The Becket Dispute

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'The Becket Dispute' (or 'Controversy') refers to the quarrel between Henry II and Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, which dominated English ecclesiastical politics in the 1160s. It was a conflict with multiple dimensions: a clash of Church and State; a prolonged struggle between two prominent individuals; a close friendship turned sour. Although the dispute itself produced a substantial number of sources, the shocking nature of Becket's death in 1170 prompted the creation of many more. The amount and detail of this surviving material – and the insights it gives into the personalities involved – make it a particularly immediate and appealing episode. In contrast, the values underlying the conflict seem rather alien today: it concerns the defence of autocratic power on the one hand and ecclesiastical privilege on the other. The Becket Dispute both brings us closer to the twelfth century and distances us from it.

A late twelfth-century image of the murder (MS available in the British Library)

Most scholarship on the Becket Dispute falls into two camps: those who view the quarrel from a secular perspective and are highly critical of Becket, such as W.L. Warren and Frank Barlow, and those who place the conflict in its wider ecclesiastical context and are much more sympathetic to Becket's actions, such as Anne Duggan and Beryl Smalley.[1] Historical debate tends to focus on three main points in the dispute: Becket's changing loyalties following his appointment as archbishop in 1162; the issuing of the Constitutions of Clarendon in 1164; and the events that led directly to Becket's murder in 1170.

The appointment of Becket as archbishop in 1162 disappointed many contemporaries. Becket was Chancellor of England, a close friend of the king, and a conspicuous consumer of luxury – he was a courtier not a churchman. Indeed, he wasn't even a priest (he was ordained the evening before his consecration as archbishop). Yet Becket's acceptance of this office and its responsibilities seems to have caused a crisis of conscience. He subsequently resigned the chancellorship and re-aligned his interests with those of the Church. This sea-change in Becket's character is one of the most obscure and intriguing aspects of the conflict. Viewed through a secular perspective, this appears as a personal betrayal of Henry, the man who installed him. Seen through ecclesiastical eyes, it is the fulfilment of a vow made to the Church by Becket on his consecration. Becket's behaviour confused and frustrated his contemporaries so it is little wonder historians are equally divided.

Although the personal nature of the dispute is probably its most engaging feature, the debate over the jurisdiction of Church and State is its most important – and is encapsulated in the Constitutions of Clarendon. The Constitutions were issued by Henry II in 1164 and encroached on various ecclesiastical privileges, including the 'benefit of clergy' and the freedom of churchmen to appeal to Rome. Much of the discussion has focused on Henry's claim that the

Constitutions re-established 'ancient customs' of English law – although few historians fully accept this today. An important factor underlying this debate is the difficulty of assessing legal continuity or innovation in this period: as Anne Duggan reminds us, both English and canon law developed significantly during the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.[2] We also need to be wary of characterising those involved in the dispute simply as pro-Church or pro-State. Becket's actions were controversial and he alienated various members of the English episcopate.[3] Divisions among the bishops, which began at Clarendon, helped to intensify the conflict and to shape its later stages.

In the late 1160s, the focus of the dispute shifted from disagreements over secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction to infringements of the rights of the archbishopric of Canterbury within the English Church. This included the right to preside over the coronation of Henry the Young King, an event that took place in June 1170 – in contravention of a papal prohibition and while Becket was in exile on the Continent. The threat of an interdict brought Henry and Becket to the negotiating table, and Becket was allowed to return to England. He proceeded to assert his rights as archbishop, including excommunicating those who had participated in the coronation. Reports of Becket's provocative actions soon reached Henry and he cried out for action. Four barons took it upon themselves to respond. On 29 December 1170, they murdered Becket in the consecrated space of Canterbury Cathedral. It was a scandalous breach of sanctuary and horrified Christians throughout Europe. Becket's martyrdom both exonerated his actions and pushed the dispute in the Church's favour. As a result, scholars have debated whether this was the only way in which the dispute could have ended and the extent to which Becket himself invited this outcome.

Although these debates are important, they are – for the time being – largely exhausted. Recent scholarship has focused on Becket's cultural legacy and has led to renewed analysis of the saints' lives and miracle collections that document the growth of his cult. Studies by Michael Staunton and Rachel Koopmans have underlined the complexity of these sources and cast new light on the construction of Becket and his role in the dispute after his death.[4] Both provide useful context for the tail-end of the conflict and the pressures that dictated Henry's actions in the early 1170s.

Designing enquiries to make students think about the Becket Dispute

Dr Birkett tells us that 'Becket's behaviour confused and frustrated his contemporaries so it is little wonder historians are equally divided.' So it might be worth throwing your students in at the deep end: this is a problem which we cannot solve, and which contemporaries could not either. They might get to the heart of this type of interpretations enquiry: *How does the benefit of hindsight help us to understand the Becket Dispute?* This question might stand in apposition to that implied by the work of Staunton and Koopmans. At least some of those constructing versions of Becket's death were historians, and some of them were working with the assumption that Becket's martyrdom was (not posthumous, but nearly) validation for his actions during the dispute: *What factors have determined how different ages have interpreted Becket?* This could be interwoven with the question which was until recently dominant in the historiography: *Why do some historians view the Becket Dispute as secular, and others as ecclesisatial?*

The Editors

Further reading

Frank Barlow's entry on Becket in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) provides an authoritative, but succinct, summary of Becket's life. Anne Duggan's (2004) readable biography, *Thomas Becket* (London: Arnold), offers an in-depth and more sympathetic assessment which places Becket firmly in the context of twelfth-century England and Europe. Finally, Michael Staunton's (2001) excellent sourcebook, *The Lives of Thomas Becket* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) brings together excerpts from a variety of sources to tell Becket's story. These extracts provide useful and often overlapping summaries of episodes in Becket's life, which, read alongside each other, prompt detailed source analysis.

REFERENCES

[1] Barlow, F. (1986) *Thomas Becket*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; Warren, W.L. (1973) *Henry II*, London: Eyre Methuen, pp.399-403, 447-555; Duggan, A. (2004) *Thomas Becket*, London: Arnold; Smalley, B. (1973) *The Becket Conflict and the Schools*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell. For historiography up to 1970 see Jones T.M. (ed.) (1970) *The Becket Controversy*, New York: Wiley; and Alexander, J.W. (1969) 'The Becket Controversy in Recent Historiography', in *Journal of British Studies* 9.2, pp. 1-26.

[2] Duggan, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

[3] See the contemporary critiques of Becket in Staunton M. (ed. and trans. 2001) *The Lives of Thomas Becket*, Manchester: Manchester, pp. 220-45.

[4] Staunton, M. (2006) *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press; Koopmans, R. (2011) *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, pp. 139-200.

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