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A Murder in a Cathedral

I had always attributed the reference to Eliot. In his *Murder in the Cathedral* he has Thomas Becket say the following words to his four murderers in the moment just before his death: 'For my Lord I am now ready to die. That this Church may have peace and liberty. Do with me as you will, to your hurt and shame. But none of my people, in God's name, whether layman or clerk, shall you touch. This I forbid.' The allusion to Jesus' words at his arrest in the Olive Garden and, consequently, the modelling of Thomas on Jesus is obvious. One of the first biographers or hagiographers, Edward Grim, who was an eyewitness to the murder and who himself was wounded in the arm, renders Thomas' all but last words in the same way.

In the biographies that were written shortly after the murder on 29 December 1170, he and his contemporary colleagues followed tradition and used many biblical references. The fairly triumphant return of Thomas to Canterbury, for instance, was compared with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem a few days before his death. The fact that at the crucial moment Thomas was deserted by everyone around him — John of Salisbury, for instance, a man of almost Erasmian discretion and cleverness in his statements and letters, hid behind the altar — will also have contributed to the parallel with Jesus. Eliot, in any case, is seen to adapt to an old tradition.

Did Thomas actually speak those words? From the point of view of tradition, they may quite possibly have been historical: following the example set by Stephen, the first martyr, the pupil used the words of the master. His contemporaries could not have recognised him as a saint if he had not spoken them. When the first lives were being written (John of Salisbury leading the way in the spring of 1171), Thomas' martyrdom had already been acknowledged. And this would be typical of his biographies. As early as 1173 he was canonised by 'his' pope, Alexander III. This once and for all turned a murder in a cathedral into the murder in the cathedral, and a life into the life of a saint. The 'Canterbury Tales', as we shall for the moment call what happened to Thomas, were put into the perspective of the final moment, of martyrdom and sainthood. It is not unreasonable to

ask whether his worldliness when he was chancellor of Henry II has not been rendered with such exuberance for the sake of contrast with the Archbishop's life. In addition, this contrast yielded a marvellous parallel. Since they were dealing with a saint, albeit *in statu nascendi*, the contemporary biographers could of course not approve of luxury. But what they could point out was that the glory of the chancellor heightened the greatness of the king. He was that faithful and good a servant. He did not necessarily have to share personally in the riches. The austerity of the bishop's life may show how excellent a servant he was to his true master. And in the meantime the biographers had been able to use the traditional course of a saint's life as the structure for their work: called by God or the Church, the saint progressed from worldliness to a complete denial of anything worldly. Their work was all the more rewarding in Thomas Becket's case who, as a bishop, was drawn into a conflict with the world and its demands that was to end in death.

Historical reality is often very hard to distil from the life of a saint. The early biographers provide a truly magnificent account of Thomas' disrobement, shortly after his death. Found underneath the bishop's garments was first of all a monk's habit, and then a hair shirt that must have been a constant torment to him. A bishop was revealed as a saint! This is almost a description of the literary treatment the hagiographers employ: outward appearance as reference to and wording of the exceptional.

John of Salisbury, whom I am beginning to like more and more, reminded a friend of the time they had once remarked maliciously that no grave could be big enough for Thomas. The context reveals that this had been a way of ridiculing the position Thomas had in mind for himself. He remained loyal to him, but not without certain objections. Just observe the size of his monument, he wrote to a friend. But its greatness was now that of the humble martyr. Both church and churchgoers had recognised Thomas. John gave in, the believer in him acknowledging that the saint was greater than the man he had known. The murder had then only happened a short while ago, but the change was sudden and complete. One fortunate consequence of this is that the earliest biographies abound with details which enable the modern historian to provide an elaborate

description of, in particular, Thomas' last days. The final morning can be reconstructed in the following way.

After attending Mass, he went round the altars in the cathedral as he always did, starting at the high altar and invoking the various saints for help. He then went to confession with an elderly monk, Thomas of Maidstone, presumably in the chapter house; but why he did not, as usual, go to confession with Robert of Merton, who was certainly present, is unclear. There is also mention of the fact that he was castigated three times that day, probably by Robert. At around two o'clock in the afternoon he had a meal in the big hall, the only meal during the monastic wintertime. According to Gerald of Wales, Thomas had a pheasant. Not long afterwards, when he had retired to his room and was talking to his counsellors, the king's messengers were announced.

The messengers were the murderers. By half past four, everything was over: the body lay on the cathedral floor. Four days earlier, Henry II had exclaimed: 'What miserable dons and traitors have I nourished and promoted in my household, who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born clerk!' This had been the final encouragement to the four murderers, who were not going to lose face.

The king's words were highly contemptuous: the bishop was his former chancellor; he knew that he was of humble descent. But he himself had offered him this high position, and had recommended him as Archbishop of Canterbury, the highest church office in England. The conflict had arisen when Thomas had used his position in the church to oppose the king. The description of the conflict is sometimes reminiscent of that other tragic struggle between an English king and his former chancellor, Henry V and Thomas More. At one point the analogy is almost striking. At their first encounter, after Becket had left England, Thomas made the proposed declaration of reconciliation and submission. It ended with the formula: 'I now submit the whole case between us to your clemency and judgement.' But, much to the alarm of the bystanders, as the biographers report, he immediately added: 'Saving the honour of God.' And that is how the conflict that would cost Thomas his life was reopened. The 'honour of God' — anyone who is more or less familiar with the controversy between church and state about their respective authority may

find Thomas' words rather pompous. It does not seem unreasonable to ask whether Thomas, supported by the Pope, did not identify his own stubbornness too much with God's honour. As it turns out, it was only for Thomas that the murder meant a complete change; the relationship between church and king hardly changed at all. It seems to me that Henry II's reputation was stained by the sudden holiness of the bishop who, while still lying in his own blood, already began to outgrow his mind and career. In the eyes of his contemporaries, Henry II's outburst on Christmas Day made him an accessory to the murder. The murder of a saint. He has had to pay for it, no less so because the canonisation followed as soon as three years later. I sometimes feel — and the hagiographies confirm this — that much was made of signs which were not actually there. With all due historical consequences.

A new biographical study seems to prove that the shortest period of Thomas' life is covered by the greatest amount of material. Leaving out the pages containing the notes, Frank Barlow's *Thomas Becket* numbers 275 large pages. Of these, 212 deal with the final nine years, from the appointment in Canterbury in 1162 to Thomas' death. And of those 212 pages, nearly eighty deal with the final year. These discrepancies are by no means the result of the author's research. The magnitude of the preliminary work he did is indeed hard to imagine. The explanation has to be sought elsewhere: Thomas' rise to popularity among his contemporaries was so sudden that the earlier periods of his life were already nearly impossible to retrieve. But there is another possible explanation: of the life of Saint Thomas — and it is with him we are concerned, not with Thomas Becket — it was only the period after 1162, and of that only the final part (since as an exile the bishop was not without episcopal fellow-sufferers) that ever really mattered. Thomas Becket was merely one of the king's chancellors; by the king's favour he became Archbishop, merely one among many, as it seemed. His banishment was the first sign of a more exceptional position. It was only after the murder and its interpretation, and more especially its consequences, that Thomas became uniquely and totally exceptional. What strikes me about Barlow's biography is that he seems to share the point of view of Thomas' contemporaries: as the book progresses, it becomes more and more inspired. The final chapters are really masterful, which does not,

by the way, preclude a rather reticent assessment of Thomas Becket's personality. The author may think he is impartial, his style betrays that he has not been able to maintain his neutral stance, although I do want to leave room for the possibility that he was carried away more by the admittedly highly dramatic events than by their protagonist. It is hard to imagine a story that is more beautiful to retell (if only for the amazing wealth of detail we possess) than that of the final days of December 1171 in Canterbury. Eliot too understood that.

To put it somewhat paradoxically: history has made it impossible for the historian to write a complete book about Thomas Becket. The saint seems to have obscured the rest, or at least made it mostly invisible. What does that make Barlow's biography? Mainly the accurate historical reconstruction of a conflict between a bishop and a king, and a description of everyone who was a party to it or otherwise involved in it. More emphatically: the conflict is more interesting than its protagonist. In this biography, John of Salisbury comes out as a far more intriguing and fascinating character than Becket, who is and always will be a church official. He does not stir the imagination, which is really not something Barlow can be held responsible for. (The great medievalist R.W. Southern recently published an extensive biographical study of Robert Grosseteste, a very eccentric philosopher and bishop, who lived a century after Becket. The book is subtitled 'The Growth of an English Mind in Medieval Europe'. The reader becomes a breathless participant in this growth, also because Grosseteste takes control of one's imagination). It is sometimes extremely tempting to call Thomas colourless. Until the moment everything around him suddenly turned red.

Barlow made a careful study of the earliest biographies, especially, of course, with regard to the final part of Becket's life. He frequently quotes or paraphrases from them. However, it is often not entirely clear when we are listening to the modern historian or to his twelfth-century colleague, or, at least, who is providing the facts or the interpretation of the facts. This has a curious effect: the literary genre of the old biography is taking control of the modern one. There are quite a few instances where an account is presented as factual and historical, while we are really dealing with the traditional elements of hagiography. There is no doubt that Barlow

knows the genres and their various rules. But he seems to handle the material too easily to distinguish entirely between earlier texts or ideas and modern views and findings. This does result in a life of Becket that has more variety and relief than it could ever have had without the interpretations of the older sources.

I will not be the only one who, after reading this book, feels he has gained a thorough knowledge of the earlier biographies, and has thereby come to see Becket more as the traditional model than as an individual, in spite of the author's many corrections. For all his scholarship and caution, he has not been able to prevent Becket in his book from becoming what he inevitably had to become. For me that is: a fascinating phenomenon of sainthood, but not an interesting historical figure (although he was surrounded by a host of interesting people, who make an important contribution to this biography).

History gave the author every opportunity to write an impressive historical work; the protagonist deprived him of the possibility to achieve the final goal, a biography. But there is one thing that Frank Barlow has left no doubt about — as he indicates repeatedly in his book: Thomas' martyrdom was the end of his life, but the beginning of his history. Nabokov's method of describing Gogol's life in reverse would have resulted in a marvellous book in Thomas' case: from total completeness about hardly anything to nothingness. After all, hardly anything happened in Thomas' life, which did not stop anyone from interpreting the little that did happen. Historical reality adds up to a murder in a cathedral. The elevation to the traditional designation is the result of tradition! What we have is a marvellous and unsurpassed play, the creation of the interpreters, the recognisers, who thought that history repeated itself before their very eyes. Or rather: was repeated.

Translated by Odin Dekkers

Frank Barlow, *Thomas Beckett*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986.