

JOHN FOXE: EXORCIST

by Kathleen R. Sands

Kathleen Sands reveals a little-known episode in the career of the famous English martyrologist.

THE EARLY MODERN English cleric John Foxe (1516-87) is best known today for his influential Protestant martyrology published in English in 1563 as *Acts and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Days*, better known as *The Book of Martyrs*. In his own time, however, Elizabeth I's 'Good Father Foxe' was renowned for much more than just this work. By the 1570s, when he was in his fifties, Foxe had become very famous, a favourite of both the Queen and her principal minister, William Cecil, Lord Burghley. In addition to his masterpiece, other works of Foxe's were widely read at the time, including his acclaimed *Sermon of Christ Crucified*, as well as biographies and editions of the works of Protestant martyrs such as William Tyndale and Robert Barnes. Respected even by conformist churchmen despite his reformist views, he worked with Archbishop of Canterbury Matthew Parker on an edition of the proposals for a revised canon law, as well as an edition of the Anglo-Saxon gospels with a parallel text of the Bishops' Bible. Among the common people, however, Foxe was familiar primarily as a working minister: a well-liked preacher and evangelist, a celebrated prophet, healer, and dispenser of wisdom and charity, a cult figure approached by all sorts of people in need of alms, prayers, and spiritual healing.

This last course of action, spiritual healing, was necessary in cases of extreme mental distress -- cases in which the sufferer felt so mired in sin and guilt that he despaired of his eternal salvation and contemplated suicide. To a society that almost universally subscribed to the idea that Satan was an immediate, palpable, intelligent, and physical presence in the world of men, such extreme mental distress was sometimes perceived as demon possession. The casting out of the possessing demon by a godly man, a practice modelled repeatedly by Christ in the gospel narratives, had been considered a venerable and powerful weapon against evil for centuries. The exorcism of an evil spirit testified to the exorcist's favour in the eyes of God and the status of the exorcist's church as the true church. In post-Reformation England, which was officially hostile to Roman Catholicism but inhabited by a considerable Catholic population, the casting out of demons sometimes surfaced as a means by which the antagonistic religious factions could win converts away from the other side. Foxe's performance of this spiritual service (which the Protestants called 'dispossession' rather than 'exorcism'), was therefore quite in line with his roles as ministering cleric and Protestant propagandist. On Saturday, April 24th, 1574, he performed this service for a law student named Robert Briggs, freeing the latter from the clutches of no less a demon than Satan himself.

Then thirty years old, a responsible husband and father, Briggs was in his final year of a rigorous course of study at the Middle Temple to prepare himself for a career as a barrister. A wealthy and well-educated gentleman, Briggs had been raised in the predominantly Catholic county of Westmorland in the north-west of England, very probably in a Catholic family. Upon his move to London, he had encountered much theological schism, since the membership of the Middle Temple included both Catholics and radical Protestants, and the weekly sermons and theological lectures were delivered by both Calvinists and non-Calvinists. To further exacerbate spiritual confusion, he knew that upon his call to the bar some time during the following year he would be required to swear the oath of supremacy, an act effectively repudiating the Roman Church. No oath, no career. To remain loyal to the faith of his youth would be tantamount to an abdication of his responsibility to support his wife and child.

The profoundly difficult decision to convert to Protestantism prompted Briggs's mental collapse. After attending a theological lecture in December 1573, he became convinced that he was an unregenerate sinner and that he was predestined for damnation. He attempted suicide several times over the next few months, trying to drown, stab, or hang himself, but eventually he became too hallucinatory and depressed even to make these attempts. Bedridden, he lay helpless, his physician diagnosing excessive melancholy and prescribing purges, bleeding, and 'phycic', probably an opiate for temporary sedation.

But these earthly ministrations ultimately proved useless: on April 11th, Easter Sunday, 1574, Satan came for Briggs. He swooned and remained senseless for twelve hours before reviving. This day launched a pattern of events that recurred virtually every day over the next three weeks as Briggs temporarily lost his sight, hearing, and feeling for hours at a time but usually retained his speech, expounding scripture in an astonishing fashion and vigorously engaging Satan in debate. He resisted, with varying degrees of success, Satan's temptations to a multitude of sins, including murder (with the contemplated victim being Lord Burghley) and lust (as personified by a beautiful demoness who sang and danced enticingly while begging Briggs to kiss and possess her). Scores of students and barristers crowded into the bedchamber daily to witness Briggs's astonishing behaviour and to listen to his ongoing arguments with Satan.

One of Briggs's few psychological props during these dark days as he struggled over his attempt at conversion was his faith in, and admiration of, John Foxe. Foxe was Briggs's spiritual ideal, God's mouthpiece, 'a divine, very learned, and a godly man,' 'a mirror of godly living, as a fountain of divinity'. Chaste, Foxe would 'not so much as look over the street upon a harlot'. Humble, Foxe admitted that his own faith was often weak. Dedicated, Foxe persisted in his ministrations to his afflicted parishioners despite Satan's opposition and the sinners' own perverse resistance. Faithful and courageous, Foxe praised God as the 'devil of devils', Satan's goad. In his repeated assaults on Briggs, Satan attempted to blacken Foxe's name through accusations of adultery, witchcraft, treachery, and hypocrisy -- ludicrous, desperate bids to divert Briggs from the trust he placed in his best earthly ally.

At one point, Satan threatened to rip Briggs apart if he refused to tear a particular sermon into pieces. Briggs responded:

Wilt thou so indeed, will thou tear me if I will not tear that sermon which is the godliest sermon that ever was made. Tear me if thou canst, I give thee liberty, but thou canst not except thou have leave, but I will never tear that sermon.

Although the sermon that was the subject of this dispute was not identified, it was probably Foxe's *Sermon of Christ Crucified*. One of London's most popular preachers at the time, Foxe had preached this forceful and moving sermon on Good Friday in 1570 at London's most important pulpit, Saint Paul's Cross, as a repudiation of Pope Pius V, who had a month earlier issued a papal bull excommunicating Elizabeth and absolving her subjects from allegiance. So important were the holy occasion, the political crisis, the pulpit and the preacher that the sermon may have been heard by thousands. By the time of Briggs's affliction in the spring of 1574, the celebrated sermon had already gone through four editions. If Briggs owned any printed sermon, it was likely to be this one. At one point in his ongoing debate with Satan, Briggs used an image of natural law crucified on the same cross as Christ, of two crucifixions in one: 'What care I for the law? I care not for it; I fear it not, for it is cancelled and nailed to the cross.' Briggs's use of this metaphor emphasises Foxe's role as his spiritual mentor, for the image was Foxe's creation, a striking extended metaphor serving as the climax of *Sermon of Christ Crucified*. Foxe invoked the image of a deadly wrestling match between Christ and the personified law as both hanging impaled on the cross of doom, with first one, then the other, gaining ascendancy. Finally, Christ wins, not on His own behalf, but on man's, elevating mercy above justice forever in God's disposition of men's souls:

And now shall you see [the law] hanged up and crucified himself: the merriest and most happiest sight that ever came to man.

Briggs's mental distress apparently constituted the initial stage of his religious conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism. These conversions generally followed a fairly predictable pattern. The sinner began by recognising his inherent depravity, a recognition that overwhelmed him with helplessness and despair, convincing him that he was the chief of sinners and could do nothing to escape damnation. This first stage of regeneration could last months or years; indeed, many initiates never progressed beyond it. Those who did so experienced a second stage: unconditional submission to divine justice, an unquestioning willingness to be damned for the sake of God's glory. The third stage, following naturally upon the unconditional surrender to God, was peace and joy, although, of course, the convert had no assurance of salvation. Religious conversion was thus believed to be initiated through great emotional upheaval, and the primary emotion through which religious feeling manifested itself was fear. Preachers deliberately attempted to induce fear in an effort to initiate the conversion process, persistently reminding each congregant that he or she was a 'worthless worm', a 'filthy nothing', a 'half-devil', a 'guilty wretch sleeping on the brink of hell.' Not surprisingly, groaning, trembling, shaking, swooning, shrieking, falling into trances, and weeping were considered evidence of the operation of divine grace in initiating the conversion process.

Briggs's state of sin manifested itself in his waning Catholicism (perceived as a heresy by the established Church), to which Satan tempted him to return on the grounds that many respected men -- even entire countries, such as France and Italy -- were Catholic. Briggs responded that truth is not necessarily the prerogative of the majority:

If all the world were set against me, I alone grounded upon Christ in his faith do assure myself to have the truth.

Briggs's specific objections to Catholicism appeared in doctrinal arguments, such as his rejection of good works as a means to salvation and his refusal to pray to saints or adore icons. When Satan tempted Briggs to the former, he stoutly resisted: Christ 'never said go to Peter or go to Paul, so wouldst thou have me to draw His glory from Him the Creator and to give it to the creature?' And when tempted to adore icons, he protested: 'I will worship one God in Heaven and none else.' The heresy with which Briggs grappled most extensively, the lie over which he disputed with Satan most protractedly, was the idea that nature, not God, is the prime mover of earthly events. This would become a very common idea among radicals in early modern Europe, espoused by groups such as the Anabaptists and mid-seventeenth-century sects like the Muggletonians, Quakers, Familists, Ranters and Diggers, with well-known exponents including Thomas Hariot, John Bunyan and George Fox (before their conversions), Jacob Boehme, Laurence Clarkson, Lodowick Muggleton, and Gerard Winstanley.

But this concept was anathema to the Calvinist separation of nature and grace, of the natural and the supernatural as oppositions: Heaven versus earth, the finite versus the infinite. Protestants believed that God was the only possible source of goodness and that any attempt by men to do good (as in performing 'good works') was tantamount to a denial of God's sovereignty. Man's unredeemed state, the state of condemnation into which he was born as a 'child of wrath,' was the state of nature. Salvation required man's rebirth from this state of nature into a state of grace, a terrible rebirth during which his naked soul witnessed God's consuming wrath as well as His redemptive love.

This idea of nature as the antithesis to grace was developed at length by Foxe in his Sermon of Christ Crucified. Arguing that God perceives and punishes a man's essential sinfulness even when that man has committed no sin, Foxe compared Him to a hunter, who, 'chasing the wild wolf, and happening upon the wolf's den, findeth there the young wolfings which as yet never did no ravening: yet because of the same nature lurking in them, he useth them no otherwise then he doth the old.' Just so is man, descended from sinful Adam and therefore guilty even before birth, 'execrable unto God, and not only his outward evil doings, but also his inward nature and very person'. God's redemption of the few elect, therefore, is an act of mercy because no man is capable of redeeming himself.

The subordination of the state of grace to the state of nature was heretical not only because it negated God's significance but also because it aggrandised Satan's. Satan, unlike God, was bound by nature: all his feats occurred within the preordained natural framework. Satan could exploit and understand nature to the full, creating wonders to dazzle men's eyes, but he could not violate or transcend it. Thus to assert that 'all things come by nature,' as Satan asserted to Briggs, was to imply that all things come within Satan's power -- to elevate Satan to the status of God. When, therefore, Satan argues to Briggs that all events occur through the natural course of things, Briggs's emerging Calvinism demands that he demur:

Tush, what? By the course of nature? Who causeth all the rain to fall, and springs, and the trees? Little springalls [acorns] to become great oaks? Or who reneweth things but God only? The scriptures teach us plain that He made all things and after[ward] made man to his own similitude and likeness. Of necessity man must be made, and all things else at the beginning saving Himself, which was before all things. For although by God's great providence things seem by course of nature to have continuance and increase, yet they had also a beginning, which could not be by course of kind [nature], but by creation, and that of almighty God only.

Thus Briggs grappled daily with Satan for two weeks in the deadly battle for his immortal soul. The crisis precipitating Foxe's summons to Briggs's bedside occurred on Friday, April 23rd, when Briggs was deprived of all his senses (including speech) throughout the entire day and night. So tormented was he that at 8 o'clock on Saturday, April 24th, his Middle Temple colleagues arrived to find him catatonic and barely breathing. Nineteen hours after the onset of this particular crisis, John Foxe arrived to lead the assembled bystanders in prayer on Briggs's behalf. Foxe first exhorted the bystanders to prepare their minds for prayer by forgiving those who had offended them and repenting of their sins with a sincere intention to amend their lives. Then, the witnesses on their knees and Foxe on his feet, they prayed together for the restoration of Briggs's senses, Foxe leading the prayers with a 'most vehement voice and hearty spirit'. It is significant that Foxe chose to stand, rather than kneel, to address Christ. Foxe and many other radical Protestants (Foxe was a nonconformist in the vestarian controversy) believed that the sacrament of the last supper should be taken sitting, not kneeling, following the example of Christ and his disciples at the last supper. They thought that kneeling was a Popish error introduced centuries earlier and now to be jettisoned as part of the ongoing reform. This suspicion of ceremony stemmed from the belief that it was impossible to capture and pigeonhole the holy spirit in formulaic prayers and rituals. Foxe called himself a 'preaching friar,' emphasising that the business of a cleric was not with rituals such as kneeling but with words, man's only conduit to God's truth.

Emphasising this significance of Words by making a first and separate prayer for the restoration of Briggs's speech alone, Foxe adjured Satan to depart Briggs's body in the name of Christ Jesus. This adjuration demonstrated the power of the five-letter 'weapon' (J-E-S-U-S), for at the moment Foxe pronounced Jesus's name, Briggs recovered his speech and cried out, 'Christ Jesus, magnified and blessed be thy name, at whose name the devil ceaseth to molest thy creature. Blessed and glorified be thy name, who by the humble prayer of thy penitent servants and by the pronouncing of thy most glorious name, Jesus, the devil departeth.' The word is the way of God: 'he hath promised me by his word I shall have a way out' -- a way out of sin and into grace, a way out of death and into life.

Foxe then made a second prayer for the restoration of Briggs's other senses. Following this prayer, Briggs's feeling, hearing, and sight were immediately restored, with bystanders testifying that 'sudden sparks of light flashed' from his eyes, which had formerly been 'as dark and dim to behold as horn'. The assembled company believed a miracle had occurred, and Briggs's words of thanks were 'Glory, praise, and power be unto thee, oh Christ, by whose power the dumb receive their speech, the deaf their hearing, and the blind their sight.'

Unfortunately, Foxe's routing of Satan proved merely temporary. Satan returned the next day and continued to torment Briggs for another week, again depriving him of sight, hearing, and touch; engaging him in theological argument; undermining his faith in God and in his community. But May 1st marked the last battle between the two: Satan inexplicably never returned after this date. Briggs was able to resume his studies, accept his call to the bar, swear the oath of supremacy, and maintain a practice as a London barrister for nearly three decades.

The role of Foxe, one of early modern England's pre-eminent Protestants, in Briggs's story ironically derives from a centuries-old Catholic tradition of the exorcist as holy hero, God's champion. As the embodiment of the Church's power, every exorcist had as his goal the affirmation of that power, the demonstration of God's authority over Satan. The latter's possession of a human being was a desecration of God's image, man, and therefore a mockery of God Himself. In possessing a person, Satan confronted God and challenged His supremacy. Crucial to the moral confrontation between good and evil explicit in an exorcism was the exorcist's compulsion of Satan's submission.

The heroism and sanctity of the exorcist were natural extensions of the idea that exorcism was a sign of the imminent presence of God and that the exorcist acted in imitation of Christ in casting out devils (Luke 11:20 and 23:42-43). Exorcism did not represent merely the salvation of an individual soul: it represented an expansion of God's kingdom and power, a diminution of Satan's. It was a visible symbol of salvation: as Christ saved men's bodies and minds from evil in their earthly life, so He would save their souls in their eternal life. Thus a single person's exorcism was prototypical, a sign of universal salvation. Exorcism forced evil to emerge from the darkness in which it normally operated and to manifest itself in concrete form. It was the single holy act which revealed God to man's earthly eyes.

Reformation notwithstanding, this was the tradition of demon-vanquishing which John Foxe inherited and in which he was compelled to operate. He was judicious, however, in choosing which of his parishioners to assist in this controversial manner. For instance, about two months after the prayer meeting at Briggs's bedside, two adolescent girls purporting to be possessed by demons visited Foxe's house, presumably to request assistance or at least advice in expelling these demons. But Foxe did not perform the same service for the two girls that he had performed for Briggs, and the dispossession of the two girls was executed instead by nonconformist ministers William Long and William Turner on July 16th, 1574. Less than a month later, the girls confessed their fraud to the Archbishop of Canterbury and performed public penance for their deception in front of the congregation at St Paul's Cross. Apparently captivated by the exciting story of the beleaguered Robert Briggs and his champion Foxe, the girls had attempted to whip up an adventure of their own, but Foxe refused to allow himself to be implicated in their fraud.

More than a quarter of a century later and a decade after his death in 1587, Foxe remained the standard by which Protestant dispossessors of demons measured themselves. The best-known of these, the notorious John Darrell (fl. 1596-98) cited Foxe as the most authoritative Protestant cleric on the authenticity of possession and included him in his list of clerics who asserted that casting out devils was natural rather than miraculous. At the same time, however, Darrell attempted to set himself up as surpassing the master's expertise by faulting Foxe's credulity and supposed lack of expertise on the subject, asserting that Foxe 'might easily be deceived therein by Satan' in differentiating true from simulated possession because (Darrell supposed) he had not read

the same authorities on the subject. Darrell's associate, George More, also imputed to Foxe less expertise about possession, asserting that both he and Darrell were divinely inspired to discern possession directly because it had pleased God to imbue them with an immediate spiritual perception of demonic presence. Foxe, on the other hand (More claimed), had been able to discern possession only indirectly, through his intellect.

But Foxe remained champion to the challenge. Five decades later, he had transcended mere heroism in the business of demon possession to achieve the status of Protestant saint. In 1620 William Perry, 'the boy of Bilson', simulated demon possession for the usual adolescent gains of being allowed to stay home from school. Manipulating the expectations of his parents' Protestant associates as well as those of the local Catholic priests who wished to gain glory by exorcising him, Perry played alternately on both sides in order to prolong his game as long as possible. At one point while he was playing on the Catholic side, the attending priest commanded the three demons inhabiting Perry's body to illustrate the spiritual state of those who die in the true faith as good Catholics. Perry complied by lying quietly in bed, his face radiating peace and serenity. By contrast, when asked to demonstrate the dying fate of Protestants, Perry put on a show of violent torment, gnashing his teeth and biting his sheets to simulate, as the priest said, the anguished death throes of the arch-heretics Calvin, Luther and Foxe.

FOR FURTHER READING

Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Clarendon Press, 1997); Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in 17th-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981); Michael MacDonald, *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London: Edward Jorden and the Mary Glover Case* (Tavistock/Routledge, 1991); Kathleen R. Sands, 'The Doctrine of Transubstantiation and the English Protestant Dispossession of Demons,' *History* 85 (July 2000); Kathleen R. Sands, 'Word and Sign in Elizabethan Conflicts With the Devil,' *Albion* 31 (Summer 1999); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Warren W. Wooden, *John Foxe* (Twayne, 1983).

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