



## Faith, Reason and History in Early Modern Catholic Biblical Interpretation : Fr. Richard Simon and St. Thomas More

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### Abstract

This article contrasts St. Thomas More's theoretical work on the role of faith and history in biblical exegesis with that of Fr. Richard Simon. I argue that, although Simon's work appears to be a critique of his more skeptical contemporaries like Hobbes and Spinoza, in reality he is carrying their work forward. I argue that More's union of faith and reason, theology and history, is more promising than Simon's for Catholic theological biblical exegesis.

### Keywords

Thomas More, Richard Simon, faith, history, biblical exegesis

The debate about the role of faith, reason, and history in Catholic biblical exegesis is a long one that extends back into the medieval period. Contemporary concerns over an overly secularized historical exegesis often point to examples from the more skeptical seventeenth century, like Hobbes and Spinoza. One often suggested alternative option from that time is Fr. Richard Simon. Thus, in the first half of this article, I take a look at Simon, regarded as a first-rate historical biblical critic from historical criticism's earliest inception in the seventeenth century. Simon could be presented as escaping the skepticism of the three more skeptical exegetes against whom he wrote in his own work. After all, Simon's historical critical work is a critique of the more perilous approaches of Isaac La Peyrère, Hobbes, and Spinoza, and Simon's is intended to be a robust defense of Catholic tradition. What I hope to show, however, is that Simon's apologetic is dubious at best, and his hermeneutic, although more learned and rigorous than even Spinoza's, is little more than an elaboration upon the very methods initiated by La Peyrère, Hobbes, and Spinoza. Far from being a defense of Catholic tradition, Simon's hermeneutic is a

carefully crafted and subtle defense of Spinoza's exegetical method. Simon's method thus suffers from the same pitfalls as Spinoza's.

In the second half of this article, I then take a look for an alternative approach to the question of the relationship between history and exegesis at some of the theoretical work from the previous century at the dawn of the Reformation, namely St. Thomas More's Christian defenses of humanism and secular learning in relation to the study of Scripture. Several of More's letters, and his life in general, exemplify the possibility of maintaining the unity of faith and reason, as well as admitting both theology and history in biblical interpretation.

### 1. History, Criticism & Theology: Richard Simon, Father of Historical Criticism

Catholic scholars sometimes assume the path blazed by Simon is the best approach to questions of faith and history in exegesis. Hence this examination of Simon's work explores this possibility. What we find in the work of Simon is not far removed from La Peyrère, Hobbes, or Spinoza, even if the proposed intent contrasts with theirs. Although Simon argued against this triad, he followed their basic methodology, albeit to suit his own purposes. Simon was born in 1638 in Dieppe, France, a mere ten years before the end of the Thirty Years' War.<sup>1</sup> He gained international fame through the publication of his masterpiece of historical criticism of the OT, his 1678 *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament (HCVT)*.<sup>2</sup> As Hume proverbially woke Kant from his philosophical slumber, so Spinoza, it would seem, roused Simon to produce his own historical critical work.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main motives of Simon's *HCVT* differed greatly from his contemporaries: Simon was attempting, in part, to provide a Catholic apologetic to defend the necessity of Catholic tradition

<sup>1</sup> For biographical information on Simon and on his biblical scholarship see Sascha Müller, *Richard Simon (1638–1712): Exeget, Theologe, Philosoph und Historiker* (Bamberg: Echter, 2006); Idem., *Kritik und Theologie: Christliche Glaubens und Schrifthermeneutik nach Richard Simon* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2004); Francis W. Nichols, 'Richard Simon: Faith and Modernity', in *Christianity and the Stranger: Historical Essays*, ed. Francis W. Nichols (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 115–68; and Henning Graf Reventlow, 'Richard Simon und seine Bedeutung für die kritische Erforschung der Bibel', in *Historische Kritik in der Theologie*, ed. Georg Schwaiger (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), pp. 11–36.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament, suivi de Lettre sur l'inspiration: Nouvelle édition* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2008). All citations will be taken from this edition. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations in this article are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., author's preface, 76–78. See comments in John D. Woodbridge, 'Richard Simon's Reaction to Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*', in *Spinoza in der Frühzeit seiner religiösen Wirkung*, ed. Karlfried Gründer and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggeman (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1984), pp. 201–26.

vis-à-vis Protestant interlocutors who assumed a *sola Scriptura* position.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, his comments about the challenges posed by ‘the uncertainty of Hebrew grammar’, and the like, resemble many of Spinoza’s comments—but to a very different end.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Spinoza’s project was to sound the death knell to theological exegesis, Simon instead emphasized the necessity of Catholic tradition. So threatening did Protestant theologians find his work that most of the published refutations of Simon for the next century were from Protestant intellectuals, not from Catholics.<sup>6</sup> As Manlio Iofrida remarks:

In the end, then, chance, disorder consume the written text, reducing it to a kind of *ruin*. The philologist can undertake the task of restoration, but in the field of doctrine only the Church can guarantee the essential function, both religious and political, of the Sacred Scriptures. In this way, these Scriptures regress from an inspired *corpus* to something much less sacred, and are as a matter of fact secularized and stripped of sacredness. Imperfect, often incomprehensible, they assume the chiaroscuro of a historical document to be deciphered.<sup>7</sup>

Although Simon ostensibly provided a robust defense of Catholic tradition, and, by virtually all accounts, demolished any tenable notion of *sola Scriptura*, Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker make the observation that Simon’s work provided little reason to rely on Catholic tradition at all, and, in fact, implicitly contributed to challenges opposing the authority of Catholic tradition. They note how, for Simon, ‘*traditio* acted more like an arbitrary Hobbesian authority settling intractable disputes than a divinely guided shepherd leading its flock into the deeper mysteries of God’s Word . . . undermining the certainty of Scripture, Simon was also destroying *traditio*’s support of

<sup>4</sup> Sascha Müller, ‘Grammatik und Wahrheit. Salomon Glassius (1593–1656) und Richard Simon (1638–1712) im Gespräch’, in *Hebraistik—Hermeneutik—Homiletik: Die ‘Philologia Sacra’ im frühneuzeitlichen Bibelstudium*, ed. Christoph Bultmann and Lutz Danneberg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), p. 523; Pierre Gibert, *L’invention critique de la Bible: XV<sup>e</sup> – XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp. 177–178 and 198; Antoine Fleyfel, ‘Richard Simon, critique de la sacralité biblique’, *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 88 (2008), pp. 473–74; and Guy G. Stroumsa, ‘Richard Simon: From Philology to Comparatism’, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 3 (2001), p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Compare comments in Spinoza, TTP, 7.12 and 14 with Simon, HCVT, author’s preface, p. 81. All citations to the Latin text of Spinoza’s TTP will be taken from Spinoza, *Œuvres III: Tractatus Theologico-Politicus/Traité théologico-politique*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Pierre-François Moreau (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> April G. Shelford, ‘Of Sceptres and Censors: Biblical Interpretation and Censorship in Seventeenth-Century France’, *French History* 20 (2006), p. 177; and Aulikki Nahkola, *Double Narratives in the Old Testament: The Foundations of Method in Biblical Criticism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 91–92.

<sup>7</sup> Manlio Iofrida, ‘The Original Lost: Writing and History in the Works of Richard Simon’, *Topoi* 7 (1988), p. 215.

its authority and mission as affirmed from Scripture.’<sup>8</sup> Simon thus set the stage for the more robust critique of Catholic tradition that would emerge among radical enlightenment thinkers.<sup>9</sup>

Simon was well versed in the arguments of his contemporaries. Whereas Simon had read the work of Hobbes and Spinoza, Simon not only read La Peyrère’s work, but in fact knew him personally; La Peyrère and Simon became friends after La Peyrère’s conversion to Catholicism and entrance into the Oratorians as a lay member. Prior to being expelled from the Oratorians, Simon served as an Oratorian priest.<sup>10</sup>

Simon’s biblical method was thorough.<sup>11</sup> Simon maintained that several points needed to be followed in order to come to a proper understanding of the OT: (1) a good Hebrew text must be established (*HCVT*, 3.1, 543–545);<sup>12</sup> (2) the Scriptures must be read critically as other books (*HCVT*, 3.1, 545);<sup>13</sup> (3) the texts, including the variants in the diverse manuscript tradition being translated marginally, must be translated (*HCVT*, 3.1, 545); (4) finally, and perhaps most significantly, Simon provided a sort of *Forschungsgeschichte* (history of research), showing how earlier biblical interpreters dealt with the many historical problems in Scripture (*HCVT*, 3.5–24), encouraging future biblical exegetes to follow the same path. Within this and prior sections, Simon himself basically followed the specific critical hermeneutic Spinoza articulated in the seventh chapter of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (*TTP*), but multiplying the problems encountered in such an investigation, far more thoroughly than Spinoza had.<sup>14</sup> As with Spinoza, Simon explicitly mentioned that the method

<sup>8</sup> Scott W. Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2013), p. 399.

<sup>9</sup> Bertram Eugene Schwarzbach, ‘La fortune de Richard Simon au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle’, *Revue des études juives* 146 (1987), pp. 225–39.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas Nikolaus Pietsch, *Isaac La Peyrère: Bibelkritik, Philosemitismus und Patronage in der Gelehrtenrepublik des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), pp. 61 and 65; and Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676): His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), pp. 2–3, 9, 18–21, 49, 87–88, and 105.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Bernier, *La critique du Pentateuque de Hobbes à Calmet* (Paris: Champion, 2010), pp. 80–86; Douglas A. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), pp. 38–42; and John D. Woodbridge, ‘Richard Simon le “père de la critique biblique”’, in *Le Grand Siècle et la Bible*, ed. J.-R. Armogathe (Paris: Beauchesne, 1989), pp. 193–206.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Louis Ska, ‘Richard Simon: Un pionnier sur les sentiers de la tradition’, *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 97 (2009), pp. 310–12.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., the comment in Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne, 1680–1715* (Paris: Boivin et Cie, 1935), p. 127, ‘If it is the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, or the *Pentateuch*, the principles of criticism are the same.’

<sup>14</sup> See, especially Dominique Barthélemy, *Studies in the Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project: English Translation of the Introductions to Volumes 1, 2, and 3 Critique textuelle de l’Ancien Testament* (Winona

he developed set up an ‘impossible’ task (e.g., ‘to make a good translation of Scripture’).<sup>15</sup> More than halfway through his mammoth tome, Simon conceded, ‘It even seems impossible to be able to succeed if we reflect on all the difficulties that have been noted above.’<sup>16</sup> Yet, Simon maintained that the method must be employed, and an attempt at making a good translation must continue, to which end he himself labored hard.<sup>17</sup> In the end, with his *HCVT*, Simon ‘drowned his opponents in learning and in a sea of problems.’<sup>18</sup>

Simon, like his friend La Peyrère, maintained that the Scriptures were copies of copies, whose present form was the work of various scribes.<sup>19</sup> Simon posited numerous unknown editors and compilers behind the OT, attributing the redaction to court writers on behalf of the Hebrew state.<sup>20</sup> This did not pose a problem regarding the doctrine of inspiration, since Simon maintained that these editors and compilers were inspired by God. Of course, as scholars note, Simon’s view of inspiration went hand-in-hand with the presence of all manner of distortions, errors, contradictions, and other infelicities in the biblical texts.<sup>21</sup> In the end, however, because of the nature of this layered editorial process, Scripture ‘was ultimately shrouded in darkness (not mystery), and only a historical-critical recovery of the original sources, an historical analysis of the needs and beliefs of the editor’s own time, and finally, a psychological reconstruction of each editor could shed any light.’<sup>22</sup> It was his overall denial of Mosaic authorship that got Simon in trouble, even though Simon conceded more of a role for Moses than even Hobbes had, not to mention

Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), pp. 60–62; F. Saverio Mirri, *Richard Simon e il metodo storico-critico di B. Spinoza. Storia di un libro e di una polemica sullo sfondo delle lotte politico-religiose della Francia di Luigi XIV* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1972), pp. 29–84; and Paul Auvray, ‘Richard Simon et Spinoza’, in *Religion, érudition et critique à la fin du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle et au début du XVIII<sup>e</sup>*, ed. Baudouin de Gaiffier, Bruno Neveu, René Voeltzel, and Jacques Solé (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968), p. 211.

<sup>15</sup> Simon, *HCVT*, 1.3, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.1, p. 543.

<sup>17</sup> Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation Volume 4: From the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Richard H. Popkin, ‘Bible Criticism and Social Science’, in *Methodological and Historical Essays in the Natural and Social Sciences*, ed. Robert S. Cohen and Marx W. Wartofsky (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974), p. 349.

<sup>19</sup> Barthélemy, *Studies in the Text*, p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Bernier, ‘Richard Simon et l’hypothèse des écrivains publics: Un échec humiliant’, *Revue d’histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 87 (2007), pp. 157–76.

<sup>21</sup> Frank E. Manuel, *The Broken Staff: Judaism through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 136; and William McKane, *Selected Christian Hebraists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 124.

<sup>22</sup> Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, p. 407.

Spinoza or La Peyrère.<sup>23</sup> In this context, Hahn and Wiker point out that:

It was not simply the denial of Mosaic authorship, but his rejection of the *traditio*'s attempt to explain the alleged textual imperfections by other means. As it developed, the Catholic position in regard to Scripture's seeming imperfections was that, what seemed disunited and imperfect, proved upon humble, faithful, and prayerful reading—guided by the Holy Spirit and Tradition—to be whole and harmonious, containing hidden perfections under seeming imperfections. Various ways arose to explain apparent imperfections: exegetes had recourse to a complex account of divine accommodation, to literal and spiritual senses, and even to the notion of purposely-placed divine stumbling blocks in the text to trip up the prideful and draw the humble to closer examination. Against this, Simon accepted the surface incongruities at face value—even rejoiced in them—so that the need for *tradition* became absolute.<sup>24</sup>

In short, Simon's acceptance of Spinoza's method led also to his accepting the conclusions of that method which identified purported unsolvable problems in the scriptural text. Rather than clinging to 'reason' as an excuse to undermine the authority of the text, however, Simon clung to 'faith' hence inadvertently also undermining the authority of the text, which he acknowledged was unable to withstand the scientific examination of reason.

Simon's work was condemned in France, at the instigation of Bossuet, and copies of *HCVT* were rounded up and thrown on fires. Simon's *HCVT* was subsequently published in the Dutch Republic when publication in France became impossible.<sup>25</sup> Bossuet, author of the Gallican Articles, did not oppose Simon's Gallicanist position.<sup>26</sup> Rather, Bossuet was upset by Simon's criticism of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, as well as what Bossuet saw as *HCVT*'s threats to more traditional Catholic views concerning biblical inspiration and tradition. Bossuet's conflict with Simon did not curb the enormous

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Gibert, introduction à la présente édition, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, ed. by Simon, pp. 35–37; and Jean Steinmann, *Richard Simon et les origines de l'exégèse biblique* (Paris: Brouwer, 1960), pp. 124–30.

<sup>24</sup> Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, p. 398.

<sup>25</sup> Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne*, p. 140; and Shelford, 'Of Sceptres and Censors', p. 175. In a footnote, Shelford claims that, 'At Bossuet's request, there were meetings between Simon and Pirot to develop a publishable version, but these efforts foundered when Simon walked out. Motivated by the possible repercussions of the seizure of an approved work, [Jean-Baptiste] Colbert [royal chancellor and thus royal censor] ordered another examination of *L'histoire critique* [sic]; once again, Simon refused to make the adjustments that were demanded' (175 n. 62).

<sup>26</sup> Emile Perreau-Saussine, 'Why Draw a Politics from Scripture? Bossuet and the Divine Right of Kings', in *Political Hebraism: Judaic Sources in Early Modern Political Thought*, ed. Gordon Schochet, Fania Oz-Salzberger, and Meirav Jones (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2008), pp. 90–104.



effect Simon's *HCVT* and other writings would have. Despite the aforementioned censure, Simon's corpus of biblical scholarship exerted an incredible influence on eighteenth century Enlightenment biblical criticism.

Simon's work was brought into the English biblical critical world via Deist biblical critics and through Locke, who owned multiple copies of *HCVT*, one in which he made marginal annotations.<sup>27</sup> Simon's work also took Germany by storm, especially through the work of the important Bible scholar Johann Semler.<sup>28</sup> In the end, we may conclude with Hahn and Wiker that, 'Simon's attempt to vanquish Protestantism's claim of *sola scriptura* by amplifying Spinoza's approach to exegesis only served to provide a much firmer scholarly foundation for Spinozism.'<sup>29</sup> Far from representing a different path from La Peyrère, Hobbes, and Spinoza, Simon's work became the vehicle for spreading the core principles of their biblical criticism through the Enlightenment and into the modern period. What is more, Simon's incredible erudition made their hermeneutic all the more formidable.

## 2. 'Buried and Hard-to-Reach Treasure': St. Thomas More and the Unity of Faith and Reason

For a response to the type of criticism represented by Simon, and thus by La Peyrère, Hobbes and Spinoza, I want to turn to the previous century, to the thought of St. Thomas More. More was not a Bible scholar, but he certainly engaged Scripture, and in fact many of his works provide an insight into his own exegesis which combined the best of traditional Christian exegesis with the tools of Renaissance humanism.<sup>30</sup> He argued passionately for reason, and chided clerics

<sup>27</sup> Justin A.I. Champion, 'Père Richard Simon and English Biblical Criticism, 1680–1700', in *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin: Essays in His Honor*, ed. James E. Force and David S. Katz (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 39–61.

<sup>28</sup> Gibert, *L'invention critique*, pp. 317–322; and John D. Woodbridge, 'German Responses to the Biblical Critic Richard Simon: From Leibniz to J.S. Semler', in *Historische Kritik und biblischer Kanon in der deutschen Aufklärung*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Walter Sparr, and John Woodbridge (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), pp. 65–87.

<sup>29</sup> Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, p. 423.

<sup>30</sup> Katherine Gardiner Rodgers, 'The Lessons of Gethsemane: *De Tristitia Christi*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 243–251; Germain Marc'hadour, 'Scripture in the Dialogue', in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More Volume 6: A Dialogue Concerning Heresies Part II: Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Thomas M.C. Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard C. Marius (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 494–526; Idem., *The Bible in the Works of St. Thomas More*, vols. 1–5 (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1969–1972); and Idem., *Thomas More et la Bible: La place des livres saints dans son apologetique et sa spiritualité* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1969).

unwilling to use history and philology in an attempt to arrive at a more accurate text of the Bible, better translations, etc. Unlike the figures we have already discussed who would emerge on the scene in the next century, More was just as passionate about the necessity of faith as he was of reason. Faith and reason were inextricably bound in More's thought. In this, More's work reflected the holistic approach akin to that later articulated in the First Vatican Council's decree *Dei Filius* as well as in other magisterial documents such as St. Pope John Paul II's penultimate papal encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Verbum Domini*.

More was born in London in 1477.<sup>31</sup> The son of a lawyer, More spent two years as a page to Archbishop John Morton, England's Lord Chancellor. At Oxford More thoroughly immersed himself in classical studies and he quickly became one of Europe's most prominent humanist scholars, producing works that epitomized that humanist tradition, including many translations and works on humanistic learning.<sup>32</sup> For a few years, apparently discerning whether or not he had a vocation to the religious life, More lived alongside the Carthusian monastery in London, actively participating in the Carthusian communal life of prayer.<sup>33</sup> He then became a lawyer, and was quite successful, carrying a reputation for professionalism and honesty wherever he went. He was elected to parliament, and then became the undersheriff of London, a post in which he served for about eight years, requiring him to provide legal advice to London's sheriff and mayor as well as serving as a judge.

<sup>31</sup> For biographical information on More see especially the essays by Caroline Barron, Cathy Curtis, James McConica, and Peter Marshall, in *Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. Logan; and Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998).

<sup>32</sup> On More's humanistic education and work, see, e.g., the essays by McConica, McCutcheon, and Curtis, in *Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. Logan; Daniel Kinney, introduction to *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More Volume 15: In Defense of Humanism: Letter to Martin Dorp, Letter to the University of Oxford, Letter to Edward Lee, and Letter to a Monk, with a New Text and Translation of Historia Richard Tertii*, ed. Daniel Kinney (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. xvii-xcii [CW15]; Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'Thomas More as a Renaissance Humanist', *Moreana* 65-66 (1980), pp. 5-22; Salvatore I. Camporeale, 'Da Lorenzo Valla a Tommaso Moro: Lo statuto umanistico della teologia', *Memorie domenicane* 4 (1973), pp. 9-102; J.H. Hexter, 'Introduction: Part I', in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More Volume 4: Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J. and J.H. Hexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. xlv-1, lvii-lxxxi, and xcii-cv [CW4]; and Edward Surtz, S.J., 'Introduction: Part II', in *CW4*, pp. clvi-clxxix.

<sup>33</sup> On his time with the Carthusians, and especially on his spiritual formation, see the discussion in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *Sir Tomás Moro. Lord Canciller de Inglaterra*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Madrid: Rialp, 2004), pp. 70-90; Ackroyd, *Life of Thomas More*, pp. 96-111; and Gerard B. Wegemer, *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage* (Princeton: Scepter, 2009 [1995]), pp. 10-17.



In 1518, at the age of 41 and after intentionally seeking to avoid official royal positions, More entered King Henry VIII's service as one of the King's counselors and became the King's secretary. He continued to advance in the King's service, and was awarded positions of increasing prestige on account of his tact, fidelity, and prudence. Significantly, More was instrumental in orchestrating the Peace of Cambrai which ended England's violent war with France. That same year (1529), at the age of 51, King Henry VIII appointed More the Lord Chancellor, the first layman in history to hold such a position, a position exclusively followed by laymen.

The rest of the story is well known. More did his best to retain both his fidelity to the Church and to the King, but eventually was tried and found guilty, in spite of his courageous testimony, and despite the lack of credible evidence. On the last day of the octave of Easter, Sunday April 12, 1534 More was summoned for an investigation to take place on the following day. This would be the last day that More could roam about England as a free man, since he was imprisoned immediately following the royal inquiry. After the royal summons, More went home, 'said goodnight to his family, went to church early the next morning, made his confession, heard Mass, and went to Communion.'<sup>34</sup> He suffered immensely during his long imprisonment of 445 days, and after a sham trial More was executed by simple beheading.

What is often passed over was the heroic courage More showed at his trial, since the death he thought he was facing—as they read it out to him—was the same horrific procedure inflicted upon the Carthusians who broke their silence to speak the truth to the King. More's daughter Margaret was visiting him in his cell as the Carthusians were marched past on their way to their execution, and More would have been able to hear the gruesome torture and execution from within. We have a graphic description of their execution from four days later:

After being dragged to the gallows, they made the condemned men climb one by one onto a cart that was then pulled away from under their feet, leaving them dangling in the air. They then immediately cut the rope, put them in a place prepared for the purpose, and, while they were still standing, cut off their private parts, which were thrown into the fire. Then they cut open their stomachs and ripped out their entrails; finally, they were decapitated and their bodies quartered before their hearts were removed and their mouths and faces wiped with them.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Peter Berglar, *Thomas More: A Lonely Voice Against the Power of the State* (Princeton: Scepter, 2009 [1999]) p. 170.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

This is what More expected to be his fate when he finally spoke out. King Henry commuted his sentence to simple beheading only on the very day More was escorted to the gallows.<sup>36</sup>

The few scholars aware of pre-nineteenth century and pre-Enlightenment roots of modern biblical criticism, who recognize prior influences as in the Renaissance turn *ad fontes*, to the sources, often identify Erasmus and More as important figures leading to the Protestant Reformation itself, and to the rise of the historical critical method of biblical studies, particularly as exemplified by such early critics as Simon.<sup>37</sup> This view should be nuanced, especially given that both More and Erasmus saw Luther and the Reformation as dangerous and as leading to war.

But even aside from that more blatant rejection of the Reformation as problematic, one crucial difference in approach, as contrasted with that of the Protestant reformers, is that More's and Erasmus's reforming influence always placed an emphasis on the development of virtue. For More, virtue allows reason to flourish, and only when both virtue and reason flourish can there exist a modicum of peace and justice. In the words of Gerard Wegemer, 'When, therefore, Luther emphasized the corruption of reason, denied the possibility of achieving virtue, rejected free will, and taught that his elect had a nonrational access to truth, More and Erasmus strongly opposed these revolutionary views as both untrue and destructive. These revolutionary dogmas, they were convinced, could only lead to war and bloodshed.'<sup>38</sup>

Contrary to the opinion of some scholars, More persisted in his defense and belief in humanism, albeit a humanism firmly set within a Christian, and indeed, a Catholic milieu.<sup>39</sup> For More, as became especially clear in his writings against Protestants, there always remained the need for an authority to interpret Scripture. There could be only anarchy with the embrace of a solipsistic assumption like *sola Scriptura*.<sup>40</sup> As Eamon Duffy explains, in More's way of thinking:

<sup>36</sup> For accounts of his imprisonment, trial, and execution, see especially, all the essays in *Thomas More's Trial by Jury: A Procedural and Legal Review with a Collection of Documents*, ed. Henry Ansgar Kelly, Louis W. Karlin, and Gerard B. Wegemer (Rochester: Boydell, 2013 [2011]); and Peter Marshall, 'The Last Years', in *Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. Logan, pp. 116–38.

<sup>37</sup> Eamon Duffy, "'The Common Knowen Multytude of Crysten Men': A Dialogue Concerning Heresies and the Defence of Christendom", in *Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. Logan, pp. 203–204; Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 92–100; and Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010 [1994]), pp. 16–18, 22–24.

<sup>38</sup> Wegemer, *Thomas More*, p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> Duffy, 'Common Knowen Multytude', pp. 204–207 and 212.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Rex, 'Thomas More and the Heretics: Statesman or Fanatic?' in *Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. Logan, pp. 97 and 100.

The Bible can only be properly understood in the light of the Church's credo and its divinely inspired exegetical tradition, as embodied in the writings of 'the olde holy fathers.' The hermeneutic of suspicion, that systematic 'dyffydens and mistrust' which More thought characterized the exegesis of Lutherans like Tyndale, caused them to set Bible and Church over against each other.<sup>41</sup>

This provides the necessary context for understanding More's thoughts on the role of such humanism, and especially philology and textual criticism, in theology and exegesis.

Through his friendship with Erasmus, and the latter's Greek edition of the NT, More felt compelled to enter the fray when his humanist compatriot was being attacked by fellow Catholics, especially religious, over what they saw as philology's and secular learning's threat to the Catholic faith. More's responses indicate that he intended no harm to the Catholic faith, but rather that such fideistic complaints, as those which were leveled at Erasmus, were themselves deleterious. More saw the pursuit of textual criticism and the attempt at recovering the original wording of the Bible to be an important task that should be carried out to the best of the scholars' abilities. More regarded the tools of philology and textual scholarship, honed in the Renaissance, to be essential propaedeutics for theology. As with Erasmus, More was highly critical of much of what took place in the Schools, among scholastic theologians, but, as has been noted above, both were influenced by St. Thomas Aquinas and held the Angelic Doctor in very high esteem; Aquinas always escaped their liberally applied scathing criticisms.<sup>42</sup>

More never shied away from putting the best of secular learning at the service of faith. Perhaps the most important of More's defenses of such secular learning are in his letters in defense of Erasmus and of the study of Greek at the university: *Letter to Martin Dorp* (1515);<sup>43</sup> *Letter to the University of Oxford*<sup>44</sup>; *Letter to Edward Lee* (1519);<sup>45</sup> and *Letter to a Monk* (1519).<sup>46</sup> These letters can be much misunderstood, a possibility of which More seemed aware. More made clear throughout his *Letter to a Monk*, for example, that he was not attacking the religious state nor monasticism, but rather was

<sup>41</sup> Duffy, 'Common Knowen Multytude', p. 197.

<sup>42</sup> Kinney, introduction to *CW15*, lxxii-xcii, especially lxxviii and lxxviii-lxxix n. 6; and José Morales, "La formación espiritual e intelectual de Tomás Moro y sus contactos con la doctrina y obras de Santo Tomás de Aquino," *Scripta Theologica* 6 (1974), pp. 439-89.

<sup>43</sup> Latin text with English translation on opposing pages in *CW15*, pp. 2-127.

<sup>44</sup> LT and ET in *Ibid.*, pp. 130-49.

<sup>45</sup> LT and ET in *Ibid.*, pp. 152-95.

<sup>46</sup> LT and ET in *Ibid.*, pp. 198-311.

calling his addressee to live out his state virtuously.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as More stated, ‘the same soil produces both wholesome and noxious herbs.’<sup>48</sup>

More did not change tenor when responding to the Protestant Reformers, or when he defended monasticism, the religious life, and traditional Catholic pious practices. Rather, as Peter Berglar points out, More ‘always defended whatever was in the greatest jeopardy.’<sup>49</sup> From 1515–1519, More thought that the value of secular learning for the faithful Christian was most in need of defense. By 1529 the climate had changed sufficiently that the religious state and monasticism itself was more in peril than philology, etc., and so More turned his apologetic to those battle fronts, defending the religious and monastic life to the hilt. Indeed, by 1540 not a single monastery, abbey, or the like, remained open in all of England. The crown had liquidated the monasteries, expelling and killing all of the religious who lived therein, their lands, their abbeys—after becoming state land, and thus giving birth to the phrase secularize in English idiom—passed into the hands of English nobles making them landed families.<sup>50</sup>

Erasmus’ detractors were concerned for the future of the Church and the life of the faithful in light of the potential harm to which textual and philological studies like Erasmus’ could lead. The path trodden by Protestant reformers like Luther validates this as a legitimate concern, as More must have realized once he had to address Protestantism. But the path Luther chose was not inevitable. The politics of the time—particularly the battle over the decaying remains of the medieval political order and the attempt to achieve territorial sovereignty excluding (foreign) papal control—and the ways in which

<sup>47</sup> E.g., consider More’s statement to the monk in question: ‘among many of you, the more exclusively something is yours, the more value you place on it. For this reason many prize their own ceremonies more than those of their religious house, their own house’s ceremonies more than those of their order, and whatever is exclusive to their order more than everything that is common to all religious orders, while they prize all that pertains to the religious somewhat more than they do these lowly and humble concerns that are not only not private to them but are common to the whole Christian people, such as those plebeian virtues of faith, hope, charity, fear of God, humility, and others of similar character’ (Ibid, p. 281). More is not here condemning the religious state, but rather he is elevating the key Christian virtues that all Christians should strive to exemplify, like the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. The religious state, and monastic life, should be the settings where a religious, a monk, grows in such virtues. In the case More is discussing, in contrast, More accuses the monk of hiding vice behind a mere façade of virtue. For example, what is in fact defamation, an attack on one’s reputation (in this case, against Erasmus), More states that the monk instead calls such defamation *fraterna monitio*, fraternal correction (Ibid, p. 266, lines 13–14).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 291.

<sup>49</sup> Berglar, *Thomas More*, p. 134.

<sup>50</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400 – c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005 [1992]), pp. 383–85, 397, 402–403, and 462.

the Latin Averroist tradition, nominalism, and Machiavellianism took root in England and Germany, had much to do with the successful violent transformation in Protestant lands.<sup>51</sup>

More (and Erasmus, for that matter) were not attempting to divorce philology completely from theology, unlike later scholars. More viewed philology and other humanistic learning as essential tools in service of the faith. Such learning developed virtue, and provided, developed, and honed skills which would help sacred learning. Berglar identifies one root of More's vitriol in his *Letter to a Monk* as 'the wrath of a layman in the face of monastic pride grounded in the belief that the monk in principle was the better Christian, the once closer to God and more sure of his salvation.'<sup>52</sup> More's was not a simple angry reaction, however, but a *fraterna monitio* (CW15, 266) of sorts. Whereas More accused the monk of defaming Erasmus' virtuous character under the guise of the praiseworthy practice of fraternal correction, More's response is in fact that which the monk claimed to have attempted: loving *fraterna monitio*. More argued that faith and reason must be united. Reason without faith is dead, but faith without reason is equally perilous.<sup>53</sup> In the end, for More, the Bible is 'exceedingly difficult' to interpret. As he wrote, 'Not one of the ancients, indeed, dared to claim that he understood it, for they thought that God, in his unfathomable wisdom, deliberately hid its meaning far from the surface precisely in order to challenge the sharpest eye and to stimulate minds with the promise of buried and hard-to-reach treasure which their very assurance might otherwise render indifferent to riches set plainly in view.'<sup>54</sup> The textual, philological, and interpretive task then was regarded as a sacred work, a work of God.

<sup>51</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 156–77.

<sup>52</sup> Berglar, *Thomas More*, p. 124.

<sup>53</sup> More provides a concrete example of the centrality of uniting faith and reason. He recounts the incident, in which he took part, where a friar was teaching the laity that if they practiced a specific devotion to the Blessed Virgin they would be guaranteed salvation no matter what. When pushed to comment, More responded with, 'first of all, nothing he had said in that entire sermon would seem really persuasive to anyone who did not accept the miracles that he had reported, a response which would not necessarily contravene Christian faith, and that even if those miracles were true they were hardly an adequate basis for the thesis at hand. For while you might easily find a prince who would sometimes pardon even his enemies at his mother's entreaty, no prince anywhere is foolish enough to promulgate a law which would encourage his own subjects to defy him by promising immunity to every traitor who propitiated his mother with a set form of flattery' (CW15, p. 289). See *Ibid.*, pp. 284–91 for the recounting of the entire incident. More makes clear that he is not disparaging the cult of the Blessed Virgin which he explicitly labels 'a most wholesome devotion' (*Ibid.*, p. 291), but rather is just disparaging an abuse which abdicates reason. Such faith alone is not faith at all, but is more akin to superstition.

<sup>54</sup> From his *Letter to Martin Dorp*, in *Ibid.*, p. 59.

More's theoretical comments on the relationship between faith and reason, Scripture and the Church's tradition and Magisterium, theology and philology, etc., were never divorced from the ultimate goal of virtue, sanctity, divinization, and union with God. This can be seen in the unified spiritual and material fabric of More's entire life, as Berglar makes clear:

Conscience did not allow More to wait idly for death and the hereafter, but spurred him on to prepare for it. That meant seeking and following Christ, which for him meant loving his neighbor in everyday life by conscientiously fulfilling his professional duties, goodness in family life, work that strives to achieve the physical, intellectual, and spiritual welfare of one's neighbor. And something more: living at close quarters with Jesus Christ in prayer, Holy Mass, the sacraments, and sacrifice. This unity of Christian life was ingrained in him—a cheerful dinner companion who was also a deep thinker, an intellectual polemicist and valued jurist who was a humble man of prayer and preferred mercy to strict justice, a generous and practical family man who yearned for the stillness of a cloister. This servant of the King served the King of Kings at Mass; beneath the trappings of office, this courtier wore a penitent's garment that caused sores; this successful literate man offset the favor of his sovereign and popularity with the public by fasting, going without sleep, and caring for the poor. For him, *memento mori* was never separate from *memento vivere*.<sup>55</sup>

Although More's life exemplified the universal call to holiness that would later come from *Lumen Gentium*'s fifth chapter at Vatican II, this was likely a concept More would have been unable to articulate. He lived the virtues in his ordinary family and work life to a heroic degree, but he was canonized for his heroic act of martyrdom. He always held religious life, particularly monastic life, and in a very special way, the Carthusians, in highest esteem. He viewed such religious life as an ideal he was unable to live, viewing his married life as an impediment, a necessary concession, on his path toward God.<sup>56</sup> And yet, one could argue that the sanctity he achieved in his ordinary life, lovingly embracing the little martyrdoms of each day, is what prepared him for courageously facing his execution. He lived a form of union with God, while deeply engaged in family, professional, and scholarly pursuits; immersed in the world, he was at the same time immersed in God. It is within this context that he placed his secular learning, which was always at the service of developing virtue. In this way, under the loving guidance of the

<sup>55</sup> Berglar, *Thomas More*, p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> Kinney, introduction to *CW15*, p. lxxxviii n. 1; and Walter J. Gordon, "The Monastic Achievement and More's Utopian Dream," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 9 (1979), pp. 199–214.



Church, faith, and reason together were seen as able to elevate the soul to God.

### 3. Conclusion

Far too often, Catholic biblical studies in the academy proceeds along the lines of the work of Richard Simon, who in turn followed the earlier more skeptical work of La Peyrère, Hobbes, and Spinoza. The problem with such pursuits is not found in the admirable mastery of languages, philological and textual methodologies, engagement in rigorous and disciplined archaeological and other historical pursuits, but rather in the severing of the ties between exegesis and the magisterium, the science of criticism and the Church's tradition, philology and traditional Catholic biblical interpretation exemplified in patristic and medieval exegesis.

It should not be surprising that some historical scholars might consider the past events related to biblical interpretation in the seventeenth century and conclude that there was no other way to proceed other than the route marked out by La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Simon. To such scholars, the foundations of the historical critical method emerged solely from an attempt to embrace unadulterated reason and to apply a scientific method to a text that was a historical document as much as a canonical and ecclesiastical one. The conclusion of the historical narrative when presented in this particular way can only be emphatic support that accords hegemony to the approach begun by these individuals. My inclusion of More into this narrative, however, is a plea for a reconsideration of these foregone conclusions.

More's inextricable uniting of faith and reason in his defense of Christian humanism, added to Erasmus's extensive philological work in seeking to recover a more accurate and faithful understanding of the biblical text, indicates that there was another possibility for an interpretation of the Bible that would not pit reason against faith in the examination of the scriptural text. Here we have a scholarly Catholic in the sixteenth century who did not see a need to undermine the authority of the biblical text, or the magisterium, for that matter, in order to apply methods of reason, such as philology and history, to its interpretation. That this particular route, holding together faith and reason, was not shared by La Peyrère, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Simon may in fact be the best indication that their motives were primarily political, rather than strictly theological, well-intentioned hopes for a more rigorous interpretation.

For too long, it has been commonplace to accept the conclusions of these methods without ever considering the motivations behind the method which may affect the way they can be used. For this

reason, Ratzinger implored Catholic exegetes in his provocative ‘Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit’, critically to examine the philosophical underpinnings of their exegesis, philosophies which often remain unexamined and yet even more frequently predetermine the results of such exegesis, or at least severely limit the range of possible results often to those antithetical to the faith.<sup>57</sup> As Benedict XVI wrote, ‘The wanting of a hermeneutic of faith in relation to Scripture not only entails the concept of absence; in its place another hermeneutic necessarily comes in, a positivist hermeneutic which favors the secular, ultimately based on the conviction that the Divine does not intervene in human history . . . Such a position can only prove harmful to the life of the Church.’<sup>58</sup> In contrast to this, More provides an example of how Catholic exegetes might approach the study of Sacred Scripture. It is an approach demonstrated by More’s scholarship, his life, and his death. This saintly witness reflects what John Paul II would articulate over 450 years later, namely that, ‘faith purifies reason. As a theological virtue, faith liberates reason from presumption.’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Schriftauslegung im Widerstreit* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), pp. 15–44.

<sup>58</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 35. Pope Benedict XVI, “Verbum Domini,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 102 (2010), pp. 713–716. English translation slightly modified from Vatican website.

<sup>59</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998), no. 76, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 91 (1999), p. 64. English translation from Vatican website.