

Thomas More and the Unity of the Church

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In this paper, I propose to explore the significance of historical research in terms of its role in clarifying past events and revising our comprehension of the sources and causes of division within the Christian Church. The ramifications of this process upon the prevailing ecumenical climate will also be considered. Given the vastness of this subject, I will specifically consider the evidence that can be drawn from a particular period of time - the years 1525 to 1535 - in English Church history and our focus will be upon the character and contribution of Thomas More.

One of the attractions of Thomas More is that he is a recognised saint in both the Catholic Church and the Church of England. Following his execution on 6th July 1535 More's death was interpreted as a martyrdom throughout Catholic Europe, resulting in the official recognition of his status by Pope Gregory XIII in 1579. More's after-life saw his reputation enhanced with Beatification by Leo XIII on the 29th December 1886 and Canonisation on the 19th May 1935. In the year 2000, Pope John Paul II declared Thomas More to be the patron saint of politicians. (1) Within More's homeland, the Church of England has no process of formal Canonisation; however, through the Synodical processes that produced the *Alternative Service Book* in 1980, Thomas More was included within the Calendar of holy men and women. In the parish church of St Dunstan in Canterbury, there is to be found the Roper vault, where the head of Thomas More is interred. (2) On a black marble slab over the vault there is the Latin inscription, '*Ecclesia Anglicana Libera Sit*' ('that the English Church may be free'). This inscription echoes part of More's speech at his trial, recorded in William Roper's *Life of Thomas More*, written in the mid-16th century:

'And for proof thereof, like as amongst divers other reasons and authorities, he declared that this realm, being but a member and small part of the church, might not make a particular law disagreeable with the general law of Christ's universal Catholic Church, no more than the City of London, being but one poor member in respect of the whole realm, might make a law against an Act of Parliament to bind the whole realm; so further showed he that it was both contrary to the laws and statutes of this our land yet unrepealed, as they might evidently perceive in Magna Charta, *quod ecclesia Anglicana libera sit, et habeat omnia jura sua integra, et libertates suas illaesus*, and also contrary to that sacred oath which the

king's highness himself, and every other Christian prince, always with great solemnity received at their coronations.' (3)

It remains one of More's paradoxes that he certainly died firmly in and for the Catholic faith, whilst at the same time witnessing to the liberty of the Anglican Church. (4) Clearly the *Ecclesia Anglicana* that More was defending was something very different from the Anglican Communion as it is understood today: More was referring to the Church of the English that hitherto had been independent from either state or monarchical interference. But this, along with his clear commitment to the principle of conscience, may go some way to explaining why he has been honoured by the Church of England. (5)

In an ecumenical context, I would argue that it is important that we revisit the times and events that created schism. This pursuit is neither based on a desire to open old wounds or to score points, but to comprehend better the bases of our division. In the last fifty years there has been considerable revision concerning our understanding of the Reformation and new research should contribute to our opinions and views. The period has become overlaid with symbolism, misunderstanding and indeed myth. The ethics of the historian's profession is clear in trying to discover historical truths. Often big distortions are built upon carelessness about little falsehoods, including accidental ones. If historians cease to remind us about historical accuracy and truth, who will? Thomas More reminded us that 'Time Trieth Truth'; the historian has, therefore, a contribution to make to the ecumenical endeavour.

Let us first consider Thomas More within his historical context. It is not always realised that Thomas More never really knew within his lifetime the full bloom of the English Reformation. His exalted position in matters of state gave him access to information about the first stirrings of reform on the Continent. He would have known of the unrest in Germany, following Tetzels attempt to raise funds for the re-building of St Peter's basilica by the sale of indulgences, and Martin Luther's protest with the 95 Theses, supposedly published on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg on All Hallows Eve, 1517. However, England in the early to mid-1520s remained firmly Catholic. On May 12th 1521, Luther's books were publicly burned at St Paul's Cross in London, in the presence of both the English Archbishops, the Papal Nuncio and the ambassadors of the Holy Roman Empire and the Venetian Republic. The event was a clear demonstration to the Catholic world of England's solidarity with the old faith against the growing interest in the Reformation that was taking hold in Germany. However, from 1525, sheets of Tyndale's translation of the New Testament in English were being smuggled into the country in substantial quantities, despite Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall's charge to the City of London booksellers of 12th October 1524, that forbade the dissemination of Lutheran material.

Two events were to prove significant in the early part of 1526. On 26th January, More, in his legal capacity as a judge, raided the premises of the Hanseatic League merchants in London's steel-yard docks and confiscated contraband books. On 11th February there was another public book-burning at St Paul's Cross. On this occasion, the event was specifically English in character: no foreign observers were present and John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, preached. During the proceedings, the arrested merchants were subjected to symbolic penitence for their transgressions in smuggling forbidden books into England.(6) The English Channel was no longer proving an adequate defence against the influence of increased publication and the effective communication that the printing press achieved. Catholic and Protestant factions within the English court, in the universities and in the cities, were becoming more manifest. The situation in England was becoming highly charged, and it was in this context that Bugenhagen, the Lutheran Pastor of Wittenberg, had printed in the summer of 1525 a reasonable, short and clear *Epistola ad Anglos (Letter to the English)* that commended Lutheranism.

It is suspected that the *Letter to Bugenhagen*, More's response, was written between December 1525 and February 1526, when More was deeply involved in the attempt to stop smuggled books getting into England. (7) In the August of 1525, More had met with John Eck, a Catholic polemicist in Germany, and had been fully briefed about events that were taking place under the new, reformed administration in Wittenberg. However, after completing his response, More laid it aside, and it was not published until nearly forty years later, in 1568. However, even as late as 1530, Henry VIII continued to forbid the reading of a large number of works published by Martin Luther (1483-1546), Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531), Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558), Martin Bucer (1491-1551) *et al.*

However, by the beginning of the 1530s, things began to change. A rift between Henry VIII and the Papacy manifested itself on the annulment question, and More resigned his office as Chancellor of England on Thursday 16th May 1532: the day after the Convocation of Canterbury submitted the clergy to royal, rather than Papal, authority. More had received the Great Seal of England from Henry's hand on 25th October 1529, and he returned it on Sunday 19th May 1532 in the garden of York Place, the royal manor at Westminster. From that point, More's career went into decline, eventually leading to his arraignment and arrest in the spring of 1534. Following a year's incarceration in the Tower of London he was finally tried and condemned to death.

More was executed on Tower Hill on July 6th 1535, one of the first victims of what could be termed the English Reformation. However, during his life of about 58 years, More never experienced the extremities of the evolved Reformation in England. In trying to combat the influences of the Reformation, he had been the loyal servant of the King and the state in both his legal capacity and also in his effectiveness as a polemicist. But More knew nothing of the

dissolution of the monasteries, the later parliamentary Acts that secured the royal dominance of the Church of England, and the various reforms that were introduced by Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer. When we view More's writings, therefore, we are given a unique perspective into the situation in Catholic England during the ten years between 1525 and 1535, when schism within western Christendom was threatening and its consequences uncertain.

In passing, I would add that a study of this brief time does reveal that the Church of England, envisaged by Henry VIII at this point, was intended to be essentially Anglo-Catholic. The gate that opened on to the English Reformation swung on two basic hinges: one was clearly anti-papal, but the other was anti-Lutheran.

It could be argued that a competent study and understanding of this period lies beyond those who carry 'politically correct' baggage with them. It is an engagement that is not for the faint-hearted, and one is exposed to a forthrightness in argument and conflict that is both deep and bitter. From the time of his death, Thomas More was a respected hero of the Catholic Church. However, with the publication of Foxe's *The Acts and Monuments of these Latter and Perilous Days*, printed in 1554, More was demonised by the reformers. (The book was later developed into Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.) We, therefore, move on to consider one of the great difficulties involved in assessing More: that difficulty which is associated with his treatment of heretics. It is my purpose in this paper to suggest that, if we wish to comprehend More's seeming extremity and inconsistency, we have to appreciate his ecclesiological understanding and recognise his concerns about the unity of the Church.

To give you a taste of More's forthrightness, you will find a good example in a letter he wrote to his friend Erasmus in the summer of 1533. More was being exposed to criticism in the changing climate of the English court, as the reforming Boleyn faction gained ascendancy. In this letter More complains about the distorted claims of his accusers, but continues:

'As to the statement in my Epitaph that I was a source of trouble for heretics - I wrote that with deep feeling. I find that breed of men absolutely loathsome, so much so that, unless they regain their senses, I want to be as hateful to them as anyone can possibly be; for my increasing experience with those men frightens me with the thought of what the world will suffer at their hands.' (8) (The Epitaph can still be seen in the More chantry chapel in Chelsea Old Church.)

The pen of John Foxe identified More as one of the main instigators in the persecution of the reformers in England, particularly William Tyndale:

'For these and such other considerations this good man (Tyndale) was stirred up of God to translate the Scripture into his mother tongue, for the profit of the simple people of his country; first setting in hand with the New testament, which came forth in print about AD 1525. Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London, with Sir Thomas More, being sore aggrieved, despised how to destroy that false erroneous translation, as they called it.' (9)

In his book about William Tyndale, Brian Moynahan barely conceals his critical suspicion of More:

'It may seem wrong, and perhaps it is wrong, that More should have been canonised in 1935, and it is, at the very least, bizarre that he should have been further elevated in 2000 to become the patron saint of politicians. Politicians persecute opponents readily enough without having More dangled in front of them as a role model.' (10)

Clearly, More remains a controversial figure in history and the seeming contradictions in his character require explanation. It is not sufficient to use the maxim of comparing More's attitude towards heresy and heretics with the same theological regard as sin and sinners: God hates the sin but loves the sinner. More did not like heretics. How can this be explained?

More's *Letter to Bugenhagen* remains an approachable and accessible example of More's polemical works. The publication, though little read, is probably More's best theological work and we can see how he combined his various skills as a writer, theologian, politician, and particularly as a lawyer, to produce a rounded and devastating critique of Lutheranism. The *Letter* is a remarkable example that demonstrated More's legal ability in both prosecution and defence.

One can study the elements of the document within the precision and constraints of England in the mid-1520s, when Wolsey was in power and England remained staunchly Catholic in the loyalties of both its King and people. It is impossible to read the *Letter* without suspecting that, at the time of writing, More did not feel that there was any real danger in England. More can boldly claim:

'Do not be so insane as to want to form an opinion of all the people in Britain from two or three apostates and deserters of the faith of Christ. You know little about the common people. If you did, you would think differently. You know little about the bishops. If you understood what sort of men they are, you would abandon your

audacious hopes. And because of his learning, you should at least have known that you could not take over and corrupt the authority of the king of this glorious realm. For he is as devout as he is invincible - completely invincible. He defeated your master long ago when Luther was warring against the sacraments. He defeated him by using overt scriptural evidence and irrefutable logic. So how can you be so confident as to hope to seduce his people?' (11)

Within six years things had changed dramatically in England as the relationship between Henry VIII and the Papacy deteriorated. However, a study of the relatively unknown works of More, particularly the polemical material, remains an important task for a serious study of Thomas More. In these pages we find the determination of a man who had a clear belief in, and comprehension of, the importance of the unity of the Church. The reformers threatened schism, and for More that was a much graver sin than the passing corruptions of the temporal Church. With Erasmus, More was disposed to Church reform, but from within.

In the *Letter to Bugenhagen*, More expounds several basic themes about the Church and its nature. I will explore five themes that constitute More's grasp of ecclesiological issues and which were offered as safeguards of the Church's unity.

1. **Jesus Christ had promised to be with his Church to the end of time and to lead it into all truth.** For More, this promise was an essential guarantee that secured the integrity of the Catholic Church. Historical change and political or religious expediency may corrupt aspects of the Church's life and witness, but Christ would remain faithful to his bride, the Church.

'If God did not guide the faith of his church, the authority of the gospel would waver, and there would truly be no truth in the words whereby Truth promises he will be with her even to the end of the world.' (12)

2. **The Holy Spirit, given at Pentecost, was for More an ever-present protector for the Church.** It was the Holy Spirit that strengthened and guided the Church. More believed strongly in the presence of a living tradition that could be discerned throughout the Church's history. It was for him a nonsense to deny this, as it was tantamount to claiming that the Church had been in error since its inception.

'I am convinced that these teachings were written in the hearts of the faithful by the same Spirit who was present to the evangelists as they wrote.' (13)

3. **Essential to the nature of the Church, as maintained by the Church Fathers and the Creeds, is that the Church is apostolic, holy, catholic and one.** Unity was part of the Church's character and, therefore, schism could not be interpreted as a fruit of the Spirit. In the *Letter*, More contrasted the fruitful tensions that existed within the schools of Catholic theology and the fragmented and divided manifestation of reformed loyalties. More was not naïve when it came to intellectual debate. His appreciation of the unity of the Church did not camouflage a situation where there was not uniformity in the Church, particularly amongst the schoolmen. The fact that there was debate and disagreement in both the Catholic Church and the universities was not a problem for More. It was a manifestation of man glorifying God within the powers of his mind. The key point that More was making was this: in the Catholic Church, one found dispute without disintegration.

In one of the more striking passages of the *Letter*, More wrote,

'The less we are able to understand the nature and causes of things, the more pleasure we take in observing them. And so it is with the divine majesty: we are the more caught up in sweet wonder at it, the more some things seem to disagree and conflict with one another, at the same time as we realize that they undoubtedly agree with one another and come together in harmony.' (14)

As I have observed, More was aware of the corruptions in the Church during the early sixteenth century that had provided justification for the threat of separation, reformation, division, hostility and violence. More's thoughts on this subject continue to have relevance in a modern world that is very conscious of divisions between Churches and within faith communities.

4. **More's challenge to the concept of an invisible Church of true belief.** To try to avoid the accusation of creating a new form of Christianity, the reformers were very emphatic upon establishing their lines of provenance. The holy scriptures clearly were vital in referring them to the source of their faith. Another connection proposed by the reformers was the notion of an invisible Church that contained the true faithful and which had continued to exist despite the dangers, corruptions and desertions of the visible Church. The fact that the reformers' ideas found resonance within the witness of other people in Church history was indicative that they were not innovators; on the contrary, they were drawing upon a strand of true belief that had existed from the beginning, despite the errors of the institutional Catholic Church.

More comments:

'But perhaps you argue that there was always a scattered remnant who, though dispersed, nevertheless constituted the true church even though they were so few as to be hidden from the world, so scattered as never to meet, so illiterate as never to write, and so dumb as never to speak ... Tell me, do you really think God purposely did all this to deceive his own church? Like it or not, Pomeranus, you have to admit that this is God's church and that it had within it and as its teachers the holy Fathers whom we venerate. If you argue that they were all mistaken in matters of faith, then you have to admit what you denied before, that the gates of hell have prevailed against the scriptures for more than a thousand years.' (15)

In More's time, Bugenhagen's assault was upon the institutional Catholic Church, and the attack was rebuffed by exposing the phantasm of the concept of an invisible Church of true belief. However, this particular debate does raise an ongoing ecclesiological question. Whenever people attempt to define a 'true' Church, it inevitably is expressed in idealistic terms. It is intangible, perfect, invisible and - of course - ultimately rejects other forms that do not approach its perfection. This attempt to define a perfect Christian community, as More appreciated, was not new. In his response, More identified Bugenhagen's claims with the manifestation of Gnosticism, held by a number of sects, which flourished towards the close of the first, and during the second, century after Christ. Gnostics adhered to a special community who possessed higher knowledge and deeper revelation than others. Highly individualistic in its expression, Gnosticism drew from many sources for its inspiration, but consistently elevated the status of a mystical community who possessed the *gnosis*, or knowledge. The heresy reappeared in the middle ages with the Cathars who rejected, amongst other things, the teaching authority of the Church.

In the experience of the Church, there have been many movements that have renewed and invigorated the spiritual lives of Christians. Many of the saints began religious movements that have enhanced Christian lives and defined Christian life-styles. There is an inherent danger, however, in prescribing such life-styles as being definitive for all Christians and exclusively as being the Christian way of living. Such elevation can lead to first and second class membership within the community of all the faithful.

Implicit within More's challenge was his appreciation of the very human Church of which he was a member, the Church militant and temporal on earth and in time.

Through Baptism, one is incorporated fully into the life of the Church, but the universal relationship of every member of the Church to God is as a sinner. This relationship preserves a scriptural Church, in which Jesus was happy to eat and drink with publicans and sinners; a Church for the prodigal son and where the sick could meet the physician of life; a Church in which both wheat and tares grow until the time of harvest (Matt. 13.24f). It was a down-to-earth Church which was mystical simply because, by divine grace, strength was perfected through human weakness. This was the Catholic Church to which Thomas More belonged and which he loved, because it was fundamentally and authentically Christian.

- 5 **The perception of Catholicity within the Church that comprehended and included the Church militant, expectant, and triumphant.** Thomas More advocated firmly an ecclesiology that always held the totality of the Church within its purview. His later work, *Supplication of Souls*, defended the doctrines associated with those who have died and who continue in life, within the Church expectant and the Church triumphant. The Church, for More, transcended the transience of his time, and he knew well that, in the fullness of time, all will be gathered and harvested together. This comprehension provided perspective for More, as he viewed the struggles and tensions of his particular time in history. He was fierce in engaging the disputes of his time, but was noted for his constancy in trying to persuade, by dialogue, those who were engaged in heresy. Because of More's constant grasp of the eternal in the temporal, he could pray for his accusers, and indeed for those who condemned him to death, that all would merrily meet in heaven:

'More have I not to say, my Lords, but like as the blessed Apostle St Paul, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, was present, and consented to the death of St Stephen, and kept their clothes that stoned him to death, and yet be they now both twain holy saints in heaven, and shall continue there friends for ever, so I verily trust and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your Lordships have now on earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together to our everlasting salvation.' (16)

The Importance of Polemical Study in the 16th Century

A study of the polemical material produced in the early sixteenth century can convey its own special lessons and insights, which provide the divided Churches in the twenty-first century with important historical knowledge. This is particularly the case with Thomas More, who was a major polemicist of the time. (17)

First, it is important to explore the roots of division. To discover the sources of intellectual thought was a Humanist trait, and Christians of all denominations should not be afraid of examining their history. It is by this investigation that we can find the causes of ongoing division. We are all products of our history and the Church in time lives historically. However, before we can be freed from our religious histories, we have to patiently understand them. That understanding does encourage a questioning about whether or not the causes of our divisions remain valid in the present. For example:

- The question of *Sola scriptura*. Does it remain the case that the Catholic Church diminishes the importance of sacred scripture? More demonstrated that the authority of scripture is related closely to the authority of the Church, and the Church itself regards scripture as holy. Clearly it is the word *sola* that remains a problem.
- The question of *Sola fide*. Was it, and does it remain, true that the Catholic Church denies the importance of faith in the lives of the faithful? More illustrated clearly the balanced relationship between faith and works in the Christian life.
- The question of indulgences. Could it be claimed that the Catholic Church continues to base its financial economy on the abuse of indulgences?
- Veneration of Our Lady and the saints. Is respect for the mother of Jesus and the heroes of the Christian faith a specifically Catholic practice today?

Fundamental questions need to be asked about the continued validity of the differences that were the original causes of the Reformation schisms. Since that time there have been adjustments and re-alignments that have taken place, by which changes of emphases can be discerned. If sufficient religious *rapprochement* has taken place, and the causes of division have been compromised by subsequent developments, then we could ask why do the divisions continue to be maintained? It is possible that continued division is more about the maintenance of institutions than maintenance of theological and ecclesiological causes.

Secondly, by investigating thoroughly this period, we can discover the depth of principle, at times immensely painful, that the people of the early sixteenth century experienced during the mutual insult and scandal that took place during the Reformation. We can explore the reforming zeal of the reformers, with their honest desire to recreate a purified Church, free from corruption and malpractice. We can appreciate their sense of shock as the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church demeaned itself by conformity to market-place economics in the communication of its gospel of salvation. We can also gain insight into the scandal caused to Catholics that the upheaval created. Beloved practices and

traditions, which had been secure rhythms of faith, were arbitrarily questioned and dismissed. The mother of Jesus was insulted, the sacraments diminished or denied and the unity of the Church shattered. A study of this period allows us to 'touch base' - it is part and parcel of the tangibility of historical study.

Thirdly, our study leads us to appreciate more profoundly the potency of religious emblems in human life. Beliefs and practices quickly and easily become emblematic in defining an individual's religious commitment. In the initial stages of the Reformation there were belief systems that expressed loyalties in the arena of conflict. So belief in *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* defined one, both religiously and spiritually. Similarly, belief in transubstantiation and the efficacy of works established commitment to another belief system. These belief systems became intellectually emblematic of an individual's religious location - Protestant or Catholic. Later, new emblems emerged and were expressed in visible terms. The mysterious gaudiness of the Catholic churches could be compared with the stripped clarity of the reformed churches. The architecture and internal ordering of the churches became emblematic. The very essence of sacrament and word were polarised into emblematic expressions. The clergy were defined emblematically: married and women clergy were in the reformed tradition, whereas a celibate clergy was a statement of the Catholic tradition. If we see this divisive development in terms of the overall historical context, we are reminded of the Wars of the Roses, when heraldic emblems were raised to define loyalties and difference. It was a time when national identities began to be established, with their particular emblematic definitions in both Church and State.

If one is tempted to treat these developments as remote, appreciate that these emblems continue to be manifested and thrive in our time. They are to be found in the tensions of Northern Ireland. They can be discovered in the enduring suspicions between Muslim, Jew and Christian and even on the terraces of football stadia. The temptation to ascribe labels lurks very close to the surface of most of our dealings, not always specifically religious. In an ecumenical age, when we try to heal the past, it is important that we do not omit to observe the potency and power of emblematic ascription. It can be a difficult process, but is none the less necessary. An honest review of this period can help the healing process and is worthy of More, who advocated the necessity of time to test the truth of things that are held in the mind and the heart.

Notes

1. Richard A.P. Stork, *John Paul II on Fisher and More and the Price of Christian Unity in Moreana XIX*, 75-76 (Nov. 1982), pp. 71-76.
2. Hugh O. Albin, *Opening of the Roper Vault*, in *Moreana XVI*, 63/Tome 2. (Dec. 1979), pp. 29-35.
3. William Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, Templegate, Illinois. 1984, p. 112.

4. Ibid. p. 124: 'Then desired he all the people thereabouts to pray for him, and to bear witness with him, that he should then suffer death in and for the faith of the holy Catholic Church.'
5. Preface by Trevor Huddleston in *Conscience Decides*, Geoffrey Chapman, London. 1971.
6. *The Suppression of Lutheran Heretics in England* (under Wolsey between 1526-1529 would seem to have been a modest attempt. The merchants of the Hanse had a day's notice before the raid. The policy was one of persuasion), Craig W. D'Alton, in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 54, No. 2, April 2003.
7. *Complete Works of Thomas More*, Yale Univ., Vol. 7. 1990.
8. E.F. Rogers, *St Thomas More: Selected Letters*. Yale Univ., New Haven. 1961, p. 180
9. J. Foxe, op. cit., p. 79.
10. B. Moynahan, *If God Spare my Life*. Little, Brown, London. 2002. p 173.
11. Op cit. *C. W.T.M.*, p. 27
12. Ibid. p. 33. Also Matt. 28.18f.
13. Ibid. p. 35.
14. Ibid. p. 37.
15. Ibid. p. 41.
16. William Roper, op. cit., p. 116.
17. B. Gogan, *The Common Corps of Christendom : Ecclesiological Themes in the Writings of Sir Thomas More* in *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, Vol. 26, Leiden, 1982.