

# Jan Laski (1499-1560)

## Pan-European Reformer

George M. Ella | Added: Dec 28, 2005 | Category: Biography

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We Reformed Evangelicals often mope that our age is the least spiritual and Bible-believing on record but there is one advantage we have over previous years, namely the rapid improvement taking place in our knowledge of former saints. It appears that our sovereign Lord is now equipping us with examples from the past to help us establish the faith in our spheres of service for the future. In my youth, few Christians had heard of George Whitefield, John Cennick, Ambrose Searle, James Hervey, Robert Traill, William Huntington, Joseph Hall, John Gill or even Jonathan Edwards. Their precious memory had fallen into oblivion. Nowadays, their works are easily available alongside those of Abraham Booth, John Brine, John Newton, John Jewel, Joseph Hall, George Abbott and other once forgotten heroes of the faith. Still to be re-assessed is the great Reformation hero, Jan Laski. It is my conviction that this mighty man of God, who had the whole of Europe, including Great Britain, as his parish, will soon be acknowledged as one of the very greatest of our Reformers.

### INFLUENCED BY ERASMUS AND ZWINGLI

Jan Laski, best known in England as John à Lasco, was born in 1499 in Warsaw, the offspring of a noble Polish family. Laski's uncle and namesake, Jan Laski, Poland's leading politician, took care of the younger Jan's education and ear-marked him for the church. Jan Laski Sen. became Metropolitan of the influential province of Gnesen in 1510 and almost simultaneously Primate of all Poland and chief advisor to the King. He represented Poland from 1513-15 at the Fifth Lateran Council, returning with pan-European views in cooperation with the Habsburg and Hungarian Empires. Laski Sen., now a papal hereditary legate, began an extensive course of persecution in Poland. Laski gained a great interest in foreign travel through his uncle but learned to detest his popish extremes of which the Archbishop later repented.

Young Laski studied from 1512-17 in Gnesen and Bologna and, though only 22 years of age, became a Cathedral Dean. He travelled widely in Europe on behalf of Rome who wished to pit Laski's learning and zeal against Luther, Zwingli and Oekolampadius. The King also sent him on numerous diplomatic missions. During his travels, Laski was the personal guest of Erasmus who turned his young friend's head from the narrow-minded bigotry of Rome to a greater tolerance. This helped wean Laski from the influence of his uncle and he became more open to the ideas of

the Reformers. The breakthrough in Laski's life came when staying in Zürich with Zwingli where the Swiss Reformer urged his young Polish friend to take the side of the gospel.

#### THE BREAK WITH ROME

Laski was chief administrator of the Bishopric of Warsaw from 1530-32 and must have remained true to Roman superstition until at least 1538 as he was then appointed Archdeacon of the Warsaw See. Middleton, in his *Biographia Evangelica*, also claims that Laski was made Provost of Gnesen and Bishop of Vesprin in Hungary. After 1538, Laski allied with the Bohemian Brethren and began openly to question papist dogmas. Probably because of his own personal influence and his close association with the Royal family, Laski was unhindered. This changed when Laski committed that papal sin of sins: he married and was immediately suspended from all secular and religious offices. The King pronounced this illegal and reinstated Laski. The Roman version is that Laski took an oath of cleansing (Reinigungseid) in 1542, and divorced his wife, thus gaining back his posts. Laski and his wife now followed Sigismund's advice and moved to Germany in 1543 to avoid popish plots against them. Laski was declared a heretic by the Polish clergy in 1554.

#### EAST FRIESLAND'S REFORMED SUPERINTENDENT

The Emden-Oldenburg regions were open to the gospel and Laski preached there for two years, declining to become a minister because of his limited abilities to speak German. Nevertheless, he established churches and built up existing bands of Christians, becoming more and more Reformed in his theology and outreach. The Countess of Oldenburg sponsored Laski and encouraged him to constitute a Reformed Church in the Province. Thus in 1545, Laski became the first Superintendent of the Friesland Reformed Church, retaining this office until 1550. Meanwhile, Laski corresponded with British, Swiss, French and German Reformers as also political leaders such as Duke Albert of Prussia. As his zeal and knowledge of the Scriptures grew, Laski stripped the churches of images and set up four elders per church to assist the ministers. He insisted that ministers should organise themselves locally and meet weekly to discuss their tasks and for mutual fellowship and edification. For the instruction of clergy and people alike, Laski composed a statement of faith and catechism. Laski visited England in 1448 to solicit support for a Protestant League against the Emperor, and the brief visit proved of lasting benefit by acquainting Laski with Cranmer.

#### CRANMER'S PLANS FOR A PAN-EUROPEAN CHURCH

In 1550, Laski followed an invitation to take up a post in England, first extended to him in 1547. Archbishop Cranmer's reminder of 1548 is extant in the Parker Society Records. Here the English Reformer tells Laski:

We are desirous of setting forth in our churches the true doctrine of God, and have no wish to adapt it to all tastes, or to deal in ambiguities; but,

laying aside all carnal considerations, to transmit to posterity a true and explicit form of doctrine agreeable to the rule of the sacred writings; so that there may not only be set forth among all nations an illustrious testimony respecting our doctrine, delivered by the grave authority of learned and godly men, but that all posterity may have a pattern to imitate. For the purpose of carrying this important design into execution we have thought it necessary to have the assistance of learned men, who, having compared their opinions together with us, may do away with all doctrinal controversies, and build up an entire system of true doctrine. We have therefore invited both yourself and some other learned men; and as they have come over to us without any reluctance, so that we scarcely have to regret the absence of any of them, with the exception of yourself and Melancthon, we earnestly request you, both to come yourself, and, if possible, to bring Melancthon along with you.<sup>1</sup>

Cranmer's plan was to revise the 1549 Prayer Book and British laws regarding the Church based on an international consensus of Reformed men. He felt that the Continental Statements of Faith, especially the Augsburg Confession were local and insular in their approach and unsuitable for a worldwide general confession of faith which distinguished radically between the Reformed faith and Tridentine errors. Cranmer knew he could rely on Laski as they both shared the same view of a pan-European, Reformed church and appeared to have influenced each other in their endeavours. Cranmer also wanted him to act as a fatherly mentor for the foreign arrivals. Laski could not resist Cranmer's invitation but another factor helped Laski make up his mind. Emperor Charles V told Countess Anne of Oldenburg that unless she rid herself of Laski, she would gain his imperial wrath. So when Laski broached the subject of his leaving Friesland to Anne, the Countess quickly agreed that he should go.

#### THE EUROPEAN LEADERS OF THE REFORMATION CONVERGE ON ENGLAND

When Laski reached England, he found a fine body of Reformed men from Italy, Spain, France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland and Germany already there. Italian Peter Martyr had become Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford (1548) and Martyr's fellow-countryman, Bernadino Ochino, had been given a prebendary at Canterbury. Both these men had been in Strasburg with Franco-German Martin Bucer and arrived in England a year before him. When Bucer arrived he had Italian Hebrew scholar Emmanuel Tremellio with him. Bucer was made Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge in 1549. The Spanish Reformer and nobleman Francisco de Encinas was already quartered at Cranmer's home. Hooper had brought Martin Micronius, the Belgian doctor from Basle and Micronius' fellow Flemings Gualter Delenus, the Hebrew scholar and Jan Utenhoven, the Bible translator were already awaiting Polish Laski's leadership. The Walloons Valerand Poullain and Francis Perussel, were equally looking forward to Laski's arrival. Melancthon was the only church leader invited who declined to come, complaining that he feared the Emperor's troops

would arrest him on the way. He was not too greatly missed as the Anglican Reformers had become suspicious of him for dropping Luther's sound doctrine of predestination and even persecuting Predestinarians. This international and highly gifted, scholarly team of Reformers worked with Cranmer, joined by Hooper, Ridley and Cox, to name but a few of Cranmer's Anglican co-workers, on the revision of the 1549 Prayer Book. According to John Ab Ulmis who had organised the transport of a number of these foreign guests, Laski was of great influence to Cranmer in drawing up the communion service.

#### THE STRANGERS' CHURCH

Laski and Cranmer became very good friends and the Archbishop insisted that Laski should lodge at his own house. Cranmer then appointed his Polish friend as Supervisor of the 'Stranger Churches' i.e. the churches of the foreigners in London, on the generous salary of £100 per annum. The 'strangers' were given the Austin Friars building, which had featured so prominently in the early years of the Reformation. It is estimated that there were between four and five thousand foreign Protestants in London at the time. Cranmer gave Laski a free hand in organising and governing these churches, only censoring him once when Laski, supported sporadically by Hooper, sought to ban all kinds of vestments. Laski, as Hooper, came round to accepting Cranmer's moderate views on these matters. The deciding factor here was Hooper's and Laski's joint fear of the Anabaptists who wished to turn the Stranger Churches upside-down, bringing in new doctrine and new ceremonies radically different from anything practised in orthodoxy hitherto. They concluded that a united order, with all its weaknesses, was better than no order at all! Later, Laski re-adopted his anti-vestment stand.

At this time, Calvin was still a secondary figure in the development of the Reformation. His earlier letters show that he little understood what was going on in Britain and he never seems to have realised what great improvements were made on the 1549 Prayer Book by Cranmer and his international team. On the matter of vestments, he was more conservative than many of the Anglican and Continental Reformers. Sadly, he only came round to understanding the full impact of the British Reformation shortly before his death in 1564. Bullinger was also a Continental leader who was, at first, slow to realise what was going on in Britain. Beza, was far more insular than Calvin and strove to block the Reformed Church of England's comprehensive, international work by suggesting that instead of all Reformed Churches contributing to a joint form of worship, they should all accept the French Forms which had arisen in a time of persecution, were applicable to an underground church but did not foresee a church living in peace, alongside but not hidden from the secular world. None of the Continental theologians here mentioned ever leant too closely on Calvin and though they accepted forms of liturgy and church order similar to those later used at Geneva, they pointed out that Calvin had taken them over from Bucer at Strasburg when exiled there from Geneva in 1538-1541. Poullain, Calvin's co-pastor at Strasburg, favoured the Strasburg Liturgy of

1545 and 1551 which have often been attributed solely to Calvin's influence rather than to Bucer's. Laski himself could never associate himself fully with Calvin, especially with his Supralapsarianism, and his love for ecclesiastical gowns, tippets and caps, but always looked to Strasburg, Zürich and Basle for his wider inspiration. Calvin came to view Laski with great suspicion.

Though Laski obviously leant on the Strasburg order, where Calvin departed from it, Laski mostly kept to Bucer's understanding. Concerning the Lord's Supper, however, Laski was more Zwinglian than either Bucer or Calvin. Bucer was the most distinguished Continental theologian of the time in England, yet Dickens says rightly that he was 'among the least arrogant of reformers'. However, Bucer had not pioneered reform in Strasburg. This honour is due to Matthew Zell and Wolfgang Capito.<sup>2</sup> There is a direct line between these two men, through Bucer, Calvin and Laski to the Reformed Church of England which has been seldom traced, if at all.

#### LASKI'S REFORMED WORSHIP

Laski put the main emphasis on his 9.00 am and 2.00 pm Sunday services. Both morning and afternoon worship began with a chanted psalm, followed by a passage of Scripture which was then expounded. This took an hour in the morning and half an hour in the afternoon as it was then followed by half an hour's catechising. The Creed, the Ten Commandments and the General Confession were essential features of Laski's liturgy. Other psalms were chanted (hymn-singing was unheard of at this time) and prayers were offered for the King, his government, the City of London, the Church and for the particular needs of the refugees and those still persecuted in the congregations' homelands. Marriage, baptism and monthly Holy Communion took place after prayers. The Dutch and French, who constituted one church, did not worship together because of language problems. A novel feature before each Holy Communion was a two weeks' time of reflection, self-examination, repentance and reconciliation as no one was allowed to communicate who had a quarrel with a brother. Would-be communicants had to put their names on a list before each communion service and on the Saturday preceding the event the elders met to strike off anyone thought unfit. Those applying to be admitted to communion had to answer forty questions satisfactorily before being admitted. All children above the age of five were enrolled in special catechism classes. In spite of this tight control a number of Anabaptists appeared in the congregation with Arian beliefs and taught that Christ did not derive his human nature from His mother.

#### BLOODY MARY'S SHADOW FALLS ON ENGLAND

Laski's influence now became enormous and it was said of him that he only needed a few minutes with anybody and he could quite change their lives and opinions. This Hooper found out to his consternation. He would be quite convinced of one thing, only to find that Laski made him quite

convinced of the opposite after a brief conversation. The result of Laski's persuasive powers and genius for church planting and organisation caused him to be in demand all over Europe. Whatever the church situation, it appeared that all thought if only Laski would come, he would change all for the better.

When Mary came to power in 1553, Laski's influence in England was nipped in the bud. He was one of the first to be ordered out of the country with his congregation. Many fled to Germany and Switzerland but on 17 September, Laski and 175 of his congregation sailed for Denmark which had opened its doors to the Reformation. Denmark was experiencing an early winter, but in spite of the bitter cold and stormy seas, the refugees were not allowed to land. The word had spread that Denmark was to be invaded by Zwinglians. The Danish Lutherans thought this worse than any news that the plague was approaching. The exiles were given permission to anchor for two days at Copenhagen, but were not allowed to disembark. Laski and his fellow-believers then sailed to Lubeck where they were also forbidden to land. Wismar, Hamburg and Rostock also refused them hospitality. By this time the ship's passengers were suffering terribly from the cold and lack of food but it was March 1554 before they found an hospitable haven at Emden where Countess Anne made the refugees most welcome. Anne was now tired of the Emperor's interim policy and was happy to once again hear an uncompromising gospel from the lips of her former Superintendent.

#### LASKI'S INTERVENTION AT WESEL

Meanwhile, in Wesel, to which many British and French-speaking brethren had fled, the Nether Rhine churches had formed a Lutheran-Reformed union. They told the British that if they accepted their vestments, which had been reduced to a mere gown called a Chorrock, and their modified creed, they could worship unmolested as a separate church. The exiles at Wesel turned to Laski for advice, requesting that he should visit Wesel and sort out matters. Both the British and the French also appealed to Calvin who told the churches that they should not let matters of indifference put their church life at risk and that they should accept the Wesel offer. Laski, however, told the congregation not to accept any compromise whatsoever. Actually, the Wesel church was the same as Laski's own ideal, bar the Chorrock. But any kind of church vestment had become anathema to him. The British followed Laski's advice, rather than Calvin's, and were promptly expelled with the French under Perussel. A number of the refugees now journeyed to Bern, the majority moving down to Frankfurt. Panic gripped Frankfurt and made the Senate tighten their otherwise most lenient restrictions on foreigners. Though the Emperor had promised the British and French the freedom of the city, Frankfurt was bankrupt because of the Turkish and Schmalkaldian wars and Interim restrictions. Perussel was a most controversial figure and he took these controversies with him to Frankfurt which tore the French church apart. Laski, too, now decided to follow the Wesel exiles to Frankfurt. He arrived there shortly after the Senate had banned John Knox for adverse political activity. Knox had also

angered the majority of the British congregation because of his opposition to their church practices. All the British wanted now was peace and quiet and they did not take too kindly to Laski's sudden appearance.

#### THE FRANKFURT CHURCH OF MARIAN EXILES

According to the Frankfurt records, the British were forbidden to establish an independent church but were considered, along with the French, Belgian and Dutch as one congregation under Lutheran supervision, though they were allowed to worship separately. Roughly speaking, three refugee churches emerged in the city, the French with the Walloons, the British and the Dutch. However, a number of English worshipped with the French and a large number of Dutch worshipped with the English. The English worshippers were in something of a minority and fluctuated between 100 and 200 adults, no more than 350 British citizens altogether having worshipped at Frankfurt between 1554 and 1559 when most of the exiles returned to Britain under Elizabeth. There were 2,000 refugees in Frankfurt all told, most of them Dutch. Until 1555, however, the Dutch had no separate form of worship. The English congregation was pastored by David Whitehead, a modified Prayer Book man, who had been voted in by a majority vote. Whitehead was assisted by several preachers and a plurality of elders. Kneeling at Communion had been abolished for the sake of a protesting minority, and all bowing, crossing and popish vestments had been discarded by a general consensus. At least forty of the British refugees, including John Fox, John Jewel, Richard Cox, Thomas Lever, John Bale, Edmund Grindal, Thomas Becon, William Whittingham, David Whitehead, Sir Francis Knollys, Alexander Nowell, John Poynt and Thomas Sampson, became noted campaigners in the Elizabethan Settlement and manned important offices in both Church and State. In principle, however, they were almost all nonconformist in the sense that they adhered to the doctrines of grace, and reduced all external signs of ceremony and order to a bare minimum. The community, though regarding Calvin with respect, were more attached to the memory of Bucer, the English martyrs, Peter Martyr and Heinrich Bullinger. Thus Laski ought to have been in his element once again.

#### LASKI FORMS A DUTCH CHURCH

The Polish Reformer was used to working from scratch, writing his own catechisms and orders of worship and generally telling people, willing to hear, what to do. The English, however, were quite happy with their present arrangement. Laski found himself out of work. He was shocked to find that the English were High-Predestinarian in their theology and had so little contact with the Lutherans. He thus decided to compel the churches to seek some form of reconciliation. However, the Lutherans considered Laski a radical Calvinist and the English thought he was too Lutheran for their taste. Laski now drew up his *Forma ac ratio tola ecclesiastici Ministerii, in peregrinorum, potissimum vero Germanorum Ecclesia: instituta Londini*<sup>3</sup> which was really a description of the forms of worship and order he had used in England but the British exiles refused to comply

as they had grown tired of arguing over 'things indifferent'. Laski had sought Bullinger's blessing on his move and the best that can be said is that Bullinger did not dampen his enthusiasm.

The Dutch, however, took to Laski's order, appreciating how they had been well-guided by him in England. They also recognised elements of their beloved Utenhove and Micronius in it. Thus Laski found himself establishing a Dutch Reformed Church in Frankfurt which, possibly because of Laski's European reputation and international political standing, was given the backing of the Senate. The English church did not suffer too much in numbers from this separation as the Wesel group made a substantial addition to the congregation.

#### LUTHERAN WESTPHAL PERSECUTES REFORMED LASKI

Laski continued to correspond with King Sigismund, who was lending an eager ear to the Reformation. Sadly Joachim Westphal, the Lutheran 'fiery spirit' had been poisoning the King's mind against Laski. It also became clear that Westphal had been behind the Scandinavian and German efforts to prevent Laski and his congregation from landing after their expulsion by Mary. Westphal claimed that all Reformed Christians were 'monsters' and that Cranmer, Hooper, Ridley and all the other British martyrs, with the French and Dutch included, were 'martyrs of the devil'. Rome had never a greater ally than this evil-mouthed fanatic. Sad to say, it is a historical fact that Roman Catholics on the Continent, on the whole, were more hospitable to the exiles than the Lutherans. All the Frankfurt refugees, for instance, were provided with churches by the Roman Catholics, (the English church belonged to the White Ladies), but the Lutherans tried their level best to disturb their worship. One such contender against the Reformed refugees was Brentius, who spread such downright lies about Laski and the Reformed position that Calvin, Bullinger and Beza, besides Laski himself, were compelled to take up their pens against these attacks on the persons and doctrines of the Reformed faith .

#### LASKI RETURNS HOME TO POLAND

Laski's stay in Frankfurt was short. Westphal used all his energies in poisoning the mind of the Senate against him. The refugees had a most difficult time but the protecting hand of one of the chief magistrates, John Glauburg kept them from undue persecution. In 1556, Laski received an urgent call from friends in Poland who pleaded with him to return home and help the struggling Bohemian Brethren. It was a most serious step to take as Laski was on the wanted list and had been called to face the heresy courts. Never the one to be put off by mere people, Laski returned to his native country.

Once back home, Laski took over his family lands and titles and in next to no time, he became the Reformed hope in Poland. Though the papists strove to win Sigismund to their side against Laski, the King told them that though he had heard that 'the bishops had pronounced Laski a heretic, the

Senate of the kingdom had determined no such matter.' The King now proved to be one of Laski's staunchest supporters. By this time, however, the Polish nobleman was feeling his age and his energies were waning. He decided that a gradual changeover from Rome to the Reformed faith would take too long. He thus strove to create a national church which would cover all Poles and then once the outward organisation was anchored in Polish law, the real work of reform could begin. All Laski really needed to do was to change the title of the Institution from Roman Catholic to Reformed and all would fall into place. Strangely enough, Laski had little opposition from Rome. Nor did Laski have much opposition from the various Reformed factions as they also saw the benefits of his plan. However, during his absence the Unitarians and Socinians had been very active in Poland and they opposed Laski's project with all the authority which they could muster. In the long run, it was the negative offshoots of the Reformation that stifled its growth in Poland and later laid the land wide open to a papist new possession. Not wanting to lose such a jewel again, Rome made Poland one of the most fanatical and aggressive Roman strong holds ever known. Laski was ill for a very short time in January, 1560 and suddenly died. Zanchy, no mean Reformer himself and the man behind the teaching of the Church of England on predestination and election, claimed that Laski belonged to the very greatest of Continental Reformers and his name should always be quoted with that of Zwingli, Luther and Calvin.

- i. Vol. I, p. 17.
- ii. The English Reformation, pp. 232-233.
- iii. Printed at Frankfurt, 1555.

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