Mankind, Matter, and More: Sacred Materiality in the Tower Works of Thomas More

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Notwithstanding his often ferocious condemnations of the flesh and its weaknesses, Thomas More was clearly no Manichean. In his most mature thought, especially as revealed in the Tower works—the *Dialogue of Comfort* and the *De tristitia Christi*—he clearly teaches how the flesh and other mere material things could contribute to the Christian's sanctification and salvation. The root and foundation of More's understanding of holy material things can be found in his understanding of the Incarnation. According to More, God effected His salvific work through, and not in spite of, material creation.
Keywords: Thomas More, matter, flesh, sacrilege, sacred space, Incarnation, sacrament

En dépit de ses condamnations souvent virulentes de la chair et des faiblesses qu'elle entraîne, Thomas More n'était pas pour autant un manichéen. Dans sa pensée la plus mature, en particulier celle qui se révèle dans les œuvres de prison – le Dialogue du réconfort *et le* De tristitia Christi *– il montre comment la chair et le matériel peuvent contribuer à la sanctification et au salut du chrétien. More fonde sa compréhension de la sainteté de la matière dans sa compréhension de l'Incarnation. Selon More, Dieu a effectué son action salvatrice à travers et non en dépit de la création matérielle.*
Mots-clés : Thomas More, matière, chair, sacrilège, espace sacré, Incarnation, sacrement

Pese a condenar ferozmente la carne y sus debilidades, a todas luces More no era un maniqueo. En sus pensamientos más maduros, reflejados

especialmente en sus trabajos desde la Torre —el *Diálogo del Consuelo* y *De tristitia Christi*— More muestra a las claras que la carne y otras cosas materiales pueden contribuir a la santificación y salvación del cristiano. El fundamento y la raíz del modo en el que More entendía la santidad de las cosas materiales puede encontrarse en la conciencia que él tenía de la Encarnación. Según More, Dios realizó su tarea salvífica a través, y no a pesar, de la creación material.
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Thomas More's evaluation of the flesh and its weakness is often expressed with a vehemence that seems to amount to hatred. It is not unusual to find him describing the body as "vile" and its appetites as "the foule affection of the fylthy fleshe."[1] A more thorough understanding of More's theology, however, reveals that he did not harbor an absolute contempt for the human body. In his prison works, for instance, More teaches that the flesh could not just affect but could *contribute to* the quality of a Christian's spiritual life. One of his "major concerns" in the *De tristitia Christi*, as Clarence Miller explains, "is the attentive reverence, mental *and bodily*, that Christians ought to cultivate in their prayers."[2] Similarly, More's "Treatise on the Passion" includes an argument for the value of ceremony, or ritualized human actions, as an aid, not an enemy, to charity, a possible reaction, Garry E. Haupt suggests, to

[1] *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, 15 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963-90), 13:191, 193; all citations of Thomas More's works in this paper are taken from the Yale edition (hereafter *CW*).
[2] In *CW* 14,723; emphasis added.

his friend Erasmus's Platonizing of the spiritual life.[3] The flesh, the human body in its deportment and its actions, matter itself, in fact, could be of supernatural value, could be holy.

Consideration of Thomas More's attitude toward the sin and crime of sacrilege—the theft or abuse of sacred things or sacred space—reinforces the importance of the body, ceremony, and matter in More's anthropology and theology.[4] Over and over again in his works, when More provides a list of the most heinous and abominable human sins and crimes, sacrilege appears. In *The Apology of Sir Thomas More*, for example, More enumerates "those extreme vices" that neither Church nor State could afford to tolerate: "theft, adultery, sacrilege, murder, incest, and perjury, sedition, insurrection, treason, and heresy."[5] Sacrilege is not the worst sin—in the same work he explicitly places heresy higher (or lower if you will) in the hierarchy of evil—but it is evident that, for More, sacrilege is among the most detestable violations of God's law.[6]

Heresy may be a worse sin, but there are times that More himself seems to respond to sacrilege with a more visceral disgust, at

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[3] Garry E. Haupt, Introduction, *CW* 13, cxix. Although not written in the Tower, as Louis Martz argues, the English "Treatise upon the Passion" is "tied together inseparably" with the *Dialogue of Comfort* and the *De tristitia Christi*. Martz, "The Tower Works," *CW* 12, lxxxv.

[4] The term "sacrilege" is derived from the combination of the Latin *sacer*, sacred, and *legëre*, to gather, and etymologically denotes the theft of sacred things. The term is extended in ecclesiastical usage to include "any kind of outrage on consecrated persons or things, and the violation of any obligation having a sacramental character, or recognized as under the special protection of the Church." In a transferred or figurative sense it also denotes "the profanation of anything held sacred." *OED*, s.v. "sacrilege," n.1. See also Robert Maltby, *A Lexicon of Ancient Latin Etymologies*, ARCA 25 (Leeds: Cairns, 1991), 537. In the canon law, Gratian declares that sacrilege is committed "quotiens quis sacrum uiolat, uel auferendo sacrum de sacro, uel sacrum de non sacro, uel non sacrum de sacro." *CIC*, C. 17, q. 4, d. p. c. 20 (Friedberg, 820).

[5] *CW* 9, 166. For similar examples, see *CW* 8, 426/21, 571,/23, 821/7.

[6] "Heretics be yet much worse" than "thieves, murderers, and robbers of churches." *CW* 9, 117.

least in the case of one of the particular forms sacrilege could take. In his polemical writings More often refers with horror to the attempted marriages of Martin Luther and other contemporary apostate clergy and religious—"that shameful sacrilege and abominable bitchery."[7] Some might read sexual neurosis into More's recurring denunciations of his opponents' flagrant renunciation of their former professions of celibacy, but this was for More, after all, a sin that was not just the breaking of a vow, but added a combination of incestual sex with the violation of the sacred. Certainly More's categorization of these unions as sacrilege was not so singular—of the eight cautionary tales about sacrilege in Robert Mannynge's *Handlyng Sinne* at the turn of the fourteenth century, at least three deal with sexual impropriety among the clergy.[8] In any case, More's disgust at the Reformers' capitulation (as he saw it) to their sexual appetites serves to illustrate in dramatic fashion how in More's mind the physical could affect the spiritual in a deleterious way.

The rejection of vows by celibates was not the only sacrilege that Thomas More denounced in his writings. In the *Apology* he notes a case of the robbery of a church involving the "carrying away [of] the pyx with the Blessed Sacrament, or villainously casting it out)."[9] Elsewhere he denounces the iconoclasm rampant wherever the Reformation had spread on the Continent—the abuse of

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[7] *CW* 8, 266/32. Louis L. Martz and Frank Manley note the frequency of More's objection to Luther's marriage—more than sixty times in the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* alone. The attempted marriage of a monk and nun was incest in canon law (*CW* 12, 371; see also *CW* 8, 483/7), but the sacrilegious character of such liaisons is also often stressed by More.

[8] One of these cases inculcates the sensible moral: "Don't do lechery in holy places." *Robert of Brunne's "Handlyng Synne," A. D. 1303, with Those Parts of the Anglo-French Treatise on Which It Was Founded, William of Wadington's "Manuel des Pechiez*," ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, 2 vols. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1901-03), 2:271-297.

[9] *CW* 9, 117/16.

crucifixes, the defiling of sacred vessels and churches, and, as he writes in the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, sacrileges "in the plain, literal sense," i.e., the Reformers' robbery of "relics and ornaments of the church, to pollute and misspend them in profane uses to fill their bellies and cover their pocky, scabbed skins with, much worse than King Belshazzar abused the hallowed vessels of the Temple to serve his own proud, execrable gluttony." Sacrilege does not have to involve sex for More to react with violent rhetoric, although it is true that this mention of the plundering of churches does bring him round again to what he seems to find most grotesque—"when they have robbed the churches, then lodge they, for more despite, their friars and their nuns in them . . . and of a hallowed church they make a stinking stews."[10]

In his prison writings, however, as has been often noted, More muted his anti-heresy polemic. He seems a milder, chastened man as he strove by prayer, meditation, and composition to steel his soul to face death. In these later writings he disagrees with the "new men" when relevant, but generally without naming names.[11] And he has done with his diatribes about the sacrilege of friars and nuns cohabiting. In the *Dialogue of Comfort*, More relates the story of Achan's sacrilege (Joshua 7) as an example of a case of medicinal tribulation.[12] It is repentance, however, and not the nature of Achan's sin that is really relevant to More's discussion in the

[10] See *CW* 6, 47, 370, 372; 8, 164, 485.

[11] *CW* 14, 445-49. Indeed, once in the *De tristitia Christi* when his exposition requires the mention of a heretic, he names Arius not Luther. *CW* 14, 275.

[12] *CW* 12, 24-27. Achan had appropriated booty from the city of Jericho that had been, by Joshua's declaration, "consecrated unto the Lord." Achan, his children, and his livestock were then stoned to death but, in More's telling, Achan "mekely toke his deth therfor, and had I dowt not both strenghth and comfort in his payne, & died a very good man." *CW* 12, 26/20-22. In the *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, More similarly makes Achan an example of the salutary effects of penitence. *CW* 6, 283. Achan's crime is sometimes identified by early modern Scripture commentators as the first sacrilege in human history.

Dialogue. More to the point, in *De tristitia Christi* More laments that "unchaste, profligate, and sacrilegious priests consecrated and handled" the Blessed Sacrament while in the state of sin, an offense that occurred, he complains, "only too often."[13] In the prison works, in contrast to his earlier polemics, More is often writing even about the worst sins rather in sorrow than in anger.

While the prison works may be short on denunciations, what they do to some degree is explain some of the underlying reasons for the important role the material or physical can play in Thomas More's understanding of the economy of salvation. Fundamentally, More sees God as accomplishing his saving work for humanity not in a sterile spiritual and Platonic way, but by employing the tools of his material creation. Salvation is not for souls alone. Body and soul he made man, and the body, the flesh, material as it is, is not inconsequential to the work of the Spirit. Christ had in fact when on earth instilled divine power to heal into such simple material objects as mud and cloth. In the *De tristitia Christi*, More imagines Christ encouraging the fearful soul to lay hold of his vesture and follow his footsteps:

> See, I am walking ahead of you along this fearful road. Take hold of the border of my garment and you will feel going out from it a power which will stay your heart's blood from issuing in vain fears, and will make your mind more cheerful, especially when you remember that you are following closely in my footsteps.[14]

This may be imaginative rhetoric, but it is a reminder for Thomas More and Christians in general of a historical miracle that God worked using a piece of cloth.

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[13] *CW* 14, 351/9-11 and 353/1. "Traditur christus in manus peccatorum / quum sacrosanctum eius corpus in sacramento /consecratur et attrectatur ab incestis flagiciosis et sacrilegis sacerdotibus. . . . accidunt heu nimium sepe."

[14] *CW* 14, 105.

Of course, as noted above, More is emphatic, and few of his contemporaries would dispute, that matter, and especially the flesh, could *impede* the divine will to save. In *De tristitia Christi* he writes—"The weakness of the flesh holds us back, somewhat in the way a remora-fish retards a ship, until our minds, no matter how willing to do good, are swept back into the evils of temptation."[15] Nevertheless, the flesh also has positive contributions to make in the divine plan of redemption. God, More insists, does not

> impart grace to men in such a way as to suspend for the moment the functions and duties of nature, but instead He either allows nature to accommodate itself to the grace which is superadded to it, so that the good deed may be performed with all the more ease, or else, if nature is disposed to resist, so that this very resistance, overcome and put down by grace, may add to the merit of the deed because it is difficult to do.[16]

The weakness of the natural flesh may, by grace, increase the supernatural merit of a human act. God does not work with or upon the soul only, in a way that invariably excludes the body. In order to gain learning, for instance, man must ordinarily undergo the physical effort necessary. They tempt and displease God who would "loke to be inwardly towght onely by god."[17] In the *Dialogue of Comfort*, More's Antony declares: "God hath given vs our bodies here to kepe, & will that we manteyne them to do him seruice with / till he send for us hens."[18] However strongly More condemns at times the "foul affections of the filthy flesh," Christians are to keep body and soul together if they can, and serve God with both.

So important is the material element in human nature that the physical can affect the quality of prayer. More explains in

[15] *CW* 14, 167-169.
[16] *CW* 14, 99.
[17] *CW* 12, 6.
[18] *CW* 12, 57/20-21.

De tristitia Christi that actions while praying such as cleaning one's fingers with a pocketknife, or picking one's nose, though they may take no real thought, can detract from the quality of one's spiritual efforts. "Are we not ashamed to pray in such a deranged state of mind and body?"[19] He counsels the one who prays not to let "bodily deportment," voice, and gestures indicate that while addressing God "you are thinking about something else."[20] Of course, More knows the mind can be lifted to God no matter what the body is doing. "Indeed I wish that, whatever our bodies may be doing, we would at the same time constantly lift up our minds to God."[21] Prayers may be said while lying down, sitting, or walking. Nevertheless, he counsels his readers:

> I would require that, besides the prayers said while walking, we also occasionally say some prayers for which we prepare our minds more thoughtfully, *for which we dispose our bodies more reverently*, than we would if we were about to approach all the kings in the whole world sitting together in one place.[22]

Proper corporal deportment would seem to enhance the spiritual quality of supernatural acts.

Of course, More knows that intention guides and governs the morality of physical actions. Intention can render an act virtuous or vicious. The "most sacred sign of charity," a kiss, might be turned by intention into a sign of betrayal.[23] A good intention can render physical action virtuous even when the intention is not continually explicit. In the *De tristitia Christi*, following Jean Gerson, More attempts to alleviate the unease of those who suffered from unwilled

[19] *CW* 14, 127-29.
[20] *CW* 14, 133.
[21] *CW* 14, 135.
[22] *CW* 14, 137. "Tanta cum reverentia corpus componatur . . ." Emphasis added.
[23] *CW* 14, 411.

distraction during prayer, using an example derived from a devotional practice that required significant physical effort—pilgrimage. Sometimes, he explains, the pilgrim journeys meditating on the saint and the purpose of pilgrimage. At other times, however, the action of journeying proceeds, but the pilgrim thinks about something else. He then continues the pilgrimage "on a natural, but not on a moral level. For though he actually moves his feet along, he does not actually think about the reason for setting out nor perhaps even about the way he is going." Yet the "moral virtue" of the act continues.

> For that whole natural act of walking is informed and imbued with a moral virtue because it is silently accompanied by the pious intention formed at the beginning, since all this motion follows from that first decision just as a stone continues on its course because of the original impetus, even though the hand which threw it has been withdrawn."[24]

As long as the worthy intention of the pilgrim is not revoked, the physical action remains virtuous and profitable to salvation.

In these works, More's acceptance of the Catholic idea of sacred space, under attack by the "new men" of his time, is evident. The example of pilgrimage, of course, testifies to this. The act of going to a place is "otherwise indifferent," yet by reason of the piety that impels the pilgrim on his way the indifferent physical action is rendered spiritually profitable and brought to perfection. The act of the pilgrim, in fact, is best when he meditates as he proceeds on "the saint or *the place*."[25] It is not necessary, however, to pray in a place hallowed by the death of a saint or other supernaturally-inflected event; other places may enhance the Christian's union with God. In the *Dialogue of Comfort* the reader is advised to resort sometimes to a specific place in his own house secluded from noise and business.

[24] *CW* 14, 319-21.
[25] *CW* 14, 319, emphasis added.

"Than let hym there before an altare or some pitifull image of christes bitter passion . . . knele downe or fall prostrate as at the fete of almighty god." He should there open his heart to God, confess his faults, and give hearty thanks to God "verely belevyng hym to be there invisibly present / as without [eny] dowt he is."[26] God, present everywhere, will be especially present, present in a different way, in places of pilgrimage, or places set aside for prayer.

For More, of course, Christ's example is paradigmatic for the Christian. Since God created both body and soul, Christ "wanted us to learn that a reverend attitude of the body, though it takes its origin and character from the soul, increases by a kind of reflex the soul's own reverence and devotion toward God." Christ, therefore, "venerated His heavenly Father in a bodily posture which no earthly prince has dared to demand" (except, More adds, some very extreme examples of debauched or barbaric rulers). When Christ prayed,

> He did not sit back or stand up or merely kneel down, but rather He threw His whole body face-forward and lay prostrate on the ground. Then, in that pitiable posture, He implored His Father's mercy.[27]

Christ's example demonstrated that the posture of the body during prayer was significant and could be spiritually helpful.

Undergirding the importance of the physical in God's plan for mankind's redemption is the Incarnate Christ himself. God willed to save the human race through the sufferings of a divine person made flesh. In the florilegium of Scripture verses that appears at the end of *De tristitia Christi*, More includes 1 Pet. 2:24—"By His bruises we are healed."[28] These were true bruises on a true human body, a body that More habitually identifies as "blessed."[29] The "holy tendre

[26] *CW* 12, 164.
[27] *CW* 14, 145-47.
[28] *CW* 14, 659.
[29] *CW* 12, 67; 13, 105.

body" of Christ was holy in all its parts: head, "handes and fete," "hart." From the dead body pierced after Christ's death on the cross there flowed "holy blode and water, wherof his holy sacramentes haue Inestymable secrete strength."[30] More argues that Christ's mental sufferings were greater, but he in no wise minimizes the real bodily sufferings of the crucifixion.[31]

The sacraments themselves also demonstrate God's will to save the human race using material means. Each of the seven demands for its validity some material element or physical action. As so great a part of More's last writings focuses on the sufferings of Christ, it is unsurprising that More should think much upon that sacrament which Christ instituted on the night before he suffered—the sacrament of the altar. God ordained "the holy manhed" of Christ "for our necessitie to cure our dedly woundes with the medisyn made of the most holsome blode of his own blessid body."[32] As noted, in *De tristitia Christi* More shows how Christ even in the present day was still betrayed into the hands of sinners when the eucharist was mistreated.[33] The Valencia holograph makes it clear that More initially wrote simply that Christ was betrayed when the sacrament was "consecrated by unchaste, profligate, and sacrilegious priests," but later amplified his treatment with the interlinear addition of the phrase "et attrectatur"—"and handled." Upon consideration, it seems, More chose to emphasize the physical. "Attrectatur," as Clarence Miller explains, "usually has bad connotations, [and] places emphasis on the literal fact of Christ's body, the eucharistic bread, being touched by the hands of sinners."[34] This is no mere spiritual violation of a mere spiritual thing; the

[30] *CW* 12, 312-13.
[31] *CW* 14, 95-97.
[32] *CW* 12, 11/26.
[33] *CW* 14, 351/9-11.
[34] In *CW* 14, 923.

physical handling exacerbates the guilt. For Thomas More, priests who consecrated the eucharist in the state of sin were all the more worthy of ranking with Judas, Pilate, and the Pharisees who delivered Christ to death, because of their unworthy touching of the material elements of the sacrament.[35]

Thomas More's ideas about the role of material things in the economy of salvation represent elements of a coherent Incarnational theology that views matter as a natural tool in the divine plan of redemption. It can be truly said, as Haupt affirms of More's "Treatise on the Passion" and *De tristitia Christi*, that his "greatest eloquence . . . is reserved for the humanity of Christ, for the element of accommodation to human frailty implicit in the Incarnation."[36] As a saint and martyr noted for his personal asceticism and his violent condemnations of disordered sexual appetites, especially in men and women who had renounced an earlier commitment to celibacy in the service of God, it is easy to perceive More as negative about material things and simply contemptuous of weak human flesh. But Thomas More's writings reveal an explicit theology of sacred materiality and a robust Catholic sense of the real sacredness of created things—material objects and earthly places—consecrated to the service of God, and human beings, in their bodies as well as their souls.

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[35] Proper treatment of the sacrament of the altar is also explored in the final pages of More's "Treatise on the Passion" and in his "Treatice to Receaue the Blessed Body of Our Lorde." See *CW* 13, 174-77 and 189-204.
[36] In *CW* 13, ci.