

UTOPIA
AND MORE'S ORTHODOXY

To attempt to assess the doctrinal orthodoxy of a Western scholar in the early decades of the sixteenth century is a more complex undertaking than it might seem. Superficially, it might appear to be sufficient to point to the subject's evident loyalty to the Papacy and the Catholic Church, and to leave the matter there. Indeed, a strong case might be made for an assessment of More's orthodoxy on just such a basis. A man who could declare himself to be "the King's true servant, but God's first", given the religious circumstances of the day, might be written off as one whose orthodoxy was unimpeachable. Yet, this is not the case, for the theological *milieu* of *Utopia* was one of spiritual and theological upsurge, though along a number of necessarily independent lines. Five aspects or movements of this ferment are especially relevant :

1) The influence of Gabriel Biel's writings, by means of which Nominalism was forcefully restated¹ and through his pupil, Johann Nathan, reached Nathan's own pupil, Martin Luther.

2) At almost the same time that More was writing *Utopia*, Luther was delivering his lectures on Romans, a study destined to have far greater significance for Reformation theology than the unedifying back-biting consequent upon the outbreak of the "Church Struggle". Not that there is any evidence to suggest that More had so much as even heard of Luther when he wrote *Utopia*. The two works are of interest here as providing additional planks in the general pattern of creative thought characteristic of the period.

3) The renewal of religious life in Spain associated with Ximenes, and evidenced in that impressive mountain of biblical scholarship the Complutensian Polyglot which, although the New Testament was completed before that of Erasmus, was not put into circulation until 1522.

4) The influence of a Neo-Platonic theology emanating from the Florentine Academy of Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, whose "life", by his nephew, More translated into English.

5) The scholarship of the Christian Humanists culminating in the work of Erasmus, especially his New Testament and editions of the Fathers.

Clearly then, any man as involved in this theological *milieu* as was More cannot lightly be labelled "orthodox" or "heretic", if only because some of the leaders of these movements found themselves condemned

1. For a detailed (though not unbiased) examination of Biel's theology see H. A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Harvard University Press, 1963) ; also *Gabrielis Biel Canonis Missae Expositio*, ed. H. A. Oberman and W. J. Courtenay, 4 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1963-7).

by one group of ecclesiastical authorities, only to be hailed as begetters of new spiritual insights by others. If it is objected that such was More's sanctity that his "orthodoxy" could never be in doubt (a notion not entirely alien to some *amici*) it may justly be pointed out that to "read back" the "mature" More of the 1530s into the "emergent" More of an earlier period is to indulge in theological and historical (and, possibly, psychological !) hindsight. It is More's orthodoxy in *Utopia* with which we are here concerned.

Before turning to the section of *Utopia* specifically devoted to religion, we may note that "religion" permeates the work as a whole and that the Utopians borrow the principles of their philosophy from religion. They never have a discussion of happiness without uniting certain principles taken from religion as well as 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 them and to admit them.¹

In urging the instruction of "philosophy" by "religion" we have both an indication of More's Christian Humanism (for it partakes of Erasmus's insistence on *ratio*) and a dash of Thomism. In its emphasis on the immortality of the soul, and on remuneration "after this life", More would seem to be reflecting something of Erasmian rationality and the Pelagian element in much late fifteenth-century theology which allowed man to earn his salvation, "the rewards for our virtues" and conversely "punishment for our crimes". In the religious language of the day: "To those who do what lies within them, God will not deny grace".²

In the opening sentences of the section on religion More demonstrates the superiority of a revealed religion over the highest form of religion reached by means of human reason. "Religious faith serves as a corrective to fallacious reasoning. In the presence of revelation, weak reason must accept and not reject an apparent repugnance, say, between divine foreknowledge and human freedom".³ This supremacy of religious faith among the Utopians is the basis for More's observation that by far the majority of them,

and those by far the wiser, believe in ... a certain single being, unknown, eternal, immense, inexplicable, far above the reach of the

1) [Ed. E. Surtz and J. Hexter] *Utopia* [Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol.4, (Yale University Press, 1965)] pp. 161/32f. All references to the *Utopia*, whether in footnotes or within my text, are to this edition.

2) See A. T. Levi's Introduction to Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (London, 1971), p. 18ff, for a fuller discussion of this point.

3) *Utopia*, p. 463, note on p. 178/12.

human mind, diffused throughout the universe not in mass but in power. Him they call father. To him alone they attribute the beginnings, the growth, the increase, the changes and the ends of all things as they have perceived them. To no other do they give divine honors. (p. 217/12f).

Despite the polytheism practiced by other Utopians, even they agree with [their wiser brethren] in this respect that they hold there is one supreme being, to whom are due both the creation and the providential government of the whole world. Each professes that whatever that is which he regards as supreme is that very same nature to whose unique power and majesty the sum of all things is attributed by the common consent of all nations. They are, however, all beginning to depart from this medley of superstitions and are coming to unite in that one religion which seems to surpass all the others in reasonableness.¹

Here the Florentine Academy speaks, so does Plato; but so much more clearly does St. John: "in Him was life and the life was the light of men" (1.6). This transcendence of God, a stumbling block at first for Luther, because the concept conjured up for him the picture of an angry Creator, was to become the cornerstone of Calvin's theological position, and of many others besides in the Reformed tradition, whose affinities to More are perhaps closer than has yet been realised. Once again, we see the evidence of common scholarly interests in the same subjects following not dissimilar paths, despite the glaring differences which divided them. It is interesting and instructive to note that in the passage quoted above More states four of the five traditional proofs for the existence of God - the cosmological, the teleological, and when he goes on to state that "whatever that is which he regards as supreme is that very same nature to whose unique power and majesty the sum of all things is attributed by the common consent of all nations" we see More's restatement of the ontological and *e consensu gentium* arguments. The remaining theistic proof, that of the moral argument, runs through many a page of *Utopia*.

More's reasons, as voiced by Hythlodæus, for the readiness of the Utopians to receive Christianity contain instructive insights for our purpose. He tells us that "they had heard from us the name of Christ" (p. 217/36), a statement redolent of sayings in the Acts and the Pauline Epistles concerning baptism in the name of Jesus (In a slightly altered sense, by substituting God for Christ, we are also entitled to see affinities with the Wisdom literature). Still more significant is More's opinion "that this factor, too, was of no small weight, that they had heard that His disciples' common way of life had been pleasing to Christ, and that it is still in use

1. *Utopia* p. 217/18f, with a few departures from the Yale translation.

among the truest societies of Christians" (p.219/5f). Here we are face to face with the ideal picture of the pattern of life of the Church in Acts 2,42. At the same time there may be just a hint of Pelagianism in the suggestion that this "way of life had been pleasing to Christ", while the observation that it was still in use "among the truest societies of Christians" may be legitimately related to More's own time and the London Charterhouse. Here, surely, More is both the Humanist Biblical Scholar and the traditionalist Catholic in his love of the ordered monastic life as he had known it in the Charterhouse, even though that was the least coenobitic of orders.

The upshot was that "not a few joined our religion and were cleansed by the water of baptism" (p. 219/9). How else? It would be unwise to draw any other conclusion than that More is thinking solely of baptism as the gateway into the Church.

The next paragraph is of still greater significance for it would seem to question the necessity of episcopal ordination. There was no priest among Hythlodæus' companions. Consequently, the Utopian neophytes

were initiated in all other matters, but so far they lack those sacraments which with us only priests administer. They understand, however, what they are, and desire them with the greatest eagerness. Moreover, they are even debating earnestly among themselves whether, without the dispatch of a Christian bishop, one chosen out of their own number might receive the *sacerdotal character* [italics mine]. It seemed that they would choose a candidate, but by the time of my departure they had not yet done so. (p. 219/10f).

Was the chosen candidate to be sent away for ordination? That is certainly an obvious interpretation, but it may be argued that the key words are *sacerdotal character*. Here, again, it may be urged that the candidate was to be sent to receive it, for the consensus of theological opinion is that once bestowed the priestly character can never be removed. Equally, however, the passage can be taken to mean that the choice is that of *vox populi*, and that the candidate (possibly by employing the doctrine of intention) would thus be empowered to do all that a priest could do.

It is interesting in this connexion to speculate on the extent to which the possible (at least) views of More may have been derived from the teaching of Gerson who, as More would know, had been the protector of the Brethren of the Common Life at the Council of Constance. Gerson held that it was within the power of a simple priest to confer the diaconate and priesthood, provided he possessed a papal indult to do so, and he was not the first, nor only, scholar to suggest that this power lay within the nature of the priestly office.

During the fifteenth century Bulls had been promulgated granting authority to specified priests to ordain. The Bull of Innocent VIII, of 1489, granting to the General of the Cistercians and four other abbots, and their successors for ever, the right to confer the diaconate on their subjects is not an isolated case. In 1400, Boniface IX gave to the Abbot of St. Osyth,

in the diocese of London, the right to confer both the diaconate and the priesthood upon the members of his abbey. An indult of 1427, granted by Martin V, empowered the Abbot of the Cistercian Abbey of Altzele, in the diocese of Meissen, to confer on all his subjects *omnes etiam sacros ordines*. Three indults: are there others still to come to light? Some notion of the stir created by the promulgation of the 1400 Bull can be gauged from the speed with which it was withdrawn three years later by another Bull (which, nevertheless, recapitulated the terms of the first) on the grounds that it had infringed upon the rights and jurisdiction of the Bishop of London.¹

Discussion of the right of a priest to ordain arose, in the West, from time to time from the days of Cyprian, whose Epistles show presbyters to have been fully in control of a diocese (as then understood) *sede vacante*.² Jerome supplied further ammunition to the debate on this subject by asking "What does a bishop that a priest does not?"³ while Augustine, writing to Jerome, says that "according to the titles of *honour* [italics mine] as now sanctioned, a bishop ranks higher than a priest."⁴ Again, Ambrosiaster asks: "Why does Paul put the setting up of deacons after that of bishops, save that the bishop and presbyter have a single status (*ordinatio*)? Each is a priest but the bishop is prior." Isidore repeats these arguments, though he points out "that some of the lawyers say that episcopacy is the name of a function, not of an honour". Peter Lombard, commenting on Philippians 1.1, argues that presbyters are there described as bishops because there could not be more than one bishop in each place; when commenting on 1 Timothy 3,4, he again argues that episcopacy is the name of a function, not of a rank. Sicard, Bishop of Cremona from 1185 until 1215, advances what is perhaps the most extreme view of all when he says: "Whatever sacraments were administered by Peter, these can be given by any priest".⁵

With Aquinas a reaction sets in against the views summarized above. Nevertheless, his teaching has been interpreted thus: "though at his consecration a bishop receives something that is indelible, it could not strictly be called a sacramental character, since it has to do with members of the Mystical Body and does not bring the subject into direct relation with God".⁶ Later mediaeval theologians for the most part held that episcopacy was an order in its own right, possessed of a distinctive sacramental character.

1. ed. H. F. Davis, *et al.*, *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology*, Vol. I (Edinburgh, 1962), p. 32; H. Immerz, *De Sacramento Ordinis* (Rome, 1955), pp. 145-7.

2. Cf. *St. Cyprian's Epistles* (Library of the Fathers), (Oxford, 1844), pp. 1,9,36, 37, in particular.

3. See S. Jerome's Epistles (C.S.E.L., Vol. 56), 308ff.

4. S. Augustine, *Letters*, Vol. I (Fathers of the Church, Vol. 12), (New York, 1951), p. 418.

5. For references, see *A Catholic Dictionary of Theology*, Vol. I, pp. 277-9.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

The object of the foregoing *excursus* might at first sight seem to have carried us away from our subject. In fact, that is not so. The nature of the priestly office had been questioned by Pico, who was but giving expression to a concern shared by others, and it is worth recalling that More was the translator of the "life" of Pico by his nephew. In England, the memory of the Hunne case was still very green, while the observation of Bishop Fitzjames, of London, that it would be impossible to empanel a jury who would not return a "guilty" verdict on any cleric tried before it, however innocent the accused might be of the charge alleged against him, is clear evidence of the deep-rooted anticlericalism of the day.¹ If, as is here maintained, *Utopia* was designed to be a "tract for the times", the references apparently allowing (if not advocating) presbyteral ordination are of significance in any attempt to assess More's orthodoxy in Utopian orthodoxy.

If, on the other hand, *Utopia* should be treated simply as a piece of satire, then More's opinion of the importance to the clergy of their ordination cannot be given a very high rating. It is, of course, arguable that in this section his views might be labelled "non-conformist" rather than as "unorthodox".

Another element in More's theology relevant to our purpose is that of tolerance. His attitude towards tolerance in *Utopia* is in sharp contrast to that we find in his dealings with those whom he regarded as "heretics" at a later date. In *Utopia*, says Hythlodæus,

those who do not agree with the religion of Christ do not try to deter others from it ... Only one of our company, while I was there, was interfered with. As soon as he was baptised, in spite of our advice to the contrary, he spoke publicly of Christ's religion with more zeal than discretion. He began to grow so warm in his preaching that not only did he prefer our worship to any other but he condemned all the rest. He proclaimed them to be profane in themselves and their followers to be impious and sacrilegious and worthy of everlasting fire. When he had long been preaching in this style, they arrested him, tried and convicted him not for despising their religion but for stirring up a riot among the people. His sentence after the verdict of guilty was exile. Actually, they count this principle among their most ancient institutions, that no one should suffer for his religion. (p. 219/21f).

The possibility of rebellion under the guise of religion was a danger to which sixteenth century rulers and churchmen were acutely alive. Because "God hath created and disposed all things in a comely order ... we ought in all commonweals to observe and keep a due order ... Our Saviour himself, and his apostles, received many injuries of the unfaithful and

1. A. Ogle, *The Tragedy of the Lollards' Tower* (Oxford, 1949) discusses the issue in great detail.

wicked men in authority, yet we have never read that they ... caused any sedition or rebellion against authority", declares the "Second Part of the Sermon on Obedience" in the *Book of Homilies* of 1542 while the "Second Book" contains a homily entirely directed "Against Wilful Rebellion". Admittedly, the *Book of Homilies* is very much "post-More"; especially the second collection, which was not published until 1571. Yet, when it is remembered that the reading of the Homilies was obligatory for all clergy not holding a preaching licence (and there were many such), the frequency with which any single congregation was reminded of this due obedience to Church and State, the horror of disobedience shared by most sixteenth-century preachers can be appreciated.¹ Already in More's day the Paul's Cross sermons (a platform for political as well as religious preachers) bear impressive witness to that fact.² Thus, toleration is not a virtue readily associated with More's century and the extent to which he advocates its practice is all the more important.

Utopus, he tells us, having heard that the inhabitants were quarrelling among themselves

ordained that it should be lawful for every man to follow the religion of his choice, that each might strive to bring others over to his own, provided that he quietly and modestly supported his own by reasons nor bitterly demolished all others if his persuasions were not successful nor used violence and refrained from abuse. (p. 221/3f).

Such toleration (defended not only in *Utopia* but in some of More's later writings) would apparently place More years (if not centuries) ahead of his time. There can be little doubt but that we can discern in his attitude something of the influence of the Florentine Academy. Pico, in his *Dignity of Man*, had argued in favour of all philosophical and theological systems as having a place in the Economy, of which Christianity is the ultimate expression. Ficino, too, had found a place for other philosophies and had maintained that the distinguishing marks of the Christian religions were teaching by reason, conversion by prayer, suffering in patience and virtuous living. The suggestion that man should be free to choose his religion, coming from More, seems completely out of character with Catholic "orthodoxy" as then understood – and for that matter, from More's own later practice. It cannot, however, be brushed under the carpet by suggesting that this is not More's thought. Rather, it stamps More very firmly as a Christian Humanist rather than as a Mediaevalist.

In condemning elaborate and expensive funerals, More is in agreement with Erasmus and some of the Reformers:

Almost all Utopians are absolutely certain and convinced that human bliss will be so immense that, while they lament every man's illness, they regret the death of no one but him whom they see torn from

1. J. W. Blench, *Preaching in England in the 15th and 16th Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), p. 273.

2. Surtz, *Utopia*, p. 521, points out the similarity between the views of the Utopians and those of Queen Elizabeth I and her advisers.

life anxiously and unwillingly. This behavior they take to be a very omen as though the soul, being without hope and having a guilty conscience, dreaded its departure through a secret premonition of impending punishment ...

On the other hand, when men have died cheerfully and full of good hope, no one mourns for them, but they accompany their funeral with song, with great affection commending their souls to God" (p. 223/21f).

This view of death is far removed from the somewhat negative attitude of the fifteenth century, accompanied by the (to some sub-Christian) funeral rites evidenced in the forms of assistance authorised by the Church to aid the departed: Masses, Offices, pilgrimages, contribution of prayers and money to specified good works which earned some remission of punishment due to sin already forgiven. How far removed is More's attitude as expressed in *Utopia* from that in the will (made in 1457) of John Birchdale, clerk, of the *familia* of the Archbishop of Canterbury: "Since evil and short are the days of man, and the divide of death ought not to be forgotten, and death like a lurking robber rushes to seize a man, so it is that in the pain of sickness, when bitter death approaches my mind ... I now make my will".¹ This is one more instance of the difficulty of assigning *Utopia* to the late Middle Ages, where the attitude to death and its accompanying ceremonies is much closer to that of the unedifying death-bed scene described by Erasmus in his Colloquy "The Funeral", where the unfortunate sufferer is left to die alone while monks and clergy dispute all round him for their own ends. Presumably, More's references to cremation are to be understood in the context of his decrying of expensive funerals. Their advocacy of euthanasia presents a much more difficult problem. From the pen of so devout a son of the Church, it is probably to be understood in the light of the Platonic influences at work in *Utopia* and which More voices through Hythlodæus. Admittedly, this is an unsatisfactory dismissal of a difficult point which, if taken at face value would call in question More's orthodoxy in a still more complex ecclesiological milieu than that of the sixteenth century.

More's orthodoxy in *Utopia* (granted that the work is not just satire) can only be "aired" within the limits of a single paper. It is an on-going subject for debate and this article will have more than served its purpose if it leads to further probings by amici.

Meanwhile, one further observation may be offered here, arising out of his concept of mutual responsibility and his argument in favour of common ownership. Here again, More is at once both a man of his time and a man ahead of it. The notion of a Christian Commonwealth is central

1. Quoted by F.R.H. DuBoulay, *An Age of Ambition* (London, 1970), p. 147. The will of More's father (1530) resembles Birchdale's: both are highly Biblical (Job, Gospel, death the thief etc.)

to the Christian Faith, and More was not the first to set it forward as an ideal, but the notion that it is in some sense coterminous with the realm does not really come to the fore until the reign of Edward VI (whatever his father might have declared about this realm of England being an empire!) The definitive concept of "the Christian Commonwealth of the realm" is best expressed in the *De Regno Christi* of Martin Bucer, the Strasbourg Reformer who held the Regius Chair of Divinity at Cambridge in 1550-51. His treatise idealises the England for which it was written. Like More before him, Bucer urges the importance of education, decries war, makes provision for good government and the ordering of society based upon the twin ideals of common ownership and mutual responsibility. Like More, Bucer discusses the obligations of marriage, the legitimacy of divorce and concurs with More that death should be the ultimate penalty for adultery. A detailed comparison of *Utopia* with *De Regno Christi* has still to be undertaken but when it is it may be reasonably presumed that both works will be found to be out of the same stable. Of the first generation of the Reformers Bucer is ahead of his colleagues in realising the need for Christian Humanist scholarship to be related to society and, in the final analysis, it may well turn out that the bond of Christian Humanism is of greater significance than ecclesiastical or national loyalties. Certainly, it is one which precludes any easy or facile definition of "orthodoxy".

Birmingham Bible Institute.

Robert PETERS.

*

... *quanquam hoc quoque fuisse non paulum momenti crediderim, quod CHRISTO communem suorum uictum audierant placuisse, & apud germanissimos Christianorum conuentus adhuc in usu esse.* (218/4f)

"This factor, too, was of no small weight, that they had heard that His disciples' common way of life had been pleasing to Christ and that it is still in use among the truest societies of Christians." (219/5f)

*

Hoc inter antiquissima instituta numerant, ne sua cuiquam religio fraudi sit. (218/29f)

"Actually, they count this principle among their most ancient institutions, that no one should suffer for his religion." (219/34f)

*

Rationem porro, mortales primum omnium in amorem, ac uenerationem diuinæ maiestatis incendere, cui debemus, & quod sumus, & quod competes esse felicitatis possumus, secundum id commonet, atque excitat nos ut uitam quam licet minime anxiam, ac maxime laetam ducamus ipsi, caeterisque omnibus ad idem obtinendum adiutores nos pro naturæ societate praebeamus. (162/22f)

"Now reason first of all inflames men to a love and veneration of the divine majesty, to whom we owe both our existence and our capacity for happiness. Secondly, it admonishes and urges us to lead a life as free from care and as full of joy as possible and, because of our natural fellowship, to help all other men, too, to attain that end." (163/26f)

*

Arthur B. Ferguson, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, April-June 1968.

"Central as it is to the study of More's thought and eminently readable to boot, Hexter's essay is a hard one for his colleague to follow. Father Surtz provides us none the less with insights which greatly enhance our appreciation of *Utopia* and deepen our understanding of More's genius. Not only does he show how More achieved the effect of dramatic intensity, especially in the Dialogue, but he reveals in the process a good deal about More's subjective thought. In fact, it is in this area where the work of the literary critic and the intellectual historian naturally overlap that Surtz seems at his best. The character of Hythlodæus, for example, becomes not merely an artistic creation, indeed 'one of the neglected great figures of European literature', but also the personification of that very element of radical humanism which at this point in his career constituted so large a part of More's own thinking. 'This radical humanist is one of More's greatest triumphs.' Much the same may be said of Surtz's treatment of More's sources and parallels, a subject in less skillful hands only too likely to degenerate into a mere display of scholarship. It must be remembered... that Surtz's contribution is by no means confined to the introduction. Valuable as that part unquestionably is, it is little more than the visible tip of the iceberg; his notes alone occupy nearly half the entire volume. It is here that his truly formidable erudition, held barely in check in the introduction, spills over in a flood of references, parallels, and explanations. Some of this scholarship gives the impression of having been inserted pretty much for its own sake. Yet it is here perhaps more than anywhere else that Surtz has placed scholars lastingly in his debt."