

How could the Foundations of the English Church Withstand the Bang that Never Was?

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We shall probably never know whether the Gunpowder Plot was primarily the work of Roman Catholic extremists or Sir Robert Cecil's securocrats. But its discovery in November 1605, and the new oath of allegiance that was subsequently devised, certainly posed a serious threat to the divided Church of England, Catholic and Reformed. Robert Persons, exiled leader of the English Jesuits, and John Donne, apprentice Protestant apologist, confronted this threat in revealingly different ways. Persons believed that the oath would cut off English Christians from the roots of their faith, while Donne feared that blood would be shed over the splitting of hairs, and the nation would be even more deeply divided.

The battle of books over the new oath of allegiance constitutes, thus, a late development in the politicization of the discourse of martyrdom.¹ It was once thought that Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* was a nation-building exercise, but few historians now take seriously William Haller's compelling thesis of Foxe's design to fashion an 'elect nation'. He was, it seems, primarily concerned to witness to the truth of Reformed doctrine (see Sullivan 164). Yet at the beginning of the reign of James I, the definition of martyrdom played an important part in the debates about the religious identity of the English nation. It was indeed Foxe who started that debate, because the *Actes and Monuments*, to some minds at least, substituted one set of English martyrs for another: that was the implication of the mock-calendar of saints affixed to later versions of the work and in particular the 1596 edition, which prompted a fierce controversy at the end of the Elizabethan era. As first Robert Persons repudiated Foxe's martyrs as pseudo-martyrs, and then John Donne disqualified contemporary Catholic victims from martyr status, martyrdom became a touchstone of the faith of the English people. Those whom the English embraced as true martyrs would represent English

S.A. *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 15 (2005): 1-??

spirituality. Nor was this simply a case of choosing exclusively between Rome and Canterbury; the Jacobean debate over pseudo-martyrs was inflected by the urgent question of religious toleration as people asked what kind of accommodation each could make for the other without the shedding of blood (see Coffey 117–21).

The story begins with the publication, in 1598, of a work by a Puritan aristocrat, Sir Francis Hastings (brother of one of the leading contenders for the royal succession), entitled *A Watch-word to all religious, and true-hearted English-men*, warning against Catholics as traitors at heart. Robert Persons responded vigorously in a series of pamphlets that drew the redoubtable Matthew Sutcliffe, Dean of Exeter, into the fray.² This ‘Watchword controversy’ bubbled away for several years until it was overtaken by the Gunpowder Plot and its aftermath. Meanwhile, Persons tried a different tack by writing his lengthiest work, the three-volume *Treatise of Three Conversions from Paganisme to Christian Religion*, which was published just as James acceded to the throne, prompting Persons to write a hurried new preface. The gist of the treatise was that Catholics had every right to regard themselves as true English Christians and loyal subjects to the new king. To prove this, Persons adopted two strategies: he sought to establish Canterbury’s inalienable indebtedness to Rome, and to demolish Foxe’s monument to the English Protestant martyrs, dominated as it was by the Marian persecution. Foxe was obscuring what to Persons was the true line of testimony to English Christianity. In other words, Persons turned from mauling the fox-cub, Hastings (that was what he habitually called him), to hunting the Foxe himself.

Then came the Gunpowder Plot, and Persons had to address himself to the new oath of allegiance. This brought a new turn to the debate over pseudo-martyrdom because it required English Catholics to denounce as heresy the doctrine of the papal deposing power (see Clancy 87–96, Lock). Not all Catholics upheld the papal deposing power, nor did their profession require it. But to denounce it as heresy was to allow to the Protestant Scot sitting on the English throne a jurisdiction that belonged only to the pope. Neither the pope himself, Paul V, nor Cardinal Bellarmine in his official judgement on the matter, would condone it (Brodrick 2: 180–224), and when James VI and I appealed, anonymously and ineffectually, to his brother princes of Europe in his ludicrously entitled *Triplici nodo, triplici cuneus* (1607/8), he was soundly taken to task by Robert Persons in *The Judgment of a Catholicke English-man* (1608). As things

now stood, it seemed obligatory for English Catholics, if pressed, to refuse the oath and die a martyr's death. This was the cue for John Donne to write his *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610), arguing that Catholics could swear the oath without betraying their consciences. Cynical critics read this admittedly unreadable work as an opportunistic career move or as a futile attempt to heal the self-division in the apostate's own seared soul (e.g. Carey 31–34; cf. Oliver 171–80 and David Edwards 183). Or it may be that Donne genuinely abhorred the prospect of a nation once more divided by bloody martyrdom. At all events, by the time the book was published Robert Persons himself had died piously in Rome amid the sanctity of holy week (Francis Edwards 390–95), the martyr, as it was later said, not of a moment but a lifetime (Ribadeneira 725), and there, in effect, the matter rested.

If then, the underlying question, for Catholics, was: 'Is the English church's dependence on Rome so essential to its being that any threat to papal supremacy is cause for martyrdom?', we have two eminent controversialists offering quite opposing versions of the foundations on which the Church in England stands. The contrast between them is fascinating from a rhetorical standpoint because Persons was the most feared and effective English controversialist of his day, writing at the height of his powers (see Carrafiello, Parish, Rowse), whereas Donne, the unorthodox poet and satirist, had as yet published little of note and was a long way from the magisterial Dean of St Paul's Cathedral whose sermons were to become so celebrated (Bald 200–36, Shell 121). But it is also instructive because it registers a late stage in the understanding of martyrdom as a weapon in confessional conflict. To press your fellow-countrymen to the point of death over a dispute of religious doctrine or ecclesiastical jurisdiction was becoming less and less acceptable, and in their own ways Persons and Donne were both attempting to come to terms with the reality of religious pluralism. They shared a concern for the welfare of English Catholics, although Persons's was more pastoral, Donne's more political, and ultimately they appealed to the Church Fathers, with this crucial difference: that Persons's method was historiographical where Donne's was forensic.

It is at the beginning of Part Two of the *Treatise of Three Conversions* that Persons articulates most clearly his understanding of the importance of papal supremacy. In Part One, which occupies the first half of Volume One, he has given the historical evidence for the role of the papacy in planting Christianity in England; in Part Three, which fills Volumes Two and Three, he is to rebut the

claims of Foxe's pseudo-martyrs according to the mock calendar, month by month. But here he insists that historical continuity or, as he calls it, ecclesiastical succession, is the ultimate arbiter of truth. He makes his appeal to St Augustine:

The sentence of the philosopher is knowne to all: *that contraries laid together do giue light the one to the other*, as white and blacke proposed in one table, do make each colour more cleere, distinct and liuely in it selfe. For which respect we hauing laid open before in the first part of this discourse the knowne manifest succession of Christian Religion in our Ile of England, first from the Apostles times among the Britans for the first six ages after Christ: and then againe among the English men for 9. ages more since their first conuersion from paganisme: we are now to examine, what manner of visible succession *John Fox* doth bring vs forth of his Church, that is to say, of the protestants of his religion (for the said fiftene hundred yeares or fiftene ages) if any such be. For that by this comparison of the one with the other, the nature & condition of both Churches will be vnderstood. But yet first, I meane to note by the way certaine principall points to be considered for better vnderstanding of all that is to be handled in this Chapter, or about this whole matter of Ecclesiasticall succession.

Wherof the first may be that, which I haue touched in the end of the former Chapter, to witt of how great importance this point is (I meane the succession & continuation of teachers, the one conforme to the other in matter of beleefe and religion) for cleere demonstration of truth in matters of controuersy, and for stayng any discreet mans iudgment from wauering hither and thither in his beleefe, according to that which holy *Saint Augustine* said of himselfe, & felt in himselfe. For that considering the great diuersity of sects, that swarmed in his time, and euery one pretending truth, antiquity, purity, and authoritie of scriptures for their error, & himselfe also hauing byn misled by one of these sects for many yeares: was brought by God at length, to be a true Catholike, and to feele in himselfe the force of this visible succession of the Catholike Church. And therefore wryting against one, that in time past had byn his maister as head of the former sect, wherin he had

liued, to witt *Faustus Manichaeus*, after diuers other reasons alleaged of his confidence & assurance of truth in the Cath. Church, & of his firme resolution to dy and liue in the same, he bringeth for his last and strongest reason the perpetuall succession of Bishops in the same Church and especially in the Church of Rome: *Tenet me in Ecclesia* (saith he) *ab ipsa Petri sede, vsque ad praesentem episcopatum, successio sacerdotum, &c.* I am held in this Church (against all yow sectaries) by the succession of Priests & Bishops, that haue come downe euen from the first seat of *Saint Peter* the Apostle, to the present Bishop of Rome (*Anastasius*) that holdeth the Seate at this day, &c. (*A Treatise of Three Conversions* 1: 276–78)

This is a standard argument about the determination of Catholic truth, but its interest for us lies in Persons's rhetorical deployment. It is offered parenthetically: 'I meane to note by the way certaine principall points'. It is a theoretical underpinning to the main argument, the comparison of the visible succession of John Foxe's church with that of the Roman church. Now anyone can see that this comparison is going to be no contest, because Foxe stands—as Donne will do—on the invisible succession, the inheritance (intangible and only comprehensible by the enlightened intellect) of the faith once given. Persons, by foregrounding the historical comparison, first insinuates the incontestability of the Augustinian argument about 'cleere demonstration of truth in matters of controuersy' from succession. Other theological or martyrological evidence, such as Foxe or Donne might proffer, is ignored.

Visible succession appears as an exceedingly attractive alternative to the spectre of sectarian confusion that Persons so persuasively invokes in this passage. It is instructive to recognize here an echo from the well-known Preface to *The First Booke of the Christian Exercise, appertayning to Resolution* (1582), published twenty years before but still being frequently reprinted, both in the Catholic and Protestant versions.³ There, Persons had offered one simple guide to Christian life and practice amid the turmoil of religious controversy, a call to resolution in the serious service of God, structured, to be sure, on the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* but appealing to incontrovertible principles common to all Christian confession.

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But the principall cause and reason was, to the ende our countrye men might have some one sufficient direction for matters of life and spirit, among so manye bookes of controversies as have ben writen, and are in writinge dailye. The whiche bookes, albeit in thes our troublesome and quarrelous times be necessarie for defence of our faithe, againste so manye seditious innovations, as now are attempted: yet helpe they litle oftentimes to good lyfe, but rather do fill the heades of men with a spirite of contradiction and contention, that for the most parte hindereth devotion, which devotion is nothinge els, but a quiet and peaceble state of the sowle, endewed with a joyful promptnes to the diligent execution of all thinges that appartayne to the honour of God. ('To the Christian Reader Towchinge Two Editions of this Booke', *The Christian Directory* 5)

At first glance the echo, in 1603, might seem to confirm the suspicions of those who had seen Persons's *Book of Resolution* (as it was usually called) as a scheme to seduce Protestants under cover of an irenic call to holiness. For in the *Treatise of Three Conversions*, the way out of bewilderment is the uncompromising single path of episcopal succession rather than a corridor accessible from every room in the house of the Lord (as *The Book of Resolution* seems to promise). But there is no real contradiction: for Persons, all roads lead to Rome; as Polonius would say, whether it is historical-geographical, geographical-ecclesiastical, moral-pastoral, pastoral-logical, logical-philosophical, spiritual, liturgical or psychological, Rome is your very place. And so, to question the papal supremacy is to break the unity of the church and undermine its foundations, weakening its resistance to heresy and schism..

Not so John Donne. For him, that particular centre no longer holds. Whatever its role in the past for guaranteeing orthodoxy, Rome's preoccupation with privilege has meant that it has effectively abandoned the faith of the Fathers; it is not so much that oath-takers would betray Rome as that Rome has betrayed the faith and the faithful. All the 'excrescences' of the Roman ecclesiastical order—the immunities, the hierarchical dispositions, the penances, observances and pettinesses—have obscured the patristic foundations. This sense of proportion and priorities emerges with peculiar force in his long chapter on canon law, which begins:

To this *spirituall Prince*, of whom we spoke in the former Chapter, the huge and vast bookes of the *Canon law*, serve for his *Guarde*. For they are great bodies loaded with divers weapons of *Excommunications*, *Anathems*, and *Interdicts*, but are seldom drawn to any presse or close fight. And as with *temporall Princes*, the danger is come very neere his person, if the remedie lie in his *guard*, so is also this *spirituall Prince* brought to a neere exigent, if his title to depose Princes must be defended by the *Canons*. For, in this *spirituall warre* which the *Reformed Churches* under the conduct of the *Holy Ghost*, have undertaken against *Rome*, not to destroy her, but to reduce her to that obedience, from which at first she unadvisedly strayed, but now stubbornly rebels against it, the *Canon law* serves rather to stoppe a breach, into which men use to cast as wel straw and Feathers, as Timber and Stone, then to maintain a fight and battell. (*Pseudo-Martyr*, chapter 10.1, ed. Anthony Raspa 190)

The argument implies that canon law is devised to deal with particular exigencies. Because of its occasional origin, it is not a good guide for deriving absolute principles of the faith, especially in the context of martyrdom, which raises the bar so high. Canon law, he argues, is like so much straw or feathers, useful to stop a gap but not to build a fire under a stake. The image is a striking one, all the more so because it attracts no gloss from Donne's meticulous modern editor, Anthony Raspa. There is presumably an allusion to the scriptural passage (commonly used as a source-text for the disputed doctrine of purgatory) about works being tried by fire, some proving to be mere hay and stubble (1 Cor. 3: 12–16). If so, Donne seems to be suggesting that canon law is not a reliable foundation for a life of virtue pleasing to God, let alone the crown of martyrdom. But one might also cite, as Persons does in his *Treatise of Three Conversions*, the view of the Magdeburg Centurions (such an important group of writers in the Protestant martyrological tradition) that much of the writings of the Fathers—anything, in other words, that is incompatible with Protestant purity of doctrine—is so much straw and stubble.⁴ Donne, who stands firmly if not fanatically by the Fathers, shifts the target of the metaphor. In so doing, and in developing the argument about the circumstantiatedness of canon law, he comes perilously close to agreement with another work of Persons, the *Answer to Coke* (1606), in which

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Persons submits that all local English restrictions to or exemptions from papal jurisdiction, temporal or spiritual, have no binding force on the conscience as general principles, because they arise from particular circumstances.

Persons, in his *Answer to Coke*, uses this line of reasoning to insist that papal supremacy is *de iure* intact. Using the argument from history, he repudiates any English claim to royal ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and so implies that the new oath of allegiance is without secure foundation. Donne, on the other hand, seems to be appealing to the legal principle of equity. He may even be implying an analogy with the distinction between natural law and positive law. Natural law is binding on all people everywhere; positive law is governed by particular jurisdiction. Just so, the scriptural and patristic foundations of the faith are grounds for martyrdom; canon law and related doctrines such as the papal deposing power are matters for dispute rather than conscience. At any rate, Donne's method in this chapter is to fight straw with straw. If men must die for the letter of the law, let the letter of the law, or some equivalent lawyerly finesse, save them. Hence the extraordinary argument here set down, one that so violates our sense of equity that I am not entirely sure I have interpreted the paragraph correctly:

In the *Common Extravagants*, that which they call *unam Sanctam*, made by *Boniface* the eight, Anno 1302. hath the greatest force of all: both because it intends to *prove* and to *Decree* a certaine proposition, *That it is of the necessitie of Salvation to be subject to the Pope*, and also because it determines it with Essentiall and formall words, belonging to a *Decree*, *Declaramus*, *Definimus*, *Pronunciamus*. And though in the body and passage of the *Decree*, there are sometimes arrogations of Secular *Jurisdiction*, by way of *argument*, and *conveniencie*, and *Probable consequence*; yet is there nothing drawne into the *definition*, and *Decree*, and thereby obligatorily cast upon our Consciences, but onely this, *That a Subjection to the Pope is, of the necessitie of Salvation*. For, sayes the glosse, *it was the intention of the Pope in this Decretall, to bring reasons, examples, and authorities, to prove that Conclusion*. So that, as if it pleased him to have said so *definitively*, without arguing the case, the *Decretall* had beene as perfit and binding, as it is after all his reasons, and argumentation: so doe not

his Reasons bind our reason, or our faith, being no part of the *Definition*, but leave us to our liberty, for all but the *Definition* it selfe. (*Pseudo-Martyr*; chapter 10.2, ed. Anthony Raspa 222)

One might analyse the logic thus: if obedience to the papal supremacy as a prerequisite of salvation were, like natural law, universally binding and self-evident (and thus catholic in the Vincentian sense), it would not need supporting argument.⁵ In the decretal under discussion, supporting arguments are proffered. Ergo, obedience to the pope is not a matter of conscience. Therefore it does not compel martyrdom; and therefore, dear fellow-countrymen, take the oath with an easy conscience and die in your beds. Here is equity with a vengeance, sophistry offered as an apt response to canon law pedantry. And in the following paragraph, Donne adduces several patristic authorities to demonstrate that the verse in scripture referring to the two swords does not *of necessity* justify papal temporal power. It is noteworthy that he does not appeal to the weight or majority of patristic authorities but is content to find any instance that will support his case.

In all this close fighting, as elsewhere in *Pseudo-Martyr*, Donne seeks legal loopholes to avert martyrdom. The clinching argument of his work as a whole concerns the heretical status of the papal deposing power. Donne will not go so far as to insist that the prospective Catholic oath-taker should actually believe the doctrine to be heretical. All he asks is that we accept that there is no convincing or absolutely incontrovertible proof that the doctrine is not heretical. And if there is not, why would the God who searches the hearts and reins consign an otherwise loyal and devout Catholic, who took the oath, to eternal damnation? For there is no other reason to embrace judicial murder willingly.

And so Donne gets the Catholic collaborator off on a technicality. What might seem to us legal hair-splitting with God did not seem inappropriate to Donne's lawyerly mind. Jeremy Maule, in one of his last essays, skilfully demonstrates just such an attitude from one of Donne's sonnets: there is nothing arrogant or undignified about pitting his legal mind against God, 'pleading as eloquently as he can the impossible claims of humanity before a divine judge' (36). It is not clear, in the case of *Pseudo-Martyr*, whether equity is served, sweet reasonableness, realpolitik, or just the state propaganda machine. Donne certainly had a better trained legal mind than Persons, whose *Answer to Coke* was contemptuously ignored by the Attorney-General. All the same, Persons, I would maintain, was by far the more compelling controversialist. Donne in effect chose

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the winning side, at least for the next few centuries. The papal deposing power attracted few martyrs and the vast majority of educated English men and women settled for a church that held to a good proportion of what the Fathers wrote, and cobbled together a claim—not particularly Foxian, and not particularly convincing—to a visible succession. Persons's foxhunt kept the field clear, at least, for the Catholic minority to honour their own martyrs without intimidation. And Donne ascended the pulpit of St Paul's, preaching passionately about good citizenship and pious death.

NOTES

1. For a magisterial survey of the uses of martyrdom in religious controversy in early modern England, see Freeman. I am indebted to Dr Freeman for giving me a preview of his work, and for assistance and advice over several years.
2. For a full bibliographical account of the controversy, see Milward, *Elizabethan* 138–45 and *Jacobean* 76–82. On the oath of allegiance, see Milward *Jacobean* 89–94 and 109–14. Francis Hastings's brother was Henry Hastings, third Earl of Huntingdon (1535–95), heir presumptive to the crown. Sutcliffe was appointed rector of Chelsea College, James's attempt to counter the effectiveness of Catholic religious propaganda (see Kennedy).
3. This work, which was revised extensively in 1585 and again in 1607, is generally known as *The Christian Directory*, although Persons's contemporaries called it *The Book of Resolution*.
4. *A Treatise of Three Conversions* 1: 125–26, referring to the *Historia ecclesiastica* of Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–1575), commonly known as the *Magdeburg Centuries*.
5. The so-called Vincentian canon of Catholic truth, 'quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est' ('what has been believed everywhere, always and by all'), is found in chapter 2 of the *Commonitoria* of St Vincent of Lérins, the fifth century theologian.

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