NOTE

THOMAS MORE AND THE SENSUS FIDELIUM

Although remembered principally as a statesman and martyr (as a statesman, however, he achieved little), Thomas More deserves to be taken seriously also as a theologian. He was not, evidently, deeply learned in patristic or scholastic authors, although he did manifest a thorough knowledge of Scripture.[1] As a theologian he was chiefly a popular controversialist. Yet for all that he demonstrated a certain originality which gives his controversial works a lasting importance.

The movement known as Christian humanism produced a number of lay theologians, most of whom operated in uncertain relationship to the hierarchy of the Church, if not critical then at least independent and consciously out of the mainstream of official theology. More was exceptional in being a layman who enjoyed the fullest confidence of the bishops and who functioned as a commissioned defender of official teaching. There can have been few lay theologians in the entire history of the Church who occupied a comparable position.

As early as 1523 he had been drawn into controversy through his pseudonymous *Responsio ad Lutherum*. Beginning with this work he seemingly moved away from the reform-minded, "progressive" orientation of his friends Erasmus and John Colet (who died in 1519) and became more and more the defender of the medieval Church, including its spots and wrinkles. Some have accused him of betraying his earlier views, of becoming simply reactionary, but it has been plausibly suggested that he perceived that in many ways Luther had undercut the possibility of moderate reform and had forced the taking of sides.[2]

In 1527 he was commissioned by his bishop, Cuthbert Tunstall of London, to read and refute heretical works, especially those being published on the Continent by the former English priest William Tyndale.[3] He was selected, in all probability, because of his fame and popularity, his prominent position, and his proven polemical talents. His print war with Tyndale continued until 1532. Within four years both men were dead, Tyndale the victim of the Inquisition at Antwerp, More of the king who had once enlisted him in the cause of orthodoxy.

Curiously, although the repudiation of papal authority was the central issue in Henry VIII's reformation, More did not die for the papacy and it

[1] See Germain Marc'hadour, *Thomas More et la Bible* (Paris, 1969) and *The Bible in the Works of Thomas More*, 2 vols. (Nieuwkoop, 1968).

[2] Louis A. Schuster, "Thomas More's Polemical Career, 1523-1533," in *The Complete Works of Thomas More* 8/3 (New Haven, 1973) 1146.

[3] For an account of the Tunstall commission, see *ibid.*, pp. 1137-39.

is difficult to escape the conclusion that his attitudes towards the papal office were at best uncertain. At his trial he said that he had warned the king not to overemphasize papal authority in his *Assertio septem sacramentorum* (1521) but that Henry had in turn convinced him that it was a more than human invention. However, in 1525 he defended the papacy against the Lutheran Johannes Bugenhagen merely by asserting that historically all who attacked it eventually became heretics.[4] In the *Responsio ad Lutherum* he noted the assault on papal authority but advanced no arguments of his own, merely observing that John Fisher and others had adequately answered the charges.[5] Even in his last major controversial work, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, he seemed to avoid the issue, stating that a resolution of the question of papal supremacy was unnecessary because the pope was part of the Church, as its head, and whether the pope or a general council could err was not important, since the whole Church could not err.[6]

More clearly seems to have been some kind of moderate conciliarist, although he was also vague as to the general council's powers and under what circumstances it might be summoned. While in prison he wrote to Thomas Cromwell, one of the principal instruments of religious change in England, that a council might depose a pope. It has been noted that conciliarism was not a strong movement in England, but that More also belonged to an international community of men of letters.[7]

However, whatever belief he may have had in conciliar authority played little part in his anti-Protestant writings, and his failure to defend the authority of either pope or council is curious because he did not in any sense back away from a quarrel and in his debate with Tyndale he seemingly felt compelled to defend all aspects of Catholicism, no matter how trivial or dubious. In fact, virtually nowhere in his two massive works against Tyndale did he appeal to hierarchical authority as such, or to official pronouncements, not even to the decrees of the early councils. To some degree at least he must have been uncertain as to the precise locus of authority in the Church.

It has been suggested that his approach was shaped by his concern for the common people and his desire to reach them by a style of argument not dependent on learned allusion.[8] While it is true that his polemical

[4] For a summary of More's views on the papacy, see E. E. Reynolds, *Saint Thomas More* (London, 1953) pp. 157–67.

[5] *Complete Works* 5/1 (1969) ed. John M. Headley, tr. Scholastica Mandeville, pp. 140–41.

[6] *Complete Works* 8/2, ed. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck, pp. 576–77, 872. See also Marius, "Thomas More's View of the Church," *ibid.* 8/3, 1299–1315.

[7] Marius, *op. cit.*, pp. 1297, 1299, 1301–2, 1313–14.

[8] Schuster, *op. cit.*, p. 1265.

writings, although of daunting length, were aimed at the general reader, it also seems like a dangerous and self-defeating policy to have omitted from such works precisely those matters which would soon be called into question, especially the papacy. In all probability More was reluctant to take a stand because he was uncertain in his own mind. The fact that papal authority was treated as a side issue seems to confirm this.

Possibly his career as an English common lawyer influenced his view of Church structure, in that he showed a mistrust of centralized authority vested in one man and consistently upheld the traditions of communal authority.[9] He had been suspicious of Henry VIII even while he enjoyed the king's favor, and his Utopians had devised elaborate methods for rotating and safeguarding the exercise of political power.

Possibly also More omitted appeals to hierarchical authority in order to meet the Protestants on their own grounds. But if so, it was only in order to cut away those grounds as swiftly as possible. Despite his demonstrated familiarity with Scripture, he steadily chipped at the foundations of scriptural authority, espousing a certain scepticism about the Bible quite unusual in his own time and daring even by the standards of later centuries. He questioned how it could be known that Luke wrote the Gospel attributed to him, suggested that some of Paul's letters might have been lost, and doubted whether the full text of the Bible would survive to the end of the world. In proposing that copyists' errors and, in modern times, printers' errors had altered the meaning of certain passages, he seemed to call into question the reliability of Scripture as a guide to truth.[10] Curiously, although he repeatedly argued that divine providence would not permit the Church to fall into serious error, he did not employ the same argument to support the Bible.

Also rather daring was his implication that the New Testament did not clearly support basic Christian doctrines. He did not think Arius could have been refuted simply from Scripture, and asked how long it would take a man to formulate the Nicene Creed simply by perusing the sacred books. He did not believe heathens or heretics were convinced by the Bible,[11] and Raphael Hythloday converted some of the Utopians to Christianity but did not, apparently, give them a Bible.[12]

Some of this was probably polemical excess engendered by the constant Protestant appeal to the Bible over ecclesiastical authority. However, More's feelings went deeper, in that he seems to have perceived in Tyndale's biblicism the beginnings of a boundless individualism

[9] Marius, op. cit., p. 1280.

[10] Confutation, in Complete Works 81, 340; Responsio, in ibid. 5/1, 98–100; Dialogue concerning Heresies, ed. W. E. Campbell and A. W. Reed (London, 1927) pp. 74, 83, 123.

[11] Dialogue, pp. 88, 107, 246; Confutation, in Complete Works 8/1, 266.

[12] Utopia, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J., in Complete Works 4 (1964) 96–97, 118.

fundamentally subversive of the communal order which he revered. He complained of the "flood of pestilential books" which had already seduced many from the truth on the Continent and were now invading England. In Germany he believed the translation of the Bible and the liturgy into the vernacular had caused a decline of faith and piety.[13] After reading the Bible, he contemptuously observed, every heretic and "prattling fool" can take it upon himself to judge the general councils and all of Christendom.[14] Tyndale's own position was clearly individualistic, in that he distinguished the true but invisible church of the elect from the "fleshly mass" of the visible church, postulated that the members of the true church might live scattered through the world unknown to each other, and offered the Bible as the means by which the godly individual might unmask the lies of the visible church.[15]

As a counterweight to Scripture (which he did not, of course, repudiate and which he quoted copiously) More proposed a rather extreme version of that theory of "oral tradition" which has been traced to William of Ockham.[16] Christ, More argued, had revealed truths with His "blessed mouth" and not by writing. His words would have remained written in men's hearts even without Scripture, and men should believe on the authority of Christ's words, not on some written warrant. When Scripture promised that God's word would never perish, it was not referring necessarily to itself but to unwritten traditions.[17] In the most perfect time of Christendom—the early Church—no sacred writing existed, and from Adam until the time of Moses there was no written divine word. Christ had promised to send the Holy Spirit upon His followers, not a book.[18]

More in fact showed a clear preference for what Marshall McLuhan would call "oral culture" over "print culture."[19] He denied that images were merely the book of the unlearned and argued that they were profitable for the educated as well. Words he considered merely signs agreed upon by men and not necessarily superior to other kinds of signs. Writing had caused more theological quarrels than it had settled and, while admitting the desirability of an English Bible, More thought there was no urgency about the project. He compared Scripture to a great

[13] *Dialogue*, pp. 256, 339, 341, 344; *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/1, 161.

[14] *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/1, 342.

[15] *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, ed. Henry Walter (Parker Society Publications 44 [1850]) 54–55, 107, 112, 137.

[16] See George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York, 1959) p. 37.

[17] *Dialogue*, pp. 95–96; *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/1, 340.

[18] *Dialogue*, p. 181; *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/1, 150–51, 155, 332, 266.

[19] See Hitchcock, "More and Tyndale's Controversy over Revelation: A Test of the McLuhan Hypothesis," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 448–66.

banquet, at which most Christians could take nourishment but some would become ill from overindulgence.[20]

Adam had more "wit" than any man, yet he did not discover writing, and St. Paul had affirmed (Rom 10:17) that faith comes by hearing. The Decalogue was committed to writing, while the New Law of love was left unwritten. More went so far as to suggest that people would be better off ignoring all books, his own as well as those of the heretics.[21] Tyndale, on the contrary, consistently argued for the necessity of a written revelation, scoffed at More's "unwritten vanities," and held that there could be no certainty of belief without its substance being written down.[22]

More's notion of oral tradition was not, however, the rather simple-minded idea that the content of faith was literally passed down by word of mouth from age to age, although in places he wrote as though he believed this were possible. Rather the substance of belief was that which "our lord said he would write in men's hearts." In one of his strongest passages he wrote: "And so it was convenient for the law of life to be rather written in the lively minds of men than in the dead skins of beasts." He also wrote that in implanting His truth in men's hearts God chose the softest of materials in order to make it permanent.[23]

His theory of "oral tradition" seems therefore to have involved, paradoxically in terms of his communalism, an idea of personal inspiration, the preservation of truths within the hearts of individual men, although it is clear from other of his positions that he did not recognize the validity of a purely private belief. He was sparing in his invocations of the Holy Spirit, but a sense of the Spirit's inspiration and indwelling was implicit in his work.

The term "living tradition" made its appearance with the Catholic controversialists of the sixteenth century,[24] and More was therefore among the first to use the concept. Although there are no references to him in More's writings, it is possible that a major influence was the English Carmelite and anti-Lollard writer Thomas Netter Waldensis (d. 1430), who had been a privy councillor to Henry V and whose works may well have been known at the royal court. Netter had employed arguments somewhat similar to More's in his refutation of John Wyclif.[25] More had

[20] Confutation, in Complete Works 8/1, 155–56; Dialogue, pp. 20–21, 232, 243, 247, 252.

[21] Confutation, in Complete Works 8/1, 37; Responsio, in ibid. 5/1, 44–45, 469, 633.

[22] Answer, pp. 26–27, 133; Exposition of Chaps. V–VII of St. Matthew's Gospel (Parker Society 44) 100; Prologue to Jonas, in ibid., p. 450.

[23] Dialogue, pp. 95–96; Responsio, in Complete Works 5/1, 100–101.

[24] See Yves M.-J. Congar, O.P., Tradition and Traditions (New York, 1967) pp. 190, 298, 304.

[25] Netter, Doctrinale anti Quitatum [sic] Fidei Ecclesiae Catholicae (Venice, 1571). See Tavard, op. cit., pp. 56–59; Congar, op. cit., pp. 98, 190, 416; J. Beumer, S. J., La tradition orale, tr. P. Roche and P. Maraval (Paris, 1967) pp. 121–23.

also met and possibly been influenced by the German Franciscan Thomas Mürner, whose ecclesiological views resembled his own.[26] He was, of course, an admirer of John Fisher, although Fisher was clearly a papalist.[27]

More's notion of divine truth being written in the hearts of men was saved from subjectivism by an equally strong theory of consensus, a theory which was perhaps the most extreme statement of the position in the entire history of the Church.

Although he did not refer to him, More's view seems to have been basically an elaboration of Vincent of Lerins' doctrine that true teaching is that which has been believed "semper et ubique et ab omnibus." More held that even without close inspection Luther's and Tyndale's doctrines could not be true because they set at nought the traditions of centuries. The whole Church, as the assembly of the faithful, cannot err. Miracles, once performed to demonstrate the truth of Christ's teaching, are no longer necessary in the face of common consensus. Disputed scriptural passages should be submitted to the common judgment of the whole Church rather than to a few theologians, and in fact no formal definition of heresy is necessary because no doctrine has ever been questioned which was not well known to the common people.[28] The teachings of the Protestants, on the other hand, were described as

hearkening against God's undoubted truth, by his holy spirit taught unto his church, and by such multitude of miracles, by so much blood of holy martyrs, by the virtuous living of so many confessors, by the purity and cleanness of so many chaste widows and undefiled virgins, by the wholesome doctrine of so many doctors, and, finally, by the whole consent and agreement of all Christian people this fifteen hundred year confirmed.[29]

For More there was thus no greater evil than to cut oneself off from the Church through heresy. To be so cut off was to wither and die. Heresy was thus an infection which no prince could allow in his domains, and any individual (or individual nation) whose beliefs were contrary to those of the whole was to be cast out.[30] In Utopia one of Hythloday's Christian

[26] See Headley, "Thomas More, Thomas Mürner, and the First Expression of More's Ecclesiology," *Studies in the Renaissance* 14 (1967) 73–92.

[27] Fisher, *Assertionis Lutheranae confutatio* (Venice, 1526).

[28] *Dialogue*, pp. 14, 80, 102, 111, 115, 271, 32, 41, 43–44; *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/1, 120, 167, 182, 223, 265; 8/2, 614, 863; *Supplication of Souls*, ed. Sister Mary Thecla, S.C. (Westminster, Md. 1950) p. 193.

[29] *Dialogue*, p. 255.

[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 134, 144, 305–6, 309, 339; *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/1, 395; *The Apologye of Syr Thomas More, Knyght*, ed. Arthur Irving Taft (Early English Text Society Publications, Original Series 180 [1939]) 73–76.

converts attacked the prevailing state religion and was banished. Hythloday thought this was just and that free and violent theological debate would destroy a commonwealth and trample true religion.[31]

More's position anticipated Cardinal Newman's treatise *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine.* There is no evidence that Newman was familiar with More's polemical writings, but he did cite Fisher.[32] Newman pointed out that in the Arian crisis the faith had been maintained more by the people than the episcopate, more by the *ecclesia docta* than the *ecclesia docens.* In his own day he thought the orthodoxy of the hierarchy was so firm that the notion of *consensus fidelium* had fallen into the background, but it deserved to be revived especially in connection with doctrines touching upon popular devotions.[33] Probably More did not anticipate the apostasy of the English bishops when composing his tracts against Tyndale, but almost as soon as the second one was finished he found himself in the ironic position of continuing to hold as a layman certain positions which all but one of the bishops, his friend Fisher, were prepared to abandon. Among those who accommodated to the new order was Tunstall, although he later returned to Rome under Queen Mary. By his work, therefore, More had unwittingly provided a basis for the continued orthodoxy of English Catholics despite the infidelity of their bishops. By lodging authority in the consensus of the whole Church rather than in the hierarchy, he was precisely preparing for the situation which soon developed in England. Had he known of this aspect of More's thought, Newman might have found it a classic illustration of his own principle.

However, More's theory of consensus went much further than Newman would have allowed and, indeed, much further than virtually any other theologian has allowed. Generally this consensus has been carefully subordinated to the authority of the magisterium, and often limited to truths which have some immediately practical or devotional implication.[34] Yves Congar has pointed out that in the early Church the elements of Scripture, tradition, and Church remained unified, only later

[31] *Utopia,* in *Complete Works* 2, 119–20.

[32] Modern edition by John Coulson (New York, 1961) p. 74. Newman quoted Fisher: "nulla praeceptorum vi, sed consensu quodam tacito tam populi quam cleri, quasi tacitus omnium suffragiis recepta fuit, priusquam ullo conciliorum decreto legimus eam fuisse firmatam."

[33] *Ibid.,* pp. 75–77, 103–4.

[34] See the survey of the question in J. P. Mackey, *The Modern Theology of Tradition* (New York, 1963) pp. 77–78, 95–104, 107, 113–21. See also Josef Rupert Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition,* tr. W. J. O'Hara (New York, 1966) p. 22; P. Clement Dillenschneider, C.Ss.R., *La sens de la foi et le progrès dogmatique du mystère marial* (Rome, 1954) pp. 317–22, 327–31, 338, 340, 343, 361–63; Tavard, "Tradition in Early Post-Tridentine Theology," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 23 (1962) 377–405.

to be separated. The notion of unwritten tradition as simply correct interpretation of Scripture gave way in the sixteenth century to the belief that it was a distinct and even rival source of authority.[35] Henry VIII's *Assertio septem sacramentorum* was among the first works to regard the "customs of the Church" as authoritative in distinction to or even in tension with Scripture.[36] More was in certain ways perhaps the most extreme representative of this Counter Reformation tendency.

John Driedo, an influential theologian and roughly More's contemporary, also held that the preached gospel had primacy over the written gospel and that Christ had not commanded His disciples to write down His words. Scripture contains only essentials and was never intended to exhaust Christian belief. While arguing that customs as well as beliefs are handed down from the early Church, Driedo also warned that some customs were not of apostolic origin and criticized persons who superstitiously sought to defend every custom as being of divine law.[37]

His strictures might have applied to More, whose view of consensus, as rooted in the belief of the whole Church, virtually required him to defend almost every aspect of popular Catholicism. His failure, for whatever reason, to appeal to the authority either of Scripture or of the magisterium left him no basis from which to criticize popular beliefs. He denied that popular devotions were to any significant degree superstitious and insisted that everything having to do with pilgrimages and the veneration of the saints should be respected, as part of the Church's common heritage. He was credulous about relics (whereas Erasmus and Colet had been scornful). When Tyndale asked why women could not be priests, More replied that custom alone validated the prohibition and no specific reason need be adduced.[38] There was perhaps an element of obscurantism in his argument, in that to confound Tyndale he introduced the figure of an illiterate wife and innkeeper and asked how the Bible could be necessary to the knowledge of faith when such a woman could not read it.[39]

The appealing side of this was the evidently warm and almost mystical feeling for the community of believers which More possessed. By all accounts a vivacious and gregarious person, he was highly popular and noted for his charities. In his *Supplication of Souls* he had asserted that the doctrine of purgatory was true because the number of those holding it far exceeded those opposing it. He also lamented that the community of

[35] See Congar, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 305, 378.

[36] See Beumer, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

[37] John L. Murphy, *The Notion of Tradition in John Driedo* (Milwaukee, 1959) pp. 56–57, 63, 68, 76–77.

[38] *Dialogue*, pp. 13, 15, 26–28, 102, 152; *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/1, 262.

[39] *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/2, 896–97.

living and dead had been broken because heretical ideas had persuaded people not to pray for their deceased relatives.[40] In his *Apology* he had warned that although the heretics flattered the laity by exalting them at the expense of the clergy, they denigrated the ancestors of these same laity by implying that they had believed falsely and superstitiously for many centuries.[41] His love for the common people and his great appreciation of their religion were apparent on every page of his polemical works. No Protestant ever exalted the laity more eagerly than this most renowned of lay theologians.

If More's theory of consensus was the most extreme in the entire history of the Church, its very excess perhaps makes it significant, in bringing to light certain dimensions of the idea of *sensus fidelium* which are usually slighted. It is evident, for example, that a strong theory of consensus proceeds from a deeply intuitive and mystical sense of the Church, in contrast to a more functional concept. (Tyndale accepted the existence of a mystical, invisible church but treated the visible church essentially in the latter way.) It has been plausibly argued that the split between Scripture and tradition occurring in the sixteenth century reflected a deeper and largely unperceived split in the European mind between what might be called the "mystical" and "sociological" views of Church and society.[42]

Of necessity, therefore, consensus appears to be connected intimately and organically with the sense of tradition, since the community's identity is largely an inheritance from the past. More was perhaps the first of those modern conservatives who perceived that the "popular will" is not by any means an agency of revolution but rather a force for preservation.

The weakness of More's position, perhaps a trap laid for him in the midst of controversy, was that it gave him no basis on which to explain or justify any kind of change. Logically the Church should have been an absolutely static and immobile reality, although More recognized that in fact it had changed over the centuries. He dealt with such changes, rather unconvincingly, simply by appealing to the providence of God: the liturgy would never have been put in Latin if this were harmful to men's souls.[43]

However, logic was on More's side, and the very consistency of his position tends to demonstrate the inadequacy of a theory of consensus unmodified by theories of superior authority. Although a consensus may

[40] *Supplication*, pp. 152, 172–83.

[41] *Apologye*, p. 47.

[42] André Prévost, *Thomas More et la crise de la pensée européenne* (Lille, 1969) p. 287.

[43] *Dialogue*, p. 157; *Confutation*, in *Complete Works* 8/1, 161.

change, at the moment it begins to change, that is, at the moment when a significant minority of persons begin to modify their beliefs, the weight of the consensus is still against such a change. Thus any change introduced into the consensus goes contrary to it and cannot be justified in terms of the consensus. It can only be justified by appeals to some other and superior principle of authority.

This is further reinforced by the generally recognized sociological fact that significant changes of opinion always originate with small and "untypical" segments of the community and only slowly, if at all, gain general acceptance. The *vox populi* is almost of necessity a restraining force, at least against the most radical proposals for change. It is thus fitting that the greatest spokesman for the laity in the history of the Church should have been a layman who implicitly rebuked his bishops for cowardice and unorthodoxy, a rebel who revolted in the name of authority, an isolated individual who spoke in the name of community. In the Church of today as in the Church of More's time, the *sensus fidelium* will, if properly understood, serve as a principle of conservation.

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