

A RESPONSE TO ALISTAIR FOX'S TREATMENT OF THOMAS MORE AS A RELIGIOUS POLEMICIST.

In Alistair Fox's psychohistorical *Thomas More -- History and Providence* (New Haven and London, 1982), the analysis of More's religious polemics plays a pivotal part. As Fox writes :

Both More the saint and More the humanist as scholarship has so far presented them are fictions....

Scholarship finds itself in such a position because the third More has never been properly assessed.

This, he says, is because scholars have failed to grapple with More's controversial works, concentrating instead on his early and late writings.

It is little wonder, then, that scholarship has tended to dismember More into parts that seem not to relate when the vital material that connects them is so persistently overlooked (pp. 1-3).

According to Fox, before More embarked on writing religious polemics, he had managed « to combine all the diverse aspects of his being and experience into a unique, personal synthesis » which disintegrated completely during the period of the controversies, when « the coherence of the total man threatens to vanish from sight altogether » (p. 111). The controversies, Fox says,

veil more completely than any of his other writings the inner experience of the private man. That experience was profound : it radically affected More's personality, it threatened to destroy his sense of providence, and it eventually brought him close to despair.... In them one can trace a pattern of progressive deterioration... (p. 111).

Having dismissed as uncritical the hagiographic accounts of More's controversies, Fox tells us that the Reformers scrutinized them « critically, » by which, it soon becomes apparent, he means « objectively » (p. 115). Why the hagiographers are wrong and More's opponents and critics are correct we are not told -- an astonishing omission when one remembers that it was a cliché of religious polemics to denigrate an opponent's works and motives. ¹ What did Fox think the Reformers were going to say on these subjects ?

After repeating Tyndale's charge that out of a base desire for promotion More had hypocritically repudiated the truth he had earlier perceived in the *Utopia* (to what, by the way, did he aspire to be promoted after 1529 ?), Fox tells us that Christopher Saint-German added another accusation --

that of deliberate dishonesty. In *Salem and Bizance* he expressed bewilderment that More, against his own knowledge to the contrary, should have contrived to make it appear in his *Apology* that anticlericalism was not of long standing, had no justifiable basis, and was merely the product of heretical subversion... *St. German's perplexity, one feels, was genuine rather than simply a polemical tactic* (p. 115) [Italics mine].

Expressing bewilderment at an opponent's dishonesty, however, was another commonplace of contemporary controversy,² and Saint-German was guilty of the very thing of which he accuses More not a few times in their dispute.³ If we are going to believe all such charges, no religious polemicist on either side will escape condemnation. So accomplished a practitioner of polemics as Saint-German⁴ was not unaware of the potential afforded by assuming an air of innocent bewilderment at an opponent's alleged dishonesty.

We next hear that John Foxe, who questioned More's « gracious nature and disposition, » was

the most percipient of More's early readers. Biased as he was, he was prepared to allow the devil his due, and was almost unique in attempting an explanation for the things he most detested in More (pp. 115-117).

John Foxe's « explanation » is that More was a man « of a pregnant wit, full of pleasant conceits, » who, if he had minded his own business, « being a layman, » and not « overreached himself to prove masteries in such matters wherein he had little skill, less experience, and which pertained not to his profession, he had deserved not only much more commendation but also longer life » (Quoted on p. 117).

John Foxe is indeed percipient enough to say elegantly that More did not know what he was talking about and that he deserved to die for his activities -- for that is what Foxe says, and nothing less : he is not trying to psychoanalyze Thomas More. The denigration of an opponent's competence -- subtle or otherwise -- is another commonplace of religious polemics in this period.⁵

Alistair Fox readily equates accusation with guilt, asserting for example that

it would require self-imposed myopia to ignore the truth of many of the reformers' claims.... More's attitude towards reform did change. From being a cautious liberal prepared to speculate, like Morton in *Utopia*, on possible ways of improving the condition of the commonweal, More became the reactionary ultra-conservative who could declare in his *Apology* that he would sooner see no reform at all, even 'though the change might be to the better', if it involved open public criticism of existing laws Although he disingenuously pretended to equate anticlericalism with heresy, the two were not identical, and he undoubtedly knew it (p. 118).

The above might tempt one to say, « thys yonge man ... [can] se further with his yonge syghte, than I can see... »⁶, but that would be as wrong and unfair as to argue that at the beginning of the cited passage Fox equates the disparate terms « Reformer », meaning « radical Protestant, » and « reform, » meaning « social and political amelioration, » -- which he does. How does he know that More pretended to equate anticlericalism with heresy ?⁷ Nor does More say what Fox claims he said regarding reform. What More does say is :

And surely yf the lawes maye be kepte and obserued without perel of soule though the change might be to ye better : yet out of tyme and place conuenient to put the defawtes of ye lawes abrode among the people in wrytynge, and wythoute any surety of the change geue the people occasyon to haue the lawes in derysyon, vnder whyche they lyue, namely syth he y^t so shal vse to do may somtyme myssetake the mater, and thynke the thyng not good wherof the change wolde be worse : that way wyll I not as thus aduysed neyther vse my selfe nor aduise no frende of myne to do.⁸

More's objection is clearly to the hypothetical nature of the change, which, « might be to ye better, » but might also be for the worse -- « and wythoute any surety of the change... wherof the change wolde be worse. »

Fox's main methodological error is to mistake as unique to More -- and therefore revelatory of More's character -- what were common polemical devices and practices. Another problem is that every time Fox disagrees with More he thinks that More must secretly share his point of view but is dishonestly arguing against his better knowledge. He can write, « More's specious argument makes one suspicious of its candour » (p. 119) -- as if that were the inescapable conclusion to be drawn about someone who uses specious arguments.

Fox's reluctance to take into account the conventions of Tudor polemic leads him to speak of More's « almost demoniac emotional violence towards opponents » (p. 119) :

More's polemical ferocity was not convention, even though some writers have claimed it was, otherwise his opponents would not have complained of it so forcefully at the time... (p. 120).

Was More's vituperation any worse than his royal master's ? Henry VIII describes Luther as the devil's servant who spews out the poison of vipers⁹, an infernal wolf (sig. ★ 2^v), and a most filthy Antichrist (sig. G3). Luther, in turn, pictures Henry as a miserable scribbler, at a loss to know how to fill up the pages of his book¹⁰ and as a silly Thomist who has to be taught the elements of philosophy and theology ! Henry, declares Luther, could not discharge his hate from a lower area, so he took occasion of the sacraments to vomit it forth from his stinking mouth¹¹. John Bale calls his opponents « whoremongers, murtherers, theues, raueners, Idolatours, lyars, dogges, swyne, wolues, abhominable workers, aduersaries to god, and verye deuyls incarnate. »¹² He terms their doctrine « blasphemouse beggerye... abhominable wytcherye... adders egges... menstrue... dogges dyrt, swylle, swynes draffe... » (sig. H4). Thomas Becon

refers to the Pope as « that Romyshe Porke »¹³ and « the Butcher of Rome » (sig. 14), and to the Catholic hierarchy as « Cacolike Pharisees. »¹⁴ Other examples abound in the writings of many polemicists of the period.¹⁵ More's « polemical ferocity, » therefore, is not very good evidence upon which to judge his character.

Fox goes on to claim that More's « polemics testify to a progressive loss of control, objectivity, and any sense of proportion » (p. 122). But was there any « objectivity » in his earliest religious polemics? His *Responsio* is no less vituperative than his later works, and Fox himself calls his *Letter to Bugenhagen* a vituperative pamphlet (p. 137).

When discussing the effect of Luther's marriage on More, Fox writes, without evidence,

It was only Luther's marriage to Katherine von Bora in 1525 that really upset his equilibrium... Luther appears to have become a personal demon for More because in many respects he was very like him. They both shared an Augustinian revulsion against sensuality on one hand, and a propensity to indulge it on the other... when Luther married More must have felt particularly outraged that his counterpart was daring to gratify both flesh and spirit in a way he could not allow himself....

Luther's doctrines had not changed so drastically between 1522 and 1528 to justify More's shifting of the note from comic to tragic, but his lifestyle had, and one can gauge the effect on More from the incessant references to Luther's 'shamefull inceste and abominable bycherye' that infest the earlier English polemics. These references are not merely the result of polemical convention as some critics have claimed; as far as I know nobody has yet found anything analogous in any other controversialist of the time (or since, for that matter). Nor do the reiterated taunts amount merely to 'comic abuse.' The language More uses is often so violently disgusted and disgusting as to suggest an obsessive preoccupation that is far from being objectively rhetorical (pp. 141-142).

More must have had a great number of « personal demons, » for he misses no opportunity to cast into the teeth of his opponents the marriage of any Reformer, going so far as to claim that Tyndale, while not married yet, was thinking about it!¹⁶ These clerical marriages More always pictured both as yielding to carnality, and, far worse, vow-breaking towards God. This was the most effective rebuttal Catholic apologists had at their command against the Protestant charges that Catholic clerical celibacy was the root cause of gross immorality and crime among the clergy, ranging from sodomy to infanticide.¹⁷

Furthermore, there was no change in More's attitude to Luther from the *Responsio* to the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. His caricature of Luther « as a 'Luder', a laughable, rather simple-minded buffoon, » represents a polemically astute method of portraying him. Moreover, an unmarried Luther is not all that comical if, as More says, « he had got the better of cacodaemons in impiety, in

order to adorn his sect with fitting emblems, surpassed...pimps in wickedness, prostitutes in obscenity... » (pp. 141-142). The claim that no other controversialist equalled More's scurrility has already been disposed of.

Fox also forgets that in this period, it is impossible to separate religion from politics. Consequently he declares that

Even the extreme degree of More's hatred of heresy, however, cannot fully explain the scope or intensity of the controversies. From almost the very beginning More stepped beyond the strict terms of his brief. He had been licensed to read and refute heretical books, yet almost half his polemical output does not really concern heresy at all. Simon Fish's *Supplication for the Beggars*...was not overtly heretical.... Likewise, there is not a trace of heresy in either Christopher St. German's *Treatise Concernynge the Division between the Spirituality and the Temporality*, or his *Salem and Bizance*... Indeed, the evidence suggests that the *Supplication of Souls*, the *Apology* and the *Debellation* were written as a response to political events, and also as a covert attempt to influence their outcome (pp. 167-168).

This is all very true, but More's perception that a political attack on the Church was only another facet of the attack on the Church's doctrine was by no means novel, idiosyncratic, and therefore revelatory of More's psyche.

To sum up: While the attempt to base a psychohistory on a Tudor writer's work is ill-advised at best, to try to do so on the basis of his polemics is particularly misleading and yields only distorted results.

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Note: My citations from Fox have omitted his footnote numbers and his footnotes. In no citation does their omission alter the nature of his argument.

1. See, for instance, Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, ed. J.K.F. Knaake et al. (Weimar, 1883-), X, ii, 185; Henry VIII, *Assertio septem sacramentorum* (n.p., 1523), sigs. A3, D2-D2^v; George Joye, *The exposition of Daniel the Prophete* (Antwerp, 1545), sig. B8^v and *The Refutation of the Byshop of Winchester's Derke Declaration* (London, 1546), fol. 82; William Turner, *The huntynge & fyndynge out of the Romishe fox* (Bonn, 1543), sigs. E6^v-E7; Thomas Becon, *A new Postil Conteynyng most Godly and learned sermons* (London, 1567), II, sig. 12^v.

2. See, for instance, Henry VIII, *Assertio*, sigs. A1^v, H4^v; John Frith, *The Whole workes of W. Tyndall, Iohn Frith, and Doct. Barnes* (London, 1573), p. 108. Hereafter cited as *Ww*; George Joye, *Refutation*, sig. A3 and *An Apologye...to satisfye (if it maye be) w. Tindale* (n.p., 1535), sig. C3^v.

3. For instance, Saint-German falsely accused More of misquoting him and denied having ever said that the clergy punish many persons because they think that anyone who finds fault with them hates priests (*A dialogue betwixte...Salem and...Bizance* [London, 1533], fol. 36^v). He plainly said of the clergy that « they take it, that they that fynde defeaute at suche abusions and disordre, loue no preestes.... And therefore haue they punysshed many persons... » See *A treatise concernynge the diuision betwene the spirytualtie and temporaltie* in Thomas More *The Apology*, ed. J.B. Trapp (CW9), p. 180.

4. Saint-German was the most accomplished user of the « some-say » device, by which opinion is created by the pretense that it already exists.

5. See Martin Luther, *Werke*, X, ii, 189, 210, 212 ; Thomas More, *Responsio ad Lutherum*, ed. John M. Headley (CW 5), Pt. 1, p. 46 and *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck (CW 8), Pt. 2, p. 831 ; John Frith, *Ww*, p. 64 ; George Joye, *Refutation*, sigs X5^v-X6 and *Apologye*, sig. A4^v.

6. *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E.F. Rogers (Princeton, 1947), p. 450.

7. Elsewhere, too, Fox misreads the opinion of others. Compare his citation of Marius about More as a persecutor and what Marius does say. See Fox, p. 2, fn. 8 (The correct reference here is to CW8, and not as given).

8. More, *Apology*, CW9, 97/2-97/11. 9. *Assertio*, sig. * 2.

10. *Werke*, X, ii, 188. 11. *Ibid.*, pp. 183-185.

12. John Bale, *Yet a course at the Romyshe Foxe* (Zurich, 1543), sig. A2.

13. Thomas Becon, *A pleasaunt newe Nosegaye* (London, 1542), sig. 13^v.

14. Thomas Becon, *The Relikes of Rome* (London, 1560 ?), sig. A3^v. The wordplay derives from the Latin *cacare* -- to defecate.

15. See John Skelton, *A replycacion agaynst certayne yong scolers abiured of late* in *The Poetical Works of John Skelton*, ed. Alexander Dyce (London, 1843), I, 206-224 ; Jerome Barlowe, *Rede me and be nott wrothe* (Strassburg, 1528) ; Robert Barnes, *Ww*, p. 199 and *Vitae Romanorum Pontificum* (Wittenberg, 1536), sigs., G7^v, M7 ; William Turner, *Romishe fox*, sigs. E3^v-E4^v, F1^v.

16. See Thomas More, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Thomas Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard C. Marius (CW6), Pt. 1, 304 and *Confutation*, CW 8, Pt. 2, 836.

17. See, for instance, William Tyndale, *Ww*, pp. 134, 140, 374 (misnumbered for p. 362) ; Robert Barnes, *Vitae*, sigs. M6^v, M7, L1^v-L7^v and *Ww*, pp. 328, 329-330, 339 ; George Joye, *The defence of the Mariage of Preistes* (Antwerp, 1541), sigs. A3^v-A4^v, A6, B4.