

Marriage, Motherhood and Ministry: Women in the Dispute between Thomas More and William Tyndale

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It is common wisdom to assert that Thomas More, the representative enlightened humanist, held women in high esteem. He is regarded as the sole male who recognised women's innate mental capacity that, if trained properly, could liberate them from ignorance and superstition. The education of his own household, especially of his daughter Margaret, is seen as the quintessence of enlightenment and the paradigm that was to inspire generations to come.

As Diane Valeri Bayne has pointed out the views of women held by Thomas More and his circle were 'liberal' and certainly in contrast to the distrust of women expressed by so many of his day. He believed women capable of rational thought; he appreciated learned and witty conversations with women.¹ In addition to More's words and deeds, the writings of Richard Hyrde reinforce the evidence of More's liberality. He probably collaborated with Hyrde on *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* which argues that the objections commonly raised about the delicate, capricious feminine nature should not bar women from the world of learning.² The virtues valued most highly by humanism—namely cultured education, eloquence and beauty—were extended to women.³

However, there is a darker interpretation of More's attitude. For example, Myra Reynolds has noted that although *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* affirms the ability of women to learn and the desirability of such learning, it relates this education only to women's domestic role. Learning would make women more attractive, companionable and efficient in their domestic relationships.⁴ Women's brains, like their bodies, were to be developed for the benefit of their husbands.

Richard Marius is certainly a leading voice among the revisionists who are arguing that all that glisters in More is not gold. Marius contends that More clearly believed woman's brain to be inferior to man's. The remedy was, however, not to leave the woman in ignorance but for tutors to labour

so much harder 'that the flaw of nature might be corrected by industry'.⁵

Furthermore, his domestic relations provide ample steam to drive the engines of destruction through the beatific image of him as the champion of women. Support is cited, for example, in the description of his treatment of his first wife. The humanist, Erasmus explained, had married

a young girl of good family . . . choosing her, yet undeveloped, that he might more readily mould her to his tastes. He had her taught literature, and trained her in every kind of music; and she was just growing into a charming life's companion for him, when she died young . . .

Young Jane, it seems, resisted her husband's efforts to 'form her manners to his own humour'. In rebellion the young bride would, according to Erasmus, weep and 'throw herself flat on the ground, beating her head as if she wished for death'.⁶

The judgments on More's second wife, Dame Alice, are almost uniformly negative. The image of Alice is as clear as it is unflattering; she was unattractive, sharp-tongued, ill-educated and inhospitable. She seemed incapable of warmth or sympathy for her husband or his concerns. Even in the Tower, she is pictured as one who bullied, snapped, ridiculed and failed to understand the issues at stake. She was as much comfort as Job's wife.⁷ Ruth Norrington's attempt to rehabilitate Lady Alice is not totally successful for the reconstruction depicts a wife who is so socially and materially ambitious that, although Alice may have enjoyed her husband's person, she failed to understand his ultimate values.⁸

Not only have the women in More's life been evaluated, but his fictional women have also been studied. He created women who could read, write, speak well and think. Such women were not merely helpmates; they exercised independence and became a standard by which men were measured. Certainly there is a notably progressive spirit in *Utopia* where women might be priests, both sexes were punished for adultery, and young couples could in mutuality inspect each other's bodies. Yet one should note that utopian domestic society was still mediaeval. Women begged their husbands' forgiveness while their husbands needed only God's. Dining was segregated so that only the women had the care of the children. As Lee Cullen Khana observed 'Paradox, then, characterizes Utopian attitudes towards women as it does the work itself'.⁹

Marius carried this criticism even further by asserting that it was 'More's habitual tendency to mock women and to regard them as foolish creatures'. Even worse, women were used as the butt of humour or as a signal that the audience should be prepared to laugh. Marius maintains that More 'was always ready to mock women, and his tales of female foolishness quickly became tedious to the modern ear'. 'The only time that More is likely to praise women', says Marius, 'is when he used women to show the feminine goodness and sensibility in contrast to the wickedness of men.'¹⁰

Without attempting to span the great gulf fixed between the opinion of the traditionalist and the revisionist, one might want to place More's attitude toward women in the wider context of the sixteenth century's religious issues, specifically the reformation of the Church. Was the role of women already a point of conflict? Will a study of Tyndale's understanding of More's view of womanhood elucidate the controversy? If this is indeed possible it might explain, if not excuse, some of the less appealing paradoxes of Thomas More. This inquiry will, therefore, attempt to reflect More's image of women as understood by his antagonist, William Tyndale.

Although the theological points of the Tyndale–More debate have been examined at length, the social issues have for the most part been ignored. In view of the present avalanche of women's studies, it is surprising that the role of women in this conflict has not received more attention. Not only are women mentioned more frequently by Tyndale in his *Answer to Sir Thomas More* than in any of his other works but also there is one passage, fifteen pages in length, in which the only topic is women!¹¹ Additionally, some of Tyndale's comments show that the exile had considerable knowledge of the Lord Chancellor's domestic relations. For example, there is a three-page digression on the possibility of a twice-married man ever becoming a priest. Could Tyndale have understood the internal tensions in his opponent? Could he have known that marriage stood between More and the priesthood or that More considered becoming a priest after the death of his first wife? He must have known something about More's personal struggles for he could chide his opponent by saying, 'If thy wife geue thee nine wordes of three, go the Charter house and bye of their silence'. C.S. Lewis wrote of this line 'the Chancellor's lips must have twitched when he read it'.¹²

Although Tyndale did not write treatises about the education of women or praise those women who could write Latin as well as a man, he simply assumed that women could read his English tracts or, at least, have them read. (For example, Tyndale addressed his readers, 'yes, if thou be a father or a mother, master or mistress . . .')¹³

Perhaps it should be stated at the outset that neither More nor Tyndale was a social revolutionary. In the opinion of both men, women were most virtuous when they were submissive to the authority of their husbands. Both would have women to keep house and to bear children. There was simply no other alternative in the sixteenth century view of God's economy.

Beyond the matter of obedience within the family, however, the differences were profound. For example, it was possible for Tyndale to rage at More with the accusation:

O poor women, how despise ye them! The viler the better welcome unto you. An whore had ye lever than an honest wife.¹⁴

Apart from the possible venting of Tyndale's personal bitterness, what could this accusation mean?

1. The Background of the Controversy

Perhaps part of the basis for Tyndale's charge lay in the context of the tensions created by Tudor society, renaissance values and religious dissent.

Tudor women had almost no rights under public law. They made no laws but were expected to obey them all; they could be tried in court but could not serve on a jury. Women had no significant political voice. Their constitution was judged to be unstable and emotional, thereby disqualifying them from responsibility. Young women under parental control had little chance of following their own preferences in marriage; their parents knew best. One might say that marriages were made in heaven, but on earth the issue was settled by the bargainings of king and the barterings of yeomen. Almost always material concerns—money, title, social position or political advantage—entered the discussions. Although there were exceptions, the Tudor man who took a wife assumed her property and her obedience.¹⁵

1.1 The Renaissance View

Renaissance authors—usually men—wrote manuals, moral diatribes and other didactic literature on the conduct of women. Women were instructed to be models of passive virtue: chastity, modesty, humility, sweetness, peaceableness, kindness, piety, beauty and always obedience. Such passive virtues were called 'Christian' and were expected to be accepted for that reason.¹⁶ Neither More nor Tyndale would have wished to negate the attractiveness of these virtues, but it should be noted that Christian virtues are also active and the delineation of those activities placed the reformer and the Lord Chancellor on opposite sides of the question.

John Colet, who really belongs to the generation before More and Tyndale, was the first English humanist to articulate a moderation of the traditional view that marriage was nothing more than a concession to human frailty. For Colet, marriage was not only a remedy for sexual incontinence, it was a means of promoting moral and social order. These themes were adopted and adapted by William Harrington who published the first book in English on marriage (1528) and by Richard Taverner who translated in 1532 the *Encomium matrimonii* of Erasmus (first published in 1518). These works approve celibacy if restricted to a few while praising marriage for both laypersons and the priesthood.¹⁷

1.2 The Religious Practices Derogatory to Women

Strange as it might appear, both Thomas More and William Tyndale noted the abuse of women by certain religious practices. They both assumed that the emotional instability which marred, and yet defined, the female constitution made them easy prey for unscrupulous priests. Early in his career More could laugh at such matters, but as the polemics wore away his humour he found it difficult to admit that such abuse occurred at all. And if abuses did, in fact, happen they did not deflect the Church from its true character.

On the other hand, Tyndale continuously objected to the unscrupulous clergymen—‘members of Satan’ Tyndale called them—who so preached Christ that they could make ‘the poor women weep and howl’.¹⁸ He noted that More willingly ‘rehearseth many abuses, and how that women sing songs of ribaldry in processions’. For Tyndale, then, the tragedy was twofold: the Church would do nothing to amend such abuses and it had hired (so Tyndale thought) More to ‘prove with his sophistry, that the things ought not to be put down’. Thus Tyndale was indignant not only because certain practices manipulated women but also because More defended perverted practices.¹⁹ Tyndale claimed that the Catholic Church thus preferred prostitution to matrimony; the *de jure* prohibition of marriage gave *de facto* approval to whoredom.

For Tyndale, the abuse of the confessional provided ample opportunity for sexual abuse by immoral priests. The abundance of such abuse recorded by writers from Chaucer and Erasmus testifies to its reality. Such criticism was also frequent in Wycliffite literature, but its presence did not prove the text to be heretical.

Some of Tyndale’s criticisms were not original but were part of the anti-clericalism of the age; Thomas More certainly had heard the accusations before. The Reformer, Tyndale, claimed that wives were put in fear during confession so that they would reveal not only their own secrets but those of their husbands as well.²⁰ The use, as well as the abuse, of confession made it possible for the priest to know the secrets of all men and thus to beguile all men and all men’s wives.²¹ In the Eastern Church, auricular confession was ended, Tyndale claimed, because a ‘deacon at Constantinople played through confession with one of the chief wives of the city’.²²

Like confession, pilgrimage often became an occasion for sexual mischief rather than spiritual maturity. Tyndale observed that

if a wife, after so many and oft pilgrimages, be more chaste, more obedient unto her husband, more kind to her maids and other servants . . . then do such things increase grace.²³

He could argue in this manner because, at least for him, the results were obviously to the contrary.

1.3 The Lollard View of Women

As in other heterodox movements, women played a substantial role in Lollardy, the indigenous English heresy. The court records name women who participated as learners and as teachers in the sect. Henry Knighton was the first to draw attention to the fact that ‘women who know how to read’ were among the ‘swine’ who were trampling the pearl of the Catholic faith, and certainly there were some wise and learned ladies, like Margery Baxter and Hawise Moon, who were counted as faithful and active in Lollardy.²⁴ The association of women with heresy and its spread form a background of the Tyndale–More debate that might be as important

as Christian humanism in understanding this issue. Because in orthodoxy the priesthood was by definition restricted to men, Roman religion gave little opportunity for female participation. The followers of Wyclif, on the other hand, not only objected to religious practices that degraded women but also allowed women a significant role as leaders, teachers and evangelists. Thomas More had too much contact with this heresy to be uninformed about the role of his women followers.

2. The Role of Women in the Controversy

There is certainly some irony in the fact that the classic debate of the Reformation pitted Tyndale, as an unmarried priest, against More, a married layman. More, who twice chose to be a chaste husband rather than an unchaste priest, held virginity in high esteem while his unmarried opponent praised wedlock. For Tyndale a married clergy was the ideal, for More they were allowed only in Utopia. More, as a child of mediaeval Christianity, extolled virginity; Tyndale extolled marriage.

2.1 The Issue of Virginity

Tyndale mocked an unnamed Doctor of Divinity who was publicly quibbling over who had the more merit: a virgin or a widow. Was the pain greater for a widow because she had experienced the pleasures of matrimony or for a virgin who imagines the pleasures to be greater than they are and, therefore, has greater temptation? For Tyndale such arguments were the kind condemned by Paul when he warned of the disputers who, not being content with the wholesome words of Christ, wasted their brains on strife over words.²⁵ Virginity was not in itself a virtue. If valued as means to gain righteousness before God, virginity could in fact be a false sacrifice and a heathen idolatry. Lucretia (Lucree) should not be admired for her virginity but rather condemned for 'she sought her own glory in her chastity, and not God's'. She gloried in it and despised them that were otherwise. Having lost her virginity, she lost her place, revealing a pride comparable to the pagan moralists like Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. Such pride God 'more abhorreth than the whoredom of any whore'.²⁶

On the other hand, Tyndale claimed that both virginity and wedlock have value if related to one's love of God's law and serving one's neighbour.²⁷ Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 were counsel, not command. Virgins and widows were not to marry if they had the gift of celibacy so that they could better serve the world and their fellow Christians. If they chose chastity, it must not be 'to win heaven thereby'.²⁸

Tyndale warned his readers to beware of the 'false feigned chastity' promoted by the 'ungodly persuasions' of Jerome and Ovid lest one 'utterly despised, defied and abhorred all womenkind' and, therefore, experience the wrath of God for the 'abomination of the pope, against nature and kind' when one could not live chaste nor find it in one's heart to marry. The wise heavenly Father, Tyndale taught, had provided a remedy

without sin. Tyndale's argument was that the gift of chastity is not given to all. Some might be able to live chaste when they are old and others when they are young, but when the needs of a lifetime were considered absolute chastity was unrealistic. The Church should not require more than God does.²⁹ Chastity simply could not be practised further than God gives it. 'If though cannot live chaste, thou art bound to marry or to be damned.'³⁰

2.2 The Issue of Marriage

In his *zeitgeist*, More conceived of sexuality as fundamentally impure, only barely redeemed by the sacrament of matrimony.³¹ While he called it heresy to assert that the married were as pleasing to God as the unmarried, Tyndale asserted that the Kingdom of God consist of neither meat nor marriage but in 'the keeping of the commandments and serving of a man's neighbour lovingly'. He argued that eating gave strength and therefore helped one obey the commandments and serve his neighbour. If it were the contrary, one should abstain from eating. In those cases when a wife, or husband, helped one in service, it was better to have a spouse than to be without. Tyndale judged marriage by the *dictum* 'that heart only which is ready to do, or let undone, all things for his neighbour's sake, is a pleasant thing in the sight of God'.³²

If service to God and neighbour were not affected by marriage, Tyndale claimed 'the one is as good as the other, and no difference'. Then Tyndale added a sentence that sounds obvious to modern man but must have grated on the ears of those who judged sexual intercourse to be only for procreation: 'To take a wife for pleasure is as good as to abstain for displeasure'.³³ Tyndale was thus among the first to reverse the order of the motives for marriage by putting comfort before procreation.

Like salvation itself, marriage was a mutually binding covenant.³⁴ As fish was not better than flesh, Tyndale claimed that virginity was not better than wedlock or widowhood. As far as pleasing God was concerned, the three were equal.³⁵ He who married should give thanks for the liberty yet be on his guard lest his wife draw his heart away from God.³⁶ Tyndale taunted More by stating that

the signification standeth not in the virginity, but in the actual wedlock. We were no virgins, when we came to Christ; but common whores, believing in a thousand idols.³⁷

In a somewhat utopian definition, Tyndale claimed that marriage 'is a state or a degree ordained of God, and an office wherein the husband serveth the wife, and the wife the husband'. Marriage was a remedy, a way to increase the world and, last but certainly not least, it is for mutual help. Marriage, like eating or drinking, should be used 'measurably with thanksgiving'.³⁸ Tyndale lectured More by stating that 'when a man taketh a wife, he giveth her himself, his honour, his riches, and all that he hath, and maketh her of equal degree unto himself'.³⁹ (In this passage, Tyndale was

making the point that if one is 'married' to Christ he enjoys all the spiritual possessions of Christ, but the current affair between Henry and Anne could not have been far from the readers' minds when Tyndale wrote 'if he be king and she before a beggar's daughter, yet she is not the less queen'.) The Reformer admonished every man to consider his wife to be the 'fairest and the best conditioned' and the wife should feel the same about her husband.⁴⁰ Tyndale defended the personal and property rights of women by constructing a not-so-hypothetical scenario of a husband who abandoned his wife and shirked his responsibility as a provider, yet appeared from time to time to claim as his own what the woman had gained in his absence. Such a woman should be protected from the unjust claims of her husband. In the absence of her husband, she should even be allowed to remarry.⁴¹

Behind his praise of wedlock, Tyndale assumed the wife's obedience to her husband. The husband was commanded to rule his wife and to protect her from immorality. He was damned if he submitted himself to her or made her his head.⁴² This is the very order of the gospel.⁴³ Yet this arrangement was not demanded by some kind of sexual superiority or male chauvinism; it was defined by role. Tyndale argued that a male, regardless of his age, must consider his mother and his aunt to be his superior and therefore render to them obedience. 'And concerning the sister, she is of egal [*sic*] birth to her brother.'⁴⁴ In marriage, however, the natural order placed the husband in authority. He was created by God to be stronger than his wife 'in many things', but this was not so that he could rage at her but rather to help her. Then addressing the husbands among his readers, Tyndale admonished:

Be courteous therefore unto them, and win them unto Christ, and overcome them with kindness, that of love they may obey the ordinance that God hath made between man and wife.⁴⁵

Before Thomas More picked up his pen to write against Tyndale, he had already entered into polemic with Martin Luther. More found it difficult to discern the difference in their thought. But whereas Luther was concerned with freeing marriage from the captivity of canon law, Tyndale was concerned with liberating marriage from moral abuse. Tyndale could not consider it a sacrament because it did not contain a promise or signification. Tyndale expressed the wish that those who claimed that marriage was a sacrament would teach everyone the biblical meaning of this sign, namely, a similitude of the benefits of Christ. The theologians might call marriage 'holy' but in practice the clergy would rather 'be sanctified with a whore, than to come within the sanctuary'.⁴⁶

More must have been aware of Henry VIII's earlier answer to Luther for he, too, appealed to Ephesians 5:32 to give marriage a sacramental basis, but Tyndale understood, as did Luther, that behind the Vulgate's *sacramentum* was the Greek *mysterion*. The translation of this word had been a

matter of controversy since 1516 when Erasmus translated the Greek into the Latin *mysterium* rather than the traditional *sacramentum*. Although Erasmus maintained that marriage was a sacrament, its sacramental nature could not be supported from this passage. Tyndale argued that marriage, scripturally considered, is not a sacrament but a similitude used to teach the relationship between the individual and Christ. If such a similitude is used to define a sacrament, Tyndale argued that a mustard seed, leaven, nets, keys, bread and many other things should also be considered sacraments.⁴⁷

Because of Tyndale's understanding of marriage, he naturally favoured a married clergy for two obvious reasons: first, to demonstrate one's ability to rule, and second, to avoid sexual scandal.⁴⁸ Although More understood Tyndale to be insisting that a priest must marry, there were more nuances in Tyndale's position. Tyndale understood Paul's meaning to be that a married clergy was to be preferred before the unmarried, for greater service could be rendered if the cause of sexual suspicions and scandals could be eliminated by allowing priests to marry.⁴⁹

Again here, More's judgment of Luther coloured his opinion of Tyndale. In More's writing, Luther and lechery are almost always mentioned together. More took the view that all the religious turmoil was but a cloak to hide the lust of immoral priests who wanted to break their vows and marry nuns, thus making them whores.⁵⁰ More said it was easy to know that Luther's doctrine was bad because he had married a nun. Tyndale turned this argument against More by also pointing to the fruit of bad faith:

But the pope's forbidding matrimony, and . . . his giving licence to hold whores . . . his setting up in Rome a stews, not of women only, but of the male kind against nature, and a thousand abominations too gross for a Turk, are tokens good enough that he is the right antichrist, and his doctrine sprung of the devil.⁵¹

More rightly pointed out that the Church did not, in fact, bind everyone to chastity but Tyndale shot back:

Of a truth; for it giveth licence to whosoever will to keep whores, and permitteth to abuse men's wives, and suffereth sodomitry, and doth but only forbid matrimony.⁵²

For Tyndale, the prohibiting of marriage (or, expressed positively, the requiring of chastity) did not promote holiness but rather protected whoredom, for a dispensation could be obtained for having a whore but not for having a wife.⁵³ A priest was forbidden to have a wife, but he might have as many whores as he wished, or even a dispensation for a concubine.⁵⁴ By giving such approval the Church defiled what God had commanded ('the chastity of matrimony') and set up what God had not required (celibacy).⁵⁵ By forbidding marriage the pope was able to collect

yearly payments for dispensations in all lands but England.⁵⁶ In England, where tributes were not collected, Tyndale claimed that a priest 'may not have any other save men's wives only'.⁵⁷ According to Tyndale, this sin was among those specifically condemned by the preaching of Wyclife.⁵⁸ Tyndale argued that the pope was a temporal tyrant who created his own laws with a mercenary motive. Throughout Germany, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, France and Spain any priest might pay the fee, then 'freely and quietly have his whore, and put her away at his pleasure, and take another at his own lust'.⁵⁹ Regardless of how much God was dishonoured, whores were allowed as long as the parties did not despise the prelates and paid their 'rents' for the privilege of 'nesting' on the bishop's lands.⁶⁰ The pope's chastity did not serve one's neighbour but led to only one consequence: promiscuity expressed as whoredom, concubinage or abuse of other men's wives. Thus by forbidding marriage, the Church appeared to prefer a whore to a wife.⁶¹

Furthermore, Tyndale reasoned that the Roman sacraments defile each other. Both marriage and orders are considered sacraments, but wedlock defiles the priesthood while whoredom, homosexuality, theft or murder do not.⁶²

Additionally, Tyndale charged that the prelates manipulated rulers with prostitutes ('which is their nurturing of kings') in order to maintain control over their kingdoms.⁶³ Again the motive was money. The goal of the cardinals and bishops was to administer the king's dominions for 'our holy father's profit'.⁶⁴ By clerical exemption, the pope's minions were protected from the long arm of English justice although the priest, before many witnesses, may defile sister, wife and mother.⁶⁵ Something was wrong with Roman justice when the misquotation of a Latin phrase was considered a serious sin but to hold a whore was but a trifle.⁶⁶ The possibility of having a whore while being free from the restraints of family left the priest at liberty to do more mischief against the king than he could ever do as a married man.⁶⁷

2.3 The Issue of Motherhood

Marius claims that for More motherhood had no role in saintliness and points out that More had little to say about mothers except to refer continually to the Catholic Church as the mother of all faithful.⁶⁸

This position is easily contrasted with the vast number of references to mothers and motherhood in Tyndale's texts. That Tyndale would require obedience to father is not surprising, but his common addition of 'mother' cannot be without significance. Children of all ages are expected to obey 'father and mother'.⁶⁹ Parental care and punishment was to be given by 'fathers and mothers'.⁷⁰ Both had a teaching role and both were to present a positive example.⁷¹

Rebellion against one's parents, not just one's father, was equated with rebellion against the king and thus, ultimately, rebellion against God.

'Neither is it possible for thee to come to the favour of God . . . until thou have submitted thyself unto thy father and mother.'⁷² Elsewhere Tyndale asserted that one cannot love God rightly if there is disobedience to parents.⁷³ Those who were in rebellion against father and mother need only take the mark of the beast 'that is, to shave himself a monk'.⁷⁴

When Tyndale needed an illustration or human model to communicate a point, he frequently pointed to mothers. There are, of course, passages in which Tyndale named both father and mother, but more often than not he put the focus on the mother. The law of God was compared to a mother's command that one child rock the cradle of baby, but

this commandment doth but utter the poison that lay hid, and setteth him at debate with his mother, and maketh him believe she loveth him not.⁷⁵

Tyndale not only employed the biblical image of a father to illustrate divine love but he also used the compassion of a mother. He said, for example, human love will not allow a mother to rob her child, but will, on the contrary, cause her to sacrifice for her child. Such is God's love.⁷⁶ This divine love was not caused by merit but exists in the absence of such merit just as 'father and mother' care most for youngest and weakest child. 'Yea, for the worst care they most, and would spend, not their goods only, but also their blood, to bring them to the right way.'⁷⁷ The assurance of God's love was mother's love. One can trust in God's love because he has caused 'thy father and mother, and all other, to love thee, to pity thee, and to care for thee'.⁷⁸

Tyndale used motherhood to explain the most enigmatic theological and ethical *conundra*. For example, how is it possible to reconcile God's love with his wrath? Tyndale said simply look at mothers who have a 'loving anger, that hateth only the vice, and studieth to mend the person'.⁷⁹ Elsewhere he considered the question of why the godly suffer, and again the illustration of motherhood is used. Tyndale explained that this problem is like the mother who temporarily delays the gratification of a child's demands. The temporary distress gave an opportunity for the child to learn the mother's love, care and provision. Through the difficulty the child learns to be thankful and to love his mother.⁸⁰ And even in the midst of the child's trouble it learns that God is not a tyrant but one who mourns and pities; God is at hand 'as a merciful father and a kind mother'.⁸¹

Not only did Tyndale find the image of motherhood useful to describe God's attitude to mankind but also to illustrate the proper attitude toward God. For Tyndale this posture encompassed both love and fear so that again he used a mother as a model to illustrate the reconciling of opposites. He said that a mother both loves her child and fears least any harm should come to it. The more love, the more concern and fear. To illustrate his major theme that love fulfils the law, Tyndale reminded his readers that the service a mother does for her child is not grievous, but if a tenth part

were required for a child whom she did not love her heart would burst with impatience.⁸² The good works that the Christian did were the fruit of faith and come from God; therefore, good works already belong to him. They could earn nothing from God. The good that a child did cannot earn parental (again Tyndale speaks of 'father and mother') love, for if the child were incapable of knowing or doing its duty the parents would continue to lavish love and generosity. They do this in spite of, not because of, the child's response, for he continually fails to behave correctly. The reward came from love of the parent and not from the deserving of the child.⁸³

2.4 The Issue of Ministry

Certainly there were vast differences between Tyndale and More on marriage and motherhood, but their hostility was even more fierce when their debate considered the place of women in ministry. For More the suggestion that women could have ministry was a monstrous blasphemy.

Of Luther's 'priesthood of all believers', More could understand only the priesthood of all women, and this conclusion the Lord Chancellor found extremely distasteful. He charged Luther with teaching that 'euery crysten man and euery crysten woman ys a preste'.⁸⁴ This assertion would certainly mean, of course, that 'euery woman and chyld may consecrate the body of our lord'.⁸⁵ Luther, however, did not make a place for women as ministers but, he was willing—as was canon law—to give women the right to hear confession in emergencies, but he never taught that women had the power to pronounce the consecration.⁸⁶

More and Tyndale both understood that, according to canon law, women could baptize in times of urgency. More used this fact as leverage attempting to pry Tyndale from his commitment to the authority of Scripture. More wanted Tyndale to admit that not all God's truth was Bible truth. If baptism by a woman were allowed, although not specifically permitted in Scripture, were there not other truths beyond those recorded in the pages of the text? Tyndale, however, refused to be caught in the net. He claimed that permission for women to baptize in emergencies was but a logical extension of Christ's command to 'love thy neighbour as thyself'. It was as obvious as the fact that a wife might lead and rule her husband if he were insane. By the same logic, a woman might in time of need administer all the other sacraments, especially if they were as essential as orthodoxy claimed.⁸⁷ Tyndale argued that every man and woman who knew Christ and his doctrine had the keys, the power to bind and to loose. Certainly a wife could confront her husband with his sin and, if he repented, forgive him and loose him. She could do this, Tyndale claimed, as well as the pope.⁸⁸ More's *Utopia* might not have been far from Tyndale's thoughts when he constructed this scenario:

If a woman, learned in Christ, were driven unto an isle where Christ was

never preached, might she not there preach and teach to minister the sacraments, and make officers? The case is possible.⁸⁹

In spite of Tyndale's final assertion that 'the case is possible', More dismissed the example as hypothetical and not to be taken seriously.⁹⁰

Tyndale built his case by citing the women who served God. Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, saved herself and her family because she had faith. He noted that women judged all Israel, did mighty deeds and were great prophetesses. 'Yea' he added 'and if the stories be true, women have preached since the opening of the new testament'.⁹¹ Tyndale pointed out the text of John's gospel which states that many Samaritans believed on Christ because of the woman's testimony.⁹² Yet he affirmed that the natural order gave preference to the ministry of men.⁹³

But if a woman could christen, could she not with good reason preach if the occasion so required? This is the context in which Tyndale demanded a response to his accusation about hating women cited in the opening of this paper:

If a woman were driven into some island, where Christ was never preached, might she there not preach him, if she had the gift thereto? Might she not also baptize? And might she not, by the same reason, minister the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, and teach them how to choose officers and ministers? O poor women, how despise ye them! The viler the better welcome unto you. An whore had ye lever than an honest wife.⁹⁴

In spite of More's lengthy *Confutation*, that question was one that he did not answer at least to Tyndale's satisfaction.

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NOTES

- 1 Francis G. Murray, 'Feminine Spirituality in the More Household', *Moreana*, Nos. 27-28 (December 1970), pp. 92-102, and M.M. de la Garanderie, 'Le féminisme de Thomas More et d'Erasmus', *Moreana*, No. 10 (1966), pp. 23-29.
- 2 Diane Valeri Bayne, 'The Instruction of a Christian Woman: Richard Hyrde and the Thomas More Circle', *Moreana*, No. 45, Vol. X (February 1975), p. 5.
- 3 Murray, p. 95. And also Germain Marc'hador, 'Thomas More and His Foursome of "Blessed Holy Women"', *Jahrbuch 1983/84 Thomas-Morus-Gesellschaft* ed. by Herman Boverter (Düsseldorf: Triltsch Verlag, 1984), pp. 113-130.
- 4 For a bilingual version of this tract, see G. Marc'hador, 'Richard Hyrde: Defense et Illustration des Humanités Feminines', *Moreana*, No. 13, Vol. IV (1967), pp. 5-23. Even in Utopia, the women served their husbands. *Collected Works* Vol. IV, 137/31-32.
- 5 Richard Marius, *Thomas More* (London: J.M. Dent, 1984), p. 223. See also, Judith P. Jones and Sherianne Sellers Seibel, 'Thomas More's Feminism: To Form or Re-Form', *Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More*, ed. by Michael J. Moore (Boone, North Carolina: Albion, 1978), pp. 67-77. It should be noted that even Erasmus had reservations about the education of women. See J.K. Sowards, 'Erasmus and the Education of Women', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XIII/4 (1982), pp. 77-89.

- 6 Erasmus, *Colloquy: The Discontented Wife* as cited by Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- 7 Canal Condren, 'Dame Alice More & Xanthippe: Sisters to Mistress Quickly?', *Moreana*, No. 64, Vol. 17 (1980), p. 59.
- 8 Ruth Norrington, *In the Shadow of a Saint: Lady Alice More* (Waddesdon: Kylin Press, 1983).
- 9 Lee Cullen Khana, 'No Less than Ideal: Images of Women in More's Work', *Moreana*, Nos. 55-56, Vol. XIV (December 1977), p. 39. Elsewhere Khana defends More for his treatment of women in his *Epigrammata*. 'Images of Women in Thomas More's Poetry', *Quincentennial Essays*, pp. 67-88. The epigrams in question are nos. 44, 66, 67, 68, 140, 147 and 219. *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, edd., L. Bradner and C.A. Lynch (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1953). Jones and Seibel make the same observation and compare More to a 'wobbly colossus with one foot set in the Middle Ages and the other trying to find a stable spot in the modern world'. Jones and Seibel, *Thomas More's Feminism*, p. 67. The passages from *Utopia* include *Collected Works* Vol. V, 187/39-189/26, 229/19-21.
- 10 Marius, *More*, pp. 9, 92, 107.
- 11 Parker Society Vol. 3, pp. 151-166.
- 12 C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), p. 191.
- 13 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 45
- 14 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 18.
- 15 Pearl Hogrefe, *Tudor Women: Commoners and Queens* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975), pp. 3-24.
- 16 Significant literature includes Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1982); Ian Mclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980).
- 17 John K. Yost, 'The Development of a Reformist Approach to Marriage and Celibacy in Early English Humanism', *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, Nieuwe Serie Deel LVII (1976), pp. 1-15.
- 18 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 12. It should be noted that Tyndale's objection was to the manipulation of women, not the presence of emotion, for elsewhere he stated that the one who is 'learned in God' and understands the significance of Christ's cross will weep as a man does at the death of his father. Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 85.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 125f.
- 20 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 337. See also, *Lynwood Provinciale*, edd. J.V. Bullard and H. Chalmer Bell (London: Faith Press, 1929), p. 147.
- 21 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 281.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 263.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 286.
- 24 Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), pp. 49-70; Norman Tanner, ed., *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich, 1428-31* (Camden Society 4th Series, xx, 1977), pp. 41-51; and Claire Cross, 'Great Reasoners in Scripture: The Activities of Women Lollards, 1380-1530', *Medieval Women*, SCH Subsidia I, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), pp. 359-380.
- 25 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 315, but Tyndale's argument began several pages earlier.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 183f. More, on the other hand, claimed that it is heresy to assert that virginity and will merit nothing in heaven. *Collected Works* Vol. VIII, 325/29-30.
- 27 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 163.
- 28 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 219. See *CW* VIII, 307/10-11 and 699/6-8.
- 29 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 438f.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 322.
- 31 Marius, *More*, p. 517. *Lynwood's Provinciale* ruled (p. 153) that 'all commixtion and meddling of male and female, only it be excused by matrimony, is deadly and mortal sin'.

- 32 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 162.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 164. More could condone sex as a pleasure. If so, 'the lewde lousy louer in lechery loueth hym selfe'. *Collected Works* Vol. VIII, 262/33.
- 34 Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 136.
- 35 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 157. The analogy between meat and marriage is also cited on p. 153.
- 36 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 103.
- 37 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 154.
- 38 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 254.
- 39 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 153f.
- 40 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 51.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 42 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 334.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 44 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 329.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 331.
- 46 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 175 and Vol. 1, p. 254. Cf. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career 1521-1530* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1983), pp. 109-112 and pp. 401-415.
- 47 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 254, also p. 313. Cf. *Collected Works* Vol. VIII, pp. 86f. and 254. Tyndale's rejection of marriage as a sacrament is another illustration of how his position differs from that of Christian humanism. Cf. John B. Payne, *Erasmus: His Theology of the Sacraments* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox, 1970), pp. 109-125.
- 48 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 229f.
- 49 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 151.
- 50 Marius, *More*, p. 426. Cf. *Collected Works* Vol. VIII, 630/9-20; 645/23-26; 715/34-35; and 727/10-34. *Lynwod Provinciale*, p. 145.
- 51 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 171. Tyndale frequently held up the Turk as a positive moral example whose qualities should shame the unchristian behaviour of Christians. also, *ibid.*, p. 52.
- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 54 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 232.
- 55 *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 430.
- 56 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 258.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 295.
- 58 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 41. See the author's *Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tyndale* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1986).
- 59 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 40.
- 60 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 275 and note 3.
- 61 Parker Society Vol. 3, pp. 165 and 18.
- 62 *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 163 and 18.
- 63 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 316.
- 64 *Loc. cit.*
- 65 Parker Society Vol. 1, pp. 224, 249 and Vol. 2, p. 275.
- 66 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 248
- 67 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 160
- 68 Marius, *More*, p. 8. See Marc'hadour, 'Foursome of "Blessed Holy Women" '.
- 69 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 175, and even in the matter of marriage, p. 169.
- 70 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 8 and Vol. 3, p. 6.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 34 ad Vol. 1, p. 199f.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 73 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 325.
- 74 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 173.

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- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 51f. It should be noted that although Tyndale used Luther's writing as a basis for many of his comments in *Wicked Mammon*, this illustration is not found in Luther's text.
- 76 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 49.
- 77 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 314.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
- 79 Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 45.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 110f.
- 81 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 280.
- 82 Parker Society Vol. 2, pp. 203 and 208.
- 83 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 84 *Collected Works* Vol. VI, 353/22–24.
- 85 *Ibid.*, 353/26–27.
- 86 *Ibid.*, 289/20–22 with notes. *Cf. Lynwood Provinciale*, pp. 14 and 101.
- 87 Parker Society Vol. 3, pp. 29f. and 98.
- 88 Wishing to avoid fanaticism, however, Tyndale was careful to stipulate that this should be done in order, at the right time and in private. Parker Society Vol. 2, p. 284.
- 89 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 176.
- 90 *Collected Works*, Vol. VIII, 190–191.
- 91 Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 18.
- 92 *Ibid.*, p. 51f.
- 93 Parker Society Vol. 1, p. 518. For example, he pointed out the unbelief of the disciples and stated that the wound was 'greater than that it could be healed with the preaching of a woman, without any other miracle'. Parker Society Vol. 3, p. 38.
- 94 *Ibid.*, p. 18.