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THE ELIZABETHAN BISHOPS AND NON-EPISCOPAL ORDERS.

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A MOST unjustifiable attack on the integrity and good faith of a well-trusted Evangelical scholar and writer has again brought into prominence the question of the precise attitude of the Elizabethan Bishops towards foreign Presbyterian Orders. The Archdeacon of Coventry was recently most unmercifully castigated by the Editor of the *Church Quarterly Review* (July, 1930) and virtually accused of deliberately falsifying and misrepresenting historical evidence in order to establish the fact that Elizabethan Bishops did not deny the validity of foreign non-episcopal Orders. The case in point is the interesting one of Robert Wright, a rather prominent, popular and able Puritan preacher.

But before examining carefully this special case it is well to remember the precise position of the Bishops in this reign, otherwise it is not always easy to understand their actions. At that time there was no idea of toleration of differing forms of belief or practice in the same Nation. Elizabeth had "established" the Reformed English Liturgy for universal use under penalties, and definite rules had been laid down for Episcopal Ordination for ministry in England. Every other form of ordination was therefore a defiance of the laws of the Land and as such liable to punishment. Religion at this period was legislated for on the principle of *nationality*. Accordingly Elizabethan churchmen did not condemn the custom of other countries, like Scotland, Holland or Switzerland, where a Presbyterian system of Church polity prevailed. If any Minister ordained by these foreign Churches wanted to live in England and exercise his ministry, exceptions were made in his favour from the National rule for Ordination and his foreign Orders were allowed and supposed to be specially covered by an Act of Parliament (1571). But these were naturally rare and exceptional cases. It was quite different, however, when *English* men, out of a dislike for the established religious system of their own country, sought to evade its requirements by a visit to the Continent in order to secure a Presbyterian ordination which they preferred and then return and exercise this Ministry in England. Much natural resentment was caused by such an underhand and questionable procedure, and it is not surprising that the Bishops were not anxious to permit these men to exercise their ministry, especially as they were usually extreme Puritans who inveighed in their preaching against the Liturgy and ceremonies of the Reformed Church, if not also against its episcopal Ministry. They usually, therefore, made most careful inquiry in such cases as to whether the alleged Minister had been really and properly ordained by the foreign Presbyterian Church, and in one case at least, that of

Walter Travers (who was stirring up strife and controversy against Richard Hooker, his fellow-preacher at the Temple), they objected that such Ordination did not give a just or legal title for an *Englishman* to minister in England. But they never questioned the *spiritual* validity of such Orders, only their strict "legality," and if such Ministers were peaceable and loyal to the discipline and ceremonies of the Church they were not in the least likely to be disturbed or questioned on the score of their Presbyterian Orders. But this deliberate attempt to defy the established laws of the "Church and realm" naturally incensed the Bishops, and it would not have been surprising if they had rigidly refused to recognize all those extreme Puritans who adopted this disloyal method of securing Orders. This situation enables us better to understand the peculiar case of Robert Wright.

He was born in Edward VI's reign in 1550 and at the age of fifteen he went to Christ's College, Cambridge, and he took his degree there three years later and his M.A. in 1572. He then commenced preaching and was allowed to do so "by Order of Her Majesty's Injunctions" in the University, according to his own account, with "approbation." Apparently he remained another seven years at Cambridge, since he tells Lord Burleigh that he lived there "about 14 years amongst Ministers—the Master and Fellows of Christ's College—who with one consent would testify" to his orderly behaviour. There is little doubt, however, that he held very strong Puritan convictions and was evidently one of the irreconcilable sort of "Precisians" who gave the Elizabethan Bishops so much trouble with their determined "nonconformities" to the religious settlement. In spite of his later protestations, there seems little doubt that he really disliked the liturgical services, and was evidently too prone to conclude that the regular use of Church services and ceremonies was a mark of slackness and unspirituality. Like all Puritans, he laid great stress on preaching and most likely rejoiced in the "Propheysings" so disliked by the Queen. He would therefore be inclined to denounce clergy not favouring these "exercises" as "dumb dogs" and "clogs of anti-Christ." We can well picture this zealous young Puritan, with no love for bishops, "lovingly admonishing" all negligent parsons and seizing the opportunity to preach and catechize privately in the families of the country squires of Puritan leanings with "the full purpose," as he tells us, "of serving in the Ministry when God should call him thereunto."

Towards the end of the year 1579 the opportunity of more permanent employment came his way. He left Cambridge and was invited into the family of Lord Rich at Rochford Hall. He evidently gave such satisfaction there that he was soon appointed private Chaplain to this peer. Wright told Burleigh in May, 1582, that he "continued" with Lord Rich's family "from Christmas was two years till last Michaelmas." But we can judge of the strong Puritan convictions of Lord Rich when Wright tells us that he called his household together and first secured their

approval before inviting him to act as private Chaplain to the family. Wright was, however, no Anabaptist, and he had a full belief in a regularly ordained Ministry. Consequently he says that he did not regard this "call" "by the Flock" as ordination, and so when a fitting opportunity occurred on a visit abroad some eighteen months later he secured ordination from the Presbytery at Antwerp. Until this event, he says, "he took not himself to be any other than a private man to do them some good till they might have a sufficient Pastor." Even after this clandestine foreign ordination he declares that "he did only the duty of a private man and neither preached publicly nor ministered any Sacrament." There was at this time no law against even a layman acting as *private* chaplain in a nobleman's household. Lord Rich, however, naturally desired his zealous and efficient Chaplain to have a wider sphere of influence and service, and so he petitioned the Bishop of London, Aylmer, to grant Wright a public licence to preach. But as this was before his ordination at Antwerp, Aylmer refused the request "when he understood I was no minister." After Wright had laboured in this capacity some fourteen months his patron died in February, 1581, but Wright was continued in his office under his successor, who seems to have been as zealous a Puritan as his father.

This new Lord Rich also promised to secure Wright a public preaching licence, and consequently he and a bastard uncle, also named Rich, visited the Bishop at Fulham for this purpose and evidently used much plain, if not exactly polite, speech to the Bishop on the subject. This was apparently after Wright's ordination, for Aylmer "did not utterly deny a licence but asked first to see some testimony that the said Minister was ordained Minister," and further he utterly refused to license him "unless he would subscribe to the orders of the Church." Aylmer was not ignorant of Wright's strong Puritan opinions and of his reported denunciations of the Prayer Book and of the Bishops and Vicars for their supposed worldliness and slackness. Moreover, just at this time a serious accusation against Wright was reported to him. It was asserted that he had denounced the solemnizing of the Queen's birthday as equivalent to creating a new holy day and "making her an idol." Elizabeth had heard this report and was furious, and asked Burleigh to urge Aylmer to deal with Wright forthwith. With much difficulty Aylmer succeeded in getting Wright up from Essex for examination in the Consistory Court in October, 1581, and again on November 7. He was accused before the Bishop and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners of this serious offence, for which the Bishop told him "he deserved to lie in prison for seven years." As a result, "for this offence" and also "for rejecting the Book and many other disorders," he was committed to the Gatehouse prison. But like Joseph he found a friend in prison in the Keeper, who was inclined to Puritanism. Consequently a few months later the Keeper allowed Wright to visit his wife in Essex on the occasion of her confinement. Un-

fortunately on this journey Wright was seen by the lawyer who had appeared against him at his trial, and this man informed the Bishop, who threatened to report the Keeper to the Queen.

Wright then wrote a letter from prison in May, 1582, to Lord Burleigh complaining of this harsh form of persecution and appealing for his interest on his behalf. In reply Burleigh sent Wright a copy of the Charges made against him at his trial, together with his own replies to them as officially recorded at the time. He also sent him a copy of the Depositions made by six Sworn Witnesses who examined Wright on a "special Commission" while he was in prison. Wright then wrote a long explanation to Burleigh denying or modifying nearly all these charges, and declaring that the testimony of the Sworn Witnesses was unreliable, since they were his known enemies and specially chosen "to serve a turn" of securing a case against him. In particular he denied that he had reviled the Prayer Book and declared that he thought it "good and godly" and that he had used it and resorted to churches for prayers and Sacraments. He declared that he had never said "there were no lawful ministers in England" or that all were "dumb dogs," but that he had always revered all "watchful and godly ministers."

He then gave Burleigh an account of his association with the two Lords Rich and mentions his visit to Antwerp when he was ordained, although he denied that he went there for that specific purpose, but rather "to see the churches from whence idolatry had been lately driven." Apparently this explanation satisfied Burleigh, for Strype in his *Life of Aylmer* tells us that in September, 1582, Wright became willing to subscribe to two articles—to his good allowance of the ministry of the Church of England and to the Book of Common Prayer, and he also required him to be bound over not to preach anything against the Ministry or the Prayer Book, and then "he did not mislike that he should have further favour so that the Queen were made privy thereunto, whom this offence did chiefly concern." Whether this "further favour" merely consisted in his release from prison, or as seems more likely in the granting of a licence to preach, is not clear, but it would seem superfluous to extort promises not to "preach against the Ministry or the Prayer Book" from a man who was to remain in prison, whereas this is perfectly natural from a man who is to be granted a licence to preach. In any case the last we hear of Wright is that seven years later he was instituted to a living in the diocese of Norwich.

Now the conduct of the Bishop concerning Wright seems quite straightforward and exactly what we should expect in view of the troubles with the Puritan opposition at the time. He first refuses him a licence before he was ordained, and then after his Presbyterian ordination he demands evidence of this illegal method of evading episcopal ordination, and meanwhile he imprisons him on the serious charges of insulting the Queen and open disaffection to the Church government. There is no evidence from Strype's

original documents that Aylmer ever condemned the validity of foreign non-episcopal Orders or that he refused Wright a licence on this account.

But his case has been needlessly complicated by a definite statement made by the Puritan historian Neal that Aylmer "always refused him a preacher's licence, because he was no minister, i.e. had only been ordained among the foreign Churches" (Vol. I, 310, 1822). Now the only authority which Neal quotes for his delineation of Wright's history is a footnote to Strype's *Annals*, and as we read his account it is obvious he is paraphrasing Strype's story, although he has badly muddled and confused it and made other definite statements or misstatements which are not borne out by Strype and for which he gives no other authority.

But it is on the basis of this second-hand evidence of Neal's that the Editor of the *Church Quarterly Review* condemns Archdeacon Hunkin and that Bishop Frere asserts that "Wright was convented in 1582 for taking upon himself to minister, having only received Presbyterian Orders at Antwerp" (*Hist. of Eng.*, Ch. 230). The only foundation for Neal's statement about Aylmer's refusal to license Wright is the fact that when "the lord Rich that dead is," as Wright describes the Lord Rich who died in 1581, applied to Aylmer for a licence, Aylmer refused it "because he understood that I was no minister." But there is no evidence that Aylmer called him "no minister because he had *only received Presbyterian Orders.*" The question therefore to be settled is, Was Wright ordained when the Bishop called him "no minister"? And the evidence is practically conclusive that he was *not*, and that this ordination at Antwerp is practically conclusive that he was *not*, and that this ordination at Antwerp did not take place till the summer of 1581, whereas the "old Lord Rich that dead is" died in February, 1581. This evidence comes out clearly in Wright's replies at his trial and also in his letter of defence and explanation in May, 1582, to Lord Burleigh. Although there is no record that Wright's possession of foreign Orders was made a charge against him either at his trial before the Bishop in November, 1581, or at the later examination before the special Commission while he was in prison, it is fairly certain that on both occasions he was asked whether he was ordained or "by what authority he preached." In fact, the Sworn Witnesses deposed that Wright answered this question by declaring that "he was called by the Reformed Church." In his letter to Burleigh, Wright denies that any "magistrate ever examined him by what authority he preached," and he adds, "neither is it set down where or when I spake the words" (that is, that "I was called by the Reformed Church"). And then he discloses the period, although not the actual date of his ordination, when he adds, "If I said any such thing in private speech *within the last year* (which I remember not) I might *justly say it*, though I took not upon me *thereby* to do any public duty." (That is, not having received the necessary Bishop's licence to do any public duty he did not exercise his Ministry publicly.) Wright wrote this

in May or June, 1582, and so we know that his ordination at Antwerp must have taken place "within the year" past, that is, since May, 1581. Now since "my lord Rich that dead is" died in *February*, 1581, Wright clearly was not ordained when that lord Rich "laboured" with Aylmer for his public licence and was refused because Aylmer "understood that he was no minister." This statement also narrows down the date of Wright's ordination to the period from May to November, 1581, when he was imprisoned. Some time during this interval he must have visited Antwerp and while there have been ordained, as he tells us, by Villiers (who was Chaplain to William of Orange) and other Presbyterian ministers. It was after the Pacification of Ghent (1576), when toleration of worship was declared in Antwerp, that English merchants returned there and the Presbyterian Thomas Cartwright for a time was Chaplain to them. As the Reformed worship was thereafter permitted for some years they could safely remain there at least till the Reformers, becoming more powerful, altogether proscribed the Romish worship in Antwerp in July, 1581. It is therefore most probable that it was in this or the following month that Wright paid his visit to Antwerp, since he expressly says that "he went there to see the churches from whence idolatry had *been lately driven*," which would correctly describe the state of many Antwerp churches where the Romanists had now been forbidden to celebrate their worship.

But we have also further proof of this approximate date for Wright's ordination since in his Answers at his Trial in November, 1581, Wright expressly says that it was "since the death of the old lord" (Rich) that he had been "called unto the Ministry." He says he did not regard the Rich household as his "Flock" "by virtue of his former choice" when the "old Lord" had got him "elected" by the household as private Chaplain, but because of this later Ordination at Antwerp. Evidently the expression the "old Lord" is equivalent to the "late lord," although as a fact that lord was only forty-two at his death. But Wright did not go to Rochford into the Rich household till late in the year 1579, and therefore "the former choice" of him as private Chaplain procured by the "old Lord" Rich must refer to the Lord Rich who died in February, 1581. It could not possibly refer to the previous Lord Rich¹ who died in 1567 when Wright was a youthful undergraduate of seventeen at Cambridge and certainly not acting as private Chaplain to anyone.

There is no evidence anywhere that *after* this Ordination, in the summer or autumn of 1581, Aylmer ever declared that "he was no minister" or refused him a licence on that score. In fact, although they might well have been made so, as contravening the laws of the Land concerning Ordination, there is no evidence to show that Wright's foreign Orders were ever made a charge against him at his trials.

The foregoing account and quotations in it are taken from Strype, *Annals*, III, 125-6 and Appendices 23 and 24, pp. 40-2 (1728), and Strype, *Aylmer*, pp. 54-6 (1821).

¹ A most unlikely suggestion advanced by the Editor of the *Church Quarterly Review*.