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“To Assyst the Ordynaryes”: Why Thomas More Agreed to Become Chancellor

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Revisionists’ explanations for Thomas More’s willingness to serve as Chancellor have him scheming to support the Aragonese faction at Court--or conspiring with Hapsburg agents to revive papal influence in England in the wake of Campeggio’s departure and Wolsey’s “fall.” In late 1529, More was obviously concerned with lay disaffection, troubled by the prospect that sectarian dissidents might capitalize on it to reform the church recklessly, and confident that the realm’s bishops, assisted by the government, could outmaneuver the critics of Roman and English Catholicism, whose arguments for an alternative ecclesiology and soteriology he had opposed earlier that year. “*To Assyst*” presents More’s concern and confidence as a more plausible answer to the question in its title, more plausible than rival responses on offer.

Keywords: heresy, chancellor, More, reform, bishops.

Selon certains historiens, l’acceptation par Thomas More du poste de Chancelier fut une manœuvre pour soutenir le clan aragonais à la cour – ou pour conspirer avec les agents des Habsbourg qui souhaitaient raviver l’influence du pape en Angleterre à la suite du départ de Campeggio et de la « chute » de Wolsey. Il apparaît clairement que More, à la fin de l’année 1529, était inquiet de la désaffection des laïques, et craignait que les dissidents les plus sectaires en profitent pour réformer l’Eglise de façon radicale ; mais il croyait fermement que les évêques du royaume, assisté du gouvernement, réussiraient à déjouer les critiques du catholicisme romain et anglais ; il s’était opposé quelques mois plus tôt à leurs arguments en faveur d’une ecclésiologie et d’une soteriologie alternatives. Cet article propose que, parmi les diverses réponses possibles à la question posée en titre, à savoir pourquoi Thomas More

accepta de devenir Chancelier d'Angleterre, la réponse la plus plausible est que, tout en étant soucieux mais profondément confiant, il le fit « pour aider » (« To Asyst »).

Mots-clé : Hérésie, chancelier, More, réformes, évêques

Según algunos historiadores, el hecho de que Moro aceptara el cargo de Canciller formaba parte de una maniobra orquestada para apoyar la facción aragonesa de la Corte o, lo que es lo mismo, conspirar con los Hausburgo para reavivar la influencia papal en Inglaterra tras la marcha de Campeggio a la « caída » de Wolsey. A finals de 1529, Moro estaba obviamente preocupado por la insatisfacción de los laicos, inquietos ante la perspectiva de que los sectores disidentes pudieran aprovecharse de esto para reformar la iglesia sin miramientos. En otro sentido, Moro confiaba en que los obispos del reino, asistidos por el gobierno, podrían superar las críticas del catolicismo romano e inglés, cuyos razonamientos en favor de unas eclesiologías y soteriologías alternativas él mismo había rechazado a principios de año. «Para asisitir» presenta las preocupaciones y confianzas de Moro como respuesta plausible –más que las respuestas «rivales»- a la pregunta en el título.

Palabras Clave: Herejía, Canciller, Moro, reforma, obispos.

When an essay's principal question and its answer can be packed together into a title, one ought to be promptly told why the pages that follow had to be written. More's motivation and expectations in 1529, when he was appointed Lord Chancellor, after all, have often been reconstructed--by glancing back at what he and his Hythloday had said about public service in *Utopia* or by peering ahead and sifting what was discussed after More's resignation. The publication of G.W. Bernard's super-sized study of *The King's Reformation*, which rejects the two most common explanations before offering its own, too simple solution, seems an excellent occasion to raise the issue again.

A number of More's admirers have long claimed that he was temperamentally disinclined to serve, though, composing the first book of *Utopia*, he seemed prepared to answer a summons to Court. After all, he met Hythloday's criticism of courtiers--which, of course, he had

scripted--with the concession that one must enter government service, if only to control damage that self-serving, sycophantic colleagues might otherwise do. But historians Geoffrey Elton and John Guy reconstructed More's temperament and ambition differently. They inferred his sympathies from what a few onlookers reported during his tenure, concluding that More agreed to serve the king but schemed to assist the queen, Catherine of Aragon, and to support an Aragonese faction at court opposed to Henry's plans to marry Anne Boleyn. More subsequently insisted that he struck a bargain with Henry whereby, as chancellor, he would be permitted to keep his distance from the deliberations about papal dispensations, scriptural prohibitions, and his sovereign's scruples. After he resigned, he protested that he never meddled in the king's "great matter" and mess. Still, Elton and Guy argue, More's "distance" and professed neutrality are unsupported by the evidence, which tells them that he was intriguing with influential others on Catherine's behalf. But now G.W. Bernard's new book emphasizes Henry's "driving role" in "the remaking of the English church." According to Bernard, More drove no bargain and had no choice; he was chosen and summoned, and he obeyed.¹

Bargain? Faction? Ferocious royal determination? Bernard's emphasis on the third does recover the king's tenacity, which other historians' stress on the second has all but eclipsed, but at what cost? Was More little more than the king's pawn? The point of this paper is to retrieve something of the chancellor's ingenuity and aspirations that the arguments about his bargaining and scheming seem to have missed or minimized. But before we investigate why he agreed to serve as chancellor, we ought to recall how it happened.

Had his predecessor, Cardinal and papal legate Thomas Wolsey, managed Henry's case against Queen Catherine more expeditiously,

¹ Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, p. 130-35. For the bargaining and scheming, see Geoffrey R. Elton, *inter alia*, "Sir Thomas More and the Opposition to Henry VIII," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 41, 1968, p. 19-34 and John Guy, *Thomas More*, London: Arnold, 2000, p. 146-65.

More's turn as chancellor might have come much later. There probably would have been no shakeup in the king's "cabinet" in late 1529. To be sure, Wolsey had tried. For much of that year, he warned the pope that Rome was likely to "lose the king and the devotion of [the] realm," if the proceedings preliminary to Henry's obtaining an annulment of his first marriage were adjourned in England and "advoked," unresolved, to the papal curia. Wolsey's agents echoed their retainer's forecast and added that Pope Clement VII would "sustayne" a terrible "unquietness of mynd" in the wake of England's disaffection. Still, Clement could not afford to give Wolsey and Henry what they most wanted. Perhaps he was persuaded that "the king's person and al his nobles shulde decline from the pope and his see apostolique" once Rome refused to acquiesce.² Yet Clement's problem that summer was an "unquietness" closer to home. Emperor Charles V was in Lombardy. The pope's friends in Florence thought him unstoppable, *fortissimus*. Hapsburg troops in Italy were previously challenged by the French, yet the peace negotiated at Cambrai left them free to range across the region. Hence, Rome could not risk alienating Charles by dissolving the marriage between his aunt Catherine and the king of England.³ So Clement put on a brave face. He feigned confidence, as late as July, that Wolsey could weather the crisis, reconcile the king to additional delays, and keep him conventionally and—for Rome—conveniently deferential.⁴

Yet, if his confidence were unfeigned, Clement miscalculated, underestimating the magnitude of Wolsey's difficulties. True, his legate was still chancellor, but he had powerful enemies at Court. Put off by his swagger when England's enduring friendship seemed to be dear to Rome, they relished his vexation as the pope grew less fearful of the French and more dependent on the Hapsburgs, all of which made England less useful and left Wolsey exposed. Moreover, in January 1529, Henry had been heard blaming Wolsey for his long "ordeal," his long wait to be free of Catherine. Faction and friction at Court probably contributed to Wolsey's fall, as did the truces affecting papal

² BL, Cotton MS. Vitellius B XI, 172r, 175v, 199v-200r.

³ BL, Cotton MS. Vitellius B XI, 181v (*fortissimus*), and 187v.

⁴ BL, Cotton MS. Vitellius BXI, 215r; LP 4.3, 5351.

interests in Italy, although the chief factor was almost certainly Henry VIII's mounting impatience.⁵

Thomas Cromwell was bent on succeeding where Wolsey had failed--but by a different route. He left it to Wolsey's strident enemy, Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, to oppose the Aragonese party in the House of Lords, while he concentrated on coupling the king's "great matter" with the anticlericalism often expressed in the Lower House of Parliament. He stirred resentment against prelates committed to the queen's cause. Still, Henry, Cromwell, and Howard had quite a challenge. Catherine enjoyed considerable support in the king's Council. Some bishops, moreover, were not easily bullied. John Fisher of Rochester, who indefatigably presented the queen's case before the legatine commission, over which Cardinals Wolsey and Campeggio had presided, continued to claim that a marriage pinned on a papal dispensation--as Henry's to Catherine was--should not be dissolved by Parliament. To do so, he alleged, was overreaching and apostasy. Bishop Tunstall of London (and later Durham) ably helped to formulate the Aragonese arguments, as did Bishop West of Ely. Bishop Standish of St. Asaph was steadfast in Parliament, yet he turned rather tepid in Convocation, proposing that the papal dispensation permitting Henry to wed his deceased brother's wife was flawed.⁶

Some say that Thomas More became chancellor and stayed in office despite setbacks in Parliament engineered by Howard and Cromwell, to fortify the somewhat unsteady Aragonese faction, because he believed "the battle in the Privy Council could still be won." John Guy, echoing Geoffrey Elton, sums up: More "was not merely caught up in politics: he was deeply implicated" in the Aragonese efforts to subvert or at least stall Henry's energetic efforts to set Catherine aside and marry Anne Boleyn. He urged on the queen's friends in Parliament. He encouraged them in Council. Yet so agile was the revisionist's More that his intrigue

⁵ CSP, Spain, 3.2, p. 877. Also consult Peter Gwyn's account, *The King's Cardinal*, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1990, especially p. 579-83.

⁶ John Guy, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980, p. 41-44.

went undetected at the time and thereafter.⁷ Did his public pronouncements mislead Henry and Cromwell? Did he fool them by pretending to be enthusiastic about the universities' endorsements of the king's suit, which he read to Parliament, or by appearing to attest to delegates the sincerity of Henry's belief that he had violated God's law by marrying Catherine, or by conspiring with Howard to stifle Aragonese efforts to discuss the king's conscience in Parliament. On the validity of the queen's marriage to Prince Arthur, Henry's deceased elder brother and, by implication, the invalidity of her marriage to the king, Thomas More pulled his oar. Odd tactics, if his long-term strategy was to strengthen the Aragonese faction, see Catherine vindicated, and call a halt to the Boleyn seduction.

Eustace Chapuys, imperial ambassador to England, reported that More's odd tactics were part of an elaborate ruse designed to throw off suspicion that he was, in reality, a "great friend" of the queen's friends. Even More's reluctance to receive the ambassador was part of the deception. Privately and "boldly," according to Chapuys, More defended Aragonese and Hapsburg interests in the king's presence. Behind the chancellor's elliptical expressions lay a profound desire to gratify the emperor, assist Catherine, and undermine Cromwell--or so Chapuys inferred. After all, More swiftly, favorably serviced every request made by the ambassador and by the emperor's other associates in England. So much, then, for the chancellor's caution!⁸

That contradiction--More's courtesies and caution--has been disregarded by revisionists. On balance, they think that Chapuys' accounts of the chancellor's behind-the-scenes, Aragonese agitation are quite trustworthy. Chapuys, whom they identify as "the center of the intrigue," would have known and told his superiors all about More's efforts at a hostile court, *avec les loups*. John Guy, however, has reservations. Without slipping from the revisionists' camp, he considers that the ambassador's dispatches are "not unimpeachable," yet, Guy

⁷ Guy, *Public Career*, p. 158-59 and Guy, *More*, p. 156, 162.

⁸ LP 5, 60 and 5, 85.

adds immediately, they are “suggestive.”⁹ But what do they suggest? To Guy, the ambassador left us a fairly reliable sketch of More, a publicly evasive, though privately emphatic, “great friend” to the queen’s friends. On this reading, Chapuys and More, who became Lord Chancellor only a few weeks after the ambassador arrived from Savoy in late summer, 1529, quickly made common cause. One can read the dispatches differently, of course; the diplomat could have been exaggerating his intimacy with and his influence on the chancellor to demonstrate that the emperor had gotten an impressive return on his investment?

Or do Chapuys’ statements suggest that More was playing him? His candor is often and justly celebrated, yet his ingenuity is also legend. And the latter, applied to early modern politics, sometimes dictated that the former--honesty--might not be the best policy for all seasons. Might More have set out to beguile the emperor’s man in London while the king and Cromwell were scavenging for ways to proceed against the emperor’s Aunt Catherine, the Aragonese bishops, and Hapsburg preferences? G.W. Bernard thinks that More’s conduct in Parliament is telling and that “whatever impressions Chapuys may have formed,” the chancellor’s public addresses tell against his “passionate advoc[acy] of Queen Catherine’s cause.”¹⁰ Chapuys wrote repeatedly that developments during More’s tenure in office stirred the queen’s “adherents . . . [to] come more prominently forward.” But when More came forward in the Commons to read the universities’ endorsements of his king’s suit or to protest that the complaint against Catherine (and Pope Julius II, who had sanctioned Henry’s first marriage) originated in the king’s conscientious pursuit of what was right and religious (and not in royal lust), the chancellor could certainly not be numbered among Chapuys’ prominent “adherents.”¹¹ More later denied that Parliament had a right to pronounce on the illegitimacy of Henry’s first marriage, and that sentiment might tempt one to imagine that Chapuys’ earlier

⁹ Guy, *More*, p. 152.

¹⁰ Bernard, *Reformation*, p. 134-35.

¹¹ CSP, Spain, 4.1, p. 433.

dispatches were accurate. If they were--if what More said after he resigned, and especially after government harassment wrecked his hopes for an uneventful retirement--one could make a more convincing argument for the Elton's and Guy's explanations for More's agreement to become chancellor. Remarks that were made in 1533 and 1534, however, are not the best evidence for More's thinking in 1529, for why he became chancellor.

One answer to that "why," which is somewhat related to the view that stresses the chancellor's Aragonese partisanship, could also explain why he catered to the Hapsburgs' interests. Chapuys could have been astute with respect to More's prudence, missing only his purpose. Indeed, the chancellor--without being particularly attentive to royal weddings, neither Henry's first and much-discussed nor his second, much-desired--could have been looking to befriend the pope's friends in England. He may have agreed to become chancellor to defend "the prymatie of the pope." He did, after all, help Henry answer Martin Luther and vindicate papal authority in 1521, yet he later insisted that the king--not he--was deliriously eager to confirm Rome's rule of the church. More even volunteered that Henry's enthusiasms for the papacy swayed him.¹² That was a convenient fiction in the 1530s, after Henry's officials started hounding the former chancellor for failing to repudiate Rome. But the truth seems to be that the king did play an important part in More's increasing fondness for the pope's "prymatie," just not the part More assigned him. When Henry was drawn into the orbit around the early English reformers, who, "follow[ing] theyr owne wyttes," threatened to turn Christianity in the realm into a pack of rival and snarling sects, More realized how critical the papacy had been and still was for the preservation of liturgical uniformity and religious unity. From that time--not before--his catalogues of Luther's heretical opinions featured "unstinting devotion to papal sovereignty" similar to dedication expressed by Bishop John Fisher.¹³

¹² *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed., Elizabeth Frances Rogers, Princeton University Press, 1947, p. 298.

¹³ Marius, "Henry VIII, Thomas More, and the Bishop of Rome", in *Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More*, ed., Michael J. Moore Boone, North Carolina: Albion,

In late 1529, what terribly disturbed More was the church's vulnerability to Luther's assaults on holy orders, religious vows, purgatory, saints, sacraments--*rei Christiani*. In what remains, I leave the reservoir of explanations that we have emptied here to argue that Thomas More became chancellor, not because he thought the queen, the Aragonese faction, the pope, or the king could resolve the coming crisis and chaos, but because he believed that they could not. And the bishops who could, he suspected, would need him in office to give them that chance.

* * *

More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, composed shortly before he became chancellor, is, among other things, a vindication of "the grete lordes spyrytuall." The purpose was to suggest that reformers were far from fully aware of the consequences, should their criticisms of the church's top brass lead to radical changes. Occasionally, More paused to take up specific charges. At one point, he tried to cool still simmering resentments that had been brought to a boil nearly twenty years before, when William Horsey, the bishop of London's chief administrative officer, was pardoned for having murdered layman Richard Hunne, a prisoner in the Tower at the time. Church officials insisted that Hunne had taken his own life. His detention was controversial. In More's retelling of the sorrowful tale, the casualty was the antagonist. Rightly condemned for heresy and "in fere of worldly shame," a despondent Hunne committed suicide. More was present when some testimony was taken and subsequently studied the proceedings "from toppe to too." He recalled that proscribed books found in the heretic's possession contained annotations in his hand, which proved that Horsey and Bishop FitzJames had not planted evidence. And "fewe [could] forbere laughynge," More wrote, when a

1978, p. 94-95, p. 102-6; Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007, p. 192-93; *CW* 5.1, p. 526-27.

self-proclaimed expert witness defended his theory that Hunne “dyd never hange hym selfe” but was put in the noose after having been strangled. The forensic expert’s “tokens” to that effect were “preposterous” rather than “playne,” as he had claimed. The verdict, then, More’s and the establishment’s: Hunne “was not honest”; Horsey was fairly treated; the bishop of London was “virtuose” and “wise.”¹⁴

Many commoners doubted all of the above from the time the news broke and decades thereafter. Uncertainties persist to this day, when Hunne’s initial complaints against clerical greed and injustice are taken as characteristic of anticlerical sentiment during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. But during the 1520s and 1530s, Hunne’s fate appeared to show what lengths the church would go to protect its privileges. More’s rehearsal of the episode was very much against the grain: “nearly all the people here hate the priests,” Chapuys confided.¹⁵

A few years after Chapuys gauged lay dissatisfaction, Christopher St. German observed that “murmur and grudge” characterized most commoners’ comments on their church, especially their assessments of its leadership, which, he claimed, wanted “pitie.” More accused St. German of making “spiritual men odious,” solely on the grounds of hearsay, although the latter declared that he was only urging priests and highly placed prelates “a litel [to] meken them selfe” and regain the laity’s respect.¹⁶ Henry earlier expressed regret that “murmur and grudge” gave the evangelical reformers an opening. More was still chancellor when the king advised Emperor Charles V, through Chapuys, to convene a council and—without awaiting Rome’s endorsement—to address Luther’s objections to late medieval Catholic practice. Henry had reason to wean Charles from Rome; together, emperor and pope posed the most substantial obstacle to his plans for Catherine and Anne Boleyn. Yet the king was especially and unexpectedly aggressive, introducing his own resolve to strip the clergy of its temporalities without permission from the papacy or from a

¹⁴ *CW* 6,1, p. 318-30.

¹⁵ *CSP, Spain*, 4.1, p. 367-69.

¹⁶ St. German, *Salem and Bizance*, reprinted in *CW* 10, p. 350-51.

conference of his bishops, to rehabilitate his realm's church and to defuse--by anticipation and correction--the reformers' protests.¹⁷

More was keenly aware of the mood in the country before Henry had contemplated seizing the temporalities of "the grete lordes spyrytuall" and before Christopher St. German warned them of "murmur and grudge." The interlocutor in More's *Dialogue* drew the relevant lesson from scripture: Jesus directed his apostles--hence, "all bysshops . . . and prelates and rulers of his church"--not "to bynde and lay upon . . . pore men's backs importunable burdeyns, to the berynge wherof them selfe [they] wyll not ones [once] put forth a finger." That lesson or directive has the cadence of a complaint, which More endorsed ("very well sayd"), yet the *Dialogue* refuses to let the interlocutor's exegesis pass as an excuse for disobedience. Church leaders' failures to unburden the poor were deplorable, yet More denied that lay insolence was a proper reply to prelates who proved to be short on compassion. Moses urged "the peple do what theyr prelatys wolde byd them, though the burden were hevy, and let them not to do it, though they sholde se the bydders do clene the contrary."¹⁸

There would always be bad apples among the clerical "bydders." Early English evangelical reformers were adept at trading on the scandals that came to light, but, More averred, standards that priests and prelates had set for the laity did not expire the moment their own behavior turned ugly or their misbehavior was discovered and publicized. And, equally to the point, despite the promise in the Gospel of Matthew, that every Christian's "yoke" would be light or agreeable (11:30: *suave; leve*), the faithful must not expect that their priests and bishops--however strong their backs--would lift all the burdens on Christian commoners. Still, More's concession that clerical backs were sometimes as weak as the church's critics claimed did not release the laity from its obligations. Within the *Dialogue's* discussion of "burdens," he strategically tucked in a Catholic, categorical imperative, "obedyance to our superyours," which he claimed to have lifted from its crib in

¹⁷ CSP, Spain, 4.1, p. 798-801.

¹⁸ CW 6.1, p. 103-4.

scripture. Its placement guaranteed that readers would draw two conclusions. First, the gospels' good news did not lower standards for discipline. Yes, their "yoke" was "light," yet "the lyghtnes of [the] burdeyne standeth not in the slacknes of any bodyly payne . . . but standeth in the swetnes of hope wherby we fele in our payne a plesaunt taste of heven." Second, prelates' missteps did not render offenders helpless in the realm's battles against heresy. Bishops especially--though they "do clene the contrary" to what they bid others to do and give the church's contentious enemies ammunition--should be obeyed, because they know those enemies' wiles and whereabouts.¹⁹ If anticlericalism were permitted to erode alliances between "oure superyours" in church and government, More intimated, the only beneficiaries would be heretics eager "for the abolycon of the fayth and spoylyng of the spyrytualtye," heretics who were also political subversives bent on "the destruccyon of the kyng and all his nobyltye." Soon after More agreed to become Lord Chancellor, he composed some late medieval boilerplate, which, in this context, can pass also as a succinct answer to this essay's question, his unequivocal description of the duty of "great officers of the realme" to "represe heretykes and assyst the ordynaryes."²⁰

Did he appreciate how formidable the challenge was in autumn, 1529? What did he make of the predictions that England would "decline from the pope," if the king's case against Catherine were sent to Rome? We began with those predictions (and warnings) of widespread disaffection because Wolsey and his retainers introduced them to preserve his legatine jurisdiction and usefulness. Those tactics failed, and Wolsey fell. His successor as chancellor, More, might have dismissed what was uttered about the realm's "decline" and disaffection as rhetorical excess, as an awkwardly unsuccessful effort to intimidate. But John Guy thinks otherwise, that More clearly perceived the crisis. Would the new chancellor have missed the importance of *Praemunire* charges against Wolsey? Could there have been any more dramatic way for Henry to signal irritation with Wolsey for having maintained his

¹⁹ *CW* 6.1, p. 106.

²⁰ *CW* 8.1, p. 27-28; *CW* 9, p. 161-62.

legatine jurisdiction as long as he did and, in effect, for having appealed to extraterritorial--or, specifically, papal--arbitration in royal affairs? Probably not. And surely More must have learned how grave a crisis he faced when, months later, eight English bishops were charged with aiding and abetting Wolsey, with "Praemunire by association," as Andrew Chibi aptly phrases it. Guy's surmise, then, seems sound; More was smart enough to see the difficulties ahead. Historians now know enough to agree with Guy that the advocacy of Henry's case to the papal curia doomed More's efforts to leash anticlericalism and "assist the ordynaries." Still, the prognosis, which would have affected More's motives for taking his new job, could have been different. Perhaps if we revisit the situation--and More's perceptions of it--in late 1529, we may find that Guy's "surprise" that More should have "ever believed he might succeed" is itself surprising.²¹

For one thing, right before he assumed office, More expressed confidence in the bishops' courts as well as in the bishops. His *Dialogue* praised clerical magistrates and their deputies for having "wysely examined" accused and accusers to ascertain whether the latter's malice or the former's malfeasance was at issue. To the new chancellor, the church had reliable techniques to probe for truth, men with prowess to search for spite that complicated the administration of justice, and ways to right wrongs and to reform abuses.²²

Critics who resented the jurisdiction of the church's courts as well as critics who were angry with the church itself continued to insist that clerical justice was notoriously unreliable. For, "uppon light complayntes," innocents, they said, had been subjected to terrible ordeals. More may have thought that he had incisively and decisively answered charges of that sort in the *Dialogue* when he examined what happened during and after the prosecution of Richard Hunne, yet he unquestionably could see that the enemies of the established church were relentless. Hence, reassuringly and almost nonstop, More tried to

²¹ Guy, *Public Career*, p. 110-12; Andrew Allan Chibi, *Henry VIII's Bishops: Diplomats, Administrators, Scholars, and Shepherds* Cambridge: Clarke, 2003, p. 123.

²² CW 6.1, p. 261.

address and attenuate their prejudice, even after he resigned from government, asserting that matters “given into the ordynary’s handes” would be handled fairly and expeditiously.²³ Possibly before St. German joined the critics and pressed Parliament severely to restrict the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts--all the while protesting that he had no wish to “break . . . the libertie of the church”-- More had ascertained just how compromised the church’s tribunals had become. Nonetheless, St. German’s proposals for reform only later grabbed his attention. Until then, nothing of that kind seems to have been advanced coherently and with clout. Furthermore, temperamentally, More was inclined to credit any word to the contrary, to value--as more than flattery--the concessions composed by accused heretic Thomas Bilney who remarked favorably on the integrity and wisdom of Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, who was just then preparing to preside over Bilney’s trial.²⁴

Tunstall registered the compliment but did not relax his demand that Bilney “abjure and submitte.”²⁵ More admired the bishop and agreed, at his request, to review heretical books and, as Tunstall’s sous-chef, to cook up a comprehensive response. *The Dialogue Concerning Heresies* was the result and is an invaluable monument to More’s readiness to “assyst the ordynaries.” Tunstall was in London soon after its publication to see More made chancellor. Had he not been translated to the diocese of Durham months later, Tunstall would doubtlessly have renewed efforts undertaken with Bishop Longland of Lincoln to suppress the presses, booksellers, and preachers spreading the evangelicals’ ideas, particularly in areas around London and Oxford--efforts that would certainly have been underwritten by the new chancellor. For More had already pronounced those ideas subversive. “Where be . . . your bysshoppys,” he asked dissidents, struck by how much faith they had placed in their faith. Their fideism falsely attributed

²³ CW 10, p. 183-85.

²⁴ Compare John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of these latter and perillous dayes*, London, 1563, p. 467 with Christopher St. German, *Doctor and Student*, ed., T.F.T Plucknett and J.L. Barton, London: Selden Society, 1974, p. 334-35.

²⁵ Foxe, *Actes*, p. 478.

the power to redeem sinners to those very sinners' trusting dispositions. And what was just as ludicrous and dangerous--their faith made them indifferent to authorities' censures and to religious authority itself.²⁶

Tunstall was an ally. The two were together in Calais on a diplomatic mission during the summer of 1529, well away from the legatine proceedings that so frustrated Wolsey and their king. More was likely saddened by Tunstall's departure for Durham, where he was to preside over the king's council as well a new diocese. His translation made room for John Stokesley, who spent the first months of 1530 canvassing French and Italian universities, soliciting endorsements of King Henry's position on the relative power of papal dispensations and biblical prohibitions. On that issue, for a while longer, Tunstall remained among Catherine's advocates. Stokesley was in the king's corner, yet More could not have been displeased with his new bishop's efforts in London and Essex, hounding heretics and improving the quality of unbeneficed clergy who served as curates. Stokesley was following instructions. Several sessions of the Convocation of clergy that met the month before More became chancellor instructed bishops to silence priests who, *pernicioso errore*, embraced and circulated heretical opinions. But Convocation also told bishops to answer heretics' complaints by reforming abuses. Notwithstanding John Guy's "surprise," therefore, one can appreciate why More had reason to believe that he and the ordinaries might succeed staving off radical religious change.²⁷

The would-be evangelical change agents, after all, seemed to be full of faith and brimming with criticism, but with no plan. They mistrusted "people that be knowen for the chyrche," particularly the prelates, who, at their best, were adept at keeping religious consensus from unraveling. Who or what in the dissident fideists' camp could serve that purpose? Where, indeed, were their bishops? More thought that he knew why reformers had enormous difficulty addressing such questions; specifically, he suspected that their ostensibly interminable

²⁶ *CW* 6.1, p. 201; For Tunstall and Longland, Chibi, *Henry VIII's Bishops*, p. 89-95.

²⁷ David Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, London, 1737, 3: p. 719-21.

complaints about authority expressed an unalterable conviction that any concentration of power in the churches would be unbiblical. More pegged the dissidents as dreamers; their perfect church, “bylde up in the ayre all so spyrytuall,” floated free of reality.²⁸

Disregarding Luther’s insistence that all Christians were sinners by nature--saved only by grace and faith--the early English evangelicals, More assumed, were determined to “fynde or ymagyn in erth” a sinless church--sinless, popeless, and bishopless. More’s response in the *Dialogue* was simple and straightforward: power might corrupt some of their number, but officials most conspicuously “knowen for the chyrche,” the realm’s bishops, were instrumental in maintaining religious discipline, minimizing the damage sin prompted, and continually mending the ministry.²⁹ Yet More grew disillusioned with some of the bishops he had hoped to help. They caved under pressure from Cromwell and the king. After he resigned as chancellor, More lamented that “the best lerned” among his associates, having once “saide and plaine affirmed the contrarye . . . often and after great diligens done to seke and finde out the trouth,” acquiesced in the government usurpation of papal prerogatives. Whether he had names or just numbers in mind--and whether the names were those of bishops, there can be no doubt that More lost his faith in *arbitrio ordinariorum*, in the bishops’ discretion.³⁰

But only gradually and grudgingly! And the matter of pace bears directly on the question of the new chancellor’s expectations in late 1529, which, of course, bear on this paper’s argument with previous, competing explanations for More’s decision at the time. In 1529, the church, for More, was God’s way to “put out all perplexyte.” Early English evangelical reformers, reading their bibles, went hopelessly astray because they were loath to consult church authorities, disconcertingly claiming that the church had been “orphaned.” They appeared to forget, conveniently, those parts of the scripture in which God promised to guide the church and delegated powers to its officials.

²⁸ CW 6.1, p. 196.

²⁹ CW 6.1, p. 204.

³⁰ Rogers, *Correspondence*, p. 527; Wilkins, *Concilia*, 3: 719.

Or so it seemed to More.³¹ Bishops spotted the problem with heretically selective and therefore flawed exegesis. Many also worried that their king's flirtation with the dissidents jeopardized their own abilities to censure critics, remedy abuses, and rule the church. Bishops Fisher (Rochester), Clerk (Bath and Wells), and West (Ely) appealed to Rome against what was, to them, the government's campaign against the church's independence. Bishop Tunstall finally conceded that his king might exercise a measure of supremacy over the church, yet only after he stipulated that dissidents remain subject to the bishops' discipline. Ambassadors reported, though, that outspoken prelates had put themselves in peril.³²

Still, in 1529 and for a time thereafter, More had reason to think that, with some assistance rather than resistance from the government, the realm's church would reform itself. Thomas Wolsey left behind "a solid working synod, fighting heresy," according to historian Andrew Chibi, "a powerful spiritual fraternity," members of which significantly disagreed with each other when they pondered the way out of the king's marital mess, but agreed on the need to stop the spread of heretical ideas.³³ And they all agreed with More that, if the government were seen to be encouraging the evangelicals, commoners would do so as well; the laity, for instance, would take dissidents at their word, presuming that they believed what they read in the Bible, when--More charged--they only read into the Bible what they already believed. As More explained to his old friend Erasmus in 1532, struggles against English evangelicals--sectarians, he called them--required constant and tremendous effort (*sedulo semper hactenus*), and, to that point, the church had been only partly successful. Henry had backed off instead of intervening when the bishops pursued reformer Hugh Latimer that year, but neither they nor the chancellor put a serious dent in

³¹ CW 6.1, p. 176-77.

³² Wilkins, *Concilia* 3, p. 745; CSP Milan, 526-27; CSP, Venice, 4, p. 262-64.

³³ Chibi, *Henry VIII's Bishops*, p. 105-46.

dismissively obstinate heretics' hopes to win king and kingdom for the reformed faith.³⁴

More kept Erasmus informed, perhaps because his old friend on the Continent, who left England for the last time nearly twenty years before, shared responsibility for More's having agreed to serve as chancellor. Brendan Bradshaw's replies to Elton and Guy raise that possibility. Commenting on More's alleged Aragonese partisanship and on his purportedly cruel and near obsessive hunt for heretics--that he was committed to "reactionary ultra conservatism"--Bradshaw maintains that More measured his steps to implement a moderate "Erasmian humanist" reform program. Bradshaw's More looked for opportunities to promote a reform of the realm's religion and society that originated with "human self-development by rational means" and depended on the "symbiotic relationship" between grace and "rational moral endeavor directed towards human perfection." Compatibly, Brian Gogan marks More's "democratic predilections" and underscores the premium he placed on consensus as a source of religious truth. Both Bradshaw and Gogan wager that More, following Erasmus, had a substantially greater interest in what the two thought commoners' "moral freedom" could do rather than in what they reckoned prelates' tribunals, visitations, and dispensations could achieve.³⁵ Enough can be teased from More's *Dialogue* to give that reading of More's humanist reform program a *prima facie* plausibility. Take the treatise's warning against "wading in scripture" without "good gydes," a passage that one would expect to include justifications for episcopal leadership. It does not. It begins on a typically "Erasmian" note and finishes trumpeting the "consensus of the faithful." "There is no man so lowe," More avers, "but yf he wyll seke his way with the staffe of hys fayth in his hande . . . and serche a way therwith and have the olde holy fathers also

³⁴ H.M. Allen and H.W. Garrod, *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, vol. 10, Oxford: Clarendon, 1958, p. 33-34.

³⁵ Bradshaw, "The Controversial Thomas More," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36, 1985, p. 560-67, and Gogan, *The Common Corps of Christendom: Ecclesiological Themes in the Writings of Sir Thomas More*, Leiden: Brill, 1982, p. 322-28, p. 366-70.

for hys gydes . . . usynge reason and refusyng no good lernynge,” he will reach satisfactory conclusions *sans faute*.³⁶

But there is more. For the *Dialogue* adds immediately that it would be a mistake for anyone “to trust upon [his or her] owne wytte.” Sectarian dissidents did exactly that, and the wheels came off every doctrinal consensus they fashioned. “No man so lowe,” though, is able to avoid the dissidents’ freelancing, fractious discourses by clinging to what More identified as “the common fayth of the catholyke church,” the consensus that materialized over time and—judging from what his instructions on “wading in scripture” did not say—the consensus that descend upon the church and not one that depended on its executives’ finesse.³⁷

Judging from what Thomas More did not say here or there, however, is risky. True, he “did not dwell on the episcopal office as such”; not his style.³⁸ Yet evidence harvested from the *Dialogue* confirms that More trusted church leadership in the early sixteenth century—as well as a return to the counsel of “the olde holy fathers”—to save Christianity in England from the dreaded disintegration that had followed evangelicals’ attempts to spread their truths on the Continent. “Where be . . . your bysshops,” More asked, taunting the reformers with their infamous inability to get along with each other; faith was fine yet potentially divisive. “The common fayth of the catholyke chyrche was better—and binding. It bound believers to the “known catholyke chyrche,” More never tired of asserting, a church that was “known” and visible, as was Christ. Jesus was both “by fayth byleved and yet also by syght and felyng known.”³⁹ Tudor bishops made the church “known, endeavored to make it moral, and hounded heretics to keep it whole. And those bishops were the heirs to the “olde fathers” and “gydes.” More’s *Dialogue* does not “dwell on the episcopal office,” yet, written just before he agreed to become chancellor, it respects the realm’s bishops as custodians of truths taught by the apostles, the

³⁶ CW 6.1, p. 152.

³⁷ CW 6.1, p. 152-53.

³⁸ Gogan, *Common Corps*, p. 155.

³⁹ CW 6.1, p. 201; CW 8.2, p. 974-75.

church's first executives, and handed down "in our dayes by contynual succession from theyrs."⁴⁰

* * *

But highly placed prelates were increasingly unpopular in Parliament and at Court. More's very appointment as chancellor signaled the king's growing irritation to chronicler Edward Hall, who was sure that Henry was determined that "no manne of the spiritualitye" would take Wolsey's place.⁴¹ Did More miss the signal? And how unlikely did it seem to him that, as chancellor, he might pull the church's reputation back up by its bishops, "assyst the ordynaryes," appease some dissidents, and chase off the implacably heretical others? John Guy, as noted, was "surprised" that More could ever have thought it all possible in late 1529. I have argued that More's surprise during his tenure in office was different. For, despite growing anticlericalism, popular sentiment had not caught up with Cromwell. More's surprise, therefore, could well have resembled that of historian Richard Rex, who claims that a "truly astonishing feature of the Henrician revolution is that a manifestly unpopular and unwanted policy was imposed so successfully and with so little public disturbance."⁴²

Thomas Cromwell could be considered the impresario of the Tudor clergy's unpopularity. His influence on the king grew steadily while More served as chancellor. Information about Cromwell's maneuvers appears to have been shared with More only rarely, on a need-to-know basis. Twentieth-century historians, however, trawled through drafts of petitions, memoranda, and legislation to put Cromwell in his proper and pivotal place in the king's administration. He could kindle criticism of the church but also douse it when calm served his purposes. When, during routine reconnaissance, he spotted some phrases that seemed too insulting, too soon ("ravenous wolves"), Cromwell deleted them from the inventories of grievances against church officials. During the

⁴⁰ *CW* 6.1, p. 149.

⁴¹ *Halls Chronicle*, London: Johnson, Rivington, et al., 1809, p. 761.

⁴² Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation*, London: Palgrave, 2006, p. 25-27.

winter sessions of 1529--just after More was made chancellor--Cromwell's sieve caught complaints, which he "shrewdly filed away" for future use, Stanford Lehmborg now says, Cromwell's own intense antipathy remaining obscure. More could be excused, then, for thinking that lay complaints about clerical absenteeism and excessive fees, which Cromwell pulled from the more comprehensive grievances registered in 1529, could be easily answered with adjustments that should only have improved, and not impaired, a bishop's ability to fight off heresy. The new chancellor had the luxury of believing that "the perpetuall chyrche" in the realm might be upgraded and would remain perpetually and usefully episcopal.⁴³

By 1533, More had resigned. In May, according to Hall, Henry contemplated aloud before delegates from both houses of Parliament the culmination of the course Cromwell was apparently charting for some time. "We thought that the clergie of our realme had been our subjectes wholly," Henry said, "but now wee have well perceived that they bee but halfe our subjectes, yea, scace our subjectes." And, conceivably, what followed fused the king's exhilaration with irritation, for he took direct aim at England's bishops who were to become truly *his* bishops. Until then, though, at their consecrations, they made "an othe to the pope, clene contrary to the othe that they make to us." So, until then, they had been "his subjectes and not ours."⁴⁴ For their part, nearly all the bishops capitulated. Dissent dropped to a whisper. More, disappointed, fell silent; only when it became clear that he would die for his dissent, did he appeal from the king, his courts, and his bishops to the pope. As for More's last analysis, we cannot be sure whether he mostly blamed the bishops for possessing too little courage or stamina or the courtiers around Henry for reducing the church to a cipher. He became chancellor to "assyst the ordynaryes" to live up to their obligations. But they were forced to live down to their critics' assessments and expectations, the critics who had been heard--by

⁴³ Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament, 1529-1536*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 84-86; for "perpetuall," *CW* 8.2, p. 607.

⁴⁴ *Hall's Chronicle*, p. 788-89.

More--to propose that the bishops “be and ever have been and shalbe very false and nought.”⁴⁵



⁴⁵ *CW* 10, p. 137.

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