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Thomas Becket

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Professor Beebe

Thomas Becket was England's Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 until his death in 1170. His significance is defined in part by what he did to protect the church from secular power, but also by his gruesome murder. Becket's fame came after his death when he was named a martyr and a saint. His death attracted masses to the church because of the pilgrimages people took in hopes of experiencing a miracle. Becket's significance to British Christianity is defined by his murder because his dramatic martyrdom brought attention to his fight for the separation of church and state. This is shown by the way he argued for it in his life and the dramatic outcome of his death.

Thomas Becket was born in London, England in 1118. He was the youngest of four children and the only boy. In his early 20s his parents passed away and he joined the staff of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury. Around this time, he was ordained a deacon. Then in 1154, Becket was appointed arch-deacon of Canterbury. With the help of Archbishop Theobald, he was named England's chancellor to King Henry II. During their time working together, Becket and the king developed a close relationship; some would say they were good friends.¹ As chancellor, Becket lived an extravagant lifestyle, similar to most clerical politicians at the time. Even while living that type of lifestyle, he was still strongly dedicated to his faith. After Theobald's death in 1162, Becket was named Archbishop of Canterbury.²

As the newly named archbishop, Becket took his job with eagerness and enthusiasm. He deserted his old lifestyle to lead a life of "extreme asceticism".³ He was passionate about protecting the rights of the church and wanted to do all that he could to keep King Henry II from

¹ Urry, William, and Peter A. Rowe. Thomas Becket: His Last Days. (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 2.

² Cunningham, Lawrence. Bishop Cut Down in His Own Cathedral. St. Anthony Messenger 111, no. 7 (12, 2003): 57.

³ Scully, Robert E. The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation. The Catholic Historical Review 86, no. 4 (10, 2000): 579-602.

intervening in its affairs. This meant keeping the church independent and not letting the state control church matters. His devotion resulted in him stepping down as the king's chancellor, and standing up for the church in matters against the king. This sudden change in relational dynamics lead to tension between Becket and King Henry II.⁴

The king and Becket disagreed on multiple issues regarding the church and state. One of the disputes was over the questions of if "criminous clerks" should be tried by the secular authorities after being convicted in ecclesiastical courts. Becket disagreed with the king and tried to persuade others bishops to do the same.⁵ King Henry II implemented *The Constitutions of Clarendon* hoping to restore the relationship between the church and state. Becket reluctantly agreed and then suddenly changed his mind. As a result of the whole ordeal, he fled England in November 1164.⁶

While in exile, Becket was still working as Archbishop of Canterbury. During this time the king was involved in the crowning of the heir to the throne by the archbishop of York. Becket opposed this because he believed it violated custom and a papal ban.⁷ Thomas Becket excommunicated the archbishop of York, the bishop of London and the bishop of Salisbury because of their association with the coronation. Becket's decisions infuriated King Henry II. In a fit of anger, he said, "Who will rid me of this low-born priest?" As a result of the king's exclamation, four knights took it upon themselves to kill Thomas Becket.⁸

On December 29, 1170 four of King Henry II's knights gruesomely murdered Thomas Becket. When the knights arrived at Canterbury Cathedral they shouted, "Where is Thomas

⁴ Scully, *The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation*, 579-602.

⁵ *Saint Thomas à Becket*. Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition, 2016, 1-2.

⁶ Jones, Neil. *Murder in the Cathedral*. Britain 82, no. 3 (5, 2014): 81.

⁷ *Saint Thomas à Becket*, 1-2.

⁸ Jones, Neil. *Murder in the Cathedral*, 81.

Becket, a traitor to the king and kingdom?”⁹ He revealed himself and they tried to drag him out of the building. He fought back and repeatedly yelled for them to do whatever they were going to do inside the cathedral. There was a struggle and Becket repeatedly pushed the four men off of him. Eventually, they overpowered him and he recognized his death was imminent.¹⁰ The knights first hit him over the head with a sword, slicing a flap of flesh from the crown of his scalp. Although gruesome, this did not initially kill him. Another blow was delivered to his left shoulder when Edward Grim, a visiting clerk from Cambridge, raised his arm to protect the archbishop. Grim’s arm was slashed and he stumbled away to shelter. An unnamed monk that had been by Becket’s side during the whole ordeal was hit over the head with a sword and rendered unconscious. After all of the commotion had ceased, Becket realized the vast amount of blood coming from his head. At this point, he fell to his knees and started praying. A witness account says his dying words were, “In the name of Jesus and for the safety of the Church I am ready to suffer death.”¹¹ A knight hit him in the head two more times before he fell to the ground. They delivered the final blow as he lay on the ground. Some believe it was the knight’s intention to cut off Becket’s head at the neck, but the sword landed at the base of the skull and sliced through his brain. As the killers were leaving, one of the knights put his foot on Becket’s neck and thrust the sword into his skull. In doing this, he broke the tip of his sword off and scattered brains and chips of bone onto the ground of the cathedral.¹²

The drama of this scene brought horror to the church. The ghastly murder of Thomas Becket came as a shock to all. However, there was one positive that was a result of Becket’s death. The fame and recognition that followed was more than he could have received when he

⁹ Scully, The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation, 579-602.

¹⁰ Urry, William, and Peter A. Rowe. Thomas Becket: His Last Days (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 130.

¹¹ Urry, Thomas Becket: His Last Days, 135.

¹² Urry, Thomas Becket: His Last Days, 127-139.

was alive. The news spread quickly and multitudes were mourning his death soon after it happened. Robert Scully, author of *The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation*, believes, “The extraordinary circumstances of Becket’s death guaranteed for him a fame and influence far greater than he had attained in life.” Many would attest that his death brought acknowledgment for acts done before and after he was murdered. This is significant because Becket was well-liked and supported when he was alive, but received even more recognition through his dramatic death.

There are multiple reports of miraculous healings attributed to Becket. Some accounts profess a direct correlation between the use of his blood and miracles. Other stories report healing that took place in the presence of his body and shrine.¹³ On February 21, 1173, Pope Alexander III declared Thomas Becket a saint. He made this decision based on his noble death and the miracles that took place as a result of it.¹⁴ This brought attention to the life, and especially the death of Becket. The more reports of miracles, the more people that heard about Becket and the church.

It is up to interpretation whether or not the king actually meant for Thomas Becket to be killed. He admits to speaking the words which lead to his death, but no one knows exactly what his intentions were. Following the canonization of Becket as a martyr, the king performed a public penance in the same cathedral Becket was murdered in four years prior. He wore a sackcloth and walked barefoot through the streets. He also suffered a harsh whipping by a group of monks.¹⁵ It is possible the king decided to do this because of the backlash he was getting in regards to Becket, but it could also be because he felt some form of remorse. Although they had

¹³ Scully, *The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation*, 579-602.

¹⁴ Scully, *The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation*, 579-602.

¹⁵ Jones, Neil. *Murder in the Cathedral*, 80.

their differences, Thomas Becket and King Henry II were close friends at one point in their lives. The king's involvement brought attention to the martyrdom of Becket and his action of repentance adds to the drama of the narrative. Becket's death was made even more dramatic because of the scope of his relationship with the king.

Shortly after his death, Becket's tomb was opened to the public. People were making the pilgrimage to his shrine in search of forgiveness and healing.¹⁶ In 1220 Canterbury Cathedral made the decision to move his body from the crypt where he was buried to a place under the high altar. This was because of the vast number of people traveling to Canterbury to see his memorial.¹⁷ Sadly, in 1538 Becket's shrine was destroyed. There is currently a candle that burns in its place inside Trinity Chapel at Canterbury Cathedral. The candle may not have the same effect as the shrine did, but it provokes reflection and meditation.¹⁸

Thomas Becket's life was dramatic enough that authors and artists took notice. T.S. Eliot, the famous British, Anglo-Catholic poet, wrote the play, *Murder in the Cathedral* about Becket. Jean Anouilh, a French dramatist, wrote the play *Becket* which is a depiction of the conflict between Thomas Becket and King Henry II.¹⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of 24 stories about a group of pilgrims that travel from London to Canterbury to see Becket's shrine.²⁰ All three of these pieces of literature are centered around Becket and his death. If his death would not have taken place, or if it would not have been as dramatic, these stories would not have as much significance. Therefore, the fate of Thomas Becket not only contributed to British Christianity but also to literature.

¹⁶ Jones, Neil. *Murder in the Cathedral*, 83.

¹⁷ Cunningham, *Bishop Cut Down in his own Cathedral*, 57.

¹⁸ Jones, Neil. *Murder in the Cathedral*, 84.

¹⁹ Cunningham, *Bishop Cut Down in his own Cathedral*, 57.

²⁰ Scully, *The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation*, 579-602.

There is some debate regarding Thomas Becket and his contributions to society. He is best known for his murder, and almost everything of significance has to do with it. His death was unfortunate and untimely, but it allowed Becket to continue his work for the church long after he was gone. The effort Becket put into keeping the church separate from the state defines his significance, as well as his contributions to the church after death as a saint and martyr. Robert Scully accurately describes Thomas Becket when he says, “To his enemies he was a traitor who tempted death by trying to usurp royal authority and replace it with the dominance of the Church. To his admirers he was a man of great physical and spiritual courage who died a martyr while trying to protect the independence of the Church.”²¹ Ultimately Thomas Becket wanted what was best for the church and did what he felt was necessary to protect it.

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²¹ Scully, The Unmaking of a Saint: Thomas Becket and the English Reformation, 579-602.

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