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A NOTE ON BUSLEYDEN'S LETTER TO THOMAS MORE

Busleyden's acquaintance with More's friends predates the publication of *Utopia* by some fifteen years. He first met Erasmus while he was lecturing in jurisprudence at Orléans in 1500. In 1503 he went to Padua to study, where he met Tunstal. It was probably through the good offices of the latter that he met More in 1515, when More and Tunstal were members of the trade delegation to the Low Countries. During this trip Book II of *Utopia* was composed, and it seems likely that More would discuss the ideas of society and government which it contains with such people as Tunstal and Busleyden. Whatever More's personal attitude to the Utopians, he seems to present them as a society which has developed upon purely naturalistic grounds, and at Busleyden's home at Mechlin he could test his own Platonic notions, perhaps derived from Pico, against the rational ideas of Italian Aristotelianism, a tradition with which Busleyden would be familiar from his stay at Padua.

In the edition of *Utopia* Busleyden's letter to More is placed at the beginning between the Latin verses of Geldenhauer and de Schrijver and More's prefatory letter to Giles. Peter Allen suggests that this prefatory material is part of the machinery which More and his friends devised to control the reader's interpretation of the text. More, Erasmus, Busleyden and the others considered themselves an intellectual and social group who were fostering the growth of European humanism. The aim of the machinery therefore, is to identify *Utopia* as a humanist document, and to suggest both the playful attitude and the serious meaning which the author brought to the work.

Because of the prefatory material, Raphael's "story" takes on the aspect of being part of an afternoon's conversation between sophisticated and learned men, a conversation in which imaginative fiction and harsh reality become intermingled. According to Allen, this machinery is essential to a proper interpretation of the context in which *Utopia* must be read (1). The Paris edition of 1517 rearranges the material, placing Busleyden's letter after the text, between More's second letter to Giles, here printed for the first time, and the verses of Geldenhauer and de Schrijver. It may have been thought that the conversational context would be enhanced by placing some of the machinery after the main text. The arrangement of the first edition, where the conversation ends with Raphael's description, gives the impression that the subject is closed. The Paris edition leaves the entire society of the Utopians an open-ended topic. Froben's editions of 1518 vary slightly from this positioning of Busleyden's letter, placing it immediately after the main text and before the poems. The first edition of Robynson's translation reprints only the letter of More to Giles, while the second edition includes also Giles' letter to Busleyden. Lupton reproduces the machinery of the second edition of 1518, with the exception of the letter and verses of Desmarais, in order to establish again the context of *Utopia*, and to show how the book bears on some of the issues of the day (2). The Yale edition adopts the attitude of the Louvain edition in placing all the prefatory material before the main body of the text. Busleyden's letter to More is between the verses of Geldenhauer and de Schrijver, and More's letter to Giles. J. H. Hexter reveals his attitude to Busleyden's letter in his note on the interpretation of *Utopia* which sees the Utopians lacking the specifically Christian virtues :

The only place it is even suggested in the published volume of *Utopia* is in Busleyden's letter to More. After the former's death, Erasmus, in prefacing the Basel edition of

1518, removed the letter from the front where it had stood in the Louvain edition, to the back, perhaps a covert editorial comment. In any case Busleyden neither draws a distinction between the natural and theological virtues nor suggests that *Utopia* exhibited the former but not the latter. He simply picks up More's own occasional references to parallels between Utopia and Plato's commonwealth and draws out an exact parallel in the distribution of excellences among classes which does more credit to his understanding of the *Republic* than to his understanding of *Utopia*, where no such class distribution of virtues is stated or implied. Indeed the whole passage smacks of a humanist showing that he too had read Plato (3).

I would like to suggest as a possibility that the significance of Busleyden's letter rests in the fact that he concentrates on the civil and social values of the Utopian constitution. The Utopians' development has been rationalistic to the point where Raphael seems confused as to the extent of the influence of rationalism :

They never have a discussion of philosophy without uniting certain principles taken from religion as well as from philosophy, which uses rational arguments. Without these principles they think reason insufficient and weak by itself for the investigation of true happiness. The following are examples of these principles. The soul is immortal and by the goodness of God born for happiness. After this life rewards are appointed for our virtues and good deeds, punishment for our crimes. Though these principles belong to religion, yet they hold that reason leads men to believe and admit them (4).

On the other hand, the rational bent of the Paduan Averroists led them to hold just the opposite of this, or perhaps, as with Pomponazzi, to hold that the immortality of the soul cannot be proved by reason and belongs strictly to the

realm of faith (5). Utopus finds it necessary to proscribe those who advance the idea of the mortality of the soul (6). For the Utopians, it is reason that leads us to love God and live a virtuous life, and a morality derived from reason is the truest available, there being at present no revealed religion (7). This reliance on reason creates a gap in the Utopians' view of nature and supernature. Religion does not penetrate their natural lives in the Christian sense that all creation is a manifestation of God's supernatural love. In short, they lack a theory of Grace. Thus an infringement of law has its effects on their natural lives. Etienne Gilson has pointed out that this is the Platonic notion of law, that the world is governed by a higher power for the sake of the governed rather than for the sake of the governor (8). Lapses of conduct hurt only the Utopians, not God. The Augustinian identification of eternal law with the Divine Reason, and thus with the Divine Will, is foreign to them, and they cannot see therefore that a natural act may have such a supernatural consequence as separating them from the Divine Will. When they have sinned, they confess to husband or parent. Their prayers are for good fortune and success. Their only notion of the interpenetration of nature and supernature is that God could, if properly besought, alter the normal course of nature. Generally, the two orders are separate, and it seems to me that Mr. Allen's contention that the Utopians are practising a Christian ethic can bear some qualification. Their ethic may be that which has been subsumed by Christianity, but it lacks the final end of Christian morality, living in Grace, that is, in harmony with the Divine Will.

Busleyden first commends More as a scholar and a man of the world, the latter in the sense that he has assumed as his own problem the condition of all humanity, not just a portion of it. More has delineated that ideal commonwealth which is most perfect and most desirable, better even than Sparta, Athens, and Rome, so that those who care have a plan by which they may consult the

well-being of the whole world. He has manifested a desire to save the modern powerful states from the fate of ancient powers, by showing that in a perfect state the legislative power doesn't so much make laws as discover, formulate and enforce natural laws. Even though the coercive power of magistrates derives from their position, they owe their real influence to their own conduct, for it is by respect rather than force that truly human people are prompted to obey. The picture which More has drawn causes fear and reverence in modern states. He has shown that, when all property is held for the common good and when every action has reference to justice, the sources of intrigue, envy, luxury and injustice are necessarily eliminated. Man is led into these through his greed and ambition, which vices once eliminated, the evils they breed, including the monster of war, will also be eliminated. The great republics of the past have been lost without a trace of their glory remaining, and the modern state can escape this fate only by evolving in the direction of Utopia. Then they can recognize their debt to More for helping preserve not only the individual but the entire state.

Thus Busleyden recognizes that the ethical behaviour of the Utopians is directed to the preservation of both individual and state. Erasmus' *Enchiridion*, which has often been seen as a handbook for the development of ethical humanism, points out that ethical behaviour has its full value in so far as it admits us to the life of Grace (9). By comparing More's Utopia with the pagan states of Sparta, Athens, and Rome, Busleyden draws attention to the naturalism of the Utopians. Although they have gone as far as reason can take them, there is still a great gap between their inner motivation and that of the true Christian.

#### N O T E S.

1) - Peter Allen, *Utopia and European Humanism: The Function of the Prefatory Letters and*

*Verses*, in *Studies in the Renaissance*, Vol. X (1963), 91-107.

2) - Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. J. H. Lupton (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1895), p. viii.

3) - *Utopia*, ed. E. Surtz and J.H.Hexter (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965), Introduction, p.lxvii, n. 2.

4) - *Ibid.*, pp. 161-163.

5) - John Herman Randall, *The Career of Philosophy* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1962), pp. 73-83.

6) - *Utopia*, ed. Surtz and Hexter, p.221.

7) - *Ibid.*, p.163, p.179.

8) - *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A.E. Downes (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p.333.

9) - "The Handbook of the Militant Christian", in *The Essential Erasmus*, trans. John Dolan (Toronto, Mentor-Omega, 1964), pp.49-50.

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