



**Postgraduate/Distance Learning
Assignment coversheet & feedback form**

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For completion by the student:		
Student Name: John Cooper-Hammond		
Module code: HPMS7006 Module title: Thomas Becket	Student ID number: 2022129	Educational support needs: No
Module tutor: Janet Burton		
Assignment due date: 10th January 2022		
If your module has multiple submissions please indicate which piece of work this is. 1 st ☒ 2 nd ☐ 3 rd ☐ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ 6 th ☐ Assignment 1: Essay question 5		
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The question posed by Staunton can be answered both yes and no.¹

Whilst much debate concentrates on the inter-relationship between Henry II and Thomas Becket, especially the latter's apparent change from supportive chancellor to champion of the church, historiographically this is probably too narrow a viewpoint. It is necessary to take a longer view of the relationship between the crown and the church in medieval times. As Le Goff notes, ... More often ... society was boiled down to two groups in confrontation - clergy and laity from one point of view...² One of the crucial political issues of the period, and the most contentious, was who decided the issue in a conflict between church and state? The three crucial principals in this matter in England were the Archbishop of Canterbury, The King, and the Pope. The monarch was not the head of the church but was interested and involved in decisions on the appointment of senior roles within it as the holders had both power and holdings, and these were vital resources to the king and these church leaders were involved in guiding the religious, and the legal life of the nation. Prior to Henry's accession there had been disputes between these dominant aspects control over of the country.

It was the custom of the Saxon Kings of England to appoint bishops and archbishops, for example Edgar, on his accession rejected his brother Eadwig's choice of Bishop Brythelm and chose Dunstan to be Archbishop of Canterbury. Edward the Confessor at the end of the Saxon line appointed both Robert of Jumièges and Stigand. William I inherited Stigand but on his death appointed Lanfranc to Canterbury. They jointly sought to maintain the independence of the English Church and Lanfranc sought to reform it along the lines established by Pope Leo IX. His reforms, however, led to a strained relationship between the church and the state, and were only held in position via his personal relationship with William.³ William I's edict of the 1070s is often seen as the foundation of spiritual courts in England, however, the separation of lay and ecclesiastical justice in western Europe was only clarified at the 1049 Council of Rheims and not fully ratified in Norman territory until the Council of Rouen in 1096. The establishment /re-establishment of the church's rights were very much part of Lanfranc's reforms. The evolution of the church courts took place in the 12th Century.⁴ The so-called 'Becket Affair', his clash with Henry II was part of this evolution.

¹ Staunton, *The lives of Thomas Becket*, p.33

² Jacques Le Goff, 1988, *Medieval Civilisation*, Blackwell p. 257

³ H. Davies, 1911, 'Lanfranc', *Encyclopaedia Britannica 11th edition* pp. 169- 170

⁴ Colin Morris, 1967, 'William I and the Church Courts, *English Historical Review* Vol. 82 No. 463 pp.449 - 463

Lanfranc later helped William II to secure the throne after the Conqueror's death. But on Lanfranc's demise in 1089 William Rufus would not appoint a successor and seized Canterbury's holdings and revenue for the crown. Despite the Chapter of Canterbury favouring Anselm, the king did not relent until frightened by a serious illness, and nominated Anselm in 1093, when he took up the office. Anselm was also a reformer and wanted the church to have its own authority, he pressed the king to reduce the power of the crown over the English church, his zeal in this led him to be twice exiled. He continued his defence of the church, defiance of the crown when Henry I became king, leading to the second of his exiles. The matter was finally resolved by the London Concordat in 1107 when Henry agreed to renounce the right of the Kings of England to invest bishops.⁵ Lanfranc died in 1109 and Henry left the see vacant until 1114, when Ralph d'Escures was chosen by the king in council with bishops and lords. A monk and bishop of Rochester, Ralph was the compromise choice of the council being a monk, a bishop, and a Norman. However, He asserted the rights and supremacy of Canterbury very strongly.⁶ When Stephen seized the throne he made 'a covenant with the priests to be the church's champion and to right the wrongs which had previously been done to the church'.⁷ However despite Roger of Salisbury going to his aid with both the royal treasury and administration, Stephen demanded his castles and arrested him on refusal. This was seen as a crime against the church, offering violence to clergy in contravention to scripture.⁸ Theobald of Bec was chosen by Stephen during the civil war between him and Mathilda but defied him over a ban on attending a Papal meeting in Rheims called by Pope Eugene III. Stephen banished him and seized his property. He was later exiled for refusing to crown Stephen's heir Eustace. When his son pre-deceased him Stephen recognised Henry of Anjou as his heir in an agreement negotiated by Theobald. He and Henry II clashed over the rights of clergy to be tried in ecclesiastical courts rather than civil ones. It was Theobald who put Thomas Becket forward as Chancellor, a recommendation accepted by Henry. Becket inherited certain disputes, over the supremacy of Canterbury in England, over the payments to the crown, over the retention of land holdings – these were on-going difficulties. To these were added his clash with Henry over church courts.

⁵ Sally Vaughan, 1980, 'St Anselm and the English Investiture Controversy Reconsidered', in *Journal of Medieval History* ^ pp. 61 - 86

⁶ Frank Barlow, 1979, *The English Church 1066 – 1154*:

⁷ Diana Greenway, 1996D. Henry Archdeacon of Huntingdon pp.704-705

⁸ "touch not mine anointed" as noted in Hugh Chisholm, 1911, 'Roger Bishop of Salisbury' *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 11th edition p454

On his accession to the throne in 1154, Henry II took on a country diminished by nineteen years of internal strife. Both church matters and civil politics had been thoroughly disturbed by the civil war, and both Stephen and Matilda had given lands and titles in order to purchase support. The country needed a strong leader to give unity and bring cohesion between the barons and bishops. It was therefore vital for the good order of the kingdom for Henry to regain royal control and be ‘strong enough to curb the lawless feuds of semi-independent chieftains’...[and] to ensure that justice was being carried out efficiently and effectively.⁹ Henry wished to return the country to the stability and his rights to the circumstances of Henry I’s reign, this he undertook vigorously. It should be remembered that, at the time, the king was king *dei gratia*, and was viewed as *rex et sacerdos* changed by anointing from layman to a sacerdotal being. Poole notes that the twelfth century writer ‘Anonymous of York’, ...‘regarded the king as on a higher plane than the priest...’ in his dispute with Archbishop Anselm, and could thus interfere in ecclesiastical matters.¹⁰ Henry chose to tackle the church, and it is of little wonder that he included his desire for civil crimes to be judged by the state, even for those committed by clerks, although resisted by the church, possibly the most powerful single institution in feudal England, particularly as it went against the rights that had been extracted from Stephen. Carpenter maintains that Henry was concerned with establishing his, ‘royal customs’ over the church relates more to issues of ‘public peace’ and control of justice, revenue and the elimination of outside interference from the papacy’.¹¹ Henry’s attempted reforms came into direct conflict with developing ecclesiastical thinking concerning the rights of the Pope over the church, however, because of the conflict between the Papacy and the Empire, and that Alexander III was distracted with a number of ant-popes, the king was able to achieve most of his aims. Church independence in England seem to have been the cost of political support for Alexander. Becket’s own nature and spirituality, along with Papal reform and example of a previous archbishop’s resistance, plus Henry’s personality made the clash between them inevitable and ‘... something of a perfect storm of conflict’.¹²

Preston writes that, ‘...Rather than resolving the power struggle between Crown and Mitre in Henry’s favour, the martyrdom of Thomas Becket further amplified the influence of the Church. ...’¹³ Becket’s murder within his own cathedral marked the end of his life and the beginning of a legend, and a

⁹ L. F. Salzman, *Henry II* (New York, 1967), p. 14.

¹⁰ Austin Lane Poole, 1958, *From Domesday to Magna Carta*, OUP p.3

¹¹ David Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery* (London, 2004), p.205.

¹² David Bosma, pre-2020, *The Reasons for Resistance: An Analysis of the Ministry and Martyrdom of Thomas Becket*. University of Otago Academia p16

¹³ Victoria Preston, 2021, *We Are Pilgrims*, Hurst & Company p.122

debate. It also tempered Henry's victory by giving the church leverage to apply, particularly at a time when he was threatened by his own sons and external forces. He was obliged to make a very public penance and in the agreement at Avranches he had also to compromise with the Church, by repealing parts of the Clarendon Constitutions and allowing appeals to the papal curia and the application of canon law in England, Henry was submitting to Papal authority. The work of the first three Norman kings to keep their authority over the English church had been all but lost during the civil war and Stephen's reign, now Henry's efforts to re-establish it were thwarted.¹⁴ At this point it would appear that the church, and Becket, having suffered a defeat, had finally triumphed. The martyrdom offered the church a propaganda coup across Europe, as the pan-European development of Becket's cult demonstrates. In addition, as Le Goff records, John of Salisbury made use of the martyrdom ... 'to carry to extremes the doctrine of the limitation of royal power'.¹⁵ Subsequently, as Barlow points out, Canterbury became 'the main pilgrimage centre in north-western Christendom'.¹⁶ The cult of Saint Thomas Becket was a fixture in the cultural and religious landscape of England. However, the drama of Becket's assassination has permanently distorted his role in the life of the church, as Franklin notes, '... in the life of the English Church, his importance was far more symbolic than real ... he has been seen as a political figure, concerned chiefly with the realities of power. ...'¹⁷

Becket's murder brought the English church some tangible, if limited, concessions, such as those of Avranches, but it gave the church a significant moral advantage in dealing with civil authority. Despite his assurances Henry II left the see of York vacant for ten years, appropriating its land and revenues, when a new archbishop took office, it was Henry's illegitimate son Geoffrey. One of Becket's legacies was as an exemplar to those that followed him. In his dispute with King John, Archbishop Stephen Langton, by choosing Pontigny for his exile, appears to be invoking the memory of St Thomas the martyr. So too did John Stafford in his dispute with Edward III. Following on, several holders of the post were in disputes with the Crown.

The possible conflicts between church and state assumed a lower order of importance during the wars between the house of York and Lancaster as those who were kings and those who aspired to be kings consumed the

¹⁴ Z.N. Brooke, 1928, 'The Effect of Becket's Murder on Papal Authority in England' Vol. 2 No.3 pp.213-228

¹⁵ Le Goff, op cit p 273

¹⁶ Barrie Dobson, 1995 'The monks of Canterbury in the Later Middle Ages, 1250-1540@

¹⁷ Robert Franklin, 1970, Thomas Becket and the Church, Canterbury Cathedral Chronicle No, 70, Canterbury p.22

politics and power struggles. Of course members of the church were involved on both sides and none, but disagreements with the civil authorities were, overall subsumed by the wider conflicts. The situation was changed completely when Henry VIII broke with Rome and England became a protestant state. Nevertheless, such was the strength of the cult and the power of this memory St Thomas Becket in the sixteenth century, that Henry VIII required it's the almost complete eradication. Even in the early 21st century, the choice of the Archbishop of Canterbury is made by the ruling monarch.

During the twelfth century the role of king was beginning to be viewed differently, the king, formerly seen as God's anointed represented and therefore a sacred figure was started to be viewed in a more pragmatic way. The monarch was being judged, as to how good he was for the country, what benefits did he bring, how successful was he, but also how much harm did he do, how oppressive, how demanding? This more pragmatic approach by the ruled led to demands being made on the monarch and was manifest in events such as the 'Barons Revolt, the signing of the Magna Carta and contributed to the dynastic Wars of the Roses. At the same time rulers were trying to maintain their authority, finances, and powers. In the church there was a movement to regulate, standardise and establish the central authority of the pope. This also led to clashes between branches of the church and the papacy as well as secular rulers with the Pope. There were periods when there were two popes and schisms. The 'Becket Affair' was a dramatic incident but very much part of an on-going power struggle. Thomas is often perceived to have been a prominent rebel, one even ahead of his own time, however, more realistically he was a man of his times, holding to ideas that were developing across Europe, he was also strongly principled and even stubborn.¹⁸

In some aspects it has been blown out of proportion, for English history – being a significant event in England has enhanced its influence, the dramatic nature of Becket's murder, in his own cathedral, has made it more memorable – not many archbishop's have had three plays written about them.¹⁹ As Bosma comments, '...Thomas held fast to his convictions as a churchman, leaving a strong and lasting legacy within the English church that sees him venerated, critiqued, and studied to this very day²⁰. It is therefore quite

¹⁸ David Horspool, 2010, *The English Rebel, One thousand years of trouble-making from the Normand to the nineties*, Penguin chapter 3, pp.42 - 66

¹⁹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1884, *Becket*; T. S. Eliot, 1935, *Murder in the Cathedral*; Jean Anouilh, 1959, *Becket ou l'Honneur de Dieu*– which also formed the basis for Peter Grenville's film of 1964, *Becket*

²⁰ David Bosma, pre-2020, *The Reasons for Resistance: An Analysis of the Ministry and Martyrdom of Thomas Becket*. University of Otago Academia p.2

reasonable to answer Staunton’s question by saying that, yes Thomas Becket’s was triumphal – in some ways; equally his cause was defeated, in some ways, by the changes in the relentless onward march of history.

Word Count: 2,155

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