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Robert Barnes and Wittenberg

By N. S. TJERNAGEL

FROM the year 1521, when Henry VIII attacked the theology of Martin Luther in his celebrated *Assertio septem sacramentorum*, to 1540, when he reiterated his theological Romanism by ordering the execution of Thomas Cromwell and Dr. Robert Barnes, English policy respecting Lutheranism went full cycle. Between those dates on which the conservative position of Henry VIII was so emphatically stated, the king of England departed from orthodoxy and came very near to espousing the theology of the Lutheran reformers of Wittenberg, Germany. The royal dalliance with heresy during those years was not unconnected with the king's success in securing his divorce, the dissolution of the monasteries, and the title "Supreme Head, under Christ, of the Church of England."

In the pursuit of those ends England's foreign policy was directed toward the establishment of an alliance with the Schmalkaldic princes, the Lutheran subjects of Charles V, the Holy Roman emperor. Vigorously pursued by Cromwell, it was a policy distasteful to the king and only reluctantly accepted. He had made an emphatic and highly publicized attack against the theology that constituted the unifying element of the League of those Lutheran princes, and it was a rather humiliating experience to be obliged to support those whom he had formerly opposed so vehemently. By 1540 Henry VIII had come to the conclusion that the projected alliance was neither necessary nor desirable, and Cromwell and Barnes paid with their lives for a policy that the king had supported but which he now disavowed.

The religious conferences that were a part of that diplomacy, however, were not without effect. The king's fundamental conservatism notwithstanding, relations between England and the Schmalkaldic princes resulted first in a relaxation of the persecution of Lutheran heresy inaugurated by Cardinal Wolsey and Sir Thomas More and finally in opening the door to English acceptance and adoption of major articles of the Lutheran faith.

Alone among the English subjects of Henry VIII to master and accept the premises and the implications of the theology of the Wittenberg reformers, Robert Barnes emerges as the apostle of Lutheranism in England during the decade preceding his death in 1540. His place in this formative period of the Anglican Church and his contribution to the confessional literature of those years has never been adequately evaluated.

Most historians of the English Reformation have taken notice of Dr. Robert Barnes as one of the exponents of the "new learning" in England and as an ardent, if somewhat erratic, champion of reform during the reign of Henry VIII. All except the most recent students of this ecclesiastical history have perpetuated the contemporary opinion that Barnes was the victim of the stake because of his efforts in behalf of Henry's marriage to Anne of Cleves. Martin Luther was the first to express that view, and the martyrologist John Foxe accepted it without question.

Little notice has been taken of Barnes' theological writing or of the fact that though he actually had no part in arranging that futile marriage alliance, he did play a primary role in the relations between England and the Schmalkaldic princes during the formative period of the English Church. If the diplomacy in which he was so significantly involved failed in its purpose of achieving a political alliance, it did have a positive result in the doctrinal formulations of those years.

While it is true that the jointly achieved confessions of the English and the Schmalkaldic princes were to have no authority in the reign of Henry VIII, they were to survive as the basic framework for the Thirty-nine Articles of the Elizabethan Settlement. In effect, the ultimate theological position of the Anglican Church was largely determined by the theology and the persistence of the English Lutheran, Dr. Robert Barnes. Anglo-Lutheran relations

during the reign of Henry VIII thus are inextricably connected with Robert Barnes, the key figure in a religious diplomacy that was to have a greater significance than the immediate events of the reign seemed to indicate.

The recurrent stumbling block of the Anglo-Lutheran relations between 1521 and 1540 was the demand of the Schmalkaldic League that any political alliance be based on English acceptance of the Augsburg Confession. That condition the king of England was never willing to meet, but Robert Barnes, whose theological writings compass the controversial subjects treated in the Augsburg Confession, succeeded in getting large and significant segments of that confession into the doctrinal formulations of the Anglo-Lutheran conferences of the reign of Henry VIII.

Thus the clear parallels between the Augsburg Confession and the Thirty-nine Articles represent not the direct influence of the former upon the latter but rather an influence brought to bear mediately in the work of Robert Barnes and the English reformers who prepared the confessional statements of the reign of Henry VIII.

Late Tudor historiography recognized Barnes as one of the fathers of the English Church; only in very recent years have modern historians taken serious notice of this martyr, whom Martin Luther referred to as "St. Robert." If a study of his life reveals something less than a saint, it does find a worthy associate of Cranmer, Latimer, Tyndale, and Coverdale, who laid the foundation stones of the distinctive structure of English Protestantism.

Robert Barnes came into public notice and into an unhappy notoriety for the first time as the result of allegedly "heretical, seditious, contentious, blasphemous, and offensive" statements made in a sermon at St. Edward's Church, Cambridge, on December 24, 1525. Cardinal Wolsey promptly brought him to book for his indiscretion. Thrown into loose confinement, Barnes jeopardized his life further by selling the Testaments of Tyndale. When friends informed him that Wolsey was about to apprehend him and bring him to trial for his book selling, Barnes took leave of England at once.

It may be assumed that Barnes' flight to the Continent was readily arranged by the German merchants who had been so

assiduous in bringing Reformation literature to England. His trial in 1526 and his activity in the distribution of Bibles in England since that time had made him well known to the growing number of those who were criticizing the existing ecclesiastical institutions and were furthering the propagation of the Scriptures in the vernacular. Tyndale had already left England; Coverdale, who had earlier been Barnes' secretary at the Augustinian priory in Cambridge, departed in the same year as his former prior.

It is impossible to establish a definite itinerary and calendar of Dr. Barnes' first exile from November 1528 to December 1531. In all likelihood he made his first stop at Antwerp,¹ where Tyndale and his associates had established an informal colony of English Protestants. He may have gone on to Germany via Hamburg,² thence going to Wittenberg, where he spent some time in the home of Bugenhagen,³ and in association with Luther.⁴ In his *Supplication*⁵ Barnes says only that he visited many countries.

However meager our information as to his specific activities for this period may be, we do have his published writings to indicate that before he returned to England late in 1531, he had made the most of a study of Lutheranism at its source, the University of Wittenberg, and had achieved a thorough mastery of the theological system of Martin Luther and the Wittenberg reformers.

The first published work of Dr. Robert Barnes was his *Sententiae ex doctoribus collectae, quas papistae valde impudenter hodie damnant*. It was printed by Johannes Clug at Wittenberg in 1530 under the pseudonym of Antonus Anglus. The work was a 152-page quarto book with a preface by Johannes Bugenhagenius Pomoranus. A German translation was published the following year under the title *Fuernemblich Artickel, neulich verteuscht, von Dr. Antonius aus England*. Bugenhagen was the translator.

Barnes' *Sentences* might best be described as a debater's handbook. It contained a collection of prooftexts from the Bible and of quotations from patristic authorities on the subject of the nine-

¹ Herbert Maynard Smith, *Henry VIII and the Reformation*, p. 306.

² J. F. Mozley, *William Tyndale*, p. 150, n.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry VIII*, Vol. V, No. 593.

⁵ Daye ed., p. 414. See n. 6.

teen articles. Some of the subjects were later expanded into formal doctrinal essays.

It is particularly significant that the subject matter of the nineteen articles has a very close correspondence to the Augsburg Confession, published for the first time in the same year. The articles reveal the typically Lutheran theological interest of Barnes and the development of a religious position in clear conformity with that of Martin Luther. Only Barnes among English subjects of that generation qualifies, in the strict theological sense, for the designation *Lutheran*. Anne Boleyn, Latimer, Cranmer, and others were called Lutherans only in the sense that one might now use the word *Protestant*.

The second published work of Robert Barnes was his *Supplication to Henry VIII*, printed in Antwerp in 1531 by Simon Cock.⁶ The book has since then been known by the title of the first of the ten essays included in it. The *Supplication* was an eloquent protestation of Barnes' loyalty to the king, in which he pleaded that His Majesty judge between him and the bishops who had so "uncharitably" condemned him. There was a lengthy attack against the papacy and against ecclesiastical authority improperly exercised in secular affairs.

The second essay listed the twenty-five articles brought against him in 1526 together with his defense against the allegations of the bishops. The third told the story of his trial, condemnation, and imprisonment. The remaining essays in Barnes' book are doctrinal in nature and give us a basis for identifying him as a Lutheran, thoroughly seasoned in the Wittenberg theology.

The sixteenth century Reformers universally accepted the doctrine of justification by faith and acknowledged the Bible as the revealed Word of God and the sole source and norm of faith and life. Barnes' essays on those subjects reveal the full maturity of his Lutheranism as well as the fundamental importance of those articles of faith to the total structure of Lutheran theology. The relation between faith and good works is elaborately and fully spelled out.

⁶ E. G. Rupp, *Studies in the Making of the English Protestant Tradition*, p. 40; Mozley, p. 201; the definitive edition of Barnes' works, including some items not in the first edition, was printed by John Daye, London, 1572—73 in a volume titled *The Whole Works of Tyndale, Frith, and Barnes*.

Barnes saw the Son of God, as Luther and Bilney had seen Him, as the "perfect Peacemaker between God and men," justifying faith as something that "must come from heaven, and not from the strength of reason," and good works as "not done to justify the man, but a just man must needs do them."⁷

His attitude toward the Scriptures and the necessity of their distribution is quite evident from his vigorous affirmation of the right of all men to possess and to read the Bible in the vernacular. Among his most fervent prayers was the plea that he be given strength to defend the Bible against all its enemies.

The problem of the free will of man,⁸ debated by Luther and Erasmus, engaged the attention of Barnes also. His essay on that subject, however, is primarily a discourse on the sinfulness of fallen man, the grace of God, and the doctrine of election. Using distinctively Lutheran terminology, Barnes maintains the belief that man, of his own will, can do nothing meritorious before God. He ridiculed the attitude of John Fisher, bishop of Rochester, who said that free will can "do no good meritorious, but yet it does not wholly do nothing; for it carries with it a *bonum conatum* or good endeavor." On the contrary, Barnes said, "man hath lost his free will by sin and can no more do unto goodness than a dead man can make himself alive again; yea, he can do nothing but delight in sin."

In pursuing the question of God's choosing, or election, of sinners Barnes identifies himself specifically with Lutheran theology. The Lutheran doctrine of election was not adopted by other Protestant groups.

The first assumption of that doctrine is that man is under the just condemnation of his sin. All men have deserved damnation because of the disobedience of Eden and the righteous curse of the Law. But now God has "declared the riches of His glory," Barnes asserts, "unto the vessels of mercy which He has prepared and elected unto glory." In other words, God has, with no reference to any merit or special qualifications or disposition in them, chosen some sinners to faith and salvation. The will of God, Barnes says,

⁷ Daye ed., pp. 226 ff.

⁸ Ibid.

is revealed in the word of the Deity, "I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

Scorning the scholastics, Barnes says: "First shall we invent, that the election cometh of deserving, and then will we also dream certain works, that shall thereunto be appointed of us, and those will we do at our pleasure, so that the election and the reprobation shall stand all in our hands, let God do what pleaseth Him." However, he continues: ". . . the pure nature of man was corrupted by sin . . . so that we are, as St. Paul says, 'by nature the children of wrath,' and in David's words all 'conceived in sin.'" Barnes' conclusion followed: "Those that be good be good by His grace. Those that be bad, be bad of corrupted nature . . . God worketh good, and evil worketh evil." Other English theologians also stated that Lutheran doctrine of justification. None had expressed the Wittenberg theology so clearly in the matter of the sinfulness of fallen man, free will, and election, or in such perfect harmony with the Augsburg Confession.⁹

In referring to the Scripture as the key of the church, Barnes hit at Duns Scotus and other schoolmen who declared that "the keys of the Church are the authority given to priests whereby they give sentence that heaven must be opened unto this man and shut unto the other."¹⁰ Rejecting the view that the priesthood is able to open or close the doors of heaven for the sinner, Barnes declared that the only key able to do that is: ". . . the holy word of God whereby we receive faith into our hearts. This is the thing whereby our conscience is loosed and made free from sin. . . . Man is but a minister and servant to this word. The keys are given to the whole Church of Christ for her faith and they be the common treasure of the Church and belong no more to one man than to another." However, Barnes did not disavow the utility of a priesthood or ministry, but acknowledged in conformity with the Augsburg Confession that¹¹ ". . . because all men can not use these keys altogether (for they would make a confusion), therefore doth the Church, that is, the congregation of the faithful men, commit the ministration of these keys, that is, of preaching the Word of God, unto

⁹ See Art. II, XVIII, XIX.

¹⁰ Daye ed., pp. 257 ff.

¹¹ See Art. V.

certain men whom they think most able and best learned in the Word of God. The which men thus chosen be but ministers of the common treasure, and no lords over it." In this declaration Barnes not only was expressing a view entirely opposed to the medieval view of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but also was clearly affirming both the characteristically Lutheran doctrine of the Office of the Keys as the possession of the church and the idea of a ministry of the Word and Sacraments rather than a Levitical priesthood.

After deploring the numerous services for which priests demanded money, and after excoriating them for holding over the people the threat that they, the priests, personally held the keys to heaven, Barnes angrily derided them, saying: "Wherefore I can no more say unto you but the words of our Master Christ, 'Woe be unto you hypocrites which shut heaven's gates before other men' (Matthew 26), and as St. Luke sayeth: 'You have taken away the key of science and neither enter in yourself nor yet suffer other that come to enter in.'" (Luke 11)

In his discussion of the doctrine of the church, Barnes reveals further the distinctively Lutheran character of his theology. His essay is introduced by the charge that the church, spiritual in its essence, has been made a worldly institution.

Defining the visible church as the whole number of professing Christians, including both hypocrites and sincere believers, he goes on to the more significant consideration of the invisible church, which includes *all* and *only* true believers.

They that believe that Christ hath washed them from their sins, and stick fast unto His merits, and to the promise made to them in Him only, they be the Church of God and so pure and clean that it shall not be lawful, no, not for Peter, to say that they be unclean; but whether they be Jew or Greek, king or subject, carter or Cardinal, butcher or Bishop, tancard bearer or carmel rater, free or bound, Friar or fidler, monk or miller: if they believe in Christ's word and stick fast to His blessed promises, and trust only in the merits of His blessed blood, they be the holy Church of God, yea, and the very true Church of God.

The Church is a spiritual thing and no exterior thing but invisible from carnal eyes (I say not that they be invisible that be of the Church, but that the Holy Church in herself is invisible)

as faith is and her pureness and cleanness before Christ only and not before the world, for the world hath no judgement and knowledge of her.¹²

The true church, Barnes concluded, is found wherever the Word is taught in its truth and purity and the appropriate fruits of faith are manifest in the lives of those who hear and believe it. It is not identified in "books, bells, candles, chalices, oil creme, water, horses, hounds, palaces, and all that is might and glorious in the world."

Barnes' works were brought to the attention of Sir Thomas More immediately on their arrival in England. Of all the subjects Barnes had treated, More apparently felt that the article challenging the authority and the pretensions of the church was the most dangerous, for he made it the subject of his first attack on Barnes' writings. It appeared to him that Barnes "had made naught of the entire spirituality." The concept of an invisible body, a communion of saints, comprising the church, was, of course, foreign to More. Indeed, as Barnes said in response to More's attack, the latter was not even aware of the existence of an invisible church. Reviewing the argument of his first book, Barnes added in the second:

Mine intent was to declare that neither the Pope, nor his college of Cardinals, nor yet all the Bishops in the world gathered together did make Holy Church because of their names, or else for the long gowns, or for their shaven crowns, or else anointed fingers, nor yet for any other exterior things that the world had in admiration.

M. More and I do vary, but in this point, that he sayeth the Church of God standeth by them that be good and bad, and I say that the true Church of Christ standeth in them only that be good men.

The ecclesiastical hierarchy meant nothing to Barnes. To him the church was the body of Christ, the whole physically unidentifiable number of true believers. To More any attack on the ecclesiastical hierarchy threatened the very ground on which his church stood.

In this theological definition of the church, as well as in the entire body of Barnes' theological writings, there is no originality of interpretation or religious thinking. There is, however, every

¹² Daye ed., pp. 242 ff.

evidence of a full grasp and unqualified acceptance of the teachings of Martin Luther and the Wittenberg reformers.

Barnes' three years in Germany completed his educational development. Louvain and Cambridge had made him a humanistic scholar; Wittenberg made him a Lutheran theologian. The Wittenberg years were also the period of his literary productivity. The *Supplication to Henry VIII*, with its theological essays, constitutes the first expression of Lutheran theology by an English divine.

Barnes was later to publish a historical study of the papacy, but it had no great significance for the development of the English Reformation. The remainder of his career, the next nine years, was to be devoted to an effort to make England Lutheran. During those years he was the "orator" and chaplain of Henry VIII, representing Thomas Cromwell and the king in the conferences and the diplomacy designed to establish an alliance between England and the Schmalkaldic princes. In the end that diplomacy failed, and Barnes was the victim of the Tudor reaction. With Thomas Cromwell he was the price Protestantism paid for its failure to support Henry in his domestic and political designs. The execution of Robert Barnes at Smithfield is described in some detail.¹³ Barnes, Garrett, and Jerome were executed for heresy; Powell, Featherstone, and Abel were hanged for treason. Like Thomas More and John Fisher before them, the latter three had refused to acknowledge the ecclesiastical supremacy of the king of England. In sentencing these six men to death on the same day, Henry VIII was serving notice of his intentions. He was, and he was determined to remain, both head of the church and Defender of the Faith.

The executions of that day created a considerable stir, the chroniclers describing the event in detail. The French ambassador commented: "It was wonderful to see adherents of the two opposing parties dying at the same time, and it gave offense to both. And it was no less strange to hear than terrible to see, for the obstinacy and constancy respectively of both parties, and the perversion of justice of which both parties complained."¹⁴ The chronicler Hall laid the blame for the execution of Barnes and his colleagues on

¹³ Edward Hall, *Chronicle, Containing the History of England During the Reign of Henry IV to the End of the Reign of Henry VIII*, II, 839.

¹⁴ *L. and P.*, Vol. XV, No. 953, p. 483. See n. 4.

Stephen Gardiner and the fact that they had preached against his doctrines. "Great pittie it was," he laments, "that such learned men should be so cast away, without examination, neither knowing what was laid to their charge, nor never called to answer."¹⁵

Faced by death, Barnes acquitted himself in the best tradition of Christian martyrdom. Weakness which had led him to temporize and equivocate on previous occasions was gone. Standing before the place of his execution, he spoke the words that are remembered as "Dr. Barnes' Protestation at the Stake," a confession that leaves no doubt as to the fact that he was a Lutheran and not merely a Protestant.

The Protestation includes a vigorous denunciation of anabaptism, a confession of faith in the Trinity, a statement with reference to justification and good works, a confession of his own sin with a prayer for forgiveness, a statement regarding his view of the church, an expression of his attitude toward the virgin Mary, and a definition of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The martyr offered a prayer for the forgiveness of those who had brought about his condemnation, a prayer for the king and Prince Edward, and an expression of loyalty to Henry VIII. A final petition addressed to the king requested that charities be distributed to the poor, that marriage be held in high esteem in the land, that profanity be "punished and straitly looked on," and that "the king give all diligence toward the setting forth of Christ's true religion."

Barnes' Protestation was published in Germany immediately after his death with a preface by Martin Luther. In it Barnes was referred to as St. Robert, "our good pious table companion and guest of our house."¹⁶ It was well deserved praise indeed from a man who had found Barnes a vigorous and able supporter of his theology. Quite understandably it combined an encomium of Barnes with a vigorous condemnation of King Henry. There was, of course, no foundation at all for the rumor, to which Luther gave credence, that Barnes died because he opposed the king's annulment of the marriage to Anne of Cleves.

Very soon after the death of Barnes, John Standish, a fellow of

¹⁵ Hall, loc. cit.

¹⁶ Published in 1540, see *Short Title Catalog*, ed. Pollard and Redgrave, No. 23210. University Microfilm print examined.

Whittington College, published *A Little Treatise Against the Protestation of R. Barnes*. The work was an attack on the theology of Barnes' confession of faith made at the stake. Standish prefaced his polemic with the words: "In his protestation is both contained heresy and treason. . . . Do not think that I write this through any malice toward him that is burned, but I do it, God's my record, fearing the great infection and spiritual death that might come to the children of God through the great number of copies that be in writing of this his protestation being both erroneous and traitorous: which yet (more is the pitie) many do secretly embrace as a most precious Jewell."

The pamphlet came into the hands of Coverdale, who quickly rose to the defense of his former superior at the Austin Friars of Cambridge. He said: "That the words of Dr. Barnes, spoken at the hour of his death, and here underwritten, are good, wholesome, according to God's holy scripture, and not worthy to be evil taken, it shall be evidently seen, when we have laid them to the touchstone, and tried them by God's word."¹⁷ Addressing himself to Standish, Coverdale says: "Yea by your own pen have ye brought it to pass, that it shall not be forgotten till the world's end, what a Christian testament and last will Dr. Barnes made at his death, and how patiently he forsook this life." Summarizing that confession, Coverdale supports with emphasis Barnes' teachings with reference to justification by faith:

D. Barnes' last will and testament, whereon he taketh his death is this; that there is no other satisfaction unto the Father, but the death and passion of Christ only. Therefore, though it had been ten thousand times revoked . . . yet shall no man's revoking, no, nor your blasting and blowing, your stamping and staring, your stormy tempests nor winds, be able to overthrow this truth and testimony of the Holy Ghost throughout the scriptures, that the death of Jesus Christ only doth satisfy and content the Father of heaven, and maketh the atonement for our sins. Neither do ye aught but bark against the moon, so long as ye labor to diminish the glory of Christ, as though he obtained not grace for all the sin of the world.¹⁸

¹⁷ Miles Coverdale, *Remains*, II, 324.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 357 f.

Three years after the death of Barnes, George Joye, erstwhile co-worker of Tyndale, came to the defense of the theology of Dr. Barnes in an attack on Stephen Gardiner's articles against the doctrine of justification. The tract is titled *George Joye Confuteth Winchester's False Articles*.¹⁹ In a prefatory note Joye states his belief that Barnes and his two fellows in suffering were burned for preaching "only faith to justify." Gardiner responded²⁰ in 1545, and Joye filed a *Refutation*²¹ in 1546.

Thus for six years after the death of "St. Robert," justification by faith continued to be an issue in England, and Barnes was remembered as its chief exponent. In the end Barnes' view was to prevail in Anglican theology, Gardiner's was to be rejected.

The course of English ecclesiastical history in the reigns of Edward VI and Mary Tudor (1547—58) obscured the memory of Barnes and his work. During Edward's reign the influence of Bucer overshadowed that of Barnes. Mary Tudor placed Barnes' writings on the English index of prohibited books, but a revival of interest in his writings in the reign of Elizabeth resulted in the publication of the definitive edition of Barnes' works in Daye's *Works of Tyndale, Frith, and Barnes* in 1572. His continuing influence is evident in the Elizabethan Settlement as well as in the sermons and theological literature of the Stuart period. Cranmer's liturgies and Barnes' theology had laid the foundations for an Anglicanism that to this day exhibits enduring traces of Lutheran influence.

River Forest, Ill.

¹⁹ Published in 1543. See S. T. C., No. 14826. University microfilms copy consulted.

²⁰ Stephen Gardiner, *A Declaration of Such Articles as Joye Hath Gone About to Confute*, 1545. S. T. C., No. 11588. Reproduced by University microfilms.

²¹ George Joye, *The Refutation of the Bishop of Winchester's Darke Declaration of False Articles*, 1547. S. T. C., No. 14822, University microfilms reproduction.