

PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THOMAS MORE'S CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this paper is to trace the influence of Pico on the development of Thomas More's Christian Humanism. Early in his career, More translated the life of Pico as well as a selection of his works. He professed a deep admiration for the Italian humanist and claimed to take him as his model for a life of piety and learning. More utilized many of Pico's themes in his own works throughout his career, yet rejected many of the arcane doctrines for which the works of Pico are justly famous. More's Christian humanism was also influenced by the lives of Erasmus and Colet with whom he was intimately acquainted, as well as the rising tide of Lutheran reform. In More's career we see a blend of traditional piety and Renaissance humanism, of the spirit of the 'devotio moderna' and the fruits of classical wisdom, of Catholic conservatism and the desire for ecclesiastical reform.

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CHAPTER I

Around the year 1505⁽¹⁾, Thomas More translated into English the biography of an Italian nobleman upon whom he is said to have modeled his life. The work, written by Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, was the biography of his famous uncle Pico who died in 1494. As Roper tells us, More was a young man who

gave himself to devotion and prayer in the Charterhouse of London, religiously living there without vow about four years, until he resorted to the house of one Mr. Colt, a gentleman of Essex that had oft invited him thither, having three daughters whose honest conversation and virtuous education provoked him there especially to set his affection.⁽²⁾

It was in this period of his life that More undertook the translation as well as the step into matrimony. His decision to marry indicates a break with the monastic spirit, but this break was not complete. He dedicated the Life of Pico to an English nun, a family friend who had taken the veil. Her brother Edward was later to serve the King and become embroiled in a controversy with Erasmus,

(1) R.W. Chambers; Thomas More, London, Jonathan Cape, 1938, p. 94. The date is conjectural but agreed upon by the majority of authorities.

(2) Roper; Life of Sir Thomas More, London, Everyman edition, Dent & Co., 1906 (1908), p. 3.

whom More found himself obliged to defend.⁽¹⁾ But at present More and Erasmus have not met.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the influence Pico had upon More. That More is said to have taken him as his model is both family tradition and scholarly footnote but the fact remains that the Life in More's volume is meant as an introduction to the more significant works that follow. The order here is different than that found in the original Latin edition of Pico's life and works published by his nephew. More could not be certain that the English public would know who Pico was, and the general drift of the biography leads one to conclude that Pico's importance for More lay in the spiritual works that follow his Life. These include three letters by Pico, a commentary on Psalm XV, 12 Rules, 12 Weapons, 12 Properties (being a spiritual guide of sorts) and a verse prayer. How Pico's Life and these works first found their way into More's hands is unknown. It has been suggested

(1) Lee attacked Erasmus because of an omission he made in his Greek New Testament. In Erasmus' defense, More developed the idea that the Bible is not the only vehicle through which the Word of God comes to man.

that Lily brought them back from Italy.⁽¹⁾ Amid an atmosphere of general enthusiasm for the so-called 'new learning' it is not important to discover just how material of this sort got to England--it could have come from any number of returning Englishmen who made the trip to Italy; Linacre, Colet, Lily, and Grocyn had been there by this time and More was in close contact with all of them.

Owing to the rapid exchange of ideas within More's circle, he too became infected with a zeal for the humanist studies and we are told that it was only under the forceful influence of his father that he abandoned his university career in favor of legal pursuits. Yet he remained with the circle of Oxford scholars headed by Colet (and soon to be joined by the towering figure of Erasmus), and while opinions differ on the nature of the

(1) Pico's works were not unknown in England in the early sixteenth century. An inventory of William Grocyn's library reveals works by Pico, and around 1508 one of Erasmus' pupils presented the English monarch with a volume of devotional writings including Pico's 'Rules for Spiritual Warfare.' See J. McConica; English Humanists and Reformation Politics Under Henry VIII and Edward VI, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 57; also Sears Jayne; John Colet and Marsilio Ficino, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1963, for Colet's use of Pico's works, especially the Heptaplus; and F. Seebohm; The Oxford Reformers, London, Longman & Green, 1968, p. 151.

varying influences present in English humanism⁽¹⁾ most are in agreement that by and large More is to be considered as a member of that group known as Christian humanists. This is a basic assumption of this paper although I will point out differences between More and his contemporaries in the ecclesiastical ranks. More was, significantly, a layman but his ties with the non-lay world were deep and quite extensive.

In tracing Pico's influence on More we shall necessarily come into contact with a large amount of interrelated ideas pertaining to the Renaissance. When I discuss Nicholas of Cusa for example, it is important because it illustrates a tendency or a direction of thought rather than a clearly defined and linear development. At all times, and particularly in the Renaissance, there exists a substratum of intellectual activity which runs below the explicitly stated. It reveals itself in nuances, in attitudes. So while More in many ways retained a medieval posture, he also adopts certain culturally transmitted ideas which show a break from those barely a hundred years before.

(1) The differing views are presented clearly in a comparison of the following works: Cassirer, E; The Platonic Renaissance in England, Edinburgh, Nelson, 1953 and Bush, D; The Renaissance and English Humanism, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1939

The alleged "hero-worship"⁽¹⁾ of Pico may have faded as More matured, or perhaps More's understanding of Pico was exclusive of many of the ideas we normally associate with the famous Florentine philosopher. Pico's is a complex character and it may be that More either ignored or simply was ignorant of many of its components. It is significant that More translated Pico's later works and none of those bearing a marked theological position. This reveals much about More's understanding of him, and in reading the biography we see a picture forming of Pico that would doubtless have appealed to one in More's position. In his translation, for example, we see that when Pico went to Rome with his 900 theses he was "desirous of glory and men's praise (for yet he was not kindled in the love of God)..."⁽²⁾. More could appreciate the antithesis of pride and 'love of God', but I suggest that his picture of Pico is strongly weighted in favor of the alleged conversion to the deeper spirituality conveyed in Pico's later writings. Whether Pico lost his desire

(1) Seebohm; The Oxford Reformers, p. 151. This is echoed by Cassirer; The Platonic Renaissance in England, p. 23.

(2) The English Works^o of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, edited and with a modern version by W.E. Campbell, London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931 (New York, The Dial Press), p. 351.

for men's praise is impossible to establish, but on the basis of those works translated by More it is safe to say that it appeared that way to More.¹ As Cassirer points out, "More finds articulate in him [Pico] in all its purity that new type of religious spirit for which he is striving."⁽¹⁾ Pico, the would-be defender of nearly a thousand arcane doctrines apparently rejected this posture late in his life and strove for a more humble, even resigned Christianity. For More this may represent a turning away from speculative theology toward the sort of negative theology one finds in Cusanus. It is a personal, subjective approach to religious truth that shuns discursive dialectic. Both Erasmus and Colet took this approach that naturally found itself ranged against the prevailing scholasticism of the time.

In touching upon those ideas current in the Italian and English Renaissance I will necessarily make use of certain terms which are themselves the subject of scholarly debate. In general, I follow Kristeller's definition of humanism and Renaissance⁽²⁾ because, as will

(1) Cassirer; The Platonic Renaissance in England, p. 23.

(2) P.O. Kristeller; Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains, New York, Harper Torch Books, 1961, pp. 8 ff.

become clear later, I am interested in establishing a specific relationship between Italian humanism and the later version we see in Erasmus and More. It is not my purpose to assert any new understanding of these terms, nor shall I attempt the question of justifying them as conceptual tools. I take the Renaissance to mean a period extending from about the middle of the 14th century to the end of the 16th; a period distinguished by a conspicuous tendency or direction that stood in contrast to the preceding centuries. This of course is not to deny that pre-Renaissance ideas were found thriving during the Renaissance, or that ideas developed more fully in the Renaissance had Medieval antecedents. Humanism seems to me to be the appropriate term to apply to one of these tendencies. Humanism was that attitude which emphasized the study of classical Greek and Latin texts, "an educational and cultural program" in which the humanists "elaborated methods of historical and philological criticism which contributed greatly to the later developments of those disciplines."⁽¹⁾ As we will see, philological and historical criticism of ancient texts figures largely in Pico, Erasmus and to a lesser degree, in More. Because

(1) Cassirer, Kristeller, Randall, Jr., editors; The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 3.

of the importance of humanism to the subject of this paper I will briefly sketch its salient points.

By the 15th century, the studia humanitatis had come to be identified with a cycle of scholarly disciplines, primarily literary in nature, that included grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. The underlying assumption in this program was that the study of classical sources prepared the student for an active, secular life of moral responsibility and above all, of high learning. The humanist program did not include metaphysics, logic, mathematics, natural philosophy or theology--standard fare in the universities of the late middle ages, particularly in Paris and other north European communities. The general aim of the studia humanitatis was to provide training for the mind in a broad and comprehensive manner but was considerably different from the scientific orientation then found in scholastic education.

This primarily literary bent came as a result of the inheritance bequeathed to the humanists by their ancestors, the medieval 'dictatores'. The 'dictatores', or practitioners of the 'ars dictaminis' centered their activity around the composition of letters usually at the request of a prince or nobleman in whose employ they typically found themselves. Not only did they write his

letters and keep his official correspondences, but they taught his children. They took as their models the classical Latin authors whose works were established as the norm for good Latin and whose eloquence they attempted to imitate.

The humanists inherited this pursuit of eloquence⁽¹⁾ but gradually assimilated not only the outward form of their models, but their content as well. The wisdom contained in such writers as Cicero and Lucian began to serve as the guide to moral virtue. Eloquence and wisdom were fused in the humanist program. As we see later in Pico (in his well known debate with Barbaro) and still later in Melanchthon (in his Reply to Pico on Barbaro's behalf)⁽²⁾ the relationship between eloquence and philosophy was open territory. The scholastics tended to keep the two distinct, while the humanists subordinated philosophy to rhetoric, possibly out of sheer disgust when faced with the 'barbaric' language then employed by the ever-technical philosophers. For the humanists, the

(1) For a full discussion of this aspect of humanism, see Gray, "The Pursuit of Eloquence" in Kristeller, ed.; Renaissance Essays, New York, Harper Torch Books, 1968, pp. 199-217..

(2) See "The Subordination of Philosophy to Rhetoric in Melanchthon" by Quirinus Breen in ARCHIV FUR REFORMATIONSGESCHICHTE, #43, 1952.

primary goal of education was to enable men to live a moral life, and while part of knowledge is to know the truth, the importance of knowing the truth is nil unless you can impell men towards its application. Eloquence is of course just as useless without moral content: dangerous, in fact.

The clash with scholasticism was bound to center on this question of the relationship of rhetoric and philosophy. Yet we must not quickly hand around labels to those who appeared to have taken one side or the other. While Pico defends the primacy of philosophy, he does so with humanist eloquence which suggests that the opposing fronts only appear well defined to someone in the trenches. Pico has a high regard for eloquence but will not use it as a criterion for the validity of a philosophical system.

More's position in this is interesting. It should be pointed out that he is by no means a philosopher yet shows quite a few affinities with Barbaro in his discussion of the perversion of language often found in scholastic writings. He insists that the sort of activity which goes under the name of philosophy is not really philosophy, and can therefore be criticized without detracting from the importance of philosophy in general. In his letter to

Dorp, More points out that a few simple rules of grammar are adequate for speaking and writing Latin, and likewise a few simple rules of logic should be enough to "make immediate application of dialectics, as an instrument, to the other branches of learning."⁽¹⁾ Instead, dialecticians have pursued the rules of logic and dialectic for their own sake, giving rise to a class of scholars who are neither true philosophers or theologians nor men of letters. They are pretenders living in an artificial world of sophistry. More touches upon a myriad subjects through the course of the letter, displaying a comprehensive appreciation for the relationship of classical learning to the study of Scripture, maintaining throughout a need for a reappraisal of the sources of Christianity using the tools of philology.

Much of the scholastic philosophy then in Europe was based on Aristotle as seen through the Arabic commentators. This Aristotelianism was in fact a blend containing many non-Aristotelian elements. It had strong institutional backing in Italy by the end of the 13th century (but considerably earlier in northern Europe)

(1) St. Thomas More: Selected Letters, edited by E.F. Rogers, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961, p. 19. This particular letter was translated by Rev. Dr. M. Haworth.

where it formed the core of the faculties of medicine and science. Medieval cosmology was primarily based on Aristotelian suppositions which postulated certain interrelationships between the sublunar and celestial worlds that show Neoplatonic (Pseudo-Dionysian) influences. Among these is the idea that there exists a graduated hierarchy connecting the lower and higher realms (the sensible and the intelligible, respectively) which stand as polar opposites and are essentially antithetical. Christian revelation spans this abyss but does not eradicate it. This picture of the universe remained strong until the 17th century, but certain important changes became clear well before then. One such change was found in Nicholas of Cusa.

Communication between the two realm of sensible and intelligible was carried on along a sort of ladder of steps linking God and man in a series of discrete stages corresponding to the degrees of emanation which radiated from God. The methods of speculative theology by and large dictated the perceived patterns of this process of emanation which in turn stemmed from the peculiar blend of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic elements. Cusanus was able to penetrate, using recently acquired tools of philological investigation, into the purely Platonic, essential opposition between the realms of the finite

(man) and that of the Infinite (God). Keeping them strictly separate, he posited a negative theology whereby it became impossible to know God in the sense that the scholastics claimed. Knowledge of the infinite "must be understood in its ultimate depth and conceived of through the conditions of human knowledge."⁽¹⁾ Because the search for truth proceeds by comparison (as does all knowledge), we know an object not in itself but as an image which bears a likeness to the object. The difference between object and image can be diminished but never eradicated. So the infinite cannot be reached by the finite understanding due to the lack of adequate comparison--our understanding has limits and conditions which preclude knowledge of the infinite. For this reason, revelation is our only guide.

Cusanus develops a theology of 'learned ignorance'. It abandons the scholastic conceptual framework of generic concepts and replaces it with a more Platonic distinction between appearance and idea. Appearance and idea can be related but never mingled, their differences are essential

(1) E. Cassirer; The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy, trans. by M. Domandi, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963, p. 10.

differences. The meaning of an idea is never completely given as a particular existent--the bridge between them is a bridge of 'participation' which is of course the necessary corollary of separation.

The one truth, ungraspable in its absolute being, can present itself to us only in the realm of otherness; on the other hand, there is no otherness for us that does not in some way point to the unity and participate in it.

And further;

By denying any overlapping of the two realms and by teaching us to see the One in the other, and the other in the One, the separation itself guarantees the possibility of true participation of the sensible in the ideal.⁽¹⁾

In other words, while the two poles of Infinite Being and finite man admit of no mingling, (due to their essential differences) man can know the infinite only through its expression in the finite.

The Aristotelian concept of the cosmos was one of a hierarchy, graded along a vertical axis. The separations between the different levels of this scale were determined by differing elements (or essences) and the higher one ascends on the ladder the closer one approaches the pure and rarified nature not found in the sublunar realm. The closer you are to the 'source' of the emanations, the less corrupt they become. Cusanus dismisses this notion

(1) Ibid., pp. 23-24.

by stressing the insurmountable differences that separate the finite realm from the infinite. The universe is quite homogeneous and without gradation and is infinitely apart from the One. This means that there is no hierarchy, there is no lower and higher--in fact, each particular entity stands in equal relationship to the One by virtue of the infinite distance between it and the One. There follows the idea that there is no center to the universe or, if you will, all are centers.

This opened the door for a better understanding of human subjectivity. If knowledge of God was to be understood as a function of particulars acting in and through their particular relationship with the infinite, theology could not claim dogmatic certainty for everyone. Cusanus argues, in De Pace Fidei, for broad religious tolerance.⁽¹⁾ In fact, his epistemology requires a

(1) The question of religious tolerance surfaces in the lives of both Pico and More and their reaction to it is remarkably similar to that prescribed by Cusanus. Pico withdrew his condemned theses not because he was convinced of their philosophical error, but rather in deference to ecclesiastical authority. More's understanding of heresy stemmed from his understanding of the relationship of the individual to the church--a relationship that should be marked by respect and reverence. Both men reacted to heterodox opinions in a way that suggested Christian unity should be preserved by allegiance to a common authority but which allowed for personal deviations from the official doctrines so long as such deviations were not spread abroad against the wishes of the church.

positive value of the particular. He is the first thinker to advocate an epistemology based on human subjectivity and its freedom to establish a relationship to God as part of its participation in the infinite. Similarly, he gives a new objectivity to the physical universe and de-emphasizes the general metaphysical hierarchy of the Cosmos. Cusanus's views of Christ are in keeping with his general philosophy. Only in Christ is the infinite personified in the finite. "Christ alone is the genuine *natura media* that embraces the finite and the infinite in one. And this unity is not accidental, but essential."⁽¹⁾ In Christ is the spiritual content of all humanity which stems from the universal consciousness of the abyss that separates the finite from the infinite. Cusanus points out that our empirical self cannot make the transition from the one to the other. Man is, however, not solely matter but spirit also. His spirit, limited and in need of redemption, can effect this transition through the agency of Christ Who contains the sum total of mankind's spiritual content. And by redeeming man, Christ redeems nature which is represented in its highest form (i.e., as high as finite matter can be) in man.

(1) Cassirer; The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy, p. 39.

Cassirer notes the latent Pelagianism in the exalted view of man's nature, particularly with respect to the notion of original sin. This brings us round to Pico rather nicely, for as we will see later, his understanding of the nature of man also seems to downplay the idea of original sin and gives an ever increasing freedom to man in determining his relationship to God. Cusanus acknowledges man's complete dependence on God. But he also stresses that man has a given freedom which is an important one; while all existent things stem from God, it is man who gives them value. Man has the power to determine less and more, better and worse. Plunged into the world of created matter, the world of the sensible, is the only state in which the mind can attend the intelligible. This places a more positive value on the world than was common and no doubt compensated for the apparent loss which one could see in Cusanus' idea of a homogenous universe divested of its neat distinctions between sublunar and celestial.

Cusanus was schooled at Deventer among the Brethren of the Common Life. He brought their stress on the importance of lay education and lay piety to Italy and was no doubt supported in this by humanist intentions running along similar lines. He was separated from Pico and Ficino by only a generation, but his influence on the

direction their thought would take, at least to one scholar, was significant. His was an unstable equilibrium--his idea of 'learned ignorance' was based on a tension that exists between the finite knower and the infinite object of his knowledge. But in his attempt to bridge the gap between faith and philosophy and unite man, the cosmos and God into a single system he anticipates the work of another major Renaissance figure who is central to our paper: Pico della Mirandola.

Pico was less successful in his attempt to unite man and the cosmos in a coherent system governed by the inherent limits of the intellect. Judging from what we know of his life, it appears that the gap between the world of knowledge and that of God became too wide for reason or intellect to bridge, and Pico was buried in the cowl of a monk, garb never worn by him in life. Pico turned more and more toward Christian revelation (perhaps under the influence of Savonarola) and abandoned the sometimes wild eclecticism for which he is famous.

The link between reason and revelation, or philosophy and theology, is explored by both Pico and More. Philosophical speculation tends to lead one away from dogmatic religion and more toward a tolerance of varying religious beliefs which, if given dogmatic expression, may be incompatible with one another. Reason's conclusions,

however rigorous, are never quite conclusive enough in matters concerning the ineffable. Revelation, of course, allows for absolute certainty, at least in theory.

...For a universal theism, grounded in pure reason, forms the core of that Utopian religion depicted by More. The supreme legislator of the Utopian state was not so presumptuous as to want to make any stipulation concerning religion, because he was not sure whether God Himself does not intend manifold and diverse forms of worship, and hence give to some this and to others that form of religious inspiration. Thus we find again, agreeing to the letter, the same religious ideal as that depicted by Cusa in his De Pace Fidei and by Ficino in his De Christiana Religione. The external evidence also confirms this connection; for More never ceased being a passionate admirer of Pico della Mirandola.⁽¹⁾

If the finite and the infinite can only relate through participation centered in particularity, then of course individual reason plays a significant role. But we must remember that the religion of Utopia was of course not a revealed Christianity--a fact that is of no small importance for More. The truths of revelation must somehow be brought into a relationship with those of reason, and this was Pico's Herculean task.

In turning to the Florentine Academy and Pico we are faced with a complex array of philosophical ideas which cannot be easily summarized. In isolating the following tendencies I have neglected others of equal importance.

(1) Cassirer; The Platonic Renaissance in England, p. 23.

But because of the subject matter I have selected only those ideas which contribute to an understanding of Pico who, we remind ourselves, is but half our story.

The expression of the infinite in the finite which formed the core of Cusanus' system of knowledge of God took the form of a sort of cult of beauty in Florence. "With its knowledge of beauty, and with the standard it finds within itself, the human mind places itself between God and the world and thus encompasses both for the first time in a true unity." (1) Man's mind is the locus wherein this unity is effected. Mind, of its own accord, moves in a relationship to the two realms without losing sight of either. This dynamic freedom of movement is developed by Pico in his Oration, and in his pursuit of truth Pico shows considerable freedom of movement as he draws now from one, now from another source. The ability of the will to create its own place, to seek whatever means it would in its quest for truth constituted the image of God in man. Pico uses the Plotinian notion that "The soul's being depends upon its attitude, upon its actual behaviour. It does not have a given specific nature imprinted upon it from the first, but becomes identified with the end of its

(1) Cassirer; The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy, p. 64.

own determination."⁽¹⁾

While the humanists were less interested in philosophy than in ethics, Pico's anthropology could quite easily be taken as the underlying humanist philosophy. They were fundamentally interested in religion and naturally wanted to remove it from the arena of metaphysics and place it instead in the realm of moral philosophy where they felt it no doubt belonged. This tendency, a humanist tendency, of removing religion from speculative theology and metaphysics, illustrates the practical, ethical emphasis of the humanist program. And while humanism per se was unable to produce a systematic philosophy to augment its influence, it did lend its tools to those more capable of constructing such a system. To a

(1) Cassirer; The Platonic Renaissance in England, p. 27. More adopts this position in his understanding of the importance of good works as well as in his personal meditations on Christ to initiate the saving grace he so ardently desired. His view of good works rests on a belief that mere faith (assent to and belief in Christian doctrines) is not sufficient for salvation. The individual must shape and express this faith through the action of good works. Works help man to conform his will to God's, and at the same time, are themselves pleasing to Him. He sums up his views on the prerequisites for salvation in the unfinished Four Last Things; "There are, ye wot well, two points requisite unto salvation, that is to wit, the declining or going aside from evil, and the doing of good." The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 498.

large extent Renaissance philosophy, as seen in the Florentine Academy, was dependent on those tools. But just how much it adopted the humanist outlook is hard to say. Pico shows strong scholastic tendencies, and equally strong humanist ones. The non-scientific (non-quantitative) aspects of humanist learning found an ally in the Platonic elements of the Renaissance philosophy, emphasizing those elements which seemed to be lacking in Aristotle--the artistic and the creative.

Neoplatonic thought became a powerful influence in the 15th and 16th centuries. Both Pico and Ficino show this, and many Italian philosophers drew ideas from the Neoplatonic sources. Ficino (among others) was translating. Manuscripts from the East provided access to uncorrupted Platonic and Aristotelian ideas, and much effort was spent trying to achieve a synthesis of the two. While Aristotle had and would continue to have for some time the lion's share of attention in the faculties of theology and philosophy in northern Europe, it faced opposition in Italy where Plato was gaining popularity, particularly among the humanists. Aristotle was entrenched in scholasticism, and the reaction against scholasticism lent weight to the competition. But while certain specific doctrines of Aristotelian philosophy are rejected by Ficino (such as the unity of the active intellect) it

would be untrue to claim that the bulk of Aristotelian philosophy had been replaced by Platonic or Neoplatonic ideas. It was not until the 17th century that Aristotle was finally displaced, and it came not from Platonists but the scientists like Galileo.

Pico's rejection of occult astrological influences (which Ficino credited) seems odd in one who was "a representative of nearly all the basic philosophical tendencies that had traditionally nourished and strengthened faith in astrology."⁽¹⁾ Cassirer sees the explanation for this in Pico's ethical view; matter cannot be the master of spirit. Man's freedom could not be affirmed when the influence of stars was allowed. While Pico's world view was in many cases determined by his Neoplatonic leanings, astrology was the point at which he drew the line. Forces are not determined by mere place, and the construction of stellar maps are mere human projections which cannot endow a star with causal influence.

While humanism in Italy was not identified with any specific systematic philosophy but became, through its attitude toward the practical ends of education and moral

(1) Cassirer; The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy, p. 115

philosophy, in England and northern Europe it tended to produce what is known as Christian humanism; the obvious example is of course Erasmus. To a Christian humanist, philology was of particular importance because it allowed him to reclaim Scripture from the suffocating hands of the scholastics. The Christian humanists, unlike Pico, built no systems and indulged in little speculative theology. Yet both Erasmus and Pico received (and retained in varying amounts) a thoroughly scholastic education. And More, Colet, Lily and others had essentially been trained through the scholastic universities of Europe. But without exception they turned toward the so-called new learning with enthusiasm. This was at a time when Oxford was beginning to offer Greek, largely through the offices of Oxford scholars who had learned it in Italy, and there was a tremendous interest in classical literature. But because Erasmus and the "Oxford Reformers" espoused no formal philosophy does not mean they had none, as we will see later. The humanist stress on practical morality, on the validity of a historical approach to literature and more importantly to Scripture, on the importance of rhetoric over logic--all found expression in Christian humanism. But what is significant about this group is that with the exception of More, none is a layman. Erasmus, it is true, had left his order, but Colet,

Fisher, Grocyn, all were formally committed to Christianity. More struggled hard over the question of his vocation, and decided against the monastery. So, in these men we see not enthusiasm for Plotinus or for Plato, but for Christian authors and Scripture. Erasmus' activity needs no more emphasis than the years have given it; he remains the epitome of this type of humanism.

Bush has described humanism as "that way of life and thought which keeps man in union with God and above the biological level."⁽¹⁾ This is generally true but it could easily deteriorate to a level of intellectual sensualism devoid of religious content as it pursued the moral qualities found in pre-Christian literature. This is in fact what occurred in Italy after the process of secularization took hold. That it didn't in England is largely due to the personalities of Erasmus and others who coupled a zeal for philological investigation with an intensely Christian philosophy. Through their attempt at religious reform, the Christian humanists created a vital and dynamic movement and although this movement had its

(1) Bush; The Renaissance and English Humanism, p. 55.

adherents in Italy (in such men as Gaspar Contarini)⁽¹⁾, papal pressure was strong enough to defuse any threat of real reform and force it underground. And where it would not be silenced, in such cases as Savonarola, there was always the stake.

Using as a basis the religious experience, Erasmus (and Colet) presented a new understanding of the relationship of Scripture to the Church. "Religious experience forms the centre and source, a purified philology forms the medium and intellectual instrument, for the comprehension of Scripture."⁽²⁾ This posits a new understanding of the Logos itself. Erasmus uses the new learning not to undermine the Church but to bolster it through a deeper understanding of the primacy of Scripture. It remains one of the high ironies in the history of Western culture that for a few years Christian humanists had access to the leading political and ecclesiastical figures of the age yet essentially failed in their attempted reform. And the devastation of Europe

(1) See Complete Works of St. Thomas More, New Haven, Yale University Press, Vol. 5, part II, pp. 789ff, for an interesting anecdote concerning Contarini's reaction to Luther. See also James Ross; "The Emergence of Gasparo Contarini: A Bibliographical Essay" in CHURCH HISTORY, Vol. 41, #1, 1972, pp. 22-45 for a more complete introduction to Contarini.

(2) Cassirer; The Platonic Renaissance in England, p. 19

that followed the wake of the Lutheran upheaval polarized religious and political life to such a degree that unity has even now escaped the grasp of the millions who claim to follow a common source. The plea for reform from within the established ecclesiastical structure and the political courts--Pope Leo X, Henry VIII, Francis I, and Charles V--voiced by the influential figures situated near the thrones had failed, but certainly not for want of talent.

Erasmus, in his reply to Servatius⁽¹⁾ gives a clear indication of his position with regard to his order, and to cloistered life in general. His work lies in other directions but not outside the circle of devotion. If his reasons are the same as those which prevent More from taking the vow (and I suspect they are similar) then we can begin to see the spirit of lay piety that is so clearly implicit in his translations and writings. There are obstacles in the way of a true understanding of Christianity and its documents, and this is due, in large part, to the top-heavy and unsound manner in which scholastic theologians approach Scriptural interpretation. In his translation of the New Testament he corrects many

(1) Seebohm; The Oxford Reformers, pp. 296ff

errors present in the Vulgate and denies the so-called verbal inspiration theory. This raised a considerable controversy because it made use of a historical approach (Erasmus cites Origen as the example) rather than the manifold senses approach. The irony here is that Origen himself was heavily in favor of the latter.⁽¹⁾ This drew fire from Luther who championed the Augustinian notion that if Scripture is not verbally inspired (and hence open to many levels of interpretation of varying significance) then it may be found to be in error on a particular point. This is especially important in regard to the Vulgate which, as a translation, must remain as doctrinally pure as the original. In fact, Erasmus points out several instances in which the Church Fathers are not in agreement with each other and more specifically not in agreement with the Vulgate. In his reply to Dorpius he asserts the need for a common-sense literary interpretation of Scripture--an approach designed to produce a workable basis for Christianity, not an airtight and painstakingly consistent system of doctrinal certainty. Erasmus, like

(1) Although Erasmus adopted an allegorical approach to Scripture in some of his early works, by the time he writes the introduction to his edition of the New Testament he leans more toward a grammatical-literal exegesis. See Albert Rabil, Jr., Erasmus and the New Testament: the Mind of a Christian Humanist, San Antonio, Trinity University Press, 1972, p. 101.

Colet, believes there is a relatively simple and pure Christianity resting not on dogma but on its own sources.

The philosophy of Christ, moreover, is to be learned from its few books with far less labor than the Aristotelian philosophy is to be extracted from its multitude of ponderous and conflicting commentaries. Nor is anxious preparatory learning needful to the Christian. Its viaticum is simple, and at hand to all. Only bring a pious and open heart imbued above all things with a pure and simple faith.⁽¹⁾

It is certain that Erasmus is not rejecting philosophy per se in this introduction to his New Testament. He is merely asserting that Christian philosophy has been given to us in accessible terms and not available only in the vast tomes of scholastic writings such as Aquinas' Summa. This is really quite different than a 'reconciliation of faith with philosophy' but completely in keeping with Erasmus' commitment stated earlier. Here we see not only a different attitude toward religion than Pico's; we see a fundamentally different world. Erasmus quests not for the philosopher's truth--he is interested in specifically Christian faith. He could no more sanction the use of Cabala to prove Christ's divinity than he would the use of 'natural magic' to draw influence from the stars. And he is decidedly against the rigid enforcement of dogma.

(1) Seebohm; The Oxford Reformers, p. 327. Quoting Erasmus.

If there should be anyone who would inquire into the Divine nature, or the nature (hypostasis) of Christ, or abstruse points about the sacraments, let him do so; only let him not try to force his views upon others. In the same way as very verbose instruments lead to controversy, so too many definitions lead to differences.⁽¹⁾

Whether this is simple naivete or no, we will leave aside. But given the general atmosphere of suspicion and heresy, a plea for unity can never be seen as folly. Erasmus was directing his views not only to the academic circles and the common man, but to the princes of Europe of whom both found themselves subjects. When we discuss the relationship of both More and Erasmus to Luther we will have occasion to present more theological perspectives concerning the philosophy of Christ. It is enough here to note that Luther had a more dogmatic approach than did either More or Erasmus (their outrageous invectives notwithstanding), a fact which prevented them from understanding one another as perhaps they should have.

Another important figure during this time was Colet. His approach to Scripture was very much the same as Erasmus' about which much has already been said. But Colet had been to Italy and had absorbed many Neoplatonic

(1) Ibid., p. 490

elements in his studies. His lectures are studded with references to Ficino, to Pseudo-Dionysius (whom he still believed at this time to have been a companion of Paul's). Yet the significant point for Colet is that if we are unable to know God, we are at least able to love Him.⁽¹⁾

Colet aimed at penetrating the original meaning of the epistles, a meaning which is broad and can assume many forms. Cassirer attributes Colet's outlook to his studies in Italy (more specifically to Florence) and traces it back to Cusanus, but his methodology in this does not demand any direct connection with the teachings of Cusanus. Both believed that while dogmatic certainty is impossible in ascertaining any knowledge of the infinite, what knowledge that is attainable comes from and through a symbolic understanding of the particular, providing of course that one's convictions stem from a genuine religious commitment.⁽²⁾ Religious life was in danger of becoming so moribund that it could cease to be Christian, a danger from which Colet attempted to free it.

On the more volatile question of freedom of the will, Colet takes a less radical stance. The soul is won over, through love, to God, willingly, but "through no merit of

(1) Ibid., p. 39

(2) Cassirer; The Platonic Renaissance in England, p. 14

its own."⁽¹⁾ Even this middle of the road stance was later to lead to trouble. Colet also expressed another seemingly mild view that was unpopular.

...the essential attribute of any sacerdotal order laying claim to apostolic institution

must assume

the attribute of a really pure and personal holiness. No merely official sanctity imprinted outwardly to a consecrated order, by virtue of its outward consecration, could possibly satisfy the requirements. And in the same way, the sacraments were nothing apart from the personal spiritual realities which they were meant to symbolize.⁽²⁾

Whether this is in fact the Donatist heresy or not, is hard to establish on the basis of a single observation. It certainly does tend to lead one to that conclusion, however, and doubtless did not endear him to the bishops to whom he would have to answer.

Colet's return to the Scriptural authority had much in common with Luther's reform. But Luther was interested in Scripture as a basis for ecclesiastical authority in a more legalistic way than Colet's sermons indicate. Both objected to the burdensome corruption of the New Testament and the practices of the Church which laid an

(1) Seebohm; The Oxford Reformers, p. 36

(2) Ibid., p. 72

unsubstantiated foundation for its activities on non-Scriptural traditions. The sale of indulgences and the cult of saint worship were roundly condemned by both Colet and Luther.

Luther challenged the authority by which the Church justified its non-Scriptural sacraments and by doing so challenged the notion that the Church was the sole medium through which the Spirit works. His was a more systematic reform, aiming at the heart of the Church; whereas both Erasmus (and Colet) and Luther preached reform, they were speaking different languages. Of course, the Church had based itself all along on Scripture--but the question centered around the interpretation of Scripture, not merely its use. Luther proposed a dogmatic approach which rivalled the existing hierarchy of the ecclesiastical world and claimed legal foundation on a new interpretation of Christian writings. It was on this legal question that More entered the controversy.

When More lent his aid to Henry VIII in refuting Luther's reform, he supported the established hierarchy (culminating in the pope) as the medium through which the Spirit works. In a way this is an admission of papal infallibility, but we should not press More too closely on this question for he was first and foremost a lawyer, in the service of his king, and quite unable to match Luther

in the realm of theology. "More's faith is not perceptibly different from that of Erasmus; it is not hugely different even from Luther's"⁽¹⁾ Yet Luther and More understood the theology of faith quite differently. Luther drew radical theological consequences from his understanding of the nature of faith, while More and Erasmus tended to espouse a more conservative line, stressing that in a united Christendom, the truth would reveal itself to all men, given enough time and good will.

According to Luther, man's justification is completely independent of his merits. Law is negative in this concept of justification. It reveals the depths of man's depravity but does not assign a positive value to his efforts at reclaiming his lost freedom. It is this hostility to law that More abhors. The highly heated invectives and the level of abusive language indicate that in the epistles exchanged between the two men there was little room for reason and even-handedness. More doubtless saw Luther as thoroughly evil, completely un-Christian.

Luther claims that the whole, justified man needs neither the guidance nor the restriction

(1) G. Marc'hadour; "Thomas More's Spirituality" in St. Thomas More: Action and Contemplation, edited by R. Sylvester, New Haven, and London, Yale University Press, 1972, p. 125.

of the law but accomplishes the law through a love that is rooted in his faith...To More, late medieval catholic, the conflict in man between body and soul has reality; and in the process of justification, which is a human as well as a divine process and not simply a divine fiat, good works and sanctification have a significant role.⁽¹⁾

Abandonment of the law is neither possible nor advisable. But all this leads us considerably far afield for now. More's outlook on the positive value of human activity reveals his humanistic leanings, and as a lawyer he saw real problems with the Lutheran view of man (with its unreasonable denial of the validity of good works) and authority. It is ironic that More should lose his life to the king he defended; More's view expresses a unity, a common orientation to the wide spectrum of political and religious activity into which it was brought to focus.

Returning to the relationship of Pico and More, certain definite patterns have emerged which is our business to trace more fully. Both made use of humanist learning but for quite different ends; both had religious views that were shaped by the study of classical texts which their humanism led them to investigate. Both showed signs of asceticism. In summary we have seen how the humanist movement in Italy, a non-philosophical

(1) The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 5, part II, p. 758.

attitude which contrasted with the scholastic practices that gave more weight to logic and metaphysics and lent themselves more readily to systematic approaches, could turn toward either secularisation or a new religious spirit. In Christian humanism it generated a concern for reform that found expression in Erasmus and Colet, while in Pico it gave birth to a blend of scholasticism and humanism that produced an eclectic system - Christian in its confession - but decidedly without a program for church reform. The primary tools of humanism were readily absorbed by philosophers and divines to enable them to return to the ancient sources of their common culture. Certain philosophical systems, or natural philosophies, came to light making use of Platonic elements absent in medieval Aristotelianism. Following Cusanus' lead, a new role was seen for man and knowledge, and the cosmos was seen as the undifferentiated locus wherein the infinite expresses itself to the intellect through symbols. When the means for refined literary criticism were made available in northern Europe, the opportunity for a return to Scripture served as the basis for an intense personal piety and a re-evaluation of the religious experience. A historical-literary approach to the Bible replaced the 'manifold senses' theory of interpretation in the works of many Christian humanists. But the rapid entrenching of

the various parties in the question of reform and the nature of the will and papal authority thwarted any chance of a peaceful application of the knowledge gained by this renewed interest in Scripture.

CHAPTER II

It is of great importance for the purposes of this paper to note that when More translated the biography of Pico he "follows the Latin closely except in so far as he chooses to make omissions. He passes over details of kinships and family history, he cuts out the particulars of Pico's earlier studies in 'obscure philosophy', he greatly reduces the story of the nine hundred questions, and summarizes a long account of Pico's writings by telling us that they 'well testify both his angelic wit, his ardent labor and his profound erudition'."⁽¹⁾ We need not assume that this editing was because More did not understand or approve of Pico's philosophical accomplishments, despite his dismissal of them as 'obscure', but it is significant that he makes no comment upon some of the more curious doctrines related in the original biography. Of course, during this time of translating More is young, and perhaps has not developed a mature outlook himself, yet the fact remains that he neither adopts nor refutes any specific philosophical doctrines of Pico's found in the biography or elsewhere but dwells rather on Pico's personal virtue and strength

(1) The English Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 19.

of faith, and of course, translates his devotional works which he expands freely. More praises the depth of Pico's learning and his thorough familiarity with the ancient authorities and describes how Pico set more faith in devotion than in cunning.

It has been pointed out that More departs from the spirit of the original text in emphasizing the "change in Pico from extremely daring humanism to Christian humility, charity, and discipline"⁽¹⁾, an observation that is supported by noting More's omission of the more philosophical side of Pico as found in his biography. That More saw in Pico a revitalized spirituality imbedded in a man of deep and thorough learning is also borne out by his inclusion of the three epistles of Pico and the spiritual treatises in verse form.

In tracing the influence of Pico upon More it becomes necessary to try and form an idea of those aspects of Pico's life and thought that More used in his understanding of Pico. On the evidence presented by More's translation of Pico's Life a tentative conclusion seems to point to a certain deliberate neglect of the philosophical side of Pico in favor of the more humanistic

(1) Ibid., p. 19 /

Christian side. For this reason, I have touched mainly upon those aspects of Pico which point to his spiritual development, but it must be remembered that as far as Pico's use of philosophy was imbued with his theology, no strict separation can be maintained. Necessarily I will have to discuss, albeit briefly, Pico's philosophy and his use of philosophical ideas and their relation to his understanding of Christian theology.

Giovanni Pico was born in 1463 in Mirandola to the feudal Counts of Mirandola and Concordia. In 1477 he began his study of canon law in Bologna, apparently in preparation for a career in the Church. For unknown reasons, this career never came about, and Pico went to Ferrara in 1479 to pursue a course in philosophy. The following year he moved to the Aristotelian center of Padua where he remained until 1482. It is probable that during this time he met Ficino in Florence as well as other humanist scholars throughout Italy. In 1485 Pico went to Paris, the reigning center of scholastic learning, where he spent a year before returning to Italy to study Hebrew and Arabic, adding these languages to his knowledge of Greek and Latin. It was during this time that he became familiar with the Jewish Cabala and wrote his nine hundred theses, hoping to attract scholars from various parts of the world to engage in learned debate.

A papal commission appointed by Pope Innocent VIII reviewed the theses and found thirteen of them heterodox or heretical. Pico attempted to clear up the matter by defending the condemned theses which resulted in the condemnation of all nine hundred. He was forced to flee to France where, despite the fact that he had signed a declaration of submission, he was arrested and imprisoned. Due to the intercession of some Italian noblemen, Pico was released and returned to Florence where he remained until his death in 1494.

It was in Florence, following his release from prison, that Pico completed his major works. The Heptaplus, a exegetical treatise on the first twenty-seven verses of Genesis, was published in 1489, followed by De Ente et Uno in 1491. His lengthy treatise concerning astrology was also written during this time, although it remained unpublished until after his death. The atmosphere of Florence was particularly suited to Pico--he was in close contact with Ficino and the Platonic Academy as well as with the humanists surrounding their Medici patron Lorenzo. Pico also was in contact with Savonarola, but the extent of this relationship is the subject of much debate. Although Pico retained much of his youthful enthusiasm for arcane doctrines, he seems to have become increasingly preoccupied with a more personal

spirituality, according to the testimony of his letters to his nephew.⁽¹⁾ His lifelong goal of creating a synthesis of Plato and Aristotle, begun in the De Ente et Uno, remained unfulfilled. His understanding of the relationship of philosophy to faith shows a tendency to subordinate the former to the latter, but he refrains from renouncing philosophy altogether. Rather,

he seeks...to increase it and carry it to the point at which it can be supplemented and enhanced by another purely intuitive kind of knowledge. But at the same time, he maintains the position that our thinking and conceiving, in so far as it is directed toward the Divine, can never be an adequate expression, but only an image and a metaphor.⁽²⁾

This principle extends throughout Pico's writings and has much in common with the 'negative theology' of Cusanus. It is found in Pico's understanding of the message contained in Scripture and throughout the Heptaplus he utilizes a Cabalistic approach for his understanding of Genesis. Genesis is not a book concerned with relating a literal account of creation, but is, in fact, concerned with all of natural history and will, if

(1) The letters to his nephew (which More translated, dated 1492) urging the reader to practice study and virtuous self-discipline, show signs of an increasing asceticism.

(2) Cassirer; "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola" in Renaissance Essays, p. 27.

understood properly, confirm much of what is now considered the province of metaphysics. But while it can tell us truths about the physical universe, it cannot tell us more about God than our rational minds are prepared to accept. The use of symbols is a necessary bridge between our intellect and that realm which is inaccessible to the finite understanding.

Pico is mistaken in his belief that the Cabala with which he was so familiar was a product of Mosaic times; and the support he finds in it for certain Neoplatonic ideas is in fact a result of Neoplatonic influences themselves. Using Cabalistic methods of interpretation, Pico finds evidence of the theory of emanation in the Genesis creation story. But his understanding of the relationship of the One to the Many relies heavily on the concept of 'symbolic expression': the Many is not a necessary effect of the One--it is its symbol.⁽¹⁾

Pico's spiritual works, included in More's Life of Pico, show a side of him not seen in his more philosophical works. Pico reveals a strong and simple piety, uncomplicated by speculation and obscure references to esoteric doctrines. These works are not significant in

(1) see Cassirer; "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola" in Renaissance Essays.

their content to students of philosophy, but the fact that for More they showed the deep piety of Pico demands recognition. Doubtless Pico's piety was consistent and thoroughly Christian throughout his life; perhaps as a result of his beliefs concerning the ineffability of God, he seems to have opened himself to the possibility that speculation is less useful than prayer (although his great projected reconciliation of Plato and Aristotle lay incomplete, his last works were a commentary on Psalm XV, the twelve 'Rules' of a Christian life, an exposition of the Lord's Prayer, and he had laid plans to write a commentary on the New Testament as well as a defense of the Vulgate and Septuagint versions of the Psalms against diverse opponents.) It is impossible to derive an understanding, however tentative, of a man on the basis of what he planned to write. Similarly, we should not derive too weighty a message from the fact that Pico was buried in a monk's cowl at the hands of Savonarola. Yet, it is possible to form an understanding of at least the kind of impressions Pico was able to project on the basis of such evidence. His interest in philosophy and the value he placed on the human intellect probably did not diminish during his later days, and for this reason we must establish his relation to the currents of intellectual life if we are to form an adequate picture of his thought.

Pico's relationship to humanism and scholasticism reveals his complex character and has been the subject of much controversy. He describes himself as a philosopher among the poets and rhetoricians, but a poet and rhetorician among the philosophers.⁽¹⁾ His training at the universities in Paris and Padua grounded him in scholasticism yet his ardent pursuit of languages and his use of classical literature place him within the camp of the Italian humanists. He engaged in literary correspondence with Poliziano and Barbaro, humanists who "considered and treated Pico as a member of their own circle."⁽²⁾ His library contains Greek classics that are more philosophical than literary and we are told that he destroyed his own Latin elegies in detestation of his vice...lest these trifles might be some evil occasion afterwards.⁽³⁾ His letters and his oration indicate Pico's humanism.⁽⁴⁾ The oration was a genre familiar to the humanists and often the occasion for a display of

(1) Kristeller, P.; 'Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and His Sources', in L'Opera e il Pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Florence, Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1965, vol. 1, p. 42

(2) Ibid., p. 46

(3) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. 1, p.353

(4) Kristeller, 'Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola and His Sources', p. 51 ff

elegant prose that lacked real substance. On this basis, some tend to dismiss Pico's oration as a rhetorical exercise devoid of any philosophical import, and consequently "should not be taken seriously in a philosophical account of Pico's thought."⁽¹⁾ This view has serious difficulties. Ideas found in the Oration are also found in more conventional treatises dealing with philosophical ideas, and more importantly, the idea of the freedom of man found in the first half of the Oration forms the basis for Pico's rejection of astrology written during the last years of his life. Indeed Pico's anthropology as seen in the Oration remained an important part of his thought throughout his life. Pico's humanism permeated his philosophy, and his philosophy in turn influenced his use of humanist learning such as the recently acquired tools of philology and language. The attempt to exhibit Pico as a strict scholastic is balanced by statements that he had "difficulty in getting at the

(1) Kristeller, P.; Renaissance Thought and Its Sources, ed. Mooney, New York, Columbia University Press, 1979, p. 176. Kristeller is here rejecting A. Dulles' notion that Pico was thoroughly scholastic, a notion that necessarily places little emphasis on Pico's understanding of the dignity of man.

true scholasticism."⁽¹⁾ The truth is that, as Pico himself declared, he was a bit of both.

The assertion of man's essential freedom so strongly expressed in Pico's Oration forms one of the foci of his thought. Man has the potential to become higher than the angels for he constitutes his own realm outside the hierarchy of creation. This idea is echoed in the Heptaplus where it is given a more systematic expression. Pico borrowed from many sources in composing his Oration: Ficino's Theologia Platonica, Plato, the Old and New Testaments, Lucan, Horace, a wide assortment of Neoplatonic writers, Aristotle, Averroes, Duns Scotus and Alfarabi to name but a few. In the second half of the Oration Pico defends his use of Cabala and other occult sources, developing the notion that each tradition has a part in a universal truth which can be isolated from the many errors they also contain. He does not agree that all traditions are merely using different words to express the same identical truth, and this exclusiveness prevents Pico from becoming an exponent of the ancient eclectic school of thought. Nor is truth the exclusive property of any one particular man or system. He claims "There has been

(1) V. Hamm, Introduction to Of Being and Unity, by Pico della Mirandola, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1943, p. 6.

nobody in the past, and there will be nobody after us, to whom the truth has given itself to be understood in its entirety. Its immensity is too great for human capacity to be equal to it."(1) Pico also cautions against adopting the tenets of once school before obtaining a familiarity with the rest, for "there is in each school something distinctive that is not in common with the others."(2)

It is not surprising that Pico adopts allegorical and symbolical methods of textual interpretation given his conviction that beneath the words of various texts from differing traditions there lies a body of truths that await discovery by the trained philosopher. In the books of the Old Testament he sees "not so much the Mosaic as the Christian religion"(3) -- a common enough interpretation in the Christian Era but Pico goes further than this. He postulates as one of his theses that Cabala is a sure proof of Christ's divinity: proof, that is, in a philosophical sense which in no way obviates the validity

(1) P. Kristeller; Renaissance Thought and Its Sources, p. 207.

(2) Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Oration on the Dignity of Man, translated by E.L. Forbes in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, p. 242.

(3) Ibid., p. 252.

of revelation. He further finds that there is no point of difference between Jewish and Christian truths which cannot be proven in favor of the latter by using Cabala.

Many truths are obscured intentionally by an overlaying of fables in order to conceal their meaning from the uninitiated. This is true not only of the ancient traditions, such as the Orphic hymns that conceal their real truths behind poetry, but for Scripture itself, the true interpretation of which was given to Moses and from him it was passed on orally to only the high priests. The masses, it seems, would profane the real truths contained in Scripture.

It was enough through guileless story to recognize now the power of God,...and through divine and beneficial precepts to be brought to a good and happy way of life and the worship of true religion. But to make public the occult mysteries, the secrets of the supreme Godhead hidden beneath the shell of the Law and under a clumsy show of words--what else were this than to give a holy thing to dogs and to cast pearls before swine?(1)

And, because Pico believed revelation to consist of two parts, a 'show of words' and behind them the 'occult mysteries', he could ascribe to God the command to conceal. How this approach differs from that of the

1) Ibid., p. 250.

humanists is clear--instead of a purified philological discovery of the literal and historical meaning of the text, Pico posits a strictly allegorical method, appropriate not only to Scripture but to most of the pagan works as well.

Wind has pointed out that Pico's understanding of the pagan mysteries was really a misinterpretation that owes its existence to a remark in Plato's Phaedo where Plato declares that, like the mystery religions,

philosophy itself was a mystical initiation of another kind, which achieved for a chosen few by conscious inquiry what the mysteries supplied to the vulgar by stirring up their emotions. The cleansing of the soul, the welcoming of death, the power to enter into communion with the beyond, ...these benefits which Plato recognized were commonly provided by the mystical initiations were to be obtained through his philosophy by rational exercise, by a training in the art of dialectic, whose aim it was to purge the soul of error. (1)

Thus there arose a parallel system of mysteries based on a "figurative use of terms and images which were borrowed from the popular rites but transferred to the intellectual disciplines of philosophical debate and meditation." (2).

(1) E. Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, London, Faber and Faber, 1958 reprint ed., Northampton, England, John Dickens & Co., 1968, p. 3 (Italics mine.)

(2) Ibid., p. 3.

What began as an ironic analogy by Plato was made thoroughly systematic by subsequent Neoplatonists and ended "by betraying the late Platonists into a revival of magic."⁽¹⁾ Pico's concern with the pagan mystery cults was in fact a concern for his philosophical adaptation or re-interpretation of them in the light of this analogy. Plato appeared "not as a critic or transposer of mysteries, but as the heir and oracle of an ancient wisdom for which a ritual disguise had been invested by the founders of the mysteries themselves."⁽²⁾ Wind attributes to this understanding of the ancient tradition of concealing philosophic truths behind a poetic veil Pico's own desire to couch his doctrines in enigmatic phrases. Yet it does an injustice to Pico to suppose he deliberately aimed at obscurity in his writings, particularly in his later ones which certainly attempt, in so far as it was possible, to set out in precise and well-defined terms the various aspects of his thought. The debt Pico owes to the belief that there are mysteries to be explored in every metaphor is clear enough and remained throughout Pico's life, but he seems less enamored of it

(1) Ibid., p. 5.

(2) Ibid., p. 7.

as a style to be imitated than as fertile ground for the exercise of his intellect.

Pico's belief in the tradition of disguise forms the core of his theology. Beginning in Mosaic times with the Cabala, a tradition of transmitting high truths through clever writings that yielded their real content only to those skilled in penetrating their literal facade was carried down through the ages. It is found not only in religious literature but in pagan works as well, and reached its culmination in Christian texts. Pico saw the Neoplatonic link connecting revelation with earlier systems detailed in the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius (1) to whom Paul entrusted his most profound teachings. Unfortunately Pico's proposed treatise on poetic theology was never written--in it he would have presumably given the key to a symbolic understanding of the New Testament which would have tied it firmly in place as the apex of wisdom literature.

Pico favored Origen's approach to Scripture largely because in Origen there is much that smacks of a slightly gnostic attitude toward revelation. This preference set

(1) Pico's chronology concerning Cabala and Pseudo-Dionysius is erroneous, which accounts for much of his confusion in the relationship of Neoplatonic doctrines to Christianity.

Pico apart from other Italian humanists who favored Augustine over the rest of the Fathers.

Petrarch illustrates the humanist preference of Augustine among Church Fathers clearly in his account of his ascent of Mount Ventoux. Here the poet quotes Augustine's Confessions to the effect that while men often involve themselves in the study of nature, it profits them little if they neglect to study themselves. The humanists were responsible for a rediscovery of the need to study man before turning to the external world around him, and in so doing buttressed their belief with writings not only from classical literature but from Church Fathers. "The return from nature to man, which is so characteristic of Petrarch, and the whole emphasis on man which became so important throughout the Renaissance, is here, in its origin, connected with the name and doctrine of Augustine."⁽¹⁾ But Augustine had another attraction for the humanists--in their desire to return to pre-scholastic letters and literature they found in Augustine not only one who was well versed in classical literature, but one who had, in fact, lived during the time of the Roman Empire. Thus his writings, pre-eminent among Church

(1) Kristeller, P., Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1956, p. 362

Fathers, were grouped not with the medieval theologians but rather with those of classical antiquity. And Augustine had a definite admiration for Plato which was to play a large part in the humanist understanding of Platonic philosophy; "Augustine's authority not only determined Ficino's orientation towards Plato, but...served him as a model in his attempt to create a system of Christian Platonism."⁽¹⁾ From him Ficino took several specific doctrines but neglected those parts of his teachings which were later to play such a significant part in the Reformation: his teachings on sin, grace, and predestination. Ficino was interested in Augustine for reasons other than the eloquent blend of classicism and Christianity which had appealed to the humanists. And, of course, the humanists themselves rejected Augustine's idea of the general depravity of man, tending rather to focus on his position as the classical, Christian author of the Confessions. Pico too uses him selectively. He seems to take from Augustine those notions that support his interest in Platonic philosophy but shy away from his teachings on the condition of man.

Pico makes use of the idea that knowledge of nature is best preceded by knowledge of the nature of man. He

(1) Ibid., p. 369

ascribed to man a metaphysical value that justified his dignity and provided the basis for his understanding of man's place in the universe. In this attitude Pico departs from the humanists, showing greater affinity with the scholastic theologians than with the followers of the studia humanitatis.⁽¹⁾ While the rest of the world exhibits the hierarchical structure proper to its diverse nature, man rises and falls freely in the universe according to his own merits and aspirations. He is not constrained to any particular niche nor order but is identified with the ends of his own choosing. Pico's anthropology links him with Cusanus and his acknowledgement of the essential unity of creation and its subordination to the transcendent ties him to the scholastics. Man's metaphysical links to the universe are not simply those found in Ficino's microcosm idea, which eventually transformed "the primacy of man into a status

(1) E. Garin, Italian Humanism, translated by P. Munz, New York, Harper & Row, 1965, p. 109. Ficino's belief in astrology illustrates this point. It allows man to be influenced by stars, stones, herbs and sounds, and thus allows for a development of a deterministic anthropology which limits man's freedom. Pico rejects this.

that was really inferior to that of things."⁽¹⁾ Knowledge about man is not the same as knowledge about things because man is without a particular nature whereas all other things, even angels, possess a unique and unchanging essence. Man's essence is that he has no unique essence that determines his behavior: rather he creates it himself. Man has unlimited powers of self-transformation.

Of course, this does not deny the fact of man's fall. Pico emphasizes rather man's potential, his ability to rise above the world of matter through the powers inherent in his own makeup. Pico does not dwell on the theological consequences of the fall, yet he is careful to indicate that the words detailing man's great potential were addressed to Adam before the fall, and that now the situation is changed somewhat: Man needs grace to complete his ascent. The privilege given to man before the Fall is now maintained by grace. In fact, the tendency toward Pelagianism is vocally expressed in Pico's understanding of the Fall. Man's freedom is revealed by his capacity to

(1) Pico bases his views of man on philosophical grounds, not on strictly moral grounds common to humanist writings. But he understands the metaphysical nature of man in terms most scholastics would tend to reject.

do both evil and good. Sin and the capacity for sin is not a permanent stain upon man that prevents him from attaining good--it merely indicates that man has to choose. Man falls and rises, and each time he does he demonstrates his essential freedom which alone is the mark of humanity.

Pico is able to find support for his anthropology because he adopts a non-literal approach to Scripture. It has already been pointed out that the use of a symbolic method of textual interpretation with respect to pagan literature allows Pico to accommodate non-Christian writings with those of an expressed Christian position. His poetic theology extends through the Christian works as well, making it possible to reconcile the truths of philosophy with those of revelation. He blurs the distinction between the two especially when it comes to his ideas concerning magic: Christ becomes the supreme magician. But Pico does not insist that the truths of philosophy run parallel with those of revelation. For him there is no question that Scripture is above philosophy and while many ideas that are found in philosophy are corroborated by Scripture, the natural place of philosophy is beneath theology and theology itself is beneath the religious life. Faith and life of faith is clearly the goal of humanity and depends on an interior state of mind

that is based on the believer's love of God. And while certain truths about God are found through intellectual investigation, Pico consistently maintains a mystical understanding of the union created between God and man through love.

In turning now to a more specific understanding of Pico's theology it is necessary to examine the reasons behind his allegorical approach. It lies outside the scope of this paper to enter into a detailed analysis of Pico's understanding of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy (considered by him to be in agreement) per se--in addition to the fact that his thought never reached maturity there is the point that Thomas More appeared little concerned with Pico's philosophy. More germane to our discussion are the basic underlying influences in Pico which allowed him to come to the conclusion that he did, namely, that the unity of truth found in various traditions is available in its highest form through a particular understanding of Scripture deriving ultimately from God.

Christian apologists had long adopted an attitude toward non-Christian writings that tended to establish a sympathetic union with much of their content. Augustine writes:

The thing itself (*res ipsa*), which is now called the Christian religion, was with the ancients

(erat apud antiquos), and it was with the human race from its beginning to the time when Christ appeared in the flesh: from when on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called the Christian.⁽¹⁾

Allegory was a natural approach to those writings which seemed to discuss God, but needed to be fit into a specifically Christian framework. Trinkhaus sees the resulting tendency as a poetic theology--

Theologia poetica was one of the chief procedures by which the wide varieties of human experience and human culture could be regarded as corresponding to one universal conception of man which was at that time identified with the Christian. A true understanding of the Christian vision of life would reveal it as, necessarily, the true universal vision of man.⁽²⁾

This opens up the vast amount of non-Christian literature to those who would use it as a Christian text in pagan guise. Pico makes full use of this approach to pre-Christian writings, and owing to certain doctrines he finds in both pagan and Hebrew wisdom literature, re-applies it back to Christian works. Thus Christ's parables can become a storehouse for Platonic theology, and Pseudo-Dionysius appears as an exponent of the true

(1) Wind; Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, quoting Augustine's Retractiones I, xlii. (Italics Wind's), p. 21.

(2) C. Trinkhaus; In Our Image and Likeness, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970, Vol. 2, p. 689.

Christianity. Pico's understanding of Scripture--that it represents a deliberate concealment of the truth and requires the exegete to employ various arcane techniques to unravel its real meaning--ties in with his understanding of natural philosophy. Beneath both there are truths, natural truths that form a unity which has been in existence since the beginning of creation. And as man is part of creation, albeit a special part, he too is brought into this realm of symbolic representation. Man cannot know God directly, through Scripture or otherwise, but he can represent what he does know about God symbolically, and more importantly, he arrives at what he knows about God through his understanding of nature. The analogy of nature-humanity-God and colors-the eye-light expresses the overall interrelatedness of Pico's philosophy. Nature is the means by which man ascends to God and at the same time it is the expression of God in the created world.

Man is said to be created in the image of God because he is capable of self-transformation, of being "reborn into the higher forms, which are divine."⁽¹⁾ This 'rebirth' is based on the Platonic conception of the contemplative ideal as the highest wisdom -- pure

(1) Oration, p. 225.

contemplation leads to the beatific vision. This vision stresses a mystical union with God that departs from the humanist understanding of wisdom as a life of personal virtue and moral action. Pico "never abandoned his view of summa felicitas as a personal 'extinction in God'",⁽¹⁾ that requires an active pursuit from man and an extension of grace from God. The highest wisdom is nothing less than knowing the ideas in the mind of God. Natural felicity is the first step in this process. It consists in seeing the traces of God in oneself and nature, understanding the interconnections between the One and the Many.

Thus it is personal and rational. But the supreme felicity for Pico is irrational, requiring the loss of self through personal extinction in a mystical ignorance. This is very much like Cusanus' learned ignorance--the highest truth is only partially expressed (and at that, only symbolically) in any particular existent. To perceive the whole one must go outside the particular (the self) and this requires personal extinction. So long as we deal in the rational world of philosophy, we are limited to imperfectly expressed truths seen by our finite

(1) Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, p. 65, note #46.

modes of perception. By stepping outside philosophy we can achieve a union with the infinite at the price of our own particular self-consciousness. Knowledge of the infinite is, of course, out of the question--it is a contradiction in terms.

"Pico believed that man must surrender himself utterly to a state of unknowing, and approach the divine secret in the blindness of self-destruction."⁽¹⁾

Natural felicity is proper to the philosopher and theologian. The traces of God in nature and man are written in the traditions of religious literature and the task of religious investigation is to unearth them. Man resembles God not only because he is a creative being but because his soul is modeled on the Trinity. The connection between God and the world exists of course because God is the source of the Many. The metaphysics of this connection as far as Pico is concerned is by no means consistent. He adopts the theory of emanation for the most part although he also shows Averroist tendencies. Certain conclusions can be safely drawn, however, and it is certain that for Pico, the realm of the intelligible is higher than that of the sensible: universals superior and prior to the concrete. Knowledge of universals is gained

(1) Ibid., p. 63

through philosophy;...

God has in His divine mind the Ideas of all things, the Ideas of the sun and moon, men, all animals, plants, and stones, the elements, and all things generally. This mind--and here is the identification on which Christian Platonism is based--is the intelligible world, where all things exist, not in a material or sensible manner of being, but in a truer, nobler, more beautiful way, the ideal or the intelligible.⁽¹⁾

Knowledge of this intelligible realm constitutes, for the philosopher, the highest natural felicity. It requires a certain degree of stepping outside the created realm of imperfect being into the otherworldly realm of ideas. There exists a tension in this view of creation that results in a devaluing of the concrete but at the same time the concrete is given a relative value. It is seen as the stage wherein God reveals Himself and serves as the ladder upon which man ascends to the higher realms. Man is therefore encouraged to plunge into the created realm of material being in order that he may understand the

(1) E. Rice; The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 63. Rice points out that even this apprehension of the ideas in the divine mind cannot be achieved without the help of grace.

realm of the ideal. It is through the plenitude⁽¹⁾ that man can approach the One. An understanding of man as magus followed the merger of this idea with the understanding of man's essential creativity. He can command the orders of creation, utilizing and organizing their powers to aid him in his ascent to God. Because all things share in the One, manipulation of their inherent

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- (1) Lovejoy defines this Platonic principle as follows:
- a) "the fullness of the realization of conceptual possibility in actuality,"
 - b) "the thesis that the universe is a plenum formarum in which the range of conceivable diversity of kinds of living things is exhaustively exemplified,"
 - c) "the extent and abundance of creation must be as great as the possibility of existence and commensurate with the productive capacity of a 'perfect' and inexhaustible Source, and that the world is the better, the more things it contains."
- Lovejoy, A.: The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1936 and 1964, p. 52. In this book Lovejoy traces the history of the 'great chain of being' which originated in Plato and received widespread exposure through the Neoplatonists. It posits the necessary fullness of the world as a dialectical necessity due to the fact that inherent in the Idea of the Good was the necessity of engendering finite existents. It then follows that all possible existents must be actualized, making the world as full as possible. This idea of the fullness of the world was fused with the Aristotelian notion of 'continuity' (i.e. that all quantities must be continuous, non-discrete), thus forming the 'chain of being' wherein one existent leads directly to the next. That this tends to contradict the Christian notion of free creation made Christian Platonism adopt two notions of the Good: one informing and generative Good, and one Absolute, ineffable Good.

energies becomes an acceptable method for reaching up towards God. Pico follows most of the Renaissance 'natural magicians' in his rejection of demonic magic and occult influences (particularly in the case of astrology) as deceitful regardless of their alleged power, but believes that natural magic is nothing less than holy philosophy--the science of the divine. It is this natural magic that Pico traces in his poetic theology. Magic is an unspecified process that allows man to embrace "the deepest contemplation of the most secret things, and at last the knowledge of all nature."⁽¹⁾ It calls forth "into the light as if from their hiding places the powers scattered and sown in the world by the loving-kindness of God"⁽²⁾, uniting heaven and earth in the process.

Pico is claiming nothing for so-called natural magic that had not been claimed before. Yet, unlike Ficino, he presupposes the truths of Christian dogma (such as the concept of the Trinity) which he seeks to verify through his philosophy, while retaining throughout the belief that access to the transcendent culminates not in verification of dogma but in mystical union above all such knowing.

(1) Oration, p. 248.

(2) Ibid., p. 248.

The belief that nature constituted "a single great organism, with a soul of its own"(1) allowed for the development of natural magic and identified it with true wisdom. Since these regular properties were difficult to discover, Pico's belief that all important truths are cryptic received further support.

Natural magic told us things about nature and God but it could not, on its own, be anything other than a preparation for mystical union with God. Through "taming of the impulses of our passions with moral science, by dispelling the darkness of reason with dialectic, and by, so to speak, washing away the filth of ignorance and vice, cleanse the soul, so that her passions may not rave at random nor her reason through needlessness ever be deranged"(2), the ascent to God progresses. It requires grace for completion. The mysteries of nature are solved through philosophy and the soul is made ready for the religious life by theology - "philosophy seeks; theology

(1) J. Randall, Jr.; The Career of Philosophy from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, New York, Columbia University Press, 1962, p. 191.

(2) Oration, p. 229.

finds; religion possesses.⁽¹⁾ Religion is an interior state of mind which holds God in its grasp by love--it is preceded by an intellectual movement of the will towards God but obliterates the intellect at the moment of its union.

In his Being and One Pico acknowledges that while we can say, for example, that God is above being, above truth, above the good because He is goodness, truth, and being itself, we are still not close enough to the real truth; these ideas about God are approximations because only through approximations can our intellect express something that is essentially a mystery. In saying these things

we are indeed in the light, but God has placed His dwelling in the shadows. We have then not yet come to God Himself. So long, in short, as that which we say of God is fully understood and entirely comprehended, we are in the light. But all that we say and perceive thus is a mere trifle, considering the infinite distance which separates Divinity from the capacity of our minds.⁽²⁾

The ineffability of God limits the goals of theological speculation. Thus we move from base darkness and

(1) A. Dulles; Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1941, p. 144. Dulles is quoting Pico's letter to Aldo Manuzio.

(2) Pico, Of Being and Unity, p. 23 (Italics mine).

ignorance into the light of philosophy, and as we climb higher, we move upwards into another darkness where we are "blinded by the cloud of the Divine Splendor."⁽¹⁾ This is further emphasized by Pico's belief that "while we are in the body we are able to love God better than we can know or describe Him."⁽²⁾ Because of our 'earthly preoccupations' we are prevented, it seems, from complete identification with God, even in mystical union. Yet we must try to remove ourselves from the realm of the sensible, we must "fly from the world, which is confirmed in evil"⁽³⁾ on wings provided by a "love of the things above."⁽⁴⁾ Our body and our mind pull us in opposite directions but by moving upwards from the realm of matter to that of spirit we can establish a unity, truth, and goodness within ourselves without which we are not fulfilling our heavenly destiny.

Pico shows definite ascetic tendencies in his understanding of the world. Involvement in the world should be regulated by one's sense of it as the locus of natural truths leading upwards, away from the physical

(1) Ibid., p. 23.

(2) Ibid., p. 25.

(3) Ibid., p. 33.

(4) Ibid., p. 34

realm. Too much involvement in the world of passions and physical existence restricts access to the realm of the intelligible, hence one's attitude should be other-worldly oriented.

CHAPTER III

Pico's lifelong search for a *pax philosophica* reaches its most mature expression in Of Being and Unity. He felt that the quarrel between the Platonist and the Aristotelian was "undermining the foundations of the Christian religion."⁽¹⁾ By showing their essential agreement, Pico was providing for what he hoped would be a universal philosophy grounded in many traditions and reaching its fullest expression in the Christian religion. Based on his idea that only through a symbolic understanding of Scripture and other sources can we approach knowledge of God, Pico saw an underlying unity in all forms of higher thought. He often found himself embroiled in controversy with the Church because of this.

If many of Pico's ideas were heretical, his intentions were good and stemmed from a purely Christian piety. In the Heptaplus he explicitly states that "Human nature can give promise of nothing or little unless it is aided by something better, that is, the divine will."⁽²⁾

(1) Pico; Of Being and Unity, quoted from the introduction by V. Hamm, p. 10.

(2) A. Dulles; Princeps Concordiae, p. 127.

What makes this passage interesting is the qualification Pico adds. He is not willing to renounce the value of purely human activity, an admission which would invalidate his understanding of the nature of man.

We have seen that Pico shares many ideas with the Italian humanists of the fifteenth century. He participated in the revival of classical literature and the study of Greek and Hebrew writings. He stressed the innate value of man and his unique relationship to God and the universe. Pico also had much in common with the scholastic theologians and attempted a philosophical synthesis between the various traditions, many of which the scholastics had not explored. He subordinated the truths of philosophy to those of theology, and put both beneath the mystical union with God which constituted man's natural end. Throughout his work Pico remained a Christian thinker and there is strong evidence that during his later years he was drawn closer to the purely spiritual life for which his theology had prepared him. Unlike Ficino, with whom he had much in common, he was a layman, although how long he would have remained one is not clear. There is no evidence to suggest that he completely abandoned his pursuit of a 'pax philosophica', nor can we assume that his proposed Poetic Theology would have remained incomplete had he lived a longer life.

Pico, though, like Scripture itself, is open to many interpretations. He embodies so many traditions and his knowledge included so many sources and influences that it is impossible to place him squarely within the confines of any one particular school. He promised much that he did not deliver, leaving fertile ground for later speculation and in the closing years of his life he seems to have been involved with the complex figure of Savonarola. This association has yet to be adequately explored--at present it allows those who wish to see Pico's last years as a time filled with religious zeal for God and a rejection of his former philosophy ample basis for their claim. Certainly Pico's letter to his nephew and his composition of the 'Twelve Rules' (written during the last two years of his life) allowed at least one Christian writer to feel that Pico had reached his true understanding of man's goal by turning his back on philosophy and embracing the religious life. This writer was Thomas More.

More translated the life and works of Pico during a period of rapid changes in the intellectual climate of Europe. Enthusiasm for the new learning was spreading through the educated classes, as it had in Italy, bringing with it elements of classicism and Platonism as well as an increased study of languages and techniques of textual criticism. Scholars from all over Europe journeyed to

Italy on a secular pilgrimage to take part in the revival of classical culture.

The classics offered instruction in moral virtues which held great attraction for the educated layman. In addition to moral instruction, classical sources provided a confusing jumble of philosophies which was the inevitable consequence of this new found access to ancient writings. Scholars could choose from among a wide variety of unfamiliar traditions contained in the recently translated works of previously unheard-of authors. Often the translators themselves would adopt a position that tended to combine disparate philosophies found in the works they were translating. Those who undertook the trip to Italy often had specific purposes in mind; we know that the Englishmen who journeyed there did so for quite specific reasons--reasons which express the differences between the Italian humanism and that humanism which has come to be called Christian. The Christian humanists believed that a purified Christianity lay within the reach of the scholar educated in Greek and Latin, familiar with the corpus of Patristic literature and above all, able to penetrate to the heart of the Biblical message through new methods of textual criticism working with the original sources themselves. These ideals could be related to non-Christian texts in a number of ways, but the main drive

was to return to 'the sources' of Christianity and free it of its cumbersome medieval baggage.

In a letter to Oxford University⁽¹⁾ dated 1518 More answers the objection to a humanistic education as secular. He points out that classical works train the soul in virtue, and that true theology--the theology contained in Scripture and the writings of the Fathers--is perverted in the works of the scholastics. He points out that the need for Greek studies is a specifically Christian need for it gives the student access to the original text of the New Testament. His attitude toward secular classics is one of enthusiasm tempered with an appreciation for the overall purpose of the Christian humanistic program: to reach the core of Christian theology which had been unavailable to the scholastics with their lack of Greek and their preference for contentious "questions".

Many of the English humanists connected with More and Erasmus were members of the clergy. Their desire for reform was enhanced by their belief in the fruits of the new learning when applied to Christian sources. Their

(1) E. Rogers, St. Thomas More: Selected Letters, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961, pp. 94-103.

desire was not to effect a tentative reconciliation of pagan and Christian philosophies but rather to form a thorough and simple understanding of the message of Christianity in order to more closely approximate that message in their lives, and in the lives of those who were dependent on them for their spiritual guidance. Colet's sermon to the Convocation (1511) emphasized the pressing need to reform the Church from within its own ranks.⁽¹⁾ Colet's understanding of Christianity was based largely on his view of St. Paul on whose epistles he lectured in 1496 at Oxford. These lectures illustrate the direction Christian humanism was to take for Thomas More and Erasmus, as well as a large number of lesser figures.

Colet lectured on Paul's letters from a new point of view. He treated them as historical works written each in a particular historical setting which must be understood literally in order to glean the particular message they conveyed. Colet did not have an adequate command of Greek to enable him to read the works in their original tongue⁽²⁾ but his approach indicates his grounding in

(1) For the complete text of this sermon, see Lupton, A Life of John Colet, London, George Bell & Sons, 1887, Appendix C.

(2) Ibid., p. 67.

Humanistic studies. Although he espouses a literal interpretation resting on grammatical fidelity to the epistles, Colet is not a scriptural literalist. Lupton relates a section of Colet's abstract of the Hierarchies of the Psuedo-Dionysius, whom he believed to have been a disciple of St. Paul's, in which he allows for the possibility of allegory in scripture;

In the writings of the New Testament, saving when it pleased the Lord Jesus and His Apostles to speak in parables, as Christ often does in the Gospels, and St. John throughout in the Revelation, all the rest of the discourses, in which either the Saviour teaches His disciples more plainly, or the Apostles instruct the Churches, has the sense that appears on the surface; nor is one thing said and another meant, but the very thing is meant which is said, and the sense is wholly literal.⁽¹⁾

The important qualifications in this view of scriptural interpretation prevent one from dispensing with the need for an ecclesiastical authority while emphasizing the fact that Paul's letters to his churches mean exactly what they say.

The spirit of this form of textual interpretation presents an alternative to the medieval "manifold senses" approach. Colet indicates that while there is almost always a literal sense in scripture, there is not necessarily an allegorical or hidden sense. Lupton rightly notes that this applies only to the writings of the New Testament in Colet's view, for as we see in

Colet's exposition of Genesis, Old Testament writings are to be seen in a different light altogether.

In his exegesis of Old Testament works, Colet relies heavily on Neoplatonic ideas he picked up in Italy. He bases his commentary on Genesis on Pico's Heptaplus, arguing that certain accommodations had been made in order to present the divine mystery of creation in a form intelligible to the human intellect. Colet's studies in Neoplatonic philosophy resulted in an attempt to detail this "poetic accommodation" in Christian terms. He uses Pico as a guide to the philosophic doctrines found in Genesis, indicating that his Christian philosophy had more Platonism in it than did that of those humanists such as More and Erasmus whom he influenced. Colet retained more of an interest in the sort of Christian Neoplatonism he saw in the Psuedo-Dionysius which tried to accommodate the truths of pagan philosophy under those of Christianity:

If Platonists like Ficino seemed to rely rather heavily upon authorities such as Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus, and Zoroaster, and to talk rather more about Venus, Minerva, and the Cumaean Sibyl than about Christ, and Paul, Colet had only to refine this pagan ore into Christian doctrine by the simple alchemy of 'accommodation', a

(1) Ibid., p. 106.

principle of exegesis advocated by the Pseudo-Dionysius himself.⁽¹⁾

In other words, in the New Testament where the sense is not wholly literal, and in much of the Old Testament, Colet falls back on the Neoplatonists for support in his exegesis. Here is a further refinement of the earlier position of Pico and Ficino who tended to see all of Scripture as basically corroborative of Neoplatonic ideas even if it surpassed them. Colet relies on the esoteric philosophy only when Scripture does not yield a literal sense, or when it treats of explicitly philosophical notions in what can be seen as symbolic terms; i.e., when there is evidence of 'accommodation'. Colet had been prepared for the Neoplatonic traditions by his readings in the Pseudo-Dionysius whom he believed to have absorbed the words of Paul from Paul's own mouth as seen in Acts 17:34.⁽²⁾

(1) Sears Jayne; John Colet and Marsilio Ficino, pp. 44-45.

(2) By the time of Colet's lecture on St. Paul's letters, serious doubts had been cast on the identification of the author of Celestial Hierarchies with the Dionysius mentioned in Acts 17:34. Grocyn had come to doubt the identification, which was rejected also by Valla as early as 1455. Erasmus certainly would have been familiar with Valla's view, as he had published Valla's notes on the New Testament somewhat later than Colet's lecture. We can only guess that

Colet's interest in the Pseudo-Dionysius reveals his contemplative nature. He taught, like many of the reformers, the need to return to the pristine Christianity of the apostolic age. Scripture, when studied properly, affords the opportunity to experience the true Christian life as it was experienced in the earliest times, "as it stood before all theology and independently of all scholastic commentary and interpretation."⁽²⁾

Colet was an inspiration to both More and Erasmus. More saw him as the "best physician" able to cure the ills

Colet knew of the objections, and owing to the lack of evidence to the contrary, we can suggest that Colet held to his earlier views. See J.B. Trapp; "John Colet and the Hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius" in Religion and Humanism, edited by Keith Robbins, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1981, pp. 139-140. It is interesting to note that when Henry VIII writes against Luther, he cites the Celestial Hierarchies as proof that holy orders should be viewed as a sacrament on the basis of Pauline authority. Luther rejects this appeal to Pseudo-Dionysius, and when More undertakes Henry's defense he cites the work not as necessarily apostolic but rather as of known antiquity much like the authority vested in the works of the Fathers. This seems to indicate that More knew of the objections to seeing the author of the Hierarchies as Paul's companion, and perhaps agreed with them. See Richard Marius; "Henry VIII, Thomas More, and the Bishop of Rome" in ALBION, Vol. 10, 1978, supplement, p. 94.

(2) Cassirer, The Platonic Renaissance in England, p. 105.

plaguing those living in the world of temptation⁽¹⁾ and Erasmus' debt to him is legendary. Yet, Colet differs from them in a number of ways. He was decidedly more philosophical--perhaps due to his early trip to Italy and the use he made of the Italian philosophers such as Ficino and Pico--and his understanding of the value of pagan authors tended to downplay their importance as guides in moral edification. Colet's radical and impatient approach to reform brought charges of heresy against him from members of the ecclesiastical establishment. In fact, many of Colet's views earned More's condemnation when expressed by the German reformers!⁽²⁾ Colet rejected what he called "dilettante paganism"⁽³⁾: the reliance on

(1) See More's letter to Colet, (#3), in Selected Letters, pp. 4-6.

(2) Leland Miles; John Colet and the Platonic Tradition, LaSalle, Open Court, 1961, p. 213.

(3) Lupton quotes from Colet's lecture on Corinthians: "Now, if anyone should say, as is often said, that to read heathen authors is of assistance for the right understanding of Holy Writ, let them reflect whether the very fact of such reliance being placed upon them does not make them a chief obstacle to such understanding. For, in so acting, you distrust your power of understanding the Scriptures by grace alone, and prayer, and by the help of Christ, and of faith; but think you can do so through the means and assistance of heathens." Lupton; A Life of John Colet, p. 76. More and Erasmus of course never claimed that one needed pagan works to rightly understand Scripture. They held that pagan works can instruct in virtue, which in turn enables men to see clearly

pagan works to elucidate Scripture. Instead of relying on non-Christian classics, one should read the Fathers who are the best authority outside Scripture itself. More and Erasmus would undoubtedly agree to the inappropriateness of applying pagan works to Christian texts. Still they believed in the basic validity of classical virtues and argued that the acquisition of such virtues could hardly present an obstacle to the true Christian. They believed, and this is the most fundamental point of Christian humanism which related it to the humanism of Italy, that moral virtue first seen in classical literature reaches its culmination in the Christian imitation of Christ.

Christian doctrine leads one to a higher virtue than that found in pagan works because it promises salvation, but pagan writers with their moral teachings based on reason alone could lead one to practice an exemplary life despite the absence of salvational results. A life of rational virtue, unenlightened by revelation, is presented in More's Utopia and underlies the tradition of the consolation of philosophy seen in his Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation. More and Erasmus adopted much of the spirit of classical writing--witty, learned, and at times

(and with greater ease than can be expected of the unvirtuous man) the precepts of Christianity.

satirical--in their early works but as they matured each turned to a more serious treatment of the religious problems besetting the Church. For Erasmus, this meant putting aside such works as the Praise of Folly and beginning his lifelong involvement with the works of the Fathers (most notably, Jerome) and the Bible.

Erasmus broke with the medieval approach to Scripture.

His interest very soon fixed on textual criticism of the Bible, in particular of the New Testament, as it had been re-established (rather than simply revived) by Lorenzo Valla, under the influence of Jerome and the Origen of the Hexapla. Then, on this basis, he set himself to give new life to meditation on the divine word, and the preaching of it. This meditation and preaching owed their chief inspiration to the Devotio moderna and to Colet, and were strengthened by the example given by the Fathers: but of the whole medieval tradition they took practically no account at all.⁽¹⁾

Stemming from his discovery of Valla's notes to the New Testament (which Erasmus had published in 1504-1505), Erasmus dedicated the rest of his scholarly efforts to the publication of corrected editions of Scripture and Patristic literature. To do so he had to acquire Greek and Hebrew and a thorough grounding in the seven arts. He

(1) The Cambridge History of the Bible, vol. II, edited by G.W.H. Lampe, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 492.

criticized the scholastics for misusing the Fathers by "making them answer questions they never put to themselves" instead of learning from their writings⁽¹⁾, and his view of Christ centers not around his teachings but rather around his life and person.

The influence of Erasmus' early schooling at Deventer is seen in his orientation to the New Testament as a way of life rather than as a source of philosophical doctrines. Erasmus moves out of the realm of speculative theology and into the world of the 'devotio moderna', taking for granted elements of Cusanus' doctrine of learned ignorance with respect to God's ineffability. The starting point for Christian teaching is found in Christ taken as an example of what man's finite intelligence can know in no other form. Erasmus saw that the surest way to reach the example of Christ and make it available to men was in presenting the message of the Gospels as clearly as it was presented and recorded in the generations living in the apostolic age. This approach is obviously quite different than the approach of a philosophical thinker like Pico who tended to pay more attention to the truths of revelation as seen in the Old Testament and in the

(1) Ibid., p. 502.

works of various 'inspired' writers whose truths must be found in basic agreement with those of Christianity.⁽¹⁾ The emphasis in Erasmus' works points away from philosophy toward practical ethics.

Erasmus differed from Colet on more than a few points of textual interpretation (e.g. Matthew 26:39 where Erasmus saw Christ's agony in more personal terms than did Colet who tended to believe that Christ's anguish was caused by his sadness for the guilt incurred by the Jews over his betrayal) as his understanding of the task ahead of him unfolded. In his early works he favored an allegorical approach because it afforded a reconciliation

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- (1) Pico seems to have abandoned his plans for a 'pax philosophica'. "Gone, too, is the desire to compose a Platonic Aristotelisque concordia or a Theologia poetica. In place of the strong desire for secular learning and philosophical disputation, is a much greater emphasis on scriptural study and on living the sort of life advocated by Savonarola." Schmitt; Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and his Critique of Aristotle, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, p. 32. Schmitt is of course referring to Giovanni Pico, despite the confusing title of this work in this context. Basically, Schmitt is correct in his assessment of Giovanni Pico's inward turning toward a life of Christian study and piety. But I would add that Pico consistently adhered to what he perceived to be Christian doctrines and if perhaps some of his ideas were deemed erroneous in the eyes of the church, Pico maintained a submissive posture for the most part.

between his beloved classical authors and Scripture⁽¹⁾. He later altered his views due to the influence of Colet and Valla, but as he became more involved in editing the New Testament and Jerome, the flavor of his attitude changes still further. He believed that Christians possess in common with pagan philosophers many truths, such as the freedom of the will, the creation of the world (Plato), the immortality of the soul (Plato), the sanctity of marriage (Aristotle), and numberless others. Far from impairing the authority of Christian dogmas, "Erasmus believes that reason 'rather strengthens' Scripture."⁽²⁾ In other words, Erasmus comes to see that one can neither wholly accept pagan teachings, and at the same time, they are certainly not to be completely rejected. Rather, they are to be seen as supporting Christian doctrine when they bring forth ideas which agree with specific points of Christianity, and to be disregarded when such agreement is not found. But one cannot bend the meaning of either reason or revelation to accommodate a reconciliation. The natural affinity of the New Testament with certain ideals found primarily in the residue of Greek philosophy

(1) See Rabil; Erasmus and the New Testament, p. 101.

(2) E.° Surtz, S.J.; The Praise of Pleasure, Cambridge, Harvard Press, 1957, p. 125.

retained by certain Fathers is a boon to Christianity only insofar as one retains the freedom to reject such ideals when they depart from the teachings sanctioned by the Church. Erasmus exhibits a spirit of selective eclecticism which ultimately traces back to Augustine⁽¹⁾. Yet, despite their differences of opinion regarding the validity of the classics, Colet and Erasmus had a common goal: Colet preached reform according to the spirit of the New Testament, and Erasmus undertook the burden of providing a clarified source upon which that reform was to base itself.⁽²⁾

(1) Rabil, Erasmus and the New Testament, p. 55.

(2) An interesting episode relating the common ground between Erasmus and Colet is preserved in Lupton's Life of John Colet, pp. 225-226. In a letter to Erasmus, Colet mildly chastises Erasmus for not sending him a copy of Reuchlin's recent work on the Cabala. Colet had mistakenly received the copy Erasmus had sent to Bishop Fisher, and had read it, and written this reply to Erasmus. "It is a book about which I dare not pronounce an opinion. I am aware how ignorant I am, and how dim-sighted in matters so transcendental...And yet, as I read, it seemed to me at times that the wonders were more verbal than real; for, according to his system, Hebrew words have something mysterious in their very characters and combinations. Erasmus! of books and of knowledge there is no end. But for this short life there is nothing better than that we should live in purity and holiness, and daily endeavor to be purified and enlightened, and fulfill what is promised in these Pythagorean and Cabalistic treatises of Reuchlin. This result, in my judgment we shall attain by no other way, than by ardent love and imitation of Jesus Christ. Wherefore, leaving

Erasmus' reform had enough in common with the content of Luther's early teachings that he was often charged with being the ringleader of the German reformers--a charge that Erasmus saw as directed mainly against his well-known penchant for the fruits of the new learning. Writing to Luther in 1519, Erasmus professes ignorance of Luther's works and urges him to discuss whatever misgivings he has about current practices in the church, or about theology, behind closed doors. Erasmus writes, "As for me, I keep myself as far as possible neutral, the better to assist the new flower of good learning; and it seems to me that more can be done by unassuming courteousness than by violence."⁽¹⁾ Erasmus concludes that the violent disputes between party-minded factions cannot prove but disruptive and is in any case contrary to the spirit of Christ. This belief, that theological matters are best discussed in private sessions amid an atmosphere of peaceful goodwill and neutrality, is found throughout

detours, let us take a short road to attain it quickly." I have quoted this at some length to indicate the essential agreement between Erasmus and Colet, and in particular, their anti-intellectual approach to piety and the teachings of Christ.

- (1) Taken from a selection of Erasmus' letters found in Huizinga; Erasmus of Rotterdam, London, Phaidon Press, 1952, pp. 230-231. The letters were translated by Barbara Flower.

More's works. According to More, Luther's arrogance and disrespect were as culpable as his heterodox theological opinions.

In his colloquy "An Examination Concerning Faith" Erasmus presents a Lutheran (Barbatus) and a Catholic (Aulus) as agreeing on the fundamental Christian doctrines as found in the Apostle's Creed. The reader is left to wonder how such a violent schism could have arisen between two parties, each of which presents itself as an adherent to a common body of truths, and more importantly, each of which adheres at least in theory to a spirit of loving compassion. In a time of rapid entrenchment, Erasmus could not remain neutral for long, however strongly he believed in the essential agreement of all Christians. He responded to the Protestant reform in his De libero arbitrio, stressing the belief in man's nature which allowed him to take part in the transformation of nature into grace. He saw man's power to act rightly according to the dictates of revealed law (and to a lesser degree, of reason) as a significant factor in the quest for salvation but by no means lessened man's dependence on grace in effecting that salvation. Luther's understanding of grace as replacing nature is rejected by Erasmus as well as the other Christian humanists who saw the effect of Christ's reconciliation at least partially dependent

on man's response to it. This human response is best manifested in an imitation of Christ, by which action we "appropriate" His work. Erasmus downplays the fallen nature of man seen in the doctrine of original sin. Man's fallen state consists in his tendency to imitate Adam (indicating a propensity to sin) but his free will allows for him to choose to imitate Christ. By imitating Christ rather than Adam, a redirection of man's state is brought about. This redirection can also be initiated by a study of classical literature with its emphasis on the striving after a life of virtue. This spirit, of man's own attempt to live righteously, enables Erasmus to say, through the mouth of Nephalius, "Saint Socrates, pray for us!"⁽¹⁾ Thus Luther's idea that the self is so corrupted that even knowledge of its corruption must come from external sources--i.e. revelation--finds no support in the humanistic approach where even reason is able to point man in the right direction.

Erasmus could hold fast to his view of classical literature while at the same time relegating pagan works to a decidedly lower status in his scholarly undertakings.

(1) Erasmus, "The Godly Feast", in Ten Colloquies, edited and translated by Craig Thompson, Indianapolis and New York, Bobbs-Merrill Co., The Library of Liberal Arts Press, 1957, p. 158.

We see him writing to Colet, refusing a suggestion that he teach poetry or rhetoric--subjects "which ceased to be agreeable to me after they had ceased to be indispensable. That sort of teaching I refuse, because it bears only a slight relation to my plan of life..."⁽¹⁾ His plan of life at this point was to edit the New Testament, and perhaps his somewhat strong statement regarding poetry and rhetoric was tailored to Colet's professed dislike of such studies. But we cannot accuse Erasmus of hypocrisy in this, for he never felt that the liberal arts were to be studied for their own sake. In the words of so-called profane writers one can find moral truths, and while attention paid to them is not to eclipse that given to Scripture, still a grounding in the classics can be quite useful. In "A Godly Feast", written some time after the letter to Colet quoted above, Erasmus has Eusebius declaim:

On the contrary, whatever is devout and contributes to good morals should not be called profane. Of course, Sacred Scripture is the basic authority in everything; yet I sometimes run across ancient sayings or pagan writings--even the poets'--so purely and reverently expressed, and so inspired, that I can't help believing their authors' hearts were moved by some divine power. And perhaps the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand,

(1) Quoted in Rabil, Erasmus and the New Testament, p. 45.

and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar.⁽¹⁾

More develops this attitude toward classical learning in his Utopia. This work, written by a Catholic to other Catholics on the "eve of the Protestant Reformation, not its dawn"⁽²⁾ presents a dialogue (both literally and figuratively) between classical culture and Christianity and points out the false and dangerous extremes to which Christendom had fallen. In a commonwealth much like Plato's (although with certain important differences) reason alone is the standard by which men live and shape their values. More's intention was to shame Christians into mending their ways when they beheld the obvious sanity of the Utopian society against which their own could only appear as perverse and perhaps a bit insane. More was not intending to display Utopia as a model to be imitated but rather to demonstrate that, if with unaided reason men could construct such a noble state of affairs, certainly Christians could fashion, with the divine guidance of revelation, an equal or better society.

More uses a form of Epicurean philosophy in his presentation of Utopian values. It was only partially

(1) "The Godly Feast", in Ten Colloquies, p. 155.

(2) E. Surtz, The Praise of Pleasure, p. 2.

Epicurean in that Utopians adhered to certain truths which were specifically denied in classical Epicureanism: the potency of God, His interest in the world, and the immortality of the soul. These three beliefs were the cardinal tenets of all Utopian religions against which no man could speak. As for the Epicurean emphasis on pleasure as the highest good, More builds his hierarchy of Utopian values around this point. He identifies true pleasures as having one of two sorts of virtues--those of the body and those of the soul. Bodily pleasures are limited to health and the delights of the senses, but the pleasures of the soul are of a higher order and fall into three groupings. The lowest of the soul's pleasures is self-rewarding virtue, followed by a serene conscience and a blissful expectation of future reward, and the hierarchy culminates in the perpetual contemplation of the truth.⁽¹⁾

More presents a picture of true pleasures in Utopia quite similar to Pico's understanding of them as seen in his Twelve Weapons (which More had translated and expanded) if one divests them of their Christian

(1) See Surtz, The Praise of Pleasure, for a full treatment of More's use of Epicurean philosophy in Utopia.

references. The message of Utopian pleasure is much like Pico's sixth rule praising the "inward gladness of a virtuous mind."⁽¹⁾ This same sentiment is expressed more fully in one of Pico's letters to his nephew (which More also translated):

I pass over how great peace and felicity it is to the mind when a man hath nothing that grudgeth his conscience nor is not appalled with the secret touch of any privy crime. This pleasure undoubtedly far excelleth all the pleasures that in this life may be obtained or desired.⁽²⁾

(1) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 388.

(2) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 365. In this same volume, More also translated a letter of Pico to Andrew Corneus from which the following passage is taken. It too presents an understanding of the inward pleasures of the mind engaged in study and pursuit of truth as the highest felicity, and the consequent subordination of the bodily or physical experience. Pico writes against certain men who would have him give up study and enter into the service of government or worldly affairs. He writes "The words of Neoptolemus they (these men) hold utterly for a sure decree, that philosophy is to be studied either never or not long; but the sayings of wise men they repute for japes and very fables, that sure and steadfast felicity standeth only in the goodness of the mind and that these outward things of the body or of fortune little or naught pertain unto us." p. 369. Pico declines to take Corneus' advice to put his learning to use in some civic capacity or align it with the service of some great prince. Pico's understanding of the fruits of philosophy requires separation from the world at large, the better to detach oneself from fortune, and an inward pursuit of the Platonic ideal. More, on the other hand, presents a society in Utopia which no longer sees the two ends--civic responsibility and felicity of mind--as mutually exclusive extremes. Pico's

The natural hierarchy of pleasures did not demand asceticism in Utopia. In fact, ascetic practices were reserved only for a few. More's point was that one may enjoy the "delights of the senses" and good health within their proper limits, and keeping in mind that pleasures of the body are to be kept subordinate to the greater pleasures of the soul. More himself wore a hair shirt, and was familiar with Pico's practice of giving "alms of his own body". Ascetic practices for More were meant to steer him away from possible sins and to make his body totally obedient to his will. Put in Utopian terms, More was foregoing lesser pleasures in the pursuit of higher ones. Asceticism itself is not unreasonable in this understand-

refusal to enter the arena of public life is a rejection of the typical humanist position in which the humanist quite properly was meant to be an aide to a prince or ruler. More himself faced this choice which for him had assumed a slightly different form but retained certain essential points. More contemplated a life as a monk (or priest perhaps?) and in the end decided to enter the services of the king--with the important qualification that according to his vision of the true Christian life, one need not separate oneself from society in order to maintain the correct Christian posture. For More, the study of philosophy could be adapted to social action, as we see in Utopia, and in his own life, his inward religious striving remained intact despite the tugs of worldly affairs. It is not until his imprisonment that More gives full expression to his pursuit of inward felicity, which for him had come to mean contemplation of the mystery of Christ's passion.

ing, but it is not to be pursued at the expense of health or general well being. More as a Christian than can pursue ascetic practices not on the basis of reason, but on the basis of 'imitating' Christ.

If Europeans had difficulty in understanding the nature of the dialogue between Utopia and contemporary Europe, they would have had little difficulty in accepting the traditional relationship presented between reason and religion. Reason and religion stood in the same relationship as nature to grace. It was the familiar two story house paradigm in which the truths of the lower level were supplemented and perfected by those of the higher. The two levels could never be contradictory--reason was not the enemy of faith but its ally. The limits of reason prevent it from discussing matters proper to religion and thus it can pose no threat in those areas from which it is excluded. The essential harmony between the two is seen in the attractively formed society of Utopia which, we learn late in the book, would long ago have prevailed in Europe and the world had not pride intervened. The citizens of Utopia are presented as quite pious on a natural basis. Utopian religion lacks only certain knowledge of divine mysteries which are possessed only by the aid of revelation--with this exception, the religions of Utopia are nothing else than the many manifestations of

natural religion which one might expect. But Utopians never make the mistake of worshipping reason itself, or of removing the limits of reason to allow it free reign in matters which More would call dogma. Dogmatic certainty is avoided except in three cases already noted: God's power, His concern, and the immortality of the soul. Without certainty in these matters, a reasonable society might slide into anarchy.

The Christian humanists in More's circle saw the misuse of reason as a prime cause in creating the conditions against which they directed their reform. The scholastics had overextended reason by seeing it as an unlimited tool for probing revelation and the mysteries of heaven. This is not to suggest that the scholastic theologians felt reason was able to replace revelation as a source for truth, but only to say that by subjecting every nuance of revealed truth to an intense scrutinization they lost sight of what many reformers saw to be the true end of revelation itself--the increase of piety and the worship of God. The belief that reason was able to direct the will in matters of faith was of course rejected by Aquinas, but the tendency to rationalize revelation in order to end up with a logically self-consistent system often had the scholastics quarreling among themselves over speculative matters not even hinted

at in Scripture. A large part of theology was thereby concerned with metaphysics and philosophy which is legitimate in and of itself but should not comprise the sum total (or even the largest part) of theological activity. More was not anti-intellectual in believing that the fundamental purpose of learning was to make one a better Christian any more than Erasmus was in deciding to purge Scripture and the writings of the Fathers from the accumulated errors of medieval commentators. What they were pointing to in their pursuit of learning for the sake of religion was that because Christians had been given the example and teachings of Christ, there was no need to pursue knowledge unless it lead to Christ. And they felt that the blind pursuit of rational truths contained in revelation by the schoolmen was definitely not in the service of Christian piety.

Pico's use of pagan wisdom differs from More's in that More tended to see all wisdom as pointing toward Christian piety--if it didn't, then it wasn't wisdom. Pico, on the other hand, saw a unity of metaphysical truths concealed in non-Christian writings which was carried on into Scripture. More saw classical works as examples of virtuous living while Pico tended to search them for deeper and more esoteric truths. Naturally, their differing orientations to such works led them to

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investigate different sources. The Christian humanists in general tended to turn away from the study of classical works once their moral teachings had been assimilated. That Pico abandoned (if indeed he really did at all) his studies in non-Christian philosophy is not to be taken as evidence that he had assimilated its moral content but rather as pointing to his sense of the inability of philosophy to lead him to the Christian God. Pico's attitude toward philosophy (which retains much of the scholastic approach mentioned earlier) could not allow him the freedom to depart from its teachings as easily as More could depart from secular sources as a whole: Pico's religion was too tightly tied to a perception of the function of the intellect to allow him to subordinate his quest for knowledge to his understanding of the nature of piety as seen in the moral teachings of the New Testament. As a consequence, he is said to have abandoned philosophy for the religious life, while More gradually left off studying the classics when they were no longer of use but retained his belief in their value. In More's last works, classical references are rare compared to his use of them in his earlier writings but there is nowhere a sense that the values expressed in the best classical sources are incompatible with Christianity. More's interest in the classics was based on their value as guides to a way of

life: Pico saw them as vehicles conveying sacred knowledge. He did not make the necessary step from perceiving this knowledge to expressing it primarily because he neglected the ethical side of piety in favor of its intellectual side. The eulogistic phrases in his biography notwithstanding, it appears clear from an analysis of Pico's works that his interest in philosophy was more conducive to academic debate than to personal virtue.

More's translation of Pico's life reveals Pico as a model for the Christian layman. How much of More's editing is responsible for this impression is a matter that depends largely on one's prior impression of Pico himself, but it must be pointed out that More places great emphasis on Pico's alleged conversion besides a slight misrepresentation of the facts concerning the nine hundred condemned theses. More makes it seem as though Pico received papal approval of his theses when in fact he lived for almost six years under papal ban which was not lifted until shortly before his death⁽¹⁾. Doubtless Pico's biographer, from whose account More worked, was in part responsible for presenting a certain side of Pico in

(1) English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 352.

the best possible light, and More cannot be taken to task for believing in it.

Immediately following the account of Pico's troubles with the church is the description of his change:

Women's blandishments he changed into the desire of heavenly joys, and despising the blast of vainglory, which he before desired, now with all his mind he began to seek the glory and profit of Christ's Church, and so began he to order his conditions that from thenceforth he might have been approved, as though his enemy were his judge. (1)

This change, More indicates, resulted in the burning of his early love poems, an increased diligence in the study of Scripture and an attitude toward disputation that favored private discussions rather than public debate. (2) Pico's fame grew rapidly and More omits references to his philosophic prowess save for a few short phrases of praise. Instead, he moves on to a discussion of the "noble acts" which distinguished the closing years of Pico's life. We are told that three years before his death, Pico sold his land and distributed alms to the poor. He gave himself over to daily prayer, asceticism (in remembrance of Christ's Passion) and read Scripture. This life, quite different from the life one expects from the author of the nine hundred theses or the Heptaplus

(1) Ibid., p. 353.

(2) Ibid., p. 354.

does indeed appear to be a shining example of the Christian ideal. Granting that More's translation of Pico's life was intended to serve as a brief introduction to the spiritual works which followed, and granting that it was dedicated to a nun who had made a formal vow of obedience to the will of Christ, and granting that the work was in English and not in Latin (the language of the educated)--it still strikes the reader as portraying the life of a layman acting as if he were a monk. The voluntary poverty, the other-worldly attitude, the alms and the asceticism all seem to bespeak a monastic spirit, and yet Pico was most certainly not a monk. Savonarola chastises Pico for ignoring God's call⁽¹⁾, but More seems to have taken heart that Pico's piety would serve him well in the company of souls destined for everlasting felicity in heaven. The obvious connection to More's own state of affairs following his decision to leave the Charterhouse in London where he had been living should not blind us to the significance of More's hand in creating a certain version of Pico by telescoping the Life in order to emphasize its message. As we shall see, that message is expressed in many of More's subsequent writings.

(1) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 361.

Pico seems to have shared More's belief that one's learning should be put into service for religion. His desire to buttress revealed truths with demonstrable proofs (from such sources as Cabala and so-called natural philosophy by which he meant a type of natural magic) later gave way to a simpler acceptance of Scripture in a monastic spirit stressing action rather than intellectual investigation. The sort of pride Pico seems to have been guilty of in his early life (according to More's version of the Life) is balanced by his later contrition and pursuit of Christian virtue. More adopts as his starting point the position Pico seems to have arrived at in the three years prior to his death. This is borne out by the fact that More translates only works by Pico written in the last years of his life⁽¹⁾ and neglects the rest of his writings which were contained in the volume compiled by Pico's nephew from which More worked. It is clear that More's mature works reflect a developed vision of spirituality that contains parallel passages seen in his rendering of Pico's devotional works. Especially striking examples of this parallelism are found in More's Four Last Things (ca. 1522) and later in his Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation. Certain passages from Pico seem to

(1) More somehow dates the second letter, to Corneus, as 1492 when in fact it was written in 1486.

have struck a responsive chord in More for we find them repeated in his own writings years later. More's elaborations on Pico's twelve weapons and twelve properties illustrates his affinity with their message--he obviously felt no compunction at paraphrasing and editing Pico's writings, something that as a true humanist he perhaps should have resisted.

There is little in Pico's philosophy prior to his alleged conversion that could have appealed to More at the time of his translation. That More praises his famous learning and thorough knowledge is enough to demonstrate he was not adverse to philosophy per se, but an account of the details of Pico's learning would not serve More's point. It may be that if More had translated Pico's life at a later date when his own concerns were significantly more theological he would have paid closer attention to Pico's position as a theologian.

More seems to have ignored a piece of advice counselling against worldly involvement at precisely the juncture in his life when he could have taken it most to heart. In his translation of Pico's life, More translated the account of Pico's disdain for "the proud palaces of stately lords. Wedding and worldly business he fled

almost alike.⁽¹⁾ If pressed into choosing, however, Pico would have chosen marriage (as More did), but as it turned out, More chose both. It may be that his decision in favor of marriage was influenced by Pico's reluctant praise of it as a lesser ill.

What seems to have appealed to More in Pico's position, indeed what seems to sum up his impression of Pico while expressing his own views, is Pico's advice to a cunning man ("but not so good as cunning"): "If we had evermore before our eyes the painful death of Christ which He suffered for the love of us, and then if we would against think upon our death, we should well beware of sin."⁽²⁾ The image of Christ's death was to remain one of his strongest aides to piety throughout his life. It runs through his works never far from the surface if beneath it at all, and forms the core of his spiritual meditations and exercises in exegesis of such pieces as A Treatise upon the Passion, The Sadness of Christ, the Four Last-Things, and of course the Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation.

Pico was, by his own admission, both scholastic and humanist. More, on the other hand, began his career as a

(1) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 359.

(2) Ibid., pp. 358-359.

humanist and only later developed an appreciation for the scholastics. His opinion of the scholastics gradually brightened as he became more and more involved in theological debate, and while he did not abandon his belief that the schoolmen had neglected true piety in the search for dogmatic certainty, he saw the learned debates at the universities as an aid to education rather than an impediment to it.⁽¹⁾ His own career as a humanist in the service of his king⁽²⁾ demanded that he make himself familiar with theological issues in order to better refute the Protestant reformers, and to that end he employed the skills of the disputant much like a scholastic. But More's activity as a polemicist hinged on his ability to ridicule and slander as much as it did on sound theological debate, suggesting that his 'scholasticism' was tempered by an appreciation for literary style and sarcasm. It would be wrong to suppose that More wrote against the heretics solely in response to external pressure. In his eyes the Protestants were heretics threatening to disrupt not only Christian unity as a

(1) See Complete Works of St. Thomas More. Vol. 5, Part II, pp. 779-780.

(2) For a discussion of More as "Henry's tame humanist" see G.R. Elton; "Thomas More, Councillor" in St. Thomas More: Action and Contemplation, p. 109.

common confession, but to bring Christendom to the brink of chaos politically. Hence he attacked the reformers on theological as well as moral grounds.

In his Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation More equates the Protestant heresy with the invasion of Europe by the Turks. But at the time of writing, More was also experiencing another kind of threat--persecution by Henry VIII. The result is a work which assumes several layers of meaning directed towards different audiences. They were expressed finally in More's understanding of the 'midday devil.'

The 'midday devil' of temptation encompasses the above mentioned tribulations in a metaphoric analogy which bases itself on the nature of persecution for one's faith. More sees nothing other than the force of the devil, naked and undisguised, as the root of the tribulations currently raging throughout Christendom. Whether it be under the name of Turk or heretic, king or temptation, the ancient force of evil is More's adversary against which the blandishments of philosophy are of no use. More capitalizes on the inadequacy of philosophy to comfort one presented with the spectre of his own death in the name of true faith (martyrdom)--a death that may be preceded by terrible pain and shame. In such a case, the only recourse the true Christian has is to seek the

supernatural aid of Christ through prayer and meditation on Christ's own painful death. More had distilled the question of heresy to its purely spiritual aspects, seeing in the drama of the Turkish invasion, Luther's reform, and Henry's persecution a contest between temptation and the example of Christ. By this time More was no longer concerned with the business of refuting heresy on theological grounds--he had essentially left that task far behind and was now preparing himself for his martyrdom.⁽¹⁾

More's controversial works interrupt the sequence of devotional tracts that began with the Four Last Things and ended with the so-called Tower writings. In this interim, More writes both in English and in Latin, directing his pen against the heretical reformers from what appears to be a reactionary point of view. Thus it is as a conservative Catholic (who nevertheless has a thorough understanding of the need for reform) that More defends his faith. The tension between his idea of Catholic faith and the official version he is defending presents itself clearly in the treatment More gives to the papacy. His

(1) See Frank Manley, "Audience" in Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 12, 1976, pp. cxx-clxiv.

counciliarism is subsumed by the Church's teachings on the pope as the official head of Christendom; More's own understanding of the pope's relationship to the Church seems to be that the pope expresses Christian unity but is by no means the infallible authority claimed by many ecclesiastical sources. It is an interesting and not necessarily idle speculation as to the nature of More's works had not the Protestant reformation interrupted his devotional writing. As it was, the circumstances which allowed More the opportunity to return to such work as he had begun in the Four Last Things acted as a profound catalyst in determining his views although he had already demonstrated the direction his views would take.

In his translation of Pico's life, More relates a single passage from what is perhaps Pico's greatest philosophical work, On Being and Unity. Pico digresses from his discussion of philosophy and offers what seems to be a glimpse of his growing devotion:

But now behold, O my well-beloved Angel [Angelus Politianus] what madness holdeth us. Love God (while we be in this body) we rather may, than either know Him or by speech utter Him.. In loving Him also we more profit ourselves, we labor less and serve Him more; and yet had we liefer always by knowledge never find that thing that we seek, than by love to possess that thing which also, without love, were in vain found.⁽¹⁾

(1) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 358.

Pico's advice, that is, where Pico speaks in his own words to various persons, is this: By keeping Christ's Passion in front of us at all times, we can avoid sin, and by loving Him we can better serve Him. These two ideals form the core of the message More received from his translation of Pico's life and selected works.

In Pico's commentary on Psalm XV, the Twelve Rules, Twelve Weapons, and Twelve Properties, his prayer, and the letters More included in his translation, many ideas are expounded which find their way into More's own works. It is unwise to assume More was introduced to these ideas by Pico due to the fact that other writers had expressed similar ideas from which More may have derived his views. But it is safe to say that More found in Pico an example of a life seemingly dictated by certain themes, and he attempted to illustrate those themes in his translation of Pico's devotional works. Naturally, this would tend to complement any compatible ideas More may have drawn from other sources, and in this sense Pico can be seen to have been a formative influence on the direction More's thought would take. In the following discussion of Pico's themes which find a later echo in More's works, I have selected a few remarkable instances which show that More's understanding of the Christian ideal, first seen in Pico, remained fairly consistent throughout his life--that is,

from his early works to his last writings from the Tower.

Pico's sixth weapon for spiritual battle, "The fear of impenitent departing", is expanded by More (as are all Pico's "weapons") from a single line into a seven lined stanza. It includes a sense of the sudden approach of death that catches men unaware and prevents them from any last minute repentance.⁽¹⁾ This weapon follows one entitled "Death at our hand and Unaware" which tends to emphasize its message. The lesson is clear--one should not live a life of sin in hopes of a final act of contrition. In More's Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation written over three decades later, we are told a story by Anthony about a man who lived an impenitent life, planning to repent the minute he beheld death coming for him. Despite his plans, an accident befell him and he died before he could repent, drawing the moral "And therefor let no man sinne in hope of grace/ grace cometh but at goddes will/ and that mynd may be the let that grace of frutfull repentyng shall neuer after be offred hym...."⁽²⁾ The ideal Christian life is a life ever

(1) For the complete texts of Pico's writings translated by More, see The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, pp. 363-396.

(2) Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 12, p. 92.

ready to go to Christ, a life of daily repentance. This ideal More saw in Pico and it remained firmly in his mind for the direction of his life. This mirrors Colet's sentiments seen in his letter to Erasmus already mentioned.

Similarly, Pico's eleventh weapon, "The Painful Cross of Christ", in which More renders in graphic terms the exhortation of meditate on the details of Christ's crucifixion, forms the core of his own devotional work A Treatise upon the Passion. In particular, the third book of More's treatise focuses on the details, the facts of Christ's death as an object for meditation. The image of Christ on the cross ought to guide man to contemplation of his own approaching death. Meditation on death is advised by Pico in his letter to his nephew where he indicates the two things that should not be forgotten: "that both the Son of God died for thee, and that thou shalt also thyself die shortly, live thou never so long. With these twain, as with two spurs, that one of fear, that other of love, spur forth thine horse through the short way of this momentary life, to the reward of eternal felicity..."⁽¹⁾ This constant remembrance of death is expressed by More throughout his Four Last Things as the idea that we are

(1) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 368.

always approaching death, and that we should "behold him and advise him such as he is, and thereby take occasion to flee vain pleasures of the flesh that keep out the very pleasures of the soul."⁽¹⁾ This idea is familiar to readers of the Utopia, and finds confirmation in More's portrayal of Pico somewhat earlier as exemplifying the monastic spirit of the true Christian. The notion of impending death is a classical one with which More was familiar from his readings in and translations of Latin epigrams. He had translated one entitled "Life Itself is a Journey Toward Death"⁽²⁾ in the years between 1509-1519. But in this epigram, More does not, of course, include the sense that our impending death should prompt us to repent and meditate on the cross. More adapts the wisdom of the classics to a Christian context without doing injustice to the spirit of either. This use of classical wisdom is thoroughly employed in the Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation.

In that dialogue, the world is seen as a prison wherein one journeys inexorably toward death. This image

(1) Ibid., p. 476.

(2) The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More, edited and translated by Bradner and Lynch, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 160. For the probable dates of More's epigrams, see p. xii.

of the world finds expression in Pico's letters where he reveals the two aids man has in effecting his escape: alms and prayer. The Christian has two "specially effectual remedies against the world and the devil, with which two, as with two wings, thou shalt out of this vale of misery be lifted up into heaven; that is to say, almsdeeds and prayer."⁽¹⁾ We catch a hint of Plato's cave in Pico's fourth weapon which also indicates the true nature of life in this world--it is as insubstantial as a dream or shadow on the wall. All of these images of the world and our life in it suggest a decidedly other-worldly orientation. By Pico's twin spurs quoted earlier (the remembrance of our own death and the death of Christ) and his two wings (alms and prayer) we are able to flee this prison and ascend heavenward. What these four things add up to is the way of love of Christ. More developed his understanding of the remembrance of death and the virtues of alms and prayer in his Four Last Things (which remained unfinished) and his Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation, suggesting that in his mind the Christian ideal had not changed greatly since his early translation of Pico's works and life.

(1) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 367.

It is curious that More's fame rested on his wit and gentle good humor. Certainly these are not traits we expect to find in a man journeying toward death in a vale of misery. But much of More's idea of the virtuous man lay in his understanding of hope and the avoidance of despair. We remember that beneath his outer garments More wore a hair shirt, and it is my belief that while he emulated Pico's asceticism and monastic spirit as a young man, he was equally mindful of the simple joys of this life and the promise of greater joys in the next. His early frame of mind as seen in the Utopian hierarchy of pleasure was influenced by his study of classical literature which dwelt more on good cheer and pleasing virtues than on the constant meditation of Christ's death. It was not until his fall from Henry's grace that he was quite literally confronted with the prospect of prison and death which he had seen earlier in Pico's writings and had given his own version of in his Four Last Things. In this last mentioned work, More exhorts the reader to remember death, doom, pain and joy in order to keep himself free from pride and sin. But he touches only slightly the theme of using these things as the center of a meditation which leads one to the mysteries of Christ's Passion and provides a spiritual buttress against the prospect of one's own death. The tone of the Four Last Things is

closer to that of a spiritual handbook for daily living than it is to a meditative guide. The links between this work and the Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation are strong, but the latter is decidedly more autobiographic and for that reason more personal, and interior.

In Roper's account of More's life he relates how More was fond of saying,

We may not look at our own pleasure to go to heaven in feather bed; that is not the way. For our Lord Himself went thither with great pain, and by many tribulations, which was the path where He walked thither; and the servant may not look to be in better case than his Master.⁽¹⁾

This idea is expressed in almost identical phrases in Pico's third rule which More translated as follows: "Consider well that folly it is and vain/ To look for heaven with pleasure and delight./ Since Christ our Lord and sovereign captain/ Ascended never but by manly fight/ and bitter passion; then were it no right/ That any servant, ye will yourself record/ Should stand in better condition than his Lord."⁽²⁾ This idea is one of the most fundamental in More's presentation of suffering in his various works. It contains within itself the solution to the anguish caused by tribulation: one should remember

(1) Roper; Life of Sir Thomas More, p. 18.

(2) The English Works of Sir Thomas More, Vol. I, p. 381.

Christ and thereby gain strength to rise above one's sorrows. The meditation on Christ's pain is essentially different from the traditional consolation of philosophy in that it provides a supernatural source of grace beyond the scope of reason. In addition, the sufferer appropriates Christ's action for himself.

Pico's influence on More can best be understood if we admit that More had at least formulated enough of his own personal sense of the Christian ideal to be able to recognize in Pico an example of deep Christian piety based on a theology of the cross. The Life of Pico seems to incorporate all those aspects of Christian humanism which found echoes in Colet, Erasmus and More. Pico was learned, knew a multitude of languages and had studied not only the classics but all the Fathers, Hebrew sources, as well as diverse other philosophies almost unheard of. His piety was deep and his life directed toward an imitation of the spirit of the New Testament. The ideas contained in his works translated by More are echoed in the writings of the Christian humanists. His monastic existence was seen as the true religious life transcending the scholastic preoccupation with reason and moving directly into the realm of devotion. Pico seemed to be the embodiment of the humanistic ideal that held piety as the goal and end of all knowledge. Lehmberg has suggested

that More's use of Pico was most influential during the time he was thinking of marriage after leaving the monastery (1504).⁽¹⁾ I would amend this to include the possibility that More continued to cherish the ideas found in Pico's works and letters on the evidence that throughout his writings, More reiterates a good many pregnant themes which he had translated around 1504 from Pico's works. There is nowhere a suggestion that More deviated from his vision of the ideal Christian life as seen perfectly embodied in Pico.⁽²⁾ In fact, all the Christian humanists would have agreed that Pico's life (by this I mean More's version of it) was an example of the fruits of true theology. Whether More's understanding of Pico and his works is correct is another question altogether.

(1) Stanford Lehmberg; "Sir Thomas More's Life of Pico della Mirandola" in *STUDIES IN THE RENAISSANCE*, Vol. III, 1956, pp. 61-74.

(2) Vittorio Gabrieli; "Giovanni Pico and Thomas More" in *MOREANA*, Number 15, 1967, pp. 43-57. This article traces some of the ideas found in Pico's devotional works through More's writings, especially the Four Last Things and the Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation.

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