**Spartacus Educational Classroom Activity**

# **Sir Thomas More - Saint or Sinner? (Questions & Answers)**

<http://spartacus-educational.com/ExAnTEU6.htm>

This commentary is based on the classroom activity: [Sir Thomas More: Saint or Sinner?](http://spartacus-educational.com/ExTEU6.htm)

**Q1**: Study sources 2 and 3. Do these sources suggest that Sir [Thomas More](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDmoreT.htm) was in favour of all young girls being educated?

**A1**: [Alison Plowden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alison_Plowden) argues in [Tudor Women](http://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref%3Dnb_sb_noss?url=search-alias=stripbooks&field-keywords=Alison%20Plowden,%20Tudor%20Women) (2002) that "More was the first Englishman seriously to experiment with the novel idea that girls should be educated too." [Alison Weir](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alison_Weir), the author of [The Six Wives of Henry VIII](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Six-Wives-Henry-VIII/dp/0099523620/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1420991252&sr=1-1&keywords=Alison+Weir,+The+Six+Wives+of+Henry+VIII) (2007) suggests that the idea of educating girls from rich families was not unusual: "in Henry VIII's time, the education of girls was the privilege of the royal and the rich, and its chief aim was to produce future wives schooled in godly and moral precepts. It was not intended to promote independent thinking; indeed, it tended to the opposite." There is no evidence that Thomas More was in favour of all young girls being educated.

**Q2**: Read sources 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9. Make a list of the criticisms that these people make of [Hilary Mantel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilary_Mantel).

**A2**:

(4) Bishop [Mark O’Toole](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_O%27Toole_%28bishop%29): He argues that Wolf Hall is "anti-Catholic" suggesting that it "is destructive to your humanity". Bishop O'Toole is particularly upset by Mantel's portrait of someone who promoted the idea of More as a persecutor of heretics." They (the Tudors) looked on heretics as we look upon drug traffickers. But it is inaccurate to say that he (St Thomas) condemned people to death."

(5) Bishop [Mark Davies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Davies_%28Bishop_of_Shrewsbury%29): He objects to the way More is compared to [Thomas Cromwell](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDcromwell.htm). "It is an extraordinary and perverse achievement of Hilary Mantel and BBC Drama to make of Thomas Cromwell a flawed hero and of St Thomas More, one of the greatest Englishmen, a scheming villain... It would be sad if Thomas Cromwell, who is surely one of the most unscrupulous figures in England’s history, was to be held-up as a role model for future generations." Bishop Davies believes that More is an "example of integrity for all times".

(7) [Jonathan Jones](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog): The Guardian's art critic believes that Mantel's portrait of More "as a charmless prig, a humourless alienating nasty piece of work, is incredibly unfair." He believes that this "flies in the face of all the evidence".

(8) [Melanie McDonagh](http://www.spectator.co.uk/author/melanie-mcdonagh/): Like Bishop Davies, Melanie McDonagh objects to the way Mantel compares More with Cromwell. "You don't get the humanist and the humorist. What you get is a heretic-hunter, whose wit is turned to dry sarcasm and whose world view is simple religious fanaticism." McDonagh makes the point that this account is very damaging as the public "know so little history".

(9) [Colin Burrow](http://www.all-souls.ox.ac.uk/people.php?personid=9): This writer agrees with some of Mantel's views of More in her novel Wolf Hall: "Thomas More is here a dogmatic persecutor of heretics (which he was), a man perhaps unhealthily obsessed by his daughter Meg (which he may have been), and someone who makes cruelly unfunny jokes about his second wife, Dame Alice (which he did)." Burrow's objection is to the way Mantel ignores his good qualities: "Here Mantel’s revisionary eye seems cruel, or to have missed something."

**Q3**. Study sources 1, 6 and 20. Do you think these works of art provide an accurate representation of Sir Thomas More. It might help you to read about the artists, [Hans Holbein](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDholbein.htm) and [Louis Laumen](http://www.louislaumen.com/biography.htm), and to look at source 10 before answering the question.

**A3**. Sources 1 and 6 were painted by Holbein. In 1527 Holbein went to live in the Thomas More household and over the next few months he painted and drew several pictures of More and his family. Most art critics are convinced that his portraits are accurate representations. However, as [Helen Langdon](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Helen-Langdon/e/B001HD3UMY) points out, Holbein was open to the idea to create an image that was favourable to the sitter. "More was certainly concerned with the impression he made, insisting on having the flamboyant cuffs on his official costume replaced by ascetic plain ones".

In a recent TV documentary, [Holbein: Eye of the Tudors](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0513ghb), the art critic, [Waldermar Januszczak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waldemar_Januszczak%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) argued that Holbein's paintings and drawings of More are the most important factor in our interpretation of the man. Januszczak points out that Holbein was forced to flee the Reformation in Europe and his English paintings reveal him as a Catholic propagandist. He says if anyone doubts this they should compare Holbein's portraits of [Thomas More](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDmoreT.htm) and [Thomas Cromwell](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDcromwell.htm).

[Louis Laumen](http://www.louislaumen.com/biography.htm) was born in the Netherlands in 1958. He became a successful sculptor and in 2006 he was commissioned to produce a statue of Sir Thomas Cromwell for the Speaker's Garden, Parliament House of NSW, Sydney, New South Wales. The statue is based on the paintings and drawings of More produced by Hans Holbein.

**Q4**: Read source 21. What criticisms does [Lacey Baldwin Smith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lacey_Baldwin_Smith%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) make of Sir Thomas More.

**A4**: The main point being made is that he found it difficult to grasp that people were reacting to economic and social forces. "Once the Reformation broke out, conspiracy took on more sinister and far more cosmic proportions, but nevertheless the conviction prevailed that heresy and its uglier stepsister sedition were the product of tiny groups of conspiring individuals determined upon private profit." Lacey Badwin Smith claims that More viewed "the religious upheaval as the work of a handful of evil men and women set upon corrupting innocent but, alas, gullible subjects."

**Q5**: Study sources 12-17. Quote from the different sources to explain why Sir [Thomas More](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDmoreT.htm) was so hostile to [William Tyndale](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDtyndale.htm).

**A5**: [John Foxe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Foxe) points out that "William Tyndale... had decided that the people needed to be able to read scripture for themselves instead of trusting the church to explain it to them honestly and fully. He believed that the corruption of the church was tolerated only because people didn't know any better - and the church wasn't about to teach them any better, or its excesses and privileges would be in danger." (source 13) [David Starkey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Starkey) believes that Tyndale's English Bible in 1526 posed a threat to the authority of the Catholic Church and so More regarded him as "an an abominable heretic, fit only for the flames". (source 12) In other words, Tyndale should be burnt at the stake.

In 1527, More convinced [Henry VIII](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDhenry8.htm) to ban all Tyndale's works in England. (source 13) Tyndale was living in Europe and so he could not capture and execute him. However, he did order the arrest of people caught importing the English Bible into the country. (source 17) [Richard Bayfield](http://spartacus-educational.com/Richard_Bayfield.htm) was captured in 1531. After being tortured and interrogated Bayfield was burnt at the stake (sources 14, 15 and 16).

**Q6**: Study source 18. Do these statistics support the views of the authors of sources 4, 9, 19, 22 and 23?

**A6**. [Jasper Ridley](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1466429/Jasper-Ridley.html) argues in his book, [The Statesman and the Fanatic](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Statesman-Fanatic-Thomas-Wolsey-More/dp/0094662703/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1422281485&sr=1-1&keywords=The+Statesman+and+the+Fanatic) (1982), that when [Thomas Wolsey](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDwolseyT.htm) was Lord Chancellor no one was burnt as a heretic. (source 23) This is supported by source 18 that shows in the 14-year period Wolsey held the post no heretics were burnt at the stake, whereas when More was Lord Chancellor, in a 3-year period, eleven people were burnt at the stake.

[Colin Burrow](http://www.all-souls.ox.ac.uk/people.php?personid=9) claims that More was "a dogmatic persecutor of heretics" (source 9) and [Peter Ackroyd](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Ackroyd)asserts that More was an "avid hunter of heretics". (source 22) [Seymour Baker House](http://www.thomasmorestudies.org/aboutctms.html) admits that "the vigour with which More pursued heretics through the courts was mirrored by the relentlessness with which he fought them". However, he points out that "his supporters point out that he was a product of his times, and that those men he most admired... lamented but accepted as necessary the practice of executing heretics". (source 19)

Source 18 provides some support for House's point of view that he was "a product of his times". The Lord Chancellors that followed More, [Thomas Audley](http://spartacus-educational.com/Thomas_Audley.htm) and [Thomas Wriothesley](http://spartacus-educational.com/Thomas_Wriothesley.htm), also executed an average of three heretics a year. It could be pointed out that the next man who held this position,[Richard Rich](http://spartacus-educational.com/Richard_Rich.htm), presided over the death of two heretics over a period of six years. However, we know that Rich was also a ferocious hunter of heretics when he worked for Audley. The difference is that the[Edward VI](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDedward6.htm) government, had a policy of allowing an element of religious freedom that had not been enjoyed before during the Tudor period.

Bishop [Mark O’Toole](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_O%27Toole_%28bishop%29) defends the record of Sir Thomas More. "More was a man of his time and heresy was the big sin, really, it was the big wrong on both sides. It is hard for us in our modern mentality to see it as wrong. They looked on heretics as we look upon drug traffickers." (source 4) It is interesting how Bishop O'Toole equates the importation of dangerous drugs with the importation of the English Bible. "More was a man of his time" in the sense that he reflected the teachings of the Catholic Church. The point is that there were a lot of men and women, like [William Tyndale](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDtyndale.htm) and [Richard Bayfield](http://spartacus-educational.com/Richard_Bayfield.htm), that did not share these views and thought it was important that they read the Bible in their own language (only the upper-class and the clergy could read the Bible in Latin. It was not until 1538 that [Thomas Cromwell](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDcromwell.htm)persuaded [Henry VIII](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDhenry8.htm) to allow the publication of the English Bible.

Bishop O'Toole claims that "it is inaccurate to say that he (St Thomas) condemned people to death." All historians of the period are in agreement that Thomas More was an "avid hunter of heretics" and was a strong supporter of the [Spanish Inquisition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Inquisition). It was done in marked contrast to the policy of the former Lord Chancellor, Cardinal [Thomas Wolsey](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDwolseyT.htm).

Defenders of Thomas More might point out that Lord Chancellor [Stephen Gardiner](http://spartacus-educational.com/Stephen_Gardiner.htm) was responsible for far more burning of heretics. Source 18 shows that Bishop Gardiner presided over the deaths of 72 heretics during a two-year period (1553-1555). Gardiner had been a persecutor of heretics for over 30 years. That is why Queen [Mary](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDmary1.htm) appointed him to the post. By the time the last Catholic monarch had died in 1558, an estimated 280 had been burnt at the stake. This compares to the two heretics executed during over 40 years under Queen [Elizabeth](http://spartacus-educational.com/TUDelizabeth1.htm).