

# John Foxe and the True, Universal, English Church

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In *Acts and Monuments*, often called the *Book of Martyrs*, John Foxe linked sixteenth-century English martyrs to the ancient Christian martyrs by paralleling their steadfast faith, their bravery on the days of their execution, and their resistance to enemies of the faith. His purpose was to connect the English Church with the early church and the faithful people of the Old Testament, and thus provide the English Church with a history that reached back to the primitive apostolic church. He also intended to give legitimacy to the English Church by portraying it as part of the true universal church, and thus employed conversion narratives to form a 'great cloud of witnesses'. This paper will show that he did this through the use of legal witnesses, the description of individual personalities that led to the creation of a network of martyrs, and the development of a providential English history.

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With his book *Acts and Monuments of these Latter and Perilous Days*, often called the *Book of Martyrs*, John Foxe aimed to prove that the church that formed in England during the Reformation was a visible manifestation of the invisible Catholic Church that had existed for a millennium, hidden under the tyranny of the Roman Church. To Foxe, this invisible Catholic Church was the true universal church that had been fighting the false church since the birth of the Christian faith. This paper will argue that Foxe employed conversion narratives as evidence to prove that the English Church was part of this true universal church. Through these narratives about faithful English people, Foxe formed a 'great cloud of witnesses' and provided le-

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gitimacy for the church.<sup>1</sup> He used three different strategies to do this: the description of individual personalities that led to the creation of a network of martyrs, legal witness, and the development of a providential English history.

Foxe linked sixteenth-century English martyrs to the ancient Christian martyrs, by paralleling their steadfast faith, their bravery on the days of their execution, and their resistance to enemies of the faith. In doing so, he connected the English Church with both the early church and the faithful people of the Old Testament. It was a deliberate strategy: Foxe intended to provide the English Church with a history and a place in the universal church. As he said in his dedication, he hoped that the book would instruct the English people, since they had ‘been long led in ignorance, and wrapped in blindness for lack [e]specially of God’s word, and partly also for wanting the light of history.’ Then he went on to say:

For as we see what light and profit comes to the Church by histories in old times set forth of the Judges, Kings, Maccabees, and the Acts of the Apostles after Christ’s time: so likewise may it redound to no small use in the Church, to know the acts of Christ’s martyrs now since the time of the apostles.<sup>2</sup>

Linking the ancient and contemporary martyrs together helped Foxe give the English Church a special role in ecclesiastical history. William Haller may have overstated Foxe’s purpose in saying that this special role was meant to make the English people ‘realize their own place as an [elect] nation...[and] the destiny to which they were called’, but it cannot be denied that Foxe did intend to give

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase ‘great cloud of witnesses’ is a Biblical allusion to Hebrews 12:1, where Paul encouraged Christians to look for encouragement to their fellow Christians who had already died. (KJV: ‘Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.’)

<sup>2</sup> John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* or *TAMO* (1583 edition), p. 5, (HRI Online Publications: Sheffield, 2011) <<http://www.johnfoxe.org>> [accessed 1 March 2011].

the English people a particular part to play in the divine plan.<sup>3</sup> His martyrs, who were all part of the heavenly cloud of witnesses by the time the *Acts and Monuments* was published in 1563, were portrayed as the inheritors of the apostolic church. It was then suggested that the readers of *Acts and Monuments* were the inheritors of the martyrs, who should strive to live up to their legacy of faith and so take their place in the true universal church.

Contemporary defenders of the Roman Church found this strategy nothing short of repugnant. This may be because the creation of such a martyrology legitimised the faith of the people who had died in resistance to traditional beliefs. It may also have been because *Acts and Monuments* emulated, and aimed to surpass, stories about the ancient martyrs. Foxe was determined that his work would not be equated with those stories, collections of which were popular in England at the time, because he did not consider them legitimate.<sup>4</sup> He was especially scornful of the most well-known of these collections, *The Golden Legend*, which included stories about the martyrs of the early church. In the preface to the Latin edition of the *Acts and Monuments*, Foxe said that the *Golden Legend* mocked the world, and did not provide a solid ecclesiastical history. He wrote:

As to my book, I make known to all that I have taken pains to put in nothing that is fabulous, or in any way like their golden (say rather leaden) legend. My story is compiled from the archives and registers of the bishops, and partly from the letters of the martyrs themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Foxe aimed to discredit the *Golden Legend* due to its lack of historical evidence, which gave him grounds to challenge the Roman Church's claim to antiquity and catholicity. During the 1560s, several members of the Roman Church responded by trying to discredit Foxe in turn. Elizabethan exile John Martial accused Foxe of lying, and Martial's fellow exile Thomas Harding rejected Foxe's book completely. He called it a 'dunghill of stinking martyrs' during his

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<sup>3</sup> William Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1963), p. 134.

<sup>4</sup> I. Ross Bartlett, 'John Foxe as Hagiographer: The Question Revisited', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 26, No. 4 (Winter, 1995), p. 772.

<sup>5</sup> J. F. Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1940), pp. 133-134.

decade-long debate with John Jewel about the nature of the universal church.<sup>6</sup> Another exile went further still: Thomas Dorman actually used the *Acts and Monuments* as evidence to prove that the members of the English Church were on the wrong side in religion, saying: ‘not the imprisonment of heretics, not the death of your stinking martyrs, not all the *Acts and Monuments* of Foxe [. . .] can prove one protestant to be a good catholic’.<sup>7</sup>

This consistent rejection of Foxe's book shows that the defenders of the Roman Church perceived the *Acts and Monuments* to be dangerous to their traditions and doctrine. Thus, they denied that the men and women whose deaths were portrayed in the book were actually martyrs, and attempted to reduce the dramatic effect of the stories within it. Dorman, for example, said that most of the people who died in England were killed only for heresy and that they died ‘not in such lingering flames as you speak of, but compassed about with bags of gunpowder’.<sup>8</sup> Bags of gunpowder were occasionally placed around the necks of those being executed for heresy in the sixteenth century, because their explosion would kill the sufferers instantly and save them from the slow death of burning alive. However, the martyrs of the early church did not attempt to reduce their suffering. Indeed, any attempt to do so was perceived by sixteenth-century writers as proof that the death was an execution, not a martyrdom.

Part of the resistance by Romanist writers arose from concerns that Foxe was creating a history for the Church of England. The claim to antiquity was one of the Roman Church's greatest advantages, and Foxe's book challenged that claim. This challenge encouraged Thomas Stapleton, another contemporary defender of the Roman Church, to translate the Venerable Bede's *History of the Church of England*. He intended to re-establish the traditional, and in Stapleton's mind correct, interpretation of the English Church's past. In his preface, Stapleton claimed that Foxe's interpretation was not valid in comparison to that of Bede, who had himself witnessed much of what he wrote. Stapleton ignored the claim that much of Foxe's work was also made up of eyewitness accounts, and focused instead on disprov-

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<sup>6</sup> John Martial, *A replie to M. Calphills blasphemous answer* (Louvain, 1566), p. 144; Thomas Harding, *A confutation of a booke intituled An apologie of the Church of England* (Antwerp, 1565), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Dorman, *A disproufe of M. Nouvelles reprove* (Antwerp, 1565), p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

ing Foxe's interpretation of the early history of the English Church, which he considered nothing but an opinion 'lately sprung up'.<sup>9</sup>

It was due to this accusation that the new Church of England did not have a legitimate history that Foxe chose to use interlocking conversion narratives. These narratives showed the unity between the martyrs, the reality of their experiences in contrast to what Foxe considered the fantasy of the medieval saints' lives, and their status as individual witnesses to the faith. They also, through the network of conversion that Foxe extended to include reformers from other countries, contributed to what Richard Bauckham calls Foxe's 'dominating belief in the church as an international body, the company of Christ's elect members in all ages and places'. Placing the English martyrs in a wider Reformation context in this way did not lessen the importance of the martyrs' role in the divine plan, but actually provided a sense of legitimacy by drawing parallels between their own struggles and those of the true church throughout the world. As Bauckham puts it, Foxe 'consistently saw the English persecution as part of the European persecution of the faithful'.<sup>10</sup>

### **Inter-Connected Individuals**

Foxe's 'heroes', as I. Ross Bartlett describes them, were 'the bricks and mortar with which he construct[ed] an image of the church and the lives of faithful Protestants'.<sup>11</sup> Foxe made the stories of sixteenth-century English martyrs as specific as possible, allowing readers to see their individual personalities. Rose Allin showed quiet courage when tormented with a candle flame; Anne Askew was quick-tongued and clever; resourceful Roger Hall managed to get food to his imprisoned sister by sticking loaves of bread on a pole and pushing them through a narrow slot in the prison wall; Cecily Ormes got soot on her hand when she went to the stake and automatically wiped it off on her smock.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Stapleton, *The History of the Church of England* (Antwerp, 1565), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse* (Oxford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978), p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Bartlett, 'John Foxe as Hagiographer', p. 772.

<sup>12</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 edition), pp. 2030, 1260; John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* or TAMO (1570 edition), p. 2208, (HRI Online Publications: Sheffield, 2011), <<http://www.johnfoxe.org>> [accessed 1 March 2011]; Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 Edition), p. 2047.

Including such personal details was a deliberate decision by Foxe. Not only did it heighten the drama of the martyrs' eventual execution, but, as Brad Gregory notes, it also helped to present the martyrs as real people who had real faith.<sup>13</sup> It challenged readers to acknowledge what had happened. In the preface to the Latin version of *Acts and Monuments*, entitled 'To the Persecutors of God's Truth, Commonly Called Papists', Foxe demanded that these persecutors 'see and behold, here present before your eyes, the heaps of slain bodies, of so many men and women [. . .] of all sorts, of all ages, of all degrees'. Papists, Foxe said, might excuse the executions of these people by saying that they were heretics, but 'the best answer to that is the men's lives'.<sup>14</sup> Their faithful, pure lives were as important as their deaths, because they offered proof that the martyrs were not the heretics they were accused of being, but victims of religious persecution who ultimately triumphed against evil by accepting punishment despite being innocent of any crime, just as Christ had triumphed over evil through his crucifixion for sins he had not committed.<sup>15</sup>

In order to establish their faith and virtue, Foxe often followed a particular pattern when providing details of the lives of the martyrs. He described first the martyrs' birth and family, then their childhood and education, their acts of faith, their capture and/or trial, and their execution. Conversion narratives often came into the story. Of first importance was the conversion of the martyr, and how he or she came to be a member of the true church. Secondly, Foxe would often make note of other people converted by the martyr through preaching tours, scholarly writing, personal witness, or through the visitation of the sick and imprisoned.

To Foxe, the conversion of other people after one's own conversion was an important part of establishing the status of the English Church as the true church, partly because one of the signs of the true church was its growth despite persecution.<sup>16</sup> The emphasis that Foxe placed on this network of conversion is clearly shown in the story of the martyr Thomas Bilney, a story which Foxe included in each edition of the *Acts and Monuments*, although particular details

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<sup>13</sup> Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> Mozley, *John Foxe and His Book*, pp. 135, 136.

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Covington, *The Trail of Martyrdom* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2003), p. 156.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, p. 172.

were added or altered in each edition. In similarity with the accounts of the other martyrs, Foxe included specific personal details, notably the fact that Bilney was short.<sup>17</sup> Foxe then went on to talk about Bilney's youth and education.

Bilney had been brought up in the University of Cambridge, having started his education there when he was very young. At first, he was supposed to go into law, but as Foxe put it, he got 'a better schoolmaster, even the holy spirit of Christ', and diverted into studying divinity. Foxe claimed that this was when Bilney's missionary spirit truly started to form: 'as he himself was greatly inflamed with the love of true religion and godliness, even so again was in his heart an incredible desire to allure many unto the same'. He wanted to 'stir up and encourage' people to love both Christ and 'sincere religion', a phrase used by Foxe to emphasize that Bilney was of the true faith, not a member of the old Romanist church. Foxe also pointed out how effective Bilney was: 'Neither were his labours vain, for he converted many of his fellows unto the knowledge of the Gospel, amongst which number was Thomas Arthur, and M. Hugh Latimer'.<sup>18</sup>

In this passage Foxe created a history for his hero, established the intensity of his faith, and pointed out his connection to other giants of the faith, as proof of the fruits of his labour. Foxe then went on to describe Bilney's acts of faith, which included his care for the sick and the imprisoned. He included a letter from Bilney that attributed his conversion to Erasmus' New Testament, and noted that before Bilney's last preaching tour in London he converted Doctor Robert Barnes and John Lambert.<sup>19</sup> Both of these men, as well as the above-mentioned Thomas Arthur and Hugh Latimer, were later martyred. These connections between martyrs in the story of Thomas Bilney weaves not only a narrative of conversion but also a network of conversion, showing the universality of the true church through the gathering of people who were converted to it, and then died for their convictions.

Another hero of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* was John Tewksbury. Foxe reported that Tewksbury was converted by reading Tyn-

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<sup>17</sup> John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* or TAMO (1563 edition), p. 533, (HRI Online Publications: Sheffield, 2011) <<http://www.johnfoxe.org>> [accessed 1 March 2011].

<sup>18</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 edition), p. 513.

<sup>19</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1563 edition), p. 533.

dale's New Testament, and became so knowledgeable that he could debate with Bishop Tunstall and other learned men. He was brought up for examination by the bishops and answered them well, although he did bend under pressure and ultimately recanted. He then saw the martyrdom of Richard Bayfield and repented of that recantation. After that, he started preaching again, was arrested and imprisoned, and was eventually martyred. Foxe counted Tewksbury's preaching and martyrdom as particularly commendable, because he was merely a leather seller.<sup>20</sup> In making note of this Foxe made the English Church universal in another way. By including people of all ages and stations in his book, he allowed each individual believer in England to contribute to it, regardless of their social status.

### Legal Witness

Gretchen Minton suggests that Foxe was more concerned with the martyrs' doctrine than with their specific biographies, but in this she misses the importance of the conversion experiences of the martyrs.<sup>21</sup> Foxe was trying to include the English martyrs in that 'great cloud of witnesses' mentioned in Hebrews 12:1, which would fulfil his goal to make the Church of England part of the true apostolic church.<sup>22</sup> Thus, he also needed to establish the links between the martyrs, and establish their legitimacy. He did this in part through an exploitation of the original meaning of the word 'martyr', which was 'witness'. Foxe deliberately used legal settings and testimonies to prove that both the cause and the martyrs were legitimate.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned before, he recorded that Thomas Bilney converted Robert Barnes, Hugh Latimer, and John Lambert in the 1520s. From the efforts of these men a new generation of martyrs arose, including the well-known figures William Tyndale and John Frith. Tyndale converted Frith, and Frith too later became a martyr. The narratives of these two men provide the clearest example of Foxe's use of legal witness.

Foxe used the interwoven chain of conversion he had established to confirm Tyndale's status as a martyr. He recorded Tyn-

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<sup>20</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 edition), p 1048.

<sup>21</sup> Gretchen Minton, "'The Same Cause and like Quarell": Eusebius, John Foxe, and the Evolution of Ecclesiastical History', *Church History*, 71, No. 4 (December, 2002), p. 721.

<sup>22</sup> See footnote 1, above.

<sup>23</sup> Gretchen Minton, "'The Same Cause and like Quarell", p. 725.

dale's own statements of innocence from any wrongdoing in translation work to discredit claims that Tyndale had misrepresented Biblical text, then presented John Frith as a witness. Frith's testimony not only provided the story of Tyndale's martyrdom, but made the readers of the *Acts and Monuments* witnesses as well. Frith involved them in the story by saying: 'Judge, Christian Reader, whether [Tyndale's] words be not spoken of a faithful clear innocent heart. And as for [Tyndale's] behaviour, [it] is such, that I am sure no man can reprove him of any sin'.<sup>24</sup> Thus, conversion narratives could link the experiences of the martyrs and provide legal legitimacy to their witness. They could help establish what D. R. Woolf calls 'a historical space, a temporal process that ranges back and forth beyond their own lives'; the establishment of which, was something else that distinguished Foxe's work from the medieval saints' lives.<sup>25</sup>

Another benefit of the martyrs' witness is that it could create new conversion narratives. Brad Gregory calls the public execution 'a powerful arena for evangelization', since the sight of people going bravely and patiently to their deaths affected both the authorities and the onlookers. He emphasises that the martyrs were 'exceptional in their behaviour, but not in their beliefs or values', and that was what made a difference for others.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, John Knott says that many of the martyrs in Foxe's narrative do not seem to be 'exceptionally pious or holy', but simply ordinary Christians urging others to do as they have done.<sup>27</sup> This urging was often quite effective. Robert Barnes converted the martyr Richard Bayfield, who helped sustain Tyndale.<sup>28</sup> Joyce Lewes was converted after she witnessed the burning of Laurence Saunders; Agnes Penyfather was converted when she witnessed the burning of Joyce Lewes. Julien Palmer was converted due to the evidence of faith that he saw in the brave death of John Hooper, and John Alcock was inspired to take up the work of Row-

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<sup>24</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 edition), p. 1104.

<sup>25</sup> D.R. Woolf, 'The Rhetoric of Martyrdom: Generic Contradiction and Narrative Strategy in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*', in *The Rhetorics of Life-Writing in Early Modern Europe: Forms of Biography from Cassandra Fedele to Louis XIV*, ed. by Thomas F. Mayer and D. R. Woolf (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 247.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> John Knott, 'John Foxe and the Joy of Suffering', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 27, No. 3 (Autumn, 1996), pp. 728-729.

<sup>28</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 edition), p. 1045.

land Taylor after Taylor's martyrdom, for which Alcock himself was later martyred.<sup>29</sup>

### Providential History

The witness of the martyrs, and their inter-connection, helps make the story of the *Acts and Monuments* one of providential history. Throughout, Foxe was trying to prove that the English martyrs were representatives of the true universal church, and that their sufferings fitted into a providential view of history that would culminate in the triumphant return of Christ. Brad Gregory says that 'the martyrologist's duty was to document the ways in which God's providence had always guided his church, despite Satan's tireless efforts to destroy it', and Foxe certainly managed to accomplish this through his use of conversion narratives.<sup>30</sup>

As Thomas Betteridge notes, English Protestants used the past to provide legitimacy for their religion, for 'the past was both a challenge and a provocation for English Protestants, a land that needed to be colonized and tamed so that it would, or at least could, reflect back at them their own image'.<sup>31</sup> To Betteridge, *Acts and Monuments* went a long way toward helping the English people create a Protestant identity that linked them with both the past and the future. Similarly, Alec Ryrie suggests that Foxe's martyrology created a wider historical context for the English Church, saying that Foxe aimed to 'lay the whole vista of the battle between the true and false churches before [his] readers' and prove that the struggle was not only national and international but spiritual: it was really a battle between Christ and Antichrist. Ryrie notes that martyrdom was an apocalyptic event for early Protestants, and 'to write a martyr narrative was to make an apocalyptic statement'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, p. 97; John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* or *TAMO* (1576 edition), p. 1930, (HRI Online Publications: Sheffield, 2011) <<http://www.johnfoxe.org>> [accessed 1 March 2011]; Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 edition), pp. 2047, 1959; Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1576 edition), p. 1966; Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 edition), 2171.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, p. 172.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Betteridge, *Tudor Histories of the English Reformations, 1530-1583* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 23, 27.

<sup>32</sup>Alec Ryrie, 'The Unsteady Beginnings of English Protestant Martyrology', in *John Foxe: A Historical Perspective*, ed. by David Loades (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 52.

Through conversion narratives, the connections between past and present became very clear. Perhaps the greatest connection is shown in how conversion narratives gradually changed in the *Acts and Monuments*. The earliest converts to reform credited their new belief to the Bible itself, or to Erasmus' translation. Thomas Bilney, for example, identified with St Paul's summary of Christ's earthly purpose in the first chapter of Timothy.<sup>33</sup> William Tyndale was converted by the Bible, and Foxe referred to him as 'the apostle of England', which suggests a direct link to an apostolic past.<sup>34</sup> This changed in the later 1530s and the 1540s, when the conversion of reformers was often attributed to one of the new English giants of the faith, such as Bilney and Tyndale and their converts. Latimer was converted by Bilney; Rowland Taylor and John Bradford were converted by Latimer.<sup>35</sup> Thomas Cranmer convinced Nicholas Ridley; Ridley in turn, while serving as master of Pembroke Hall in Cambridge, influenced John Rogers.<sup>36</sup> It changed again when Foxe started describing the martyrs of 1557 and 1558, for he often attributed those conversions to the godly faith of the Edwardian Church (1547-1553), and the pastors and preachers within it.<sup>37</sup> It is as if Foxe considered 'the great cloud of witnesses' to be fully formed by that point, and that all further martyrs were simply upholding this tradition.

This can be supported through the concept of the two churches: true and false, invisible and visible. John Bale and his successors theorised that these two churches ran parallel throughout history; an idea that became quite popular among Tudor writers. John Philpot, a

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<sup>33</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, (1563 edition), pp. 519-520. The specific verse to which he refers is 1 Timothy 1:15, here quoted in the KJV version: 'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.'

<sup>34</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, (1583 edition), p. 1099.

<sup>35</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, (1583 edition), p. 1032; Eric Josef Carlson, 'Taylor, Rowland (d. 1555)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004), online ed. by Lawrence Goldman, January 2008

<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27079?docPos=1>> [accessed 26 April 2013].; D. Andrew Penny, 'Bradford, John (c.1510-1555)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Matthew and Harrison, online ed. by Goldman <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3175?docPos=1>> [accessed 26 April 2013].

<sup>36</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, (1583 edition), pp. 1688, 1741, 1742, 1754; Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation*, p. 40.

<sup>37</sup> For some examples, see Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583 Edition), pp. 1419, 1545, 1955, 1875, 2052, and 2169.

Marian martyr, assured his interrogators that Protestantism was a thousand years older than its rival, and traced the two churches back to Cain and Abel. As Bernard Capp phrases it, Latimer found “great consolation and comfort” in the firm belief that Christ was about to return “to keep his great parliament to the redress of all things that be amiss”.<sup>38</sup> Conversion narratives in this context were starting points for narratives of faith, showing how the true church had continued to win people throughout the centuries, despite persecution.

Conversion narratives that connected the martyrs to the new Church of England also provided legitimacy for the religious atmosphere that had taken over with the accession of Elizabeth, and in part provided legitimacy for the leaders of that church. As William Haller puts it, the narratives in *Acts and Monuments*:

gave the subjects of Elizabeth a circumstantial report of the very striking events which led to the queen’s accession, featuring the personal stories of many of the participants, including the queen herself [. . .] it supplied a history of the church and the nation, seen by the light of what was taken to be the truth of revelation: that is to say, of a conception of the meaning of history which almost everybody who thought about the matter at all took for granted.<sup>39</sup>

This history of the church and nation that Foxe supplied, and the new interpretation of the ancient history of the church that it included, was significant for Elizabeth’s subjects in several ways. Not only did it tell stories from both the ancient and recent past, but it also included stories of people who were still alive, making it directly and immediately relevant for its audience. Foxe included the conversation narratives of believers who had escaped persecution or went into exile, and a significant number of these people were prominent members of the Elizabethan Church. This included Edwin Sandys, Archbishop of York under Elizabeth, who was converted by the martyr John Bland, his teacher at Cambridge; Edmund Grindal, who was converted by Nicholas Ridley and gave Foxe the idea of the *Acts and Monuments*; and Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury under

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<sup>38</sup> Bernard Capp, ‘The Political Dimension of Apocalyptic Thought’, in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, ed. by C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 94.

<sup>39</sup> Haller, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation*, p. 14.

Elizabeth.<sup>40</sup> Parker's conversion, as Foxe noted, came about through the preaching and examples of Bilney and Latimer, and Parker was licensed to preach by Cranmer. Bilney, Latimer and Cranmer were all martyred. This connection may have encouraged Parker to become actively involved in *Acts and Monuments*: he provided the account of Bilney's execution to Foxe for inclusion.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

John Foxe used conversion narratives to show that the church that formed in England during the Reformation was a visible manifestation of the invisible Catholic Church, which he considered the true universal church. Such narratives created a 'great cloud of witnesses' that contained real individuals, not idealised saints. These individuals were all interconnected, forming a network within themselves that could be linked to the ancient Christian martyrs and connect the English Church with the early church. Thus, it provided the English people with an answer to the Roman Church's eternal question of 'where was your church before Luther?'. In describing the conversion of men who survived the Marian persecution, Foxe was able to include the Elizabethan Church within his network of conversion, and legitimise its leaders as inheritors of the English martyrs. That provided a sense that the story was not over: the universal church was continuing to grow and develop, and the English Church was part of it.

Norskov Olsen notes that to Foxe, the past was not dead, because it contained within it the history of salvation. Temporal events led people to new faith in Christ, and these characters in history provided 'the lesson and the principle of election'.<sup>42</sup> The salvation of individuals, including the moment of their salvation through their conversion, thus became a major part of the on-going process of God's purpose in the world. It showed how the connections between individuals helped fulfil this purpose, and kept the invisible church alive

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<sup>40</sup> Patrick Collinson, 'Sandys, Edwin (1519?-1588)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. by Matthew and Harrison, online ed. by Goldman <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24649?docPos=2>> [accessed 27 May 2011]; Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation*, p. 82.

<sup>41</sup> Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation*, p. 82.

<sup>42</sup> V. Norskov Olsen, *John Foxe and the Elizabethan Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 52.

and healthy despite violence and persecution. As D.R. Woolf puts it, Foxe's book 'sought to demonstrate, life by life, the courage, faith and steadfastness of the ordinary Englishman and woman, down to the lowest of the low, so as to encourage those more fortunate ones who lived on into Elizabeth's time to imitate their godliness'.<sup>43</sup> Through narrating a network of conversion, Foxe recorded the actions of hundreds of individual witnesses to the faith, formed a legend out of his reality, and unified the martyrs and their message, thereby giving them a place in the true universal church.

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<sup>43</sup> Woolf, 'The Rhetoric of Martyrdom', p. 252.