

The Supremacy Complex of Henry VIII and More's Objection to Illegitimate Power

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What Thomas More was able to see and hear in his own conscience, regarding the question of the King's supremacy, is much more relevant than what a certain historiography has handed down to us.

We should ask whether the reason for the crisis of conscience More manifested at that point in his life, a crisis with few parallels in all of England, can be attributed only to the denial by English reformers of Papal primacy concerning the truths of faith, or rather that this truth proved to be a harbinger of other equally important reasons and implications, leading Thomas to confess to his daughter:

In this matter if it were possible for me to do the thing that might content the King's Grace, and God therewith not offended, there hath no man taken this oath already more gladly than I would do... But sith standing my conscience, I can in nowise do it [...] I have no manner remedy, but God hath given me to the strait, that either I must deadly displease him, or abide any worldly harm that he shall for mine other sins, under name of this thing, suffer to fall upon me.¹

In reality, reading and meditating on his letters from the Tower puts us in the presence of a soul seeking to explain a whole group of motivations. "But Margaret, for what causes I refuse the oath, the

¹ *The Last Letters of Thomas More*, edited by Alvaro de Silva, Grand Rapids, Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000, p. 73-74; *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, Edited by Elizabeth Frances Rogers, Princetown University Press, 1947, p. 516/60.

thing (as I have often told you) I will never shew you, neither you nor nobody else... But surely, Daughter, I have refused it and do, for no causes than one."²

Clear understanding of these motivations will only be revealed during his trial. However, his interrogation of 3 June 1535 before the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer, the Lord Chancellor Thomas Audley, the Duke of Suffolk Charles Brandon, the Earl of Wiltshire Thomas Boleyn, and the Secretary Cromwell, gives us an early glimpse of the path his choice had taken and the beliefs that had developed in his heart.

We must remember More was imprisoned on 17 April 1534 for refusing to swear to the *Act of Succession* in the form it was presented. This decree sanctioned the right to the throne for descendents of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn with a preamble inspired by the King's new religious policy. On 3 November 1534, the *Act of Supremacy* was passed declaring the King supreme head of the Church of England. This act was then integrated into the *Treasons Act* declaring anyone who willfully disavowed this supremacy guilty of high treason.

We cannot exclude the possibility that before this law, perhaps aimed specifically against him, Thomas may have nurtured hopes of finding a way to both satisfy his conscience and save his life.

At interrogations before the Act was passed, he appeared combative and determined to explain, to the extent allowed by his self-imposed silence, his reasons for refusal, keeping open the possibility of his taking the oath. After the supremacy was recognized, he appears a man resigned to his fate, as a man who had by now freed his mind of those problems and who no longer wished

² *Ibid.*, p. 86. Rogers, pp. 526-527.

to discuss the titles of King or Pope, stating, "I had fully determined with myself, neither to study nor meddle with any matter of this world, but that my whole study should be upon the passion of Christ and mine own passage out of it."³

Evidently, he now clearly understood he would leave that prison only for the scaffold, since there was no longer even the slightest chance of avoiding martyrdom.

During the interrogation on 3 June 1535, Cromwell observed that, in his opinion, More as Lord Chancellor had forced heretics, thieves, and other malefactors to clearly state whether or not they considered the Pope head of the Church,

and why should not then the King sith it is a law made here that his Grace is Head of the Church here compel men to answer precisely to the law here as they did then concerning the Pope [...] they were as well burned for the denying of that, as they be beheaded for denying of this, and therefore as good reason to compel them to make precise answer to the one as to the other.⁴

In his answer, More was careful to reply that the King cannot be head of the Church and cannot force anyone to obey this law. But this answer seemed oriented toward the belief he would express during his trial around a month later:

He said there was a difference between those two cases because that at that time, as well here as elsewhere through the corps of Christendom, the Pope's power was recognized for an undoubted thing [whereas] in this case a man is not by a law of one realm so bound in his conscience, where there is a law of the whole corps of Christendom to the contrary in matter touching belief, as he is by a law of the whole corps

³ *Ibid.*, p. 113; Rogers, p. 552.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119; Rogers, p. 557-558.

though there hap to be made in some place a law local to the contrary, the reasonableness or the unreasonableness in binding a man to precise answer, standeth not in the respect or difference between heading or burning, but because of the difference in charge of conscience, the difference standeth between heading and hell.⁵

Clearly, if earlier the principle of the Pope's authority over the entire kingdom had been accepted beyond any doubt, a principle that had now been abrogated by Parliamentary law, then refusal to support the sovereign's supremacy would mean refusal to recognize the authority of the King in matters of faith.

Today we would say More's reply contained all the conditions for sending him to trial. Because of this, Cromwell said he liked him less than before, because then he pitied him, but now instead he did not think his intentions were good.⁶

The concerns of his most tenacious persecutors were not long in being confirmed. Around a month later, before the reading of his sentence, More showed the judges just how truly good his intentions were, contrary to what Cromwell thought.

In his own defense, breaking the silence that had brought him so much pain and trouble, he said:

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 thereof, 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 Savior himself, personally

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119-120; Rogers, pp. 557-558.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122; Rogers, p. 559.

present upon the earth, only to Saint Peter and his successors, bishops of the same see.⁷

Furthermore, as his son-in-law reported, he demonstrated “this was contrary as much to the laws as the statutes not yet repealed of that nation, as well as contrary to that holy oath His Majesty himself and all the Christian princes had always taken with great solemnity at their coronation.”⁸

These are the words of a believer who entrusted his final defense to arguments that contained little or nothing subjective. This is the defense of the believing conscience, founded on timeless, objective values, against the presumption of the power to decide subjectively and privately the religious and political destiny of an entire nation. His words emphasized how the new path taken by the country ran contrary not only to the true faith of the thousand year Christian tradition, but also to the truth of reason itself.

This was precisely the premise during More's time; that the King, as supreme civil power, was also the direct keeper of religious truth [...] To More's keen eye, this supremacy was not merely organizational – as was led to believe – this premise meant civil power could seize the keys to those revealed truths that, till then, had been jealously kept by the Church. This was no longer rebellion, but usurpation, and usurpation not of a power, but of its source. If the Act of Supremacy had substituted the sovereign for the supreme Pontiff simply in the exercise of power, then the contrast would not have been any more grave than, let's say, the conflict over investitures. This was probably the viewpoint of the clergy and members of parliament who had adhered in good faith to the claims of the King. But if the sovereign were

⁷ W. ROPER, *Life of Sir Thomas More*, Burns & Oates, London 1905, p. 91. Of course, this (written c. 1555) lacks the full authority of texts we have from More's pen.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

instead to usurp the source of power – something that More most likely became convinced of – then the issue was no longer power, but truth; and for this he had to face martyrdom.⁹

He died to bear witness to the paradoxical error into which his kingdom had fallen. Christ had not called the church to be an organism of the State, to delegate His powers to a secular institution. Neither could a prince of this world rise up to become keeper of the eternal, immutable laws or apply these laws as he pleased.

Although no natural truth exists independent of revealed truth, the need does exist for distinguishing the sphere or authority of natural truth from that of revealed truth, so as to avoid one single power being able to absorb these two truths into itself, thus ending in delegitimizing transcendence and losing the authentic secular nature of the State.

More must have, at least vaguely, understood this and died for this; martyred in defense, not only of ecclesiastical

⁹ “Ora, questa era precisamente la premessa al tempo di Moro: che il Re, in quanto supremo potere civile, fosse anche immediatamente il detentore della verità religiosa ... All’occhio acuto di Moro la supremazia non era solo organizzativa - come la si voleva far credere, - era la premessa perché il potere civile si impadronisse delle chiavi di quelle verità rivelate che, fin lì, erano state possesso geloso della chiesa. Non si trattava più di ribellione, ma di usurpazione e dell’usurpazione, non già di un potere, ma della sua fonte. Se l’Atto di supremazia avesse sostituito il sovrano al Pontefice, semplicemente nell’esercizio di un potere, il contrasto non sarebbe stato più grave che, poniamo, la lotta per le investiture. E questo era, probabilmente, il punto di vista del clero e dei parlamentari che avevano aderito in buona fede alla pretesa del Re. Ma se il sovrano doveva, invece, usurpare la fonte del potere - cosa di cui fini probabilmente per convincersi Moro - ciò che ne andava di mezzo non era più il potere, ma la verità; e per questo si doveva affrontare il martirio.” V. Mathieu, *“Ragioni di una scelta”*, in *Idea di Thomas More*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 1977, p. 181.

authority as keeper of the truths of faith, but also the authority of nous [mind and reason] to search for truth in the light of reason. The first aspect makes More a saint for the church and all those believers in revealed religion, the second aspect shows him as a witness for all those who believe in truth in general, even though they may not be believers in the rest; for those who believe truth is independent of any power.¹⁰

For too long, the world was ruled by the supremacy complex of Henry VIII, and one could rightly say the King's axe continued to fall. How many temporal princes after Henry attempted to seize possession of revealed truth to use it as they pleased, and how many of these preferred death to giving up the truth in their hands?

As long as single individuals freely decide to determine their own existence for themselves beyond any sort of objective truth, then revealed truth, even if unheard, will continue to express itself. When this becomes a mass phenomenon supported by civil laws, the concept of the incorporation of natural and revealed truths into a single power (whether called King, nation, society, or political party) does not change, but is likewise expressed.

This principle, dramatically manifested in our era, corresponds not so much with the rejection of God, but the manipulation of His face. The fracture between faith and life could now be considered fully consummated, but not to the detriment of faith, which continues to be vital, so vital every single individual privately desires possession, just as they desire that the vision of and,

¹⁰ « Moro, dovette capire ciò, almeno oscuramente, e che per questo sia morto: martire in difesa, non solo della competenza ecclesiastica a custodire la verità di fede, ma anche della competenza del nous a cercare la verità, alla luce della ragione. Sotto il primo aspetto Moro è un santo per la chiesa e per tutti i credenti nella religione rivelata, ma sotto il secondo è un testimone per tutti coloro che credono nella verità in generale, anche se per il resto non sono credenti: per coloro che credono nella indipendenza della verità da qualsiasi potere ». *Ibid.*, p. 188.

above all, solution to the fundamental enigmas of existence, such as the meaning of life, suffering, death, and injustice, no longer be entrusted to a higher communal consciousness, but rather to a personal consciousness, believing or non-believing, with the consequent liberation of revealed truth.

In doing this, faith and reason are no longer two separate truths, but are made substantially to coincide, since the moment the heart of man is moved by the need for faith; reason meets this need by supplying the spiritual categories.

This decreases the need for distinguishing between the spheres of natural truth and revealed truth. The single individual becomes master of his own transcendence, and the State the guarantor of the new human consciousness. Except that this way, even if the absorption of powers is democratically accepted, the State loses its authentic dimension, i.e., its secular dimension, and institutional religion is completely stripped of its reason for existence. Therefore perhaps in the future we may see the contrary of what Church principles for centuries have accustomed mankind to seeing.

We do not know if More managed to see this far in his consciousness; it is certain however that during his time the roots were firmly established that later grew into a new believing consciousness – and Elizabethan England would be the first laboratory where effects of the Henry Complex were felt.

As an intelligent politician, More's strength lay in seeing where other failed to see, judging as a despotic regime what others considered a system of liberation, and testifying with his own blood to the illegitimacy of the primacy of power over truth.

The life of Saint Thomas More clearly illustrates a fundamental truth of political ethics. The defence of the

Church's freedom from unwarranted interference by the State is at the same time a defence, in the name of the primacy of conscience, of the individual's freedom vis-à-vis political power. Here we find the basic principle of every civil order consonant with human nature.¹¹

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Portrait of Henry VIII after Hans Holbein the Younger, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio Proclaiming Saint Thomas More Patron of Statesmen and Politicians*, 4.