Abstract

William Tyndale’s The Obedience of a Christian Man has been credited with influencing the Henrician regime’s thinking and propaganda on the subject of obedience to royal authority. According to an anecdote first recorded by the Archdeacon of Nottingham, John Louthe, Henry was so delighted by Tyndale’s tract that he called it ‘a book for me and for all kings to read’, and historians have argued that Henry sought to recruit Tyndale as a royal propagandist or diplomat in 1531. This article argues that Louthe’s anecdote was probably a later invention, that Henry disapproved of the Obedience and its author, and that the evidence that Henry sought to recruit Tyndale rather than simply to force him to abjure his heresies is slim. The Obedience contained very little that would have pleased Henry, presenting him as a mere ‘shadow’ of a King, manipulated by evil prelates. While Tyndale rejected rebellion against even tyrannical rulers, this should not be confused with advocacy of obedience of the kind that Henry might approve of, and his Obedience sanctioned disobedience of various kinds. From the outset, remarkably radical ideas were contained within an apparently ‘conservative’ tradition of English evangelical political thought.