

ON MORE AND THE PAPACY

The appearance of the Yale edition of More's *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* is an event of major significance for students of English literature and of the Reformation. Text, introductory essays, appendices, and commentary cohere to constitute a beacon illuminating the intellectual cross-currents of the period and a powerful instrument for the further investigation of Reformation thought. Beyond the product of the book itself stands the moral achievement represented by ten years of labor on the part of four scholars whose various talents and interests have been superbly mobilized and directed by the Executive Editor R. S. Sylvester to the fulfilment of this awesome endeavour.

The purpose of this note, however, is not to review the *Confutation* but to take issue with some of the statements made by Professor Marius in his otherwise splendid essay on "Thomas More's View of the Church". Regrettably, he has seriously misconstrued my own treatment of the same subject which appeared in the Introduction of the *Responsio ad Lutherum* and has used it, or rather a distortion of it, to present the conciliarist strain in More. His criticisms and objections can be reduced to two overriding assertions: that according to my Introduction "More came to see himself as a 'papist'" (8, 1314); and that in spite of all the problems involved, the outlines of More's view of the papacy are fairly clear (8, 1311). In both cases Marius' treatment appears to this reader to be simplistic.

Regarding the first point, as a mere matter of fact the imputing of papist or "papist" - the purpose of the quotation marks remains ambiguous and confusing - to More never appears on 5, 770-71 or anywhere else in my treatment of More's ecclesiology. Although the careless reader might claim, particularly in the light of an earlier statement (cf. 5, 769), that such was the implication to the real presence of the term in my introduction and proceeds to lecture the now bewildered and increasingly pained author that those eyes he had believed to be open to historical anachronisms must not be shut "against the variety and multiform character of the past" (8, 1315).

Indeed for anyone who wishes to penetrate beyond the post-Tridentine, Romanist effort to associate More with a simplistic and absolute papalism, it soon becomes evident that More's view of the church, as Marius will gladly attest, lies in another direction. For one specifically who struggled to construct the conciliarism of

More in express agreement with his learned colleague, Richard Marius, for one who was anything but "reluctant to place More in the conciliar tradition" (8, 1314) it was only with the greatest reluctance that he became convinced that More's understanding of the church lay still in another direction. Certainly all notions of polity in More's thought point to conciliarism; his ideas of limited or constitutional monarchy, his deep distrust of monarchy itself are more congruent with conciliarism than with the papacy as we have come to know it (cf. 5, 773). But now by rendering an oblique reference regarding the assembling of bishops into a case for the concrete institutionalization of councils as the receptacle of the Holy Spirit, Marius would seem to find the proof text for his interpretation in the very text of his disabused and doubting colleague.

How reluctant can one be? Indeed how stupid can one be? Apparently very, for I remain unimpressed and unmoved. Granted the passage Marius quotes from the *Responsio* is a palpable hit, the sense of the passage would make the whole church as *domus* the recipient of, and suffused by, the Holy Spirit. In a beautifully articulated exposition of the passage Marius in fact suggests this aspect of the text, an aspect which, in an honest effort to reconstruct my previous neglect of this text, helps explain, if it does not excuse, my failure to give it greater attention. The emphasis falls upon the "comon knowen church" and *consensus*.

Whatever conciliarist strains may lurk in the *Responsio*, the full weight of More's ecclesiological view lies elsewhere. In contradistinction to the plodding character of the first version of the *Responsio*, where More mechanically troops out the required arguments to counter his opponent - almost undistinguished and undistinguishable, like so many slices from the same sausage - the second version of the *Responsio* represents a dramatic shift that lifts his argument out of its routine pattern and allows him to express his full mind and conviction on the matter at hand. With the intrusion of the H gathering the *Rosseus* reveals a concentration, passion, conviction, at last More's taking hold of his opponent's argument, the drama of realizing the point at issue - the threat of Luther's reform and the direction of the Reformation as a whole. And what is the point? That *consensus* is not enough, for if the church is to know itself and to maintain that community and universality, it must have a recognizable touchstone in the papal primacy, divinely founded. Otherwise the common church may not

come to be known to itself. And More will go on to perceive that to attack the See of Rome is to attack not only the identity of the church but every form of magistracy.

More's assertion of the papal primacy in the autumn of 1523 represents a momentous shift in his over-all stance to the church. Heretofore his attitude to the papal primacy appears to have been that its origins were human and derived from administrative need. Such an attitude was dangerously akin to Luther's in his exposition of the fateful thirteenth thesis of the Leipzig debates, which had circulated earlier in England as an extensive treatise entitled *De potestate papae*. Luther had in effect removed the question of the papacy from its conciliar context and placed it in a new framework that pertained to the church's very nature and continuity in time. No thinking person living in the twenties would ever be quite the same after having encountered Luther's challenge. For Luther had cast a challenge concerning the nature of the church into the antique Roman fold - a challenge that confronted the generation of the twenties and would continue to confront later generations. The placid, almost mindless, acceptance of catholicism was no longer to be. The great divide had begun to emerge and More made his choice. Thus to claim that More's shift in 1523 was of little importance as a practical matter (8, 1314) is a strangely puzzling, if not meaningless, statement. How can profession and performance be separated from conviction, particularly in the case of one such as Thomas More?

Yet once having come to a new appreciation and understanding of the papacy and its meaning for the church, More is unable to expatiate upon it. And here we encounter Professor Marius' second assertion: namely, the essential clarity of More's view of the papacy. Whatever qualities his view may appear to share with the conciliar tradition and late medieval thought on the papacy More is never in a position to expand his affirmation of the papal primacy. Agreed, there is no question of sovereignty or of a capacity to define doctrine in More's understanding of the papacy. The only attributes that he clearly bestows upon the papacy are as a yardstick for the identification of the Christian *consensus* and as the supreme embodiment of magistracy. The papacy becomes a given to which he constantly returns. More's needs neither required nor did his situation allow him to define the papacy any further, but its reality and importance for him are never in doubt. Indeed during a period of increasing strife between spirituality and commonalty his own situation as counsellor, then chancellor, and finally in retirement prevents him from speaking his mind without em-

barrassing his king and shattering the subtle balance of forces that More was able to contain for a while in his person. The conciliarist strain within More's ecclesiology sees development during these very years when any formal expression of the papal primacy in the vulgar tongue would have proved potentially explosive in the increasingly charged atmosphere after 1529. In fact the arc of King Henry's own conciliarism with its appeal to a council dominated by princes includes these years 1530 to 1536 and reaches its apex in June 1533, thereby defining a period concurrent with More's composition of the *Confutation*.

Nevertheless along with the timeliness of the conciliarist strain in the *Confutation*, which More could easily afford to express and which was obviously congruent with his notions of community, universality and the role of the laity, there persists in a muted undertone the vital adherence to Rome. As Professor Lusardi points out (8, 1424-5), there are several places in the *Confutation*, and particularly as evinced in its truncated ninth book, where suppressions have occurred in order not to embarrass the king in his present struggle with the pope. By these very silences, suppressions and lacunae the idea of obedience to Rome is reflected and its importance evident. In the interchanges with the king's council that culminated in More's trial, Cromwell, seeking a precise answer from More on the royal supremacy, will remind the prisoner that as chancellor he had readily forced heretics to say yes or no to questions on the pope's supremacy (Rogers, 557-8). And when More makes his great witness as the final act in his own defense during the trial, he will assert above an act of Parliament that higher law of God, by first appealing to the supreme government of his church and that spiritual preeminence vested in the See of Rome.

From 1523 to his death in 1535 the fact of papal primacy runs as a continuing thread through More's thinking on the church, providing the touchstone for the church's identity. Even to Cromwell on March 5, 1534, in his apparent denial of the papal primacy and of having meddled with the belief, More obliquely gives expression to his conviction (Rogers, p. 498). Marius would insinuate that my analysis of More's position stopped short at 1523 and did not take into account the English works (8, 1339). But such was not the case, and now as then I see nothing in the later development of More's ecclesiastical ideas which would modify the central importance he gives to the papal primacy. Amidst the increasing attention More freely bestows upon councils in the early thirties, we need to listen carefully to the evident silences and ponder the ominous lacunae in his writings. More's personal situation in a

changed and changing England enforced these silences and lacunae up to the great witness as the final defense in his trial. On the other hand in the interim he can freely exploit the role of councils in so far as they affirm and express *consensus* and the common corps of Christendom. Here again Professor Marius misconstrues my argument (cf. 8, 1314). The essential papalism of England and her undistinguished role in the conciliar period would, of course, not prevent an international figure such as More from resorting to the ideas of the continental conciliarists. But the absence of a strong conciliar tradition in the English experience helps us to understand the context of More's thought as well as to appreciate the marked attention paid to councils both by the king and his former chancellor in the early thirties.

More's life, political career, and death attest to one who was different from the normally detached thinker. His thought was engaged, but its expression was constrained. Thus it would appear that his understanding of the church, although cast in a traditional mold, was peculiarly personal, even existential, — its main features formulated in an earlier period of his career but its expression determined by the exigencies of the Henrician matter. More pursued a lonely road during these years, one that reflected less any intellectual indebtedness to Gerson and D'Ailly than to the uniquely terrible situation in which a truly catholic conscience found itself. Neither his interests nor his situation encouraged More to give clarity to his understanding of the papacy and of councils and the relationship between them. Consequently we need to restrain ourselves from demanding answers to questions which More neither raised nor ever cared to raise. More's resort to a council like his enduring adherence to the divinely founded papal primacy is real enough but in each instance, whether he is appealing to council or to pope, his intention is directed beyond the narrowly constitutional issues of the church to the greater realities of the common corps of Christendom and of a *consensus* begotten by divine inspiration. Therefore we should be most reluctant to affix any of the traditional tags of conciliarist or papist to his ideas respecting the church.

In fairness to my gifted colleague and his labored criticism of my introduction it should be noted that he is less interested in affixing any new tag to More than in exposing the conciliarist strain in his thought. And in this respect Professor Marius has rendered a real service to scholarship on More. But it would be a considerable disservice to suggest that the conciliar comes to displace or supplant the papal element in More's understanding of the church. Both co-

exist : the papal as a constant, essential to his entire view of the church, giving identity to the church ; the conciliar, developed by circumstances, nevertheless as best, expressing that total community which is the church.

*University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill*

JOHN M. HEADLEY



Charles C. Doyle

writes from Los Angeles on 16 June 1973 :

"... Moreana 31 was a good issue. I especially enjoyed Constance Smith's presentation and exegesis of the "Vision" (p. 5-13). I'm rather skeptical of her identification of the eagle in Stanza IV with Wolsey, the hawk with More. Why the feminine pronouns ? Certainly the royal eagle would be either Queen Catherine or else the Roman Church herself, and the hawk (initially obedient, later wayward) Anne Boleyn or the Protestant faith in general. It hardly compliments More to imagine him "taught to come when as he lur'd", and then "by stealth to others calls enur'd" !

In the Watergate hearings on television the other day Chairman Ervin reprimanded one of Nixon's henchmen by quoting the Shakespearean Wolsey's dying words about getting left naked to his enemies (Senator Ervin - that wonderful old man - assigned the speech to "Shakespeare's play Henry IV").