his own authority. Nay, verily; no man may yet be a common preacher, save he that is called and chosen thereto by the common ordinance of the congregation, as long as the preacher teacheth the true word of God. But every private man ought to be, in virtuous living, both salt and light to his neighbour: insomuch that the poorest ought to strive to overrun the bishop, and preach to him in word and deed unto his household, and to them that are under his governance &c.⁵

⁴ Gordon Rupp, *Six Makers of English Religion*, London 1964, p.16.

⁵ *Prologue to the prophet Jonas 1531; An Exposition upon the V. VI. VII. Chapters of Matthew*, 1532. Duffield, p.94 and p.214.

This is the practice for the 'holy huddle'. Individual scholarship and personal admonition was the religion of the petty bourgeois lay literate, catholic or lollard; the piety that Tyndale both advocated and practised.

Through circumstances, inclination and, I suggest, theology, Tyndale was a separatist. In earlier generations he might have found his place in the library of a monastery, but in the ferment of the sixteenth century he was drawn into controversy. He opted for *congregation* as the precise translation of *ecclesia* and although in his *Answer to More* he was aware that the word contained the ambiguity which is still preserved in the use of the German *Gemeinde*, he opted for the third possible meaning, and then only in a precisely modified form. The church in the New Testament was not the building, not the 'multitude of shaven, shorn and oiled; which we now call the spirituality and clergy...'. The third use had been forgotten. It was either 'the whole body of the city, of all kinds, conditions, and degrees', which is how the reformers of the continental free cities saw it, with conflicting views as to how far ecclesiastical control should be exercised over all citizens. Or as Tyndale preferred:

And in this third signification is the church of God, or Christ taken in the scripture; even for the whole multitude of all them that receive the name of Christ to believe in him, and not for the clergy only.⁶

I turn secondly to Henry the eighth's invitation to Tyndale to return to London, and so to play a part in the reform of the Church of England. Biographers from Demaus to the present have described the secret negotiations between the royal agent Stephen Vaughan and Tyndale in the crucial period November 1530 to June 1531. Cromwell was a rising man at the court, More was failing as he could not arrange the annulment of the royal marriage. The king seems to have had a genuine respect for scholarship and for theology in particular. Cranmer built his reputation on his tour of the protestant universities to seek their opinion on the marriage. The arrest of Latimer and little Bilney would not have helped to give Tyndale confidence, but revolutions whether Lutheran or Leninist are made by those who are

[p.60]

prepared to seize their moment. Even martyrdom in London would have been more effective than on that foreign field where lies a piece of England. Tyndale would have received either a heavenly crown or an earthly mitre and this paper would have had no possible validity. Tyndale in the event refused. He assured Vaughan of his loyalty to the monarch but did not obey, despite his exegesis in his *Prologue to the Book of Numbers*, that the authority of the king, like domestic necessity, may override an oath.⁷ His purpose was to translate the Bible and make it plain to the ploughboy at all costs.

He may have been influenced by the realisation that on the issue of the royal marriage to Anne his views were fully in line with his adversary Thomas More. He published *The Practice of Prelates* in 1530. He found no contradiction in the laws of Moses on the matter:

I did my diligence a long season, to know what reasons our holy prelates should make for their divorcement; but I could not come by them. I searched what might be said for their part, but I could find no lawful excuse of myself, by any scripture that I ever read: I communed with divers learned men of the matter, which also could tell me no other way than I have showed.

⁶ Henry Walter, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue, The Supper of the Lord*, by William Tyndale, Cambridge 1850, p.12.

⁷ *The Pentateuch*, p.396.

Scripture came before expediency, and indeed in the same work led Tyndale to economic criticism which clearly identified him not with the new reformers but with the old radical preachers in the tradition of John Ball. Tyndale was opposed to large estates and the prospect of the tyranny of the rich over the poor:

For God thinketh it better for his commonwealth, that twenty should spend twenty or forty shillings apiece, than that one should spend twenty or forty pounds, and nineteen never a whit: for then must many poor hang on one rich.⁸

Such views have never been congenial to expansionist mercantile communities and Tyndale's rigorous ascetic morality was more respected than followed by Anne Boleyn who was the probable recipient of the best surviving copy of the first edition of the New Testament. Although Cranmer was able to follow and survive Cromwell in the royal favour, protestants who did not support the royal cause like Frith and Barnes were still liable to the fire, and even in the more evangelical climate of Edward VI, Hooper's life was threatened over the relatively trivial matter of episcopal vestments. I conclude that Tyndale was wise to refuse Vaughan's invitation, and that the distant threat of the Emperor in Antwerp was safer than the fickle favour of the English king.

My third point is that Tyndale's doctrine so far as it may be discerned leaned toward the radical position. I begin with the authority of scripture. This proved a two-edged sword to Luther and Zwingli as they found both the seeds of royal absolutism and congregational authority in the two testaments, but despite Tyndale's obvious endorsement of Romans 13, he consistently put obedience to the scripture before obedience to the king. Classic views of absolutism, like that of Abednego Seller, included Tyndale with the continental reformers in freeing the monarch from accountability

[p.61]

to his subjects, but Quentin Skinner has argued in great detail that the right to resist tyranny was accepted by Luther and his supporters after 1530, as well as by a significant part of the reformed tradition.⁹ Tyndale claimed that the preacher of the word might need to 'meddle with the pope, bishops, prelates and... great men of the world... these persons are of all other most corrupt, and therefore may not be left untouched.' I would couple this with a most significant statement about the right to interpret scripture which he expounded in the prologue to his *Exposition of the first Epistle of John* which he published in Antwerp in 1531:

whosoever bath the profession of baptism written in his heart, cannot but understand the scripture, if he exercise himself therein, and compare one place to another, and mark the manner of speech, and ask here and there the meaning of a sentence of them that be better exercised.¹⁰

I am assuming that Tyndale's joy in his baptism is like Luther's and not like the anabaptists who found the lay piety of the low countries such a fruitful mission field, but his method of exegesis is closer to Knox than to those who advocated a learned ministry and is clearly the method of the lollard fellowship. In this respect Tyndale's views are those followed by the separatist puritans.

⁸ Duffield, p.392 and p.388.

⁹ Skinner, vol.2, p.74.

¹⁰ Duffield, p.210 and pp.172-3.

There are two specific areas where Tyndale veered towards the radical position. One was in his view of covenant. There is a growing body of argument on the meaning of this term and its relationship to the eighteenth-century political doctrine of the social contract. Interpretation of the term is tied up with the right of resistance and the emergence of arminianism in the early seventeenth century. To the full predestinarian, the covenant is absolute, a matter of grace. To the city dwellers of the Rhine it had come to mean a two-sided agreement, the so-called 'double covenant' which laid mutual obligations on God and on mankind. This view meant that man had the power to reject God's grace, or to accept it and to know that he had accepted. This is the basis of the gathered church. In his chapter on 'Browne and the Covenanted Community' B. R. White picked up an important paper by Møller and concluded:

Browne's most notable English predecessor in teaching the conditional nature of the divine covenant with man was William Tyndale. Although Tyndale's teaching was broadcast by the tracts which he had written, it was probably far more widely spread by his notes in the margins of the various editions and reprints of his Bible translations. It seems that there was a double influence upon Tyndale leading him to his "mutualist" view of the covenant: that of the Rhineland reformers, and of the Biblical studies he undertook for his translation work.¹¹

An example of Tyndale's exegesis may be taken from his *Prologue to the Gospel of Matthew* 1534 and his *Exposition upon the V. VI. VII Chapters of Matthew* 1532. The incipient arminianism is seen in his rather odd explanation of the general covenant:

If we meek ourselves to God, to keep all his laws, after the example of

[p.62]

Christ, then God hath bound himself to us to keep and make good all the mercies promised in Christ, throughout all the scripture.

Later in the prologue the two testaments are compared: fulfilment of the old brings temporal reward, while the new is everlasting. This is a restatement of the doctrine of the two *regiments*, or kingdoms under which all are subject. in the first state there is neither father, mother, son, daughter; neither master, mistress, maid, manservant, nor husband, nor wife, nor lord, nor subject, nor man, nor woman, but Christ is all.¹² This is the democratic church which was to be the later basis for political democracy. It clearly had no place in the monarchic and *haute bourgeoisie* reformations of the sixteenth century.

Tyndale's second potentially sectarian doctrine was in his interpretation of the state of the dead. There is a clear exegetical problem between Jesus' promise to the penitent thief and Paul's statement that the dead are asleep until the trumpet shall sound.¹³ This was made more difficult by the early assimilation of the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul with the belief in resurrection. The Council of Florence in 1439 declared for the conscious sufferings of the dead in Purgatory, while the unorthodox view that the souls of the dead are either dead or asleep was termed by Calvin *psychopannychism*. G.H. Williams decided that More had been justified in accusing Tyndale of anabaptist views, 'for although Tyndale did not agree with the Radicals on the matter of baptism, he did share with them the belief in the doctrine of

¹¹ B.R. White, *The English Separatist tradition from the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers*, Oxford 1971, p.55.

¹² Duffield, p.106; p.1 12; p.238.

¹³ Luke 23:43; 1 Corinthians 15:51f.

the sleep of the soul.'¹⁴ Death at Vilvorde where other Flemish sectaries had died with the approval of Henry VIII hints to Williams at anabaptism. It is an ironic tragedy that the churches have so often been divided about the doctrine over which there can be least certainty: the Brethren movement was split over the same issue in the nineteenth century. So far as Tyndale is concerned, this is a further strong indication that he was not prepared to sacrifice his beliefs to conformity.

Tyndale, then, was justly criticised by More for his threat to the order of the church. The ploughboy with his Bible was to be free to point the finger of criticism at prelate and monarch. Bunyan and Wesley were the true followers of Tyndale, not Cranmer, Parker and Whitgift, and the *Geneva Bible* was the successor to his *New Testament*, not the great official folios chained to the desks in parish churches or locked away in oak chests. Tyndale's view of earthly society was totally negative: church and state were corrupted by sin and needed to repent, but to find a heavenly kingdom not a new Israel on earth. It is fruitless to conjecture what he would have made of the exegesis of the monarchy and the possibility of a Solomon or a Josiah on the throne, but he was not spared to consider them. There remains the enigma of his dying prayer: on balance from the evidence I have quoted, he hoped for freedom for the gospel and a church of true believers without episcopal, let alone royal, control. Tyndale was an evangelical with the single purpose of making the Bible available in a contemporary printed translation.

I have argued that he was a precursor of that form of lay congregation-centred protestantism for whom the Bible is the church, and although he did not give much thought to the possible shape of an English protestant church, his exegesis inevitably followed the pattern of the anabaptists and the more radical puritans. In these respects, whether or not he visited Wittenberg, he

[p.63]

was more lollard than lutheran and a prophet of that poor, semi-skilled social group which has supplied the radicals in religion and politics in every civilisation.

© 1977 Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes. Used by permission of the Methodist Publishing House.

Prepared for the Web in June 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.medievalchurch.org.uk/>

¹⁴ George Hunston William, *The Radical Reformation*, Philadelphia 1962, p.21 and p.401.