The Driving Forces Behind Foxe’s Book of Martyrs

Thesis
We assert that Foxe’s Book of Martyrs was published for these purposes: personal reasons, a tribute to Queen Elizabeth, and to gain support for the Protestant faith and belief.

John Foxe’s Background

John Foxe was born in 1517 in Boston, Lincolnshire, England. In the year of 1538, he began his college career at Brasenose College. Foxe was raised a Catholic, but when he entered Oxford University he quickly became a supporter of the ideas of Martin Luther and Luther’s hatred for the selling of pardons in the Catholic Church. Several other editions of Foxe’s books were published as he added more and more martyrs to his timeline of deaths. John Foxe lived a fairly long life for men at the time, dying at his home in Grub Street, England, on the 18th of April 1587 at the age of seventy.1

His Personal Reasons

While Foxe was attending Oxford, he witnessed the burning of William Cowbridge in September of 1538, for his involvement in the English publication of the Bible. He had many issues with the church under Henry the eighth, feeling that the Catholic religion had gone too far astray from God.

Foxe was elected fellow of Magdalen College in July of 1539 and became one of the college lecturers in logic. He didn’t keep this position for long, because fellows were required to follow priest’s orders and he refused to do so. After leaving Magdalen College he stayed with Hugh Latimer, the Bishop of Worcester and the two became good friends. Thanks to Latimer, Foxe eventually found employment as a tutor in the household of Sir William Lucy in Charlecote, Warwickshire. It was here that he met his wife, Agnes Randall and had six children. He also began translating and publishing the sermons of Martin Luther.2

Foxe and his family fled to Europe when Queen Mary came into reign in 1553, eventually settling in Frankfurt. While they are in Frankfurt, Hugh Latimer is burned at the stake. Foxe loses many of his friends in this same way, and this fuels his desire to write a book against these acts. His first published Book of Martyrs was in Latin in 1559. “The persecution which began in England January 1555 changed Foxe’s agenda. The victims of the persecution were his own friends and colleagues. Not only did they, and the cause for which they had died, urgently required justification, but Foxe became bitterly angry at the infliction of such cruelty so close to home.”3 His Book of Martyrs now became more significant as it would include some of his friends.

His anger against Queen Mary is most greatly shown in Volume 3 of his Book of Martyrs. He dedicated his first English edition to the “most Christian and renowned princess, Queen Elizabeth.”4 Foxe became friends with other scholars who encouraged him to continue with his Book of Martyrs. Foxe returned to England in 1559 after Queen Elizabeth came to the throne because she seemed to be a more tolerant monarch than Queen Mary.2 Foxe published his Book of Martyrs in Latin 1559 and was based largely off of old history books and the deaths that could be found in them—in 1563 he published his first English edition. Foxe traveled around England freely under the reign of Queen Elizabeth, gathering witness accounts, letters, and official records of martyrs. He dedicated his first English edition to the “most Christian and renowned princess, Queen Elizabeth.”5 A second edition is published in 1570 and his book is placed in many churches around England next to the bible, to further help the Protestant religion gain support and followers. Foxe also to support the new Protestant establishment of Elizabeth with the most powerful propaganda he could command.2

“Afore never intended his work to be a particular celebration of England. His later editions devoted much space to the continental martyrs, and his conception of godliness knew no national boundaries or priorities. Nevertheless, it became a foundation stone of English Protestant nationalism, thanks largely to Elizabeth’s longevity, which gave her Settlement a chance to take root.”6

A Tribute to Queen Elizabeth

In 1555, Foxe and his wife fled to Europe when Queen Mary took the throne of England.3 Some of Foxe’s friends that stayed in England were arrested and eventually burned. While in Europe, he became friends with other scholars who encouraged him to continue with his Book of Martyrs. Foxe returned to England in 1559 after Queen Elizabeth came to the throne because she seemed to be a more tolerant monarch than Queen Mary.2 Foxe published his Book of Martyrs in Latin 1559 and was based largely off of old history books and the deaths that could be found in them—in 1563 he published his first English edition. Foxe travelled around England freely under the reign of Queen Elizabeth, gathering witness accounts, letters, and official records of martyrs. He dedicated his first English edition to the “most Christian and renowned princess, Queen Elizabeth.”5 A second edition is published in 1570 and his book is placed in many churches around England next to the bible, to further help the Protestant religion gain support and followers. Foxe also to support the new Protestant establishment of Elizabeth with the most powerful propaganda he could command.2

“Foxe never intended his work to be a particular celebration of England. His later editions devoted much space to the continental martyrs, and his conception of godliness knew no national boundaries or priorities. Nevertheless, it became a foundation stone of English Protestant nationalism, thanks largely to Elizabeth’s longevity, which gave her Settlement a chance to take root.”6

Gaining Support for the Protestant Faith and Belief

John Foxe’s book of martyrs focuses on the problem that the Protestant faith was dealing with during the 15th century. Many scholars believe that his book Acts of Martyrs that John Foxe wrote at the time was actually a protestant propaganda booklet. One of these scholars would be Erwen Nichelson who says “It has been variously characterized as the national protestant paradigm and the ‘key protestant text’, it’s woodsult as the most influential of all English book illustration”4.

The book of martyrs during the 15th century was even passed around many protestant churches and library as a way to put it into the hands of as many people that John Fox could possibly at this time. We can see the effort that John Fox put into getting this message out to the people “On the first of February 1571, the mayor and corporation of London ordered the copy of the book should be placed in Drury’s Court, at the expense of the city, for all to read. Only months later, in April, the Convocation for the southern provinces decreed that every archbishop, archdeacon, cathedral dean, and senior residentiary of every cathedral should have the book and place it in the hall or great chamber of his house for all to read.” This was to make sure that the mass population could read John Foxes work in any village or in any location to better spread the views that John Fox had on the Protestant religion.

Other scholars at the time have even thought that John Fox’s Book of Martyrs was one of the most influential protestant book at the time such as Erwen Nichelson. Erwen goes on to say how this even inspired other Protestant book at the time bringing the Protestant faith to the forefront of the political and social landscape of England at the time.3 David Loades in another book “John Foxe: An Historical Perspective” said it was a great way to use a powerful apologetic weapon against the Catholic’s.4 When Fox’s discussed the martyrs he would focus on the way he represented them to make sure that his arguments were clear and precise so that it would feel more like a historical evaluation rather than a Protestant propaganda.

For Fox this political goal was even one that challenged predetermined notions of Protestantism at the time such as in his book of Martyrs where he says “To many, if not all, of the priory counsellors, this would have added extra incentive for the dissemination of Foxe’s book; they wanted to spur the Queen on to further religious reforms”4. In this way he could advocate for new religious reform across the country with Queen Elizabeth’s help. From this book large steps for Protestant acceptance and later dominance in England began to spread.

Bibliography