PART II

1525: Robert Barnes versus the Prelates

Of the rhetoric of dissent in England during the reign of Henry VIII, I know no better example than the sermon preached in St Edward's Church, Cambridge, on Christmas Eve 1525: by Dr Robert Barnes, aged 30, prior of the extensive Augustinian friary behind Corpus (the memory of which survives now only in the name of the Friar House restaurant). Or, as the original text of the sermon has not survived, one should say the account of the sermon first given by Barnes six years later, expanded in 1534, and edited by John Foxe in 1572/3; in an edition of the works of Tyndale, Frith and Barnes which made available to Elizabethans the writing of these 'chief ringleaders in these latter times of the Church of England'. Foxe put the three in the tradition of Wyclif, and felt that there was more simplicity and true zeal in their work than in England in the early 1570s. He also felt that Barnes was of especial comfort to the elderly. (One of Barnes's Cambridge pupils, Christopher Colman, appears to have been a member of the Plumbers' Hall separatist conventicle in London in the late 1560s.) Certainly Barnes's mar- prelate rhetoric could stand as a model for later puritans. The savage indignation was similar.

Barnes became prior of the Cambridge Augustinian house in about 1520; having been a member of it (and a friend of the Cambridge Carmelite John Bale) for the previous six years. In the first half of the 1520s he lectured in Cambridge on the letters of St Paul, spread his own taste for good letters and good learning, and made the priory a focus for the Cambridge 'godly brethren' — Latimer, for instance, preached in the chapel. 'If they be poor, they may be buried among
the friars.’ Barnes’s feeling for ‘the common people’, ‘the simple’, ‘the brethren’ — part of the tension between himself, as a regular, and the secular clergy — taps a tradition which the puritans were to exploit: ‘your poor brother, whom Christ hath redeemed by his precious blood, dieth in prison, and openly in the street, and hangeth himself for necessity, and yet will you not bestow on him so much as one of your precious stones. Tell me of one bishop that ever brake his mitre to the helping of a poor man’. The feeling emerges most dramatically, in my extract, in the story of the Cambridge copper kettle, which Barnes first told in 1534; a story of a ‘naughty lewd kettle’, and the exploitation of poor laymen — ‘whom God visited with poverty to prove your charity’ (a typically trenchant and sobering remark). Later, Barnes was to say that the profits from the dissolution of the English religious houses should have been devoted to the care of the poor. In his own estimation, he was the ‘simple poor wretch’, the upholder of the ‘order of charity’, the man daring to speak the truth, who is saved by the mercy of God from the fury of the prelates; the satirist of the ‘liberties of holy church’. The man who appeals to plain words, and finds Wolsey’s casuistry ‘far fetched’.

‘I damned in my sermon the gorgeous pomp and pride of all exterior ornaments’: the mitres, the gloves, the precious stones, the houses and horses, servants and dogs. They were ‘damnable and pompous’. They were also unscriptural: ‘Tell me where you find but one prick in holy scripture of your mitres.’ He elaborated upon covetousness, as John Colet had done in the sermon to Convocation at St Paul’s cathedral in 1512 (1). ‘I can see them follow none but Judas,’ said Barnes: ‘Judas sold our master but once; and you sell him as often as he cometh into your hands.’ The prelates are they — ‘inordinate butchers’, uncharitable, idle, shameful: tyrants. Their law, the canon law, should be compared to the ‘holy words of scripture’: ‘look whether the interpretation of the word do agree with the nature of your laws’. The prelates deceive the simple, and diminish the authority of the nobility and the prince. This appeal to the prince as a liberator from the practice of prelates was, in the 1530s, to be upheld; effecting Colet’s fear that, if the spirituality did not quickly put its own house in order, the ‘people’ would turn decisively
against the traditional church. ‘Put the case’, advised Barnes, ‘that this were a lie . . . ’ The church in England was unable to survive the harsh test of that imperative.

There is in Barnes, too, a strong sense of the truth under persecution: ‘now dare no man preach the truth and the very gospel of God’. The truth revolving round ‘devotion’, not ‘form’; the spirit rather than the letter. So, on the eve of Christmas, remember that ‘Christ is every day born, every day risen, every day ascended up’; ‘this you must sanctify in your hearts daily, and not one day’. Unfortunately for his Cambridge career, the elegant, witty and sociable friar was liable to be carried away by his own exuberance. In his sermon (preached from the pulpit which is still used in St Edward’s) he touched upon points of purgatory and the pardon of sins (with examples from St Edward’s and St Benet’s), of papal power and of the virgin Mary. Barnes had many enemies. And he had given them their chance.

Adversaries gathered a collection of objections to the sermon (2). Barnes offered to preach again, clarifying his position, on the following Sunday. But the vice-chancellor, Dr Edmund Natures, Master of Clare, forbade that. The vice-chancellor was a drearily predictable establishment cleric, dominated by fears of offending against the ‘average’. Instead, Barnes was called to a meeting with the vice-chancellor and a few other authorities to discuss the objections. Barnes said that the opposition points were an inaccurate summary of what he had preached: the compilers pressed them, as seditious, slanderous – and heretical. ‘Will you be content to submit yourself?’ asked Natures. Barnes: ‘Wheresoever I have spoken against God’s word, or against the exposition of holy doctors, I will be content to be reformed.’ Will you not add to the word and the doctors the phrase ‘the laws of the church’? No: this is ‘too large, for I knew not what they meant by the laws of the church, nor I was no doctor of law. Wherefore I judged it sufficient for me to be reported by God’s word and by the exposition of holy doctors; for that was my faculty.’ This meeting was in the Old Schools. And it was ended by a sit-in. During the discussion ‘was the whole body of the university gathered together, and knocked at the School doors, and said they would hear the examination’. Natures sent the esquire bedell to talk to
the demonstrators, 'but they were the more moved, and knocked sorer'. Natures then, ineffectively, talked to them himself: 'they would not depart, except they might hear this matter judged, and, as they said, it appertained to learning'. Natures washed his hands for the moment of the affair. 'We must give over this matter, for the university is in a rumour.'

Three days later, Barnes was called to the vice-chancellor's chamber in Clare. He wanted impartial witnesses to be called. 'If I shall thus die, I shall be content': 'I am no better than our master Christ'. There followed a discussion about the wisdom of summoning any witnesses; and eventually Barnes agreed to stand by the decision of the vice-chancellor, hoping that charity would override the 'law'. Here again, 'the university gathered together', demanding representatives at the hearing, as there had been at the sermon.

Four weeks passed. A revocation had been written for Barnes, to be read in St Edward's. He had got, by a leak, a copy of it. 'I called into my chamber an eight or ten of the best learned men that were in Cambridge' - a tantalisingly brief and isolated reference to the Cambridge reformers of the 1520s. Barnes mentioned by name only the two who had died by the autumn of 1531: Thomas Bilney and George Stafford. This 'conference' agreed 'that it was neither right nor conscience that I should agree to the revocation'. (Foxe, writing of the year 1526 in Cambridge, was to say that some thirty dons were suspected of owning copies of the works of Luther; and to claim that seven colleges contained 'godly and learned in Christ' - Pembroke, Peterhouse, Queens', Corpus, King's, Gonville Hall and St John's).

Natures decided that the revocation must be read. Barnes refused; and was given a week to think it over. 'I said I would appeal from the vice-chancellor to the whole body of the university.' Then London stepped in. Barnes was taken from Cambridge on 6 February 1526, and on the seventh was interviewed by Wolsey 'in his gallery at Westminster'. Wolsey was quiet and kind, Barnes adamant (foolishly so, he later thought). On 8 February Barnes's trial for heresy began in the Chapter House of Westminster Abbey: by two bishops (plus Fisher, who arrived late), two abbots and three doctors of law. The questioning was general, not merely on the sermon. On 10 February the 'articles' from the sermon were
condemned as heretical — and as slanderous, erroneous, contentious and foolish. On Sunday, 11 February, Barnes did penance at St Paul’s. Wolsey was there, ‘with all the pomp and pride that he could make’. Fisher preached; ‘and all his sermon was against Lutherians, as though they had convicted me for one’. Barnes was in prison in London for a year, then under confinement in Augustinian friaries, first in London, then in Northampton. Then, after a feigned suicide, he escaped to Antwerp, returning to London in the mid-1530s, to become a popular preacher in the City. An upholder of the carnal marriage of the ‘fond frantic friar’ Luther, wrote Thomas More in 1533: ‘run out of religion, abjured of heresy, perjured by relapse, and roiled about like a layman, railing against religion, and all the known catholic church, in contempt of his vow, and his oath too, and of all good christian people on earth, and withdrawing their honours from all the saints in heaven’ (3).

Barnes was burnt at Smithfield in 1540.

1. I had originally intended to print in this book the (contemporary) English version of Colet’s 1512 sermon; but C. H. Williams reprinted it in 1967, in ‘English Historical Documents 1485-1558’ (being vol. v of the series ‘English Historical Documents’): no. 79, pp. 652-60 (Williams mistakenly dates it as 1511).


3. More, ‘The Confutation of Friar Barnes’ Church’, being the eighth (and final, and liveliest) book of ‘The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer’, published in two parts (1532, 1533): the quotation is on pp. ccccxii of part two. The whole ‘Confutation’ runs to 900 pages, and has never been reprinted since the sixteenth century.