

Correspondence

To the Editor of the Journal of British Studies:

"One must regret that a Saint [Thomas More] followed, rather than transcended, the predominant views of his time." (Leland Miles, "Persecution and the *Dialogue of Comfort*," *J.B.S.*, V (1965), 26.) These predominant views are those connected with the persecution of heretics by force and by the written or spoken word.

I would comment: (a) Two saints (to mention no others), of great intellectual and spiritual stature, stand in More's company in respect of these charges: Bernard of Clairvaux attacked for heresy Peter Abelard and Gilbert de la Porrée, "pursuing them with such zeal that he secured the condemnation of Peter and only just failed to have the other condemned." (John of Salisbury, *The Historia Pontificalis* (London, 1956), p. 16.) Bernard sent to Rome, in accusation of Abelard, some of the "fiercest and most devastating letters" he had ever written (David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (London, 1962), p. 120); and the "saintly abbot . . . spoke openly against" Gilbert after his acquittal "and wrote many things to his discredit" (John of Salisbury, *Historia Pontificalis*, p. 25). (b) Thomas Aquinas advocated the persecution of heretics: "There is their sin, by which they have deserved . . . to be eliminated from the world by death. . . . St. Jerome says . . . 'The tainted flesh must be cut away, and the infected sheep cast out from the fold: lest the whole house burn, the mass be corrupted . . . and the flock perish.'" (Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Political Writings* (Oxford, 1948), p. 157.) More in his argument follows Aquinas and Jerome. (For this argument see Miles, "Persecution," *J.B.S.*, V (1965), 25, 26.) As for Bernard, John of Salisbury judged that the saint in his later persistent harassing of Gilbert was "inspired by zeal for the faith . . . in all he wrote." (*Historia Pontificalis*, p. 25.) On Miles's own showing, we cannot say less of More. ("Persecution," *J.B.S.*, V (1965), 27.)

It would seem to me that whether a saint did or did not transcend his intellectual environment in his attitude toward heresy is peripheral to the matter of his suitability for canonization, if not entirely irrelevant to it. What we have to try, by imaginative re-enactment, to discover is why he did certain things when confronted by particular concrete situations, for example, the treatment of heretics; we have, to quote Gerhard Ritter, "to understand

the decisions of historical personalities in terms of the moral views of their own times." (Gerhard Ritter, "Scientific History, Contemporary History, and Political Science," *History and Theory*, I (1961), 278-79.) I submit that Bernard, Aquinas, and More acted, each one, from a sense of high personal moral responsibility; they did what they thought was right for the interests of religion and the spiritual well-being of the nation as a whole. As Ritter goes on to say, moral views change, we think differently from the middle ages about heresy-hunting, but at all times man has considered himself as a being responsible for morals; "what do change are the notions of the correct realization of the moral principle in . . . social life, *not the principle as such.*" ("Scientific History," *History and Theory*, I, 279. Italics mine.) Here, surely, we have something which is fundamental to any objective understanding of the actions of men in the past. Did these three saints – four, if we include Jerome – set themselves to realize, with intellectual honesty and in spiritual integrity, the moral principle *as they saw it*? If we say, as we must, that they did, then their actions are in no way incompatible with their sainthood, nor, except from a subjective, unhistorical point of view, regrettable. To repeat: whether they were, or were not, in advance of their time is immaterial.

A final word: If strict justice is to be given to Calvin, Miles's "Calvin's burning of Servetus" ("Persecution," *J.B.S.*, V (1965), 27) needs amplification: Calvin tried to get for Servetus a death more merciful than burning but his effort was unsuccessful. (See George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 614.)

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June, 1966

To the Editor of the Journal of British Studies:

My article never sought to argue against More's "suitability for canonization," though Ernest Barker and even some Catholics used to so argue until More's canonization brought an era of idolatry. My main point, which to date stands unchallenged, is that by his own sixteenth-century definition as elaborated in Book III of the *Dialogue of Comfort*, More stands indicted of "persecuting" heretics. Miss Smith's inference that the article lacks historical perspective is contradicted by my long passage (*J.B.S.*, V (1965),

26-27), beginning with the observation that we “would do well to consider E. E. Reynolds’s eloquent plea that we judge More as a man of the sixteenth, not of the twentieth, century.”

However, Miss Smith’s point is well made, that More was not the only Saint who failed to transcend the moral views of his time. Indeed, one thing that attracted More to Bernard and Jerome is that they, like many of the Church Fathers, had battled heresy on the one hand and been themselves persecuted on the other. More obviously saw a parallel between such patristic writers and himself.

Yet I am not as certain as Miss Smith is that we can therefore conveniently lump together More, Jerome, Bernard, and Aquinas as being the same kind of Saints. Did the latter three ever have second thoughts about their treatment of heretics? More did. As R. W. Chambers notes (*Thomas More* (Ann Arbor, 1958), p. 313), “from the time he enters the Tower, those harsh words [against heretics] cease.” In contrast to the virulence of his earlier controversial writings, More’s treatment of heretics in the prison-composed *Dialogue of Comfort* is mild and tolerant. Notable is Part 1, chapter xii, of the *Dialogue* (see Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, ed. Leland Miles (Bloomington, Ind., 1965), pp. 36-37), in which More clearly recognizes that “as a mean-witted man” he might be wrong and the heretics right on the issue of faith versus works. In the last analysis, More might well be — as a Saint — superior to the patristic writers whom Miss Smith cites.

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July, 1966

To the Editor of the Journal of British Studies:

(1) I certainly think Mr. Leland Miles has proved his point that More by his own definition in Book III of the *Dialogue of Comfort* stands indicted of the “persecution” of heretics. (2) The force of Miles’s recognition that More should be judged as a man of the sixteenth, not of the twentieth, century seemed to me, and still seems, after a careful rereading, to be undone by the rest of the “long passage” which elaborates the initial regret that More did not rise above his intellectual environment, as did Colet, Erasmus, and Castello, other men of the sixteenth century. I still feel that this is approving or regretting aspects of the sixteenth century

in terms of twentieth-century values. But I should be sorry to misinterpret Mr. Miles. (3) "Did Bernard, Aquinas, and Jerome have second thoughts about their treatment of heretics? More did." I would answer that in the *Dialogue of Comfort* More is still *arguing* with the heretics. Miles himself in his article says that even in the *Tower* More, although his approach has mellowed, is trying to undermine the validity of Lutheran argument (*J.B.S.*, V (1965), 27), and my own reading of the lines on the issue of faith versus works, which to Miles seems to show More conceding that here he may be wrong and the heretics right, shows him still to be arguing, and that in a clearly rebuking tone (*Utopia and A Dialogue of Comfort* (Everyman ed.; London, 1951), p. 152). The stronger evidence for second thoughts in More lies, I suggest, in his undoubted relief that "there hath appeared good lykelyhood of som good agreement to grow together in one accord of our faythe . . . and that in the mean whyle . . . contencions, despicions with vncharytable behaiouere is prohibited . . . vpon all parties," and in his repeated determination "to leaue of contencion" and no more to strive with the heretic (*ibid.*, pp. 151-53). Before, however, we thereby think More "superior" to the earlier Saints, we should remember that the thought of these on the heretic was not wholly of one nature, that is, it was not entirely punitive: "St. Bernard . . . St. Dominic, St. Francis, had successively tried the rarest eloquence to convince, and the example of the sublimest self-abnegation to convert" (Henry C. Lea, *The Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (London, 1963), p. 121). Aquinas, too, approved of the Church's "merciful hope of the conversion of those in error" (*Selected Political Writings* (Oxford, 1948), p. 157), but persuasion and example were found to be fruitless, and Bernard, Aquinas, and the Church, "despairing" (Aquinas's word) of the heretic's conversion, had to resort to force. It seems, therefore, to me that on this point of the treatment of heretics Bernard, Aquinas, and More can be put together as the "same kind of Saints" in that in all three are the two strands of thought, the one of the rightness of employing persuasion, and showing mercy and patience, the other, that if souls could not be rescued from perdition by these means, then force must be used to secure that end. The chronological order differs but the approach to the problem is the same.

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