from Tyndale to Madison

THE HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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INTRODUCTION

My own college textbook from a political philosophy class espoused a common view regarding the source of contemporary religious liberty. Enlightenment philosophies, it taught, were chiefly responsible for opening people's minds to the error of religious persecution and paving the way for a society in which "heretics" are not tortured and burnt in town squares.

This conception has not gone away. I recently served as a judge for a national essay contest in which the contestant instructions explained that religious liberty is a concept derived from the European Enlightenment. After all, the general argument goes, devoted Christians have often been the chief persecutors in Western history and therefore cannot be said to have had a positive role in advancing the idea that the civil magistrate should not interfere with matters of conscience. On the contrary, it is said, the forces most inimical to genuine Christian faith — a general religious apathy among the populace, relativism in regard to truth, a growing secularist mindset, and Enlightenment-influenced skepticism among intellectual leaders — were the primary forces behind the triumph of religious liberty in the West.

Examples come from diverse sources. Firuz Kazemzadeh, an esteemed Ivy League scholar who has been appointed and reappointed to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, attributes the failure of Muslim nations to embrace religious liberty to the fact that they have neither "gone through the Enlightenment" nor "developed any of the attitudes that formed the minds of the founding fathers of this country, including deism and a measure of skepticism in matters of religion which permitted the kind of tolerance which we all seek today."[1] Historian Merrill D. Peterson has called the 1787 Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty "the supreme expression of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment," which was driven by "skepticism toward all received truths and of untrammeled free inquiry in the pursuit of knowledge."[2] The introduction to the audio edition of Joseph J. Ellis's *His Excellency: George Washington* refers to the United States

of America as "the greatest achievement of the Enlightenment."[3] Even Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, who wrote *A Patriot's History of the United States* to counteract the effect of a popular Marxist interpretation of American history entitled *A People's History of the United States*, say that "the overall molding of America's Revolution in the ideological sense" was derived from Enlightenment thinkers Thomas Hobbes and Charles de Montesquieu.[4] And the colorful 2003 edition of Joy Hakim's *Freedom: A History of US*, which sports a foreword written by President George W. Bush and the first lady, discusses the freedom born out of the Age of Reason, concluding, "And that's when we were lucky enough to be born."[5]

We have to recognize the truth of the claim that professing Christians were indeed the principal persecutors during the relevant era in which religious liberty emerged. But is it necessarily true that the heroes who stood against persecution and brought liberty of conscience to the forefront in America were avowed skeptics and unorthodox secularists? The goal of this book is to answer this question by undertaking a detailed account of the troubling history of religious persecution from the 16th through the 18th centuries, chiefly in England, and by exploring the ideas that brought religious liberty to America.

Today, all Christian denominations embrace religious liberty as an ideal. But it was not always so. It is improper to judge today's adherents of a particular branch of Christianity by the acts of their distant theological cousins. Moreover, it is unfair to denigrate entirely the life's work of significant religious reformers for their failure to embrace religious liberty.

Yet the sad truth is that some giants of the faith were religious persecutors. The story that follows is told with unflinching honesty. However, it must be borne in mind that this book is limited to a discussion of religious liberty. The scope affords no opportunity to praise these individuals' many other positive achievements. It is similar to a discussion of the founding fathers and slavery: even those who owned slaves and defended slavery, as regrettable as this was, made significant contributions to the founding of this nation. Indeed, the foundations they laid were chiefly responsible for slavery's eventual eradication.

In a similar way, religious liberty arose gradually. Catholics, Anglicans, Calvinists, and Lutherans persecuted each other and other smaller groups of dissenters. It would be erroneous to castigate men or entire movements for their failures without recognizing their achievements in other areas. At the end of the road, an Anglican, James Madison, trained in liberty by a Calvinist Presbyterian, John Witherspoon, worked with the persecuted

Baptists of Virginia to turn a broken theory of religious toleration into the robust experience of religious liberty that has changed America and the world.

We must tell the story of the Christian persecutors so that we can put to the test the claim that people who cared little about faith and religion were the heroes of liberty. The true heroes are not to be found among the salons of the Enlightenment philosophers, but in the cells in King's Bench Prison and tied to the stake at Smithfield.

This is the story of those who lived and died believing that God is the author of liberty.

Notes

1. "Remarks by Firuz Kazemzadeh" in "The State of Religious Freedom," *World Affairs* 147, no. 4 (1985): 246.
2. "Jefferson and Religious Freedom," *The Atlantic Monthly* 274 (December 1994): 113.
3. Recorded Books, *His Excellency by Joseph J. Ellis*, performed by Nelson Runger (Prince Frederick, MD: Recorded Books, LLC, 2004).
4. Larry Schweikart, *A Patriot's History of the United States, From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror* (New York: Sentinel, 2004), p. 70.
5. Joy Hakim, *Freedom: A History of US* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), introduction.

PART I

FROM OUT OF THE SHORT FIRE

Chapter One

SCRIPTURE FOR PLOUGHBOYS

TYNDALE'S MISSION

*If God spare my life many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of Scripture than you do.**

~ William Tyndale

There are times when profound ideas are most clearly articulated in the heat of debate. A simple statement, designed to make a small point, suddenly illuminates the mind in a way that changes the course of lives and sometimes the course of civilization.

In the western shire of Gloucester stands yet today a grand stone manor house in the Cotswold tradition, Little Sodbury Manor. It is strategically perched on the edge of a hillside, revealing an idyllic view of the vale of the Severn. The square tower of the ancient parish church in the village of Little Sodbury lies in the near distance. In 1522, an Oxford scholar named William Tyndale secured a position in this home as the tutor for the children of the lord of the manor, Sir John Walsh, and his wife, Lady Anne.

Walsh was an important figure in the county, having twice held the post of high sheriff of the shire, among other important offices for both church

* Quoted in Foxe, *Book of Martyrs.*

and crown. The family's social standing was significant, evidenced by a visit to their home by Henry VIII and then queen Anne Boleyn on the evening of August 23, 1535. Anne Walsh was the sister of Sir Nicholas Poyntz of Acton Court, who was a close friend of both Henry and Anne.

Tyndale, like the Walshes, came to have strong Protestant leanings in an age when religious conformity was expected and violently enforced. While living at Little Sodbury, Tyndale had an argumentative encounter with a traveling "learned man," undoubtedly a priest of indeterminate rank. A theological debate erupted between Tyndale and the cleric, in which Tyndale demonstrated that the priest's position was contrary to the teachings of the Bible.

To this, the learned man replied, "We were better to be without God's laws than the pope's!"

Tyndale swiftly declared, "I defy the pope and all his laws." The famous martyrologist Foxe notes that Tyndale went on to assert that "if God spared him life, 'ere many years, he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he did."[1] (In the original versions of Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* — now known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* — he uses third-person pronouns to describe Tyndale's statement, but it is clear that Tyndale is speaking of himself.)

With these few words, Tyndale not only declared the central purpose of his own life, but also unknowingly set into motion a long chain of events that would ultimately lead to the religious liberty of the American people.

Impediments to Biblical Literacy

For Tyndale to achieve his goal of giving the Bible to ploughboys, the worlds of religion, law, and politics would all have to dramatically change. The Bible was essentially unknown in a nation where the Roman Church was so dominant that the pope's annual revenue from England was comparable to that taken by the king.[2] Even the clergy were largely scripturally illiterate. Tyndale made a practice of conversing with everyone from archdeacons to children about matters of faith, and his simple and plain explanations of passages of the Bible frequently revealed the error of even the most learned. Despite everyone's common acknowledgment of Tyndale's "virtuous disposition" and "life unspotted," some began fervidly to resent him.[3]

After a while, clamoring on the part of area priests led to charges of heresy and a trial. The official in charge of the proceeding railed viciously against Tyndale. Yet none of the priests in attendance would stand as his accuser, and Tyndale was able to return to the Walshes after his examination. "This I suffer," he said, "because the priests of the country be unlearned."[4]

And indeed they were — at least in the Scriptures. Even 30 years later, when the bishop of Gloucester surveyed the knowledge of the 311 priests, deacons, and archdeacons in the diocese, 168 were unable to name the Ten Commandments (nine didn't even know how many commandments there were); 39 did not know where the Lord's Prayer appeared in the Bible, and 34 were unable to name the author of the Lord's Prayer.[5]

Around the same time that Tyndale was at Little Sodbury, Thomas Cranmer, who would later become the first Protestant archbishop of Canterbury, introduced a radical new practice at Cambridge University that demonstrated the breadth of biblical illiteracy even among those at the top of religious society. Those who were being examined for a doctorate in divinity at Cambridge would now, thanks to Cranmer's innovation, be examined on the Bible. Cranmer's 1694 biography, written by John Strype, describes the situation:

> For he used to examine these Candidates out of the Scriptures. And by no means would he let them pass, if he found they were unskillful in it, and unacquainted with the History of the Bible. So were the Friars especially, whose Study lay only in School-Authors. Whom therefore he sometimes turned back as insufficient, advising them to study the Scriptures for some years longer, before they came for their Degrees, it being a shame for a Professor in Divinity to be unskilled in the Book, wherein the Knowledge of God, and the Grounds of Divinity lay. Whereby he made himself from the beginning hated by the Friars.[6]

The impediments for a ploughboy or any other layman to obtain Bible knowledge in Tyndale's day were daunting. As a result of the Constitutions of Oxford of 1408, it was illegal to translate any portion of the Bible into English without permission from a bishop. This enactment also prohibited anyone from owning such an English Bible. Violation of the law was considered heresy, a crime traditionally punishable by being burned at the stake. It had been passed in reaction to the efforts of John Wycliffe to translate the Bible into English for the people of the nation. In addition to these formidable legal barriers, a ploughboy would simply not be able, for practical reasons, either to obtain a copy of the Latin Bible or to read it if he could. Moreover, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey issued a general prohibition on May 14, 1521, against any books that proclaimed the doctrines of the Reformation.[7]

Common literacy, a free press, and the free exercise of religion would be needed before an English translation would be practical. All were utterly out

of the question when Tyndale declared his purpose to help ploughboys know the Scriptures. Yet he apparently still believed that all these barriers could be overcome and the Bible be made available to all the people of England.

Tyndale's Quest

Tyndale ultimately left the employment of the Walsh family in pursuit of this goal. He went to London to seek an audience with the bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, to obtain permission to translate the New Testament from the original Greek into English. Schooled on the continent and highly admired by some contemporaries as a man of learning and charity, Tunstall was a close friend and supporter of the man whose work had made a fresh translation possible: the great scholar Erasmus.

Looking at the rest of Europe in 1523, Tyndale saw that England stood alone in its lack of a vernacular translation of the Bible. (Wycliffe's earlier translation from Latin was in a form of English so archaic that it was virtually unreadable in the early 16th century.) The first vernacular translations were printed in Germany in 1466, France in 1474, Italy in 1471, and Spain (Catalan) in 1478.[8] All these were translated from the Latin Vulgate into the local tongue, but Luther's 1522 New Testament in German was the first translation to be based on the Greek text produced by Erasmus. Erasmus had recently published a New Testament with the original Greek and a new Latin translation in a side-by-side format. His purpose was to provide a new Latin translation of the Bible to replace the venerable, but error-ridden Vulgate translated by Jerome in the fourth century. To prove the accuracy of his *Novum Testamentum omne*, Erasmus placed the Greek text alongside the Latin. This Greek text would enable Tyndale to work from the original language into English.

Tyndale's request to Tunstall for permission to translate the New Testament exemplified a certain naiveté that would ultimately prove disastrous.[9] He often approached matters as if all others would make decisions as he did — by simply looking at the Word of God and applying its clear directives to the situation at hand. Tyndale often acted in apparent obliviousness to the political realities of his situation. Tunstall's friendship with Erasmus might have given Tyndale hope that the bishop would be favorable to his request. The Tyndales were also a highly respected and wealthy family of nobility, while Tunstall himself had no such background. These were but few positive factors against so many to the contrary.[10]

Three powerful reasons made it highly unlikely that Tunstall would approve Tyndale's proposition. First, the stigma of the Wycliffe translation

was not completely forgotten. Twenty-two Lollards, the followers of Wycliffe, were burned at the stake between 1506 and 1519.[11] Rather than fading from memory, the ashes of the Lollard martyrs were still warm. Second, Tyndale's reputation as a troublemaker in Gloucestershire may well have reached the bishop's ears. Even though he had survived the heresy proceeding, Tyndale had still been charged and was likely viewed as a potentially serious menace to the peace. The third obstacle was the most important: Luther's translation of the New Testament had quickly become synonymous with heresy. Giving sanction to an English Luther was an idea simply not to be countenanced by the Catholic bishop of London.

By the time of Tyndale's request, Luther was considered the arch-heretic in England. In April 1521, Henry VIII began work on a book denouncing Luther. (The king seemed to have an equal passion for intellectual pursuits and frivolous pleasures and was always as eager to read Aquinas or write his own discourses as he was to make merry with the youths in his company.[12]) Henry's book was called *Assertio septem sacramentorum* (i.e, *A Defense of the Seven Sacraments*) and was published that July. Although he likely completed a large part of the work himself, some portions were written by scholars such as Thomas More, who acknowledged a minor role.[13] The book contains scathing personal attacks on Luther, as well as a defense of the Catholic Church's infallibility, the pope's authority, and the claim that ceremonies and practices based on the oral traditions of the church were from Christ Himself.

Henry wrote of Luther:

> The most greedy wolf of hell has surprised him, devoured and swallowed him down into the lowest part of his belly, where he lies half alive and half dead in death: and whilst the pious pastor calls him, and bewails his loss, he belches out of the filthy mouth of the heathen wolf these foul inveighings, which the ears of the flock detest, disdain and abhor.[14]

The pope was pleased with Henry's attack, awarding him the title *Fidei Defensor* — defender of the faith. The title is still used by the British monarch today, with the abbreviation F.D. appearing on modern coins of the realm.

In 1522, Luther replied to the king, somewhat intemperately himself, calling the king "more a trivial buffoon than a king," among other *ad hominem* attacks.[15] Thomas More was given the task of replying to Luther, and he set to work on this task in early 1523. More's replies to Luther were vicious, though sometimes expressed in humorous mocking, and laced with

scatological attacks that sound more like a 21st-century comedian too filthy for network television than a 16th-century saint:

> Since he has written that he already has a prior right to bespatter and besmirch the royal crown with s***, we will not have the posterior right to proclaim the bes****ed tongue of this practitioner of posterioristics most fit to lick with his anterior the very posterior of a p***ing she-mule until he have learned more correctly to infer posterior conclusions from prior premises.[16]

C. S. Lewis rightly described More as almost obsessed with harping on Luther's "abominable bichery" to the point where he "loses himself in a wilderness of opprobrious adjectives."[17]

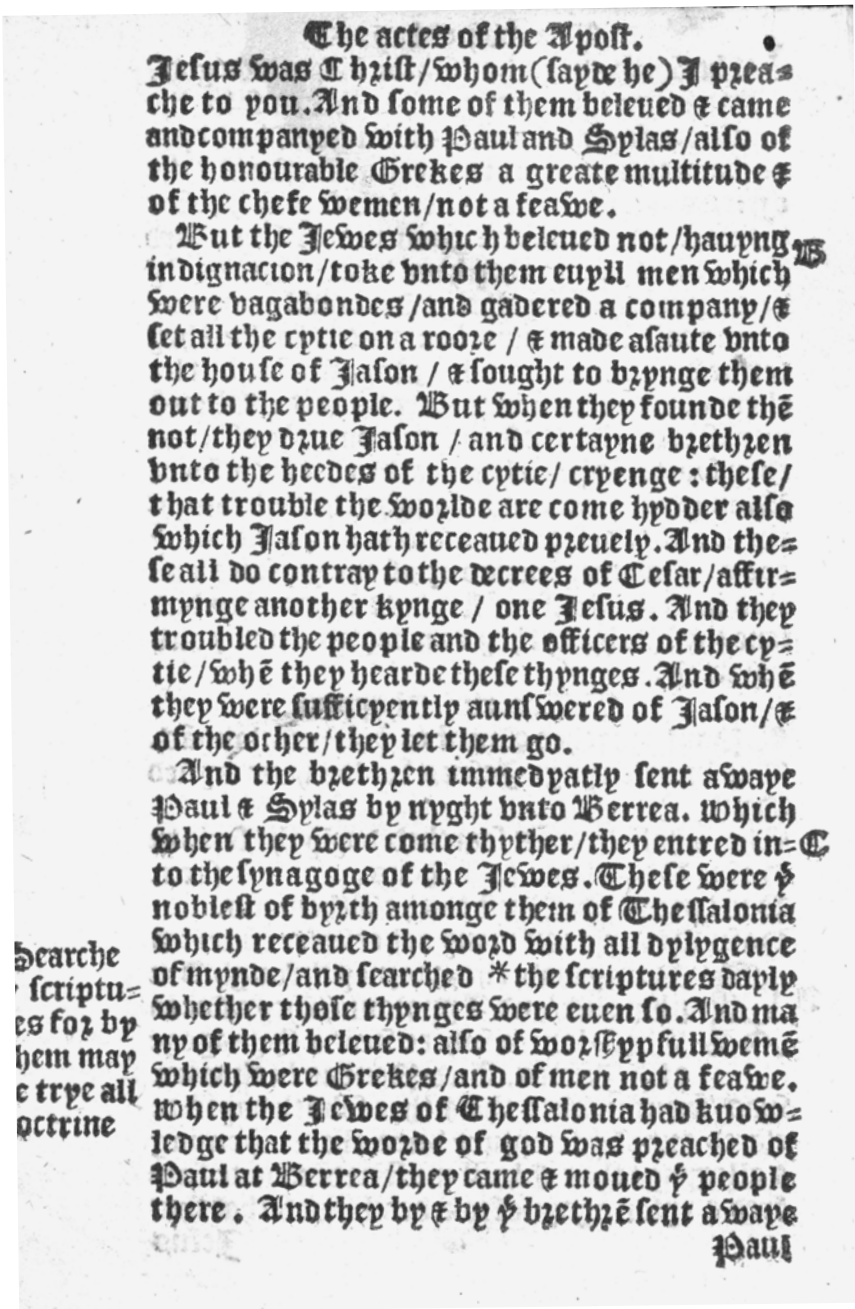
In this atmosphere, there was no chance that Tyndale's request, made in the spring of 1523, would be granted. Tunstall turned Tyndale down with some formal courtesies but little warmth. Tyndale later wrote:

> And so in London I abode almost a year, and marked the course of the world . . . and saw things whereof I defer to speak at this time and understood at the last not only that there was no room in my lord of London's palace to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all England, as experience doth now openly declare.[18]

Tyndale left for the continent, intent on finding a place to translate the Bible into English in order to send the printed Word of God back to ploughboys, laborers, merchants, and even the clerics of England. The first stops on his journey are not known with certainty, but he ended up in Cologne, Germany. The details of his early work in translating the New Testament are also obscure, but Tyndale was engaged in the actual printing of the first 22 chapters of the Book of Matthew during the summer of 1525. After receiving a threat from a Catholic spy, he and an assistant were forced to leave Cologne immediately with their printed sheets and manuscripts. This was no mere act of paranoia but a response to a genuine danger. Escaping to Worms, Tyndale successfully completed and printed his first translation of the New Testament early in 1526. Copies of Tyndale's work were openly sold in London by February of the same year.

Book Burning and Heretic Hunting

On February 11, a large anti-Luther demonstration was held at St. Paul's Cathedral, complete with the burning of Luther's books and copies of his



The actes of the Apost.

Jesus was Christ/whom(sayde he) I preache to you. And some of them beleued & came and companyed with Paul and Sylas/also of the honourable Grekes a greate multitude & of the chefe wemen/not a feawe.

But the Jewes which beleued not/hauyng ¶ indignacion/toke vnto them euyll men which were vagabondes/and gadered a company/& set all the cytie on a rooze / & made asaute vnto the house of Jason / & sought to bzynge them out to the people. But when they founde thē not/they dzue Jason / and certayne bzethzen vnto the heedes of the cytie/ cryenge: these/ that trouble the wozlde are come hydder also which Jason hath receaued pzeuely. And these all do contray to the decrees of Cesar/affirmynge another kynge / one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the officers of the cytie/whē they hearde these thynges. And whē they were sufficyently aunswered of Jason/& of the other/they let them go.

And the bzethzen immedyatly sent awaye Paul & Sylas by nyght vnto Berrea. which ¶ when they were come thyther/they entred into the synagoge of the Jewes. These were ꝑ noblest of bzyth amonge them of Thessalonia which receaued the wozd with all dylygence of mynde/and searched *the scriptures dayly whether those thynges were euen so. And many of them beleued: also of woꝛshypfull wemē which were Grekes/and of men not a feawe. when the Jewes of Thessalonia had knowledge that the wozde of god was pzeached of Paul at Berrea/they came & moued ꝑ people there. And they by & by ꝑ bzethzē sent awaye Paul

searche scriptures for by hem may e trye all octrine

A page from the Book of Acts in the 1536 edition of Tyndale's translation of the New Testament. *The Newe testament yet once agayne corrected by William Tyndale*; courtesy of Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Douce N.T. Eng. F. 1536, image 212.

translation of the New Testament. The books had been seized in a raid led by Thomas More on a German section of London. More arrested three heretics on the spot and returned the following day for further searches.[19] Sometime in March, officials became aware that a new source of heresy was in circulation: Tyndale's English New Testament printed without any of the traditional indicia of the translator or publisher. Cardinal Wolsey, who as vice-regent often seemed more in charge of the nation than Henry VIII, convened the bishops that summer to consider the new threat. Unsurprisingly, they concluded that the "error-ridden" translation (of Tyndale) should be burned. Orders were issued to booksellers to stop selling the work. In connection with a public burning of copies of the English New Testament, Bishop Tunstall preached a sermon at St. Paul's on October 26 denouncing the translation as having more than two thousand errors — a highly unlikely claim given the painstaking and thorough process Tyndale endured throughout its preparation as well as the esteem with which later scholars have viewed his work.[20]

At first, officials seemed content to find books and burn them. But it would not be long before the 150-year tradition of hunting, arresting, and burning the Lollards began to be applied to the Lutherans and others coming to a new form of Christian faith after reading the New Testament in English. The first notable arrest was that of Thomas Bilney in November 1527 in Cambridge. Bilney, a scholar trained in both civil and canon law, renounced his newfound faith but was nevertheless imprisoned in the Tower of London for 12 months starting that December. In the words of David Daniell, the highly esteemed Tyndale biographer, Bilney's arrest "heralded an onslaught," and Tunstall's prisons were full beyond capacity by March.[21] Many of those arrested recanted their heresy; and many, like Bilney, seemed genuinely confused since still they held to many central Catholic doctrines, including the doctrine of transubstantiation and the authority of the pope.

John Tewkesbury, a leather seller (according to martyrologist Foxe) or a haberdasher (according to 17th-century historian Strype), was one of those arrested in this wave of heretic hunting. In April 1529, he was twice examined by Tunstall and subsequently taken by Thomas More to his house in Chelsea, where he was so badly tortured at the rack that he was nearly unable to walk. He recanted his new faith but later abjured and was burned at the stake. Foxe reports that this tradesman was so well versed in "the doctrine of justification and all other articles of faith . . . that Tunstall and all his learned men were ashamed that a leather-seller should so dispute with them, and with such power of the Scriptures and heavenly wisdom, that they were not

able to resist him."[22] With a boldness reminiscent of that of Peter and John when they stood before the religious authorities of their day, Tewkesbury caused his persecutors to marvel. This episode demonstrated that Tyndale was already succeeding in his mission to train the common, laboring class to be superior to the professional clerics in scriptural understanding.

In addition to his heresy for possessing and knowing the Bible in English, Tewkesbury was also closely examined on Tyndale's second important work, a book entitled *The Treatise of the Wicked Mammon*. This treatise expounds upon the central Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, warning readers that many "philosophers and worldly wise men" have arisen who hold to the "belief that they shall be justified in the sight of God by the goodness of their own works and have corrupt[ed] the pure word of God to confirm their Aristotle."[23] *Wicked Mammon* was printed in Antwerp (where Tyndale had moved) on May 8, 1528, and was distributed in England soon thereafter.

Two Men and Their Missions

In that fateful year of 1528, Henry's highest officials were vigilantly engaged in the discovery, arrest, prosecution, torture, and imprisonment of heretics. Six years earlier the king had intemperately castigated Luther, but now Lutheran heretics suffered from far more than a war of words. Some of Henry's officials — particularly Thomas More — sincerely believed they were serving God as they brutalized religious dissenters.

Henry began to be distracted. A young woman entered the swirl of court life who captured the king's complete attention. For several years she had lived in the French court as an attendant of Henry's sister, Mary, the wife of Louis XII. The attendant's name was Anne Boleyn.

Tyndale was on a mission to educate all men in the rich truths of the Bible so that they would know God; Henry was on an entirely different mission — one driven by ego and hormones. The well-known story of his lust and power had an incredible impact on the role of the Bible in England and the Western world. As when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, however, evil may have been intended, but God caused the good ultimately to prevail.

Notes

1. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable*, 982.
2. Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters*, 36.
3. Foxe, *The First Volume of the Ecclesiasticall History*, 1224–25.
4. Tyndale, "To the Reader," [4].

5. Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 78; Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters*, 90.
6. Strype, *Memorials of . . . Thomas Cranmer*, 1853.
7. Moynahan, *God's Bestseller*, 89.
8. Ibid., 83.
9. Monahayan convincingly argues that Tyndale was naïve in his later dealings with representatives of the crown; see *God's Bestseller,* 45, 229–34. Daniell defends the reasonableness of Tyndale's request to Tunstall; see *William Tyndale*, 85.
10. Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 11, 92–93.
11. Moynahan, *God's Bestseller*, 12.
12. *History of . . . K. Henry VIII*, 24–25.
13. Some historians assert that the entire book was written by Thomas More. More's biographer and defender, Peter Ackroyd, writes on page 226 of *The Life of Thomas More*, "It is not at all certain that Henry himself composed every word." He ascribes a relatively modest role to More. The viciousness of language used against Luther is one reason to suspect More's greater involvement. However, since the viciousness lacks the additional quality of vulgarity, More either restrained himself when writing for the king or was less involved than some suggest.
14. Daniell, *William Tyndale,* 255.
15. Ibid., 254.
16. Ibid., 258, quoting R. Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography*, 281; Marius also coedited *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 8 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973).
17. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*, 175.
18. Tyndale, "To the Reader," [6].
19. Moynahan, *God's Bestseller,* 91.
20. David Daniell has given us unparalleled analysis to understand the excellence of Tyndale's work. In addition to his superb biography, Daniell's massive treatise, *The Bible in English*, thoroughly documents the overall accuracy of Tyndale's translation.
21. Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 177–78.
22. Ibid., 171.
23. Tyndale, *Wicked Mammon*, [Avir]; spellings have been modernized here and wherever needed for clarity's sake throughout the book.