

THOMAS MORE : « A MODEL FOR US ALL ».

An Address given by J.J. Scarisbrick at Chelsea Old Church
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Part of the explanation of the fame of Thomas More and the remarkable way in which he has fascinated so many generations far beyond the boundaries of his native land is that he is the first non-royal layman in English history whom we today can know intimately.

Thanks to Holbein, we know what he looked like. We know what his father, second wife, children and many of his friends looked like. We could recognise him if we met him in the street. We know what he wore. We have an idea of how his house was furnished and what pets he kept. By previous standards he left behind a large corpus of private correspondence, including letters to and from Erasmus, that are full of wit and life, and those intensely poignant letters written to his daughter Margaret from the Tower, which are among the most moving testimonies to a father's love for a daughter in the English language.

He also left behind, of course, a mass of published writings which throw their own light on the author, for they are peppered with anecdotes about his daily life, who he met, what things had caught his eye or ear. That is especially true of his polemical works. But others contain much veiled autobiographical material. In *Utopia*, for instance -- among many other things -- he is wrestling with the problem of whether and on what terms a decent, serious man should ever dare to enter the corrupting world of politics and service to the prince ; a step which he himself was already taking at that moment. In his last works written in the Tower he is searching much deeper into his own heart, trying to distinguish true obedience to God and true courage from vainglory and the temptation to seek martyrdom ; and he is wrestling with fear and the pull of family affection.

Finally, there is that plethora of contemporary or near-contemporary biographers who obviously gathered up with great care every scrap of information they could find about their hero and produced more *Lives* than any previous English man or woman had ever merited.

So it is that we can know him so well and see him in the round. He can be a man for all seasons for all of us ; the man 'born for friendship' can be our friend.

Yet More is also very elusive. This is partly because, albeit much of the documentation survives, much does not. For example, there is extraordinarily little about him in the State Papers for the period when he was Chancellor -- the crowning of his public life. There is so little that one may suspect that, with typical caution, he made sure that documents disappeared when he departed from the political arena in May 1532. And then, of course, More always liked to tease, to move obliquely and cover his tracks. He baffled and angered contemporaries by his use of pseudonyms and his ventriloquising. He was not devious : he was complex and sophisticated. Like many a Renaissance humanist he revelled in literary artifice, punning and conundrums. Consider *Utopia* for a moment : what an extraordinarily difficult book that is to pin down. Gallons of ink have been consumed in interpretation, that is, in trying to understand exactly what More meant us to take from it. I am not going to embark on any analysis here. Rather, I want to make three quick points about it.

First, what an original book it is. No one had ever before sat down and tried to answer the question : what is wrong with society ? No one had ever asked before : why is there poverty ? why is there injustice ? whence man's inhumanity to man ? why wars ? No one since Plato (and one or two much slighter medieval writers) had ever sat down to sketch what the ideal society might be.

Utopia, however, is not wholly the ideal. It anticipates some of Orwell's *1984*. There are many features of this society which More must have abhorred. So as well as being a stick with which to beat contemporary Christian society -- by showing how zealous, peace-loving and so on was the society guided by reason alone -- *Utopia* is also *Distopia*. It is a warning against mere human reason and invites us to give thanks for the sanity of Christian morality and Revelation.

Thirdly, the character 'More' in the dialogue commonly puts up the 'Aunt Sallies' -- only to have them despatched promptly by the others. This is *Encomium Moriae* in reverse. And since *Utopia* gives good reasons for not entering politics at the very time that the author was embarking on a public career, More was making fun of himself twice over.

Why did he enter politics ? He did so because he was a normally ambitious, clever man who had a large family to sustain and a zest for activity. If he really believed that the reality was as black as he had sketched it, he could still believe that he could keep his own hands clean. How exactly he made the leap into public life is not clear. But he owed a

good deal to Wolsey. It was Wolsey who really noticed and advanced him. Now, there is a good deal more to be said about that cardinal that has always been allowed him in the past -- his concern for the underdog, the poor, justice and so on -- and this may explain why More could have felt reassured and why he could have been attracted to this patron.

When Wolsey fell in 1529 More was the natural successor, even though it was most unusual to have a lay lord chancellor. More was by then uniquely versed in the ways of English government and the mysteries of state. And he was still an Erasmian reformer. He gave himself heart and soul to the judicial duties of his office. He still wanted a Bible in English (to us a small enough step, but at the time a matter of great contention). In 1531 the first poor law in English history reached the Statute Book. It is difficult to find any evidence of More's connection with it, but there must be a good chance that the chief minister of the crown was involved.

In recent years, as is well known, there has been a remarkable outpouring of major new works on More. Many of them have been hostile. Though the latest of three biographies -- by Richard Marius -- is much more sympathetic, his reputation has been damaged badly. Essentially the case against him is that, by 1529, the sometime humanist fired by genuine concern for good causes had become a crusty conservative and religious bigot. When he resigned in May 1532 he had nothing to show for his 'thousand days' as chancellor and, embittered by political failure, his deep sense of sin (not to mention his continual battle, it is alleged, with an unruly and warped sexuality), had degenerated into a man so harsh, intolerant and violent in his views that he may even have been suffering from a pathological condition. It has been suggested that he had a mental breakdown : in which case eventual martyrdom was almost a welcome catharsis.

To my mind this is a travesty of the facts. To take one quick piece of evidence : what strikes one again and again about More's behaviour while in royal service (and in an extremely delicate position as the king pressed ahead with the Divorce and against the Church) and then in his retirement and subsequently in the Tower, is how very circumspect and self-disciplined he was. He scrupulously avoided disloyalty while in office (the evidence that has been adduced for the claim that he was masterminding opposition in Parliament to the crown does not bear the weight which has been put on it) ; he refused to be involved in controversial public action after his retirement, as the affair of the Nun of Kent illustrated ; in the Tower and even during his trial, until he was

sentenced, he maintained a silence that baffled his opponents. This is not the behaviour of a frantic, disorganised man.

The crucial evidence of those who denigrate him comes, of course, from his polemical writings. Yes, they are often abusive, unfair, long-winded and crude -- at least for the modern reader. But More was writing for the general public, lay people and especially younger ones. He had to be lively and entertaining. He intended that his works should be read aloud -- declaimed. He explained that he wanted anyone to pick up a book of his at any point and get the gist of the argument, so he constantly repeated the argument as he went along. His repetitiveness is not lack of control ; it is deliberate tactic. Like a Bruckner symphony, despite its apparent digressions and meandering, More gets there in the end.

Above all we must remember that More the polemicist was More the lawyer -- prosecuting counsel -- bent on getting a conviction. He was convinced that the defendants were guilty, dangerous men. He used every trick to discredit them : impugning motives, catching them out on details, indignation, mockery. This is not calm academic debate. It is merciless advocacy. It is often very clever.

More was implacably opposed to men like William Tyndale and that anticlerical fellow-lawyer Christopher St German. We have also to face the fact that he was a persecutor. That revulses us, perhaps. We have nonetheless to make an effort to get into his mind.

He believed that English Protestants were a small, clamorous minority who greatly exaggerated their own importance, and stirred up much the anticlerical and anti-Catholic feelings which they claimed merely to represent. In his view they were reckless innovators, arrogant and ignorant in their claim to have suddenly discovered the truth after centuries during which the Church of Christ, protected by the Holy Spirit, had got everything wrong. They threatened the whole fabric of society, tore Heaven and Earth apart, wanted to doom man to predestination and *natura deleta*.

Whether he was right in that perception is not the point. That is how he saw things. That is why he responded so fiercely. His whole world was at stake. Others agreed. He was not the only man who regarded Protestantism as a threat so grave that the harshest counter-attack was needed.

It is anachronistic to expect More to have been a liberal humanitarian. On the other hand he was not a mindless fanatic -- and we simply cannot ignore the constant testimony to his personal kindness and gent-

leness. He failed to stem the tide. He failed to halt the attack on the Church and the repudiation of England's ancient allegiance to Rome. He was in the agonising position of having a close view of what was happening and a clear insight into where it would lead -- but lacked the power to stave off disaster. No wonder he was tormented. How remarkable the serenity and self-possession that produced that famous remark about the field having been won when he set out from home for the fateful encounter with the royal commissioners at Lambeth in April 1534.

He had waited for the inevitable demand from the king with growing calm. He refused the king. He went to the Tower - quietly. No doubt the king hoped for either natural death or submission ; but More, like Fisher, was too tough for either. So there had to be sterner measures. We know what happened.

Why did Henry attack ? After all, More had long since retired from public life and carefully refused to be party to anything which would be construed as disloyalty. The king acted partly out of revenge and frustration, partly to frighten others and partly because he hoped to the last that More would break. What capital could have been made out of that submission !

And if we ask what More died for, what is the answer ? Yes, he died for Christian matrimony and in protest against a king's violent maltreatment of his wife. He died for conscience' sake. But not for freedom of conscience as we understand that today. He denied those seditious innovators, Tyndale and the others, the right to speak out and disseminate their poisonous ideas, while insisting on their duty to follow their consciences to death.

Certainly he died for papal authority. Even if he never had a very 'high' view of the Roman primacy, he was absolutely clear about its key role in Christendom. He was no ultramontanist like Fisher, and the majority of pre-Reformation English men and women for that matter. He died, above all, for the unity of Christendom -- of which Rome was the key and visible centre. He died to defend the unity of the Church against schism and heresy, as he explained so powerfully in that last speech at the end of his trial. For him a Church of England was a contradiction in terms and the royal supremacy a blasphemy.

We must not make him a saint too early. He was a man of real flesh and blood as well as of profound piety and self-discipline. He probably trod on some people on his way upwards in public life. He probably did find it difficult to tame the flesh and to suffer fools gladly. There are a number of incidents in his life -- like his attack on his fallen

master, Wolsey, in 1529 -- which are less than admirable. But he remains a man of rare integrity, courage and gifts of mind and character. He remains the model for the Christian layman who accepts the call to the active life. The More household remains a model for us all. More awaiting the inevitable final confrontation with the king, wrestling with his fears and divine mystery during his long months in the Tower, and then silent as that mockery of a trial unfolded (until he finally broke silence at the end) -- that More remains one of the most memorable figures in English history. The plaster saint of over-pious hagiography has gone. That is no loss to anyone. More is now both a little more like the rest of us and even more unlike the rest of us than ever.

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THOMAS MORE IN FRIEDRICH VON HÜGEL.

Baron Friedrich von Hügel published two volumes in 1908 (London : Dent) on *The Mystical Element of Religion* « as studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and her friends. » That circle included a lawyer, Tommaso Moro, who, in 1497, stood godfather to Tommasina Venazza, while the other sponsor holding the child at the Font was Caterinetta, the future saint. This Dottore Moro became a Calvinist in the days when Occhino and so many others were leaving the Church, but he returned to the fold, even becoming a priest. He crosses these pages repeatedly, especially vol. I, pp. 341-44.

Our More is outside the scope of the Baron's study, yet he comes into the picture after Nicolas of Cues, first happy integration of those three old forms « not easily reconciled : Institutionalism, Intellectualism, and Mysticism » :

« And a similar combination we find in Blessed Sir Thomas More in England, who lays down his life in defence of Institutional Religion and of the authority of the visible Church and its earthly head ; who is a devoted lover of the New Learning, both Critical and Philosophical ; and who continuously cultivates the Interior Life. » (I, p. 62).