

WHY IS THERE NO UNIVERSITY IN UTOPIA ?

(Presented after dinner at a conference organized by the Thomas More Society of the University of Notre Dame, Oct. 2, 1982.)

Thomas More always kept the welfare of the university close to his heart -- more, perhaps, than some of its doctors -- because it was a key institution of Christendom. In his letter to Dorp (1515) More wrote that Rome had the most distinguished of all the universities, perhaps because of what Erasmus might have told him about it or simply because of the advantages of its location at the center of Christendom. ¹

The remark about Rome occurs along with references to Padua and Bologna in the context of his comments about Louvain and Paris, where he had been « seven years » earlier. He had not spent much time there, he admits, but enough to inform himself about the subjects they taught and the methods of instruction. I admire them both, he concludes, « but after having found out all I could by personal presence or by inquiry when not there, I have up to now no reason for wanting my children ... to receive their education, even in dialectics, at either university rather than at Oxford or Cambridge ». He was already contemplating the education of his children when Margaret, the oldest, was just ten (-- being a girl, she would not go to college anyway).

Oxford, where More had spent two years studying the liberal arts before his legal training, received his keenest attention, and he knew it the best. He writes of the university « that has always outshone Cambridge » with extravagance, calling it « that illustrious seat of letters, » « that ancient nursery of learning whose products have been an ornament not only to England but to the whole Church. » No university anywhere can compare with it in its bountiful provisions for the support of needy students. « May God grant that it continue to flourish in virtue and in all the liberal arts. »

When appointed to be their legal and business counsel in 1524, he was moved to express his great affection for « those esteemed and cultured gentlemen ... before whom I have stood in awe since my youth, and whom I have respected, and whose gratitude I have always endeavoured to earn, and whose affection I have prayed to win. » This latest display of their good will toward him crowns all the previous favors they have

shown him. It appears that More reacted with almost boundless gratitude for this recognition from his Alma Mater.

But in such an outpouring of sentiment, is there just a touch of irony perhaps ? « You can ever expect from More, » he concludes in this letter of 1524, « all that you would desire, either as a group from a most devoted patron and friend, or individually, from a very dear comrade and brother. » More's wit and wisdom in his dealing with Oxford is best shown in his famous letter of 1518 urging the faculty to retain the study of Greek.

He wonders, at the outset, whether he, « a former student of the university, » might be permitted to communicate to scholars of their distinction certain conclusions to which he has recently come. He hesitates to approach so brilliant a group for fear of seeming to give an exhibition of pride and arrogance. « Who am I, the possessor of little prudence and less practice, a scholar of mediocre proportions, to arrogate to myself the right to advise you in anything ? And how can I dare to offer advice in the field of letters especially, when any one of you is fitted by his wisdom and erudition to give advice in that field to thousands ? »

That was his first thought. Then he had a second thought, and it encouraged him to go ahead. « For it occurred to me that only ignorant and arrogant fools would disdain to give a man a hearing, and that the wiser and more learned you were, the less likely you would be to think highly of yourselves or to scorn the advice of others. » This thought made him even bolder to think that such just judges would not harm one offering advice without thinking of the consequences. Surely they will rather thank him for loyal and affectionate, even if imprudent, advice.

Finally, he writes out of a sense of obligation, he says, as a loyal friend, rather than passing over in silence something that ought to be brought to their attention. For « it was at your university that my education began » and « whatever slight learning I have acquired » is due to your efforts. Therefore, even at the risk of seeming impertinent to some, it would be worse to be condemned for ingratitude. He feels bound to defend to his utmost the honor of the university in the matter that brings him to write.

Lifting, now, the irony, he lets them have it ; it has fallen to him to « prevent the decay of learning » in the situation that has developed. A few members of the University, moved, says More, by a perverse sense of humor, have formed a society named « The Trojans » and have given themselves Greek names -- Priam, Hector, Paris -- for the purpose

of pouring ridicule on those devoted to the study of Greek letters. But the joke is really on them because they are innocent of how good Greek literature is.

« I am somewhat bitter, » More writes, that some academics have nothing better to do in their spare time than to cast slurs on the subjects of their colleagues. Evidently one cannot expect a « whole crowd of academics to possess wisdom, temperance, and humility. » The silliness of the Trojans has even approached insanity in a Lenten sermon wherein one of them berated not only Greek but all classical scholarship and humane studies, taking his departure from some stupid British proverbs.

The wisdom in More's wit begins to have a parallel with today's universities and explains why there is no university in Utopia as he warms to his critique. Who would not groan at the degradation of the office of preaching at the hands of those whose supreme duty it is to protect it ? « Who could possibly have devised a more outrageous insult than for an avowed preacher, ... in the presence of a large congregation, from the elevation of the pulpit, and in view of the Sacred Body of Christ, to turn a Lenten sermon into Bacchanalian ravings ? » Those who had expected to listen in reverence to the Word of Life received instead a scandalous defamation of the preaching office.

With obvious delight More heaps epithet upon epithet as he exposes an underlying hatred of the higher arts. « No one has ever claimed that a man needed Greek and Latin, or indeed any education at all, in order to be saved. » Children can receive all they need at home from their mothers ... as they do in Utopia. Why a university, then ? Why « cultivation and book learning » ? Why are there universities in Christendom ? Why do people send their children to places like Oxford ?

More's answer is simple and it is direct : To have their souls trained in virtue. How ? By studying the laws of human nature and conduct. And how can they better do that than by reading the best poets, the best orators, the best historians ? -- in short, « a humanistic education. » For the purpose of a university is to build a path to the contemplation of things supernatural through precision in the liberal arts, in things natural and rational.

What has More been doing in this letter ? « Joking aside, » he says, « I am exhorting you to do your duty » and to maintain the great prestige your university has acquired by retaining those studies which « the universal Church » so rightly recommends. (Today, perhaps, it is something else recommended by the Church, Greek having long since

perished in most places, that universities seem so ready to discard).

More's sage advice is still applicable : « You see much better than I that, if wicked factions are not suppressed at birth, a contagious disease will spread, and the better be slowly absorbed by the worse, and that outsiders will be forced to take a hand in helping the good and wise among you » to set the university back upon its true course. For learning will surely perish if the university continues to suffer from these contentions and the most serious things « are allowed to be made sport of with impunity. »

« I think you see what I mean, » More concludes, and I conclude. « Much more could be said to the point by men with better wits than mine. »

1. *Selected Letters of St. Thomas More*, edited by Elizabeth Frances Rogers (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1961), letter 4, p. 17. The passages quoted hereafter are drawn from letters 19, 25 and 36 in the same edition.

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NOT MORE'S UTOPIA.

Writes Franklin B. Williams on 24 Sept. 1982 :

Dear Father M.,

This note is primarily a caution to MOREANA, not to worry about EITHER of the following, which say nothing about MORE but are concerned with XIX-XX century Utopianism :

1. *Lawrence I. Berkove, « Two Impossible Dreams : Ambrose Bierce on Utopia and America, » HUNTINGTON LIB. QUARTERLY, xlv 1981, 283-292 (Autumn 1981) = 4.*

2. *South Atlantic Modern Language Assoc., 1982 annual meeting at Atlanta, Ga., Nov. 11-13 1982. Special session, 9 a.m. Sat Nov. 13, topic : The Quest for 'Utopia' in 20th Century Prose Fiction ... » 4 papers.*
