

**Response:**  
**Failed Politician? Sainly Statesman?**  
**Faithful Conscience!**  
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*I. Introduction*

John Guy, one of England's most prominent Tudor historians, comes to the conclusion that "More failed in politics...and ended up as a moral absolutist."<sup>1</sup> That conclusion comes as no surprise, given the stubbornly iconoclastic tone that Guy has taken throughout his book, and even the announced intention of the Reputation Series as a whole to challenge the received tradition in biography. As the cover notes, readers will find that "their illusions might be shattered, their ideas infringed, their delight in a moral tale defiled." But whether this conclusion is really supported by the evidence and has any scholarly justification is another matter. I think not.

There is, of course, a way in which one can truthfully say that More failed in his political aims. He did not manage to persuade King Henry and the others whom he sought to convince, either about the marriage or on the question of the supremacy. He fell from office, suffered public disgrace, and was eventually executed, while the revolution that Henry (perhaps unwittingly) unleashed was quickly snatched away by opportunists who saw their moment to act.

But John Guy's petulant suggestion that More ended up a moral absolutist because he failed in his political aims seriously misrepresents the matter. My own concern in this essay is not with reviewing the details of Guy's book, but more generally with the topic of More and conscience. Yet I think that it is absurd even to hint that More's frustration in the use of his political power for his own ends led to

his self-interested adoption of some uncompromising standard, as if he were suddenly introducing some unreasonably high standard of conduct in which he had not previously believed, a standard that would allow him to issue moral condemnations of his enemies when he no longer stood any chance of "winning" according to the usual rules of political combat.

John Guy is not alone in voicing this sort of criticism about More. James Wood, for instance, finds More manipulative in his ambitions and deceitful in his religious intolerance.<sup>2</sup> Steven D. Smith's fine recent article in the *University of St. Thomas Law Review* cites a good number of the scholarly critics of More as unprincipled and merely expedient in the course of reflecting on Thomas More's refusal for reasons of conscience to swear the Oath of Supremacy without further explanation of his reasons from the point of view of civil law and religious freedom. Smith exposes the fallacies in many of these misinterpretations of More, but finds that the evidence about More's deeds and words still raise various questions that he calls "the conundrums of conscience."<sup>3</sup> Where some scholars paint More a wolf in sheep's clothing, there is the related—but far more widely known—misrepresentation of More as holding a modern liberal view of conscience, namely, Robert Bolt's *Man for All Seasons*, where More is presented as ready to die out of fidelity to his chosen moral principles—with the accent on "chosen"—especially when he says: "But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather, not that I believe it, but that I believe it. I trust I make myself obscure?"<sup>4</sup> In fairness, it is only right to point out that John Guy is critical of Bolt's portrayal of More as holding this view of conscience and suggests that holding something as incoherent as this would be more typical of King Henry VIII.<sup>5</sup> And yet the portrait of More by John Guy is more sinister, of course, in its speculation that More only turned to moral principles out of desperation, whether as a cynical Machiavellian claim for high ground when all his other political resources had failed him, or as a desperate clutching for some sort of floating timber after his political shipwreck.

The question, it seems to me, is not just how More made absolute claims at the end of his career, but how More understood conscience all his life, and how he understood politics in relation to conscience. If there is a consistency in this regard, I think that Guy's suggestion that More turned morally absolutist when the political options by which he had lived as long as they were viable will be rendered untenable. It certainly is possible that someone might fail at politics because his devotion to moral principles leaves no room for the compromises and maneuvering that politics invariably demands. By the standards of *Realpolitik*, one might indeed be saintly to the point of being unworldly. But I do not think this to be More's situation. To address this question, I would like to undertake, first, a brief review of More's life-long understanding and lived practice of conscience in its genuinely Catholic

<sup>2</sup> James Wood, "Sir Thomas More: A Man for One Season" in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Random House, 2000), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Steven D. Smith, "Interrogating Thomas More: The Conundrums of Conscience," *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 1/1 (2003): 580-609.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons: a play in two acts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 91. Turner (p. 162) documents Bolt's deliberate allusion here to Bertold Brecht's *Galileo*.

<sup>5</sup> See Guy, 204-05.

<sup>1</sup> John Guy, *Thomas More* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 213.

understanding—a task for which we have excellent resources not only in the law review article by Steven Smith but also in the collection of More's late letters by Alvaro de Silva.<sup>6</sup> And, second, I would like to offer a reading of the *Utopia* as a guide to our appreciation for More's understanding of the place of conscience in politics.

The issue will turn, I think, on whether More's remarks about refusing to disclose his reasons for not taking the infamous Oath for "reasons of conscience" were principled or adventitious. An especially important text in this regard comes from a letter to Meg where More puts the matter in terms that could seem to leave an open question about what More's view of conscience really was. He writes: "How be it (as help me God) as touching the whole oath, I never withdrew any man from it nor never advised any to refuse it nor never put, nor will, any scruple in any man's head, but leave every man to his own conscience. And me thinks in good faith that so were it good reason that every man should leave me to mine."

Steven Smith, for instance, reviews the use that has been made of a statement like this, for instance by John Noonan and Edward Gaffney in *Religious Freedom: History, Cases, and Other Materials on the Interaction of Religion and Government*. More's own family, of course, found it not heroic but absurd that he would hazard endangering his family and showing ingratitude to a king who had been gracious and loyal to him. The general question here is, why claim that some beliefs are entitled to the special respect and protection of law because they belong to some distinctive moral category? Smith also treats at length the question of how to reconcile the statement about leaving every man to his own conscience with More's enthusiastic persecution of those who dissented from the Catholic faith, his suppression of Protestant writings, and his part in the execution of heretics. Was More only in favor of a general right of conscience when his own interests and life were at stake? And why be so reticent about telling people what those beliefs were that he thought demanded in conscience? John Fisher and others shared More's disapproval of the Oath but left no doubt about why they believed what they believed. As much as anything else, it is More's unwillingness to explain his reasons in public that prompts cynical interpretations about his alleged hypocrisy.

As Smith rightly shows, it cannot be the case that More holds a position like that of Kant, that truth-telling is some absolute duty, regardless of consequences. The duties of his office placed him from time to time in positions in which calculated misrepresentations seemed called for, and More seems to have done his duty. It is at very least condescending to try and excuse More as simply a creature of his time, as someone who had genuine but merely inchoate respect for conscience but who had not yet overcome the assumption that heretics should be punished. Likewise, Smith shows at some length that it is impossible to excuse More as simply fulfilling the demands of his office as Chancellor and to imagine that it was the law, not More, that was persecuting heretics. For Smith, it is decisive that More had reflected on these questions in the *Utopia* and that he pursued the policies zealously. Was More inconsistent? hypocritical? self-serving (that is, defending conscience only for himself, but not for others)? Could he have believed that Protestants were not actually sincere and not truly acting from conscience? He does seem to have believed

their views false and insidious, but he could hardly have thought them insincere when they were willing to go death for their faith.

Nor does it fit the facts for us to imagine that More actually sought martyrdom, considering his determined and persistent effort to escape the verdict and the death sentence. He feared the horrible pain of execution and he was deeply concerned not to put his loved ones at risk.

In Smith's review of the literature, he wisely considers but rejects as an explanation the curious distance that many modern thinkers have toward the truth of their beliefs as a possible explanation for their puzzlement about martyrs who are willing to die for their faith. While the modern devaluation of truth readily makes them willing to reduce the decisions taken by martyrs to various cultural, social, political or anthropological explanations (such as the extreme position of John Guy), this solution is not quite plausible in the case of More. For modern interpreters who takes beliefs not as truths but merely as instruments meant to help us survive in the brutal give-and-take of the world, More's refusal seems as if he is allowing a dispute about an abstract legalistic proposition to bring on his own death and to jeopardize their welfare—a kind of reversal of means and ends. His willingness to accept martyrdom looks irrational, as if a kind of privileging of a belief that should regarded an instrument meant to help us to survive, not an end in itself. As an interpretive device, this sort of instrumentalism is marvelously supple and quite non-judgmental about what the interests of an individual are or should be that any particular organism might want.

One of the problems facing any interpreter of More is that many of his contemporaries who knew him well and shared both his religious faith and his devotion to objective truth found his position simply unintelligible. Normally—if one can speak of "normally" for martyrs—those who die for truth insist on explaining, yet More would not explain himself. Perhaps it is that he didn't want to complicate their consciences by explaining what seemed so clear to him. They found the Oath that he refused to swear largely unobjectionable, and in this view he is simply leaving them at liberty to act as they see fit, begging only for the liberty to do what his conscience dictates.

Smith, I think is right to insist that More is not the modern existentialist, in its incoherent position of imagining that he could believe an idea without thereby committing himself to the truth of the idea. Beliefs about the sorts of matters that are religious are not just dry propositions to which we give or withhold intellectual assent, but have a personal character: loving, trusting commitment of heart, mind, and soul. False denial is not simple dishonesty but a kind of betrayal. It may prove helpful to look at some important instances of More's comments on conscience.

## II. Some Important Instances of More's Comments on Conscience

In More's speech at the conclusion of his trial on July 1, 1535, there is a stubborn fact that resists any such interpretation. More had been imprisoned precisely because he could not, in good conscience, swear allegiance to the oath King Henry demanded, and yet until this moment he refused to explain his stance one way or the other. He simply kept silent, and Henry seems all the more to have craved his approval. But in his final speech, once the verdict had been rendered and the death sentence imposed, there no longer remained any reason to reserve his opinion. Only

<sup>6</sup> *The Last Letters of Thomas More*, ed. with an introduction by Alvaro de Silva (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000). See esp. "Introduction: Good Company," 1-25.

then did he make clear what it was that required him in conscience to refuse the oath: the superiority of the authority of the Church to that of the King:

Seeing that I see ye are determined to condemn me (God knoweth how) I will now in discharge of my conscience speak my mind plainly and freely touching my Indictment and your Statute, withal.

And forasmuch as this Indictment is grounded upon an Act of Parliament directly repugnant to the laws of God and his Holy Church, the supreme Government of which, or of any part whereof, may no temporal Prince presume by any law to take upon him, as rightfully belonging to the See of Rome, a spiritual pre-eminence by the mouth of our Saviour himself, personally present upon earth, only to St. Peter and his successors, Bishops of the same See, by special prerogative granted; it is therefore in law, amongst Christian men, insufficient to charge any Christian man.<sup>7</sup>

His refusal to swear the oath, he insists, was not an attack on the king. In fact, it was precisely to avoid any attack on the king that he had long clung to silence, however much this silence might be misinterpreted. Rather, his silence on the King's "great matter" was a choice made in light of something that More recognized in his conscience as true independently of any choices on his part. Where Henry tried to replace the "higher law of God and Christ's Church" with his own law, More felt the need to witness to that higher law, even if so witnessing required the sacrifice of his life.

Besides the important legal points at issue—about the marriage, about the very nature of law, about the exact wording of the oath—we also find here a telling piece of evidence about More's own understanding of conscience. It is a very traditional Catholic understanding of conscience<sup>8</sup> as the faculty by which an individual can pass moral judgments about the choices one intends to make as well as about choices already made. A well-formed conscience will evaluate these choices on the basis of moral truths that are entirely antecedent to the will of the moral agent. In accord with the scholastic tradition that More knew from his days at Oxford,<sup>9</sup> he took the formation of conscience to be the effect of a lengthy process of *discovering* the moral order and not a matter of *deciding* on what such an order was to be, for himself or for his age. For this long tradition in ethics, having a well-formed conscience depends on coming to know and appreciating what the truths of morality are; it is never a matter of choosing a morality, however stern or rigorous. To use a metaphor that reflects

More's own profession, individual conscience is the courtroom in which a trial must be held, but the trial must be conducted by abiding principles of law, not by any principles specially created for the occasion.

The traditional Catholic position on conscience focuses on the judgments an individual makes in applying the objective norms of morality in order to determine the rightness or wrongness of an action. According to this position, the entire body of ethical principles depends upon a first principle which is naturally known to all human minds<sup>10</sup> without need for any special investigation (namely, that good is to be pursued and evil avoided); while a given person might not ever think about stating this principle in so many words, it is nevertheless present as a principle by which everyone operates.<sup>11</sup> And yet this first practical principle is far too general by itself to decide on all the practical matters one faces in life—somehow one has to determine just what is good and what is not for specific situations. Some of the more specific principles that are needed for good judgment can be obtained through reasoning about the natural law, which can articulate secondary and even tertiary precepts in order to concretize the primary practical principle. But some of the more detailed principles needed to form conscience aright will only be known through revelation and the decisions of divinely commissioned authorities. In fact, for most people, the acquisition of moral beliefs comes about unreflectively through the guidance of parents, school, church, and public opinion. Despite the external nature of these sources of moral guidance, there always remains the inner seat of reasoning and judgment about moral matters. From both sources, proper authority and reason's discovery of the natural law, one can form one's conscience.

Aquinas notes that judgments of conscience are evident in a variety of experiences, including (1) the recognition that we have done or have not done something (in this regard, conscience is said to be a *witness*); (2) the judgment that something should be done or should not be done (here conscience *binds* and *incites* us to some action); and (3) the judgment that something is well done or ill done (thus conscience is said to *excuse*, *accuse*, or *torment* us).<sup>12</sup> As individuals mature, they may well find reason through experience to affirm the more specific moral principles they have acquired or to correct them in light of the first principle (prejudice, for instance, may have encouraged some evil practice under the appearance of good, or some long-standing rationalization may have caused a kind of moral blindness about some good that ought to be pursued or respected).

The proper formation of conscience is crucial for the development of a disposition to pass sound judgments upon practical matters in light of moral principles. Since the correctness of the principles used in one's reasoning is

<sup>7</sup> Thomas More, in Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*, in *Lives of Saint Thomas More* (William Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield), ed. E. E. Reynolds, Everyman's Library #19 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1963), 161.

<sup>8</sup> For a modern statement of the Catholic understanding of conscience, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Catholic Conference, 1994) #1776-1802. One of the classic statements of this position can be found in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* I, q.79, aa.12-13; he provides a more expansive treatment of this topic in qq.16-17 of his *Quaestiones disputate de veritate*.

<sup>9</sup> In this period Oxford University was a stronghold of medieval scholasticism; see Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, rev. ed., ed. F. M. Powricke and A. B. Emdem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), vol. 3, 140-68. See More's 1526 "Letter to Bugenhagen" in vol. 7 of the Yale Univ. Press *Collected Works* for testimony to More's indebtedness to scholasticism and his enduring importance on its importance for Christian thinking.

<sup>10</sup> The technical name for the faculty by which a person has this infallible knowledge of the first practical principle is *synderesis*. The term *conscience* is then reserved for the disposition that is built up in an individual (however well-formed or ill-formed this disposition may be) to make judgments of moral evaluation in practical cases. For a sense of the range of positions taken on these matters in medieval scholasticism, see Timothy C. Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980). There is an extremely thorough recent review of this material in Sr. Prudence Allen's article "Where Is Our Conscience?" in *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44/3 (2004): 335-72.

<sup>11</sup> Aquinas traces this position back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.6.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.79, a.12.

indispensable for arriving at correct moral judgments, there is need for individuals and for societies to examine their moral principles in the process of building up a body of moral truths, and this process is called the formation of conscience. A judgment of conscience based on false principles or on a faulty application of genuine principles renders the judgment of conscience erroneous. There are also subjective factors, such as the certainty or uncertainty one might have about the relevant principle or about how to apply moral principles. Accordingly, there has developed a sophisticated casuistry for handling such problems as what to do in cases when one is unsure about what the right course of action is, or what to do when even the learned are divided in their opinions on a moral question. The respect which this opinion accords to the subjective factor in measuring personal culpability and in acknowledging the diminution of moral responsibility in no way denigrates or imperils the intellectual orientation of this understanding of conscience.

From the beginning of his career to its end, More held a traditional view of conscience and recognized the need for its proper formation. This is already evident long before the moment of the trial. In a letter to his children's teacher, for instance, he writes: "The whole fruit of their endeavors should consist in the testimony of God and a good conscience. Thus they will be inwardly calm and at peace and neither stirred by praise of flatterers nor stung by the follies of unlearned mockers of learning."<sup>13</sup> Truth can easily become a casualty when sycophants exaggerate in hope of gain and when cowards weasel their way out of danger by deception. But for More, acknowledging within oneself the truth about any given situation will generate the inward calm and peace of a good conscience.

In order to appreciate More's sense of the demands of conscience in the matter of Henry's desire to obtain a divorce from Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn, a question of a truth based on revelation and the determination of authority (rather than in any direct way a question of natural law), one would have to attend not only to the range of questions about the facts of the case but also to questions about More's knowledge and position. Was, for instance, the dispensation by which Henry was allowed by the Church to marry Catherine (his deceased brother's wife) valid? Determining King Henry's actual disposition at any given time is a complicated question because of the changing demands of political intrigue and the pressing dynamics of international relations, not to mention the vacillations in Henry's own mind by reason of such factors as his poorly restrained lusts, his desires for an heir, his anger at Catherine's resistance, and his general frustration at not getting what he wanted. There are also difficult questions on the subjective side about such things as exactly when Thomas More knew what. More's biographers have tried to recount the likely stages of More's acquaintance with Henry's growing desire for the divorce.<sup>14</sup> The process of gathering data appropriate for making sound moral judgments about his own course of action is a crucial part of the formation of conscience. The record shows a picture of More working vigorously for his King on this matter in precisely the ways that lawyers are trained to explore all sides of a

question at law; and yet he was careful never to yield to expediency on a matter of principle, no matter how hard the King pressed him for support. One may surmise that More held for the obligation of Henry to continue to recognize his wedding vows to Queen Catherine until such time as they were proven not to be binding, and in this respect he was like the defender of the bond in any annulment proceedings. The burden of proof rests with the party trying to prove that a presumptive bond does not exist.

But in order to appreciate More's understanding of conscience, we should broaden our consideration beyond this famous case. Years earlier More had agonized about whether to enter public service at all, and from what we know about the details of his early years as well as about his early writing, one can already detect the same careful dedication to forming his conscience properly in order to work out a decision. Although his father John More had early on staked out a career in public service for his son, More did not actually join Henry's staff until 1517 when he was made a member of the Privy Council at nearly forty years of age.<sup>15</sup> In the two years prior to that decision he was hard at work on the *Utopia*, in whose first book one can almost see More trying to think out the foreseeable problems of possible cooperation with evil when More has his characters weigh the good one can do in public service with the risk of compromising on moral principles that is attendant on any foray into the seas of political life.

The path that John More laid out for his young son included two years of service (beginning about age twelve) in the household of John Morton, the Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>16</sup> After receiving two years (1492-1494) of spiritual and intellectual formation in traditional scholastic learning at Oxford and tasting the new Humanist scholarship through his acquaintance with the likes of John Colet and Desiderius Erasmus,<sup>17</sup> More longed to continue with literary and theological studies. But his father's ambitions for his son brought about his transfer to the New Inn, a London institution that trained young men for a career in law. By February 1496 More was sufficiently prepared for admission to the prestigious Lincoln's Inn, which possessed the unique privilege of recommending candidates for admission to the London bar.

During the four years of his legal studies, More was engaged in vocational discernment. Under the care of John Colet's spiritual direction,<sup>18</sup> he sought clarity

<sup>15</sup> There is some dispute over the precise date when More joined Henry's staff. Elton held for 1517 but Erasmus and virtually every else take it to have been 1518. John Guy's new volume *Thomas More* (Arnold, 2000) summarizes what is at stake in this controversy on page 49-52.

<sup>16</sup> In the long tradition of ecclesial appointments to the post of Lord Chancellor, Archbishop John Morton (later Cardinal) served in that capacity under Henry VII from 1487 to 1500. In 1529 More (succeeding Cardinal Wolsey) became the first layman to hold that post.

<sup>17</sup> John Colet (1466-1519) brought back to England a passionate interest in biblical, patristic, and Greek subjects developed during his studies with Italian humanists. Although it is not possible to establish the precise date when More came into contact with Colet, we do know that Colet lectured on the epistles of St. Paul at Oxford in 1499, became More's spiritual director in 1504, and was appointed the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, in 1505.

From Erasmus's own letters of 1499 (see Nichols, *Epistles*, vol. 1, page 200, 226) we learn of the already well-established scholar's delight at meeting a young man like More.

<sup>18</sup> See More's letter to Colet of 23 October 1504 in *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Rogers (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), 5-9.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Gonell, in *Selected Letters*, 105.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 268-72 and 313-16; R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 223-30; James Monti, *The King's Good Servant but God's First: The Life and Writings of Saint Thomas More* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 301-12.

about the state of life to which God was calling him. His spiritual reading during this period is known to have included the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis and the *Scale of Perfection* by Walter Hilton.<sup>19</sup> Each morning and each evening he prayed with the Carthusians of London's Charterhouse. Eighteen members of this order were eventually to die as martyrs for their fidelity to the papacy.<sup>20</sup> He was testing the possibility that he had a vocation to the priesthood and in particular to their ascetical form of religious life.<sup>21</sup> Toward the end of his legal education, once it became clear to him that marriage and not religious life was to be his vocation, he relatively quickly sought marriage to Jane Colt, a young country girl from a virtuous family of his acquaintance. Before her untimely death at age twenty-three in 1511, they had four children, for whom More then provided a new mother by his marriage to Alice Middleton, a widow some six years his senior.

One can also see something of More's understanding of conscience in his literary activity from this period, especially in his *Life of John Pico* (that is, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, 1463-1494). This work is a close translation from the Latin text of the biography that was penned by Pico's nephew. To it More added his own preface, a translation of some of Pico's letters on Christian spiritual formation, and a set of his own poems on "Spiritual Warfare" that were inspired by Pico's ideas. There can be no mistaking that Pico was a heroic model for More—a layman whose conversion from hedonism had entailed a commitment of himself to an intensely spiritual life of penance and asceticism (he was admitted to the Order of Preachers just before his death). More admired this humanist scholar who had devoted no small portion of his energies to the public good of his city of Florence. More's own academic interests and ascetical practices resembled those of Pico, and one can see something of More's own care for the ongoing formation of his conscience in the "Twelve Rules for Spiritual Warfare," which recurrently counsel us to overcome temptations by imitating one or another of the traits of the Heart of Christ as he undergoes the Passion. As advice for keeping the judgments of one's conscience sharp, More set down a dozen "rules" for spiritual warfare and a matching dozen "weapons"—in this he employs a hallowed notion within the tradition of Christian spirituality, the need to act directly against an enticing temptation. When inclined, for instance, to take undue pride in one's own good actions, the remedy is a cultivation of humility. When aroused by the likely pleasure of a sinful act, one should recall that these short-lived pleasures will invariably be succeeded by sorrow and loss.

Near the end of More's life, in his writings from the Tower, we still find More recommending the practice of a careful and daily examination of conscience in which he had steeled himself since his youth. For this purpose some sort of solitude is crucial, and we may well suspect that the remarks in his *Dialogue of Comfort against*

*Tribulation* about reserving a time and place for the examination of conscience reflect his long practice of retiring for a certain time each day (and for longer periods on Fridays) to the oratory he built on his estate at Chelsea:

Let him also choose himself some secret solitary place in his own house as far from noise and company as he conveniently can. And thither let him some time secretly resort alone, imagining himself as one going out of the world even straight unto the giving up his reckoning unto God of his sinful living. Then let him there before an altar or some pitiful image of Christ's bitter passion, the beholding whereof may put him in remembrance of the thing and move him to devout compassion, kneel down or fall prostrate as at the feet of almighty God, verily believing him to be there invisibly present as without any doubt he is. There let him open his heart to God and confess his faults such as he can call to mind and pray God of forgiveness. Let him call to remembrance the benefits that God hath given him, either in general among other men, or privately to himself, and give him humble hearty thanks therefore. There let him declare unto God, the temptations of the devil, the suggestions of the flesh, the occasions of the world, and of his worldly friends much worse many time in drawing a man from God than are his most mortal enemies....<sup>22</sup>

As here described, the examination of conscience is envisioned as taking place, not just as a mental exercise but in prayer before Christ. The stress is on honesty before God, both about one's faults and weakness and about one's talents and accomplishments, with great effort to be truthful about the precise nature of one's inclinations and temptations, lest rationalization take over and carry off the soul. By emphasizing not only sorrow for sin but gratitude for blessings, More is portraying conscience as a prayerful place of intimate dialogue with God and thus an indispensable aid in the quest for holiness and virtue.

### III. *The Evidence of the Utopia*

Among all More's writings, the *Utopia* rightly holds a special place. The work is a fascinating humanist exercise of the imagination that has been legitimately interpreted in diverse ways—as a political program, for instance, as ironical satire, and even as an anticipation of Marx's communism. But the book, especially the first of its two parts, may also be understood as an exercise in the formation of conscience undertaken by More just two years before he entered Henry's service. Raphael Hythloday, the intellectual world-traveler, cannot bring himself to consent to public service, for fear that his conscience would be compromised by the insatiable quest of this world's princes for territory, wealth, and glory in war or by the pressures of the sycophants at royal courts. By contrast, the character More, borrowing from Cicero's *honestas*, argues that politics is the art of the possible. It is a matter of remembering one's non-negotiable principles and determining what is negotiable, and how far one may go without compromising those principles. In the give-and-take between the characters More and Hythloday, one need not look too far to see More,

<sup>19</sup>Monti (65) notes that, in *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, More believes the author of the *Imitation of Christ* to be the French spiritual writer Jean Gerson.

<sup>20</sup>See Dom Bede Camm, O.S.B., ed., *Lives of the English Martyrs*, vol. 1: *Martyrs under Henry VIII* (London: Longman, Green, & Co., 1914).

<sup>21</sup>In William Roper's *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, Knight*, ed. Elsie V. Hitchcock (London: Early English Text Society, 1935), 76, there is a report of a conversation between More and his daughter Meg about his persistent admiration and even longing for the Carthusian life. He confides to her that, if it had not been for having a family, he would long before have shut himself up in a cell as narrow as that in which he was then imprisoned.

<sup>22</sup>*A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, Bk. II, ch. 16, ed. Louis Martz and Frank Manley, in the *Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), vol. 12, 164-65.

in the humanist tradition of concern for morality and politics, readying his conscience for the inevitable tests that lie ahead.

What gives More confidence is a deeply Augustinian sense of the genuine possibility, if one stays mindful of the hierarchy required by the proper order of one's loves, for reconciling the City of God and the City of Man. The actual configuration of the Utopia described in the second part of More's volume may seem at the surface to be entirely innocent of institutions historically prevalent in Christendom, and yet the dramatic setting for Hythloday's opportunity to recount what he saw in Utopia is a conversation which takes place just after More has come from mass at Notre Dame, "the most beautiful and most popular church in Antwerp." In the preliminary part of their conversation the figure of More's old patron, Cardinal Morton, looms large as the very embodiment of prudence, both on such policy questions as capital punishment and the proper penalties for thieves and on the way to re-direct a dinner conversation that has become inflamed by stubborn passions.

What is more, the long discussion of political philosophy and its political instantiation in Utopia turns out to have deep roots in the Augustinian distinction between the two cities in *De civitate Dei*. As Gerard Wegemer has shown in *Thomas More and Statesmanship*,<sup>23</sup> there is reason to think that the utopian proposals of the second book of Utopia are not just straightforwardly intended in the fashion, say, of Cicero's *Republic*, but carefully ironic in the satirical vein of Horace, Lucan, and other classical authors so dear to the humanist renaissance. The freedom of imagination that marks this work uses as a literary conceit the contrast between the dingy, stale Old World and the charming vistas of the New World, then just recently discovered (1492). The delight that the characters take in wondering whether the incredible reports of a new continent could possibly be accurate provides an engaging literary strategy for political philosophy. One need only think of Pico della Mirandola or of More's contemporary Machiavelli<sup>24</sup> to remember how fascinated the humanists were with re-thinking the purpose of government and the proper relationship of virtue and power in society. Wegemer has shown that the Utopia proposed in the second book systematically violates all the principles of Augustinian political philosophy, principles with which More must be presumed to have been familiar—not just on the basis of the allusions to the *City of God* that lace the Utopia but from the fact that he had lectured with great success on historical and philosophical aspects of this book at the parish of Saint Lawrence Jewry in London upon the invitation of the learned cleric William Grocyn.

So considered, the first book of the *Utopia* shows us Thomas More carefully thinking through the struggles that public life will involve, not as if he somehow already knew what we know by the hindsight of history, but with an Augustinian optimism about the ways in which the Earthly City can be reconciled to the Heavenly City, an optimism clearly tempered by a realistic sense that politics is the art of the possible. The earnest debate between More and Hythloday about whether one's

commitment to moral principle will necessarily have to suffer unacceptable compromise in the battles of politics adds an important dimension to the interpretation of the *Utopia*, for the author has already had a decade and a half of prior experience in law and public office. His religious faith has generated and grounded a commitment to moral principles. This Humanist essay provides a rhetorical vehicle in the first book for exploring certain issues relevant to the decision about entering public life, and in the second book a way to explore the non-negotiable principles of politics as part of the necessary formation of conscience.

One could well make a case that many of More's writings during his Chancellorship were in part the efforts of a Catholic humanist to form King Henry's conscience. In some of them More makes a direct argument in his own name, for instance, in his openly apologetical work *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*.<sup>25</sup> At other times, More works by indirect persuasion with all the cleverness possible to an author using a pseudonym, as in *The Debellation of Salem and Bizance*.<sup>26</sup> What is at stake for More is the struggle for the Christian order of England, an order threatened both by the religious reformers then trying to enter England from Germany with various forms of Protestant ideas and by political opportunists who played on Henry's weakness with flattery and pretension in a manner much like that More had anticipated in the worries expressed by Hythloday in the first book of the *Utopia*. Perhaps the direct argumentation of works like *Confutation* (1532-1533) or *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) are more readily intelligible as appeals to Henry and to the leaders of Parliament to make their decisions upon clearly argued principles. But why, we might ask, write such an elaborate and curious *tour de force* as a fictional account of the Turkish attack upon Hungary? Not far beneath the figures and symbols one finds direct applications to the situation of England, ready for the King's eyes to recognize and to choose as his policy without being backed into the corner in a way that direct writing might have done. In short, More realized that there were various ways in which he could try to form the consciences of his King and of other members of Parliament.

In More's last letters from the Tower there is also compelling evidence about his notion of the place of reasons of conscience. Besides producing such works as *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* and the shorter *On the Sadness of Christ*, More wrote numerous letters during the fourteen months of his captivity. Among his twenty-four surviving letters from the period there are four to Thomas Cromwell (in one of which he writes: "upon that I should perceive mine own conscience should serve me"), one to Henry VIII, eight to Meg, two to fellow prisoners: the theologian Nicholas Wilson and the priest Leder, one to his friend Antonio Bonvisi, and the longest, jointly composed by More and his daughter Margaret Roper, to Alice Alington. These letters have recently been gathered together in an attractive volume by Father Alvaro de Silva, whose introduction points out that the word *conscience* is extremely common throughout these final letters. It appears more than a hundred times, and some forty times in a single text, the letter from Margaret to Alice. This

<sup>23</sup>Gerard Wegemer, *Thomas More on Statesmanship* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup>No formal connection between More and Machiavelli (1469-1521) is known, and yet there are many ways in which More's position stands directly contrary to that of Machiavelli. *The Prince* was already written (1513) but not yet published when More published his *Utopia* (1518).

<sup>25</sup>*The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. L. Schuster, R. Marius, J. Lusardi, and R. J. Schoeck.

Volume 8 of the Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), 3 parts.

<sup>26</sup>*The Debellation of Salem and Bizance*, ed. J. Guy, R. Keen, C. Miller, and R. McGugan. Volume 10 of the Yale Edition (1987).

letter is in Meg's hand but is widely regarded by scholars as the product of More's mind, with all the careful distinctions he was cultivating in the long Tower months. It is presumed that a real conversation between More and Meg in the Tower was the source for the imaginary dialogue presented in the letter, for Meg was trying to win over her father to swear the oath in order to regain his liberty, urging that his reservations were simply a "scruple of conscience." More returns to the literary license of his humanist education to portray Meg as a kind of temptress like Eve tempting Adam, but happily a temptress who gains reassurance and even joy at her father's ultimate insistence upon having "a respect for his own soul."

In this clever letter, More tells Meg the story of a certain Company, "an honest man from another quarter" who is unable to join in on a questionable verdict delivered by his fellow eleven jurors. The reader might here think of *Twelve Angry Men*, or perhaps a work of own More's tradition, *Piers Plowman* by William Langland. Enraged that Company is delaying the verdict by his stubborn resistance, the eleven try to prevail on him to be "Good Company" and sign on to their opinion. That Company is but one against eleven does not bear on the truth of his position. The fact that many important people in More's England took the oath without a crisis of conscience was for More no evidence that he was wrong. He speaks with the greatest respect for his opponents in these late letters, but he also suggests that they should have known or did know better. In this letter More has Company make an important disclaimer: he is open to the possibility of being corrected, but he explains that he has already weighed the matter, so now he asks the eleven "to talk upon the matter and tell him...*reasons*" why he should change his stance. His fellow jurymen refuse his offer, and so Company decides to keep his own company, lest "the passage of [his] poor soul would passeth all good company." More reminds Margaret that he himself "never intended (God being my good lord) to pin my soul to another man's back...for I know not whether he may hap to carry it."

In letter after letter More talks of his reasons of conscience, and his insistence on the point makes clear that for him conscientious resistance is grounded in something other than personal integrity or sheer voluntarism. De Silva notes a range of meanings for the word conscience in these final letters.<sup>27</sup> It refers, first, to one's "mind" or "inmost thought" as the understanding by which one has built up personal conviction of a reasonable sort about a matter. Although accompanied by feelings of various sorts, it is not just a feeling of contentment, or self-satisfaction, or emotional tranquility, but the tranquility that comes from purity of heart. Second, De Silva argues that conscience refers to a person's specifically "moral" sense, one's consciousness of right and wrong in the matters for which one bears responsibility, and thus one's awareness of good and evil. Third, the term conscience, by its etymological origins in *cum* and *scire*, denotes a certain kind of "knowledge" that we have "with" another. One sees this especially in More's sense that for all the solitude of his captivity, he found himself alone with his God. Christian teaching on conscience has regularly championed a strong sense of the intimate relation between conscience and God. This is evident both when it makes the cornerstone of Christian anthropology the conviction that the human being is made in the image of God and when writers on morality speak about the voice of conscience as the voice of the

divine lawmaker.<sup>28</sup> Now, to become a proper image of God, the Christian must look at himself in Christ as in a mirror, so that the image reflected there may become more and more Christ's own image. Coming to accept and share the wisdom of Christ by better knowledge of oneself and increasing conformity to the model of Christ is clearly at the heart of More's understanding of conscience in these late letters.

More believed firmly that Christ has entrusted to the Church the mission to hand on in her teaching the truth about God and about human freedom. For More, this freedom was to be found in the obedience we render according to the same spirit that marks the famous line from Saint John: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." The problem, of course, is how one is to use one's freedom, how one is to handle the formation of conscience. More constantly urges those to whom he writes that it is to be formed through study and reflection. For the Christian believer, the proper formation comes about through the authority of the Church as it teaches the truth—even if this ultimately means giving up one's life, as More did for the spiritual primacy of the Roman Pontiff.

In the letter from Meg to Alice, one sees More struggling for his own spiritual integrity—it is a story of good fun, to entertain his daughter as well as to enlighten her. Unlike the vision of conscience in Bolt's *Man for All Seasons*, this is not the notion of conscience championed by philosophical individualism but the idea of conscience of Christian tradition—a conscience that knows most truly when it knows what it knows along with Christ. Even the play on words about "company" and "good company" may well be an allusion to the importance of ecclesial unity in the face of so much "bad company" that More opposed so vigorously during the period of his chancellorship. For reasons of his own, Bolt has More end in moralizing: "Finally, it is not a matter of reason but of love"—but, like the passage cited earlier from that play, this line too fails to do Thomas More full justice. For him it was always a matter of reason too, a matter of careful discernment about principles he did not choose or create but which he honored as a groundwork for reasonable decision-making.

In that touching letter, More is thus telling Meg that she may not just change her mind about something for the sake of pleasing others or for personal convenience. But this is not stubbornness, for the character Company is reasonably ready to change his mind, but only if a set of good reasons can be presented, and not just reasons of political expediency. Otherwise, he would not be changing his mind but simply saying what he does not mean. His action would actually be a betrayal of his own self, a lying to his own mind. By swearing the oath in the way that many of England's clergy and nobles had decided to do, More would have lost himself and lost the place of solitude with his God. He preferred to accept prison and even death in order to be truly free. As he writes to Meg, "I have of pure necessity for respect unto mine own soul."

<sup>27</sup>*The Last Letters of Thomas More*, edited and with an Introduction by Alvaro de Silva (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 9-11.

<sup>28</sup>This is the understanding of conscience preferred by Cardinal Newman in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*.