

THE MYSTICISM OF ST. THOMAS MORE¹

“NEC enim arbitrator levioris esse operae Morum effingere quam Alexandrum magnum aut Achillem, nec illi quam hic noster immortalitate digniores erant.”

“For I do not think it a lighter task to paint More’s likeness than those of Alexander the Great or Achilles, nor were they more worthy of immortality than this man of ours.”

These words of Erasmus reveal the opinion that the greatest of his contemporaries had of Thomas More. On the friendship of More and Erasmus much history has turned and much history is beginning to turn even in our time. It is of surpassing interest to observe that Erasmus, the friend of More, was also friend of Franciscus de Vittoria, and that in his recent volume on *The Spanish Origin of International Law* Professor James Brown Scott introduces the work of Vittoria by reference to the *Utopia* of More and the *Institutes of a Christian Prince* of Erasmus.

The name of Vittoria rightly finds its place in the graceful and most attractive volume in which Mr. Algernon Cecil paints for us his portrait of Thomas More. His book is in the style less of a chronicle than of an essay in interpretation of the mind and character of More. On an early page we learn how the young Oxford Platonist (p. 26) is won to the Aristotelean tradition by a visit to Paris and by the teaching of Jacques Lefèvre, in whom the happiest minds and healthiest judgments recognise “the restoration of true philosophy, especially that founded upon Aristotle.” Stapleton in turn assures us that in the maturity of his years Thomas More was a master of Thomist text and tradition. One wonders to what extent he may have been indebted to the Dominicans at Blackfriars in those days, and to what extent in his lectures on the *De Civitate Dei* of St. Augustine he may have been indebted to the commentary of Nicholas Trivet of the Order of Preachers. Possibly they taught the Aristotelean tradition in those days at the Inns of Court. In his introduction to *The Political Theories of the Middle Ages* Maitland refers to “the Inns of Court and lectures on

¹ *A Portrait of Thomas More: Scholar, Statesman, Saint*, by Algernon Cecil. (Eyre & Spottiswoode; 16/- net.)

English law and *Scholastic Exercises* and 'The call to the Bar of the Inn' which is in fact an academically earned degree." The influence of the scholastic discipline may be traced in the writings of Thomas More where, for instance, he is always careful to repeat the argument of his opponent in the words of his opponent. In his visits also to Oxford and Cambridge he was fond of following the practice of a mediæval disputation; and it is known that his daughters were skilled in disputation and actually conducted a disputation in proper form before the King.

In his study of Aristotelico-Thomist tradition in philosophy (and in the Liturgy of the Mass) Thomas More found the conception of "the good character of natural man" which was to distinguish the citizen of Utopia and which Vittoria, reaffirming against Luther the teaching of St. Thomas, stated to be native to mankind. The conception was to be found not only among the philosophers but also among the mystics and, in its most graceful statement, among the English mystics whom More had studied at the Charterhouse. One is grateful for a passage from *The Scale of Perfection* by Walter Hilton that Mr. Cecil cites to us: "Well I wot whoso might once have an inward sign of that dignity and ghostly fairness which a soul had by kind [nature] and shall have by grace, he should loathe and despise in his heart all the bliss, the liking and the fairness of this world as the stench of carrion." Most grateful are we for the claim that Mr. Cecil makes, and that he makes good, for Thomas More to be numbered among the great English mystics; and for the citation (unknown to many) from Baron von Hügel who places More beside Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa as combining "the fullest adhesion to and lifelong labour for External Institutional Authority with the keenest intellectual, speculative life and with the constant temper and practice of experimental and mystical piety." "The last word for him," says Mr. Cecil, "as he looks his last upon life is a considered, convinced, confident assertion that the soul cannot be adequately fed upon unsubstantial things—signs or figures or tokens as the modernists of the time proposed—but only upon 'the selfsame precious body of Christ that suffered his bitter passion.'" Indeed it is interesting to observe that the treatises on the Eucharist and the Passion were written during those last days in the Tower of which St. Thomas

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wrote to his daughter Margaret: "Methinks God by this imprisonment maketh me one of his wantons and setteth me upon his lap and dandleth me even as he hath done all his best friends . . . St. John Baptist, St. Peter, St. Paul and his most especial favourites."

Here then is a new note in the biography of St. Thomas More (and he has been fortunate in his many biographers). Here is English prose written with a grace that never conceals its power, as in the admirable ending to the chapter on Pico della Mirandola or in the memorable pages on Utopia Revisited or in the masterly analysis that Mr. Cecil makes of the character of Luther and the mind of the Reformation. Here, last of all (for which a lawyer owes and makes his humble thanks), is the eloquent *envoi* in which the "home-spun Englishman" is commended to his country:

"In an England, then, which the lawyer with his love of ordered freedom has done more, perhaps, than all other sorts and conditions of men to make, none, it may well be, is fitter than St. Thomas More to be proposed to his countrymen as an example of that basic, diaphanous type of which it has been said by a modern Humanist that 'a majority of such would be the regeneration of the world.' For, just as in France St. Joan, by community of profession, may seem set to purge without offence the too-militant patriotism of her people, so he, by the association of a gracious humanism and fullness of spiritual life with the 'legal mind,' seems exceptionally qualified to rid his compatriots of anything arid, insular, prejudiced or censorious in their outlook and to raise their great love of justice to the plane of equity and of freedom until it attain the liberty of the sons of God."

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