BEHEADINGS, BURNINGS and HANGINGS in TUDOR ENGLAND

Jan Lievens (1607–1674) created this painting, "Still Life with Books," circa 1630. Today the original oil-on-panel is owned by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In 16th-century England, people were executed for translating religious books, like the Bible, into English. Click on the image for a better view.

Censorship is alive and well, in Tudor England, during the reign of Henry VIII and the ascendancy of Thomas Cardinal Wolsey. It is also a time when beautiful stained-glass windows and exquisitely executed illuminated manuscripts adorn places of worship and library shelves.

When translators working in England want to provide people with English versions of religious works, the law not only disallows the process, people are executed for making the effort.

Death, by burning at the stake (as a heretic), is not limited to translators.

People who recite portions of the Bible in English (or teach such words to their family members) can also be put to death. So can people like Elizabeth Barton, a nun who prophesied bad things would happen if the King divorced the Queen and married Anne Boleyn.

Wolsey is especially worried about a scholar named William Tyndale who is fluent in eight languages. Well-educated, and with a flair for expressing English phrases particularly well, Tyndale doesn't believe in the law which forbids him to do his life's work.

What is the law which keeps Tyndale from publishing his English-Bible translations in his own country? The British Library helps us to understand the restrictions:

> *In England, however, under the 1408 Constitutions of Oxford, it was strictly forbidden to translate the Bible into the native tongue. This ban was vigorously enforced by Cardinal Wolsey and the Lord Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, in an attempt to prevent the rise of English 'Lutheranism.' The only authorised version of the Bible was St Jerome's Latin translation, known as the 'Vulgate,' made in the fourth century and understood only by highly-educated people.*

The law originally implicates the early-15th-century Lollards, priests who follow the teachings of John Wycliffe, an Oxford professor of philosophy and theology. Wycliffe and the Lollards believe the Pope should have no power in England because, among other things, that equates to having a foreign power run the country.

In 1521, Henry VIII publicly states that people like Martin Luther (the monk-turned-reformer who disputes the existence of purgatory, among other things, and is a kind of successor to the Lollards) are wrong. He even writes a scholarly work which praises the Catholic Church and wins him recognition—as *Fidei Defensor* [Defender of the Faith]—by the sitting Pope.

But that is before Henry decides he wants a different wife.

In 1527, Henry asks Pope Clement VII for a divorce from Catherine, citing spiritual grounds. His main point is that marrying his dead-brother's wife is against Biblical teaching.

The Pope is unimpressed with Henry's request, and its basis, and refuses to grant Henry a divorce. He seems immovable on the point.

When his own circumstances change, the King's point of view changes. If the Pope is the decision-maker on so many matters - even on Henry's much-longed-for divorce from Queen Catherine - isn't that like having a foreigner run the country?

Maybe there is a way to end the Pope's power in England. Thomas Cromwell, the political fixer who has successfully delivered results for others in the past, now takes center stage as a helper for the King.

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