



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on July 6, 2010

Heads for Henry, Hearts for God

Now that we are done with three days celebrating — or at least (more or less) observing — Independence Day with cookouts, fireworks, trips to the beach, and possibly even a thought or two about our independence from Great Britain, it might be a good time to turn our minds, however briefly, across “the pond” to jolly old (well, old anyway) England and remember a man who lost his head on this date 475 years ago.

On July 6, 1535, Sir Thomas More, formerly Lord Chancellor of England was beheaded as a traitor for his refusal to sign the Oath of Supremacy, affirming that the King is the head of the church in England.



Why is that event, occurring nearly five centuries ago and 3,500 miles away, important to Americans today? Because by opposing the usurpation of church authority by temporal rulers, More was opposing a dangerous consolidation of power by the head of state. And the concept of defined and limited government powers is the whole basis of our own constitutional Republic and the freedom of religion, as well as speech and press and other liberties guaranteed in our Bill of Rights.

The story is well known, owing in no small part to the enormous success of both the play and movie about Sir Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons*, with the film version capturing six Academy Awards in 1966. Though less well known, John Fisher, bishop of Rochester, is very much a part of the same story, having been beheaded just two weeks before Sir Thomas and for the same reason. Both men had quite favorable relations with King Henry VIII before the falling out. Sir Thomas, who had risen to office of Lord Chancellor, was a trusted friend and confidant of His Majesty. Fisher had been the confessor and spiritual advisor to the King’s grandmother. But when Henry waged war on the church in his kingdom and severed its ties with Rome, Englishmen were forced to choose between their King and their church. Unlike so many of their countrymen, More and Fisher remained loyal to the faith of their forebears and paid for that choice with their life’s blood.

The break with Rome came about differently in England than on the continent, where theological disputes added fuel to nationalist sentiment. Henry himself had defended the Catholic Church and its doctrines, having written and published the *Defense of the Seven Sacraments* against Luther, a book that won him the title, Defender of the Faith, bestowed on the British monarch by Pope Leo X. But when the King sought an annulment of his marriage of 17 years to Queen Catherine so that he might marry Anne Boleyn, Pope Clement VII refused to declare the marriage void. A battle over jurisdiction was ignited and Henry obtained from the Parliament an act declaring the King the supreme head of the Church of England. All of the bishops but one went along with it and Henry was granted the divorce and the new marriage that he demanded. Parliament also passed the Act of Succession, proclaiming Anne as Henry’s Queen and that succeeding monarchs would come from their line.

Subjects, to prove themselves loyal, were required to take an oath affirming the validity of the marriage



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and the King's supremacy over the church. Refusal to so swear left one open to the charge of treason against the crown, punishable by death. It took no small amount of courage to refuse the will of the King and defy an act of Parliament. Fisher was the only bishop in all of England who would not take the oath. More was also in a lonely position, since virtually everyone of importance in the kingdom had affixed his name to the oath. Though he resigned the post of Lord Chancellor when the course of Henry's action had become clear and the break with Rome inevitable, he was still a man of great prominence in England and renowned throughout Europe as among the greatest scholars and writers of his day. His good friend Erasmus had dubbed him "the English Socrates," a title Sir Thomas did not welcome, protesting that he had no taste for hemlock. Though he maintained a strict silence concerning both the marriage and the King's claim of supremacy over the church, the conspicuous absence of his good name among the distinguished signatories to the oath was something Henry was unwilling to tolerate.

Still, More hoped his silence would be his refuge. In a scene in *A Man for All Seasons*, More tries to convince his troubled wife that he is safe from the charge of treason. Tapping a finger against his chest, he assures her: "This is not the stuff of which martyrs are made."

Yet in the end he would choose martyrdom, rather than betray his faith, a choice that was as puzzling to many of his contemporaries as it might be to many of us. Clearly it was a matter of conscience for both More and Fisher and for other, lesser-known Englishmen, who likewise refused the oath and suffered the same fate. And yet we have seen, in our time as well as theirs, how equivocal the claims of conscience can be. We have seen politicians who fan the flames of racism not out of a deeply held belief in white supremacy, but because they believed appeals to bigotry would get them more votes. We have seen "pro-life" members of Congress undergo a conversion when they seek the presidency and see the need to genuflect before the National Abortion and Reproduction Rights Action League and plight their troth to the court-created, allegedly constitutional "right to choose" death for pre-born babies. Funny, isn't it, how presidential ambitions often coincide with an improved understanding of the issues involved in abortion.

The issues were different, but the bartering of souls and the compromises of conscience were essentially the same in the 16th century as in the 20th or 21st century. Bishop Fisher might have lived out his life in comfort and security had he been, like so many of his colleagues, more eager to please his prince than serve his God. More could have had whatever it was in the King's considerable power to give him had he but fallen in line with so many of his peers by putting his name to the oath and getting on with his life. Because he did not, he remains, centuries later, an inspiring example of extreme courage in the face of unrelenting tyranny.

The independence of the church was guaranteed by the Magna Carta, More testified at his trial. But appeals to a document that was then three centuries old carried little weight with those determined to bend the law to suit the immediate whims of a strong-willed monarch with a Parliament prostrate at his royal feet. Freedom requires restraints against consolidation of power in a single authority. And it requires men and women who say "no" when the state demands too much. Thomas More and John Fisher would not — in conscience could not — acquiesce in the surrender of the church to the state. They served both their church and their nation by keeping their loyalties in the proper order. That order was well stated in the final words More spoke before putting his head on the block: "I am the king's good servant, but God's first."

Portrait of King Henry VIII: AP Images



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