

Thomas More Reader: Historical Portraits and Vignettes (modernized selections)

30. “The Sultan of Syria”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Vincent: What guarantee can anyone get from such a great prince other than his promise, which for his own honor it would behoove him not to break?

Anthony: I have known him and his father before him to break more than five promises as great as this one that he’s now making to you. Who will come and throw it in his face, and tell him it’s a shame for him to be so fickle and so untrue to his word? What does he care about these words that he knows perfectly well he’ll never hear? And even if they were said to him, he wouldn’t much care. If you could come after him yourself and state your grievance to his own self in person, you would find him about as shamefaced as a friend of mine, a merchant, once found the sultan of Syria. Intending to do business for a number of years in that country, this merchant gave the sultan a large sum of money for an office that would serve his needs for that period of time. But scarcely did he have the license granted and put in his hands when, before it was ever worth anything to him, the sultan suddenly sold the office to someone of his own sect and put our Hungarian out. Then my friend came to the sultan and humbly put him in remembrance of that license which had been approved by his own mouth and signed with his own hand. And the sultan, with a grim expression on his face, responded as follows: “I’ll have you know, you worthless lout, that neither my mouth nor my hand shall be master over me, to bind my whole body at their pleasure. No, I will so be lord and master over them both that whatsoever the one may say or the other may write, I will be at full liberty to do as I myself please, without asking the permission of either of them. And therefore, go get you out of my country, you knave.”

31. “The Savage Turk”

[From *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Now, as for those Christian countries that he does not use for tribute purposes only, as he does Chios, Cyprus, and Crete, but counts as clear conquests and utterly takes for his own, such as Peloponnisos, Greece, Macedonia, and similar places (which will include, I truly believe, Hungary if he can get it)—in all those countries he treats Christian people in various ways. He does, indeed, let them keep living there, because they are too many for him to carry off or to kill without leaving unpopulated and desolate either those countries or else some others of his own, from which he would have to import people (a thing not easily done) to populate those lands. And there, behold, those who will not be turned from their faith—of whom God, praised be his holy name, still has very many!—he allows to dwell still in peace.

However, their peace is not all that peaceable. He does not allow them to have any land of their own, nor any high-level position or profession. To finance his wars, he robs them by taxing them

down to the bare bones. Their children he chooses as he pleases, in their youth. He takes them from their parents, transports them to wherever he so pleases, where their families will never see them again, and abuses them as he pleases. Some young ladies he makes harlots, some young men he trains for war, and some boys he causes to be castrated—not to have their stones cut out, as the custom was of old, but to have the whole member cut off from the body. How few escape and live, he little cares, for he will have enough! And all whom he takes so young, for any use of his own, are handed over to the custody of either Turks or false, renegade Christians, so that every one of them is either turned away from the faith of Christ or else treated in such a way that in terms of this world they come to an evil end. For in addition to the many other insults and injuries that the Turks and the false, renegade Christians often inflict on the good Christian people who persevere in abiding by the faith, they sometimes find ways to get some false-hearted villains to say they've heard this or that Christian speak insulting words against Muhammad. On the basis of that false testimony, either they drive the person to forsake the faith of Christ and turn to the profession of their shameful, superstitious sect, or else they put that Christian to death with intolerably cruel torments.

Vincent: May our Lord, Uncle, in his mighty mercy, keep those wretches away from here. For, to tell you the truth, should they happen to come here, I think I see more than one sign that many of our own folk will be all too ready to fall in with them. Just as the sea, before a great storm, sometimes starts churning and roaring of its own accord, before the wind ever gets rough, so it seems to me that I am hearing, with my own ears, some of our own folk here among us—people who a few years ago could no more have borne the name of a Turk than the name of the devil—begin now to find little fault with that. Indeed, some are beginning, little by little, to praise the Turks. They seem happier to find fault with every stratum of Christendom: priests, rulers, rites and ceremonies, sacraments, laws and customs—everything, both spiritual and temporal.