

More's Christology

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Author's Note.—This is the second part of an essay on “Mr. More and the Gentle Reader”. The first part, which appeared in *The Bookman* (predecessor of *THE AMERICAN REVIEW*), April, 1929, is of a general and commendatory nature. In the present paper exception is taken to a particular feature of More's thought.

HIGH and permanent pleasure. That phrase from one of More's essays came to my mind when, after his death, I began sadly to reread his letters to me. The sadness retired before the living vigor and clear beauty of his penned words. Some day, I hope, his complete correspondence will be collected and published. He was a voluminous and distinguished letter-writer, unlike his friend Irving Babbitt, who was a distinguished and voluminous talker. Babbitt left with me a pile, a volcanic pile, of conversational memories, but only a few dozen words set down with pen and ink. More wrote me a considerable pile of letters, but my personal recollections of him are scant and rather pale. To be sure my meetings with him were few and far between. But in his letters I find his ideas far more pungently expressed than in his conversation. He was first and last a writer. The “Hermit of Princeton”, as he was dubbed, confided to friends that the moment of most intense delight in his daily life was the early-morning moment when he lifted his pen from his desk. He was not afflicted with writers' cramp; the mental kind, I mean. When

he took pen in hand he did not gnaw the hither end of it, wondering what he was going to write. He knew just what he wanted to say and, in a rare degree, just how he was going to say it. In his letters as in his essays he conveys the feeling that was his when he was writing them, a feeling of "high and permanent pleasure".

Not that he was unsociable; quite the contrary. Like Babbitt he was a very companionable person; but with a marked difference. The "Warring Buddha of Harvard", if one may so call Babbitt, regarded writing as mainly a duty. Comparatively speaking it was a hard and wearing task for him. If one called attention to an obscure or jerky passage in a new essay of his, he would say: "Well, now, I tried very hard to make that clear; I thought it would read right along." My impression was that when he came out from his study after a bout of composition, he emerged into a larger freedom, the freedom of bouts of argument; bringing out high thoughts with which to assail his company. Not so the "Hermit of Princeton". In his study, alone with his pen, he had said his highest and completest say. In company he was very much the pleasant man of the world; carefully attired, physically and mentally; lending an ear to gossip, recounting in his turn amusing anecdotes; witty, urbane, and even suave. He seemed at times anxious to display to his listeners a genial indulgence that he denied to his readers. He covered his severe philosophy with a conversational lid. This, now and then, would lift a little to let out an acid phrase, accompanied by a half-sardonic smile; but quickly the lid went down again and the smile smoothed-up its

corners. Just because he was so much a hermit of the study he wished not to be alone when he was in company.

However, it is well known that with a single friend or in a select group More could doff his urbane manner and let out his inmost thoughts. Persons who, unlike me, were with him frequently should have much to record of him in this vein. Such records together with his letters are of special value in view of More's extraordinary personal reticence in his essays. . . . I have one recollection that I wish to set down here. When *en route* to a lecture engagement he spent several hours alone with me in my study. At that time he had entered upon his theological phase. I had written him a critical letter; and he was warm with his new convictions; and the weather was provokingly hot. He accepted a glass of cold milk, nothing else; and somewhat to my surprise he took off his coat and rolled up his white shirtsleeves. "Now," he said grim-smilingly, with a light flourish of his right arm, as though wielding a rapier — instead of Babbitt's broadsword — "now you will please to tell me plainly your religious beliefs and I shall then inform you just what sort of heretic you are!"

I told, or tried to tell, and he proceeded to pierce me through and through, sipping his milk the while. I could not well parry his swift logic nor hold my ground against his amazing knowledge of the history of theology, orthodox and unorthodox. He so fascinated me that I forgot the heat. But now I have also forgotten "just what sort of heretic" I was. In fact, it seems that I was several sorts all mixed up together. At first he set me down as an out-and-out Arian, but

I protested firmly and he partly allowed my protest. On one point, at least, we were entirely agreed: namely, that Arianism, if it is thought through to its proper conclusion, means that there can be nothing eternal, nothing without beginning or end, in the human spirit.

More's final position in respect to Christian theology is most tellingly given, I think, in the small book, *The Sceptical Approach to Religion* (Princeton Press, 1934), designed to summarize and simplify the argument developed in the six volumes of *The Greek Tradition*. But the uninitiated reader would perhaps do well to begin with the last chapter, the beautiful and moving essay on "The Gift of Hope", where the author, as a rule so shy of speaking autobiographically, comes very near to doing so. . . . I confess that I approach this whole matter very gingerly, recalling Spenser's verse regarding the New Jerusalem, "Too high a ditty for my simple song". A full and careful study of More's theology has been provided by Professor Robert Shafer in his book *Paul Elmer More and American Criticism* (Yale University Press). I have to offer a few remarks from a somewhat different point of view. I cannot share Professor Shafer's regret that More finally leaves his readers, after a fashion, in the lurch by intimating that he has tried to give them an objective account of Christian doctrine rather than of what he is sure that he himself believes. This seems to me a fine return of More upon himself, a crowning evidence of the unremitting veracity and humility of his spirit.

The truth is that from first to last he was in the main a Platonist, by constitution and by reason of

the studies that occupied the greater part of his life. But in advanced middle age he saw very clearly that Platonism at its best (that is, as he knew it and lived by it) is a preparation for Christianity. Therefore he set himself—rather with head than with heart, I think, though by no means without heart—to show how Plato's doctrines found their completion eight centuries later in the dogmas of the Christian Catholic Church, especially in the pronouncements of the Council of Chalcedon. He confessed to friends that early in life he had found himself confronted by a sharp dilemma: Christ must be either a madman or a god. (This dilemma is a normal one for the academic reason.) And now he decided that Christ must be God; that otherwise there was no reality in Plato's difficult doctrine of Ideas, wherein there is assumed an inexplicable union of the divine and the human; a union unbelievable if it could never be historic and personal and complete.

So far, so good. But it is one thing to believe that Jesus Christ is both God and man in a unique sense; quite another thing to believe that this unique sense can be defined with anything like adequacy by the human reason, or that the reason's efforts in this direction are of anything like prime importance. We cannot even be sure, without presumption, that the word "Incarnation" itself is a permanent fixture. It is impregnated with the implications of the Latinistic stage of Occidental civilization; and in some future religious era there may become current a more suitable term to denote the supreme historical fact that occasioned the dogma. Christology is not an exact science; and at present, like the science of the atom,

it is in a marked state of transition. A number of contemporary and authoritative religious thinkers have adopted in this field a far more tentative tone than More's. Search, for instance, the writing of Von Hügel and A. E. Taylor, or even the more decisive utterances of William Temple (Archbishop of York), noting what they say, or refrain from saying, on the subject of Christology; then place your findings alongside the definitions given by More. The difference is very significant. I recall a passage in which the late Baron Von Hügel, that great Roman Catholic saint of the intellect, remarks that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ "is in *some* sense unique" (*italics mine*). But More set himself to define that sense as precisely as he could.

In *The Sceptical Approach* (page 163 ff.) he says that in Christ divine revelation is of a "a new form . . . unique in *kind* as well as in degree" (*italics mine*). All previous prophets and teachers, though they prepared the way for Christ, must be placed in an essentially different category. As for ordinary religious persons: "We may speak of being in God, but it is only by a loose and rather dangerous metaphor that we may speak of God being in us. Man's reason and conscience may be divine, they are not the indwelling of divinity." In fact, the scale of divine revelation "is not *continuous* but interrupted at least at three points in the ascending passage from inanimate to animate, from animal to man, and from the dualism of man to the dualism of the God-man". This comes perilously near to claiming that, by constitution, Jesus is as different from man as man is from the animals.

But More, shrinking back (I think) from that gulf, hastens to assure us that our human faith in divine revelation is, unlike that revelation itself, entirely "*continuous*", evincing "no break, no distinction in kind". For if such were not the case (though More does not state this point) Jesus Christ's faith in God would be of a different *kind* from other men's faith in God; which would be an inhuman paradox. So, according to More, our faith in the Divine Being, whether He is revealed through Jesus or through other men, is a single kind of faith — though the revelation through Jesus is different in kind from the revelation through other men! Here is an intolerable dichotomy of revelation and faith. Later (page 178) More says that "Christianity alone of religions corresponds with the final data of self-knowledge". But surely our final datum is the indwellingness of the divine will of transcendent deity; and our knowledge of that, if we follow out More's logic, must be different in *kind* from Christ's knowledge of it. Thus we come to the gulf that More would fain avoid: the inmost experience of the knowing, praying, believing, loving, and serving Jesus of Nazareth is different from ours in *kind*. If so, we cannot really take part in his experience.

The gentle reader may justifiably exclaim, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave when the warp of our Christological pattern is the word *kind*!" Would not the words "quality" and "possession" be somewhat less objectionable? Consider what happens when a great poet expresses an old human emotion or idea with perfect originality, with original perfection. "The quality of mercy is not strained". . . . Or, "Tomor-

row and tomorrow and tomorrow". . . . Those two experiences are as old as the human race. But Shakespeare, for the moment entirely possessed by them, is possessed also of the perfect words and tune of them. His experience is the same kind as ours but supreme in poetic quality and possession. . . . In Christ men find the same kind of life or being as their own; otherwise they could not really know it or share it. But in Him it has unique perfection of quality: his will is completely possessed by and of the Divine Will. And this complete possession is sublimely, divinely, different from the incomplete possession that we find in other persons, no matter of how high a quality their lives and thoughts may be; for instance, the Buddha. We say, with a certain rightness, of a supreme passage of verse, "This is infinitely better than any other passage on the same subject." And when we compare the most Christ-like life that we know with the Life of Christ, we say with entire rightness, "This is infinitely better." Here indeed the light that lighteth every man, the Word that creates all things, becomes flesh and dwells among us (and we behold his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth. . . . One is driven to quote St. John because one's own words are so weak and fumbling. My point is that the words "quality" and "possession" are somewhat less objectionable than the word "kind" as employed by More. They seem to me closer to the sense of the New Testament, and to the trend of the most authoritative Christological thinking of the present time in so far as I have studied it. More's system, I am sure, is not highly authoritative. And if, as Professor Shafer complains, More himself does not en-

tirely believe it, so much the better. For I must say, in the upshot, it is unbelievable.

Also I think that More's Christological system weakens the force of his earlier dualistic philosophy, considered in the first part of this essay. As Christologist he urges that the duality of the nature of Jesus is "*analogous* [my italics] to the duality of the supernatural and the natural in man, but it is different also [the context shows that he means different in kind] in being the duality of divinity and humanity". This thought, as More develops it, seems to me to mean that, except in the case of Christ, there is no *real* reality, so to speak, in the commingling of the divine and human in human life. When, for instance, Sir Philip Sidney prays, "Eternal Life, maintain thy life in me", the words "thy life" do not or should not really mean that. They do not even mean "a life which is an image of thy life"; for an image may really partake of that which it images. The right meaning according to More's logic must be "a life which is *analogous* to thy life". And therefore that "true universal in human nature" which More as Platonist used to exalt, is not truly universal: it is merely an analogue of the Universal Life. There can be no essential correspondence between two things that are merely analogous. . . . Here again poetry can help us. In Shakespeare's time the Roman Catholic martyr, Robert Southwell, wrote:

*Man's soul of endless beauty image is,
Drawn by the work of endless skill and might. . . .*

Southwell knew that the Universal Artist puts himself really, though inexplicably, into the image that he creates.

The truth is that the main significance of More's Christian thought lies in its strong reaction against that religionistic humanitarianism which, enthroning nature in place of God, reduces Christ to "a mere man", as the phrase goes. At the same time (this point will be developed in a later paper) he was reacting from the non-theological humanism of Irving Babbitt, to which More's own outlook had formerly approximated but which, he now believed, could provide no ultimate defense against humanitarian assaults. Those two reactions drove him into a kind of Christological absolutism — despite his brilliant and effectual denunciations of the "Demon of the Absolute" in other fields of thought.

Milton, I believe, had continually to fight the devil of pride in his own breast and was therefore able in his chief poem to make the character of Satan extraordinarily vivid and appealing. Similarly More could powerfully sketch and confute the Demon of the Absolute because this very creature was always trying to ensnare him. Witness his relentless criticism of the Absolute in German philosophy and of the absolutist tendency which he found in Roman Catholic theology; both are dealt with in his penetrating essay on Von Hügel in the final volume of the Shelburne Essays, *On Being Human*. More could not believe in a God whose will is absolutely law. "I must attribute the evil of the world," he says, "to some other obscurely guessed factor that thwarts the full working of His will. . . . There is something in the sum of existence besides the will of God, and beyond that fact I deem it folly to conjecture" (*Sceptical Approach*, pages 163-4). This utterance, whether or no it be theologi-

cally correct, is humanly appealing; and it stands in remarkable contrast to his reasonings about Christ. Those reasonings are not supported, I believe, by the synoptic gospels; therefore More terms these, in a misfortunate passage, "the humanitarian gospels". That adjective, when we consider the connotations given to it by More's total work, simply will not do; it does not apply to those three sublimely human versions of the life of Christ. Here More's thought is gored by the horn of the Demon of the Absolute. In short, my impression is that, over against the age-old absolutism of metaphysics, More's thinking tends to humanize the idea of God; but that, because of his extreme though valuable reaction against the new humanitarianism, his logic tends to de-humanize Christ.

However, when a person remarked to me recently that More's books "smell of the lamp", I exclaimed, "But what a lamp!" A clear and steady light, continually noble, pervades the reaches of his immense scholarship. And it is always a challenging and educative light. The reader may often differ from the author's ideas but not, unless he is a far too gentle reader, without a real effort to clarify his own. At the same time the reader may feel that More's ideas upon the highest matters suffer from a certain deficiency of the poetic spirit. This spirit by itself cannot give us the highest truth, but without it the highest truth is not given. More lacks the *lumination* of an Emerson; whom, as he liked to say, he adored this side idolatry. Let us then place More in our bookcase a little lower than that angel; but not too far away. He is the necessary complement and corrective to Emerson. The light of that great but confused sage has burned muddily in

a thousand subsequent writers. More brought to the scene the cleansing light of a great critical intellect. . . . Emerson sometimes gives us the impression that he had a feeling that, in his own light, he had caught up with Jesus. More, after long and severe searchings for high truth, placed his lamp, in his own way, at the feet of the glory of Christ.

Two Texts

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I HAVE come across two announcements during the last week upon which I feel moved to write, for they are closely allied in spirit and both (in my judgement) heretical — and therefore calculated to do harm to the social philosophy which I have most at heart. The first I found in an article which appeared in *THE AMERICAN REVIEW* from the pen of the late Mr. Penty.* The second I read under I know not what authorship in a general article which appeared in one of the American papers a few weeks ago.

The first pronouncement was to the effect that we could hardly restore economic freedom and re-establish private property, which is the sole guarantee of economic freedom, in the modern world unless we got rid of machinery; or at any rate modified the present wide use of machinery. The second pronouncement, briefer and of much narrower scope, was a protest against the resistance offered (by those who seek the restoration of economic freedom) to the power of modern capitalist organization — individual capitalist controllers, whether as managers or controllers, or millionaire owners of stock. The writer said that instead of criticizing and opposing concentrated capitalist control of production we should do better to fix our attention upon good wages, secure

* "The Restoration of Property" by A. J. Penty, *THE AMERICAN REVIEW*, February, 1937.