

## High Humanism and Plebeian Piety: St. Thomas More's Defense of Catholic Devotions

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In his 1529 *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, St. Thomas More vigorously defends not only Catholic doctrine and theology but popular and even vulgar forms of Catholic devotion. More speaks out strongly against those heretics whose opposition to sacred images is driven not by “any furtherance of devotion, but manifestly for the malicious motive of diminishing and quenching people’s devotion” (69), and he likewise warns of a literally diabolical attempt to undermine visible bodily worship by destroying “all such devotion as has always, up till now, shown itself, and expressed the good affection of the soul” (65-66).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the original title of More’s work does not mention heresies by name but “divers matters” beginning with “the veneration & worship of images & relics / praying to saints / & going on pilgrimage” (36).

To those who associate More with his good friend Erasmus and the other great humanists of the day, this keenness to protect what many intellectuals, then as now, would be inclined to dismiss as kitsch or quasi-superstitious “folk” Catholicism may come as something of a surprise. Shouldn’t Thomas More’s vast learning and erudition have distanced him from the morés of the ignorant? Shouldn’t they have led him to a more sophisticated and critical viewpoint from which to scrutinize the strange and potentially pernicious flea market of pious custom? After all, as More’s interlocutor somewhat gleefully reminds him, they are living in the age of St. Valery’s, a shrine adorned by wax models of male and female genitalia and equipped with different sized rings for the insertion of *membra viriles* (262). And if Thomas More’s intellectual orientation did not disincline him from popular devotion, to what degree can he be said to be a true humanist, at least in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*?

Such are the questions animating this essay. To attempt an answer, we shall analyze More’s threefold defense of the use of images, the cult of saints, and the making of pilgrimages, paying special attention to his underlying anthropological assumptions.

### *A Humble Beginning*

When More receives the Messenger on behalf of a friend vexed by the religious controversies of the day, he does not initially anticipate the task of upholding Catholic devotion. The Messenger tells More that their mutual acquaintance has heard that a well-regarded priest in London was

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<sup>1</sup> All citations are taken from St. Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Mary Gottschalk (NY: Scepter, 2006).

treated poorly by the ecclesiastical authorities and forced to abjure certain heresies which he never held (47). When More meets with the Messenger to discuss the case the following day, he begins by stating the articles with which the priest was charged: “that we should do no venerating of any images or pray to any saints or go on pilgrimages” (58). More assumes that “every good Christian will agree” that these are heresies and proceeds to establish, in good lawyerly fashion, that the priest was indeed guilty of preaching such things (58). The Messenger, however, stops him, saying, “I would for my part well agree that they are heresies. However, I have before now heard some who would not do so. And therefore when we call them heresies, it would be good to [say] why” (58). With this simple request, the question shifts significantly from the trial of the priest to a trial of the practices that the priest purportedly condemned. More thus calls in his first witness: “the common faith and belief of Christ’s Church” (59). A practice is orthodox and laudable if it “has been practiced, taught, and approved, and the contrary consistently condemned, throughout the whole flock of all good Christian people,” past and present (59). And indirectly corroborating the soundness of the Church’s belief is the testimony of Sacred Scripture, which does not forbid images of the saints or Christ.

For a faithful Catholic, this should alone be sufficient for assent. As St. Thomas Aquinas notes, while argument from authority in the realm of reason is the weakest, argument from divine authority is the strongest (*Summa Theologiae* I.1.8.ad 2). And that which the Church has everywhere and at all times practiced or held to be true cannot but be thought to have at least some divine authority. Yet Aquinas also notes that an appeal to divine authority may be correct but still unsatisfying. “The listener,” he writes, “will indeed be made certain that the matter is so; but he will acquire no scientific knowledge or understanding and will go away empty” (*Quodlibeta* IV, q. 9, a. 3 [18]).

### *Sacred Images*

It is therefore not surprising that the Messenger persists in his line of questioning and that More graciously allows it. Beginning with the topic of sacred images, the Messenger cites an authority of his own, the author of *The Image of Love*, who asserts that “images are but the books for the illiterate” and that those “who are better instructed in spiritual wisdom” should consequently abandon them (61). (Ironically, the Messenger could have cited a key figure from the very tradition he was calling into question, for Pope St. Gregory the Great had also once characterized sacred images in much the same way.<sup>2</sup>) The Messenger also views the ornate liturgical precepts of the Mosaic Law in a similar light, as so many shadows of the law of Christ. “Therefore,” he continues,

the worshipping of God with gold and silver and other such corporeal things ought not be practiced among Christian people, but leaving all that shadow, we should draw ourselves to the spiritual things and give our Lord worship service only in spirit and with spiritual things. (65)

Though much of the debate here between More and the Messenger involves an exegesis of the Old Testament, it is their different hermeneutics that are the most striking. For the Messenger, advancement in the life of godliness or holiness either necessitates a withdrawal or confers a

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<sup>2</sup> “Pictures are used in churches so that those who do not know their letters may at least by looking at the walls read what they cannot read in books” (Epistle CV, translation mine). Gregory does not, however, go on to say that the spiritually perfect should therefore abandon them.

freedom from the religious use of physical objects and activities. At best, such things are training wheels for the spiritually immature; at worst, they are occasions of idolatrous downfall. For More, on the other hand, not even perfect sanctity changes the fact that man is both body and soul and that the latter is by its nature designed to arrive at higher spiritual goods (e.g., knowledge, virtue) through the ongoing agency of the former. This is clear enough for More from the foundational example of the mind's dependence on symbolic and visual images. Words are images that signify a concept in the thinker's mind, and "figures" are mental images wrought by human imagination in order to aid in recognition and knowledge. When the mind therefore understands a word or figure, it *eo ipso* grasps the reality to which this image points, thereby transcending it; yet it would not have transcended the image without its aid.<sup>3</sup> Both kinds of image are thus essential, regardless of one's stage of intellectual or spiritual development, for they are constitutive of human cognitional activity.

The same is true for sacred images, which "natural reason" does not forbid (68). Since spiritual advancement does not involve becoming less human but, in a certain sense, more—that is, more authentically and transparently an image of God animating and benefiting from a God-given body—the Christian who grows in holiness does not outgrow the utility of sacred images any more than a professor of higher mathematics outgrows the need for precise and purposive mathematical symbols. His mind still benefits from an image that draws him, vividly and effectively, to his Maker: both an illiterate person and a learned one, More points out, will be more readily moved by the sight of a crucifix than the words *Christus crucifixus* (69), and neither will be tempted into idolatry, for the very nature of an image is such that it refers its observer to that of which it is an image (68).<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason that More rejects the opinion expressed in *The Image of Love* and instead claims that images "are good books both for the illiterate and for the learned too" (68, emphasis added)<sup>5</sup>, and it is for this reason that he warns against those who, by making themselves "so spiritual," are putting themselves above Moses, David, St. John the Baptist, and even Jesus Christ, all of whom used the body as well as the soul in praying and worshipping (65-66).

### *The Cult of Saints*

More's first debate with the Messenger over the veneration of the saints (pp. 70-73) also brings to light an anthropology in which body and soul are not sundered or altered by spiritual progress. More is stunned by the "diabolical hatred" that inspires a man to hate someone he never knew, especially when that someone is well-known for his holiness and love of God; and More rejects the view that the heretics' hatred is animated by a zeal to protect God's honor from dilution. For, he explains,

well they know that the Church venerates saints not as God but as God's good servants, and that therefore the honor that is done to them redounds principally to the honor of their Master, just as by common custom we sometimes do reverence and give a very kindly reception to some individuals for

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<sup>3</sup> Though More does not elaborate further, this principle is true even when the object is present to the eyes or mind, for what More calls "figures" continue to play an intermediary role in human cognition.

<sup>4</sup> In the case of venerating the image of saints, no honor is taken from God either, for "the saint is honored in the image and God is honored in his saint" (68).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 79: "There is no one, I think, so good or so well-educated, or so proficient in meditation, that they do not find that they are more moved to pity and compassion upon the beholding of a crucifix than they are when they lack one."

their superior's sake, whom we else would perhaps not even bid good-morning. (71)

But More saves his harshest words for the false and sophomoric intellectualism that would again disregard the subtle interplay between the physical and the spiritual in the name of religious sophistication. He marvels at the

madness of these heretics who bark against the old, ancient customs of Christ's Church, mocking the setting up of candles, making silly wisecracks, asking with blasphemous mockery whether God and his saints lack light, or whether it is night with them, they cannot see without candles. They could as justifiably ask what good that ointment [from Mary Magdalene] did to Christ's head. (71)

To More, the story of Magdalene and the precious ointment clearly indicates that bodily worship and demonstrativeness do not pertain only to the dark age before the New Covenant or to the spiritually infantile but to true piety in all places and at all times:

But from the example of that holy woman, and from these words of our Savior, let them all learn that God delights in seeing the fervent heat of the heart's devotion bubble out through the body and do him homage with all such goods of fortune as God has given one. (72)

This affirmation of the heart's "bubbling out" through the body marks on the one hand an implicit rejection of any kind of Gnostic or Cartesian dualism that would divorce the body from the spirit, the exterior life from the interior, and on the other an implicit endorsement of a more classical, "integrated" anthropology.

### *Pilgrimages*

More's "integrated" anthropology also proves crucial in his defense of pilgrimages. After a brief conversation about the likelihood of the clergy promoting pilgrimage sites for personal profit, the Messenger again uses what we are tempted to call a Gnostic attack on traditional practices by invoking the omnipresence of God and, hence, the absurdity of revering particular places that are deemed sacred to Him. Since the heart is, as St. Paul attests, the temple of Christ, are not temples of stone irrelevant?

More does not deny the veracity of St. Paul's remark but again calls into question the either/or dualism of the Messenger. Certainly the temple that is our heart is the most important, but how does that a priori rule out the importance of physical churches? Rather, More contends, the latter are crucial in building up the former: "This we know by experience: that those who are the best temples of God in their souls, they are the ones who most regularly come to the temple of stone" (81). Though More does not explicate the theoretical reasons behind this phenomenon, his objection nevertheless adumbrates a classical, non-dualistic understanding of external habit and sensory perception affecting internal disposition in the composite being known as man.

More does, however, become more explicit about the metaphysics of human nature when he is forced to defend the existence of miracles from the Messenger's claim that belief is invalid when it contradicts "reason and nature" (87)—a somewhat surprising objection from a man who considers "logic nothing but babbling" and contemporary theology, which in "building everything upon reason... rather gives blindness than any light," a disaster (54). More responds with what in many respects is a rebuttal of the yet-to-emerge mechanistic determinism of early modern science.

Reason, More reminds the Messenger, discloses not a tidy and predictable cosmic order but a world full of surprises. One must therefore be careful in asserting what is and is not impossible by nature. As for miracles, reason merely grasps the fact that these events do not occur according to that “order and course [which] people ‘call’ nature” (98), and that if they do occur, they therefore occur according to God, whom reason knows to exist (97, 99).<sup>6</sup> Later on More explains in greater detail the relationship between human reason and biblical faith. As the faculty by which man knows or believes anything, reason is necessary in being “able to tell what one should believe” (159). Faith, on the other hand, is necessary in keeping reason from “running wild” and growing “overly high-spirited and proud,” qualities which, ironically, render reason less reasonable. Therefore, reason must “not resist faith but walk with her,” and faith should never and does never “go without her” (159).

### *Conclusion*

Our survey of More’s anthropological justification for the use of sacred images, the veneration of the saints, and the utility of pilgrimage reveals, if not explicitly, a consistent and nuanced understanding of human nature. It would appear that for More, the soul, which in a mysterious union gives the body its very being, does not depart from the body in proportion to its perfection. Rather, the soul continuously receives data from the senses, forms images and assigns symbols for the attainment of insight into the truth, and uses reason both to limn what it can know by its own power and what it cannot. Similarly, by the external habits it acquires, the soul is conditioned in a particular manner and given a particular character, and thus, if it is relatively intelligent, it takes seriously external activities such as visiting or not visiting churches, pilgrimage sites, etc.

It is these assumptions, in turn, that shed light on the degree to which More can be considered a humanist in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. Certainly, if by “humanist” we mean a thinker fixated on man instead of God, then More can by no means be reckoned as such. Even his generous use of reason and his ostensibly sanguine view of the compatibility of faith and reason do not detract from his theocentrism but serve to enrich it. Paraphrasing Aquinas, More makes use of human reason, not to prove faith (“for thereby the merit of faith would come to an end”), but to elucidate it (*ST* I.1.8.ad 2).

But if, on the other hand, humanism refers to a retrieval of the classical learning of Greece and Rome, especially in the realm of literature, then Thomas More’s defense of all manner of quaint, Christian, medieval custom can be said (perhaps paradoxically) to be thoroughly humanist. For More’s defense, as we have seen, rests at least in part on a particular anthropology, and that anthropology, in turn, is unmistakably classical. More’s understanding of the relationship between soul and body, for example, can be identified with the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions of reflection on this topic, while his understanding of the impact of temples of stones upon the temple of the heart can be most clearly understood in terms of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nor can these elements be understood exclusively in terms of medieval scholasticism (which shows many of the same strains), for More has consciously retrieved not only the content of the ancients, but the form, writing his thoughts in the genre of a philosophical dialogue rich with irony and wit, character and plot, and literary polish. In all of this, More illustrates that his reputation as a

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<sup>6</sup> Tellingly, More’s rational proof for the existence of God is taken—though he does not tell the reader this—from Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods*.

Renaissance humanist of the first order is not undeserved, even when defending those who might have preferred bad Latin to good Greek.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I am thinking primarily of Chesterton's remark that the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance is "the passage from bad Latin to good Greek." The line occurs in a passage from the essay, "A Short History of England," in which Chesterton hails More as "above all things a Humanist, and a very human one."