THOMAS BECON
AS A RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIALIST

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Among the many Protestant polemicists of the Tudor era who attacked the doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome, Thomas Becon is one of the few who were active during the reigns of all the four monarchs concerned with the religious upheaval – Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth. An examination of his controversial works, therefore, provides the reader with a miniature history of the Reformation in England. It is the purpose of this paper to investigate how Becon’s controversial technique varied from reign to reign in his unceasing effort to advance the Protestant cause under whatever conditions prevailed.

During the latter part of the reign of Henry VIII, between the years 1541 and 1547, Becon published a large number of tracts under the pseudonym of Theodore Basille. While on first sight these works appear to be of a devotional nature and orthodox in content, the fact that they are pseudonymous arouses suspicion, and a closer look reveals that these works actually represent Becon’s attempt to further the cause of the Reformation during the period of the Henrican reaction.

In order to provide his works with the aura of orthodoxy, Becon expresses doctrinal positions which we know from later works he did not really hold. While he never goes so far as actually to preach justification by works, he does his best to de-emphasize justification by faith and to dwell on the desirability of good works. He does, however, maintain the need for auricular confession, a practice against which he inveighs vehemently in works published during reigns sympathetic to the Protestant cause.


2 Davis, Henry (London, 1542) sigs. C4r, K2v.

In the Henrican works Becon's comfort to his brethren who were being persecuted by the orthodox bishops is indirect rather than direct, as is his attack on Catholic doctrine and practice. He speaks about persecution in general terms, without naming the persecutors or identifying the beliefs of those persecuted, but certain key phrases in the following passage make Becon's meaning unmistakable:

How ware the Prophetes handled, which preached in the name of the Lord.... How was Christe...? Was he not called.... A Heretyke?.... An enemy to our mother the holy chyrch?.... Was not his doctrine counted new learnynge? Agayne howe were the Apostles of Christe entreated?.... Were not they reported & accused before the magistrates princes & rulers, that they were such pestiferous fellowes, as troubled the common weale...? 1

Becon's indirect attack on the retention of Catholic doctrine and ceremonies in the Church of England takes various forms. It may, for instance, be disguised as Scriptural commentary, as in Becon's treatment of Psalm 115, in which David says that all men are liars. Here again, key phrases reveal Becon's intention. He marvels at David's lack of tact in thinking that the rulers of the church, ,,the learned Byshoppes” will suffer themselves to be included in his declaration, since they pride themselves on having a monopoly on God's truth (DAVIDS HARPE, d6v). But who were the people David was thinking of, asks Becon. It was people who were outwardly holy but inwardly full of hypocrisy, he reveals, people such as Ananias, for instance, whom Paul called a painted wall, because he acted ,,more lyke a bocher than a Byshop” on the occasion when Paul ,,should haue pourged hymselfe before the councell of the Articles layd agaynst him....” (Ibid., d7v). But, says Becon, David has to tell the truth about people, for, inspired as he is, he cannot lie or ,,playe placebo” (Ibid.). The use of ,,Placebo,” the name by which the Vespers for the Dead were known, as a synonym for lie, at once characterized such Catholic ceremonies as were being retained in the Henrican Church and protected the author, who could claim that

1 Davidis harpe, sigs. c8r-d1v. A clue to what must have been Becon's real feelings is provided by the contemporary diatribes of John Bale, his fellow Reformer, which could afford to be explicit on those points Becon treated so delicately, since Bale wrote from the Continent. See Bale, Yet a course at the Romyshe foxe (Zurich, 1543) and The Epistel Exhoritatorye (Basle, 1544).