

BLINKERED NOBLENESS

SIR THOMAS MORE (1477-1535)



To the modern mind, Sir Thomas More is a paradoxical character. For him, William Tyndale—pioneer translator of the Bible into English—is the Devil’s darling; Muslims, and the Protestants for whom, in his *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* they stand, are God’s enemies, and, notoriously, the burning of heretics “is lawful, necessary, and well done.” Such a bigoted view of any religion—Spenser’s extreme anti-Catholicism is an example on the other side—is the kind of blind passion that can lead to massacre and war. In this respect, More compares unfavourably with his more tolerant friend Erasmus, who declares, “I prefer a true Turk to a false Christian.” Yet More is a many-sided man who can write business letters to Wolsey advising on the conduct of the King’s Scottish and Continental wars as readily as the noble missive he sends his wife when their barns have burnt down: going far beyond counselling resignation to God’s will, he urges her, “we must and are bounden not only to be content, but also to be glad of His visitation” and presses her to enquire “what my poor neighbours have lost, and bid them take no thought therefor; for and I should not leave myself a spoon, there shall no poor neighbour of mine bear no loss by any chance happened in my house.”

When More is taking precautions not to be tainted by his slight connection with Elizabeth Barton, the Nun of Kent, whose accounts of her visions include denunciation of the King’s divorce and lead to her execution, he comes into his own as a narrator. In a long, carefully worded epistle of 1534, he gives Thomas Cromwell full details of all his conversations with and about the nun, describing how, like many others, he was delighted by her seeming goodness until her turpitude became apparent, but emphasizing that he has always refused to listen to any purported revelations concerning “the King’s Grace.” Little touches of concrete detail conjure up pictures within this rational, cautious believer’s account of false appear-

ances: "Father Resbye ... lodged one night at mine house, where, after supper, a little before he went to his chamber, he fell in communication with me of the nun, giving her high commendation of holiness."

Several similar touches appear in several of More's most renowned letters, those he writes to his daughter Margaret Roper from his prison in the Tower of London, where he faces death—possibly agonizing death by hanging, drawing and quartering—for refusing to endorse the lawfulness of the annulment of the King's first marriage and his assumption of supremacy over the Church of England. In solemn, sedate language, he describes to his grieving daughter the course of his questioning by Thomas Cromwell and other high officers. Insisting that he judges no other man and seeks to influence no one, he declares, "But as for myself, in good faith my conscience so moved me in the matter that, though I would not deny to swear to the succession, yet unto the oath that there was offered me I could not swear without the jeopardizing of my soul to perpetual damnation." His steadfastness is hard won:

albeit I am of nature so shrinking from pain that I am almost
afear of a fillip, yet in all the agonies that I have had ...
forecasting all such perils and painful deaths, as by any manner
of possibility might after fall unto me, and in such thought lain
long restless and waking, while my wife had weened I had slept,
yet in any such fear and heavy pensiveness, I thank the mighty
mercy of God, I never in my mind intended to consent that I
would for the enduring of the uttermost do any such thing as ...
should damnably cast me in the displeasure of God.

No pressure can make him specify what it is in the oath or the statute of royal supremacy that he objects to—"it were a very hard thing," he protests to his inquisitors, "to compel me to say either precisely with it against my conscience to the loss of my soul, or precisely against it to the destruction of my body"—but his restraint does not save him. In his last letter before his beheading, he tells Margaret, "I never liked your manner toward me better than when you kissed me last, for I love when daughterly love and dear charity hath no leisure to look to worldly courtesy." More's loving tenderness shines out even as his conscience compels him to face the doom that Lord Lisle escapes.