

Many Means to an End: The Composition and Nature of
Catholic Orthodoxy in England, c. 1520-1535

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Prefatory Note

This dissertation is my own work. Where material has been drawn from other sources, this has been fully acknowledged. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Where a quotation has been cited from a translated text, either on its own or along with a Latin edition, the translation is that of the cited translator unless I have noted an alteration of some kind. “Church” always appears capitalised when referring to an institutional *ecclesia*, whether it is Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed; “church” appears in lowercase to refer to either the word itself or a church building. When quoting from Latin texts, all abbreviations have been expanded so that the full word is present, and “f” has been changed to “s,” “j” to “i,” and “u” to “v” where relevant. For the sake of uniformity, I have opted for “Wycliffe” instead of “Wyclif,” “Ockham” instead of “Occam,” and “Catherine of Aragon” instead of “Katherine of Aragon,” though I have maintained the spelling used by other authors when quoting from their works. Two editions of John Fisher’s *Defensio regiae assertionis* were published in Cologne by Petri Quentel in 1525, one in June and another in July; all citations in this thesis are derived from the July edition. Citations from the Vulgate have been drawn from the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library edition edited by Swift Edgar and Angela M. Kinney (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010-2013) and the Douay-Rheims English translation it contains.

Short Abstract

Despite observations that the conservative reaction to early Reformation ideas deserves more attention, little has been done towards this end. This gap in the literature has resulted in misunderstandings about English thought early in the Reformation and mistaken ideas about what “orthodoxy” entailed in the early sixteenth century.

This thesis therefore examines conservative English theology from 1520 to 1535. It explains that, in this period, “orthodoxy” should be understood in the late medieval sense of an overarching consensus involving contrasting perspectives and formed through centuries of debate rather than as a synonym for “right doctrinal opinion.” It argues that the theologies of the foremost defenders of the established English Church in the Reformation’s early years, Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell, existed within and embodied this late medieval conception of “orthodoxy.” These men were products of and participants in orthodoxy, and therefore agents in its development.

Chronologically, this thesis analyses English conservative defences of the corporeal eucharistic presence, the administration of communion under one kind, the sacrament of penance and faith in relation to justification, and free will, with attention focussed on points of theological variation between authors. It situates these variations within medieval intellectual currents, while also considering how authors’ individual socio-cultural and intellectual circumstances influenced both the composition and nature of their writings. Eclecticism defined the English defence of established Church teachings early in the Reformation and was characteristic of late medieval orthodoxy. In addition to illuminating hitherto unacknowledged nuances in English thought, this thesis shows that defenders of the established Church in early Reformation England were orthodox when the word is taken

in its proper context, and historians should not shy away from using the term in assessments of this period of the Reformation.

Long Abstract

At the beginning of “The English Campaign Against Luther in the 1520s,” Richard Rex noted that England’s “commitment to orthodoxy” early in the Reformation has been largely ignored.¹ Ecclesiastical historians, he explained, exhibit a preference for the reformers over their Catholic opponents, something also noticed by David Bagchi fifteen years later.² One need not wade far into Reformation literature to see the continued truth of this observation. There are obviously several texts that focus on the early reformers, but works concerned with the period as a whole also focus on the reformers with little regard for their Catholic opponents, at least in England. Peter Marshall’s *Heretics and Believers* and Ethan Shagan’s “The Emergence of the Church of England, c. 1520-1553,” for instance, do little more than mention the English resistance to reformist theology without giving much indication of what this resistance entailed.³

With literature still weighted towards the reformers, the initial English conservative reaction to the Reformation remains largely in shadow. Much of what we do know about it comes through analyses of evangelicals, and the little information that exists is scattered amongst texts so much so that Edward Powell has remained primarily a footnote in Reformation scholarship despite being Oxford’s leading theologian in the fight against Luther. Gaps even remain in our knowledge of conservative theologians who are still famous today, namely Henry VIII, John Fisher, and Thomas More. This investigative fragmentation

¹ Richard Rex, “The English Campaign Against Luther in the 1520s: The Alexander Prize Essay,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 39 (1989): 85.

² *Ibid.*; David Bagchi, “Catholic Theologians of the Reformation Period Before Trent,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 231.

³ Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Ethan H. Shagan, “The Emergence of the Church of England, c. 1520-1553,” in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Vol I: Reformation and Identity, c. 1520-1662*, ed. Anthony Milton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

has led to generalisations about the nature of conservative English theology and has done little to quell the wider misunderstanding of what “orthodoxy” entailed in the early sixteenth century.

Around 2010, scholars started noting potential difficulties with the use of “orthodoxy” to refer to the Catholicism being challenged by the Reformation’s first reformers. In 2012, Alexandra da Costa cited complications with “orthodoxy” due to the mutability of religious identities early in the Reformation, and in 2013 Shannon Gayk questioned whether we should use “orthodoxy” or “traditional religion” when discussing late medieval and early modern England.⁴ Part of the problem presumably arises from the neutrality expected of historians: “orthodoxy,” literally meaning “right opinion,” carries connotations of rightness, so its use may seem to contravene this neutrality in a way that “traditional religion” does not.⁵ But this emerging concern for the utility of “orthodoxy” arises from an anachronistic conception of the word and has resulted in perspectives like that presented by Lucy Wooding: “In the early years of [the] Reformation there was no such thing as unequivocal religious orthodoxy.”⁶ Historians of this period understand “orthodoxy” to be synonymous with “right doctrinal opinion.” While this interpretation is correct for later in the sixteenth century, during the early Reformation, “orthodoxy” must be understood in the late medieval sense of an evolving consensus of the majority on the Christian faith comprised of differing perspectives.

⁴ Alexandra da Costa, *Reforming Printing: Syon Abbey’s Defence of Orthodoxy, 1525-1534* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3, n.7; Shannon Gayk, “Early English Orthodoxies: Reading the English Reformations,” *Journal of English and German Philology* 112, no. 4 (2013): 498.

⁵ Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, Ashley Null, and Alec Ryrie, “Introduction,” in *Contesting Orthodoxies in the History of Christianity: Essays in Honour of Diarmaid MacCulloch*, ed. Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, Ashley Null, and Alec Ryrie (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021), 1.

⁶ Lucy Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

Natalia Nowakowska highlights this anachronism in her discussion of early Reformation Poland.⁷ Following in her footsteps and considering the problems that have arisen due to historians' frequent neglect of the conservative reaction to reform, this thesis focusses on the composition and nature of traditional English theology between 1520 and 1535, the years before the Act of Supremacy and before the deaths of Fisher and More in 1535. It argues that English conservative thought in this period was the embodiment of late medieval orthodoxy and should be understood as such. In the image of late medieval orthodoxy, English conservative theology was a complex, cohesive whole, comprised of many avenues of thought – an end reached and defined by many means.

By turning attention back to this overlooked area of the Reformation, we bring some balance to the historiography of English thought in this period. We see that the English conservative response to the reformers was far more complex than has hitherto been appreciated, both in terms of the authorities at its foundation and in the factors shaping its make-up. From this emerges a more nuanced perception of each of our authors of investigation and an idea of how historians should understand “orthodoxy” during this period of English history: it was a robust classification of thought that was paradoxically vivified by its variations, coherent with its contradictions and unified with its disunity. It was orthodoxy in the late medieval sense of a consensus informed by different theological opinions, before the word came to refer to incontestable doctrinal belief.

The introduction outlines the historiography of the English Reformation and highlights historians' persistent oversight of English theological conservatism from roughly 1520 to 1535. It illustrates the historiographical shortcomings that have arisen therefrom

⁷ Natalia Nowakowska, *King Sigismund of Poland and Martin Luther: The Reformation Before Confessionalisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19-24.

and discusses Nowakowska's work differentiating between the late medieval and modern conceptions of orthodoxy. It explains that "orthodoxy" was regarded as the heterogeneous consensus of the majority with reference to William of Ockham, Jean Gerson, and Nicholas of Cusa, and shows that this same perception of the concept was the norm in the early sixteenth century. The introduction then introduces each of our four authors of investigation, Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell, and outlines the intellectual atmosphere of early sixteenth-century England, discussing scholasticism, humanism, university curricula, and the potential impact of John Wycliffe on English Reformation theology. Lastly, it outlines the thesis's chapter structure. Each chapter grapples with a theological issue central to the Reformation and illustrates how our authors of investigation fit the mould of late medieval orthodoxy.

Chapter 1 examines defences of the corporeal eucharistic presence. It highlights the imbalance in how these defences have been analysed historiographically, and shows how the tendency of scholars to overlook the relationship between ecclesiastical consensus and "orthodoxy" has resulted in imprecise portrayals of conservative eucharistic theology. The chapter is divided into two analytical sections that collectively demonstrate how English conservative defences of the corporeal presence exhibited the archetypal qualities of late medieval orthodoxy. The first considers English treatments of Luther's challenge to transubstantiation and illustrates how More, Fisher, Henry VIII, and Powell all took Luther's digression from the longstanding consensus of the majority as the basis of their refutations. It then shows how, despite this fundamental commonality, our authors were independent agents in the evolutionary process intrinsic to orthodoxy as it was then understood: the composition and nature of their arguments were guided by their respective socio-intellectual backgrounds and varying affinities for the dominant epistemological forces of

their day, scholasticism and humanism. The second section, which juxtaposes how More and Fisher engaged with the Sacramentarians, continues to show the impact of these backgrounds on English conservatism, and uses More and Fisher's contrasting perspectives on eucharistic metaphysics as an example of how English conservative theology reflected the expected eclecticism of late medieval orthodoxy.

Chapter 2, which examines the debate on whether communion should be administered under both kinds to the laity (utraquism), is the first investigation of its kind in English Reformation scholarship. There are analyses of utraquism's significance to Luther, such as that by Zdeněk V. David, but the topic has been entirely ignored in the context of early sixteenth-century England.⁸ Examining it sheds light on the ways in which English conservatives recognised and defended the process of evolution intrinsic to late medieval orthodoxy. The chapter is divided into two sections that respectively analyse conservative defences of two mechanisms for this evolution, general councils and the emergence of custom. It was at the Council of Constance (1414-1418) that the Church formalised the practice of only administering communion under one kind, and as English conservative defences of this practice naturally upheld this conciliar decree, the chapter's first section examines whether our authors were conciliarists. It surveys the historiography pertaining to the conciliarism of our authors, and highlights the inconsistencies within it, particularly in how Fisher's ecclesiology has been understood by Edward Surtz, Richard Rex, and Brian Gogan. It finds that, contrary to the conclusions of Surtz and Rex, all four of our authors were conciliarists, but, as was the case with late medieval orthodoxy, they drew on different authorities and from different phases of the movement's development. The second section

⁸ Zdeněk V. David, "The Strange Fate of Czech Utraquism: The Second Century, 1517-1621," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46, no. 4 (1995): 641-668.

considers how our four authors defended the development of the custom of administering communion *sub una specie* against Luther's opposition to it. It outlines Luther's seven arguments in favour of utraquism and then takes the third and fourth as subjects for analysis. It finds that, like we see in Chapter 1, Henry VIII, More, Fisher, and Powell refuted Luther in ways reflective of the environments in which they lived, and their refutations were written according to their personal predilections. They defended the evolutionary process inherent to the conservative consensus while themselves being part of it.

Chapter 3 considers teachings relevant to justification. It is divided into two sections that together show the eclecticism and resilience of English conservative theology at the outset of the Reformation. The first section corrects the claim that John Fisher's penitential theology was representative of the entirety of conservative penitential theology in early sixteenth-century England. It begins by outlining the history of the sacrament of penance and details the debate between attritionists and contritionists over the extent of sorrow required to partake in the sacrament of penance. It then discusses the state of secondary literature on the subject before showing that while Fisher, Henry VIII and (to some extent) More were attritionists, Fisher believed that justification could be received outside of the sacrament of penance, while Henry VIII and More did not. The section then turns to Powell, who did not offer any insight into his position in this debate. His defence of penance was instead a classic example of Christian humanism and shows how conservative thought was evolving to incorporate humanist ideas near its centre: Powell refuted Luther by retaining the traditional insistence on the importance of ecclesiastical catholicity while voicing the humanist concern for the stability of society at large. The chapter's second section examines More's exchange with William Tyndale on the concept of faith. It outlines Tyndale's distinction between historical and feeling faith and demonstrates that, as existing

scholarship has recognised, ecclesiastical consensus played a significant role in More's refutation of it – but more so than has been appreciated. More's feet were so firmly planted in the Church's traditional teachings that he framed and refuted Tyndale's two faiths in the context of the medieval distinction between actual and habitual faith, irrespective of the fact that it had no place in reformist theology. Much as we see in the preceding chapters, this chapter shows that English conservative theology resembled late medieval orthodoxy in its rich variety of ideas shaped by the circumstances affecting its authors. But it moves further in illustrating how deeply traditional teachings were embedded in conservative thinking: they were used to understand and dismiss the reformers' ideas, even when irrelevant to their formulation.

Considering that analyses of the early Reformation debate on free will have prioritised the exchange between Luther and Erasmus, Chapter 4 broadens the scope of academic literature by shedding light on the English involvement in this exchange. The chapter's first section challenges the idea that Fisher's treatment of free will was comparable to that of Erasmus. They were both humanists and posited a similar argument in favour of free will being active in the salvific process, but they had different objectives in dealing with Luther and these influenced the different tones with which they approached the reformer and the theology by which they dismissed his ideas. In the manner of late medieval orthodoxy, there were variations in their thought arising from their personal convictions. The chapter's second section examines the gradual alignment of More and Henry VIII's objections to Luther's subversion of free will with those of Fisher and Erasmus over the course of the 1520s. It shows that conservatives were part of the ongoing process of late medieval orthodoxy: while they adhered to the Church's traditional teachings, their perspectives on free will were honed under the pressures of the Reformation.

The conclusion summarises how the concept of orthodoxy was understood in the late medieval period and traces how each of this thesis's chapters demonstrates that English conservatism in the early Reformation was the embodiment of this earlier conception of orthodoxy. It recommends that scholars of early modernity not shy away from using "orthodoxy" to describe the Roman Church in their investigations of this historical period, but cautions against using "doctrine" without noting how the word was then understood. The conclusion then proposes the point at which we can begin using these words in their modern sense as a topic for future research and summarises our findings for each of our authors of investigation, pointing to future avenues of research where relevant. It ends with a reflection on what happened to late medieval orthodoxy after the beginnings of confessionalisation, briefly tracing the enduring importance of consensus in the ecumenical councils from Trent to Vatican II.

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Introduction

The old cliché often attributed to Sir Winston Churchill, that “history is written by the victors,” could not ring more true for earlier histories of the Reformation in England. From John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* in 1563 until at least A.G. Dickens’s *The English Reformation* in 1964, the conquest of Protestantism over Catholicism chimed like a triumphant gong through most historical narratives.¹ Even as the Oxford Movement sought to reclaim the more traditional elements of English Church culture in the nineteenth century, giving rise to what we now refer to as Anglo-Catholicism, the lens was one of moderate Protestantism: the more evangelical days of Edward VI were ignored and the idea that the English Church was a *via media* between the Catholic and Protestant extremes was embraced.² But by and large, the state of Reformation literature in England, as it was until the mid-twentieth century, was one that characterised the Reformation as a revision and rectification of a moribund religion.

English national identity played no small role in this. To be English was, until the mid-twentieth century, to be Protestant, even if only culturally, and on this basis, histories of the Reformation in England were instrumental histories: stories of the past told to explain the present.³ Indeed, Christopher Haigh attributed much of Dickens’s treatment of the Reformation in England to his identity as a patriotic Englishman and Protestant, and to the prejudices and biases that sprung therefrom.⁴ This norm largely shifted by the 1960s, when

¹ John Foxe, “Acts and Monuments,” in *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, Vol. I-VIII, ed. Josiah Pratt (London, 1877); A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London: Batsford, 1964).

² Diarmaid MacCulloch, “Changing Historical Perspectives on the English Reformation: The Last Fifty Years,” *Studies in Church History* 49 (2013): 283-284.

³ For the connection between Englishness and Protestantism, see Matthew Grimley, “The Religion of Englishness: Puritanism, Providentialism, and ‘National Character,’ 1918-1945,” *Journal of British Studies* 46, no. 4 (2007): 884-906; for institutional histories, see MacCulloch, “Changing Historical Perspectives,” 285.

⁴ Christopher Haigh, “A.G. Dickens and the English Reformation,” *Historical Research* 77, no. 195 (2004): 33-34.

the gradual process of secularisation that had begun taking hold in England centuries or decades before came into harvest: the “religious” became distinct from the “irreligious” and the cultural universality of Protestant England ceased to exist.⁵ Combined with the influx of Catholics into higher education in the UK following the 1944 Butler Education Act, which made secondary school education accessible to the masses as part of a post-war initiative, the academic landscape became ripe for new historiographical perspectives on the English Reformation as the century moved into its last quarter.⁶

In the background of these cultural and social changes came an epistemological shift at some point in the 1970s.⁷ The belief in an attainable historical truth characteristic of earlier “modernist” narratives fell by the wayside.⁸ In what is known as the “postmodern turn,” historians instead came to talk of a plurality of truths.⁹ They fixated on text and language in relation to the realities they sought to describe, aimed to amplify the perspectives of groups classified as underprivileged, and the presence and absence of power as a defining feature of political and intellectual configurations became an analytical focus when history was viewed through this new postmodern lens.¹⁰

With the intersection of these cultural, social and intellectual changes, that once audible gong of triumphant Protestantism began to quieten. The 1980s saw the advent of a

⁵ Hugh McLeod, “The Long March of Religious History: Where Have we Travelled since the Sixties, and Why?” in *Religion as an Agent of Change: Crusades, Reformation and Pietism*, ed. Per Ingesman (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 39-40; S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c. 1920-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 310-312.

⁶ Eamon Duffy, “The English Reformation After Revisionism,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2006): 723; for more on the Butler Education Act, see Elizabeth “Libi” Sundermann, *For God and Country: Butler’s 1944 Education Act* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

⁷ Sarah Foot, “Has Ecclesiastical History Lost the Plot?” *Studies in Church History* 49 (2013): 15; Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 140-141.

⁸ Bentley, *Modern Historiography*, 139-140.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 141-142; Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Postmodernist Challenge and its Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 89-122.

¹⁰ Bentley, *Modern Historiography*, 142; for postmodernism and the relationship between truth and language, see Breisach, *On the Future of History*, 89-122.

period of scholarship on the Reformation in England known as “revisionism,” the quintessential works of which were Christopher Haigh’s edited volume *The English Reformation Revised* and Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars*.¹¹ Revisionist accounts were more sympathetic to Catholicism in sixteenth-century England. They highlighted the previously unacknowledged vitality of late medieval popular religion and held that Reformation-era religious practices took hold in English life only gradually, over several decades, a realisation come to through the heavy use of parish-based sources, like the accounts of churchwardens, in historical research.¹²

In the context of revisionism, Richard Rex published “The English Campaign Against Luther in the 1520s,” in which he paid unprecedented attention to the political and cultural dynamics of the English polemical exchange with the reformers throughout the 1520s.¹³ He based this article on the observation that England’s “commitment to orthodoxy” in the early Reformation has been largely ignored.¹⁴ Within a few years of this observation, historians of the English Reformation ushered themselves into a phase of scholarship known as “post-revisionism,” the phase we remain in today. Post-revisionists, among whom Haigh and Duffy numbered themselves around the turn of the century, predicate their analyses on revisionism’s conclusions and aim to carve out a more moderate path between traditional Protestant-lensed Reformation historiography and the very long, drawn-out but “successful Catholic rearguard action” of classic revisionism.¹⁵ Yet despite this historiographical change, conservative theology (the theology of the established Catholic Church) remained

¹¹ Christopher Haigh, ed., *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); for another notable revisionist perspective, see J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

¹² Peter Marshall, “(Re)defining the English Reformation,” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 565-566.

¹³ Richard Rex, “The English Campaign Against Luther in the 1520s: The Alexander Prize Essay,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 39 (1989): 85, particularly n. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵ Marshall, “(Re)defining the English Reformation,” 565-566 and n. 7.

understudied such that in 2004, David Bagchi echoed Rex's sentiments, though with the entire European Reformation in his gaze, in calling for more research into the writings of "Catholic theologians," including the "intellectual background of individual writers."¹⁶ After all, even the works of Heiko Oberman, which are known for their meticulous reconstruction of medieval intellectual currents, look primarily at their influence upon the reformers.¹⁷

Today, over three decades since Rex's initial remark in the wake of revisionism and over two since Bagchi's call for further investigations into conservative thought after the historiographical shift to post-revisionism, the gap they noticed in the literature remains. There are obviously several texts that focus on the early reformers, like Martin Luther and William Tyndale, but works concerned with the period as a whole also focus on the reformers with little regard for their Catholic opponents, at least in England.¹⁸ This is particularly prominent in texts intended for teaching university students. All three editions of Carter Lindberg's *The European Reformations*, for instance, trace popular anticlericalism in England arising from financial and sexual transgressions of the clergy to the Lollard tradition, a movement which took direction from the fourteenth-century English theologian John Wycliffe (d. 1384).¹⁹ They explain that, when combined with the growing zeal for humanist learning in the early sixteenth century, this anticlericalism rendered England fertile

¹⁶ David Bagchi, "Catholic Theologians of the Reformation Period Before Trent," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 231.

¹⁷ For example, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications*, trans. Andrew Colin Gow (London: T&T Clark, 2004) and Heiko A. Oberman, "Luther and the *Via Moderna*: The Philosophical Backdrop of the Reformation Breakthrough," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54, no. 4 (2003): 641-670.

¹⁸ For Luther, see David M. Whitford, ed., *Martin Luther in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); for Tyndale and other English reformers, see Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie, ed., *The Beginnings of English Protestantism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 309-310; Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 546-548; Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 249-251; for Lollardy's relation to Wycliffe, see Wendy Scase, "Lollardy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15-16.

for the spreading of Reformation ideas.²⁰ Lindberg then describes, in each of these books, the spread of Lutheran thought from Cambridge to the rest of England by men like Robert Barnes and William Tyndale.²¹ His discussion of the resistance to the Reformation in England is limited to brief mentions of the public burning of Luther's books on 12th May 1521 at a gathering organised by Cardinal Thomas Wolsey and Henry VIII's 1521 *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, a text which, as we will soon see, was but the first step in a much wider campaign against Luther and his peers.²² These are supplemented in the second and third editions with a passing mention of a sermon attacking Luther delivered by John Fisher, the bishop of Rochester, at Wolsey's gathering, but Lindberg never acknowledges any of Fisher's later anti-Reformation treatises.²³ Overall, Lindberg provides a one-sided account that completely overlooks the conservative side of the coin.

Both editions of Euan Cameron's *The European Reformation*, a text also geared towards university students, similarly skirt over the English resistance to the Reformation. Cameron spends much of the second section of these books explaining the ideas of the early Wittenberg reformers and even devotes a few pages to those who rejected these ideas in mainland Europe, like Desiderius Erasmus, Johannes Cochlaeus, and Johannes Eck.²⁴ There is no such balance in his discussion of the early Reformation in England. In both editions, Cameron's focus on England in the 1520s and early 1530s centres on the reception of Reformation ideas by evangelicals, namely Barnes and Tyndale, and the absorption of these

²⁰ Lindberg, *European Reformations* (1996), 311; Lindberg, *European Reformations* (2010), 550; Lindberg, *European Reformations* (2021), 251.

²¹ Lindberg, *European Reformations* (1996), 311-315; Lindberg, *European Reformations* (2010), 550-558; Lindberg, *European Reformations* (2021), 249-251.

²² Lindberg, *European Reformations* (1996), 311 and 316; Lindberg, *European Reformations* (2010), 550 and 558; Lindberg, *European Reformations* (2021), 251 and 255.

²³ Lindberg, *European Reformations* (2010), 550; Lindberg, *European Reformations* (2021), 251.

²⁴ Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 186-193; Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132-135.

ideas into the established English Church following the political turmoil initiated by Henry VIII's pursuit of a marital annulment in the latter 1520s.²⁵ Nothing is made of the theological resistance to these ideas in England at this time. This leaves us with an image of an intense theological debate occurring in mainland Europe with a gradual, yet poorly resisted dissemination of these views in England. Even if Cameron endorses a Reformation that was gradually accepted by the English laity and imposed politically, the account he gives of English thought does not do justice to the heated theological resistance to Luther's ideas that occurred in England's borders, particularly in the early 1520s, and relegates England to a position of near irrelevance in wider Europe's defence of traditional Catholicism.

It is not surprising that pedagogical works, like those by Lindberg and Cameron, contain this oversight as they reflect the *status quo* of contemporary research. But even recent monographs and chapters from edited volumes intended for those outside of university lecture halls do little more than mention the English resistance to reformist theology without giving much indication of what this resistance entailed. Peter Marshall's *Heretics and Believers*, for example, provides a chronology of conservative English works published against the reformers in the 1520s and early 1530s, beginning with Henry VIII's *Assertio* in 1521 and moving through the subsequent works of John Fisher and Thomas More (which will be discussed in due course), but this chronology is only a description of the process towards reform.²⁶ It mentions that England was "hailed as a beacon of orthodoxy" in wider Europe because of these works, but contains little detail and analysis of their contents.²⁷ Similarly, despite its title, Ethan Shagan's "The Emergence of the Church of

²⁵ Cameron, *European Reformation* (1991), 280-283; Cameron, *European Reformation* (2012), 284-287.

²⁶ Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 126-128.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

England, c. 1520-1553” has little to say on England’s initial conservatism in the Reformation prior to 1534. Shagan remarks only that the evangelicals were once “hounded and haunted by Henry VIII’s regime,” but allied themselves with the king around the time of the Act of Supremacy.²⁸ Fisher and More, two of England’s most ardent defenders of the established Church at the time, take a subsidiary place in his narrative: Fisher is referenced only in relation to his execution in 1535, and references to More are limited to his resignation as Lord Chancellor in 1532 and his belief that Robert Barnes was a heretic.²⁹ Shagan’s consideration of the 1520s instead focusses on the early days of Henry VIII’s quest for a marital annulment and England’s first evangelicals, namely Thomas Bilney, John Frith, and William Tyndale.³⁰ In both of these accounts of Reformation England, England’s initial conservatism is mentioned only in brief, presumably because the authors’ eyes are turned primarily to the ecclesiastical changes to come.³¹

Aside from a few select works, like Richard Rex’s *The Theology of John Fisher* and Frank Mitjans’s “St. Thomas More and St. John Chrysostom,” much of what we do know about conservative English theology in the early Reformation comes through analyses of evangelicals, and this has resulted in mischaracterisations of conservative theology in early Reformation England.³² In his discussion of Thomas Cranmer’s views on repentance, for instance, Ashley Null explains that Cranmer, the first evangelical-minded archbishop of Canterbury, received his early theological training at Cambridge during the chancellorship of

²⁸ Ethan H. Shagan, “The Emergence of the Church of England, c. 1520-1553,” in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Vol I: Reformation and Identity, c. 1520-1662*, ed. Anthony Milton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31 and 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-32.

³¹ For another example, see Peter Marshall, *Reformation England, 1480-1642*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 29-44.

³² Richard Rex, *The Theology of John Fisher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Frank Mitjans, “St. Thomas More and St. John Chrysostom,” *Moreana* 53 (2016): 129-142.

John Fisher, and through this discussion, we learn of Fisher's affinity for the soteriology of John Duns Scotus (d. 1308).³³ But Fisher's secondary place within this analysis, paired with the general lack of literature on traditional English theology in the early sixteenth century, leads Null to overstate Fisher's soteriological stature and take his theology of penance as representative of the "typical" English position on penance, a perspective we consider in Chapter 3.³⁴ Likewise, Peter Marshall's treatment of Cranmer in "Evangelical Conversion in the Reign of Henry VIII" sheds light on Scotus's prominent influence over the conservative theology taught in early sixteenth-century England.³⁵ But its focus on motifs of "enlightenment" permeating evangelical narratives of conversion creates an impression of conservative English theology reminiscent of earlier Protestant accounts of the Reformation: English theological conservatism had lost the plot and needed to be left behind.³⁶

One of the major objectives of this thesis is to correct these mischaracterisations of conservative English thought. But perhaps more importantly, the thesis seeks to end a wider, more systemic misunderstanding about the nature of conservative theology that has been allowed to persist in Reformation scholarship. Historians tend to view conservative theology with an anachronistic perception of what "orthodoxy" entailed as a theological body and as a word in the early sixteenth century. Natalia Nowakowska was the first to recognise this. Historians, she explains, tend to understand "orthodoxy" to mean "doctrinal orthodoxy," as if it entailed a sort of menu or checklist of agreed upon theological teachings.³⁷ We see this, as Nowakowska herself recognises, in Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Christian Tradition*, but it is also

³³ Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 44-49 and 65-83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-49.

³⁵ Peter Marshall, "Evangelical Conversion in the Reign of Henry VIII," in *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*, ed. Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14-37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Natalia Nowakowska, *King Sigismund of Poland and Martin Luther: The Reformation Before Confessionalisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20.

evident as recently as Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, Ashley Null, and Alec Ryrie's edited volume *Contesting Orthodoxies in the History of Christianity*.³⁸ In the volume's introduction, it is explained that "orthodoxy" literally means "right opinion," but that "as historians, it is not our role to assess which doctrinal truth-claims are right" – the right opinion that is orthodoxy is equated with right doctrinal opinion.³⁹ While this conception of "orthodoxy" is correct from about the mid-sixteenth century onwards, before this time it had an altogether different meaning. To understand this, we must begin by outlining the differences between the late medieval and modern understandings of "doctrine" and "church," particularly the institutional Church.⁴⁰

Today, the word "doctrine" is regarded as a kind of official teaching or indisputable belief professed by the Church. We see or get a sense of this from Pelikan, Colin Gunton, Tom Greggs, and J.L. Schellenberg.⁴¹ But while the Latin word "doctrina" was and could be translated as "teaching" in the late medieval period, it was a non-dogmatic teaching that was synonymous with "learning" and akin to a sort of academic opinion.⁴² It was used more liberally than we understand "doctrine" today. This is why the English anti-heresy statute of

³⁸ Nowakowska's wording suggests that Pelikan explicitly says that "orthodoxy" is defined as "what the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God," which Nowakowska qualifies is "professed belief." But much as we explain regarding "orthodoxy" beginning on page 11, Nowakowska makes an explanatory leap here: this definition is, in fact, Pelikan's definition of "Christian doctrine." But Pelikan nevertheless appears to take this understanding of "Christian doctrine" as synonymous with what is "orthodox" when the page is taken as a whole. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3; Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 21; Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, Ashley Null, and Alec Ryrie, "Introduction," in *Contesting Orthodoxies in the History of Christianity: Essays in Honour of Diarmaid MacCulloch*, ed. Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, Ashley Null, and Alec Ryrie (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 28-33.

⁴¹ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, Vol. 4, 3; Colin Gunton, "Historical and Systematic Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3-20; Tom Greggs, "Church and Sacraments," in *The New Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Michael Allen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 139; J.L. Schellenberg, *What God Would Have Known: How Human Intellectual and Moral Development Undermines Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 1.

⁴² Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 21-22.

1400 consistently referred to “doctrines et opiniones” and in 1523, John Fisher wrote of Eutychian (a fifth-century heresy) “sententiam et doctrinam:” the words “doctrina,” “opinio” and “sententia” were synonyms.⁴³ Indeed, besides this one example from Fisher’s work, the word “doctrina” appeared several times in early sixteenth-century sources in ways that are best rendered in English as “learning” or as an academic opinion. In 1521, Pope Leo X remarked that the *Assertio* was written with the “utmost *doctrina* and no less eloquence” (absolutissima Doctrina nec minori Eloquentia), with “doctrina” here referring to learning or erudition.⁴⁴ Nowakowska found a similar example in the 1534 cathedral canons of the Baltic see of Kulm, wherein the new bishop, Johannes Dantiscus, was congratulated “on his ‘excellent *doctrina*,’ talent and virtue.”⁴⁵

“Doctrina” as a non-dogmatic teaching is particularly evident in writings by Luther’s conservative opponents. In his *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523), the English humanist and lawyer Thomas More polemically imagined Luther’s thought process and quoted him as saying “my *doctrina* cannot err, because I am most certain that my *doctrinam* is not my own but Christ’s.”⁴⁶ Similarly, in 1527 the German humanist and polemicist Johannes Cochlaeus wrote that a letter written by Henry VIII to Luther in 1526 countered “Luther’s doings and *doctrinas* with holy scripture” (ex sacris literis contra Lutheri et actus et doctrinas agit), and King Sigismund I of Poland instructed the governing assembly of Toruń, a city he believed to

⁴³ The English anti-heresy statute is quoted from *Ibid.*, 21; for Fisher, see John Fisher, *Assertionis Lutheranae confutatio* (Antwerp, 1523), DXXXII; for information on Eutychianism, see Samuel Cohen, “Eutychianorum furor! Heresiological Comparison and the Invention of Eutychians in Leo I’s Christological Polemic,” *Entangled Religions* 11, no. 4 (2022): 1-2.

⁴⁴ This translation is my own, though O’Donovan also renders “doctrina” as “learning.” “Volentesque non solum ea, quae Majestas tua contra eundem Martinum Lutherum absolutissima Doctrina nec minori Eloquentia scripsit...” Leo X, “Bulla pro Titulo Defensoris Fidei,” in *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum or Defence of the Seven Sacraments*, ed. and trans. Louis O’Donovan (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908), 170-171.

⁴⁵ The italicisation in this quotation is my own. Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 21.

⁴⁶ “Doctrina mea non potest errare: quia certissimus sum, doctrinam meam non esse meam: sed Christi.” Thomas More, “Responsio ad Lutherum,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 5: Responsio ad Lutherum*, ed. John M. Headley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 312-313.

be “infected with the Lutheran heresy” (*Lutherana haeresi infectam esse*), to not allow the city to “conform to new *doctrinis* and rites” (*ne civitas ipsa novis doctrinis et ritibus se accomodet*).⁴⁷ In each of these cases, “doctrina” and its derivatives denote a degree of learning or an academic opinion, not the modern sense of an irrefutable teaching of the Church.

If “orthodoxy” cannot be directly equated with “doctrina” and “right doctrinal opinion” when discussing the early sixteenth century, what exactly was it? Nowakowska claims that it was understood as a “process,” not a “fixed set of beliefs,” and was “an evolving consensus around the faith,” with “faith” understood as the fundamental tenets established in the creeds and the decrees of the councils of late antiquity.⁴⁸ She is correct, but her explanation creates confusion for the reader who turns to her sources because the word “orthodoxy” did not yet exist in the form she seeks to define. Nowakowska begins by saying that Vincent of Lérins (d. 445) “defined orthodoxy not by its specified theological content, but as ‘that which has been believed everywhere, always and by everyone.’”⁴⁹ She then asserts that William of Ockham (d. 1347) “defined orthodoxy as a historical consensus, as that which had been accepted as ‘catholic’ (i.e. universally held) by all Christian and catholic peoples,” and then claims that Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) “defined orthodoxy as that which had been believed by the majority of the universal church.”⁵⁰ The confusion arises from the fact that none of these authors explicitly defined “orthodoxy” in the texts

⁴⁷ Johannes Cochlaeus, “A Brief Discussion of Luther’s Response to the Royal Letter, Addressed by Johannes Cochlaeus to that Noble and Valiant Man, Sir Hermann Rinck of Cologne, King’s Counsellor and Knight of the Golden Spur, etc.,” in *Henry VIII and Martin Luther: The Second Controversy, 1525-1527*, ed. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021), 230-231; for this being from 1527, see Richard Rex, “Introduction,” in *Henry VIII and Martin Luther: The Second Controversy, 1525-1527*, ed. Richard Rex (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021), 33-34; Sigismund I, “Legatio a Sigismundo primo, rege Poloniae, ad conventum Thorunensem,” in *Acta Tomiciana, Tomus Nonus, Editio Altera*, ed. Zygmunt Celichowski (Poznań: Kraszewski’s Press, 1876), 15.

⁴⁸ Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

mentioned or cited by Nowakowska. Vincent of Lérins's canon referencing what is "believed everywhere, always and by everyone" defined the word "catholic," not "orthodoxy." Indeed, this famed passage of Vincent's fifth-century *Commonitorium* was immediately followed by the qualification that this universality is what it is to be "truly and properly catholic, as the force and meaning of the name itself indicate, which encompasses almost all things universally."⁵¹ Similarly, the pages Nowakowska references in Pelikan's *The Christian Tradition* to explain Ockham and Nicholas of Cusa's perceptions of "orthodoxy" discuss their views on "catholicity" and the meaning of "catholic."⁵² The word "orthodoxy" did not appear, nor was it used in the edition of Nicholas's *De concordantia catholica* (c. 1433-1434) cited by Nowakowska.⁵³

The issue is that the *noun* "orthodoxy" does not, in fact, seem to have been used in Latin theological texts from the late medieval period into early modernity. In the early sixteenth century in particular, we instead find the *adjective* "orthodox" in a declined form of "orthodoxus, -a, -um." Edward Powell, a fellow at Oriel College, Oxford, and opponent of the Reformation in England, referred to "orthodox people" (*populo orthodoxo*) in his *Propugnaculum summi sacerdotii evangelici ac septenarii sacramentorum* (1523).⁵⁴ Thomas More spoke of the "orthodox" (*orthodoxus*) in his letter to the Lutheran Johannes Bugenhagen written sometime between 1525 and 1526, Pope Leo X spoke of the "orthodox faith" (*orthodoxae fidei*) in 1521 and John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester, did the same in

⁵¹ "Hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum quod ipsa vis nominis ratioque declarat quae omnia fere universaliter comprehendit." Vincent of Lérins, "Commonitorium," in *The Commonitorium of Vincent of Lérins*, ed. Reginald Stewart Moxon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 10.

⁵² Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, Vol. 4, 61 and 98-100.

⁵³ Nicholas of Cusa, *The Catholic Concordance*, ed. and trans. Paul E. Sigmund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁵⁴ Edward Powell, *Propugnaculum summi sacerdotii evangelici ac septenarii sacramentorum adversus Martinum Lutherum* (London, 1523), fol. 91^r; for similar examples, see *Ibid.*, fol. 61^r and 97^v.

both 1523 and 1527.⁵⁵ Fisher also frequently referred to the “orthodox fathers” (patrum orthodoxorum) in his writings, and he helpfully provided an explanation of how we should understand the word “orthodox” at the beginning of his *Assertionis Lutheranae confutatio* (1523): “the orthodox” (orthodoxis) are “those who think rightly with the Church” (qui cum ecclesia recte sentiunt).⁵⁶ “With the Church” is key here, because if late medieval theologians saw an equivalence between orthodoxy and anything, it was “ecclesia,” not “doctrina.” Nowakowska does recognise this equivalency, but she mentions it after her explanation of “orthodoxy.”⁵⁷ The concepts should, however, be taken together because they were intrinsically linked, and it is only by seeing how the Church was once understood that we can make sense of Nowakowska’s discussion of “orthodoxy” in works that do not openly use the word.

Before reformers like Philipp Melanchthon and William Tyndale began seeing the Church as a congregation of those who correctly understood the Gospel over the course of the 1520s, the Church was regarded as a spiritual and intellectual community constituted at once by its history, universality (i.e., catholicity) and unity.⁵⁸ Pelikan traces these elements in the ecclesiology of writers from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, like Jean Gerson (d. 1429) and Nicholas of Cusa, the latter of whom defined the Church in the 1430s as “a gathering together in unity and concord... characterised by a spirit of fraternity which is

⁵⁵ Thomas More to John Bugenhagen, 1525-1526, in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 7: Letter to Bugenhagen, Supplication of Souls, Letter Against Frith*, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Marc’Hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 90-91; Leo X, “Bulla pro Titulo Defensoris Fidei,” 170-171; for Fisher and “orthodox faith,” see Fisher, *Confutatio*, XXXVII and John Fisher, *De veritate corporis et sanguinis Christi in Eucharistia* (Cologne, 1527), fol. 214^v.

⁵⁶ For Fisher and “orthodox fathers,” see Fisher, *Confutatio*, I, II and XVI and Fisher, *De veritate*, fol. 101^r, 134^r and 148^r; for Fisher’s definition of “orthodox,” see Fisher, *Confutatio*, I.

⁵⁷ Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 29-30.

⁵⁸ For Melanchthon and the Church, see Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 30; for Tyndale’s rendering of the Church as “congregation,” see Alan Stewart, “The Trouble with English Humanism: Tyndale, More and Darling Erasmus,” in *Reassessing Tudor Humanism*, ed. Jonathan Woolfson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 85.

opposite to division and schism.”⁵⁹ This traditional ecclesiology was therefore prevalent among Luther’s conservative opponents early in the Reformation. Nowakowska has found the belief that the Church is a universal body unified in its past and present expressed in the writings of Sigismund I of Poland and his subjects from the 1520s, and we also find it presented in the works of conservative English theologians at this time.⁶⁰ In his *Confutatio*, Fisher described the Church as consisting of the thought and scriptural interpretations of the Church fathers and the decisions of the councils, and he admonished Luther’s apparent scorn for the fathers, councils and “custom of the universal Church observed for so many centuries” (*totius ecclesiae tot retro saeculis usurpatam consuetudinem*).⁶¹ Likewise, Fisher dismissed as “foolish” (*dementius*) the idea that one could “reject the understanding that the entire Church has deemed most true for so many centuries, in order to place faith in the interpretation of scripture by Luther alone.”⁶² Similarly, Richard Marius has shown that Thomas More, like Fisher, regarded the Church as catholic by nature and a unified consensus “from the time of Christ to the present.”⁶³ Catholicity, unity and tradition were inherent to the idea of *ecclesia*, so when Fisher defined “orthodox” as one who thinks “with the Church,” he meant that one who is orthodox adheres to this universality, unity and the Church’s customs passed down through the ages. “Orthodoxy” as a noun would therefore refer to the intellectual and customary ways of the *ecclesia*, which by virtue of its catholicity from Christ to the present, were the ways of the majority.

⁵⁹ For the unity and universality of the Church, see Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, Vol. 4, 79-85 and 98-110; Nicholas of Cusa, *Catholic Concordance*, 18.

⁶⁰ Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 12-13.

⁶¹ Fisher, *Confutatio*, I.

⁶² “At quid dementius cogitari potest, quam ut spretis tot, et tam eximiorum interpretum comentariis, et iam reiecto sensu, quem tot saeculis uniuersa prorsus ecclesia uerissimum censuit, fidem uni Luthero de scripturis ad hibeamus?” *Ibid.*, II.

⁶³ Richard C. Marius, “Introduction: Thomas More’s View of the Church,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 8: The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 1285 and 1290-1292.

We can also see this perception of “orthodoxy” from how conservatives like Fisher and More defined “heresy,” orthodoxy’s counterpart. Fisher explained the word in the very same passage in which he defined “orthodox.” In its entirety, the passage reads:

The Greek word “αἵρεσις” (haireisis) means “choice” and thus anyone who chooses to teach something different from the common sense of the universal Church is rightly considered a heretic and founder of a sect. By his choice, he cuts himself off from the orthodox, that is, from those who think rightly with the Church.⁶⁴

The link between a heretic and one who digresses from thinking “with the Church” (what is orthodox) is further seen with Fisher’s comment that a person who “does not think with the Church makes himself a stranger to the truth and clearly proves himself to be a heretic.”⁶⁵

More similarly described “heresy” in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529) as “a secte and a syde way... from the common fayth and byleue of the hole chyrche;” it was a “syde way” because it deviated from the mainstream.⁶⁶ Again, Fisher and More show that early sixteenth-century conservative theologians saw orthodoxy as the way of the majority, with that majority institutionalised in the Church, a body defined by and comprised of its universality, unity and history. This is precisely why it seemed unimaginable to the author of the *Assertio* that Luther’s teachings could be afforded any legitimacy: it would amount to reducing “the universal Church of Christ to two or three heretics whispering in a corner about Christ.”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ “αἵρεσις enim graecis electio dicitur, ac proinde quisquis diversum ab communi totius ecclesiae sensu (quod doceat) eligit, is merito censetur haereticus, et sectatum autor. Secat enim electione sua seipsum ab orthodoxis, hoc est ab iis, qui cum ecclesia recte sentiunt.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, I.

⁶⁵ “Quisquis igitur cum ecclesia non sentit, alienum ab veritatem se facit, et haereticum esse sese plane convincit.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, III.

⁶⁶ Thomas More, “A Dialogue Concerning Heresies,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 6: A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Thomas M.C. Lawler, Germain Marc’Hadour, and Richard C. Marius (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 37-38.

⁶⁷ “Ecclesiam Christi catholicam ad duos aut tres haereticos redigat de Christo susurrantes in angulo.” I have deviated from O’Donovan in translating “catholicam” as “universal” rather than “Catholic,” as the confessional association with “Catholic” interferes with the universality intended by the Latin text. Henry VIII, “Assertio

All of this is to say that Nowakowska is correct when she explains how “orthodoxy” was understood from the late medieval period into the sixteenth century: while Vincent of Lérins, William of Ockham, and Nicholas of Cusa spoke of the Church as a catholic body by nature and as the position of the majority, they were in fact describing orthodoxy without invoking the term. The concepts of orthodoxy and the *ecclesia*, with its essential components of universality, unity and tradition passed down through the ages, were intrinsically linked. In summary then, “orthodoxy,” as it was understood into the first decades of the Reformation by conservative theologians and proponents of the traditional Church, was not a checklist of “right” doctrines, as we conceive of it today. It was a consensus of the majority around the Christian faith that emerged through centuries of history and the accrued theological debate of scholars “thinking with the Church.”⁶⁸ We can understand it as a “process,” to use Nowakowska’s term, because of how it was and continued to be shaped by these debates: it was what James D. Tracy called “the daughter of time.”⁶⁹

One important implication of understanding “orthodoxy” in this way rather than as a formalised list of doctrines is that it enabled a plurality of *doctrinae* (non-dogmatic teachings). Indeed, the late medieval Church was something of a tapestry woven with different theological threads, and this multiplicity was both recognised and actively appreciated by theologians of the age. James of Viterbo (d. 1308) wrote that the Church’s “union consists in multiplicity.”⁷⁰ About a century later, Jean Gerson observed that “although the Christian Church is one, it is distinguished by a multiple and beautiful variety” and that

Septem Sacramentorum,” in *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum or Defence of the Seven Sacraments*, ed. and trans. Louis O’Donovan (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908), 400-401.

⁶⁸ Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 22.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*; James D. Tracy, “Erasmus and the Arians: Remarks on the *Consensus Ecclesiae*,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 67, no. 1 (1981): 7.

⁷⁰ Quoted from Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 28.

“the Christian Church is one in multiplicity.”⁷¹ Around the same time, Nicholas of Cusa noted that there was a “varied participation in unity” in the Church, what Pelikan describes in his account of this period as “a polyphonic harmony of many rather than a monophonic singleness of melody.”⁷²

Pelikan is not the only scholar to be attuned to the innate theological heterogeneity of the late medieval Church. Alister McGrath has noted the late medieval Church’s “astonishing doctrinal diversity.”⁷³ Denis R. Janz has succinctly explained theological differences between the followers of John Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, and William of Ockham, the godfathers of the major late medieval theological movements, and Gordon A. Jensen has noted that “there was no one theology in the late medieval era... [there was a] mosaic of theologies.”⁷⁴ When these observations are consolidated into studies of Reformation England, the overwhelming, anachronistic tendency to conceive of “orthodoxy” as “right doctrinal opinion” has resulted in conclusions by some historians that there was simply no orthodoxy to be overturned at the dawn of the Reformation.⁷⁵ Lucien Febvre alludes to this supposed deficiency in orthodoxy by referring to the early sixteenth century as a time of “magnificent religious anarchy.”⁷⁶ Openly equating the word “orthodoxy” with “correct doctrine,” David Bagchi notes the “widespread theological vagueness pervading the church at the close of the Middle Ages” and describes the period

⁷¹ Quoted from Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, Vol. 4, 79.

⁷² Quoted from *Ibid.*

⁷³ Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 20; Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 16.

⁷⁴ Denis R. Janz, “Late Medieval Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5-14; Gordon A. Jensen, “Late Medieval Theology,” in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 66.

⁷⁵ Nowakowska also makes this observation. For this, see Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 20.

⁷⁶ Quoted from *Ibid.*

as one of “doctrinal confusion.”⁷⁷ Perhaps most forwardly, Lucy Wooding has remarked that “in the early years of [the] Reformation there was no such thing as unequivocal religious orthodoxy.”⁷⁸

Aside from these ideas that orthodoxy in the established Church was “confused” or non-existent around the beginning of the Reformation, the conventional misperception that “orthodoxy” was “doctrinal rightness” has spurred an emerging linguistic shift in how the established Church is described in histories of the Reformation. Derivatives of the word “orthodoxy” were once frequently used to refer to the established Catholic Church in the Reformation. Collectively, “orthodox” and “orthodoxy” appeared thirteen times in relation to the established Church or its ideas in Rex’s “The English Campaign Against Luther in the 1520s” from 1989, and Christopher Haigh used these words multiple times for the same purpose in his 1993 book *English Reformations*.⁷⁹ Moving into the early 2000s, derivatives of “orthodoxy” were still employed for the same purpose. In 2000, Ashley Null described the early sixteenth-century Cambridge scholar Robert Ridley as being “firmly orthodox” and a defender “against the spread of Protestant ideas in England.”⁸⁰ In 2002, Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie noted the interest in “the vitality of traditional religion, and in orthodox resistance to religious change” spurred by revisionism, and Cecilia A. Hatt continuously equated the English Church with orthodoxy in her discussion of the 1520s.⁸¹ A year later, Richard Rex and

⁷⁷ David Bagchi, *Luther’s Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists, 1518-1525* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 5-6.

⁷⁸ Lucy Wooding, *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

⁷⁹ Rex, “English Campaign Against Luther,” 85-86, 88, 91-95, 98 -100; for examples from Haigh, see Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 21, 61, 65.

⁸⁰ Null, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance*, 68-69.

⁸¹ Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie, “Introduction,” in *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*, ed. Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4; for examples from Hatt, see Cecilia A. Hatt, ed., *English Works of John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester: Sermons and Other Writings 1520-1535* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48, 52 and 56.

Craig W. D’Alton both used “orthodoxy” in reference to traditional Catholic ideas in the early Reformation.⁸² Around 2010, however, something changed. Some scholars began questioning the utility and suitability of the word “orthodoxy” in histories of the early Reformation. In her discussion of Nancy Bradley Warren’s *The Embodied Word* and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin and John Flood’s edited volume *Heresy and Orthodoxy*, both published in 2010, Shannon Gayk reflected on how these works cause us to question whether we should use “orthodoxy” or “traditional religion” in our investigations of late medieval and early modern England.⁸³ In 2012, Alexandra da Costa cited difficulties in using the word “orthodoxy” due to the mutability of religious identities early in the Reformation, and as we move later into the decade, the word was completely omitted from discussions in which we would generally expect it to be present.⁸⁴ In *Reformation Unbound* (2014), for instance, Karl Gunther used words like “traditional” and “popish” or phrases like “pope’s church” to refer to the established English Church which men like Tyndale and Barnes sought to reform; “orthodoxy” and “orthodox” appear to have been avoided.⁸⁵ Similarly, no reference to orthodoxy was made in Brad S. Gregory’s interrogation of the concept of Catholicism in “Situating Early Modern English Catholicism” from 2017.⁸⁶

To be clear, “orthodoxy” continues to be used to refer to early Reformation Catholicism into the present day, with examples being found in the writings of Clare Costley King’oo in 2012, Hervé Picton in 2015, Peter Marshall in 2017 and 2022, as well as Colin M.

⁸² Richard Rex, “New Light on Tyndale and Lollardy,” *Reformation* 8, no. 1 (2003): 171; Craig W. D’Alton, “The Suppression of Lutheran Heretics in England, 1526-1529,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54, no. 2 (2003): 232.

⁸³ Shannon Gayk, “Early English Orthodoxies: Reading the English Reformations,” *Journal of English and German Philology* 112, no. 4 (2013): 498.

⁸⁴ Alexandra da Costa, *Reforming Printing: Syon Abbey’s Defence of Orthodoxy, 1525-1534* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3, n.7

⁸⁵ Karl Gunther, *Reformation Unbound: Protestant Visions of Reform in England, 1525-1590* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 28-29, 31 and 33.

⁸⁶ Brad S. Gregory, “Situating Early Modern English Catholicism,” in *Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, Memory, and Counter-Reformation*, ed. James E. Kelly and Susan Royal (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 18-20.

Donnelly in 2023.⁸⁷ There is, however, an emerging concern about its use in the historiography of early Reformation England that is no doubt rooted in the longstanding mistaken perception of what “orthodoxy” entailed in this period of history. To take “orthodoxy” as “right doctrinal opinion” naturally invokes connotations of correctness, which contravenes the neutrality expected of an historian. But if “orthodoxy” is understood in its correct context during this period of history, as a consensus of the majority institutionalised in the Church, we see that this emerging concern is misguided. It deprives traditional Christianity of its essence and creates an environment conducive to erroneous conclusions when one wishes to analyse the idea of orthodoxy in the early Reformation. This is of course evident from the previously described mistaken perception that orthodoxy did not exist in the early sixteenth century, or that its diversity was somehow “anarchic.” But it is perhaps best seen in Alexandra da Costa’s *Reforming Printing: Syon Abbey’s Defence of Orthodoxy 1525-1534*. In her fourth chapter, da Costa argues that “Syon was forced to formulate and project its own definition of orthodoxy” when faced with evangelical writers, like Tyndale, “who attempted to redefine what it meant to be a true Christian.”⁸⁸ What was this supposedly new definition of “orthodoxy” according to da Costa? “Sharing in the common and long-standing belief of the Church.”⁸⁹ This is precisely what orthodoxy was and had been for centuries; there was nothing new about it. The widespread mischaracterisation of “orthodoxy” has clearly pervaded Reformation literature for too long. The growing tendency to avoid using the word in investigations of the early Reformation is dangerous

⁸⁷ Clare Costley King’oo, *Miserere Mei: The Penitential Psalms in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 21-22, 65 and 98; Hervé Picton, *A Short History of the Church of England: From the Reformation to the Present Day* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 14-15; Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 126-128, 131-133 and 135; Marshall, *Reformation England*, 1 and 33-34; Colin M. Donnelly, “‘Wherefore Amend Your Lyves Yff Yowe Wyll be Savyd’: The Soteriology of Thomas Bilney,” *Reformation* 28, no. 1 (2023): 64-65.

⁸⁸ Da Costa, *Reforming Printing*, 82.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 20 and 99.

because it risks depriving us of the ability to appreciate the subtleties of the established Church's theology during this tumultuous period of European history.

This thesis sits at the intersection of these historiographical issues. It takes its heading from the gap in Reformation literature noted by Rex and Bagchi and the historiographical shortcomings that have arisen therefrom, and it aims to address the widespread misconception of what "orthodoxy" entailed in the early Reformation. Focussing on the composition and nature of traditional English theology between 1520 and 1535, the years before the Act of Supremacy and before the deaths of Fisher and More (two of this investigation's main subjects) in 1535, this thesis argues that conservative English thought in this period was the embodiment of late medieval orthodoxy and should be understood as such. Like a tree that has seen many ages, English conservative theology was "the daughter of time."⁹⁰ Its roots were strong and varied; they meandered through the soil in different directions as individual theologians drew on different schools of thought. Where the breezes of the Reformation blew them, the branches of conservative theology moved in response, positioning themselves in accordance with their constitution in the Church's past and the directions determined by its authors. These directions began with a theologian's academic or social background and were guided by the bounds of personal interests or beliefs, political aspirations, target audiences and theological allies. In the image of late medieval orthodoxy, conservative English theology was the sum of its past and present, and so was another step in orthodoxy's development. It was a complex, cohesive whole, comprised of many avenues of thought – an end reached and defined by many means.

⁹⁰ The quoted phrase is James D. Tracy's; for this, see Tracy, "Erasmus and the Arians," 7.

By turning attention back to this overlooked area of the early Reformation, we bring some balance to the historiography of English thought in this period. We see that the traditional English response to the reformers was far more complex than has hitherto been appreciated, both in terms of the authorities at its foundation and in the factors shaping its make-up. From this emerges a more nuanced perception of each of our authors of investigation and an idea of how historians should be understanding “orthodoxy” during this period of English history: it was a robust classification of thought that was paradoxically vivified by its variations, coherent with its contradictions and unified with its disunity. It was orthodoxy in the late medieval sense of a consensus informed by different theological opinions, before the word came to refer to incontestable doctrinal belief.

Cast of Characters: Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell:

As subjects for analysis, this investigation takes four figures who led the charge against the reformers in early Reformation England: Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell. They have been chosen because they wrote the foremost treatises of the English campaign against the reformers. At least two of them, Henry VIII and More, are household names for students of English history. But when it comes to theological history, Fisher is the only one of these authors to have garnered academic attention at all proportional to the magnitude of his role in the English defence of the established Church in the early Reformation. In this section, we will briefly outline who these men were and describe the state of literature pertaining to their contribution to the defence of conservative theology. Details of their intellectual environments, including descriptions of scholasticism, humanism and the works studied at the English universities during their day, will be provided in the section following this one.

Henry VIII is no doubt the most famous of our authors of investigation, having been the subject of countless narratives and the man popularly regarded as responsible for formally opening the English floodgates to reform with the 1534 Act of Supremacy, which severed England's ties to Rome by naming Henry VIII the Supreme Head of the Church in England.⁹¹ The second son of Henry VII, Henry VIII became heir to the English throne after his older brother, Arthur, died in 1502; he ascended the throne in 1509 and reigned until his death in 1547.⁹² He was a supporter of humanist learning and was a profoundly pious man who heard mass every day (sometimes multiple times a day), not just Sunday, and we know from Erasmus that he had a keen interest in theology.⁹³ In 1522, Erasmus wrote to Duke George of Saxony that Henry VIII wanted "to have some acquaintance with books of scholastic theology" and that he enjoyed "the discussion of some theological point even over his wine," and in 1529, Erasmus wrote in a letter to the German humanist Johannes Cochlaeus that Henry VIII prepared for jousts "by reading the schoolmen," namely Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and Gabriel Biel.⁹⁴

In the early days of the Reformation, Henry VIII remained a fervent traditionalist and was among the first to rattle his sabre for the conservative cause in the wake of Luther's teachings. In 1523 and 1526, he penned two letters against Luther; the first was written to the princes of Saxony and the other was addressed to Luther himself.⁹⁵ These letters have

⁹¹ Alec Ryrie, *The Age of Reformation: The Tudor and Stewart Realms, 1485-1603*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 101-102.

⁹² Lucy Wooding, *Henry VIII*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 12 and xii-xiii.

⁹³ For Henry VIII's and humanism, see *Ibid.*, 24-25; for his piety, see *Ibid.*, 58; for his erudition, see *Ibid.*, 2-3 and 83-84 and Rex, "Introduction," 3.

⁹⁴ Desiderius Erasmus to Duke George of Saxony, 1522, in *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1252-1355 (1522-1523)*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 181-182; Desiderius Erasmus to Johannes Cochlaeus, 1529, in *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 2082-2203 (1529)*, trans. Alexander Dalzell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 198.

⁹⁵ Henry VIII, *Epistola regia ad illustrissimos Saxoniae duces pie admonitoria* (London, 1523); Henry VIII to Martin Luther, 1526, in *Henry VIII and Martin Luther: The Second Controversy, 1525-1527*, ed. Richard Rex (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021).

been almost entirely ignored by scholars, who seem scarcely aware of their existence, but we afford them some much due attention in Chapter 4.⁹⁶ The one text widely associated with Henry VIII is the first anti-Lutheran work published under his name, the *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* of 1521. It was lauded in conservative circles across Europe, earned Henry VIII the title of “Fidei Defensor” (Defender of the Faith), and set a tone that reverberated in the anti-Reformation treatises produced over the next decade-and-a-half in both England and wider Europe.⁹⁷ In England, it was referenced in the writings of each of our other three subjects, More, Fisher, and Powell, and in wider Europe it was variously translated, edited, and defended by the conservative theologians Johannes Cochlaeus, Johannes Eck, Thomas Murner, and Hieronymus Emser.⁹⁸

But whether Henry VIII actually wrote the *Assertio* has been contested since the book’s publication, and it is a question that will be addressed throughout the pages of this thesis. After its initial presentation to Pope Leo X in 1521, Juan Manuel, the imperial ambassador in Rome wrote to the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, that “all the learned men in England had a part in [the *Assertio*’s] composition.”⁹⁹ Erasmus, by contrast, in his above-mentioned correspondences with Duke George and Cochlaeus, insisted that the king possessed the theological knowledge to write the *Assertio* himself.¹⁰⁰ More recent literature has become less polarised, and tends to argue that the *Assertio* was written with some level

⁹⁶ Some exceptions include Richard C. Marius, “Sources: The Contemporary Seen,” in *The Complete Works of Thomas More, Vol. 6: A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Thomas M.C. Lawler, Germain Marc’hadour, and Richard C. Marius (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 535, Rex, “Introduction,” 14-15, and Richard Rex, “Thomas More and the Heretics: Statesman or Fanatic?” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 98.

⁹⁷ Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 126; Ryrie, *Age of Reformation*, 87-88.

⁹⁸ For More, see More, “Responsio,” 360-361; for Fisher, see John Fisher, *Defensio regiae assertionis contra Babylonicam captivitatem* (Cologne, 1525); for Powell, see Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 4^r; for the *Assertio* and wider Europe, see Rex, “Introduction,” 13.

⁹⁹ Rex, “English Campaign Against Luther,” 88.

¹⁰⁰ Erasmus to Duke George, 1522, 181-182; Erasmus to Cochlaeus, 1529, 197-198.

of collaboration. Lucy Wooding deems it likely that Henry VIII was responsible for the broad conception of the book, though he had others complete its more detailed aspects, and Jean-Louis Quantin likewise holds that the text was the product of a collective effort.¹⁰¹ Alec Ryrie similarly notes that “apparently... [the *Assertio*] really was the king’s own project, although he was coached by Fisher, More and others...”¹⁰² Richard Rex also attributes primary responsibility for the *Assertio* to the king, and in one of his earlier works, Rex provides a suggestion later cited by both Ashley Null and Peter Marshall for where collaboration with other theologians over the text’s contents took place. In the spring of 1521, Rex explains, Cardinal Wolsey convened a council to discuss English opposition to Luther; it was in session while the *Assertio* was being composed, and so was well suited to revise it.¹⁰³

Ryrie notes in his account that the *Assertio* was “no great piece of theology” and cites this as “one reason for suspecting that the king was its ultimate author,” but today’s historians never really dive into the text itself to unpack its theology.¹⁰⁴ The comparative approach of this thesis creates a unique opportunity to juxtapose the theology of the *Assertio* with that of More, Fisher, and Powell. In doing so, we can conclude alongside Ryrie that the buck stopped entirely with Henry VIII where the *Assertio*’s contents were concerned. While it is still probable that Henry VIII was aided in his project by more established theologians, the *Assertio*’s generic style of and approach to argumentation shows it was somewhat of an outlier to the works produced by our other three authors of investigation. In fact, as we see in Chapter 2, there were times when More and Fisher

¹⁰¹ Wooding, *Henry VIII*, 115; Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23.

¹⁰² Ryrie, *Age of Reformation*, 87.

¹⁰³ Rex, “English Campaign Against Luther,” 88; Null, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance*, 69; Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 127.

¹⁰⁴ Ryrie, *Age of Reformation*, 87.

appeared to simultaneously endorse yet cautiously distance themselves from the *Assertio's* commentary on the administration of communion. It is highly unlikely that any theologian deemed eminent enough to ghostwrite the *Assertio* would elicit this kind of response from his peers.

After Henry VIII, Thomas More is perhaps the most widely known of our authors of investigation. He was born in 1478, towards the end of the Wars of the Roses (1455-1485), to John More, a London-based lawyer who by 1489 entered his son as a page in the household of John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England.¹⁰⁵ During his three years in Morton's household, More distinguished himself enough academically to be sent to the University of Oxford at Morton's expense.¹⁰⁶ More arrived there in 1492 and after two years of study, he was recalled to London by his father to commence a legal career.¹⁰⁷ Over the next decade, More cultivated friendships with the humanists John Colet, Thomas Linacre, William Grocyn, and Desiderius Erasmus and developed himself as a humanist, a movement we will discuss in the next section.¹⁰⁸ By 1505, More was skilled in reading and translating Greek, and in this year, he collaborated with Erasmus on a translation of the Greek dialogues of Lucian, an ancient rhetorician.¹⁰⁹ More's most famous humanist work, *Utopia*, was finished in 1516, and in 1518, he entered royal service, where he became a close companion of Henry VIII; the king conferred with More on intellectual matters and political affairs.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Joanne Paul, *Thomas More* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 15-16; James McConica, "Thomas More as Humanist," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 25.

¹⁰⁶ Paul, *Thomas More*, 16-17.

¹⁰⁷ Eugenio M. Olivares Merino, "Cyprian in Thomas More's Writings," *Moreana* 57, no. 1 (2020): 28-29.

¹⁰⁸ Paul, *Thomas More*, 17-18 and 22-23.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 and 22; Jonathan Arnold, *The Great Humanists: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 176.

¹¹⁰ Dominic Baker-Smith, "Reading *Utopia*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 148; Cathy Curtis, "More's Public Life," in *The Cambridge*

With the onset of the Reformation, More joined Henry VIII in defending the established Church. After Luther attacked the *Assertio* with his *Contra Henricum Regem Angliae* in 1522, More penned his *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523), his first formal foray into the religious disputes of the age.¹¹¹ He entered the fray again with his letter to the Lutheran Johannes Bugenhagen between 1525 and 1526, and in 1528, Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, asked More to write against the reformers in English so that he could reach a wider audience.¹¹² More acquiesced, publishing his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and *Supplication of Souls* in 1529.¹¹³ In this year, More ascended to the post of Lord Chancellor, the most powerful position in England after the kingship itself, and was preoccupied with political affairs until his resignation in 1532.¹¹⁴ From this point through to his imprisonment in the Tower of London in 1534 and eventual execution in 1535 for refusing to accede to the Act of Supremacy, More turned his attention back to defending the Church from the Reformation controversies.¹¹⁵ He began composing his voluminous *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* in 1532, a text he did not finish until the following year.¹¹⁶ Also in 1533, More wrote two works focussed on the Eucharist, his letter to the English evangelical John Frith and *The Answer to a Poisoned Book*, and two polemics critiquing contemporary government policies, *The Apology* and *The Debellation of Salem and Bizance*.¹¹⁷ After his imprisonment in 1534,

Companion to Thomas More, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72-73; Paul, *Thomas More*, 84.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹² For the date of More's letter to Bugenhagen, see Frank Manley, "Introduction: *Letter to Bugenhagen*," in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 7: Letter to Bugenhagen, Supplication of Souls, Letter Against Frith*, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Marc'Hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xxx; for More writing in English, see Paul, *Thomas More*, 85 and Curtis, "More's Public Life," 81.

¹¹³ Paul, *Thomas More*, 85.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

¹¹⁶ Peter Marshall, "The Last Years," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More*, ed. George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 118.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

More wrote a series of works collectively known as his “Tower Works:” *A Treatise upon the Passion, A Treatise on the Blessed Body, A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* and *De Tristitia Christi*.¹¹⁸

Evidently, More was a prolific writer, and the sheer magnitude of his corpus has no doubt contributed to his fame. But his reputation as one of northern Europe’s foremost humanists combined with his ardent defence of the established Church in the Reformation has led modern scholarship to produce two polarised images of More. On one hand is More the “man for all seasons,” the level-headed saintly scholar found in R.W. Chambers’s 1935 biography of More and the many analyses of his *Utopia*; on the other hand is the grotesquely negative More presented by G.R. Elton, Jasper Ridley, and Richard Marius: More the religious fanatic who relished the persecution of heretics.¹¹⁹ In the last decade or so, scholars like Richard Rex, Travis Curtright, and Joanne Paul have sought to reconcile these two images and give us a sense of one Thomas More, the devoutly Christian humanist.¹²⁰ Despite these advancements, in-depth assessments of More’s theology remain scarce.¹²¹ Yet understanding More the theologian provides another opportunity to bridge the gap between the two contrasting images of him. His theology was the product of centuries-old scholastic learning blended with more recent humanist practices and shaped by the tumultuous climate around him. In examining it, we come upon the image of a remarkably erudite man who navigated the turmoil of his day using the intellectual and literary tools at

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹¹⁹ Paul, *Thomas More*, 3-4; Rex, “Thomas More and the Heretics,” 93-94; Travis Curtright, *The One Thomas More* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 1-14.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*; Rex, “Thomas More and the Heretics,” 93-94; Paul, *Thomas More*, 2-5.

¹²¹ Exceptions include Mitjans, “St. Thomas More and St. John Chrysostom,” 129-142 and Merino, “Cyprian in Thomas More’s Writings,” 23-47.

his disposal. He advanced a humanist view of the world through his religious writings, while simultaneously defending the integrity of the Church, an institution he held dear.

While not having the same widespread, popular notoriety as Henry VIII and More, John Fisher is generally known among scholars of early modern England. Born in 1469, Fisher began his studies at the University of Cambridge in 1483.¹²² He finished his BA in 1489, his MA in 1491, and in the academic year of 1494-1495, he was elected senior proctor, a position through which he made the acquaintance of Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of Henry VII, to whom he would later become private confessor.¹²³ In 1501, Fisher graduated a doctor of divinity and was elected vice-chancellor of Cambridge within the next fortnight.¹²⁴ He was appointed the bishop of Rochester in 1504 and made full chancellor of Cambridge the following year.¹²⁵ In 1511, Erasmus travelled to Cambridge at Fisher's invitation to teach Greek, and he continued teaching at the university until 1514, a visitation that marked significant advancements in the university's liberal arts tuition.¹²⁶ When the Reformation controversies made their way to England after 1517, Fisher took up his pen in defence of the established Church and remained conservative in his theology until, like More, he was executed in 1535 for refusing to endorse the Act of Supremacy.¹²⁷

Fisher was among the first to preach against Luther in England. On 12th May 1521, at the public burning of heretical books presided over by Cardinal Wolsey at Paul's Cross, a pulpit that stood in the churchyard where St. Paul's Cathedral stands today, Fisher delivered

¹²² Brendan Bradshaw, "Bishop John Fisher, 1469-1535: The Man and His Work," in *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2.

¹²³ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 13.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*; Bradshaw, "Bishop John Fisher," 3.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7; Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 51.

¹²⁷ Bradshaw, "Bishop John Fisher," 14-15.

a sermon criticising Luther's *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae* (1520).¹²⁸ In 1522, Fisher's *Convulsio Calumniarum Ulrichi Veleni* was published against a little-known reformer named Ulrichus Velenus, and the following year, Fisher published his first major treatise against Luther, the *Confutatio*, which criticised Luther's thoughts on "scripture, the papacy, justification, free will, penance, the eucharist, purgatory and indulgences."¹²⁹ Soon afterwards, he began working on two further anti-Lutheran polemics: his own defence of the *Assertio, Defensio regiae assertionis*, and his *Sacri sacerdotii defensio*, both printed in 1525.¹³⁰ Fisher preached another sermon against the reformers at Paul's Cross in 1526, and in 1527, his *De veritate corporis et sanguinis Christi in Eucharistia* was published against the reformer Johannes Oecolampadius.¹³¹ Hereafter, Fisher found himself preoccupied with Henry VIII's quest to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon (the so-called "King's Great Matter"), so *De veritate* is the last of his writings against the reformers, though his imprisonment in the Tower of London in 1534 did see him produce two treatises reflecting on death and religious life.¹³²

The first scholar to provide a truly detailed account of Fisher's works, particularly his Latin theological writings, was Edward Surtz, whose *Works and Days of John Fisher* shed light on a range of areas, like Fisher's educational background, soteriology and eucharistic beliefs.¹³³ Since then, he has received attention from major figures in Reformation

¹²⁸ Susan Wabuda, "The English Reformation," in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 392; Hatt, *English Works of John Fisher*, 42.

¹²⁹ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 80-81; Bradshaw, "Bishop John Fisher," 9; for Velenus and his pamphlet, see A.J. Lamping, ed., *Ulrichus Velenus (Oldřich Velenský) and His Treatise Against the Papacy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976).

¹³⁰ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 81.

¹³¹ For the 1526 sermon, see Hatt, *English Works of John Fisher*, 56; for *De veritate*, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 82.

¹³² *Ibid.*; Hatt, *English Works of John Fisher*, 350-411.

¹³³ Edward Surtz, *The Works and Days of John Fisher: An Introduction to the Position of St. John Fisher (1469-1535), Bishop of Rochester, in the English Renaissance and the Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); for praise of Surtz, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 3-4.

historiography, including Eamon Duffy and J.J. Scarisbrick, and his English works and sermons have been the subject of commentaries by Cecilia A. Hatt.¹³⁴ Today, the primary handbook for his theology is Richard Rex's *Theology of John Fisher*, which has been, and remains, an immensely valuable resource for understanding Fisher's thought. It has been turned to by Ashley Null, Alister McGrath and Peter Marshall, and was indispensable to writing this thesis.¹³⁵ But even with this amount of literature on Fisher's theology, stones remain unturned. Accounts of Fisher's eucharistic theology focus on his *De veritate*, with no consideration of his treatment of the subject in his earlier *Confutatio*, and as helpful as the book is, there are some problems with how Rex's *Theology of John Fisher* portrays Fisher's positions on conciliar authority, the sacrament of penance and free will. In our discussion of Fisher, we will focus on three of his Latin treatises, namely his *Confutatio*, *Defensio regiae* and *De veritate*, in an attempt to turn over some of these stones. In doing so, we uncover Fisher's connections to areas of medieval theology that have not yet been acknowledged and see that he was himself an indication of how the conservative reaction to the Reformation was the sum of its past evolving through its present. He conveyed longstanding scholastic ideas in ways stylistically and argumentatively characteristic of the growing humanist movement, and his theology was at times influenced by his political and intellectual milieu.

Compared to Henry VIII, More and Fisher, the life of Edward Powell remains somewhat obscure. What little we know about him has been pieced together from scattered

¹³⁴ For essays by Duffy, Scarisbrick and others, see Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy, eds., *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); for Hatt, see Hatt, *English Works of John Fisher* and Cecilia A. Hatt, ed., *John Fisher's Court Sermons: Preaching for Lady Margaret, 1507-1509* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹³⁵ For example, see Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 65-83, n. 6, 8, 31 and 50, Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 287-292, n. 9 and 14, and Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 601.

letters and registers.¹³⁶ He was born sometime in the 1470s and by the mid-1490s, he had earned an MA from Oxford and was named a fellow of Oriel College.¹³⁷ In 1506, he received a DTh from Oxford and was made canon of Salisbury sometime in the next decade or so.¹³⁸ At the council convened by Wolsey in opposition to Luther in 1521, Powell was part of Oxford's delegation, and in response to Wolsey's request that each of the delegates write against Luther, Powell wrote his *Propugnaculum* of 1523, the only treatise of the Oxford attendees to have been published.¹³⁹ As the 1520s progressed and Henry VIII began seeking to annul his marriage, Powell entrenched himself in the queen's camp and wrote *Tractatus de non dissolvendo Henrici Regis cum Catherina matrimonio*, which appears to have since been lost.¹⁴⁰ He then became reckless in his preaching. In 1533, around the time that Anne Boleyn was crowned queen, Powell delivered a sermon (also now lost) in Bristol that was so critical of the king that it caused an evangelical riot.¹⁴¹ He then returned to Salisbury and continued to preach against Henry VIII and his new queen there, apparently going as far as to publicly call Anne Boleyn's father a heretic.¹⁴² Powell's indiscretion caught up with him as he was arrested the following year, and on 30th July 1540, he was executed for treason along with the traditional Catholics Thomas Abell and Richard Featherstone, while the evangelicals Robert Barnes, Thomas Garrett and William Jerome were burned for heresy.¹⁴³

Among most Reformation historians, Powell is little more than a name in a list. David Bagchi includes him in a catalogue of those who wrote against Luther, but provides no more

¹³⁶ For example, see Guy Fitch Lytle, "John Wyclif, Martin Luther and Edward Powell: Heresy and the Oxford Theology Faculty at the Beginning of the Reformation," *Studies in Church History: Subsidia* 5 (1987): 470, n. 18, and 472, n. 24.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 472.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Rex, "English Campaign Against Luther," 89.

¹⁴⁰ Lytle, "John Wyclif, Martin Luther and Edward Powell," 476.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 477.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*; Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 280-281.

detail than this.¹⁴⁴ Susan Wabuda names him in her own enumeration of those who opposed Luther, but goes no further than mentioning his *Propugnaculum* and execution.¹⁴⁵ Richard Rex and Peter Marshall both reference Powell, his work, opposition to Henry VIII's marital annulment and execution, but the contents of his *Propugnaculum* are never analysed nor discussed in detail.¹⁴⁶ Michael Tavuzzi's piece on Luther's Catholic opponents names Henry VIII, More, and Fisher as Luther's English opposition, but Powell is entirely overlooked.¹⁴⁷ The most recent source we have that both details Powell's life and subjects his *Propugnaculum* to some level of analysis is Guy Fitch Lytle's assessment of John Wycliffe's influence on Oxford's initial response to the Reformation.¹⁴⁸ As is discussed in the next section, this is a very limited analysis that does not take broader trends in the European campaign against Luther into consideration, and its fixation on Wycliffe means that it provides little insight into the content of Powell's theology. This thesis's discussion of Powell is therefore the first significant venture into his thought, and it reveals a man who seemed somewhat less dependent on scholastic theological currents than his peers, but who had a strong grasp of humanist rhetoric and a love for classical tropes. When Powell is considered alongside his allies, we see the high level of methodological variation in the treatises of the English campaign against Luther, and are shown how, in the manner of late medieval orthodoxy, English theological conservatism was a process that came to incorporate new ways of thinking as they developed.

¹⁴⁴ Bagchi, "Catholic Theologians," 225.

¹⁴⁵ Wabuda, "English Reformation," 393 and 396.

¹⁴⁶ Rex, "English Campaign Against Luther," 87, 89, 90 and 105; Rex, "Introduction," 13; Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 128, 203-204 and 281.

¹⁴⁷ Michael Tavuzzi, "Luther's Catholic Opponents," in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 224-231.

¹⁴⁸ Lytle, "John Wyclif, Martin Luther and Edward Powell," 465-479.

The Intellectual Atmosphere of Early Sixteenth-Century England:

The early sixteenth century sat at a crossroads of intellectual history, and it is essential that we briefly outline the two crossing paths, for they directly influenced how each of our authors of investigation thought and expressed their thoughts. From about the twelfth century, theology and philosophy had been dominated by scholasticism, an epistemic methodology that originated with Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109) and governed intellectual pursuits in the schools, universities and monasteries of Europe's Latin west.¹⁴⁹ It was, as Erika Rummel put it, essentially "a system of enquiry based on Aristotelian logic combined with Christian [teachings]."¹⁵⁰ In line with the multiplicity of late medieval orthodoxy, it was a system that took many forms; there were, as Charles G. Nauert has said, "many scholasticisms."¹⁵¹ The broad divisions for these forms which will be referenced throughout this thesis are the *via antiqua*, the *via moderna* and the *schola Augustiniana moderna*.¹⁵²

The *via antiqua* consisted of the theology of men like Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), Albertus Magnus (d. 1280), and John Duns Scotus (d. 1308).¹⁵³ It was the *via* of philosophical realists, those who believed in the concept of universals. Consider the example of religion: there are many different religious faiths, including Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, each of which contain distinct systems of belief. Despite their differences, they share

¹⁴⁹ Blaise Dufal, "The Fathers of Scholasticism: Authorities as Totems," in *Individuals and Institutions in Medieval Scholasticism*, ed. Antonia Fitzpatrick and John Sabapathy (London: University of London Press, 2020), 53.

¹⁵⁰ Rummel's quotation uses the phrase "Christian doctrine," but I have modified it to "Christian [teachings]" due to the problematic nature of "doctrine" described above. Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11.

¹⁵¹ Charles G. Nauert, "Humanism as Method: Roots of Conflict with the Scholastics," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 29, no. 2 (1998): 430.

¹⁵² These are beautifully summarised in Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2021), 80-81, 84-87 and 295; also see Heiko A. Oberman, "Via Antiqua and Via Moderna: Late Medieval Prolegomena to Early Reformation Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 1 (1987): 23-40.

¹⁵³ Jensen, "Late Medieval Theology," 66.

membership under the designation of religion. Realists, endorsing the concept of universals, would consider religion to retain its own metaphysical existence.¹⁵⁴

This question of universals is what distinguished the *via antiqua* from the nominalists, who were divided into the *via moderna* and the *schola Augustiniana moderna*. Whereas realists endorsed the concept of universals, nominalists saw them as merely helpful categories for organisation rather than as metaphysical entities of their own.¹⁵⁵ Returning to our example of religion, nominalists would see Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism as merely classificatory designations. The *via moderna* was the original division of nominalists, and it counts William of Ockham (d. 1347), Robert Holcot (d. 1349), Pierre d'Ailly (d. 1420), and Gabriel Biel (d. 1495) among its adherents.¹⁵⁶ But in 1344, the seeds were sown for an offshoot of this *via* by a text written in opposition to it: Thomas Bradwardine of Merton College, Oxford, wrote *De causa Dei contra Pelagium*, in which he accused his contemporaries of being neo-Pelagians in their soteriology.¹⁵⁷ We return to this in greater detail where it is more relevant in Chapter 3, but suffice it to say here that Bradwardine believed that his peers echoed the teachings of the fifth-century heretic Pelagius by suggesting that humans have the ability to act well and thus merit salvation.¹⁵⁸ For Bradwardine, saving grace cannot be merited from good human works; advocating a return to the grace-centred soteriology of Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings, Bradwardine saw grace as a gift given freely by God irrespective of one's actions.¹⁵⁹ Bradwardine's

¹⁵⁴ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 80-81.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 86-87; Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1986), 23; Thomas Bradwardine, *De causa Dei contra Pelagium et de virtute causarum* (London, 1618).

¹⁵⁸ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 86-87; Oberman, "Via Antiqua and Via Moderna," 23.

¹⁵⁹ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 86-87; Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, 8-10.

teachings influenced the thought of Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358) at the University of Paris, and as Gregory was a member of the Augustinian Order, these teachings spread throughout this order – hence why this offshoot of the *via moderna* became known as the *schola Augustiniana moderna*.¹⁶⁰

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, each university tended to have one of these *viae* dominate its theology. The University of Cologne, for instance, was a stronghold of the *via antiqua*, while the University of Erfurt, where Luther was educated between 1501 and 1505, was a home of the *via moderna*.¹⁶¹ The University of Paris became a bastion for the *via antiqua* after King Louis XI of France banished the nominalists from it in 1474, and at late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Oxford and Cambridge, the theologians of the *via antiqua* were favoured over those of the *via moderna*.¹⁶² Indeed, the influence of the *via antiqua*, particularly the thought of Scotus, on early sixteenth-century English theologians, like John Fisher and the evangelical-minded Thomas Cranmer, has seen discussion by Richard Rex and Ashley Null, and this influence will also be illustrated in this thesis.¹⁶³

The universal textbook of scholastic theology was Peter Lombard's *Libri quattuor sententiarum* (c. 1158), more commonly known as the *Sententiae*.¹⁶⁴ It was, as the title says, a collection of *sententiae* – the quoted opinions of authoritative writers, like the apostles

¹⁶⁰ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 87; Janz, "Late Medieval Theology," 13.

¹⁶¹ For Cologne and Erfurt, see Oberman, "*Via Antiqua* and *Via Moderna*," 24; for Luther at Erfurt, see Theodor Dieter, "Luther as Late Medieval Theologian: His Positive and Negative Use of Nominalism and Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34.

¹⁶² For Louis XI and the nominalists, see *Ibid.*, 32; for the *viae* at Oxford, see J. I. Catto, "Theology after Wycliffism," in *The History of the University of Oxford: Volume II: Late Medieval Oxford*, ed. J.I. Catto and T.A.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 270-271; for the *viae* and Cambridge, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 19.

¹⁶³ For Fisher and Scotus, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 20 and 63; for Cranmer and Scotus, see Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 72-76.

¹⁶⁴ Jensen, "Late Medieval Theology," 68; Philipp W. Rosemann, *Peter Lombard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-4 and 55.

and Church fathers – arranged by theological topic.¹⁶⁵ Book 1, for example, considered the Trinity, while Book 4 focussed on the sacraments.¹⁶⁶ Its purpose was to synthesise “the positions [on these topics] represented by the quotations, while bearing in mind contemporary theological debates;” it would thus provide the reader with a good knowledge of the perspectives surrounding these areas of theology.¹⁶⁷ Lombard’s *Sententiae* was so popular that it was the subject of countless commentaries by scholastics across the three *viae*, including Aquinas and Scotus of the *via antiqua*, Ockham and Biel of the *via moderna*, and Gregory of Rimini of the *Schola Augustiniana moderna*, and from the thirteenth century into the sixteenth century, students of theology at any university in Latin Christendom were expected to attend lectures on it.¹⁶⁸

Aside from theology proper, the universities of northern Europe in the age of scholasticism were pedagogically structured according to the *septennium*, seven subjects that comprised the liberal arts curriculum.¹⁶⁹ This itself consisted of two divisions: the *trivium*, which included grammar, dialectic (logic) and rhetoric, and the *quadrivium*, which included arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy.¹⁷⁰ In practice at the English universities towards the end of the fifteenth century, however, a larger proportion of time was devoted to logic and natural philosophy. The basic text of the Cambridge BA degree was

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4; for collections of *sententiae* being the standard of medieval theological education, see Greta Grace Kroeker, “The University of Paris During Calvin’s Life,” in *John Calvin in Context*, ed. R. Ward Holder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 27.

¹⁶⁶ Rosemann, *Peter Lombard*, 60-61.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 and 66.

¹⁶⁸ For commentaries by Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, and Biel, see *Ibid.*, 3-4; for the commentary of Gregory of Rimini, see Frank A. James III, *Peter Martyr Vermigli and Predestination: The Augustinian Inheritance of an Italian Reformer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 126; for the *Sententiae* at Wittenberg, see Jonathan Mumme, “The University of Wittenberg,” in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 41; for the *Sententiae* at Oxford, see L.W.B. Brockliss, *The University of Oxford: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 90; for the *Sententiae* at Cambridge, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 19.

¹⁶⁹ Arnold, *Great Humanists*, 4.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

the *Summulae Logicales* of Petrus Hispanus (d. 1277) and much time was spent reading Aristotle and commentaries of his works.¹⁷¹ The three-year Cambridge MA, which Fisher took in 1491, was also heavily focussed on philosophy, and a year each was allotted to dialectics, Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* and his metaphysical writings.¹⁷² At Oxford, the texts required for someone to receive a bachelor's degree were set by a statute in 1268, and they ensured that Aristotle was henceforth a staple of Oxford's curriculum.¹⁷³ Students were expected to be familiar with Aristotle's *Predicaments*, *De interpretatione*, *Physica*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *De anima*, as well as works on logic that were recently rediscovered, namely Aristotle's *Topica*, *Elenchi*, and the *Prior Analytics* and *Posterior Analytics*, which expounded upon syllogisms and argumentative construction.¹⁷⁴ These texts remained at the core of education at Oxford into the first decade of the sixteenth century, and so would have been learned by More and Powell when they attended the university.¹⁷⁵

Tangential to this institutionalised scholasticism was Renaissance humanism, a movement and academic methodology of its own centred on the *studia humanitatis*, which included, but was not limited to, grammar, rhetoric, literary studies, poetics, history and moral philosophy.¹⁷⁶ Its fascination was the world of Greco-Roman antiquity, and its adherents placed a heavy emphasis on contextualising and historicising the sources from this period.¹⁷⁷ In the realm of theology, humanists were thus unsatisfied with interpretations

¹⁷¹ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 16.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*; Hatt, *English Works of John Fisher*, 6.

¹⁷³ Brockliss, *University of Oxford*, 87.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 116 and 121. For More at Oxford, see Merino, "Cyprian in Thomas More's Writings," 28-29; for Powell at Oxford, see Lytle, "John Wyclif, Martin Luther and Edward Powell," 472.

¹⁷⁶ Peter Mack, "Humanism and the Classical Tradition," in *The Oxford History of the Renaissance*, ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 10; Matthew Day, *English Humanism and the Reception of Virgil, c. 1400-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3.

¹⁷⁷ Kenneth J. Woo, "Western Christianity in 1500," in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 51-52; Kroeker, "University of Paris," 27.

of excerpted biblical and patristic quotations, the essence of scholastic works like Lombard's *Sententiae*; they instead advocated a return to the original sources (*ad fontes* – “to the fountainheads”).¹⁷⁸

While its earliest roots were in the sixth- to eighth-century monasteries of present-day England and Ireland, where classical Latin texts were collected and copied before being re-exported to mainland Europe during the reign of Charlemagne (768-814), humanism came into its own in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when Italian scholars sought to emulate the rhetorical writing styles of antiquity.¹⁷⁹ Among these early humanists were Lovato Lovati (d. 1309), a Paduan notary who wrote epistles in Latin verse, “a treatise on classical Latin poetic metre, and a short commentary on Seneca’s tragedies,” and Francesco Petrarca (d. 1374), who collected classical manuscripts and endeavoured to uphold classical standards of Latin in the poems, letters and philosophical treatises composed by his hand.¹⁸⁰ Thanks largely to the support of wealthy patrons, such as Niccolò Niccoli (d. 1437) and the Medici family, who founded libraries and commissioned humanist scholars to collect and translate ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts, the fifteenth century saw humanism grow in prominence on the Italian peninsula.¹⁸¹

From its flourishing state in Italy, humanism was exported to northern Europe in the latter half of the fifteenth century. This was due to both the growth of the printing industry in the 1450s, which led to the production and distribution of a greater number of humanist

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 27-29; McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 50. For a detailed discussion of humanists and scripture, see Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

¹⁷⁹ Mack, “Humanism and the Classical Tradition,” 14.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 18-19; for another account of the growth of humanist learning, see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

texts, and to the direct contact of Italian humanists with scholars and courts of northern Europe.¹⁸² Enea Silvio Piccolomini (d. 1464), for instance, who became Pope Pius II in 1458, stimulated the growth of humanism in the north through his visits to German courts, and Rudolph Agricola (d. 1485), who was known to have contributed to the growth of Latin, Greek and Hebrew studies, was one of the first to introduce Italian humanism to the academic institutions of the Germanic regions.¹⁸³ Indeed, it was Agricola's influence that contributed to the intellectual development of one of northern Europe's most famous humanists, Desiderius Erasmus.¹⁸⁴ It was also likely by way of visiting Italian scholars that Cambridge was first exposed to humanism. Around the time that Fisher was a student at Cambridge in the 1480s, three Italians are known to have been teaching at the university: Gaio Auberino, Stefano Surigone, and Lorenzo Traversagni.¹⁸⁵ Auberino wrote letters on the university's behalf in 1483 and was lecturing between 1486 and 1487, just before Fisher received his BA in 1488.¹⁸⁶ Little is known about Surigone, but Traversagni was active at the university until 1482; he delivered lectures on rhetoric and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in 1476 and lectured on Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* in 1478.¹⁸⁷ His lectures on rhetoric placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of eloquence among the liberal arts and were apparently so popular that they warranted editions in print.¹⁸⁸

Some northerners also travelled south to study under Italian humanists before returning to their homelands, where they shifted the intellectual climate of scholarly

¹⁸² David H. Price, "Northern Humanism and its Impact," in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 100-101.

¹⁸³ Arnold, *Great Humanists*, 91-95.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁸⁵ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 15.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 13 and 15.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

communities and institutions with their new or enhanced learning. The Englishman John Colet, for example, travelled to France and then to Italy between 1492 and 1496 before settling in Oxford where he “[expounded] his Neoplatonic and Pseudo-Dionysian perspective on the Pauline epistles,” lectures that Powell may have attended as they were given while he was a student at Oxford.¹⁸⁹ Similarly, William Grocyn left England in 1488 to study under the Italian humanist Angelo Poliziano.¹⁹⁰ When he returned in 1491, he settled in Oxford, where he made advancements in the study and teaching of Greek.¹⁹¹ Both Colet and Grocyn were affiliated with a circle of English humanists who counted More in their number and were influential on his humanist education – indeed, it was under Grocyn that More began learning Greek.¹⁹²

With this changing intellectual environment in Europe, the turn of the sixteenth century was something like a confluence in a river, wherein the tributary of humanism merged with the scholastic stream. There was undeniably a periodic tension in this meeting that intensified as humanists began asking for educational reforms in the first decades of the sixteenth century, but this is to be expected given that scholasticism and humanism were methodologically different enterprises.¹⁹³ As Greta Grace Kroeker has recognised, if Christian truth could be understood by reading the Bible and focussing on the text outside of the well-established formalities of scholastic dialectic, “the very idea of theological truth and authority,” as it had been understood for centuries, was threatened.¹⁹⁴ This is why early sixteenth-century conservative scholastics, like Pierre Cousturier and Edward Lee, regarded

¹⁸⁹ Arnold, *Great Humanists*, 157-158; Lytle, “John Wyclif, Martin Luther and Edward Powell,” 472.

¹⁹⁰ Arnold, *Great Humanists*, 197-198.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.* and Mack, “Humanism and the Classical Tradition,” 26.

¹⁹² Arnold, *Great Humanists*, 176-177; Paul, *Thomas More*, 17; Mitjans, “St. Thomas More and St. John Chrysostom,” 133.

¹⁹³ Nauert, “Humanism as Method,” 430; Kroeker, “University of Paris,” 28.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

humanists as being “mere grammarians” incapable of practising theology: they had different ideas of what constituted appropriate intellectual method.¹⁹⁵ But in addition to instances of conflict, there was also harmony. As we see in this thesis, the English defence of conservative theology at the outset of the Reformation mobilised both methodologies; treatises against the reformers were crafted using scholastic logic together with humanist rhetorical devices and appeals to the world of classical antiquity. These two means came together to help form and defend the same end, orthodoxy as it was understood in this period of history.

Aside from its participation in these wider European trends, England grappled with a uniquely English heretical sect known as Lollardy throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. As it has been suggested that Lollardy had some sway over early Reformation thought, its potential influence deserves some comment. As mentioned above, the Lollards traced their origins to the fourteenth-century Oxford theologian John Wycliffe, who, among other controversial teachings, held that the Church should not possess property or secular power, that clerics should only be obeyed if their behaviour merited it, and that the Bible was the sole source of religious authority.¹⁹⁶ He was posthumously decried as a heretic at the Council of Constance (1414-1418) in 1415, but his legacy had a lasting impact in England and, as we discuss in Chapter 1, in Bohemia, where it was influential upon the Hussite movement.¹⁹⁷ Earlier accounts of the Reformation in England, including those given in Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* and Dickens’s *The English Reformation*, held that Lollardy was

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*; for Cousturier and Lee, see Rummel, *Humanist-Scholastic Debate*, 6-7.

¹⁹⁶ Marshall, *Reformation England*, 17.

¹⁹⁷ G.W. Bernard, *The Late Medieval English Church: Vitality and Vulnerability Before the Break with Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 206.

a precursor to the reception of reformist ideas in England.¹⁹⁸ This interpretation has long since come under fire due to the fact that Lollardy was far from homogenous and there is no evidence to suggest that England's early reformers, like William Tyndale, John Frith, and Thomas Bilney, were influenced by Lollards.¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, we have records of Lollards being persecuted from the end of the Wars of the Roses into the 1520s, so what Guy Fitch Lytle has called the "colossal shadow of Wycliffe" still loomed over England to some degree in the run-up to and during the Reformation.²⁰⁰ Theological refutations of Wycliffe and his followers were not written after 1430, however, suggesting that this Lollard presence was a social or political phenomenon outside of the realm of formal theology, and indeed modern historians have described it as such.²⁰¹ But given that Lytle presents this image of a shadow in an analysis of Powell's *Propugnaculum* and he believes it to have influenced the composition of the treatise, it is worth considering more closely.

Lytle invokes the image of the "colossal shadow of Wycliffe" in reference to the University of Oxford, which he claims "wrestled" with Wycliffe's legacy "from the late fourteenth century down to the Reformation" due to his affiliation with the university.²⁰² In Lytle's view, this shadow manifested itself in Powell's *Propugnaculum* as an "obsession" with Wycliffe and a desire to show that Luther "was the heir of all the great heresiarchs of the past" and "most directly" of Wycliffe.²⁰³ As evidence, Lytle references Powell's claims that

¹⁹⁸ Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 10-11; Richard Rex, *The Lollards* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2002), 115-116.

¹⁹⁹ For the weakness of Lollardy, see Marshall, *Reformation England*, 35; for Tyndale, see Rex, "New Light on Tyndale," 143; for Frith, see Brian Raynor, *John Frith, Scholar and Martyr: A Biography* (Oxford: Pond View Books, 2000), 85; for Bilney, see Donnelly, "'Wherefore Amend Your Lyves,'" 70-71.

²⁰⁰ For persecutions, see Marshall, *Reformation England*, 17; Stephen Kelly, "The Pre-Reformation Landscape," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern English Literature and Religion*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Helen Wilcox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 19; Lytle, "John Wyclif, Martin Luther and Edward Powell," 469.

²⁰¹ For no theological refutations, see Catto, "Theology after Wycliffism," 275; for a political explanation, see Marshall, *Reformation England*, 17-19; for a social explanation, see Bernard, *Late Medieval English Church*, 221.

²⁰² Lytle, "John Wyclif, Martin Luther and Edward Powell," 469.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 473 and 475.

Luther was “forging Wycliffe’s old errors for us today as if they were new” and that Luther’s theology was “Wycliffite, Hussite, heretical and contrary to the determination of the Church.”²⁰⁴ While Powell certainly drew links between Luther and Wycliffe, Lytle has underemphasised the fact that Powell connected Luther with other heretics as well, like Hus and, in Lytle’s own words, “all the great heresiarchs of the past.”²⁰⁵ In short, Lytle has missed the bigger picture. It was common practice for defenders of the established Church to connect perceived heretics with their heretical forebears in attempt to show that their deviations from the theological norm were merely reiterations of previously condemned heresies. In his *Catalogus Haereticorum*, first published in 1522, the Dominican Bernard of Luxemburg (d. 1535) argued that “Luther was a heretic, as Wyclif and Hus had been; he was not even an original heretic, as he revived errors which had already been condemned long ago.”²⁰⁶ In Johannes Eck’s *Enchiridion*, which ran seventy editions between 1525 and 1600 and became a sort of manual for anti-Lutheran apologetics, we find a similar claim: Luther and his followers revived “the heresies often condemned of Arius, Manichaeus... John Wycliffe, John Hus and other heretics” and so it is “not necessary to argue against them.”²⁰⁷ John Fisher, whose affiliation was with Cambridge, not Oxford, made comparable associations between Luther and historical heretics, including Wycliffe, in 1523 and between

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 474; “In hoc plane veteres wiclefi errores, nobis hodie pro novis cudens.” Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 7^r; “hoc est wiclefisticum, hussiticum, haereticum, et contra determinationem ecclesiae.” *Ibid.*, fol. 40^r.

²⁰⁵ For another example of a reference to the Hussites, see *Ibid.*, fol. 39^r.

²⁰⁶ Euan Cameron, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Post-Reformation,” in *Contesting Orthodoxies in the History of Christianity: Essays in Honour of Diarmaid MacCulloch*, ed. Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, Ashley Null, and Alec Ryrie (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021), 100.

²⁰⁷ “Revocant haereses sepe damnatas, Arrii, Manichei... Ioannis Wicleph, Ioannis Hus, et aliorum haereticorum: ideo contra eos non est disputandum.” Johannes Eck, *Enchiridion Locorum Communium Adversus Lutteranos* (Landshut, 1526), sig. Kviii^r; Euan Cameron cited a similar example from the 1541 edition of the *Enchiridion*. For this, see Cameron, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Post-Reformation,” 100. Note that on this page, Cameron erroneously states that the first edition was issued in 1535; for the seventy editions starting in 1525, see Tavuzzi, “Luther’s Catholic Opponents,” 229.

Oecolampadius and these heretics in 1527.²⁰⁸ With the commonality of this rhetorical practice in mind, both in England and wider Europe, there was nothing particularly special about Powell connecting Luther and Wycliffe at Oxford, at least nothing suggesting that Wycliffe's legacy, which may well have been a force in England's social and political spheres through Lollardy, had more of an impact on the composition and nature of conservative theology than that of any other historical heretic. For conservatives like Powell, the shadow of Wycliffe had dissipated long ago in the realm of theological disputation; it was cast into memory by the enduring light of the Church. Luther and his followers were merely whispers of the past that would (the hope was) soon be silenced.

Thesis Structure:

To demonstrate the ways in which English conservative responses to the Reformation embodied late medieval orthodoxy, this thesis examines the teachings of our authors of investigation in four areas of theology or Church practice that came under scrutiny by the first reformers. The first two chapters consider questions around the Eucharist, while the last two consider questions relevant to soteriology.

Chapter 1 examines defences of the corporeal eucharistic presence. It highlights the imbalance in how these defences have been analysed historiographically, and shows how the tendency of scholars to overlook the relationship between ecclesiastical consensus and "orthodoxy" has resulted in imprecise portrayals of conservative eucharistic theology. The chapter is divided into two analytical sections that collectively demonstrate how English conservative defences of the corporeal presence exhibited the archetypal qualities of late medieval orthodoxy. The first considers English treatments of Luther's challenge to

²⁰⁸ Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLII; Fisher, *De veritate*, fol. 107^r-108^f.

transubstantiation and illustrates how More, Fisher, Henry VIII, and Powell all took Luther's digression from the longstanding consensus of the majority as the basis of their refutations. It then shows how, despite this fundamental commonality, our authors were independent agents in the evolutionary process intrinsic to orthodoxy as it was then understood: the composition and nature of their arguments were guided by their respective socio-intellectual backgrounds and varying affinities for the dominant epistemological forces of their day, scholasticism and humanism. The second section, which juxtaposes how More and Fisher engaged with the Sacramentarians, continues to show the impact of these backgrounds on English conservatism, and uses More and Fisher's contrasting perspectives on eucharistic metaphysics as an example of how English conservative theology reflected the expected eclecticism of late medieval orthodoxy.

Chapter 2, which examines the debate on whether communion should be administered under both kinds to the laity (utraquism), is the first investigation of its kind in English Reformation scholarship. There are analyses of utraquism's significance to Luther, such as that by Zdeněk V. David, but the topic has been entirely ignored in the context of early sixteenth-century England.²⁰⁹ Examining it sheds light on the ways in which English conservatives recognised and defended the process of evolution intrinsic to late medieval orthodoxy. The chapter is divided into two sections that respectively analyse conservative defences of two mechanisms for this evolution, general councils and the emergence of custom. It was at the Council of Constance (1414-1418) that the Church formalised the practice of only administering communion under one kind, and as English conservative defences of this practice naturally upheld this conciliar decree, the chapter's first section

²⁰⁹ Zdeněk V. David, "The Strange Fate of Czech Utraquism: The Second Century, 1517-1621," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 46, no. 4 (1995): 641-668.

examines whether our authors were conciliarists. It surveys the historiography pertaining to the conciliarism of our authors, and highlights the inconsistencies within it, particularly in how Fisher's ecclesiology has been understood by Edward Surtz, Richard Rex, and Brian Gogan. It finds that, contrary to the conclusions of Surtz and Rex, all four of our authors were conciliarists, but, as was the case with late medieval orthodoxy, they drew on different authorities and from different phases of the movement's development. The second section focusses on how our four authors defended the development of the custom of administering communion *sub una specie* against Luther's opposition to it. It outlines Luther's seven arguments in favour of utraquism and then takes the third and fourth as subjects for analysis. It finds that, like we see in Chapter 1, Henry VIII, More, Fisher, and Powell refuted Luther in ways reflective of the environments in which they lived, and their refutations were written according to their personal predilections. They defended the evolutionary process inherent to the conservative consensus while themselves being part of it.

Chapter 3 considers teachings relevant to justification. It is divided into two sections that together show the eclecticism and resilience of English conservative theology at the outset of the Reformation. The first section corrects the claim that John Fisher's penitential theology was representative of the entirety of conservative penitential theology in early sixteenth-century England. It begins by outlining the history of the sacrament of penance and details the debate between attritionists and contritionists over the extent of sorrow required to partake in the sacrament of penance. It then discusses the state of secondary literature on the subject before showing that while Fisher, Henry VIII and (to some extent) More were attritionists, Fisher believed that justification could be received outside of the sacrament of penance, while Henry VIII and More did not. The section then turns to Powell, who did not offer any insight into his position in this debate. His defence of penance was

instead a classic example of Christian humanism and shows how conservative thought was evolving to incorporate humanist ideas near its centre: Powell refuted Luther by retaining the traditional insistence on the importance of ecclesiastical catholicity while voicing the humanist concern for the stability of society at large. The chapter's second section examines More's exchange with William Tyndale on the concept of faith. It outlines Tyndale's distinction between historical and feeling faith and demonstrates that, as existing scholarship has recognised, ecclesiastical consensus played a significant role in More's refutation of it – but more so than has been appreciated. More's feet were so firmly planted in the Church's traditional teachings that he framed and refuted Tyndale's two faiths in the context of the medieval distinction between actual and habitual faith, irrespective of the fact that it had no place in reformist theology. Much as we see in the preceding chapters, this chapter shows that English conservative theology resembled late medieval orthodoxy in its rich variety of ideas shaped by the circumstances affecting its authors. But it moves further in illustrating how deeply traditional teachings were embedded in conservative thinking: they were used to understand and dismiss the reformers' ideas, even when irrelevant to their formulation.

Considering that analyses of the early Reformation debate on free will have prioritised the exchange between Luther and Erasmus, Chapter 4 broadens the scope of academic literature by shedding light on the English involvement in this exchange. The chapter's first section challenges the idea that Fisher's treatment of free will was comparable to that of Erasmus. They were both humanists and posited a similar argument in favour of free will being active in the salvific process, but they had different objectives in dealing with Luther and these influenced the different tones with which they approached the reformer and the theology by which they dismissed his ideas. In the manner of late

medieval orthodoxy, there were variations in their thought arising from their personal convictions. The chapter's second section examines the gradual alignment of More and Henry VIII's objections to Luther's subversion of free will with those of Fisher and Erasmus over the course of the 1520s. It shows that conservatives were part of the ongoing process of late medieval orthodoxy: while they adhered to the Church's traditional teachings, their perspectives on free will were honed under the pressures of the Reformation.

The conclusion summarises how the concept of orthodoxy was understood in the late medieval period and traces how each of this thesis's chapters demonstrates that English conservatism in the early Reformation was the embodiment of this earlier conception of orthodoxy. It recommends that scholars of early modernity not shy away from using "orthodoxy" to describe the Roman Church in their investigations of this historical period, but cautions against using "doctrine" without noting how the word was then understood. The conclusion then proposes the point at which we can begin using these words in their modern sense as a topic for future research and summarises our findings for each of our authors of investigation, pointing to future avenues of research where relevant. It ends with a reflection on what happened to late medieval orthodoxy after the beginnings of confessionalisation, briefly tracing the enduring importance of consensus in the ecumenical councils from Trent to Vatican II.

Chapter 1

English Conservatism and the Corporeal Eucharistic Presence

“Hoc est corpus meum” and “hic est enim sanguis meus” – these are the words of institution spoken by Christ in relation to the bread and wine respectively at the Last Supper, and they have been the source of centuries of bloodshed and heated theological debate that persists into the modern day.¹ What did Jesus mean when he uttered them? Was the bread *really* his body? Was the wine *really* his blood? If so, how did this change come about? Or was Christ simply speaking metaphorically? There were murmurings of these questions throughout the Church’s history, but the sixteenth century saw them asked with such intensified fervour that answers to them etched fault lines across western Europe and shattered the Catholic Church’s once universal hold over the kingdoms of Latin Christendom.

It has always been the teaching of the Catholic Church that when these words are spoken during the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ truly becomes present in both body and blood. The method, first promulgated but not yet dogmatised at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and reaffirmed as the official teaching of the Church at the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965, is transubstantiation.² From at least the thirteenth century into early modernity, this was explained through an Aristotelian distinction between a substance and its accidents.³ Substantial properties are properties necessary for something

¹ Matthew 26:26-28 (Vulg.); György Geréby, “Azymes and Epiclesis: Two Medieval Debates About the Eucharist,” in *The Metaphysics and Theology of the Eucharist: A Historical-Analytical Survey of the Problems of the Sacrament*, ed. Gyula Klima (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), 32.

² Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “The Eucharist,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 280-282 and 289-290; for Lateran IV and transubstantiation, see Marilyn McCord Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories of the Eucharist: Thomas Aquinas, Gilles of Rome, Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 110, n. 5.

³ For transubstantiation and Aristotle, see Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 139; for modern deviations from Aristotle, see Joshua P. Hochschild, “‘Real Presence’ Is Not Enough: Recovering the Lost Semantics of Transubstantiation,” in *The Metaphysics and Theology of the Eucharist: A Historical-Analytical Survey of the Problems of the Sacrament*, ed. Gyula Klima (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), 438-439.

to retain its identity, while accidental properties are features not necessary for this identity.⁴ Take, for example, a circle that is a metre in diameter. It is necessary that a circle be round; circularity is the *substance* of a circle. But it is not necessary that a circle be exactly a metre in diameter. The one metre diameter is therefore an *accidental* property of this circle. Other accidental properties include taste, texture and odour.⁵ According to this earlier explanation of transubstantiation, when the words of institution are spoken, the substances of the bread and wine are replaced by the substances of Christ's body and blood, but the accidents of the bread and wine remain intact.⁶

There were various explanations for what happens to the substances of the bread and wine when they are replaced by the substances of Christ's body and blood, but the Church did not insist on any particular theory.⁷ As was the case with late medieval orthodoxy, theological variation was accepted. Indeed, as Thomas More remarked in 1533:

For as for the manner how the blessed bodye of Chryste is in the blessed sacrament... the catholyque chyrche in suche wyse leueth at large, that it byndeth not the people to any suche strayghtes in the mater, but onely to the poyntes that we be bounden by certayne and sure reuelacyon, to byleue... that vnder what maner so euer yt be there, veryly there yt is, his very fleshe and hys very blood.⁸

As an example of this accepted variation, and as the schools of the *via antiqua* were dominant in early sixteenth-century England, we should briefly consider the views of Aquinas and Scotus. In the simplest terms, the transubstantiation theories of these scholastics differed in the number of steps present in the process of transubstantiation.

⁴ Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 139; McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 209.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 139.

⁷ Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories*, 151.

⁸ Thomas More, "The Answer to a Poisoned Book," in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 11: The Answer to a Poisoned Book*, ed. Stephen Merriam Foley and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 169.

Aquinas held that transubstantiation involved a single step: the whole substance of the bread and whole substance of the wine are turned wholly into the substances of Christ's body and blood; Marilyn McCord Adams has termed it "absolute whole being conversion" of one substance into another.⁹ Scotus, on the other hand, posited a two-step process of eucharistic transubstantiation which focussed on the location of the substances in question: the substances of the bread and wine are first present at the altar and then not present at the altar, and the substances of Christ's body and blood are first not present at the altar and then become present at the altar.¹⁰ Another way of thinking about the difference between these theories is that Aquinas believed in a *turning* of one substance into the other whereas Scotus posited the *substitution* of one substance for another.¹¹

Even with this pedagogical liberality, there were sceptics who questioned the corporeal presence as early as the ninth century. In the 840s, the Frankish king Charles the Bald requested treatises on the eucharistic presence by two Benedictine monks of Corbie Abbey, Paschasius Radbertus (d. 865) and Ratramnus (d. 868).¹² The former upheld the corporeal presence while the latter challenged its importance and argued that greater emphasis should be placed on the spiritual reality signified by the Eucharist.¹³ A comparable opposition to the corporeal presence came in the eleventh century, when Berengarius of

⁹ Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories*, 87-91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 145; Scotus also believed that another form of transubstantiation involving an annihilation of one substance and creation of another was a metaphysical possibility, but he did not believe that this is the form of transubstantiation that occurs in the Eucharist. For more on this, see *Ibid.*, 139-145.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹² Stephen Merriam Foley, and Clarence H. Miller, "The Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy," in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 11: The Answer to a Poisoned Book*, ed. Stephen Merriam Foley and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xviii; Patricia McCormick Zirkel, "The Ninth-Century Eucharistic Controversy: A Context for the Beginnings of Eucharistic Doctrine in the West," *Worship* 68, no. 1 (1994): 5-6 and 21; Paschasius Radbertus, "De corpore et sanguine domini," in *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis, Vol. XVI*, ed. Bedae Paulus (Turnhout: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1969), 13-131; Ratramnus, "De corpore et sanguine Domini," in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, Vol. 121, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1852), 125-170.

¹³ For the details of this debate, see *Ibid.*, 2-23.

Tours (d. 1088) argued that because Christ's body had been resurrected, it could not become present in the Eucharist.¹⁴ The bread and wine, he believed, remain bread and wine, but are "filled with Christ's presence through sacramental change."¹⁵ Perhaps the most famous theologian to have challenged the Church's teaching on the eucharistic presence before the Reformation was John Wycliffe, who maintained that Christ becomes present in the sacrament, but denied that this is through transubstantiation.¹⁶ For Wycliffe, transubstantiation was a recent invention without scriptural precedent and the idea of accidents existing without their respective substances was a metaphysical impossibility.¹⁷ As he was the godfather of Lollardy, Lollard rejections of transubstantiation in England were traceable to Wycliffe to at least some degree, and his eucharistic theology travelled as far as Bohemia, where it embedded itself in Hussitism, a heretical movement that became a thorn in the Church's side throughout the fifteenth century.¹⁸ Czech students studying at Oxford after 1388 returned home to Bohemia with copies of Wycliffe's writings, and there they influenced the theology of Jan Hus, a Czech theologian condemned for heresy at the Council of Constance (1414-1418).¹⁹ Hus did not himself oppose transubstantiation, but some

¹⁴ Foley and Miller, "Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy," xviii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Ian Christopher Levy, *John Wyclif's Theology of the Eucharist in its Medieval Context: Revised & Expanded Edition of Scriptural Logic, Real Presence, & the Parameters of Orthodoxy* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2014), 16.

¹⁷ Ian Christopher Levy, "Was John Wyclif's Theology of the Eucharist Donatistic?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 2 (2000): 144; John Wycliffe, *De Eucharistia tractatus maior*, ed. Johann Loserth (London: Trübner, 1892), 47-48 and 51-53. For a detailed account of Wycliffe's views on transubstantiation, see Stephen E. Lahey, *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 102-134.

¹⁸ It is now recognised that Lollardy was far from a homogenous movement, but Wendy Scase has found that Wycliffe's rejection of transubstantiation was the basis of one of the major Lollard treatises on the subject. For this, see Scase, "Lollardy," 15-17.

¹⁹ Vilém Herold, "The Spiritual Background of the Czech Reformation: Precursors to Jan Hus," in *A Companion to Jan Hus*, ed. František Šmahel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 90-92.

theologians fundamental to Hussitism did, like the English Lollard Peter Payne, who travelled to Bohemia in 1415 and became a leading intellectual figure in the movement.²⁰

During the Reformation itself, transubstantiation was attacked on two fronts. On one side was Martin Luther, who maintained the teaching of the corporeal presence but did not consider transubstantiation to be the optimal means of explaining it.²¹ On the other side were the Sacramentarians, like Johannes Oecolampadius and Huldrych Zwingli, who denied that Christ's body and blood were truly present in the Eucharist and instead endorsed a symbolic presence.²² At the heart of the divide were the words of institution, specifically how the word "est" in "hoc est corpus meum" and "hic est enim sanguis meus" ought to be understood. Those favouring the corporeal presence, including Luther, argued that the word should be taken literally, while Zwingli, with whom Oecolampadius agreed, followed the Dutch theologian Cornelius Hoen in interpreting "est" as synonymous with "significat."²³ In this chapter, we engage with English conservative theology on both fronts. But before doing so, we must consider the state of secondary literature on the subject, for existing analyses are unbalanced between our four authors of investigation, and the accounts that do exist overlook the fundamental principle of their thought.

Of our four authors of investigation, only the eucharistic theologies of Thomas More and John Fisher have seen scholarly attention. More's thoughts on the Eucharist have been commented on by Stephen Merriam Foley and Clarence H. Miller in their introduction to his

²⁰ For Hus and transubstantiation, see Stephen E. Lahey, "The Sentences Commentary of Jan Hus," in *A Companion to Jan Hus*, ed. František Šmahel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 132 and 162-165; for Peter Payne, see William R. Cook, "John Wyclif and Hussite Theology," *Church History* 42, no. 3 (1973): 335 and 344.

²¹ Volker Leppin, "Martin Luther," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, ed. Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 46-47.

²² For Oecolampadius, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 145; for Zwingli, see Carrie Euler, "Huldrych Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation*, ed. Lee Palmer Wandel (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 58.

²³ Leppin, "Martin Luther," 46-50; for Cornelius Hoen, see McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 214-215.

Answer to a Poisoned Book (1533), and have been most recently analysed by Matthew T. Gaetano.²⁴ Fisher's eucharistic thought has also been considered by Foley and Miller, as well as Edward Surtz, H.C. Porter, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard Rex.²⁵ But while the commentaries on More's theology consider his religious polemics throughout the 1520s and early 1530s, the analyses of Fisher's views on the Eucharist have been almost entirely preoccupied with his *De veritate corporis et sanguinis Christi in Eucharistia* (1527).²⁶ This was Fisher's most extensive work on the subject, but to disregard his earlier writings prevents us from understanding how Fisher compared with his fellow conservatives in the debates against Luther and inhibits our ability to see his place in the intellectual currents of the age.

There is, however, a deeper issue pervading the existing accounts of the eucharistic theologies of both More and Fisher that is connected to the historiographical problem that forms the basis of this thesis. The lack of awareness of what "orthodoxy" entailed in this period of history has prevented historians from recognising the significance of their observations about conservative defences of the corporeal presence. Surtz, Rex, and Foley and Miller, for example, all highlight Fisher's extensive citations of Church fathers in the fourth preface of his *De veritate*.²⁷ They note that with these citations, Fisher sought to show that the corporeal presence had been continuously taught since the Church's inception and

²⁴ Foley and Miller, "Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy," liv-lxi; Matthew T. Gaetano, "Thomas More and the Eucharistic Controversies," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 54 (2024): 111-135.

²⁵ Foley and Miller, "Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy," li-liv; Surtz, *Works and Days*, 337-350; H.C. Porter, "Fisher and Erasmus," in *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 91 and 93; Germain Marc'hadour, "Fisher and More: A Note," in *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 107; Richard Rex, "The Polemical Theologian," in *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 112; Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 129-147.

²⁶ Surtz, *Works and Days*, 337-350; Porter, "Fisher and Erasmus," 91 and 93; Marc'hadour, "Fisher and More," 107. Rex is a minor exception as he mentions Fisher's defence of transubstantiation in his *Defensio regiae assertionis* of 1525; for this, see Rex, "Polemical Theologian," 111-112.

²⁷ Surtz, *Works and Days*, 341-342; Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 140-141; Foley and Miller, "Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy," lii.

that there was a longstanding “consensus” that Christ truly becomes present in the Eucharist – but they go no further than this.²⁸ They do not recognise that, as we saw in the introduction, ecclesiastical consensus and what was considered to be orthodox were intrinsically linked. We are therefore led to believe that for Fisher, the consensus of the past was merely an argument against the Sacramentarians, when it was, in fact, an epistemological foundation.

Foley and Miller’s discussion of More’s eucharistic theology also contains this oversight. They claim that More saw Sacramentarianism as the enduring heresy of Berengarius from the eleventh century, but this comment is misleading and again misses the broader point.²⁹ Berengarius was not actually named by More in the passage cited by Foley and Miller. In the cited passage, More asserted that the Sacramentarians should be rebuked because they “denye now” articles of “fayth” that “all good chrysten nacyons, are & long haue be full agreed vppon,” and these Christian nations have “so longe rekened the contrarye byleuers for heretyques.”³⁰ Foley and Miller are not wrong to name Berengarius as one of these “contrarye byleuers,” as More would certainly have had him in mind. But More did not, as their comment suggests, see the Sacramentarians as heretics simply because they emulated older heresies. He saw them as heretics because they strayed from the theological norm, which was defined by the prevailing consensus of the Church.

Gaetano’s account of More’s eucharistic theology is not so blind to the importance of consensus. Indeed, the article is largely oriented towards showing how the consensus of the Church was integral to More and Erasmus’s rejections of reformist theology, though Gaetano

²⁸ Surtz, *Works and Days*, 341-342; Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 140-141; Foley and Miller, “Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy,” lii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xix.

³⁰ More, “Answer to a Poisoned Book,” 179.

believes this consensus took different forms. More associated this consensus, Gaetano claims, with the “ongoing presence of Christ and the Holy Spirit,” while Erasmus, being “an author... followed the evidence, heeded his conscience... [and] sought to maintain concord and promote piety as much as possible” while ultimately deferring to “the consensus of the whole Christian people” on theological matters to stop “potentially endless debate.”³¹ The legitimacy of this distinction as Gaetano has described it is questionable. Obviously, More was also an author, so it makes little sense to predicate the observed difference on Erasmus’s authorial status. More importantly, however, Erasmus certainly recognised the Holy Spirit’s central role in ecclesiastical developments through the centuries, as James McConica showed many years ago.³² It is more likely that Erasmus’s pragmatic description of consensus was an aspect of what Greta Grace Kroeker has termed his “theology of compromise,” which we discuss in Chapter 4.³³ Whatever the reason, Gaetano has at least illustrated a difference between how More and Erasmus described the consensus of the Church, but he would be better able to reconcile and contextualise this difference if he saw the relationship between this consensus and the ever-evolving process that was orthodoxy.

By examining English conservative defences of the corporeal presence, this chapter fills part of the gap that exists in our knowledge of Reformation eucharistic theology and simultaneously demonstrates how English theological conservatism reflected the late medieval conception of orthodoxy. It consists of two analytical sections partitioned by a line that is both chronological and thematic. The first examines English conservative treatments

³¹ Gaetano, “Thomas More and the Eucharistic Controversies,” 126-127 and 134.

³² James Kelsey McConica, “Erasmus and the Grammar of Consent,” in *Scrinium Erasmianum*, ed. J. Coppens (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 86 and 96; also see Charles Trinkaus, “Introduction,” in *Collected Works of Erasmus, Vol. 76: Controversies: De libero arbitrio, Hyperaspistes 1*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and trans. Peter Macardle and Clarence H. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), xviii-xix.

³³ Greta Grace Kroeker, “Erasmus and Luther: Free Will and Tradition,” in *A Companion to Erasmus*, ed. Eric MacPhail (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2023), 98-99.

of Luther's opposition to transubstantiation, specifically his contentious metaphor suggesting that Christ's presence in the Eucharist may be comparable to the union of fire and iron in red-hot iron. It shows that Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell all worked from a common theological dependence on the longstanding consensus of the Church when approaching the question of Christ's eucharistic presence, but their arguments were shaped by their own intellectual backgrounds and environments. In other words, it portrays how the consensus that was the quiddity of late medieval orthodoxy resided at the heart of conservative responses to Luther in England, and then moves to show that, like late medieval orthodoxy, this consensus was evolving according to the intellectual forces acting upon it.

The second section, which considers English conservative responses to the Sacramentarians, analyses the later writings of Thomas More and John Fisher, the only two of our authors to have written against Sacramentarianism. It continues to show the defining impact that individual predilections and intellectual surroundings had on English defences of the corporeal presence, and then closely examines how More and Fisher approached eucharistic metaphysics. Both men appear to have stood primarily within the confines of the *via antiqua*, but they provided different explanations for the actual nature of Christ's eucharistic presence. More followed Scotus and some of the later nominalists in how he understood Christ's presence beneath the accidents of the bread and wine, while Fisher offered a solution that was exclusively Thomistic. In this difference, we see that pedagogical variation existed in the conservative English response to the reformers and witness an instance of the theological eclecticism that was inherent to the late medieval conception of orthodoxy.

Against Fire and Iron: English Responses to Martin Luther:

In his *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae* of 1520, Luther criticised the Church's insistence that transubstantiation is the means through which Christ becomes present in the Eucharist. For over a millennium, he argued, the Church upheld the faith without any mention of the "monstrous word and monstrous idea" (portentoso scilicet vocabulo et somnio) that is transubstantiation.³⁴ He claimed that it has no basis "in scripture nor in reason" (nulla scriptura, nulla ratione nititur), and that it only came to be once the "pseudo-philosophy of Aristotle began to make its inroads into the Church" over the preceding three centuries.³⁵ He questioned why the substances of Christ's body and blood could not exist *in* the substances of the bread and wine, just as the substances of the bread and wine exist within their respective accidents, and to demonstrate this point, he utilised what Stephen R. Shaver has referred to as a "containment metaphor:"³⁶

Why could not Christ include his body in the substance of the bread just as well as in the accidents? In red-hot iron, for instance, the two substances, fire and iron, are so mingled that every part is both iron and fire. Why is it not even more possible that the body of Christ be contained in every part of the substance of the bread?³⁷

It is a metaphor that Luther offered again in his polemical reply to the *Assertio, Contra Henricum Regem Angliae* (1522), as well as in his 1523 treatise *Von Anbeten des Sakraments*

³⁴ "Sed et Ecclesia ultra mille ducentos annos recte creditit: nec usquam nec unquam de ista transsubstantiatione (portentoso scilicet vocabulo et somnio)..." Martin Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae* (Strassburg, 1520), sig. Biv^r; Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *The Works of Martin Luther, Volume 36: Word and Sacrament, Volume Two*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and trans. A. T. W. Steinhäuser, Frederick C. Ahrens and Abdel Ross Wentz. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 31.

³⁵ "Donec coepit Aristotelis simulata philosophia in Ecclesia graffari, in istis treceatis novissimis annis..." Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Biii^v-Biv^r; Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 31.

³⁶ Stephen R. Shaver, *Metaphors of Eucharistic Presence: Language, Cognition, and the Body and Blood of Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 210.

³⁷ "Cur autem non possit Christus corpus suum intra substantiam panis continere, sicut in accidentibus. Ecce ignis et ferrum duae substantiae, sic miscentur in ferro ignito, ut quaelibet pars sit ferrum et ignis. Cur non multo magis, corpus gloriosum Christi, sic in omni parte substantiae panis esse possit." Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Biv^r; Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 32.

des heiligen leichnams Christi.³⁸ Cyril of Alexandria used a similar metaphor to describe the union of the Word with the flesh in the Incarnation, so Luther's analogy may have spawned from this patristic example.³⁹ It shows an astute understanding of consubstantiation, the view that the substances of the bread and wine remain with those of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, though it must be noted that Luther was not explicitly endorsing it here.⁴⁰ This metaphor was merely intended to challenge the accepted teaching of transubstantiation itself and highlight what was truly important in Luther's eyes: belief in the corporeal presence itself, not understanding how this presence comes about.⁴¹

Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell each took aim at Luther's criticism of transubstantiation, and each of them commented on his fire and iron metaphor in some way, making it an ideal point of comparison. These references to Luther's metaphor, and the discussions of transubstantiation around them, are the subject of this section. They provide an initial glimpse into English conservatives' dependence on the Church's longstanding pedagogical traditions in their debates with the reformers, and give a sense of how English theological conservatism was a process guided by its adherents and shifting intellectual movements, in this case scholasticism and humanism. These two methodologies, which have generally been seen as conflicting, found a common enemy in the reformers, and they came together both within conservatism as a whole and in the works of individual authors to meet this growing threat. In their harmony under the canopy of the *ecclesia*, we

³⁸ Martin Luther, "Martin Luther Against Henry King of England," in *Luther's Reply to King Henry VIII: Now First Englished After the Lapse of Four Centuries*, trans. E.S. Buchanan (New York: Charles A. Swift, 1928), 37; Martin Luther, "The Adoration of the Sacrament," in *The Works of Martin Luther, Volume 36: Word and Sacrament, Volume Two*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and trans. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 282.

³⁹ Ellen Concannon, "The Eucharist as Source of St. Cyril of Alexandria's Christology," *Pro Ecclesia* 18, no. 3 (2009): 333.

⁴⁰ Leppin, "Martin Luther," 46.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; Amy Nelson Burnett, "Luther and the Eucharistic Controversy," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56, no. 2 (2017): 148.

unearth what was hidden to Gaetano: the consensus of the Church, the essence of late medieval orthodoxy, was influenced by contemporaneous intellectual climates; they shaped how its teachings were conveyed.

Before getting to the variations between our four authors induced by their personal inclinations, however, we must illuminate the common foundation on which each of their discussions of transubstantiation were built. In their respective remarks on Luther's fire and iron metaphor, each of our authors highlighted the same fundamental problem: the metaphor does not depict the complete substantial change that takes place when Christ becomes corporeally present in the Eucharist. Henry VIII's *Assertio* claimed that Luther's metaphor is mistaken because, unlike the manner of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, it has never been said that "iron is so converted into fire that only the form of iron remains, with the substance of iron changed into the substance of fire."⁴² John Fisher wrote in his *Defensio regiae* (the only one of his anti-Lutheran works to mention the metaphor) that, despite the "mixing and union" (mixtionem et unionem) of fire and iron, "it is not true that 'this fire is this iron,' since these natures remain unchanged in substance and entirely distinct."⁴³ Powell similarly declared that fire and iron remain distinguished between themselves, "as neither is able to assert itself over the other" (ut neutrum de altero affirmari possit), and it is not the case, despite Luther's contention, that "fire is iron or that iron is fire" (nec ignis est ferrum vel contra).⁴⁴ More differed from his peers in that he presented two interpretations of Luther's metaphor: either fire is a "quality" (qualitas) of heat in the iron, or it is "an

⁴² "Nemo unquam dixit ferrum sic in ignem converti, ut tantum ferri species relinquatur, substantia ferri in ignis mutata substantiam." This translation is my own. Henry VIII, "Assertio," 250-251.

⁴³ "Tamen ob hanc per mixtionem et unionem, nondum verum est, quod hic ignis sit hoc ferrum, quum hae naturae quantum ad substantias suas penitus immutate sint, et omnino diverse remaneant." Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 51^v.

⁴⁴ Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 46^v.

accumulation within the pores of the iron” (ignis congestus in poros).⁴⁵ If it is the former, More claimed, “it is not at all like the body of Christ, which is not a quality.”⁴⁶ We will explain what More meant by “quality” shortly, but for now, it is sufficient to say that qualities were regarded as accidental properties, so More was accusing Luther of describing Christ’s body as an accident rather than a substance.⁴⁷ If fire is an accumulation in iron’s pores, as in More’s second interpretation, then the problem with Luther’s metaphor is the same as that highlighted by Henry VIII, Fisher, and Powell: no complete substantial change occurs as the fire does not take the substantial place of the iron. As More explained, the “iron is not fire, but iron fired” (ferrum... non est ignis, sed ferrum ignitum), whereas Christ said, “this is my body” (hoc est corpus meum), not “in this is my body” (in hoc est corpus meum).⁴⁸

These comments on Luther’s metaphor were evidently cut from the same cloth: all four theologians approached the metaphor with the presupposition that Christ can only become present in the Eucharist if a *complete* substantial change takes place (specifically through transubstantiation); Luther’s proposed *partial* substantial change was unacceptable. But on what did they base this presupposition? Fundamentally, they all rested their positions on the longstanding teachings of the Church – orthodoxy as they understood it. These teachings came, to varying degrees of emphasis, from the consensus of the fathers and councils together with the decrees of scripture. In his *Assertio*, Henry VIII wrote that “the Church does not believe [in transubstantiation]” because of arguments drawn from Aristotle, “but because the Church has believed it from the beginning, and so that no one wavers, it

⁴⁵ More, “Responsio,” 488-489.

⁴⁶ “Nihil simile de corpore Christi, quod non est qualitas.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ For this explanation, see pages 76-77.

⁴⁸ “More, “Responsio,” 488-489.

decreed that it must be believed.”⁴⁹ In relation to Luther’s metaphor specifically, the king wrote that the necessity of a complete substantial change of the bread into the body of Christ was “the opinion of all the ancients” (*veteres senserunt omnes*), and anyone who thinks otherwise goes “against the whole Church, against the faith of so many centuries” (*contra totius Ecclesiae, contra tot aetatum fidem sequendus*).⁵⁰ In his *Responsio*, More echoed this same sentiment: “Faith in transubstantiation is not... new but [is] the uninterrupted faith of the whole Church from the time of Christ’s passion.”⁵¹ Powell argued that, despite Luther’s claims to the contrary, the language of transubstantiation “follows the custom of scripture” (*pro scripturae consuetudine*) and the “change of the substance of bread into the body of Christ itself was “believed and taught by the most ancient doctors long ago, [as] they reveal in their works left behind for us.”⁵² With regard to the corporeal presence, Fisher stressed the importance of aligning with the views of the majority manifested through the decrees of councils and institutionalised by the Church. He wrote that “every Christian should place far greater faith in the decree issued by the Lateran synod composed of so many holy fathers than in any of Martin Luther’s commentaries.”⁵³ On the preceding page, he insisted on the importance of believing “with the Church” (*cum ecclesia credere*) on the question of the eucharistic presence – the defining feature of what was “orthodox” according to his *Confutatio* published two years prior.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ “Neque enim ideo credit Ecclesia, quia sic illi disputant [rationibus petitis ex Aristotelica schola], sed quia sic Ecclesia iam inde ab initio credidit, et, ne quis vacillet, ita credendum esse decrevit.” This translation is my own. Henry VIII, “Assertio,” 242-243.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 250-251.

⁵¹ “Hanc transubstantiationis fidem, non esse... novam: sed a Christo passo, totius ecclesiae perpetuam.” More, “Responsio,” 486-487.

⁵² “Nam mutationem substantiae panis in corpus Christi, antiquissimos doctores olim credidisse partier et docuisse: sua nobis relicta opera produunt.” Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 46^r.

⁵³ “Non est ambiguum quin ei decreto (quod ipsa synodus tot sanctorum patrum, Laterani tulerit) multo certior a quovis Christiano fides ad hibenda sit, quam ullis Martini Lutheri commentis.” Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 53^r.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 53^v; Fisher, *Confutatio*, l.

Longevity of teaching formed in consensus was clearly the bedrock of the conservative defence of the corporeal presence, but it was also an argumentative constant in the progression of this consensus. It manifested itself evidentially among our four authors with the joint invocation of perspectives presented by scholastic authorities. One such argument focussed on the grammatical construction of the Latin words of institution. After Christ blessed the bread and wine, the argument went, he began referring to them only as his body and blood, as is evident from the demonstrative pronouns used in “hoc est corpus meum” and “hic est sanguis meus.” The pronoun “hoc” used in the former sentence is in the nominative neuter gender and thereby agrees with the neuter noun “corpus;” if bread remained in the offering to the disciples, the correct pronoun would be the masculine-gendered “hic,” as “bread” (panis) is a masculine noun. Likewise, the pronoun “hic” used in the latter sentence is in the nominative masculine form and thereby agrees with the nominative masculine noun “sanguis,” meaning that Christ is giving his very blood to his disciples, not wine. If the substance of wine remained in the offering and wine was therefore being given to Christ’s disciples, the correct pronoun would be “hoc,” as “vinum” (wine) is a neuter noun.⁵⁵ Despite this argument’s grammatical focus, it was not humanist in origin. James F. McCue believed that Albertus Magnus was the first to employ it in the thirteenth century, but the argument can be found even earlier in the Benedictine monk Guitmund of Aversa’s *De corporis et sanguinis Christi veritate in eucharistia* (c. 1073-1075).⁵⁶ It was also

⁵⁵ For this argument in the works of our subject authors, see the following: Henry VIII, “Assertio,” 234-237; More, “Responsio,” 448-451 and 456-459; Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 48^{r-v} and 53^v-54^r; Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 49^r-50^v.

⁵⁶ James F. McCue, “The Doctrine of Transubstantiation from Berengar through Trent: The Point at Issue,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 3 (1968): 397; Guitmund of Aversa, “On the Truth of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist in Three Books: A Dialogue Between Guitmund and Roger, Members of the Benedictine Confraternity,” in *The Fathers of the Church: Medieval Continuation*, Vol. 10, trans. Mark G. Vaillancourt (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009): 168-169 and n. 95; for the life of Guitmund, see Mark G. Vaillancourt, “Introduction,” in *The Fathers of the Church: Medieval Continuation*, Vol. 10 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 21-22.

presented in Aquinas's *Commentum in IV libros sententiarum* from the 1250s as well as in the writings of both the thirteenth-century Franciscan Cardinal Matthew of Aquasparta and John Wycliffe.⁵⁷

Another argument employed by each of our four authors that seems to have predated their lives involved the story of Aaron and Pharaoh in Exodus 7:

So Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh and did as the Lord had commanded. And Aaron took the staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it was turned into a serpent. And Pharaoh called the wise men and the magicians, and they also by Egyptian enchantments and certain secrets did in like manner. And they every one cast down their staffs, and they were turned into serpents, but Aaron's staff devoured their staffs.⁵⁸

Luther had regarded the instances of Christ's eucharistic body being referred to as "bread" in Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:46) and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:23 and 26-28) as evidence for the substance of the bread remaining with the substance of Christ's body after the consecration.⁵⁹ In response, each of our authors cited the above passage, the last sentence (Exodus 7:12) in particular, to show that there was scriptural precedent for calling something "not by the name of what it is, but of what it was before" or by the name of the "species it appeared to be" from its accidents.⁶⁰ They were not the first to see Exodus 7:12 in this way. Rabanus Maurus (d. 856) and Andreas de Sancto Victore (d.

⁵⁷ For Aquinas, see McCue, "Doctrine of Transubstantiation," 401-403; for Matthew of Aquasparta, see Matthew of Aquasparta, *Quaestiones disputatae selectae, Tom. II: Quaestiones de Christo*, ed. Patribus Collegii A. S. Bonaventura (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1914), 185; Wycliffe, *De Eucharistia*, 292.

⁵⁸ "Ingressi itaque Moses et Aaron ad Pharaonem fecerunt sicut praeceperat Dominus. Tulitque Aaron virgam coram Pharaone et servis eius, quae versa est in colubrum. Vocavit autem Pharaon sapientes et maleficos et fecerunt etiam ipsi per incantationes Aegyptias et arcana quaedam similiter. Proieceruntque singuli virgas suas, quae versae sunt in dracones, sed devoravit virga Aaron virgas eorum." Exodus 7:10-12 (Vulg.). I have deviated from the Douay-Rheims translation in rendering "virga" and its derivatives as "staff" instead of "rod" for the sake of uniformity with the translation of Guitmund of Aversa's *De corporis et sanguinis Christi veritate in eucharistia* cited later in the paragraph.

⁵⁹ Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Biii^v; Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 31.

⁶⁰ "Apostolus tamen, fateor, panem non semel appellat, vel Scripturae secutus in sermone morem, quae solet interdum vocare quippiam, non id quod est, sed quod ante fuerat... vel contentus fortasse vocare quod specie prae se ferebat." Quoted from Henry, "Assertio," 238-239; for More, Fisher, and Powell and this argument, see More, "Responsio," 462-463, Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 57^{r-v}, Fisher, *Confutatio*, LXXXVI, and Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 45^r-46^r.

1175) both regarded this verse as showing that something is “called by the name of what it was, not the name of what it turned into” in their biblical commentaries, and Rodericus Ximenius de Rada (d. 1247) made the same observation in his *Breviarium historie catholice* from the early thirteenth century.⁶¹ In terms of eucharistic theology specifically, Guitmund of Aversa used Exodus 7:12 in much the same way as our four authors in his refutation of Berengarius’s eleventh-century challenge to the corporeal presence:

Who does not freely confess that the sacraments of the Lord’s table are rightly called bread and wine, either because they were first bread and wine, or because once they are substantially changed (substantialiter transmutata), they preserve the likeness (similitudo) of bread and wine? For so the serpent that was made from a staff is called a staff. In fact, it is written: “Aaron’s staff devoured their staffs;” that is, the serpent that had been made from Aaron’s staff [devoured] their serpents.⁶²

Between the grammar-based argument of the words of institution and this appeal to Exodus 7:12, English conservative theologians clearly had an affinity for arguments forged in the fires of older eucharistic controversies. Their common use against Luther, together with the perceived infallibility of ecclesiastical consensus, shows the weight that English conservatives attributed to the products of the Church’s historical struggles. Theological truth lay with the Church, which was the sum of its past. But as we will now see, it was also shaped by intellectual forces dominating its present.

As with any evolutionary process, some elements remained more connected to the old ways than others. Among Henry VIII, More, Fisher, and Powell’s responses to Luther’s

⁶¹ “Sed eo nomine appellata res est, unde versa est, non in quo versa est.” Rabanus Maurus, “Commentaria in Exodum,” in *The Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. Database, accessed 24th March 2025), lib. 1, cap. 12, col. 33, lin. 17-29; “Sed eo nomine dicta est res, unde uersa est, non in quam uersa.” Andreas de Sancto Victore, “Expositio super heptateuchum in Exodum,” in *The Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. Database, accessed 24th March 2025), lin. 393-394; “Non potuit uirga uirgam absorbere, set eo nomine dicta est res unde uersa est, non in quam uersa est.” Rodericus Ximenius de Rada, “Breviarium historie catholice,” in *The Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. Database, accessed 24th March 2025), lib. 2, cap. 67, lin. 5-7.

⁶² Guitmund, “On the Truth of the Body,” 169-170.

opposition to transubstantiation, Henry VIII and More retained an affinity for scholastic or at least medieval ways of thinking. Despite being a patron of humanism, the strongest humanist element of Henry VIII's discussion of Christ's eucharistic presence was mere polemical rhetoric. He employed a sarcastic tone against Luther, calling him a "merciful man [who] offers liberty to all those who divide themselves from the Church," and professed "astonishment" (miror) that Luther was not "ashamed [of his] immeasurable folly."⁶³ But the arguments for transubstantiation that lie beneath the king's stylistic choices were largely reiterations of medieval perspectives. Indeed, aside from listing authorities like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ambrose, the bulk of the *Assertio's* defence of transubstantiation was the two seasoned modes of argumentation discussed above: it examined the grammatical structure of the words of institution and appealed to Exodus 7:12.⁶⁴ Beyond these, Henry VIII presented a Christological criticism of Luther's proposition that the substances of the bread and Christ's body could exist together in the Eucharist. Interestingly, however, this was voiced in a way that drew Luther's censure and placed the king outside of the theological norm.

Just after alluding to the importance of consensus by claiming that Luther's fire and iron metaphor conveyed an idea "contrary to the belief of... the whole Church, and of so many ages," Henry VIII wrote that a person with esteem for "the body of Christ... will more easily consent that any other two substances should remain together than that any other body remain mixed with the adorable body of Christ."⁶⁵ His reason was that "there is no

⁶³ "Et homo misericors offert libertatem omnibus qui velint ab Ecclesia separari." Henry VIII, "Assertio," 228-229; "Miror hominem non pudere tam intemperantis ineptiae." This translation is my own. *Ibid.*, 236-237.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 246-249.

⁶⁵ "Nam quisquis beatissimum Christi corpus sic, ut debet, existimat, facilius assentietur quascumque duas substantias simul manere conjunctas, quam ullum corpus aliud manere commixtum cum venerando corpore Christi." *Ibid.*, 250-251.

substance worthy to be mixed with that substance that created all substances.”⁶⁶ This last sentence was the source of Luther’s ire. “Lord Henry,” he wrote, “thinks that in the sacrament, the divinity of Christ takes the place of the bread.”⁶⁷ Luther then asked, “what heretic was ever such an insane person as to teach that the bread was changed into the divinity?”⁶⁸ The transformation of a material substance or creaturely reality into something immaterial, like soul or divinity, was deemed to be a metaphysical absurdity.⁶⁹ It was taught that Christ’s divinity is present after the consecration, but by way of his bodily presence through concomitance, the belief that whatever joined with Christ’s body after his resurrection (body, soul and divinity) becomes present together in the Eucharist under the accidents of both the bread and the wine.⁷⁰ In other words, the divine presence was contingent on the substance of the bread being transformed into the substance of Christ’s body. Strictly speaking, Henry VIII never explicitly said that the bread’s substance turns into the divinity – Luther embellished the king’s words. Nevertheless, Luther perceived a peculiarity in the king’s remark, and by examining it more closely alongside commentaries by older and contemporaneous theologians, it does seem to reveal a vaguer understanding of eucharistic theology and Christology than might be expected of one with extensive theological training.

Henry VIII clearly recognised a level of substantial superiority in Christ’s eucharistic body, but his decision to explain it by appealing to Christ’s divine nature was unique. For

⁶⁶ “Neque enim ulla substantia digna est, quae cum ea misceatur substantia, quae substantias omnes condidit.” *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ “Dominus Henricus sentit in sacramento, divinitatem Christi succedere pani.” Martin Luther, *Contra Henricum Regem Angliae* (Wittenberg, 1522), sig. Div^v; Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry King of England,” 37.

⁶⁸ “Quis haereticus sic insaniuit unquam, ut doceret, panem in divinitatem converti?” Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Div^v; Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry King of England,” 37-38.

⁶⁹ Bernhard Blankenhorn, *Bread from Heaven: An Introduction to the Theology of the Eucharist* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 191.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

those who believe in the corporeal presence, the body of Christ that becomes present in the Eucharist is glorified, meaning that it is incorruptible.⁷¹ The idea of corporeal incorruptibility has its origins in an area of Christian ontology that pertains to the bodily existence of all humanity, not only Christ. Before the Fall, it was taught, human flesh was different from what it is today. It was unable to suffer the death and decay now customary to an earthly existence – it was incorruptible.⁷² After the first sin in the Garden of Eden, this changed, and the human body became susceptible to the symptoms of mortality – it became corruptible.⁷³ When Christ arose from the dead, he ascended into heaven in incorruptible body, and it is this incorruptible body that we call “glorified.”⁷⁴ But incorruptibility was not seen as exclusive to the resurrected body of Christ. It was taught that every human being, both the saved and the damned, will be resurrected in incorruptible form on the Day of Judgement, though those who lead particularly godly lives on earth, like the saints and martyrs, come to possess these incorruptible (glorified) bodies as soon as they die.⁷⁵ When Henry VIII defended the corporeal presence, he never mentioned that the body that becomes present is glorified, nor does he ever use the words “incorruptible” or “corruptible” to refer to a bodily substance. Christ’s body was portrayed simply as his body. Yet when the concept of substantial mixing in the Eucharist was refuted earlier in the Church’s history, it was Christ’s glorified, incorruptible body that took centre stage, not his divine nature. When Guitmund

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 23-26.

⁷² Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 18.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; for incorruptibility and the glorified, see Steven J. McMichael, “The Celestial Jerusalem, the Glorified Body, and St. Francis: Abodes of the New World of Paradise in the Sermons of Bernardino da Siena,” in *Preaching and New Worlds: Sermons and Mirrors of Realms Near and Far*, ed. Timothy Johnson, Katherine Shelby, and John Young (New York: Routledge, 2018), 78; for a detailed discussion of questions around Christ’s incorruptible body, see Yonatan Moss, *Incorruptible Bodies: Christology, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

⁷⁵ Meagan S. Allen, *Roger Bacon and the Incorruptible Human, 1220-1292: Alchemy, Pharmacology and the Desire to Prolong Life* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), 1 and 27; Freeman, *Holy Bones*, 18-21, particularly 21.

of Aversa argued against consubstantiation in the eleventh century, he found himself responding to the claim that the substances of the bread and wine were required to remain with Christ's bodily substance to facilitate consumption of his body and blood.⁷⁶ Against the idea that it would be "evil for Christ to be chewed... [and] ground by teeth," Guitmund argued that if Christ "could be touched after the Resurrection" with hands and lips, he could just as well be touched by teeth.⁷⁷ Despite the appearance of being "divided and ground in [the] sacrament," Guitmund continued, "[the body of the Lord]... remains undivided."⁷⁸ Two centuries later, Aquinas took issue with consubstantiation because it involved Christ's "incorruptible and perfect" body moving from heaven in some way to become present alongside the bread and wine at the altar.⁷⁹ This movement would involve Christ "gaining or losing some perfection in his glorified state," which is contradictory: Christ's glorified body, a perfect entity, cannot gain or lose perfection.⁸⁰

Perhaps the best indication that the *Assertio* deviated from the norm is found in Thomas More and John Fisher's respective defences of the king's remark that "no substance can be mixed with the substance that created all substances."⁸¹ More wrote that Luther aimed to portray Henry VIII as "so ignorant as to think that the body is not a creature but the creator," but the king spoke as he did "because of the divinity of Christ, which is always present in the body through concomitance."⁸² Fisher wrote that by "'creative substance' the king does not want to understand the flesh of Christ [that becomes present in the

⁷⁶ Guitmund, "On the Truth of the Body," 194.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁷⁹ Blankenhorn, *Bread from Heaven*, 181-182.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Henry VIII, "Assertio," 250-251.

⁸² "Nam hic videri vult, tam rudem esse principem: ut putarit corpus Christi, non esse creaturam, sed creatorem... ut non senserit principem ita loqui, propter divinitatem Christi: quae per concomitantiam (ut vocant) semper adest corpori." More, "Responsio," 486-489.

Eucharist]... but Christ who created all.”⁸³ With his disputed remark, Fisher further explained, Henry VIII sought to show “the unworthiness of bread, which is subject to corruption, to be mixed with the incorruptible Christ.”⁸⁴ Both men essentially dismissed the king’s comment as purely terminological, but in doing so, they concealed the fact that he made a metaphysical claim: the substance of the bread could not mix with the substance of Christ’s body *because* of Christ’s divine nature. Whether this concealment was deliberate is debatable. But one thing is certain: Fisher’s clarification of the king’s point was a fabrication, not an elaboration. As mentioned above, Henry VIII never invoked the distinction between corruptible and incorruptible bodies, nor did he refer to Christ’s body as “glorified.” His reason for the inability of the bread substance to be mixed with the substance of Christ’s body was predicated entirely on Christ being “the substance that created all substances,” while Fisher’s description centred on a corruptible substance’s inability to mix with the “incorruptible Christ.”⁸⁵ These are fundamentally different claims. The first is rooted in Trinitarian theology and the second in Christian bodily ontology. Unlike Fisher, More did not offer an elaboration of Henry VIII’s position, but he at least acknowledged that the question was about whether “the body of Christ [can] be with the bread as a glorified body is or can be with a different body.”⁸⁶ Henry VIII was not only out of step with his predecessors in emphasising Christ’s divinity instead of the incorruptible nature of his body, he was also out of step with his contemporaries, who followed a more established avenue of thought.

⁸³ “Nec hic per creatricem substantiam, Rex carnem Christi vult intelligi... sed ipsum christum qui cuncta creavit.” Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 64^r.

⁸⁴ “Fatetur indignitatem, ut panis corrupendus incorruptibili Christ sic misceatur.” *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Henry VIII, “Assertio,” 250-251; Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 64^r.

⁸⁶ “Quod si velis sic esse, corpus Christi cum pane, sicut corpus glorificatum est, aut potest esse cum alio corpore.” More, “Responsio,” 488-489.

To be clear, there was nothing theologically dubious about the *Assertio's* appeal to Christ's divinity. Christ's divine nature was a central aspect of the Eucharist and is still considered to be the cause of vivification in Catholic circles when the body and blood are received in communion today.⁸⁷ It was simply an anomalous choice of argumentation that perhaps stemmed from a deeper theological incognisance on the part of the *Assertio's* author. Christ's divine nature was a rather elementary aspect of theology. While we know from Erasmus that Henry VIII had a personal interest in theology that led him to read and discuss works by Aquinas and Biel, the fact that the *Assertio* never mentioned Christ's incorruptible, glorified body despite this being central to the commentaries of his predecessors and contemporaries suggests that he was not well versed in the more niche corners of Christian thought.⁸⁸ It is one example of the *Assertio's* more rudimentary theology that leads us to conclude, with Alec Ryrie, that the text was probably Henry VIII's own work.⁸⁹

What we have in Henry VIII's treatment of transubstantiation, then, is a position that encapsulates the importance of ecclesiastical consensus through the ages, both as a theological foundation and mode of argumentation. Despite being stylistically humanist, the text remained rooted in older ways of thinking, though its irregular discussion of substantial mixing is indicative of how the trajectory of conservative theology was determined to an extent by individual authors. In this case, the apparent limitations of Henry VIII's theological learning produced a fundamentally different refutation of eucharistic substantial mixing than we find elsewhere in the Church's history. This is in itself an example of the theological variation that existed within the confines of late medieval orthodoxy and shows the

⁸⁷ Blankenhorn, *Bread from Heaven*, 191.

⁸⁸ Erasmus to Duke George, 1522, 181-182; Erasmus to Cochlaeus, 1529, 197-198.

⁸⁹ Ryrie, *Age of Reformation*, 87.

flexibility with which one could “think with the Church.” There was room for anomaly, but as long as one’s ideas ultimately aligned with the central tenets of the *ecclesia*, they could be regarded as orthodox.

The role of individuals in determining the composition and nature of the conservative English response to Luther’s views on the corporeal presence is further seen by more closely considering the modes of argumentation employed by Thomas More. More has generally been lauded for his humanism, and Charles Nauert sees his 1515 letter to the Dutch humanist Martaan van Dorp as one of the finest examples of a humanist defining the terms of conflict with scholastics.⁹⁰ In Nauert’s view, the letter “goes right to the central issues” in redefining the basis of “grammatical science in the humanist way, as something based on usage instead of logic,” and in attacking “the scholastics’ misapplication of dialectic... and their uselessness for the practical tasks of preaching the gospel and refuting heretics.”⁹¹ Contrary to the impression that one might acquire from this, however, More’s scholarship was more nuanced. In fact, Nauert’s assessment of this letter glosses over the subtler aspects of More’s position on logic. More did express frustration with the pedantries of scholastic method and alleged that Peter of Spain’s *Summulae logicales* (c. 1275), a primary didactic text in northern European universities until at least the Reformation, contained “little logic” (*parum habeat logices*) and led scholastic thinkers astray.⁹² But he

⁹⁰ Nauert, “Humanism as Method,” 435.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² For More on the *Summaries*, see Thomas More to Martaan van Dorp, 1515, in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 15: In Defense of Humanism, Letters to Dorp, Oxford, Lee, and a Monk, Historia Richardi Tertii*, ed. Daniel Kinney (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 25-27; More referred to Peter of Spain’s *Summaries* as “Little Logic” (*paruorum logicalium*); for this being the *Summaries* and the text’s importance to medieval education, see Brian Copenhaver, “Philosophy as Descartes Found it: Humanists v. Scholastics?” in *The Routledge Companion to Sixteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund and Benjamin Hill (New York: Routledge, 2017), 27-28; for discussion over dating the *Summaries*, see Brian P. Copenhaver, Calvin Normore, and Terence Parsons, “Introduction,” in *Peter of Spain, Summaries of Logic: Text, Translation, Introduction and Notes*, ed. and trans. Brian P. Copenhaver, Calvin Normore, and Terence Parsons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5-9.

praised the French humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples as a “restorer of true dialectic and true philosophy, especially Aristotelian.”⁹³ More went on to say that, like Aristotle, who “restricted his own dialectic to the ten ultimate classes of real entities or of predicables, to a treatise on propositions, and to the forms of the syllogism,” he thinks that “in dialectic... it [is] sufficient to master the nature of words, the force of propositions, and the forms of syllogisms.”⁹⁴ More’s stated regard for syllogisms combined with his reputation as a humanist is particularly interesting given Erika Rummel’s view that humanists shied away from syllogistic argumentation and only tended to use syllogisms in debates with scholastic authors to show that, despite accusations to the contrary, they were not ignorant of dialectic and could beat the scholastics at their own dialectical games.⁹⁵ Evidently, there were some exceptions to this rule.⁹⁶ While logic has been traditionally classified as a scholastic enterprise, some humanists, like More, still saw utility in it, and as we will now see, More used it as a means of presenting and rejecting the ideas of reformers.

We see this affinity for logic at play in More’s *Responsio*, where his defence of transubstantiation was a blend of humanist and scholastic methodologies. Take, for example, More’s criticism of Luther’s syntactical analysis of the words of institution presented in his *Contra Henricum*. Luther believed that if we consider the context in which “hoc est corpus meum” was spoken, the word “hoc” should be understood as referring to the bread, not the body of Christ, for the entire passage from Matthew 26 reads, “he took bread and gave thanks and broke it and said, ‘this is my body.’”⁹⁷ All the verbs in this sentence (“took,” “gave

⁹³ “Instauratorem verae dialecticae, veraeque philosophiae, presertim Aristotelicae.” More to Dorp, 1515, 23.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24-27.

⁹⁵ Rummel, *Humanist-Scholastic Debate*, 13.

⁹⁶ Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin has also noted exceptions. For this see, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, “The Debate Between Thomas More and William Tyndale, 1528-1533: Ideas on Literature and Religion.” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 39, no. 3 (1988): 387-388.

⁹⁷ “Nam textus sic habet. Accepit panem, benedixit, fregit et dixit. Hoc est corpus meum.” Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Dii; Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry King of England,” 32.

thanks” and “broke”), Luther argued, are said of the bread, not the body of Christ, making the bread, not the body, the subject of the sentence.⁹⁸ More protested that, with this argument, Luther disregarded Henry VIII’s previously explained grammatical analysis of the words of institution, and stubbornly reiterated the account he first presented in his *De captivitate Babylonica*.⁹⁹ More first quoted Luther’s argument from his *Contra Henricum* in full.¹⁰⁰ He then rhetorically declared that the king had already “solved such a clearly silly sophism,” but the “villainous Luther” concealed this, “[tossed] out the same fallacy... and [made] us a long chain from ice.”¹⁰¹ This “chain” was Luther’s original argument restructured by More as a polysyllogism:

It was bread which [Christ] took, therefore it was bread which he blessed; it was bread which he blessed, therefore it was bread which he broke; it was bread which he broke, therefore it was bread which he gave to the disciples.¹⁰²

After this passage, More immediately resorted to polemical rhetoric again, saying “Luther, you usually snore with a wakeful nose, so that you pretend you do not understand when the king broke this fragile chain of yours for you.”¹⁰³

What we have here is quintessentially scholastic logic embedded in a passage that is otherwise a classic example of humanist rhetoric. The two modes of argumentation are combined, with the syllogism being used more or less rhetorically as a means of propelling the more polemical elements of More’s discourse. Richard Marius, who has noted that More relied on syllogisms in his 1532 letter to the Sacramentarian John Frith (which we will

⁹⁸ “Vides hic, ut omnia illa verba, accepit, benedixit, fregit de pane dicantur.” Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Dii^r; Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry King of England,” 32.

⁹⁹ More, “Responsio,” 462-463.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ “Stultum sophisma, quam aperta ratione diluerit: hoc nequitosus occulit Lutherus... rursus stultissime iactat idem sophisma... et catenam nobis longam faciens e glacie.” *Ibid.*

¹⁰² “Panis erat, quem accepit: ergo panis erat, quem benedixit. Panis erat, quem benedixit: ergo panis erat, quem fregit. Panis erat, quem fregit: ergo panis erat, quem dedit discipulis.” *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ “Sic Luthere soles vigilanti stertere naso: ut te non sentire simules: quum hanc fragilem catenam tuam tibi rex infringeret.” *Ibid.*

consider in the next section), attributes More's affinity for logic to his career as a lawyer.¹⁰⁴ While this was no doubt influential, More's interest in logic likely predated this. His comments to Dorp on Aristotelian reasoning suggest a more academic grasp of dialectic, and as we outlined in the introduction, logic was one of the pillars of the scholastic *trivium*, with syllogistic argumentation being taught at the English universities through texts like Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* into the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁵ With this in mind, More's respect for formal logic was likely sown during his Oxford years, and it was presumably distilled into the moderate form expressed in his letter to Dorp sometime during his introduction to humanist learning in the 1490s, leaving him well suited to combine both scholastic and humanist methods of scholarship long before the Reformation.

If we turn our attention to More's treatment of Luther's fire and iron metaphor specifically, we find a similar blending of humanist style with a manner of thinking grounded entirely in Aristotle's philosophy. More's starting point was again rhetorical: he aggressively asserted that the analogy is "so unlike the truth" that it is really "not worth answering at all."¹⁰⁶ He then provided two interpretations of Luther's metaphor intended to illustrate these inaccuracies: either fire is a "quality" (*qualitas*) of heat in the iron, or it is "an accumulation within the pores of the iron" (*ignis congestus in poros*).¹⁰⁷ We already commented on the second interpretation above, and must now turn our attention to the first. If fire is a "quality" of the iron, More argued, "it is not at all like the body of Christ, which is not a quality."¹⁰⁸ In referencing "*qualitas*," More was working exclusively with

¹⁰⁴ Richard Marius, "Introduction: *Letter Against Frith*," in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 7: Letter to Bugenhagen, Supplication of Souls, Letter Against Frith*, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Marc'Hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), cxlviii.

¹⁰⁵ For this discussion, see pages 37-38.

¹⁰⁶ "Quamquam similitudines tuae, tam dissimiles veri sunt: ut operae precium non fuerit ullum respondisse." More, "Responsio," 488-489.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ "Nihil simile de corpore Christi, quod non est qualitas." *Ibid.*

Aristotle's categories, metaphysical groupings for various kinds of formed matter.¹⁰⁹

Depending on the source, Aristotle posited either ten or eight categories: ten in his *Categoriae* and *Topica* (substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, state, position, action and passion), eight in his *Metaphysica* (the previously listed categories excluding state and position).¹¹⁰ With the exception of substance, each category was a classification of accidental properties. "Quality," Aristotle held, included habits, like virtues and knowledge, and dispositions, such as temperature and physical well-being (whether one is healthy or diseased).¹¹¹ By describing heat as a quality of iron, and rejecting Luther's metaphor on the basis that the body of Christ "is not a quality," More effectively rejected Luther's metaphor on the grounds that it falsely represents the body of Christ as an accident of the bread rather than the substance that it is.¹¹² Immediately after dismissing the metaphor, More returned to his rhetorical insults, addressing Luther as "O iron head, and forehead worthy to have a fired iron brand it with tall letters."¹¹³

Whereas in the previous example More employed a syllogism rhetorically, seemingly adapting a scholastic method of dispute to a humanist mould, here he built his polemic entirely on the Aristotelian foundation that was so central to the late medieval world. This was not a blending of humanist and scholastic methodologies per se, as not all humanists completely rejected Aristotle; some sought only to abandon the blind devotion to him that

¹⁰⁹ Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories*, 12.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12 and n. 5; Aristotle, "Categories," in *Categories, On Interpretation, Prior Analytics*, ed. and trans. H.P. Cooke and Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 62-81; Aristotle, "Topica," in *Posterior Analytics, Topica*, ed. and trans. Hugh Tredennick and E.S. Forster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 292-293; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 236-237; for more detail on the exclusion of state and position, see Abraham Edel, "Aristotle's Categories and the Nature of Categorical Theory," *The Review of Metaphysics* 29, no. 1 (1975): 47-48.

¹¹¹ For dispositions and the other forms of quality, see Aristotle, *Categories*, 62-65.

¹¹² For Aristotle and Oxford, see Brockliss, *University of Oxford*, 87, 116 and 121.

¹¹³ "O caput ferreum, et frontem dignam, cui ferrum ignitum longas infigat literas." More, "Responsio," 488-489.

emerged beginning around the twelfth century.¹¹⁴ But beyond common references to a substance and its accidents, none of our other authors show such an in-depth reliance on Aristotelian metaphysics in their discussions of the corporeal presence. It is an attribute of More's *Responsio* that distinguishes him intellectually and shows the continued influence that his early schooling in Aristotle at Oxford had on his later religious thought. If we consider the growing attempts in Thomas More scholarship by the likes of Richard Rex, Travis Curtright, and Joanne Paul to reconcile the two images of More (the humanist and the religious zealot) into one Thomas More, the Christian humanist, we find in More's defence of transubstantiation a versatility to his Christian humanism.¹¹⁵ He retained an appreciation for some means of thinking and methods of arguing that were more popular among scholastics, and he incorporated them into his humanist prose with ease.

While the humanist elements of Henry VIII and More's discussions of the corporeal presence were displayed largely in their stylistic choices and polemical delivery, the methodological pendulum was more firmly in the humanist camp when we consider John Fisher and Edward Powell's respective defences of transubstantiation. Both men employed classical tropes in their treatments of Luther's metaphor and wove references to antiquity into their scriptural arguments in ways that showed how the underlying axiom of conservative theology endured, but came to take different outward forms as humanism grew in prominence.

At the beginning of this section, we saw how Fisher, along with Henry VIII, More and Powell, objected to Luther's metaphor on the grounds that it did not depict a complete substantial change of iron into fire. In addition to relying on the longstanding consensus of

¹¹⁴ For humanists wanting to abandon blind devotion to Aristotle, see Rummel, *Humanist-Scholastic Debate*, 153.

¹¹⁵ Rex, "Thomas More and the Heretics," 93-94; Curtright, *One Thomas More*, 1-14; Paul, *Thomas More*, 2-5.

the Church, Fisher argued for the importance of a complete substantial change by referencing a story supposedly about Julia the Elder, the daughter of Roman Emperor Octavian (also known as Augustus), who reigned from 27 BC to 14 AD.¹¹⁶ Julia is perhaps best remembered for the exile that her father imposed on her for adultery, but this is not the story recounted by Fisher.¹¹⁷ Instead, Fisher noted that Julia was known to have “kept an egg in her lap for so long that the substance inside the shell transformed into a chick.”¹¹⁸ He used this as a basis on which to introduce a hypothetical situation comparable to the eucharistic transformation. Fisher proposed that if “Julia received the egg and, after keeping it warm for a long time, broke it and gave it to a nurse,” the nurse would not receive an egg, but “a chick under the shell, which had formerly belonged to the egg.”¹¹⁹ Fisher then drew a direct comparison with Matthew’s Gospel to show that, just as the egg substance transformed completely into the chick, the substance of the bread must transform entirely into the substance of Christ’s body. He made this comparison with a clever duplication of language: Julia “took” (*accepisse*) and “broke” (*fregisse*) the egg, and “gave” (*dedisse*) the chick to the nurse, just as Christ “took” (*acceperit*) and “broke” (*fregisse*) the bread, and “gave” (*dederit*) his body to the disciples.¹²⁰

There is no question that the historical knowledge and capacity for literary juxtaposition displayed in this example is a testament to Fisher’s humanist learning – both

¹¹⁶ “Tradunt historie Juliam, Octaviani Cesaris filiam.” Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 49^v; for the life of Octavian, see Jonathan Edmondson, “Introduction: Approaching the Age of Augustus,” in *Augustus*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1.

¹¹⁷ Sarah T. Cohen, “Augustus, Julia and the Development of Exile *Ad Insulam*,” *Classical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2008): 206.

¹¹⁸ “Juliam... ovum in gremnio suo tam diu fovisse, quoad substantia tota, que intra testam continebatur, versa fuisset in pullum.” Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 49^v.

¹¹⁹ “Nunc si dixeris Juliam ovum accepisse, et posteaquam diu fouisset, fregisse, dedisse quam nutrici verum dices. Nequaquam tamen verum est quod ovum ipsa dederit, sed pullum sub testa quae pridem fuerat ovi.” *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

history and literary studies were core subjects of the *studia humanitatis*.¹²¹ But there is something rather curious about Fisher's reference to Julia the Elder: it does not appear in any classical sources, at least not how Fisher presented it. Perhaps the most accessible source for details of Julia's life was Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus's extensive biography of her father, Augustus, in his *De vita Caesarum*.¹²² Records show that while no copies of this text existed in Cambridge prior to 1500, three were present in Oxford by this year, so Fisher may well have come into contact with it at some point prior to the publication of his *Defensio regiae* in 1525.¹²³ Suetonius, as he is commonly known, discussed Julia's life, but he never mentioned eggs being transformed into chicks. In fact, the word "ovum" did not appear in the work in any declined form, and "pullus" appeared only once, but as the adjective meaning "dark" rather than as a noun meaning "chick."¹²⁴

The closest story from antiquity resembling that cited by Fisher did not pertain to Julia the Elder at all. It was a story of Julia Augusta, otherwise known as Livia Drusilla, the third wife of Octavian, presented in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* from the first century AD.¹²⁵ This was a popular work among humanists dating back to Petrarch and one which saw increasing favour among English scholars from 1517 onwards.¹²⁶ Pliny mentioned Livia anecdotally in a description of how the practice of artificially incubating the eggs of poultry came about. It allegedly emerged, Pliny explained, from a method of prognostication

¹²¹ Mack, "Humanism," 10; Day, *English Humanism*, 3.

¹²² Edmondson, "Introduction," 6.

¹²³ Charles F. Briggs, "History at the Universities: Oxford, Cambridge and Paris," in *Medieval Historical Writing: Britain and Ireland, 500-1500*, ed. Jennifer Jahner, Emily Steiner, and Elizabeth M. Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 269.

¹²⁴ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars, Volume I: Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Caligula*, trans. J.C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 276-277.

¹²⁵ Pliny, *Natural History, Volume III: Books 8-11*, trans. Harris Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 390-391.

¹²⁶ Sarah Neville, "Referencing Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* in Early Modern England," *Notes and Queries* 64, no. 2 (2017): 322.

employed by Livia (and women more generally) to prenatally determine the sex of a child.¹²⁷ Pliny never explained how exactly this form of prognostication worked, but he did illustrate the process: Livia would “warm an egg in her lap” (ovum in sinu fovendo) and when she needed to set it aside, she would “pass the egg to a nurse to maintain the warmth” (nutrici per sinum tradendo ne intermitteretur tepor).¹²⁸ Presumably, the goal was for the egg to eventually hatch.

Given the similarities between Pliny’s story and the story referenced by Fisher, Fisher appears to have had Julia Augusta, not Julia the Elder, in mind when he wrote against Luther. He was likely writing from memory, which would also explain the differing word choices of Fisher and Pliny: Fisher used “gremio” for “lap,” while Pliny used “sinu,” and while they both employed derivatives of the verb “foveo” to describe the warming of the egg, Fisher used “dedisse” to explain it being passed to the nurse, while Pliny used “tradendo.”¹²⁹ As mentioned above, however, “dedisse” was probably employed intentionally to connect the story with Matthew’s Gospel. The fact that Fisher drew on a classical tale from memory, carefully related it to the metaphysics of the Eucharist, and juxtaposed it against the account of the Institution relayed by Matthew is a testament to the force that humanist learning had on Fisher’s conception of conservative teachings. Humanism did not simply shape the expression of Fisher’s theology, as it seemed to with Henry VIII. It was integral to his theology and how he understood the questions faced by the Church.

Of our four authors of investigation, Edward Powell relied most heavily on humanist methodology. As we will continue to see in the subsequent chapters, he was a master of rhetoric and lover of ancient history. This came through in his defence of transubstantiation,

¹²⁷ Pliny, *Natural History*, 390-391.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 49^v; Pliny, *Natural History*, 390.

which was crafted in such a way that it combined the conservative practice of comparing recalcitrant religious deviants (like Luther) to historical heretics with equally demonising comparisons to figures from the ancient world. This contributed to a more damning image of Luther, but also offers a glimpse into how, like in the case of Fisher, humanist learning influenced Powell's approach to theology and the Church's role in wider society.

We find one example of how the humanist interest in the classical world shaped Powell's use of the conventional reference to historical heresies in his treatment of Luther's fire and iron metaphor specifically. Powell first criticised Luther's contention that transubstantiation was a recent theological development, and, when doing so, he referred to Luther as "Cerberus," the three-headed dog that guarded the gates of Hades in Greek mythology: "Why, I ask, does our Cerberus bark about the transformation of bread into the body of Christ being a recent invention?"¹³⁰ Powell argued that Cyprian had taught that a complete substantial change takes place in the Eucharist about twelve hundred years before their time, and then referred to Luther as a "Wycliffite" (wiclefizans) for believing that the bread substance remains with the substance of Christ's body after the consecration.¹³¹ At this point, Powell introduced Luther's metaphor and rejected it for the reason that we explained above: it does not depict a complete substantial change of fire into iron. If Christ became present in the Eucharist in the way that fire becomes present in iron, Powell argued, "it cannot be said without doubt that 'this bread is the body of Christ.'"¹³² In other words, "hoc est corpus meum" would never be true. For this reason, Powell exclaimed, Luther's

¹³⁰ "Cur, precor, noster, Cerberus latrat: transmutationem panis in corpus annis novissimis?" Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 46^v; Luba Freedman, "The Revival of Classical Monsters in the Italian Renaissance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Monsters in Classical Myth*, ed. Debbie Felton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 480; Paul Murgatroyd, *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 23-25.

¹³¹ "Quod vero wiclefizans ait: Firmiter se credere corpus Christi esse panem, et panem esse corpus Christi." Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 46^v.

¹³² "Si corpus Christi sit in qualibet parte panis: sicut ignis in qualibet parte ferri: nullo haud dubie pacto dici potest: ut panis sit corporis Christi." *Ibid.*

“entire example argues against him” and he “fights” like one of the “andabatae, who fought with their eyes covered, blindly striking without knowing where to hit or how to dodge.”¹³³

Similar to More’s integration of a syllogism into a polemical passage for rhetorical purposes, this part of Powell’s *Propugnaculum* modified the traditional practice of comparing perceived heretics with heretics from the past largely for the sake of rhetoric. As per the custom, Luther was a heretic singing the same song as Wycliffe from over a century before. But Powell augmented this accusation with the comparison to Cerberus. Luther was now not just a heretic; he was the gatekeeper of hell. Those who followed him would be damned. The effect of this portrayal was further amplified by the comparison of Luther to the andabatae, a classification of gladiator known to don helmets with visors that impeded the wearer’s vision.¹³⁴ Powell had established that Luther’s theology was diabolical, and now, again through his penchant for classical learning, he showed that it emerged from Luther recklessly slashing around without rhyme or reason.

Where we get a sense that humanism permeated Powell’s *Propugnaculum* in more than compositional style is in a passage that is otherwise a good example of Powell’s use of *pysma*, the rhetorical practice of posing a series of questions:

Why do you struggle in the way of Catiline, in this most Hussite thing? And why do you provoke others into this struggle, unless it is to sow discord in the Church of Christ, and to supply the seed of schism to those who hate peace?¹³⁵

¹³³ “Andabatarum est: qui, clausis oculis, confligentes nec qua feriant: nec qua ictus declinant: cernunt.” *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ David Matz, *Ancient Roman Sports, A-Z: Athletes, Venues, Events and Terms* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2019), 185. Early sixteenth-century humanists seemed to have a fascination with gladiators; Erasmus also referenced them in his writings. This likely stemmed from the frequency with which gladiators were mentioned in Cicero’s speeches and essays. For Erasmus and gladiators, see Harry Vredeveld, “The Age of Erasmus and the Year of His Birth,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1993): 779-782; for Cicero and gladiators, see Matz, *Ancient Roman Sports*, 48 and 67.

¹³⁵ “Cur ergo more Catelinae, in ea re hussitissime certas? Et alios in hoc etiam ad certamen provocas: nisi ut in Christi ecclesia discordiam semines, et schismatis materiam his, qui pacem oderunt: ministres?” Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 39^r.

Here again Powell modified the conventional strategy of comparing Luther to a member of an older heretical sect by simultaneously adding a comparison to a figure from antiquity. But in this instance, the classical trope is more indicative of Powell's political philosophy and view of the Church. To see how, we must understand that the humanist fascination in the classical world brought an interest in the *res publica*. This did not necessarily refer to republican forms of government, nor was it antithetical to monarchies.¹³⁶ Its definition was more liberal: the *res publica* was understood as "a just political order that exists for the attainment of the common good of a political community;" this common good was "facilitated by such institutional principles as fairness and the rule of law."¹³⁷ In sixteenth-century England, the concept was more often rendered as "commonwealth," and it was this commonwealth that Thomas More sought to explore in his *Utopia* of 1516.¹³⁸ As Joanne Paul has found, the community of the *res publica* was fundamental to More's view of the Church, which was, in his view, the greatest community.¹³⁹ It surpassed the communal bonds formed through political and familial relationships, and the reformers were seen as a threat to its unity.¹⁴⁰

The quoted passage from Powell above suggests that the same connection between the *res publica* and the Church was a governing feature of Powell's theology. Lucius Sergius Catilina (generally known as Catiline) was a Roman politician known for his involvement in a conspiracy to overthrow the Roman Republic; it was exposed by Cicero in 63 BC.¹⁴¹ By describing Luther as struggling "in the way of Catiline," Powell portrayed the reformer as a

¹³⁶ Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves, *Polish Republican Discourse in the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Teresa Bałuk-Ulewiczowa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-7.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

¹³⁹ Paul, *Thomas More*, 17-18.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 and 82.

¹⁴¹ Barbara Levick, *Catiline* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 42-85.

herald of political turmoil, and he immediately connected this turmoil to “discord” and “schism” within the “Church of Christ.” For Powell, as with More, the unity of the Church as the common good seems to have been paramount in his thought, and this humanist association of the *res publica* with the *ecclesia* appears to have been an underlying concern in his discussion of the corporeal presence.

When we step back from this analysis and combine the various elements of these conservative responses to Luther’s views on transubstantiation, we gain a deeper recognition for what lay at the core of the conservative defence of transubstantiation than Surtz, Rex, Foley and Miller, and Gaetano provide. There was a universal dependence on the perennial consensus of the Church, but this was *both* as a governing epistemological authority and as a sort of repository for plausible arguments. Henry VIII, More, Fisher, and Powell all approached Luther’s opposition to transubstantiation with the same belief that this consensus must be adhered to, and there was a common appeal to grammatical and scriptural arguments born in this consensus centuries before. But while there was longevity to this concord, it was not stagnant. As was the case with late medieval orthodoxy, the English defence of transubstantiation appeared to be part of a wider process. Each author had his own way of challenging Luther that reflected both his individuality and the intellectual forces acting upon him.

English Conservative Theology Against the Sacramentarians:

As the 1520s neared their end, political affairs in England came to distract from the theological questions flowing in from mainland Europe. By about 1526, Henry VIII had taken a romantic interest in Anne Boleyn, the sister of his previous mistress, Mary Carey.¹⁴² As the

¹⁴² Gwilym Owen and Rebecca Probert put the date at 1525, while Eric Ives has put it at 1526. For these, see Gwilym Owen and Rebecca Probert, “Marriage, Dispensation, and Divorce During the Years of Henry VIII’s

king still lacked a legitimate son and Queen Catherine's ability to conceive was becoming increasingly bleak, Henry VIII began intently seeking an annulment in 1527.¹⁴³ Theological resources were thus redirected from the ongoing Reformation to the so-called "King's Great Matter" just as Sacramentarianism was gaining traction among English reformers like William Tyndale, John Frith, and George Joye.¹⁴⁴ With this diverted attention, only two of our four authors, Thomas More and John Fisher, produced works against the Sacramentarians, and these are the subject of this section.

In his aforementioned *De veritate corporis et sanguinis Christi in Eucharistia* of 1527, Fisher wrote against Johannes Oecolampadius, a reformer connected with Basel, Switzerland.¹⁴⁵ The targeted text was Oecolampadius's *De genuina verborum domini, Hoc est corpus meum, iuxta vetustissimos authores, expositione liber* (1525), one of the most detailed Sacramentarian treatises known for its strong command of patristics.¹⁴⁶ This detail likely contributed to the immense volume of Fisher's *De veritate* – it spanned over 220,000 words – and while it has received scholarly attention, the preoccupation has been entirely with the work's prefaces, even in Richard Rex's monumental *Theology of John Fisher*.¹⁴⁷ In Rex's words, this is because they are "unconstrained by the exigencies of detailed refutation [and so are] more readable than the books they introduced."¹⁴⁸ These detailed refutations,

'Great Matter: A Local Case Study,' *Law and Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2019): 80-81, and Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn: 'The Most Happy'* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 81.

¹⁴³ Owen and Probert, "Marriage, Dispensation, and Divorce," 80-81.

¹⁴⁴For the "King's Great Matter," see Rex, "Thomas More and the Heretics," 96. Robert Barnes, another notable English reformer, believed in the corporeal presence. For more on this, see Korey D. Maas, "Revisiting Robert Barnes on the Eucharist," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2008), 142 and 149.

¹⁴⁵ Oecolampadius was born in Germany, but had strong connections with Basel and settled there in 1522. For this, see Nigel Harris and Sharon van Dijk, "Introduction," in *The Correspondence of Zwingli and Oecolampadius*, ed. Nigel Harris and Sharon van Dijk (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 13-15.

¹⁴⁶ Leppin, "Martin Luther," 48; Foley and Miller, "Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy," xlvi-xxlix.

¹⁴⁷ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 137.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

however, are where the intricacies of Fisher's theology reside, so we shall move beyond the constraints of existing literature and consider the contents of the text itself.

Thomas More was more active than Fisher in confronting the Sacramentarians, and he produced his works in English to combat the spread of the movement among his fellow Englishmen. He first wrote against William Tyndale. In 1531, Tyndale published *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* in response to More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* from 1529, and it was here that Tyndale first made his Sacramentarianism known.¹⁴⁹ More answered with his *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, written between 1532 and 1533, but much of the text is devoted to criticising *sola scriptura* approaches to theology, the pestilence of vernacular scriptures, the spreading of heresy in England and its political implications, and the reformers' views of the Church.¹⁵⁰ Where we get the best indication of More's defence of the corporeal presence in the face of Sacramentarianism are in his letter against John Frith and *Answer to a Poisoned Book*, both composed in 1533. These were More's two entries in a broader exchange initiated by Frith's *A christen sentence and true iudgement of the moste honourable Sacrament of Christes body & bloude*, drafted in 1532 and circulated in manuscript form, but not published until 1548.¹⁵¹ More's letter to Frith, which was a response to this treatise, was itself answered by the anonymously written *Souper of the Lorde*, which More suspected was the work of either Tyndale or the Cambridge-educated

¹⁴⁹ Glen Bowman, "William Tyndale's Eucharistic Theology: Lollard and Zwinglian Influences," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 66, no. 4 (1997): 433; William Tyndale, "An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue," in *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue, the Supper of the Lord After the True Meaning of John VI and I Cor. XI, and W.M. Tracy's Testament Expounded by William Tyndale*, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1850), 5-215.

¹⁵⁰ Louis A. Schuster, "Introduction: Thomas More's Polemical Career, 1523-1533," in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 8: The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 1256.

¹⁵¹ Foley and Miller, "Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy," xvii and xxxi-xxxii.

ordained translator, George Joye.¹⁵² Contemporary scholarship agrees that Joye was the probable author, but due to his initial anonymity, More referred to him simply as “the Masker,” against whom he wrote the *Answer to a Poisoned Book*.¹⁵³

While we have passing mentions and brief exegetical explanations of these works given by Richard Marius, Merriam Foley and Clarence H. Miller, Joanne Paul, and Matthew Gaetano, this three-way exchange has yet to be examined in detail.¹⁵⁴ By juxtaposing its more detailed elements with corresponding issues in Fisher’s *De veritate*, we come upon two ways in which the conservative defence of the corporeal presence reflected the late medieval conception of orthodoxy. Firstly, we continue to see how the conservative response to the reformers was caught in the confluence of scholasticism and humanism. The varied use of these methodologies by the individuals employing them demonstrates that a change was taking place in how the consensus at the heart of conservatism was being conceived of and defended. The more formulaic elements of scholastic methodology were either being replaced with or integrated into humanist rhetorical models, showing that our period of investigation was just another phase of late medieval orthodoxy’s ongoing evolution. Secondly, More and Fisher’s respective discussions of questions pertaining to eucharistic metaphysics provide a glimpse at the theological heterogeneity within the conservative defence of the corporeal presence, which was itself characteristic of late medieval orthodoxy.

¹⁵² For George Joye’s background, see Schuster, “Introduction,” 1195; More, “Answer to a Poisoned Book,” 8-9. Frith also responded to More’s letter with *A Boke Answeringe unto M Mores Lettur* in 1533, but More never had the opportunity to reply. For this book, see John Frith, *A Boke Answeringe unto M Mores Lettur* (Antwerp, 1533); for More’s desire to but inability to reply, see Foley and Miller, “Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy,” lix.

¹⁵³ For George Joye and the authorship of *The Souper of the Lorde*, see *Ibid.*, xvii, and William A. Clebsch, “More Evidence that George Joye Wrote ‘The Souper of the Lorde,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 55, no. 1 (1962): 63-66.

¹⁵⁴ Gaetano, “Thomas More and the Eucharistic Controversies,” 131.

Our first point of comparison is how they approached the issue of Christ's bodily omnipresence (ubiquitarianism). At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, it was established that Christ is one person consisting of two natures, one fully human and the other fully divine; the union of these natures is known as the hypostatic union.¹⁵⁵ Bodily omnipresence held that, by virtue of this union, Christ's humanity cannot be separated from his divinity, and just as his divinity is present in all places, so too must his humanity be present in all places.¹⁵⁶ This was not, in fact, a teaching of the established Church. It first appeared in the thought of Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon in the 1520s, but was rejected by Zwingli for metaphysical reasons.¹⁵⁷ Omnipresent beings, Zwingli argued, were incapable of physical movement, and there is ample scriptural evidence for Christ's body having moved around both on earth and in heaven.¹⁵⁸ Likewise, Zwingli considered omnipresence to involve spatial infinity, and created substances cannot be spatially infinite.¹⁵⁹ In terms of the Eucharist, Zwingli saw belief in the corporeal presence as naturally involving omnipresence, and so it became a common feature of Sacramentarian objections to transubstantiation and one we find in the writings of Oecolampadius, Frith, and the Masker.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Richard Cross, *'Communicatio Idiomatum': Reformation Christological Debates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1 and 4.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

¹⁵⁷ For Luther and Melanchthon, see *Ibid.*, 32; for Zwingli, see *Ibid.*, 70. Richard Cross puts the year of bodily omnipresence's emergence at 1527, but Oecolampadius addressed the idea in 1525. For this, see Johannes Oecolampadius, *De genuina verborum domini, Hoc est corpus meum, iuxta vetustissimos authores, expositione liber* (1525), sig. Kvii^v.

¹⁵⁸ Cross, *'Communicatio Idiomatum,'* 70.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 71; Huldrych Zwingli, "On the Lord's Supper," in *Zwingli and Bullinger: Selected Translations with Introductions and Notes*, ed. G.W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 221.

Oecolampadius complained in his *De genuina verborum domini* that the ability “to be everywhere and to fill all things” is an attribute “of the creator, not the creature.”¹⁶¹ He then presented a *reductio ad absurdum* argument in syllogistic form:

It is a property of God to be everywhere; if a creature were everywhere, it would be God, and then there would be some god who once did not exist. Therefore, God would have begun in time.¹⁶²

John Frith incorporated a rejection of bodily omnipresence into his own *reductio* argument against the corporeal presence:

Ye can shewe no reason why [Christ] shulde be in many places at once, and not in all, but in all places at once he can not be, wherfore we must conclude that he cannot be in many places at once.¹⁶³

Unlike Oecolampadius and Frith, the Masker did not posit his argument as a syllogism in the *Souper of the Lorde*. It was presented over the course of a paragraph. He protested that to “attrybute to [Christ’s] manhed that property whych onely is appropriated to his godhed is to confounde bothe the natures of Cryste.”¹⁶⁴ He then argued that “what thyng so euer is euey where... muste nedis be infinite, with oute begynnyng and ende, it muste be one alone, and almythty.”¹⁶⁵ These are properties, he asserted, that are only possessed by the “glorouse maiestye of the godhed,” and for this reason “Crystis body maye not be in al or in many places at once.”¹⁶⁶ The Masker justified this by appealing to John 14:28, John 10:30 and Hebrews 2:6-9, which, he believed, collectively show that Christ is “lesse then the father, but as touchyng hys godhed,” and that Christ’s “manhed [is]... lesse then god.”¹⁶⁷ After this,

¹⁶¹ “Quando creatoris non creaturae sit ubique esse, omniaque.” Oecolampadius, *De genuina verborum domini*, sig. Kvii^v.

¹⁶² “Dei est esse ubique; creatura si ubique esset, deus esset, essetque iam deus aliquis, qui olim non fuisset, deus ergo coepisset in tempore.” *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ John Frith, *A christen sentence and true iudgement of the moste honourable Sacrament of Christes body & bloude* (London, 1548), sig. Aiiii^v-Av^r.

¹⁶⁴ *The Souper of the Lorde* (Antwerp, 1533), fol. 8^r.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, fol. 8^{r-v}.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 8^v.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

we are given the conclusion: “It is not possible for God to make a creature egall unto hymselfe, for it includeth repugnaunce & derogateth his glorye.”¹⁶⁸

The ways in which Fisher and More responded to the arguments of their respective interlocutors show that conservative theology largely reflected the methodological preferences of the men defending it. Against Oecolampadius, Fisher quoted the original syllogism presented above, and then implied that Oecolampadius is mistaken if he thinks that the Church teaches bodily omnipresence by asking who exactly is saying that the body of Christ is everywhere.¹⁶⁹ Even if Christ’s body is not everywhere, Fisher explained, God could make it so because “nothing is impossible with God” (*nihil enim apud deum impossibile*), and this omnipresence would not be an attribute of Christ’s body, but of “the external operation of God.”¹⁷⁰ Fisher then addressed Oecolampadius’s supplementary remarks to the syllogism cited above, and it is here that we see Fisher’s penchant for humanist methodology in full force. Just after presenting the above syllogism in his *De genuina verborum domini*, Oecolampadius wrote that glory “belongs to God alone” and one should “firmly deny” that he can “give his glory to another.”¹⁷¹ The idea was that this glory could not be given “to the whole humanity of Christ, which is “but a creature” that once “did not exist.”¹⁷² Fisher fired back at this without restraint:

What say you? Is Christ not truly God and truly man? And insofar as he is man (as you already infer), he is a creature. What then? Did God not communicate the glory of his divinity to this creature? Why then are you amazed, if such a man who is God, I do not say is, but is able to be in many places, since the glory of divinity was communicated to him?¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Fisher, *De veritate*, fol. 287^r.

¹⁷⁰ “Non suapte natura sit ubique, sed per forinsecam operationem dei dumtaxat.” *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ “Gloriam suam alteri tribuat, quae solius dei est, eo constanter inficias.” Oecolampadius, *De genuina verborum domini*, sig. Kvii^v.

¹⁷² “Humanitas Christi tota... creatura est, quae aliquando non fuit.” *Ibid.*, sig. Kvii^v-Kviii^f.

¹⁷³ “Quid ais? Nunquid Christus non est verus deus, et verus homo? Et quatenus homo est (ut iam tu colligis) creatura est. Quid ergo? Nunquid non deus gloriae suae deitatis huic creaturae communicavit? Cur igitur

Fisher answered Oecolampadius by first explaining God's absolute power and then paired this with a forceful employment of *pysma*, a classic rhetorical device among humanists, to challenge Oecolampadius's grasp of the hypostatic union. The only syllogistic element of his reply is the quoting of Oecolampadius's original argument.

More's responses to the arguments of Frith and the Masker were methodologically more complex than Fisher's response to Oecolampadius. Scholastic dialectic was the cornerstone of More's replies, and he supplemented it with rhetorical devices. Beginning with More's letter to Frith, More first quoted Frith's previously cited syllogism, albeit with some minor variations:

You can sayeth he shewe no reason, why [Christ] sholde be in many places at onys and not in all. But in all places he can not be / wherefore we muste conclude that he can not be in many places at onys.¹⁷⁴

Due to the logical nature of More's treatment of this syllogism, it is helpful to restructure it in standard argument form:

(P1) [There is] no reason, why [Christ] sholde be in many places at onys and not in all.

(P2) In all places [Christ] can not be.

(C) [Christ] can not be in many places at onys.¹⁷⁵

More sarcastically proclaimed that this is a "maruelous concluded argument," and then blended a polemical jab with a critique of the syllogism's structure: "A very chylde maye sone see that thys consequent can neuer folowe vpon those twoo premysses of hys

miraris, si talis homo qui deus est, non dico, sit, sed esse possit in pluribus locis, quandoquidem ei communicatur gloria deitatis?" *Ibid.*, fol. 287^v.

¹⁷⁴ Thomas More to John Frith, 1533, in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 7: Letter to Bugenhagen, Supplication of Souls, Letter Against Frith*, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Marc'Hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 249.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

antecedent.”¹⁷⁶ With these references to the “antecedent” (P1 and P2) and “consequent” (C) of Frith’s syllogism, More commenced a deconstruction of the argument in accordance with the formalities of logic. But his next step in this deconstruction was the use of *pysma*. If he granted Frith the first part of (P1), that “no man could shewe a reason why [Christ] shulde be in many places at onys,” More asked, “what had he wonne by that?”¹⁷⁷ Would Frith then conclude that Christ “could not be in many places at onys,” even if God made it so by his absolute power, unless “we were able to tell how, and why and wherby, and shewe the reason?”¹⁷⁸ More then returned to the syllogism in its entirety and picked apart Frith’s choice of words while using the Aristotelian breakdown of the major and minor premise in a syllogism.¹⁷⁹ He noted that in the “maior” premise (P1), Frith used the more tentative word “shold,” while “in the minor” (P2) and “conclusyon,” he used the more definitive “can.”¹⁸⁰ For this reason, More argued, “the argument can neuer be good.”¹⁸¹

More did not end his deconstruction of Frith’s argument here. He continued by claiming that if Frith wanted to conclude as he does, he would instead need to posit this syllogism:

If it myghte be in many places at ones, than myghte it be in all places at onys. But in all places at onys it can not be / & therefore it can not be in many places at ones.¹⁸²

Even with this argument, though, More asserted that “bothe the partys of [the] antecedent be very weke.”¹⁸³ More granted the first premise to Frith as a “causale proposycyon,” but

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Terence Parsons, *Articulating Medieval Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15.

¹⁸⁰ More to Frith, 1533, 249.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 249-250.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 250.

rejected it in the context in which Frith sought to use it on the grounds that it was what we would today call a fallacy of hasty generalisation: Frith inferred a broader conclusion from an accepted observation that may not necessarily follow that observation.¹⁸⁴ More explained this by likening the premise to saying “men ronne in many places, ergo men ronne in all places.”¹⁸⁵ As for the second premise, More denied that much time needed to be devoted to it because “we do not saye that [Christ] is in all places / for the sacrament is not at onys in all places.”¹⁸⁶ Like Fisher, however, More continued by arguing that if God wanted to make Christ’s body present in all places at once, he would be able to do so by virtue of his absolute power.¹⁸⁷

More’s response to Frith’s Sacramentarian argument involving bodily omnipresence was clearly far more detailed than Fisher’s answer to Oecolampadius. It was also more methodologically complex. Whereas Fisher relied on *pysma* and otherwise explained established teachings about Christ’s divinity and God’s power, More approached Frith with a logical eye infused with the rhetorical elements more customary among humanist writers. The same affinity for logic was at the core of More’s approach to the Masker’s argument involving bodily omnipresence. As we saw above, the Masker’s argument in the *Souper of the Lorde* was in continuous prose. More took it upon himself to reformulate it as a syllogism:

What thyng so euer is in euery place at ones, that thyng muste nedes be infynyte without begynnyng and ende / it must be one, and alone, and almyghty / which propretyes are appropried to the gloryouse maiestie of the godhed. But the manhed of Chryste is a creature and not god: ergo Chrystes manhed can not be in all places or in many places at ones.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁸⁸ More, “Answer to a Poisoned Book,” 191.

Just as he did against Frith, More broke this down according to the Aristotelian model of syllogisms, instructing the reader to consider the “fyrste proposycyon, whych we call the maior.”¹⁸⁹ He argued that it is perfectly within God’s power, as the creator of “heuen, and erthe, and all the creatures yt he created therein” to make “Chrystes manhed... be in all places at once.”¹⁹⁰ More then clarified that the Church does not actually say “that Chrystes bodye is in all places at ones, but [it is] in heuyn, and in suche places in erth as the blessed sacramente ys,” and illustrated how the logical construction of the Masker’s argument does not actually serve to refute this teaching.¹⁹¹ The Masker’s premises, More explained, say nothing about “beynge in manye places at ones, but onely [about] beynge at ones in all places,” yet the Masker “concludeth sodaynely agaynste beynge in many places.”¹⁹² In other words, the Masker provided a conclusion that had nothing to do with his premises. More then summarised his analysis with the language of logic, saying that “neyther is [the Masker’s] maior trew... nor his premysses any thyng proue his conclusyon,” and ended this discussion with polemical derision.¹⁹³ He mocked the Masker’s “vayn gloryouse vanytie” and said that if he “dremed” the way the Masker does, he would “haue ben a shamed to haue tolde... [his] wife” when he awoke.¹⁹⁴

Against the Masker’s rejection of bodily omnipresence, More did not seamlessly alternate between scholastic and humanist methodologies to the same extent that he did against Frith. The construction of his argument was more linear. He started with a theological appeal to God’s omnipotence, then criticised the Masker’s argumentative

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 191-192.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 192-193.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

construction based on the rules of logic, and ended on a polemical note more characteristic of a humanist. But the mere fact that More voluntarily restructured the Masker's argument into a syllogism and addressed it as such shows the extent to which scholastic dialectic remained at the fore of his thinking at a time when many humanists were putting it aside. And if we consider this alongside the voluntary creation of a syllogism mentioned in our discussion of the *Responsio* above, we can fully appreciate the methodological dexterity of More's conservatism. In his *Responsio*, More crafted a syllogism of his own accord for rhetorical purposes and embedded it in a passage that otherwise relied on rhetoric. Against both Frith and the Masker, More depended on logic and syllogistic constructions as the basis of his argument and supplemented these with rhetoric, both through *pysma* and polemical mockery. In More's religious works, scholastic and humanist practices were not incompatible. They could be used alongside each other to defend established teachings with maximum force.

If we take the responses of Fisher and More to Sacramentarian arguments involving Christ's bodily omnipresence together, we see how conservative defences of the corporeal presence were caught in the intellectual winds of the early sixteenth century. Just as was evidenced in our discussion of Luther's fire and iron metaphor, authors met the reformers from different points within the humanist-scholastic divide, and this divide was more permeable than has usually been acknowledged. In a way more conventional among Christian humanists, Fisher conveyed the widely accepted theology of divine omnipotence and the hypostatic union solely with the help of *pysma* in his exchange with Oecolampadius, whereas More employed humanist rhetoric, including *pysma*, together with scholastic logic to debase both the theology of his interlocutors and their very way of thinking. Different approaches, both old and new, were used to address the same problem, and in this we see

how the practice of conservative theology was in a moment of transition, evolving as late medieval orthodoxy did.

Beyond these issues of bodily omnipresence, the Sacramentarian challenge to the corporeal eucharistic presence required More and Fisher to describe precisely how, metaphysically, Christ is present in the Eucharist. They each posited a different explanation traceable to theologians within the medieval *viae*, and by juxtaposing these explanations, we see an instance of how conservative English theology exemplified late medieval orthodoxy's expected and accepted theological eclecticism.

This question of how Christ is present in the Eucharist was addressed by More in his *Answer to a Poisoned Book*. During his longer explanation of how Christ can be present at so many altars at once, More compared the manner of Christ's presence in the Eucharist to how a soul is present in a human body. "The soule," he explained, "is vndiuisyble and is in euery parte of the body, and in euery parte it is whole;" the "substaunce of the spyrytuall body of Chrystes flesshe & his bonys" is present in the same way: "whole in euery parte of the sacrament."¹⁹⁵

Drawing on Aristotelian metaphysics, scholastic theologians understood there to be three forms of locality: something could be present circumscriptively, definitively or repletively.¹⁹⁶ Circumscriptive presence referred to instances in which something is fully present in a place and fully extended such that each individual part of that thing occupies a part of that place and no other thing can occupy that same place.¹⁹⁷ Imagine a one-litre

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁹⁶ Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories*, 94 and 239; also see Thomas Osborne, "Faith, Philosophy and the Nominalist Background to Luther's Defense of the Real Presence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 1 (2002): 72, and Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 276.

¹⁹⁷ Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories*, 94; Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 276.

hollow cube into which one litre of cement is poured; this cement is circumscriptively present in the cube, as it occupies the entirety of the space within it and prevents any other substance from being present in the cube circumscriptively. Definitive presence is somewhat more difficult to define because its finer details changed between authors. Generally, it was understood as the form of presence had by spiritual bodies and referred to instances in which something is fully extended in a place and is equally whole in each individual part of that place.¹⁹⁸ If we continue with our example of cement in a cube, the cement would be definitively present if each millilitre of space within the cube was filled with the entire one litre of the same cement.¹⁹⁹

Repletive presence was similar to definitive presence in that it referred to instances in which something is fully present and whole in each part of a given place, but differed from definitive presence in that the thing in question is not confined to the borders of that space.²⁰⁰ The one litre of cement would be repletively present if each millilitre of space within the cube was filled with the entire one litre of the same cement – just as if it were definitively present – but each millilitre of space beyond this cube’s borders was equally filled with this one litre of cement. Given the ubiquity this form of presence describes, it was reserved for God: it explained his ability to permeate all barriers and exist in all places.²⁰¹

By likening Christ’s eucharistic presence to the soul’s presence in a body, and describing the soul as “in euery parte of the body” and “whole” in “euery parte,” More held that Christ becomes present in the Eucharist definitively.²⁰² This was the view of John Duns

¹⁹⁸ As an example of the varying definitions of definitive presence, Aquinas added the caveat that to be definitively present, the place in which something is present must “define the scope of its power.” For more on this, see Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories*, 94-95.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94; Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 276.

²⁰⁰ Osborne, “Faith, Philosophy and the Nominalist Background,” 72; Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 276, n. 104.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² More, “Answer to a Poisoned Book,” 209.

Scotus and nominalists like William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel.²⁰³ Thomas Aquinas also understood locality in this threefold way, but he saw the eucharistic presence as something rather different. Regardless of whether something is circumscriptively, definitively or repletively present, Aquinas believed that its presence is *always* defined by its *own* quantitative dimensions in commensuration with the dimensions of the place it occupies.²⁰⁴ In the case of our cube example, this would be the dimensions of the hollow one-litre cube. This is not the case for Christ's body in the Eucharist. Christ's quantitative dimensions remain in heaven, and the substance of Christ's body becomes present in the Eucharist by way of dimensions alien to it, namely those of the bread and wine.²⁰⁵ For this reason, Aquinas did not think that Christ's eucharistic presence is comparable to the presence of a soul in a human body, nor did he believe it could be explained with these three forms of spatial locality.²⁰⁶ Instead, Aquinas posited that Christ becomes present in the Eucharist in a special sort of way which he described as "through the mode of substance" (*per modum substantiae*).²⁰⁷

If we turn now to how Fisher explained Christ's eucharistic presence in his exchange with Oecolampadius, we see that Aquinas's theory of eucharistic presence was very much what he had in mind. Twice in his *De veritate*, Fisher provided an explanation for Christ's presence that was divorced from the threefold philosophy of spatial locality. The first time,

²⁰³ For Scotus and Ockham, see Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories*, 133 and 152; for Biel, see Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 276.

²⁰⁴ Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories*, 93-94.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 93-95.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*; Stephen E. Lahey, "Late Medieval Eucharistic Theology," in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 505-506; Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae," in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia, Tomus XII*, edited by the Commissio Leonina (Romae: Ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1906), III, q.76, a.1 and a.5; for Christ not being circumscriptively or definitively present, also see Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum, Magistri Petri Lombardi Episcopi Parisiensis, Tomus IV*, ed. Maria Fabianus Moos (Paris: Sumptibus P. Lethielleux, 1947), IV, d.10, a.3.

he wrote that the body and blood of Christ are not beneath the accidents of the bread and wine “through the mode of quantity” (*non sunt ibi per modum quanti*), nor are they there “locally or definitively” (*neque localiter, aut diffinitive*).²⁰⁸ Using the wording of Aquinas, Fisher said that they are there “through the mode of substance” (*per modum substantiae*).²⁰⁹ The second time, Fisher explained that “the true body of Christ” is in the Eucharist, “but not locally. Neither is it there circumscriptively... nor definitively, but through the transformation of the bread into himself.”²¹⁰

More and Fisher evidently had different perceptions of the metaphysics surrounding Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. With his comparison of the eucharistic presence to the soul’s place in a human body, More appeared to follow Scotus, Ockham, and Biel, while Fisher worked more firmly within the confines of the *via antiqua* with his preference for Aquinas’s teaching. On the surface, this difference may seem like a contradiction within English conservatism. After all, More saw Christ as definitively present in the Eucharist, a form of locality that Fisher explicitly said does not explain the eucharistic presence. But this variation in illustrating an otherwise accepted theological truth is precisely the sort of pedagogical diversity that Jaroslav Pelikan, Alister McGrath, and Gordon A. Jensen have seen as widespread and accepted in the late medieval Church, but which scholars of early modernity have not appreciated. More and Fisher were heirs of this late medieval tradition, but as we have seen in this section, and the chapter more widely, they were also products of their time. They carried the teachings of the preceding centuries into a new era and wielded

²⁰⁸ Fisher, *De veritate*, fol. 69^v.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ “Est enim ibi verum Christi corpus, sed non localiter. Neque enim circumscriptive (ut aiunt) ibi est, neque diffinitive, sed per mutationem panis in ipsum.” *Ibid.*, fol. 288^r.

them against their challengers in ways reflective of their own inclinations at the intersection of the scholastic and humanist worlds.

Conclusion:

Taken as a whole, English conservative defences of the corporeal presence provide a template for our tree of conservative theology. They afford us insight into everything from its roots to its branches, to the fibre at the heart of its being. This fibre was of course the consensus of the Church around the Christian faith. Edward Surtz, Richard Rex, and Foley and Miller all saw a tendency of conservatives to appeal to this enduring consensus in their discussions of transubstantiation, but they presented it as a mere argument against the reformers. It was more than this. The consensus of the past and present was the very foundation of conservative theology – it was the conservative conception of orthodoxy – and it was on this foundation that Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell approached the intensifying challenge around them. All their arguments in favour of the corporeal presence, even their strategy of linking contemporaneous reformers with heretics from the Church's past, were built on the consensus of the majority that had been passed down since the Church's inception.

How the teachings of this consensus on the corporeal presence were conveyed (how the branches of our tree took direction in the sky) varied between writers and was at the mercy of their own intellectual backgrounds in combination with the intellectual landscape around them. As the least theologically erudite of our four authors, Henry VIII reiterated old defences of the corporeal presence beneath the cloak of humanist rhetoric, and posited his own reason for why Christ's body cannot mix with the substances of the bread and wine in the Eucharist that distinguished him from his predecessors and contemporaries. He reasoned that this mixing was impossible due to Christ's divinity when the norm was to

appeal to the nature of his glorified body. More, being schooled in both humanism and scholasticism like Fisher and Powell, blended these two methodologies together with ease, but he retained a unique affinity for logical disputation that likely arose, in part, from his legal career. Fisher and Powell, on the other hand, were more firmly in the humanist camp, and frequently wielded rhetoric and classical tropes in their disputes with the reformers. These individual situations within broader environmental contexts contributed to the evolution of the consensus that was late medieval orthodoxy, and understanding them is essential for making sense of any apparent differences in the ideas presented by conservative authors.

Questions of eucharistic metaphysics are where we see the varied, meandering theological roots that lay beneath the soil. Fisher understood Christ to become present in the Eucharist “through the mode of substance,” an entirely Thomistic concept, and explicitly rejected that Christ can be described as definitively present in the Eucharist. This put him at odds with More, who appeared to follow Scotus, Ockham, and Biel in seeing Christ as present in the Eucharist definitively. But in this disagreement was an overarching unity, one founded in and emerging from the consensus of the Church. More, Fisher, Henry VIII, and Powell were all conduits of this consensus, and they all contributed to its evolution in their own way, preserving orthodoxy as it was then understood.

Chapter 2

English Conservatism and the Administration of Communion

Until roughly the twelfth century, communion was commonly administered to the laity under both kinds – the bread and wine were both received.¹ By the thirteenth century, this had changed. As transubstantiation emerged as the accepted mode through which Christ becomes present in the Eucharist, concerns emerged over the average parishioner's careless treatment of what was effectively the blood of Christ.² It was being spilled on floors, reduced to vinegar over time or otherwise "treated irreverently," so custom came to bar the laity from receiving the consecrated wine.³ On 15th June 1415, the thirteenth session of the Council of Constance ratified this custom as official Church practice, and this prohibition on lay reception of the wine, within the Catholic Church, continued until it was reversed by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.⁴

Constance itself was convened primarily to end the Great Western Schism, though the condemnation of the teachings of Wycliffe, Jan Hus and their followers was no less pressing.⁵ The decree of the council's thirteenth session was in response to the 1414 Hussite objection to the ecclesiastical custom barring the laity from receiving the consecrated wine.⁶ Advocacy for the lay reception of communion under both kinds, "utraquism" as it became

¹ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 206-207.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*; "Ne ab iis scilicet parum reverenter tractetur: effundatur: aut in acetum, quod facile fit." Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 30^v-31^r. Based on Powell's comment, a change of wine into vinegar after the consecration would be an accidental change sufficient for the substances of Christ's body and blood to cease being in the sacrament; for this, see Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae," III, q.77, a.4.

⁴ For the Council of Constance, see Ian Christopher Levy, "Interpreting the Intention of Christ: Roman Responses to Bohemian Utraquism from Constance to Basel," in *Europe After Wyclif*, ed. J. Patrick Hornbeck II and Michael Van Dussen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 173; for the Second Vatican Council, see Rowena Roppelt, "A Fuller Light: Communion Under Both Kinds," *Worship* 79, no. 1 (2005): 4.

⁵ Phillip H. Stump, *Reforms of the Council of Constance (1414-1418)* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), xi-xiv.

⁶ Pavel Soukup, "The Waning of the 'Wycliffites': Giving Names to the Hussite Heresy," in *Europe After Wyclif*, ed. J. Patrick Hornbeck II and Michael Van Dussen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 204.

known (from the Latin “sub utraque specie”), henceforth became largely synonymous with Hussitism; indeed, the chalice emblazoned the banners, shields and tunics of the Hussites during the Hussite Wars (1419-1436).⁷ But oddly enough, utraquism had little to do with either Wycliffe or Jan Hus. Its intellectual fathers were Jakoubek of Stříbro and Nicholas of Dresden, two of Hussitism’s central figures alongside the movement’s namesake.⁸

The decree made at Constance rested primarily on ecclesiastical precedent. The council acknowledged that communion was once offered to the laity under both kinds, but to avoid certain unnamed “dangers and scandals” (*pericula et scandala*), like the spilling of Christ’s blood alluded to above, this practice was “reasonably” (*rationabiliter*) ended through “custom” (*consuetudo*).⁹ As such, the council proclaimed, the prohibition on lay reception of communion under both kinds must be “held as a law which nobody may repudiate or alter... without the Church’s permission.”¹⁰ Constance made an additional qualification to justify this decision on theological grounds, presumably to refute charges that those who receive communion only under the form of bread are not receiving Christ’s blood and therefore not fully partaking in the sacrament. It insisted on the necessity of believing that “the whole body and blood of Christ are truly contained under both the form of bread and the form of wine.”¹¹ This was the first formal endorsement of concomitance,

⁷ Stephen E. Lahey, *The Hussites* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 32; for the symbolic significance of the chalice, see Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400-1536* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 58.

⁸ Lahey, *Hussites*, 4, 8, 12 and 35; Hieromonk Patapios, “*Sub Utraque Specie*: The Arguments of John Hus and Jakoubek of Stříbro in Defence of Giving Communion to the Laity Under Both Kinds,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 53, no. 2 (2002): 509; for Wycliffe not being connected to utraquism, see Soukup, “Waning,” 200; for Jakoubek specifically, see Ian Christopher Levy, “Rejecting Transubstantiation in Late Medieval England and Bohemia,” in *The Metaphysics and Theology of the Eucharist: A Historical-Analytical Survey of the Problems of the Sacrament*, ed. Gyula Klima (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), 341-343.

⁹ “Constance, 1414-1418,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume One: Nicaea to Lateran V*, ed. and trans. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 419.

¹⁰ “Habenda est pro lege, quam non licet reprobare, aut sine ecclesiae auctoritate... innovare.” *Ibid.*

¹¹ “Cum firmissime credendum sit, et nullatenus dubitandum, integrum Christi corpus et sanguinem tam sub specie panis, quam sub specie vini veraciter contineri.” *Ibid.*

which we discussed in Chapter 1.¹² On the basis of custom reinforced by concomitance, the council declared that those who regard the Church's ruling on communion under both kinds as "sacrilegious or illicit" (*sacrilegum aut illicitum*) are mistaken and should be "confined as heretics" (*haeretici arcendi sunt*).¹³

Jakoubek, against whom this council openly directed its decree, was not himself opposed to concomitance.¹⁴ He simply believed that it did not nullify the sacramental importance of the chalice.¹⁵ He relied on a variety of theological authorities, including Greek fathers like John Chrysostom and John of Damascus, Latin fathers such as Augustine, Cyprian and Jerome, Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, and scriptural citations to make his case.¹⁶ Scripturally, Jakoubek drew on the descriptions of the Last Supper in the synoptic Gospels as well as John 6:53, "unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you."¹⁷ He took this passage from John 6 to mean both spiritual and sacramental (visible) eating and drinking; the sacrament therefore required one to eat and drink both the forms of the bread and wine respectively. As Jakoubek, following Augustine, interpreted the audience in John 6 to be everyone present, not just the disciples, he argued that the requirement to physically eat and drink both the sacramental bread and wine respectively extended to the laity.¹⁸

Jakoubek's theology and the Hussite movement materialised into the Czech Utraquist Church, which gained legitimacy in 1436 through the compacts of the Council of Basel, though this formal recognition was revoked in 1462 under Pope Pius II.¹⁹ Luther positioned

¹² For this being concomitance, see James J. Megivern, "Concomitance and Communion: A Study in Eucharistic Doctrine and Practice" (PhD diss., University of Fribourg, 1963), 1; for our previous discussion, see page 68.

¹³ "Constance," 419.

¹⁴ For Constance and Jakoubek, see "Constance," 418; for Jakoubek and concomitance, see Levy, "Interpreting the Intention," 174.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Patapios, "*Sub Utraque Specie*," 519 and 521.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 518.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 519-520.

¹⁹ David, "Strange Fate of Czech Utraquism," 642.

himself as a successor of this Church, a portrayal also adopted by his conservative detractors, though Zdeněk V. David has questioned the credibility of this lineage.²⁰ Rather surprisingly given his Sacramentarian view of the Eucharist, Zwingli seemed to provide no input on the manner of communion's administration, at least no mention of it was made in either his *Die 67 Artikel* (1523) or *Subsidium sive coronis de eucharistia* (1525).²¹ But utraquism did gain traction among some early English evangelicals. The English Sacramentarian John Frith supported it in his *A christen sentence* from 1532, though he did not insist on its implementation, and the English Lutheran Robert Barnes wrote wholeheartedly in favour of the lay reception of the chalice in both his *Sententiae ex doctoribus collectae* (1530 and 1536) and *A Supplication Vnto the Most Gracyous Prince Kyng Henry The VIII* (1531).²²

Until now, utraquism has been entirely neglected in scholarship pertaining to the early days of the Reformation in England. This is likely because scholars have been preoccupied with the arguably greater question of Christ's corporeal eucharistic presence, but the fact that communion continued to be given under one kind in England throughout

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 645, 651 and 666.

²¹ Huldrych Zwingli, "Die 67 Artikel," in *Luther's and Zwingli's Propositions for Debate*, trans. Carl S. Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 36-51; Zwingli, "On the Lord's Supper."

²² Frith, *A christen sentence*, sig. Bii^rv; Frank Manley, Germain Marc'Hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence H. Miller, "Commentary," in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 7: Letter to Bugenhagen, Supplication of Souls, Letter Against Frith*, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Marc'Hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 391; Robert Barnes, *Sententiae ex doctoribus collectae* (Klug, 1530), Eiiii^r-Fviii^r; Robert Barnes, *Sententiae ex doctoribus collectae* (Wittenberg, 1536), Ev^r-Fii^r; Robert Barnes, "A Supplication Vnto the Most Gracyous Prince Kyng Henry The VIII. 1531," in *A Critical Edition of Robert Barnes's A Supplication Vnto the Most Gracyous Prince Kyng Henry The VIII. 1534*, ed. Douglas H. Parker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 695. This discussion of the lay chalice was omitted from the 1534 edition of this same text, which instead focussed much of its attention on married clergy; for this omission, see Douglas H. Parker, "Introduction," in *A Critical Edition of Robert Barnes's A Supplication Vnto the Most Gracyous Prince Kyng Henry The VIII. 1534*, ed. Douglas H. Parker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 18. For the 1534 edition itself, see Robert Barnes, "A Supplication Vnto the Most Gracyous Prince Kyng Henry The VIII. 1534," in *A Critical Edition of Robert Barnes's A Supplication Vnto the Most Gracyous Prince Kyng Henry The VIII. 1534*, ed. Douglas H. Parker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 133-348. More hoped to compose a treatise against Barnes on this issue but died before he was able to do so; for this, see More to Frith, 1533, 257 and Foley and Miller, "Shape of the Eucharistic Controversy," lix.

the reign of Henry VIII likely contributed to this oversight as well. The practice only changed under Edward VI in 1547: the English clergy agreed in Convocation that both the bread and the wine should be accessible to the laity, and three weeks later, on 20th December, Parliament passed legislation allowing for communion to be administered under both kinds.²³ But beyond being the first significant voyage into an area of Reformation discourse, this chapter's focus on the manner of communion's administration has a wider significance for the purpose of this thesis. As we have seen, the changes in Church practice regarding communion were propelled first by custom and then cemented by conciliar decree. In defending the Church's position against Luther's proposed utraquism, English conservatives were effectively defending the evolutionary process inherent to the consensus that was late medieval orthodoxy. In their perspectives on conciliarism and custom, we find accepted mechanisms for this evolution, and in their specific arguments against Luther, we observe how English conservatives defended the process of change while themselves being part of it.

The first section of this chapter examines conciliarism, the first of these mechanisms. It was through a council that the practice of administering communion under one kind was formalised, so understanding how each of our authors regarded conciliar authority sheds light on a cornerstone of their opposition to utraquism. The section opens with an overview of existing literature on conciliarism in early Reformation England and notes the underdeveloped and sometimes conflicting accounts of whether More and Fisher were conciliarists. It then explains the three phases of conciliarism described by Antony Black, and shows how Fisher, More, and Powell all seemed to posit conciliar theories emblematic of the

²³ Joseph Ketley, "Preface," in *The Two Liturgies, AD 1549 and AD 1552 with other Documents set Forth by Authority in the Reign of Edward VI*, ed. Joseph Ketley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), iii, n. 1; also see "The Order of the Communion," in *The Two Liturgies, AD 1549 and AD 1552 with other Documents set Forth by Authority in the Reign of Edward VI*, ed. Joseph Ketley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), 1-2.

movement's second phase, albeit with allegiances to different authorities. Henry VIII was again the anomaly. He appeared to draw on ideas from conciliarism's third phase, and his *Assertio* also revealed mild sympathy with utraquism such that More and Fisher subtly distanced themselves from the book.

The second section examines how Henry VIII, More, Fisher, and Powell refuted Luther's actual arguments for utraquism, and shows how their individual circumstances influenced their defences of ecclesiastical custom, the second mechanism for the evolution of conservative thought and practice. As Luther's arguments have received no attention in English scholarship, they are first outlined in full. The third and fourth arguments are then used as our basis for analysis and how each of our authors responded to them are compared. Henry VIII's *Assertio* again ran astray from the norm. Like any late medieval orthodox work, it saw authority in ecclesiastical custom, but its responses to Luther were otherwise written with political ambition in mind. More also responded to Luther with an eye to politics, but it was the humanist political philosophy related to the *res publica* rather than personal aspiration. He blended this philosophy with the Holy Spirit's unyielding influence over Church developments to provide a defence of communion *sub una specie* that reflected his standing as a theologically learned statesman. Fisher and Powell, by contrast, responded to Luther on grounds characteristic of highly educated clerics, but ones with different academic inclinations. Fisher was more interested in providing clear articulations of established theology and canon law than Powell, who based his responses to Luther on these same ideas but permitted his love of rhetoric to take centre stage. Taken as a whole, this chapter again shows how, like late medieval orthodoxy, the English conservative reaction to the reformers was comprised of varying ideas that were part of a broader process of change. But the chapter takes this a step further. It demonstrates that it

was a process recognised by conservatism's adherents, who defended it with the same tenacity with which they defended conservative teachings themselves.

Haec sancta synodus: Conciliarism Among English Conservatives:

For the first and only time in history, the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries saw the simultaneous existence of multiple popes, courts and obediences created by the papacy's College of Cardinals.²⁴ Pope Urban VI, who was elected in 1378, was temperamental and prone to violence, and this displeased several cardinals.²⁵ Those who were discontent fled Rome and dismissed Urban's election as illegitimate.²⁶ Later that year, these cardinals entered their own conclave in the Kingdom of Naples and elected Pope Clement VII.²⁷ For the next three decades, the respective successors of these two popes existed in competition, a break in the Church known as the Great Western Schism.²⁸ In 1409, the Council of Pisa sought to mend the Schism by deposing both the incumbent successors of Urban and Clement's respective papal lines and electing another pope, Alexander V.²⁹ The Urbanist pope, Gregory XII, and Clementist pope, Benedict XIII, naturally rejected their depositions, and so began the time of three popes.³⁰ In 1414, the Council of Constance was convened to end the madness, and on 6th April 1415, the decree of the council's fifth session appeared to be formulated to avoid a similar debacle to that which emerged from Pisa:

Legitimately assembled in the Holy Spirit, constituting a general council and representing a catholic Church militant, [this holy synod] has power immediately from Christ; and that everyone of whatever state or dignity, even papal, is bound to obey it in those matters which pertain to the faith, the eradication of the said

²⁴ Joëlle Rollo-Koster, *The Great Western Schism, 1378-1417: Performing Legitimacy, Performing Unity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*; also see Phillip H. Stump, *Conciliar Diplomacy at the Council of Constance (1414-1418): Unity and Peacemaking in a World Historical Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 23-28.

²⁹ Rollo-Koster, *Great Western Schism*, 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

schism and the general reform of the said Church of God in head and members.³¹

This decree, called “Haec sancta,” effectively proclaimed the legitimacy of the council’s own decisions and granted it supremacy even over the pope.³² In doing so, it propounded a philosophy of ecclesiastical governance known as conciliarism, which, broadly speaking, held that general councils of the Church, which were guided by God, took precedence over papal pronouncements in matters of faith and Church reform.³³

Like late medieval orthodoxy itself, there was no one brand of conciliarism. It took many forms that were united in a common idea: the pope was not an absolute, infallible ruler, but a constitutional ruler who could be corrected if need be.³⁴ His authority was ministerial, “delegated to him by the community of the faithful (*congregatio fidelium*) for the good of the whole Church,” and it was the Church alone that was infallible.³⁵ Even though it elected a ruler, the *congregatio fidelium* retained whatever power was necessary to preserve and protect the Christian faith, and this power could be exercised by its representatives convened in a general council.³⁶ In certain cases, this power could be used independently of and against the will of the pope, and in these instances the pope could be judged, punished or deposed.³⁷

³¹ “In Spiritu sancto legitime congregata, generale concilium faciens, et ecclesiam catholicam militantem repraesentans, [haec sancta synodus] potestatem a Christo immediate habet, cui quilibet cuiuscumque status vel dignitatis, etiam si papalis existat, obedire tenetur in his quae pertinent ad fidem et extirpationem dicti schismatis, ac generalem reformationem dictae ecclesiae Dei in capite et in membris.” The capitalisations of “h” in “Holy” and “c” in “Church” are my own; “Constance,” 409.

³² Paul Valliere, *Conciliarism: A History of Decision Making in the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 144.

³³ *Ibid.*, 141-144; Francis Oakley, “Gerson as Conciliarist,” in *A Companion to Jean Gerson*, ed. Brian Patrick McGuire (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 195-196.

³⁴ Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church, 1300-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 72; the plurality of conciliarism is also recognised in Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 94-95.

³⁵ Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

The conciliarist movement is generally seen as one of the precursors to the Reformation. Between issues like the crisis of authority created by the Schism and growing anti-clericalism across Europe fuelled by such phenomena as illiterate, incompetent clergy and clerical tax exemptions, the need for some manner of ecclesiastical reform became increasingly recognised in the fifteenth century.³⁸ Conciliarism stood to bring about this reform from within the Church. When it failed to do so, reform-seeking eyes began turning towards methods of imposing change by external means, like secular powers.³⁹ In England specifically, reformers like Thomas Cranmer placed greater emphasis on conciliarist principles as they stepped away from the papacy, and during the King's Great Matter of 1527 to 1533, conciliarism became a *modus operandi* for those in the king's camp: they threatened to appeal to a general council if the pope was not sympathetic to Henry VIII's request for a marital annulment.⁴⁰ But conciliar theory remained an argumentative and theological force among More, Fisher, and Powell, as well as in Henry VIII's *Assertio* of 1521, particularly in their defences of the Church's decision to stop administering communion to the laity under both kinds. In fact, if there was ever a movement that encapsulated the spirit of late medieval orthodoxy as an evolving consensus of the majority, it was conciliarism, and its nature among English conservatives is our present focus.

With the exception of Powell, who has been widely ignored by historians, the conciliar tendencies of More, Fisher, and Henry VIII have received attention by scholars. But imprecision pervades these assessments, and this has left some questions unanswered and

³⁸ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 12-14; Carlos M.N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 62.

³⁹ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 16; Eire, *Reformations*, 62; for secular powers, also see Paul Avis, *Beyond the Reformation? Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 141.

⁴⁰ For Cranmer, see *Ibid.*, 139; for conciliarism and Henry VIII's marital annulment, see *Ibid.*, 134, and Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 133-134.

some conclusions that appear conflicting. Much as we saw in the previous chapter regarding the corporeal presence, Henry VIII's *Assertio* was an outlier to the writings of More, Fisher, and Powell on communion's administration, so we will first analyse the positions of the latter three authors on conciliar authority and return to the *Assertio* in due course. Doing so shows another instance of the theological heterogeneity characteristic of late medieval orthodoxy, and an example of the *Assertio* nearly digressing from ecclesiastical precedent to such an extent that the prospect of it being written by anyone notable other than Henry VIII seems unlikely.

The greatest level of historiographical discussion on the conciliar tendencies of our four authors has centred on Thomas More. David Bagchi has remarked in passing that “despite giving his life for papal supremacy over the English Church, [More] was not a papalist,” and Francis Oakley and Peter Marshall have both noted More's clear conciliarist persuasion in the final years of his life.⁴¹ As evidence, both Oakley and Marshall cite More's letter to Thomas Cromwell in 1534, in which he claimed that he had never considered “the Pope above the generall counsaile,” and Oakley also cites More's comment in his *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* that the general council may admonish or depose an “incorrigible pope,” but claims that More never provided much insight into the relationship between pope and general council before this.⁴² Richard Rex once took the opposite perspective, but appears to have since changed his tune. He originally asserted that More's “commitment to papal supremacy undoubtedly hardened as the years passed,” but has

⁴¹ Bagchi, “Catholic Theologians,” 224; Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 135-136; Marshall, “Last Years,” 135.

⁴² Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 135-136; Marshall, “Last Years,” 135; Thomas More to Thomas Cromwell, 1534, in *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 499; Thomas More, “The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 8: The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 590.

more recently claimed that More relied on a “conciliar definition of papal headship” in both his *Responsio* of 1523 and in a speech at his trial in 1535.⁴³ Rex never explicitly explains what this definition was, but from his citations, it appears to simply be that papal primacy was recognised by general councils.⁴⁴ Even with this breadth of consideration among historians, a significant amount of murkiness remains. We know that More afforded general councils a great deal of authority, but have little indication of who his conciliar sources were or of the nature of his conciliarism.

Where conclusions appear to be the most conflicting is with the existing commentaries on whether John Fisher had conciliarist persuasions. In his account of Fisher’s life and works, Edward Surtz outlines the basics of the bishop’s devotion to papal supremacy from before the Reformation unto his death. From Fisher’s position on the King’s Great Matter, Surtz surmises that the bishop saw the pope as the ultimate authority, able to overturn decisions “established by the Church, whether by individual or assembled bishops, whether in particular or general council.”⁴⁵ He then supplements this conclusion with references to Fisher’s other writings. He points to Fisher’s exchange with the Flemish theologian Josse Clichtove in 1519, in which Fisher declared that in important theological matters, like those pertaining to scripture, “the authority of the sovereign pontiff is great, but is still greater if the custom of the Roman See is added to it, and it is greatest if the

⁴³ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 103; Rex, “Thomas More and the Heretics,” 101.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 101 and 113, n. 15. Rex cites the reference to Fisher’s *Confutatio* in More’s *Responsio*, specifically a passage describing how the Greeks at the Council of Florence (1439-1445) acknowledged the pope as St. Peter’s successor and rightful head of the Church. He also cites the final argument from More’s trial in 1535, in which he argued that acceding to the Act of Supremacy would put him in opposition to “the general council of Christendom.” For More’s reference to the *Confutatio*, see More, “Responsio,” 138-141; for this passage of the *Confutatio*, see Fisher, *Confutatio*, CCCLXXVII-CCCLXXVIII; for More at his trial, see William Roper, “The Life of Sir Thomas More,” in *Two Early Tudor Lives*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Davis P. Harding (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 249-250.

⁴⁵ Surtz, *Works and Days*, 69.

consent of the whole Church accrues to it.”⁴⁶ From here, Surtz references Fisher’s sermon preached against Luther at Paul’s Cross in 1521, in which he proclaimed that “the pope iure diuino is the heed of the vnyuersall chyrche of christ,” and discusses evangelical responses to Fisher’s thoughts on the papacy.⁴⁷ He then comes to Fisher’s most extensive commentary on papal supremacy: the twenty-fifth article of his *Confutatio*, which sought to show that “the Sovereign Pontiff is the head of the whole Church” with references to scripture, the fathers, and a direct refutation of Luther’s position on the subject.⁴⁸ Surtz mentions Fisher’s discussion of conciliar authority in articles twenty-eight and twenty-nine of his *Confutatio* earlier in the chapter, and cites multiple instances in this text where Fisher equated the Catholic Church to the pope *with* council, but he seems to gloss over the importance of this dyad in favour of emphasising the primacy of the pope.⁴⁹ Indeed, despite providing the full quotation, Surtz makes nothing of Fisher’s remark to Clichtove that the greatest authority in the Church lies with the pope, custom, and universal consent *together* as one. Likewise, Surtz’s reference to papal headship of the Church in Fisher’s 1521 sermon is made without any discussion of the authority Fisher attributed to general councils in this same sermon, namely that they speak (along with the fathers and doctors of the Church) with the voice of the “holy ghost,” which informs the Church like God the father did “by his Prophetes before, and as did his sonne the second person by his Apostles.”⁵⁰

Richard Rex’s characterisation of Fisher’s views on pope and council resemble Surtz to a large degree, though Rex pays far more attention to the relationship between the two

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 71; for more on this exchange, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 66-67.

⁴⁷ Surtz, *Works and Days*, 71-77.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

⁵⁰ John Fisher, *A Sermon, very notable, fruiteful, and Godlie, made at Paules Crosse in London, Anno domini, 1521* (London, 1554), sig. Gi^r.

factions than his predecessor. He clearly acknowledges that Fisher saw the universal Church as represented by “a pope with a general council ‘convoked in the Holy Spirit’” and that no one could therefore dissent from their joint decrees, but cautions against taking this as an indication that Fisher was a conciliarist.⁵¹ Fisher did not, Rex believes, hold that the general council is superior to the pope, and, unlike More, he never suggested that “a council could depose a pope.”⁵² Rex does reference a remark that Fisher made while opposing the nullification of Henry VIII’s first marriage, that popes are not infallible and can be admonished by the Church when they err, and he elsewhere cites Fisher’s comment in his *Confutatio*, that instances where a pope and council disagree are “suspicious” (*suspecta*), “unless [this disagreement] was by the pope’s most obvious fault.”⁵³ But Rex ultimately concludes that Fisher was more in line with papal monarchists from a brief statement he made in 1519: “There is nothing on earth greater than the supreme pontiff.”⁵⁴

When we take Surtz and Rex’s accounts together, something seems amiss. Both men recognise that Fisher saw some sort of association between the pope and council, but neither of them provides an indication of the nature of this relationship, nor do they afford much time to its theological origins. They simply acknowledge that Fisher recognised the significance of councils, but conclude from separate statements that the pope superseded councils in Fisher’s eyes. Perhaps the best clue that something is awry in these assessments is found in the fact that Rex classifies Thomas More as a conciliarist while noting that More never provided a personal account of papal authority in his *Responsio*; instead, he chose to

⁵¹ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 101-102.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 102, n. 54 and n. 56.

⁵⁴ “Nihil enim est in terris summo pontifice maius.” *Ibid.*, 102; Latin quoted from John Fisher, *De unica Magdalena* (Paris, 1519), fol. XLVII^v.

direct his readers to the account of papal primacy in Fisher's *Confutatio*.⁵⁵ How could More be a conciliarist while relying on the ideas around the papacy propounded by one who was supposedly not a conciliarist? Rex later came to refer to this shared position as a "conciliar declaration of papal headship," so he presumably changed his mind, but he has not, so far as I am aware, ever revised his earlier account.⁵⁶ We are therefore left wondering what to make of Fisher's position if he seemed to both express sympathy for papal supremacy over the council while at other times claiming that whenever a pope and general council disagree, it is due to a fault of the pope.

A problem with Rex's earlier assessment of Fisher's perspective on the relationship between pope and council is his framing of the issue. By taking Fisher's failure to openly proclaim that "a council could depose a pope" as an indication that he aligned more closely with papal monarchists, Rex effectively confines his definition of "conciliarism" to the extremities of conciliar theory.⁵⁷ As we saw in our description of the commonalities between the various brands of conciliarism above, councils retained the right "to judge, punish, and even depose" a pope in cases where the integrity of the Christian faith was in jeopardy.⁵⁸ Fisher's stated belief in the ability of the Church to "admonish" (*admoneri possunt*) the pope and "recall" (*inde revocari*) him from error, dismissed by Rex as falling "a long way short of the power of judgement," was still within this purview of conciliarism, and the fact that Fisher saw any disagreement between council and pope as suggestive of a fault on the part of the pope is indicative of this alignment as well.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ For More as a conciliarist, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 103; for More directing people to Fisher's *Confutatio*, see *Ibid.*, 88 and More, "Responsio," 138-141.

⁵⁶ Rex, "Thomas More and the Heretics," 101.

⁵⁷ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 102.

⁵⁸ Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 72.

⁵⁹ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 102 and n. 54.

Two years before Rex's *Theology of John Fisher* was published, Brian Gogan cut against the grain in concluding that Fisher was a conciliarist, and his account reconciles the two apparent extremes of Fisher's thought. Relying on the multiple instances in the *Confutatio* where Fisher equated the Church to a pope and council together, including those later cited by Rex, Gogan asserts that Fisher saw "the general council as the supreme ecclesiastical authority" and that he was "a safe distance from the extremes of curial hegemony" and "more moderate than... papal monarchists."⁶⁰ As Gogan sees it, the general council that reigned supreme for Fisher was "the council in conjunction with its president," the pope himself.⁶¹ They were guided by the Holy Spirit, which resided in the Church and cultivated what Fisher called the "concordia veritatis."⁶² This was the consensus of the Church that was binding for all, and as Gogan explains, Fisher saw the general council as the "institutional instrument" through which consensus was achieved.⁶³ What Gogan summarises here is the connection between *ecclesia* and consensus.⁶⁴ While Gogan does not recognise it as such, this consensus was, as we saw in the introduction, how Fisher and his contemporaries understood orthodoxy, making the general council the "institutional instrument," to use Gogan's phrase, of what was orthodox.

This relationship between pope and council described by Gogan was a common thread in the writings of Fisher, More, and Powell, and it had deeper roots in conciliarist history than Gogan relays. According to Antony Black, conciliarist thought underwent three

⁶⁰ Brian Gogan, "Fisher's View of the Church," in *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 141-143.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶⁴ Rex does comment on Fisher's interest in consensus where popes and councils were concerned, but downplays its significance. He acknowledges that "many medieval and early modern theologians" saw consensus as "the crucial dogmatic concept," but refers to it as a "less realistic model." For this, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 102.

periods or phases of development. The first was between 1378 and 1383, the early days of the Schism, when advocates of conciliarism drew largely from the works of Marsiglio of Padua and William of Ockham.⁶⁵ These tracts were produced at the University of Paris by the likes of Conrad of Gelnhause and Henry of Langenstein and endorsed the convocation of an emergency council and emphasised its authority over the rivaling papal claimants.⁶⁶

The second phase was from 1408 to 1418 and emphasised a sharing of power between the pope and bishops-in-council. The conciliarism of this period involved theories of mixed government, wherein theologians saw the Church as consisting of a monarch (the pope), an aristocracy (the cardinals) and a polity (the councils), though sometimes the pope and cardinals were paired as a single unit.⁶⁷ The works of Pierre d'Ailly and Jean Gerson are good examples of this period of conciliarism, though we can also include the earlier thought of Nicholas of Cusa.⁶⁸ Cusa wrote during the third phase described below and eventually became a papalist, but his early ideas involved a sharing of power more representative of this second phase.⁶⁹ In d'Ailly's view, "fullness of jurisdiction belongs to the pope alone... to the Church figuratively... [and] to the council representatively."⁷⁰ Gerson's position was similar: the pope had fullness of power "essentially (*formaliter*) and subjectively," and the Church and councils had it "materially or relatively;" who enjoyed supreme power as pope was at conciliar discretion, and a council could regulate the use of this power if "it is found

⁶⁵ Antony Black, "The Conciliar Movement," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350 – c. 1450*, ed. J.H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 574.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 579; Cardinal Francesco Zabarella considered the pope and cardinals as a single body under the name "apostolic see" in his *Tractatus de schismate* (1403-1408). For this, see Oakley, "Gerson as Conciliarist," 184.

⁶⁸ For d'Ailly and Gerson, see Black, "Conciliar Movement," 575.

⁶⁹ For the Cusa exception, see Antony Black, "Popes and Councils," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History Volume VII, c. 1415 – c. 1500*, ed. Christopher Allmand (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 80; for Cusa eventually becoming a papalist, see Black, "Conciliar Movement," 585.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 579-580.

to have been abused.”⁷¹ D’Ailly and Gerson differed in how they conceptualised papal supremacy. For d’Ailly, papal supremacy “was of human origin;” it was something that the Church imposed upon itself.⁷² Gerson, on the other hand, recognised the divine supremacy of the pope by way of his succession from Saint Peter.⁷³

Cusa’s theory was unique in that it combined the importance of ecclesiastical consensus with the Neoplatonic interest in hierarchy.⁷⁴ He believed that the more agreement there was around an idea, the more authority it had, and he incorporated this into the structure of the Church established by God, which involved papal primacy.⁷⁵ Thus, for Cusa, “the pope with the [council] was superior to the pope alone; but the [council] could not make a final authoritative judgement without papal consent.”⁷⁶ His *De concordantia catholica* of 1432-1433 argued for conciliar supremacy, and claimed that the ability to make laws in the Church “resides in the ‘common consent’ of the council,” but he believed that a council necessarily involved the pope.⁷⁷ Without the pope, Cusa contended, a council could not represent the universal Church.⁷⁸

The third phase, which Francis Oakley describes as “radical,” occurred from 1432 until 1450, the years roughly spanning those of the Council of Basel (1431-1449).⁷⁹ Juan de Segovia (d. 1458) is an example of one who wrote during this period, which was characterised by an inversion of Gerson’s above formulation: the council was now the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 580; Oakley, “Gerson as Conciliarist,” 198-203.

⁷² Marius, “Introduction: Thomas More’s View,” 1313.

⁷³ *Ibid.*; Oakley, “Gerson as Conciliarist,” 198; Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 73.

⁷⁴ Black, “Popes and Councils,” 80-81.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Black, “Conciliar Movement,” 583.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 583-584; also see Peter L. McDermott, “Nicholas of Cusa: Continuity and Conciliation at the Council of Basel,” *Church History* 67, no. 2 (1998): 261.

⁷⁹ Black, “Conciliar Movement,” 574; Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 73.

primary recipient of divine authority; the pope became the derivative recipient.⁸⁰ Under this phase of theorisation, councils were convened independently of the pope and decided their own “membership, chairmanship and procedure.”⁸¹ The Church-in-council thus held complete authority over the pope and all Christians, “appropriated the traditional jurisdictional primacy of Rome,” and the pope became regarded as its executive servant.⁸²

Fisher, More, and Powell all drew from the second phase of conciliarism’s development, but as was the case with late medieval orthodoxy, there was some variation in their sources of influence. Beginning with Fisher, we have already concluded, like Gogan, that he was a conciliarist. As for the nature of this conciliarism, Fisher’s frequent insistence on the council operating *with* the pope, such as his belief that “the universal Church” is represented by “the pope together with the council,” shows with little doubt that his ecclesiology involved a theory of mixed government characteristic of conciliarism’s second phase.⁸³ Two further statements by Fisher permit us to identify the source of his conciliarism as Nicholas of Cusa. Firstly, Fisher only believed the decrees of councils convened “under the authority of the pope,” an endorsement of Cusa’s pope-in-council theology described above.⁸⁴ Secondly, Fisher echoed Cusa’s belief that the authority of an ecclesiastical decree increased with the amount of agreement around it: Cusa argued that “the pope with the [council] was superior to the pope alone,” and Fisher argued that “the authority of the Sovereign Pontiff is great, but it is still greater if the custom of the Roman See is added to it,

⁸⁰ Black, “Conciliar Movement,” 580; for Juan de Segovia’s views, see Black, “Popes and Councils,” 81-82.

⁸¹ Black, “Conciliar Movement,” 580.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 580-581.

⁸³ “Nam Pontificem una cum concilio, non est dubium, Ecclesiam universalem repraesentare.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, CCCCXLV; for similar examples of these two bodies working together, see *Ibid.*, CCCCXLVI-CCCCXLVII, and CCCCL.

⁸⁴ “Neque ego penitus cuiuscumque concilii decreta probanda censeo, sed eius, quodcumque fuerit in spiritu sancto, Pontificis autoritate, cunctisque praemonitis, quorum interest adesse, convocatum.” *Ibid.*, CCCCLVI.

and it is greatest if the consent of the whole Church accrues to it.”⁸⁵ In this context, the instances highlighted by Rex and Surtz in which Fisher made claims about papal primacy make perfect sense. Fisher saw the pope as leading the Church after Christ, but like Cusa, he saw the pope’s role and authority as working within and inseparable from the general council.

The views of Powell and More, by contrast, were more in line with Jean Gerson. Like Gerson and unlike d’Ailly, Powell saw the pope as the rightful successor of Saint Peter who “presides over Christ’s Church by divine right.”⁸⁶ His station is not, Powell explained, a product of “human law,” but is of “divine and evangelical law,” and his purpose is the “just governance (gubernaculum) of the people of God” and the “sacred administration (administratio) of the Christian people.”⁸⁷ But even with the pope’s role in governance and administration, Powell asserted later in his *Propugnaculum* that since the Church’s beginnings, general councils have been the Church’s “most complete form of management” (integerrimum moderamen).⁸⁸ He went on to explain that the greatest harm inflicted on the early Church by the Roman emperors was their prohibition on Church councils.⁸⁹ This enabled the “unchecked spread of heresies throughout the Church,” which were only “purged and wiped away” when “the Church regained the freedom to convene councils

⁸⁵ For Cusa, see Black, “Popes and Councils,” 80-81; Fisher quoted from Gogan, “Fisher’s View,” 140.

⁸⁶ “Ut unum summum pontificem sub Christo capite habeat: qui Christi ecclesiae... iure divino praesideat.” Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 12^v; for a similar example, see *Ibid.*, fol. 13^r.

⁸⁷ “Non ergo papatus, quem vocant: sacerdotium summum, pontificium maximum, in ecclesia Christi iuris est human... sed iuris naturae, divini pariter et evangelici... est iustum populi dei gubernaculum: ab ipso deo institutum... [est] religiosa administratio populi Christiani.” *Ibid.*, fol. 13^v.

⁸⁸ “Ab ipsis primitivae ecclesiae initiis exordiamur: ubi generalia concilia integerrimum moderamen ecclesiae catholicae semper fuisse, canonica scripturae veritas ipsa clamabit.” *Ibid.*, fol. 35^v.

⁸⁹ “Nam nascentem Christi ecclesiam in nulla unquam re, Romani imperatores magis laeserunt: quam quando celebrandorum conciliorum copiam christianis interdixerunt.” *Ibid.*

under Constantine.”⁹⁰ With these descriptions, Powell painted his vision of ecclesiological authority. “Gubernaculum” and “administratio” are both words that convey a more subtle, higher-level guidance, whereas “moderamen” communicates a more practical, functional body of regulation – a functionality conveyed by Powell’s discussion of the importance of councils in late antiquity. He effectively followed Gerson’s formulation of the division of power in the Church: the pope has power “essentially,” while the councils have it “materially or relatively.”⁹¹

More did not provide as clear an indication of the division of authority between pope and council. We can be sure, however, that his views lay somewhere within the second phase of conciliarism by combining the fact that he was, as existing literature has already noted, an unapologetic conciliarist with his appeal to Fisher’s explanation of papal primacy without providing any insight of his own.⁹² This explanation by Fisher included the affirmation that the “Roman Pontiff is the successor” of Saint Peter, and so is “the head of the whole Church... entrusted by [Christ] to feed, rule, and govern the universal Church.”⁹³ To share Fisher’s perspective on papal primacy, which clearly regarded the pope as a legitimate authority different from the mere “executive servant” perceived by most Basel-era conciliarists, while openly expressing conciliarist sympathies, suggests that More conceived of a sharing of power characteristic of the conciliarism’s second phase – and not in a way emulating d’Ailly’s position that papal authority was of human origin. Where we can

⁹⁰ “Ab eo quidem tempore primo coeperunt passim in ecclesia grassari sectae et haereses... Postea tamen quam Christi ecclesiae sub Constantino (deo id volente) celebrandi concilia copia reddita fuit... ita haeretica pravitas ab ecclesia Christi purgata est et detersa.” *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Black, “Conciliar Movement,” 580.

⁹² Bagchi, “Catholic Theologians,” 224; Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 135-136; Marshall, “Last Years,” 135.

⁹³ “Diffinimus... Romanum pontificem, successorem esse beati Petri... et verum vicarium Iesu Christi, totiusque ecclesiae caput, et omnium christianorum patrem, et doctorem existere: et ipsi in beato Petro pascendi, regendi, et gubernandi universalem ecclesiam a domino Iesu Christo plenam potestatem traditam esse.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, CCCLXXVII; More, “Responsio,” 138-141.

draw a link between More and Gerson, and see further evidence of Powell's Gersonian alignment, is in how they appeared to argue for the legitimacy of Constance's decree on communion's administration by using a comparable argument to that employed by Gerson against the Hussites over a century before.

As explained at the beginning of this chapter, Jakoubek of Střibro, one of the leading figures in the Hussite campaign for the administration of communion under both kinds, argued for the lay chalice on the basis that it was a sacramental requirement.⁹⁴ Luther made the same assertion in both his *De captivitate Babylonica* and *Contra Henricum*, albeit on somewhat different grounds that are highlighted in our forthcoming enumeration of his arguments for utraquism.⁹⁵ The underlying principle of their charge was the well-established rule that no custom, no matter the reason for its adoption nor the longevity of its practice, could alter a stipulation of divine law (*iure divino*).⁹⁶ As the sacraments were divinely instituted, they were established in *iure divino*, and so they could not be changed by mere human prerogatives.⁹⁷ If communion under both kinds was part of the sacrament, as the Hussites and Luther believed, then the custom of administering communion to the laity under one kind developed unlawfully and the Council of Constance overstepped its place in ratifying it.⁹⁸ Conservatives naturally denied that the manner of communion's administration was intrinsic to the sacrament; they saw it as an element of *iure humano*, which could be changed by the Church where reason permitted it.⁹⁹ For Gerson, these changes and the development of custom came by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and it was under the

⁹⁴ Levy, "Interpreting the Intention," 174.

⁹⁵ Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 20; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Aiv^v; Luther, "Martin Luther Against Henry," 25; Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Ciii^v.

⁹⁶ Levy, "Interpreting the Intention," 174-175.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

infallible guidance of this third person of the Trinity that the council gathered at Constance was able to issue the ultimate binding pronouncement that the laity was to only receive communion under one kind.¹⁰⁰ This insistence on the role of the Holy Spirit differentiated Gerson from Nicholas of Cusa, who attributed this guiding power to Jesus Christ himself.¹⁰¹ For Cusa, the changes over how communion was administered were made by the Church, Christ's body, as "an extrapolation of Christ's unique sovereignty and perfect will."¹⁰²

Like Gerson, both Powell and More attributed the changes to ecclesiastical custom regarding communion to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Powell wrote that "in interpreting and managing *iure divino*," the Church is "taught by the Holy Spirit," and he declared that while the prohibition on lay reception of the wine may not have always been in place, it is now "by the great consensus of the Church."¹⁰³ Bearing in mind that Powell understood general councils to be the essential instrument for regulating Church teachings, he would have understood this "great consensus of the Church" to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. More similarly explained that changes to communion did not "arise from ... councils" (Non ex... natam concilii).¹⁰⁴ Councils instead "passed a decree against those who" dared to challenge a longstanding custom established "by the counsel of the Holy Spirit."¹⁰⁵ From here, More went on to underscore that the wine was not taken away from the laity by

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 183-185 and 191-192.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 189-190. Fisher digressed from Cusa on this point, as he too attributed these changes to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For examples, see *Defensio regiae*, fol. 26^r and 29^f.

¹⁰³ "In divinae legis interpretatione simul et dispensatione... spiritus sanctus [ecclesiam vere catholicam] instruxerat." Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 33^v; "Illi populum a communione calicis forsan non prohibebant. Nos autem contra magno ecclesiae consensu cohibemus." *Ibid.*, fol. 33^f.

¹⁰⁴ "Non ex... natam esse concilii" More, "Responsio," 362-363.

¹⁰⁵ "Sed adversus eos esse statutum qui... auderent mutare: quod iam tum diu ante, per omnem populum catholicum fuerat observatum, nimirum spiritus sancti... consilio." *Ibid.*, 362-365.

priests, “but by the Spirit of God who rules and governs the church in matters of faith by His inspiration.”¹⁰⁶

Gerson was not the only theologian of Constance to put such a large emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Peter Pulka (d. 1425) and Nicholas of Dinkelsbühl (d. 1433) of the University of Vienna challenged the Hussites on this basis as well.¹⁰⁷ But it was Gerson’s works that were arguably the most popular and which began making significant inroads into English intellectual life by the 1520s.¹⁰⁸ In fact, More’s legal philosophy was influenced by Gerson, and Gerson’s *Monotessaron* was the source of More’s text of the Gospels in his *Treatise upon the Passion* and *De Tristitia Christi*.¹⁰⁹ With this level of intellectual presence during the lives of both Powell and More, it is most probable that Gerson was the authority from whom they derived this idea of the Holy Spirit guiding ecclesiastical custom on communion.

Once again, Fisher, Powell, and More relied on different authorities in their defences of conservative teachings. All three of them conceived of conciliar authority according to the parameters of conciliarism’s second phase, as it is described by Antony Black. But whereas Fisher followed Nicholas of Cusa’s theory of conciliar authority with the pope-in-council, Powell and More seemed more aligned with Jean Gerson, either in how they conceived of the relationship between popes and councils, or in how they understood the Holy Spirit to inspire consensus through a council. These three men had a shared conception of a general

¹⁰⁶ “Sed per spiritum dei... suo flatu in rebus fidei regit et gubernat ecclesiam.” *Ibid.*, 364-365.

¹⁰⁷ Levy, “Interpreting the Intention,” 178-182.

¹⁰⁸ Yelena Mazour-Matusevich, “Some Aspects of Jean Gerson’s Legal Influence in Sixteenth-Century England: The Issue of Epikeia,” *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 4, no. 1 (2017): 49-50.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 47-62; Garry E. Haupt, “Introduction,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 13: Treatise on the Passion, Treatise on the Blessed Body, Instructions and Prayers*, ed. Garry E. Haupt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), xlv-xlvi; Thomas More, “A Treatise upon the Passion,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 13: Treatise on the Passion, Treatise on the Blessed Body, Instructions and Prayers*, ed. Garry E. Haupt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 50-51 and 118; Thomas More, “De Tristitia Christi,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 14: De Tristitia Christi*, ed. and trans. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 621-623.

council's power within the Church, but, in the manner of late medieval orthodoxy, their respective views were undergirded by different ideas.

As we move now to Henry VIII's perspective on conciliar authority, we find ourselves somewhat afield of our other three authors. The role of conciliarism during the king's annulment proceedings has been amply debated, but Matthew McNicoll tackles the issue with the greatest level of detail by mapping the evolving presence of conciliar sympathies in Henry VIII's thought from when he took the throne in 1509 to the Act Extinguishing the Authority of the Bishop of Rome of 1536.¹¹⁰ As a template, McNicoll uses Francis Oakley's contention that the central beliefs of conciliarism during its classical age (1414-1445) consisted of "three broad strands:" (1) the recognition of "long-overdue and urgent need for reform of the... Church which could best be accomplished through the regular convening of councils;" (2) "the need for conciliarist reform within the Curia whereby the Church would cease to be monarchical but rather oligarchical as popes would be forced to govern with greater reliance on the cardinalate;" (3) the belief in "the superiority of the general council to the pope."¹¹¹ He aims to determine whether Henry VIII evidenced an alignment with one or more of these strands, and finds that while no definitive conclusions can be made about the first decade of his reign, the king sympathised with the first strand in his *Assertio* of 1521 and openly endorsed the last two from the onset of his Great Matter in 1527.¹¹²

There are two elements of Henry VIII's position on ecclesiological authority that differentiate his views from More, Fisher, and Powell. The first is where he was situated in

¹¹⁰ For examples, see G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation England, 1509-1558* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 133, n. 8, Thomas F. Mayer, "Thomas Starkey, An Unknown Conciliarist at the Court of Henry VIII," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49, no. 2 (1988): 207, and Matthew McNicoll, "Henry VIII: Conciliarist?" *Journal of Early Modern Christianity* 5, no. 2 (2018): 109-149.

¹¹¹ Quoted from *Ibid.*, 113; for Oakley, see Oakley, *Conciliarist Tradition*, 66-72.

¹¹² McNicoll, "Henry VIII," 109-149.

the threefold classification of conciliarism's phases described by Antony Black. McNicoll never cites Black, but his discussion of the conciliarism that emerged in the king's thought during his Great Matter allows us to group Henry VIII in conciliarism's third phase, which came about with the Council of Basel. In 1528, McNicoll explains, Henry VIII sought to have the questions around his annulment settled in England, but during the proceedings, it was decided that the case would instead be settled in Rome.¹¹³ The king was incensed. He saw this as an affront to his authority: as king, he did not think he should be subject to any other earthly power.¹¹⁴ Moreover, there was precedent for matrimonial disputes being settled in the realms in which they arose dating to the Council of Nicaea in 325.¹¹⁵ Henry VIII subsequently appealed to the universities of western Christendom for their opinion on whether his marital dispute should have been settled in England and nine of fifteen ruled in his favour.¹¹⁶ In 1535, Henry VIII wrote a letter to the English diplomat John Wallop in which he regarded this academic decision as tantamount to a conciliar decision:

It has been already determined by the assent of a General Council, although not assembled in one place, because the greater part of the universities of Christendom have already determined it in favour of our clergy and common law.¹¹⁷

McNicoll goes no further than noting that it was "unusual" to equate academic and conciliar opinions in this way, but this peculiarity is precisely what suggests that Henry VIII's conciliarism resembled that which emerged from Basel.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 138-139; G.W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 33-40.

¹¹⁵ McNicoll, "Henry VIII," 138.

¹¹⁶ The universities in favour of the position were Orléans, Paris, Angers, Bourges, Toulouse, Bologna, Padua, Ferrara and Vicenza; those opposed were Louvain, Alcalá, Marburg, Salamanca, Valladolid and Angers. For this, see *Ibid.*, 137, n. 116.

¹¹⁷ Henry VIII to John Wallop, 1535, in *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Vol. 8, January – July 1535*, ed. James Gairdner (London, 1885), no. 725; also see McNicoll, "Henry VIII," 138.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

University scholars began playing a larger role in councils beginning at Pisa in 1409, but this increased exponentially at Basel from 1435 onwards, when they became central to the council's decision-making process.¹¹⁹ Drawing on Ephesians 4:11, "to some, his gift was that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers," it was reasoned that just as the apostles were succeeded by bishops, the teachers were succeeded by university doctors.¹²⁰ The Basel conciliarists thus considered university scholars inseparable from the Church's *magisterium*.¹²¹ Juan of Segovia described them as forming something akin to "a distinguished class" (*ordinem... quasi precipuum*), and after Pope Eugene IV was deposed in 1439, Basel encouraged princes to consider the issue based on advice provided to them by their universities.¹²²

There is no denying that Henry VIII's personal and political desire to end his first marriage played a role in this conciliar alignment. There was an element of pragmatism in considering the decision of universities, which happened to be favourable to the king's position, as equivalent to the decision of a general council. It is also unlikely that many of his contemporaries would have afforded it the same status – the university doctors were not even gathered in one place. Nevertheless, it was at Basel that the universities were first invested with significant ecclesiological decision-making power, so the king's assertion was downstream of these developments. But beyond this, as it was Henry VIII who appealed to these universities, he convoked this so-called "council." Emperor Constantine was instrumental in the convocation of Nicaea and Constance was called at the behest of

¹¹⁹ Antony Black, "The Universities and the Council of Basle: Collegium and Concilium," in *The Universities in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Jozef Ijsewijn and Jacques Paquet (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1978), 513-514 and 519.

¹²⁰ "Et ipse dedit quosdam quidem apostolos, quosdam autem prophetas, alios vero evangelistas, alios autem pastores et doctores." Ephesians 4:11 (Vulg.). English quoted from Black, "Universities and the Council of Basle," 519.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 519-520.

¹²² *Ibid.*

Sigismund, so in this vein, Henry VIII believed it in the power of Europe's princes to summon Church councils.¹²³ In fact, in 1530, he informed "the Imperial ambassador that the right of convoking a General Council lay with the secular princes, not the pope" and that the pope "was no more above the Council than he was above the princes."¹²⁴ This was a far cry from the mixed government ecclesiology of conciliarism's second phase, which was supported by Fisher, More, and Powell, and its degradation of papal authority was certainly more reminiscent of conciliarism's third, more radical stage of development.

There is, however, another feature of Henry VIII's discussion of councils specifically pertaining to the administration of communion that sets him even further apart from our other three authors. When McNicoll describes the *Assertio* as aligning with Francis Oakley's first strand of conciliarism, the view that the Church needed reform that could be achieved through general councils, he references this passage:

For [Luther] touched the old sore, by which Bohemia had been formerly blistered, that the laity ought to receive the Eucharist under both kinds. When first he began to handle this point, he only said that the Pope would do well to have it ordained by a general council that the laity should receive the sacrament under both kinds... For my part, I do not dispute the first [point]. And though I do not see reasons why the Church does not ordain that the sacrament be administered to the laity under both kinds, I am unable to doubt that there were sufficient reasons which caused it to be omitted in times past, and which now prevent it from being reinstated.¹²⁵

The passage does suggest that Henry VIII saw councils as required to bring about reforms in Church practice, but its apparent sympathy with utraquism is rather odd, and this oddity has

¹²³ McNicoll, "Henry VIII," 138-139.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹²⁵ "Tetigit enim vetus ulcus, quo pridem ulcerata est Boemia, quod laici sub utraque specie non recipiant Eucharistiam. Eam rem quum prius ita tractasset, ut duntaxat diceret recte facturum Pontificem, si curaret communi concilio statuendum ut sub utraque specie laici communicarent... Ego de primo non disputo. Caeterum, etiam si causas non viderem, cur non decernat Ecclesia ut utraque species ministretur laicis, tamen dubitare non possem quin sint idoneae quae et olim fecerunt ut id omitteretur et nunc quoque faciunt ne redintegretur." This translation is my own. Henry VIII, "Assertio," 216-217. McNicoll cites O'Donovan's translation; for this, see McNicoll, "Henry VIII," 123-124.

hitherto gone unnoticed. Constance only deemed it heretical to condemn the ecclesiastical custom of administering communion under one kind, so to convey limited support for the practice of administering it under both kinds did not itself contravene the council's decree.¹²⁶ But still, even this minor expression of sympathy seems peculiar given the debates that occurred and the decisions made regarding the administration of communion in the preceding century.

Due to its role in ending the Great Western Schism and the widely held association of Wycliffe's teachings with Hussite theology, the details of Constance would have been well known to any formally educated theologian of the early Reformation.¹²⁷ Indeed, lines were drawn in England between Luther and the Hussites from a correspondence sent by Cuthbert Tunstall on 29th January 1520 from Worms, where he was acting as the English ambassador to the Holy Roman Emperor, urging Cardinal Wolsey to prevent the circulation of Luther's works in England.¹²⁸ Commenting on *De captivitate Babylonica*, Tunstall wrote that "they say ther is moch more strange opinions in hit, nere to the opinions off Boheme, I pray God kep that bok[e] out of Englund."¹²⁹ If the *Assertio* was the product of a collective effort, as many historians today believe, Henry VIII must have had the final say in the book's contents because it is exceedingly unlikely that any prominent English conservative theologian of the day would include a comment expressing even minor sympathy with an issue inseparable from Hussitism.

The degree of autonomy that Henry VIII likely had in writing the *Assertio* is further shown from how More and Fisher approached this passive support for utraquism in their

¹²⁶ "Constance," 419; Levy, "Interpreting the Intention," 173.

¹²⁷ Rex, "Introduction," 5-6.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹²⁹ Quoted from *Ibid.*

respective defences of the book. Both men treated the issue with tact, and either subtly distanced themselves from the comment or added details to make it appear more in line with their own conservative outlooks.

From outward appearances, More gave his wholehearted approval of the above-referenced passage in his *Responsio*. He quoted the passage from the *Assertio* in full and praised its “restrained... moderate reproach” (*modeste... modice reprehendit*) of Luther when faced with his unrestrained “malice” (*maliciam*) and “impiety” (*impietatem*).¹³⁰ But then, in direct response to the *Assertio*’s statement of sympathy with *utraquism*, he wrote:

However, I do not doubt that this practice which has already been followed throughout so many ages has been followed by the counsel of God, as the king has shown splendidly; and unless it should please God that the practice be changed again, he would not otherwise allow the Church to change it for the worse by human counsel, nor in the matter of the sacraments to be governed by a spirit other than his own Holy Spirit.¹³¹

In this passage, More imbued the *Assertio*’s remarks with more theological significance than they originally contained. He simultaneously directed the reader’s attention away from the king’s peculiar remark and towards the longstanding customs of the Church that were integral to the conservative conception of orthodoxy. The redirection is evident from the passage itself, and the adherence to Church custom distanced More from the thin line being walked by the *Assertio*. Theologically, More was clearly invested in the idea espoused by many theologians of conciliarism’s second phase that the Church’s practices and beliefs evolved with the guidance of God through the Holy Spirit. But he exaggerated the king’s commitment to this same idea. More wrote that Henry VIII had “shown splendidly”

¹³⁰ More, “*Responsio*,” 360-361.

¹³¹ “*Quamquam ego non dubito: quin istud, quod per tot aetates iam factum est: dei consilio factum sit: id quod luculenter ostendit rex: et nisi deo rursus idem placeat immutari: non passurum alioqui ecclesiam, istud humano demutare consilio: nec in sacramentis alio gubernari spiritu, quam sancto spiritu suo.*” I have deviated from Scholastica Mandeville’s translation in rendering “*luculenter*” as “*splendidly*” instead of “*clearly*,” and in rendering the first letter of pronouns referring to God in lowercase. *Ibid.*

(*luculenter ostendit*) that the custom of administering communion under one kind was established by “the counsel of God” (*dei consilio*), but the king seldom mentioned God at all in his consideration of communion’s administration.¹³² The closest he came to conveying what More portrayed was that “it is very probable that the Holy Spirit” (*videtur ergo verisimile quod Spiritus sanctus*) brought about the changes to how communion was practised.¹³³ “*Videtur*” and “*verisimile*” come with connotations of potentiality; their use renders the *Assertio*’s prose far less decisive than More claimed. More effectively enhanced the *Assertio*’s theological depth by artificially depicting it as representing his own theological beliefs. This distanced him from the content of the original text, illuminating a way in which the *Assertio* again digressed from the apparent norm, and shows another factor influencing the evolution of English conservative theology: its ideas were filtered and refined through the different authors discussing them.

Fisher’s treatment of the *Assertio*’s odd remark in his *Defensio regiae* did not resemble More’s alteration of the contents of the original text. But it involved cautious wording that seemed to mask an underlying disagreement. After directly quoting the *Assertio*’s support for convening a council to consider the administration of communion under both kinds, Fisher remarked that “after a certain very strong conjecture” (*subinde robustissima quadam coniectura*), the king stated that changes cannot be made to the manner of communion’s administration “without the most just causes” (*sine iustissimis causis*).¹³⁴ The key phrase is “*robustissima quadam coniectura*.” As a superlative, “*robustissima*” has connotations of great certainty, certainty of the strength of the noun it

¹³² *Ibid.*; Henry VIII, “*Assertio*,” 214-227.

¹³³ “*Videtur ergo verisimile quod Spiritus sanctus, qui Christi regit Ecclesiam, sicut Eucharistiae sacramentum mutavit a coenantibus... ita laicos ab utraque specie deduxit in alteram.*” *Ibid.*, 222-223.

¹³⁴ “*Sed et subinde robustissima quadam coniectura docet clerum non sine iustissimis causis id fecisse.*” Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 40^v.

modifies, yet it is paired with “coniectura,” a noun which projects uncertainty by its very nature. With this construction, Fisher provided only the smallest flicker of passive support for the *Assertio*’s comment: he lent some credence to the idea with “robustissima,” possibly out of obligation to his king, but immediately distanced himself from it by labelling it conjectural.

We can be further certain that Fisher disagreed with this particular element of the *Assertio* by considering comments he made about the administration of communion in his *Confutatio* two years prior. He quoted from the decree of the thirtieth session of the Council of Basel held in 1437, namely that the “custom of administering communion to the laity under one kind” has been “long observed until now,” upheld as law by doctors of the Church, and so must be considered “binding” with no one able to “reject or change it without the authority of the Church.”¹³⁵ He added that “this decree must be obeyed by every Christian, regardless of what may be contained in other writings or annals” and then referenced Constance’s initial declaration that anyone who “rejected this ordinance regarding communion under one kind [is] to be punished as a heretic.”¹³⁶ What he neglected

¹³⁵ “Laudabilis quoque consuetudo communicandi laicum populum sub una specie, a sanctis patribus rationabiliter introducta, et hactenus diutissime observata, et a doctoribus divinae legis, factorum canonum atque sanctorum scripturarum multam peritiam habentibus, iam a longaevo tempore commendata, pro lege habenda est, nec alicui licitum est, eam reprobare, aut sine auctoritate Ecclesiae ipsam immutare.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, CCLXXXVII. At the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Basel on 7th May 1437, the prospect of reuniting with the eastern Church saw the council dissolved and moved to Ferrara, where it resumed on 8th January 1438. Historians do not therefore regard the subsequent sessions held at Basel, including the thirtieth session cited by Fisher, as part of an ecumenical council, which is why this thirtieth session cannot be found in “Basel—Ferrara—Florence—Rome, 1431-1445,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume One: Nicaea to Lateran V*, ed. Norman P. Tanner and trans. Joseph Gill (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 453-591. For this, see *Ibid.*, 453, Thomas M. Izbicki, “The Official Records of the Council,” in *Companion to the Council of Basel*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 44, and Alberto Cadili, “The Legacy of the Council,” in *Companion to the Council of Basel*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 473. For the proceedings of Basel including the thirtieth session, see *Decreta et acta Concilii Basiliensis nuper Impressa vigilantique studio emendate* (Paris, 1512).

¹³⁶ “Huic decreto necesse est obtemperetur a quocunque christiano, quicquid in aliis literis aut annalibus contineatur... [Constantiense concilium] velut haereticos puniendos decrevit, quicunque suae sanctioni de communicatione sub una specie contradixerint.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, CCLXXXVII.

to mention is that the decree of the thirtieth session of Basel he relied on so heavily actually permitted utraquism among the Hussites, so long as its practitioners refrained from imposing their views on traditional Catholics and agreed that concomitance rendered receiving communion under one kind just as valid.¹³⁷ In fact, words of outright condemnation, like accusations of heresy, are absent from this session's decree and just before the passage cited by Fisher, the council noted in a softer tone that "whether communion is received under one species or both, according to the order or observation of the Church, it benefits those worthily receiving it toward salvation."¹³⁸ Whether wilfully or unknowingly, Fisher misrepresented this declaration of Basel as more insistent on communion being administered under one kind than it was. For him, there was no question about the Church's position: it was clear, and had been clear since Constance, that Christ's body and blood were to be received by the laity only under the form of bread. Any statement sympathetic with utraquism, like that presented in the *Assertio*, would have been unthinkable.

Stepping back from this analysis, More, Fisher, Powell, and Henry VIII all clearly defended a primary mechanism for the evolving process that was late medieval orthodoxy: they were all conciliarists. But once again, in the manner of late medieval orthodoxy, their views were far from uniform. Fisher, More, and Powell all seemed to endorse a conciliarism represented by the movement's second phase, though Fisher followed Nicholas of Cusa while More and Powell appeared to follow Jean Gerson. Henry VIII, as we have just seen, was again in his own camp. He seemed to endorse a conciliarism more representative of the

¹³⁷ Thomas A. Fudge, "The Hussites and the Council," in *Companion to the Council of Basel*, ed. Christopher M. Bellitto (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 277. This decision was eventually repealed by Pope Pius II in 1462; for this, see *Ibid.*, 280-281.

¹³⁸ "Sive autem sub una specie sive sub duplici quis communicet secundum ordinationem seu observationem ecclesiae proficit digne communicantibus ad salutem." *Decreta et acta Concilii Basiliensis*, fol. clix^r.

movement's third phase, which subordinated the pope entirely to the council. But he also presented a view of communion in relation to councils that came so dangerously close to crossing the threshold of what was considered orthodox that More and Fisher carefully distanced themselves from his thought. In both instances of anomaly, politics likely came into play. By degrading papal authority beyond the mixed governmental models of conciliarism's second phase, the king delegitimised another power to which he would otherwise be subject and augmented his own political standing. He also eliminated an obstruction to his quest for a marital annulment. And regarding the *Assertio's* minor sympathy with utraquism, More and Fisher likely distanced themselves from the text as cautiously as they did out of fealty to their king. This enabled them to retain their theological convictions while avoiding any life-ending implications that disagreement would precipitate. Alongside the intellectual and social factors discussed in Chapter 1, therefore, politics played a role in the pedagogical heterogeneity of early Reformation English conservatism, and the irregular teachings of the *Assertio* strongly suggest that the king was its ultimate author.

Sub Una Specie: English Conservative Replies to Luther on Communion:

Moving now to how English conservatives treated Luther's arguments in favour of utraquism, we see them defend another mechanism for the evolution of ecclesiastical consensus: the emergence of custom. As with their views on general councils, their perspectives varied. They were shaped by factors important to the men espousing them – political, social and academic. Before analysing them, however, we must explain Luther's arguments, and as they have never been discussed in English literature on the Reformation, they should be outlined in full.

It was not until the publication of his *Formula missae et communionis* at the end of 1523 that Luther granted that the laity had received enough instruction on communion to

receive it under both kinds, but his first major criticism of the established Church's prohibition on lay reception of the wine came in his 1520 *De captivitate Babylonica*.¹³⁹ Here, he said that he once "adhered to the common custom" of the Church and "did not concern [himself] at all with whether the pope was right or wrong" in declaring that communion ought to be administered *sub una specie*.¹⁴⁰ But since his ideas had already come under attack, he felt he could "freely speak [his] mind," so posited seven arguments in favour of the lay chalice that he later reiterated in his *Contra Henricum* of 1522.¹⁴¹

The first argument relied on the Gospel accounts of the Institution. Distinguishing him from his perceived Bohemian forebears, Luther criticised the Hussite use of John 6:54, "unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you," to advocate for communion under both kinds.¹⁴² As he saw it, to take this passage as evidence for the sacramental necessity of utraquism condemned anyone unable to partake in the sacramental eating, like infants or those who were too ill to take the bread.¹⁴³ He believed that a better argument could be made by appealing to the three synoptic Gospels, specifically Matthew 26, Mark 14 and Luke 22, along with Paul's first letter to the Corinthians; each of these show Christ giving both the bread and the wine to his disciples.¹⁴⁴ Taking Matthew 26:27 and Mark 14:23 as examples, Luther noted that, in the former, Christ does not say "eat of it, all of you," but "drink of it, all of you," and in the latter, Christ says

¹³⁹ Amy Nelson Burnett, "The Social History of Communion and the Reformation of the Eucharist," *Past & Present* 211, no. 1 (2011): 98.

¹⁴⁰ "In usu communi haerebam: nihil de Papae sive iure, sive iniuria sollicitus." Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 19; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Aiv^r.

¹⁴¹ "Dabo libere quae sentio." Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 19; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Aiv^r.

¹⁴² Quoted from Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 20; note that the Vulgate numbers this as John 6:54.

¹⁴³ Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 20; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Aiv^v.

¹⁴⁴ Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 20; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Aiv^v.

“they all drank of it,” not “they all ate of it.”¹⁴⁵ Both passages, he argued, “note the universality of the cup,” as if “the Spirit foresaw the schism, by which some would be forbidden to partake of the cup, which Christ desired should be common to all.”¹⁴⁶

The second argument was hermeneutical. Luther did not believe that the disciples should be understood as representative of the clergy alone during the Last Supper, but as representatives of both the clergy and the laity. If the disciples only represented the clergy, he contended, then the laity should not be permitted to receive communion under either kind because it should not be given to any who did not initially receive it during the Last Supper.¹⁴⁷ To change one of Christ’s laws, he insisted, is to “make all of his laws invalid.”¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, if the disciples represented both the clergy and laity during the Institution, then the laity must be able to receive communion under both kinds; to withhold one kind from them when it is sought is impious and “contrary to the act, example, and institution of Christ.”¹⁴⁹

Luther’s third argument presupposed the conclusions drawn from the first two, that the sacrament of the altar must be communicated under both kinds to be complete. Simply put, Luther claimed that if we can omit the administration of the consecrated wine in the Eucharist, then the Church would just as well be able to omit elements of other sacraments,

¹⁴⁵ “His adde quod Mattheus refert, non de pane Christum dixisse, manducate ex hoc omnes, sed de calice, bibite ex hoc omnes. Et Marcus item non dicit, manducaverunt omnes, sed biberunt ex eo omnes.” Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Aiv^v; Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 20.

¹⁴⁶ “Uterque universitatis notam ad calicem, non ad panem ponens, quasi spiritus futurum hoc schisma praeviderit, quod calicis communionem prohiberet aliquibus, quem Christus omnibus voluerit esse communem.” Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Aiv^v; Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 20. For this argument in *Contra Henricum*, see Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry,” 25, and Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Ciii^v.

¹⁴⁷ Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 21; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bi^f.

¹⁴⁸ “Si unam Christi institutionem permittimus mutari, iam universas eius leges fecimus irritas.” *Ibid.*; Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 21.

¹⁴⁹ “Quod si denegetur dari petentibus, impie et contra Christi factum exemplum et institutionem agitur.” Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bi^f; Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 21. For this argument in *Contra Henricum*, see Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry,” 25, and Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Ciii^v.

like baptism and penance.¹⁵⁰ But this is impossible, so Luther concluded that just as these other sacraments “must be administered in their entirety, so the sacrament of the bread must be given in its entirety to all laymen.”¹⁵¹

The fourth argument provided in *De captivitate Babylonica*, which Luther listed as his fifth in his *Contra Henricum*, resembled the third, though it focussed more on the Eucharist itself instead of comparing it with other sacraments. It was what we would today call a “slippery slope” argument: if the wine can be removed from the sacrament, then the bread can just as well be removed, and the entirety of the sacrament itself can be erased. If the whole sacrament cannot be erased, Luther reasoned, then neither can any of its individual parts.¹⁵²

The fifth argument in *De captivitate Babylonica* (the fourth in Luther’s *Contra Henricum*) took into consideration Christ’s comments in Matthew 26:28 and Luke 22:20, that his blood was shed for the remission of sins of all people. With this universality in mind, Luther insisted that the blood of Christ cannot be denied to those whom Christ gave it freely, including the laity.¹⁵³

Luther’s sixth argument invoked the distinction generally attributed to Augustine between the sacramental sign (*signum*), the outward appearance of a sacrament, and the thing it signifies (*res*), the grace conferred through the sacrament.¹⁵⁴ The signs of the

¹⁵⁰ Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 21-22; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bi^r.

¹⁵¹ “Quare, sicut totus baptismus, totaque absolutio, ita totum sacramentum panis est omnibus laicis dandum, si petant.” Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 21-22; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bi^r. For this argument in *Contra Henricum*, see Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry,” 25, and Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Ciii^v.

¹⁵² Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 22; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bi^{r-v}; Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry,” 25; Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Ciii^v.

¹⁵³ Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 22-23; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bi^v; Luther, “Martin Luther Against Henry,” 25; Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Ciii^v.

¹⁵⁴ Leppin, “Martin Luther,” 41. Phillip Cary argues that this conceptualisation of *res* and *signum* was actually a medieval deviation from Augustine. For this, see Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine’s Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4 and 155-252.

sacrament of the altar are the bread and wine, which signify the grace received through communion. As sacramental signs, Luther argued, are lesser than what they signify (the consecrated bread and wine are lesser than the sacramental grace), and everyone agrees that the laity receives the sacramental grace, it makes little sense to deprive them of the consecrated wine, a mere sign of the grace being received.¹⁵⁵

The seventh and final argument posited by Luther appealed to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It held that in 1 Corinthians 11:21-23, Paul administers both the consecrated bread and consecrated wine to all of the faithful in the Church; not simply to the priests.¹⁵⁶

Of our four authors, only More and Fisher addressed Luther's arguments in succession. Powell integrated them into his prose and formulated his criticisms in a combined, condensed form, and Henry VIII dodged them almost entirely. For the sake of analysis, we therefore concentrate primarily on English conservative responses to Luther's third and fourth arguments, as they are numbered in *De captivitate Babylonica*, though responses to his other arguments are referenced where relevant.¹⁵⁷ In doing so, we see how our authors defended the gradual evolution of custom associated with late medieval orthodoxy – the legitimacy of which Luther was now questioning – and build on the findings of Chapter 1. There, we observed how the social circumstances of each of our authors blended with changes in prevailing intellectual currents to shape how conservative

¹⁵⁵ Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 23; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bi^v; Luther, "Martin Luther Against Henry," 26. This argument was not present in the 1522 edition of *Contra Henricum*; Luther jumped from his fifth argument to his seventh while still numbering them as such. This omission was noticed by both More and Fisher; for these, see More, "Responsio," 378-381, and Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 38^r.

¹⁵⁶ Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 24; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bi^v-Bii^r; Luther, "Martin Luther Against Henry," 26; Luther, *Contra Henricum*, sig. Ciii^v-Civ^r.

¹⁵⁷ Both More and Fisher numbered these arguments according to the *Contra Henricum*, so when we refer to their responses to Luther's fourth argument, their works list them as responses to his fifth. Likewise, what we call Luther's fifth argument is treated as his fourth in both the *Responsio* and *Defensio regiae*.

eucharistic theology was conceived and expressed. The ways in which Henry VIII, More, Fisher, and Powell responded to Luther's views on communion reveal a comparable degree of circumstantial influence, but also offer novel insights into how personal interests determined the trajectory of their ideas.

The only one of Luther's arguments to have received any noticeable attention in Henry VIII's *Assertio* was his first. The king illustrated what he perceived to be a contradiction: Luther contended that Matthew 26:27 and Mark 14:23 depict Christ directing that communion be received under both kinds and then subsequently censured priests for denying the chalice to the laity who wanted to communicate under both kinds.¹⁵⁸ Henry VIII observed that Luther "first said [utraquism] was a commandment" and then said it was "not a commandment, but left to one's discretion."¹⁵⁹ The king's pursuit of this idea ended here. His primary defence of communion *sub una specie* sidestepped Luther's seven arguments altogether and instead involved four broad justifications for upholding the existing practice of the Church. The first of these was in the peculiar remark discussed in the section above: the king mentioned that while he did not see why the Church prevents the laity from receiving communion under both kinds, he did not doubt that "there were sufficient reasons which caused it to be omitted in times past, and which now prevent it from being reinstated."¹⁶⁰ He essentially deferred to the opinion of the Church as a community of the faithful, and in affording ideas theological weight simply because they arose from Church

¹⁵⁸ O'Donovan's translation suggests that the text only refers to Matthew 26:27, but as the reference is similar to Mark 14:23, which Luther himself cited in his first argument, I have included a reference to Mark as well; Henry VIII, "Assertio," 218-219.

¹⁵⁹ "[Lutherus] primo dixit esse praeceptum, hic dicit non esse praeceptum, sed cuiuslibet arbitrio relictum." This translation is my own. *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ "Tamen dubitare non possem quin sint idoneae quae et olim fecerunt ut id omitteretur et nunc quoque faciunt ne redintegretur." This translation is my own. *Ibid.*, 216-217.

practice, he adhered to Fisher's definition of what it was to be orthodox: to "think with the Church."¹⁶¹

The remaining three justifications all fixated on one detail of Luther's *De captivitate Babylonica* presented just after the seven arguments for utraquism, that the clergy were responsible for the laity being deprived of the wine.¹⁶² The first was that the "whole clergy for so many ages" could not be "so foolish as to have bound itself to eternal punishment" for something that provided "no temporal benefit."¹⁶³ The second, which was built somewhat on the first, was that those who supported administering communion *sub una specie*, like "the most holy and learned man Thomas Aquinas," were "received into heaven" by God, who also "wanted them to be venerated on earth."¹⁶⁴ The third was an appeal to authority. The king argued that there were others, like Peter Lombard and Nicholas of Lyra, who were greater than Luther "in piety and learning" and thought "the opposite of Luther" regarding communion's administration.¹⁶⁵

Besides Henry VIII, only Thomas More mentioned Luther's anti-clericalism when discussing his seven arguments, but this was always with reference to the *Assertio*. His responses to arguments four and five both portrayed the *Assertio* as showing that the chalice was taken away by God, "not by man" (non ab homine), and his treatments of numbers one and six mentioned priests specifically, but the emphasis was again on God.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Fisher, *Confutatio*, I.

¹⁶² "Sed quod illi peccant, qui hoc arbitrio volentibus uti, prohibent utranque dari, culpa non est in laicis, sed sacerdotibus." Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Bii"; Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 27.

¹⁶³ "Nec plane assentior totum clerum per tot saecula fuisse tam stolidum, ut se obstrinxerit aeterno supplicio propter eam rem, unde nihil reportaret commodi temporalis." This translation is my own. Henry VIII, "Assertio," 216-217.

¹⁶⁴ "Deus non modo suscepit in coelum, verum etiam voluit esse venerandos in terris... Inter quos fuit... vir eruditissimus, et idem sanctissimus divus Thomas Aquinas." This translation is my own. *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ "Quanquam sunt permulti, qui... sive doctrina, sive pietate spectentur, tales sunt, ut Lutherus eis comparari non possit, qui hac in re contrarium Luthero sentiunt. Inter quos sunt Magister sententiarum, et Nicolaus de Lira." This translation is my own. *Ibid.*, 216-219.

¹⁶⁶ For four and five, see More, "Responsio," 378-379 and 376-377 respectively. Quoted from *Ibid.*, 378-379.

Against the first, More contested Luther's interpretation of the Gospel accounts of the Institution. He argued that Luther misrepresented the words of the evangelists and then denied that priests unlawfully deprived the laity of the chalice by appealing to the *Assertio*: "The king has proved that the change was effected by God alone, whose Spirit alone... governs the Catholic Church in the sacraments and in the articles of faith."¹⁶⁷ After this, More returned to his hermeneutical critique, censuring Luther's universalisation of the words "drink of it, all of you," and then ended by insisting (without reference to the *Assertio*) that "whatever is changed throughout the whole church concerning the sacraments is changed with no one but God doing the changing."¹⁶⁸

The reference to Luther's anti-clericalism in More's discussion of the sixth argument was similar. More first noted Luther's charge that the clergy were responsible for prohibiting the laity from receiving the wine and immediately deferred to Henry VIII's treatment of the issue in his *Assertio*. More insisted that "the king [proved] that God" changed how communion was to be administered and that he "does not allow his catholic church... to err in the sacraments."¹⁶⁹ Without relying on the *Assertio*, More continued describing how God guides Church practice and then invoked the distinction between the sacramental *res* and *signum* to argue that "schismatics and heretics" like Luther, "fighting against... the will of God, have for the sake of the sign alone destroyed the whole substance of the sacrament and all its fruit."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ "Verum probavit id rex, a solo factum deo: cuius unius spiritu, in sacramentis et articulis fidei gubernari probavit, ecclesiam catholicam." I have modified the word order of the translation. *Ibid.*, 368-369.

¹⁶⁸ "Quicquid circa sacramenta, per totam mutator ecclesiam, mutari illud non alio mutante, quam deo." *Ibid.*, 368-373; quotation from 372-373.

¹⁶⁹ "Rex probat id fecisse deum... qui ecclesiam suam catholicam non patitur in sacramentis errare." *Ibid.*, 380-381.

¹⁷⁰ "Sed vos schismatici et haeretici... voluntatem dei pugnantes, pro signo solo totam sacramenti rem, fructumque eius omnem perdidistis." *Ibid.*, 382-383.

In both cases, anti-clericalism was not the principal theme of More's response to Luther. It was embedded in a wider theological discussion, whether hermeneutical or sacramental, and used to accentuate the power of God, which was, as we will discuss shortly, the primary element in More's defence of communion *sub una specie*. In both cases, More suggested that the *Assertio* presented this same view, but as we saw in the previous section, the text put no such emphasis on God's role in changing Church practice around communion. All it said was that "it is very probable" that these changes came about through the Holy Spirit.¹⁷¹ Henry VIII was alone in his overarching interest in Luther's anti-clericalism, and this likely stemmed from an aspiration that bloomed sometime in his youth.

There is speculation as to when exactly it emerged, but from early in his reign, Henry VIII wanted the pope to confer him with a religious title. J. Mainwaring Brown attributes this desire to the king's beginnings as a would-be priest prior to the death of his older brother Arthur in 1502.¹⁷² Lucy Wooding traces it to the king's role in the War of the Holy League (1508-1516): in 1512, England, as a member of the Holy League, declared war on France, and Pope Julius II promised Henry VIII the title of "Most Christian King," an honorific traditionally belonging to the kings of France, if Louis XII of France was defeated.¹⁷³ Whatever its origins, this dream became a reality on 11th October 1521, when Pope Leo X granted Henry VIII the title "Fidei Defensor" as a reward for the *Assertio*.¹⁷⁴

It has been suggested that the book was written from the outset with this persisting objective in mind, and the papal flattery within it has been pointed to as evidence to this

¹⁷¹ "Videtur ergo verisimile quod Spiritus sanctus..." Henry VIII, "Assertio," 222-223.

¹⁷² J. Mainwaring Brown, "Henry VIII's Book, 'Assertio Septem Sacramentorum,' and the Royal Title of 'Defender of the Faith,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 8 (1880): 243.

¹⁷³ Wooding, *Henry VIII*, 73-74 and 115; also see Ryrie, *Age of Reformation*, 88, and J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 115-116.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

effect.¹⁷⁵ The *Assertio*'s unique fixation on Luther's anti-clericalism and general disregard for his actual arguments in favour of utraquism was likely another facet of this strategy, for in defending the clergy, the king was effectively defending the pope himself. The book thus shows how English conservatism, like late medieval orthodoxy, was inseparable from the *ecclesia* as the institutionalised community of the faithful, but there was a malleability about it that arose from the individuality of its adherents. Henry VIII's first justification for why communion *sub una specie* should be upheld was the persisting decision of the Church to do so, but his subsequent justifications were seemingly self-serving, influenced by a longstanding political ambition that could be realised through the publication of such a book.

Politics also fused with theology in More's treatment of Luther's utraquism, but it was political philosophy arising from his humanist inclinations rather than personal ambition. As we saw above, More repeatedly cited God as guiding changes in Church practice, and this pattern also appeared in his responses to arguments three and four. Against Luther's third argument, that if the Church could omit the administration of wine during communion, then it could omit aspects of other sacraments, like baptism and penance, More appealed entirely to divine guidance. He began by again overstating Henry VIII's position by claiming that he had shown that the wine was "taken away from the laity by the dispensation of God," and then belaboured the point further in claiming that the king declared that "God, who took away one form from the laity, can... take away both forms" if he chooses to do so.¹⁷⁶ He further explained that the Church cannot make these changes

¹⁷⁵ For the title and the book's composition, see Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, 126, Ryrie, *Age of Reformation*, 97, and Brown, "Henry VIII's Book," 257-261; for papal flattery, see *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ "Rex ad istud respondit Luthere, alteram sacramenti speciem ablatam esse laicis, dispensatione dei... Nec veretur asserere, deum, qui unam speciem sustulit laicis, auferre, si velit, utramque posse." More, "Responsio," 374-375.

without the guidance of God, who, “through the Holy Spirit... leads [his Church] into all truth, so that... [she may be] a pillar and support of truth and faith.”¹⁷⁷

More’s response to Luther’s fourth argument, that if the laity can be deprived of the wine, then they can be deprived of the bread and the whole sacrament itself, follows the same pattern. More first chastised Luther for making an argument so similar to his third and then reiterated that Henry VIII already refuted this point: he showed in the *Assertio*, according to More, that changes to the administration of communion were “not effected by men but by God” (*Non ab homine factum esse, sed a deo*).¹⁷⁸

More’s appeal to God as the governor of Church custom at every possible opportunity in this discussion of communion was likely a result of his conciliar outlook described above. Indeed, Jean Gerson, who More seemed to follow, argued in his own dispute with the Hussites on lay communion that “authentic reception and exposition” of Church teachings were ultimately “resolved in the authority, reception and approbation of the universal church... which received this interpretation... by the revelation of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷⁹ He believed that for a Church doctor’s opinion to be theologically acceptable, it needed either to adhere to existing ecclesiastical consensus or otherwise be approved by the Church.¹⁸⁰ For Gerson, a general council like that gathered at Constance was the perfect means through which these opinions could be judged: guided by the Holy Spirit, the council was infallible, and so Constance’s decision prohibiting the lay chalice was binding.¹⁸¹ More

¹⁷⁷ “Per spiritum sanctum, [Deus] ducit [ecclesiam suam] in omnem veritatem: ut eam reddat columnam, et firmamentum veritatis et fidei.” *Ibid.*, 374-377.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 378-379.

¹⁷⁹ Levy, “Interpreting the Intention,” 183.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

understood the question on lay communion in the same light: God directed his Church to restrict the laity's access to the wine, and so the decree of Constance must be followed.

As for More's frequent misrepresentation of Henry VIII's position, we concluded in the previous section that there was an element of strategic distancing at play. The king made a comment expressing mild sympathy with utraquism, and More seemed to subtly redirect the reader's attention from the remark to Church custom and then infused the *Assertio* with his own theology. This same conclusion cannot be made for these other instances of misrepresentation. While the king's interest in anti-clericalism was likely self-serving, it did not risk crossing the barrier into what was theologically unacceptable. Instead, More's tampering with the *Assertio*'s narrative was likely related to his political philosophy. In Chapter 1, we spoke of the importance of the *res publica* to early sixteenth-century humanists: they were interested in the political order and good of the public community that the concept entailed.¹⁸² As Joanne Paul explains, the *res publica* was essential to More's view of the Church, which he regarded as the greatest community.¹⁸³ He was interested in how custom maintained communal bonds and saw it as an indication of the Church's "legitimacy and uniformity."¹⁸⁴ By persistently appealing to God's involvement in the emergence of Church custom, More continuously highlighted God's role in holding this community together. The Church, guided by God, was a stabilising force for society at large – what More described as "a pillar and support of truth and faith" (*columnam, et firmamentum veritatis et fidei*).¹⁸⁵ This perspective was wholly absent from the *Assertio*'s treatment of Luther's views on communion, eclipsed by the pursuit of titular grandeur. By

¹⁸² For this discussion, see pages 84-85.

¹⁸³ Paul, *Thomas More*, 10 and 17-18.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸⁵ More, "Responso," 376-377.

reframing the *Assertio* as espousing this view of the relationship between God, the Church, and ecclesiastical practice, More put what he considered to be an essential feature of the *res publica* in the spotlight. The image of More that emerges from his responses to Luther's arguments for lay communion is therefore the shining example of the Christian humanist dominating the recent accounts of his person, like those by Rex, Curtright, and Paul.¹⁸⁶ He paired a Gersonian perception of God's role in the development of Church practice with a humanist vision of civic configuration.

Personal interests also played a part in how Fisher and Powell responded to Luther's third and fourth arguments, but these were not in the form of political interests or theory. They were academic in flavour, reflecting their roles as university-level clerics in a changing intellectual climate. But there was less methodological straddling between scholasticism and humanism than we saw in Chapter 1. Indeed, Fisher and Powell seemed to be on different extremes in how they handled Luther's arguments for utraquism: Fisher was more measured, clearly articulating the formal teachings of the Church, whereas Powell's penchant for humanist polemic saw him bury these teachings under so many layers of rhetoric that one may scarcely realise they are even there.

We see this difference from the outset in how Fisher and Powell each handled Luther's third argument, that if the Church could deprive the laity of the wine, it could omit elements of other sacraments, like penance and baptism. Fisher contended that, in making this argument, Luther committed what we would today call the fallacy of false equivalence: the Eucharist is not comparable to penance or baptism. His reason rested on the distinction between the sacramental *res* and *signum* that Luther himself used in his sixth argument

¹⁸⁶ Rex, "Thomas More and the Heretics," 93-94; Curtright, *One Thomas More*, 1-14; Paul, *Thomas More*, 2-5.

combined with the concept of concomitance. Neither baptism nor penance, Fisher explained, “has two parts in which the whole *res sacramenti* is contained,” whereas in the Eucharist, “the whole Christ” (body and blood) is present in both the bread and the wine.¹⁸⁷ “Nothing greater [is received],” he continued, “under both species than under one alone,” as the bread and wine are “merely *signa* and not *res*, so add nothing of power that is not in the *re* signified.”¹⁸⁸ To this, Fisher added an appeal to canon law, specifically a reference to how custom was deemed to authentically emerge and become binding. He suggested that practices related to the sacraments, like the “words of baptism” (*verba baptismi*) or how communion was administered, could be changed when “just reasons” (*iustas causas*) required it.¹⁸⁹

From its compilation around 1140 through to at least the end of the fifteenth century, the foundational and most influential textbook of medieval canon law was the *Concordia discordantium canonum* of Gratian of Bologna (d. c. 1145); it is usually known as the *Decretum Gratiani*.¹⁹⁰ In it, Gratian paid close attention to how custom could grow into law.¹⁹¹ The custom in question needed to be reasonable, not contravene the Christian faith, and be in place long enough to acquire legal standing.¹⁹² When the Council of Constance issued its decree against the Hussite practice of *utraquism* during its thirteenth session, it

¹⁸⁷ “Respondemus, quae de baptismo et poenitentia nequaquam simile est, quum neutrum horum partes duas habeat in quarum utraque tota res sacramenti contineatur. At qui sacramentum Eucharistiae sumit, vel sub specie panis, vel sub specie vini, totum Christum sumit utrobique.” Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 37^{r-v}.

¹⁸⁸ “[Nihil] maius sub utraque specie suscipit, quam sub altera tantum. Species enim signa dumtaxat sunt et non res.” *Ibid.*, fol. 37^v.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ James A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* (London: Routledge, 1995), 47-48 and 56; for more on Gratian’s life and influence, see Anders Winroth, “Gratian and His Book: How a Medieval Teacher Changed European Law and Religion,” *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 10, no. 1 (2021): 1-15.

¹⁹¹ Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law*, 157-159.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*; Levy, “Interpreting the Intention,” 175; Gratian, “The Treatise on Laws,” in *Gratian: The Treatise on Laws with the Ordinary Gloss*, trans. Augustine Thompson and James Gordley (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), D.1 c.5 and D.8 c.7, gloss b.

seemed to do so on the basis of this canon law principle: the custom of administering communion *sub una specie* was “introduced for good reasons” and had “been observed for a very long time,” so “should be held as law.”¹⁹³ When Fisher said that the practices around communion and baptism could be changed for “just reasons” (*iustas causas*), he had this same principle of reasonability in mind. In fact, two of his three points in his response, the invocations of concomitance and the reasonability of custom, were echoes of the decree made at Constance, reflecting a deep knowledge of the history of Church teaching and canon legal practice.¹⁹⁴

Powell approached Luther’s third argument with a remarkably different tone. It was entirely polemical. He called Luther “our jester” and said he was “flailing his sword in the dark like one of the *andabatae*” to suggest he was cluelessly slashing away at Church teachings – a comparison we also saw Powell make in Chapter 1.¹⁹⁵ He asked where Luther “learned that baptism, absolution, or the remission of sins have parts” given that he agrees that they “exist only in their use,” not as divided parts, and ended with another jab intended to depict Luther as clueless: he was like “someone trying to fish in the mountains or hunt in the sea.”¹⁹⁶ The key phrase here is that these sacraments “exist only in their use” (*tantum in usu constare*), “use” being the sacramental grace that works through them – the *res sacramenti*. Powell was essentially making the same point as Fisher, but replaced the theological language with polemical jibes: Luther drew a false equivalence between the Eucharist on one hand and baptism and penance on the other because, unlike the Eucharist,

¹⁹³ “*Consuetudo ab ecclesia et sanctis patribus rationabiliter introducta, et diutissime observata sit, habenda est pro lege.*” “Constance,” 419; also recognised in Levy, “Interpreting the Intention,” 175.

¹⁹⁴ “Constance,” 419.

¹⁹⁵ “*Nugator noster, andabatarum more gladium in tenebris ventilans...*” Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 29^v. For the earlier comparison, see pages 82-83.

¹⁹⁶ “*Quaeso, didicit [Lutherus]... baptismum aut absolutionem, aut remissionem peccatorum, partes habere? Cum etiam ipse fateatur utrunque tantum in usu constare: partem ibi quaerens: ubi quaerenda non est: in aequore venari, et in montibus expiscari conatus.*” *Ibid.*

the latter two sacraments cannot be divided into parts in which the *res sacramenti* remains. Like Henry VIII and More, the personal interests of Fisher and Powell shaped their defences of the custom of administering communion under one kind – but these were primarily academic. They relied on the same theological principle, but Fisher voiced it with formulaic restraint while Powell conveyed it with the rhetorical flair archetypal of Christian humanists.

The difference between how Fisher and Powell handled Luther's fourth argument, that if the Church could withhold the wine from the laity, it could just as well withhold the bread and erase the whole sacrament, was very much the same. Fisher's approach was again measured, and even more rooted in the decree made at Constance and the canon law around it than his reply to the third argument. He began by referencing the unspecified "dangers" (*pericula*) that Constance used to justify the prohibition on lay reception of the wine, claiming that if communion is only administered "under the form of bread, these dangers do not occur."¹⁹⁷ The remainder of his response relied on the just reasons required by canon law for custom to emerge and become binding. He wrote that it does not follow from the fact the wine was withheld from the laity for "just reasons" (*iustas causas*) that the bread could be withheld "without any reason or justification."¹⁹⁸ He qualified, however, that there were some circumstances under which both species could be withheld, but there was always an underlying "reason" (*causam*) for withholding them, such as if a person is "dying and suffering from vomiting" (*ipsis morituris, quando videlicet ex vomitu laborant*) or an infant who "spits out" (*respuunt*) what is "in its mouth" (*in os*).¹⁹⁹ In short, Fisher

¹⁹⁷ "Respondemus, quae in ministrando hoc sacramento sub specie panis, non ea pericula occurrunt..." Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 37^v; "Constance," 419.

¹⁹⁸ "Atque iccirco non consequitur, ut si concilio visum fuisset ob iustas causas, laicis hanc partem subtrahi debere, pars identidem altera praeter omnem rationem et causam subtraheretur." *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 37^v-38^r.

understood changes in how communion was administered to revolve around an axis of reasonability that can be traced to Gratian's *Decretum* from the twelfth century.

Powell's reply to Luther's fourth argument contained this same idea at its core, but it was buried beneath layers of rhetorical choices characteristic of his strong humanist persuasion. He opened his response with a charge that Luther recognised that neither scripture nor reason substantiated his argument, so he resorted to "the purest sophistry to prove" his point.²⁰⁰ He wanted to seem, Powell claimed, like one who could at least "sing to the flute, who is not, nor able to be, nor even able to be considered to be one who sings to the lyre."²⁰¹ This comparison was lifted from a passage in Cicero's *Pro Murena*, in which Cicero sought to show that those who fail to achieve one skill satisfy themselves with a lesser one: "They say of Greek musicians that those sing to the flute who could not learn to sing to the lyre."²⁰² Powell then employed a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against Luther, likening his fourth argument to this syllogistic form:

If a doctor or surgeon is allowed to remove one part of the body from a diseased man, then he may also remove another. That is to say, if he can amputate a man's hand without wrongdoing, then he can also cut off his head. Therefore, he can destroy the whole man.²⁰³

Powell's concluding remarks returned to his usual mockery. He said that this argument "deserves to be ridiculed as utterly ridiculous" and Luther should "laugh at himself [for] spewing such absurdities at us."²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ "[Lutherus] cum nec scripturam, nec rationem ullam sibi superesse videret: qua suum nobis errorem probaret: sophismatibus probare desudat meracissimis." Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 30^r.

²⁰¹ "Quia is auloedus saltem videatur: qui non possit, nec esse, nec haberi cytharoedus." *Ibid.*

²⁰² "Ut aiunt in Graecis artificibus eos auloedos esse qui citharoedi fieri non potuerint..." Cicero, *In Catilinam I-IV, Pro Murena, Pro Sulla, Pro Flacco*, trans. C. Macdonald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 222-223.

²⁰³ "Si homini medico, aut chirurgicophas sit aegroto corporis partem unam aliquam adimere: potest et aliam. Veluti, si citra culpam possit amputare homini manum: potest et sibi caput tollere. Ergo potest totum hominem perdere." Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 30^r.

²⁰⁴ "Si hoc disputandi genus subsanandum sit: ut omnino ridiculum: cur non potius se ipsum Lutherus derideat: tales veniarum nobis eructans ineptias?" *Ibid.*

The key theological detail hidden in this rhetorical diatribe is that the doctor in Powell's *reductio* construction is permitted to remove a body part "from a diseased man."²⁰⁵ The ailment, presumably some form of infection, is the *iusta causa* enabling the amputation. The reason the doctor has for removing the hand does not extend to the man's head, so the doctor cannot decapitate the man and kill him in doing so. This is essentially the same argument that Fisher employed to refute Luther's fourth argument – it depends on the same canonical precept that changes in custom are permitted for justifiable reasons – Powell simply conveyed it in a form that was appealing to his intellectual and methodological preferences. Indeed, between its polemical tone, use of Cicero and application of logic for rhetorical purposes, this reply to Luther was quintessentially humanist.

Taken together, the responses of Henry VIII, More, Fisher, and Powell to Luther's arguments in favour of utraquism were all centred on the legitimacy of Church custom as a determinate of Church teachings. In defending the emergence of a custom that marked the end of lay reception of the wine, they were defending the process of change inherent to late medieval orthodoxy itself. But they did so in ways reflecting their stations – political, social and academic. Henry VIII's political ambition caused him to disregard Luther's arguments almost entirely to focus on anti-clericalism, an issue that would likely increase the king's favour with the pope. More, the pious statesman, refuted Luther by combining a largely Gersonian explanation for changes in Church practice with his humanist vision of political order, while the arguments wielded by Fisher and Powell reflected their high levels of education in the intellectual environment of their day. Their treatments of Luther's

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

arguments were products not just of their social and intellectual surroundings, but of how they personally acted within them.

Conclusion:

Two of the main mechanisms for change in the late medieval Church were the development of custom and formal prescription. The Church's decision to end the practice of administering communion to the laity under both kinds involved both mechanisms, the former from around the twelfth century and the latter at the Council of Constance in 1415.²⁰⁶ When Martin Luther sought to restore the practice in the early 1520s, Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell found themselves defending these mechanisms for change, and in doing so were defending the evolutionary process intrinsic to late medieval orthodoxy.

Contrary to what has been suggested by Edward Surtz and Richard Rex, all four of our authors were conciliarists, but in the manner of late medieval orthodoxy, their conceptions of conciliar authority were eclectic. Indeed, like our tree of conservative theology, their conciliar unity was rooted in theoretical diversity. More, Fisher, and Powell all had mixed governmental visions of ecclesiological authority, placing their views in the second phase of conciliarism's development, as it is described by Antony Black. But whereas More and Powell appeared to align most closely with the thought of Jean Gerson, Fisher's ecclesiology resembled that of Nicholas of Cusa. Henry VIII, on the other hand, championed a conciliarism emblematic of the movement's third phase: he subordinated the pope entirely to the council and invested decision-making power in the universities of Christendom. He was, as he often seemed to be, rather distant from his peers. He was so astray, in fact, that

²⁰⁶ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 206-207; Levy, "Interpreting the Intention," 173.

his *Assertio* showed mild support for utraquism, a sentiment from which More and Fisher distanced themselves and which strongly suggests that the king was the book's ultimate author.

In responding to Luther's arguments in favour of utraquism, each of our authors defended the emergence of custom, the other mechanism for ecclesiastical change. The content and form of these responses provides additional insight into how the branches of our tree of English conservatism took shape in the sky. Henry VIII again strayed from his peers by dodging Luther's actual arguments almost entirely. He was angling for a papal title, as he had been for years, and directing his attention to the reformer's anti-clericalism was likely a conscious step towards this end. More, the devoutly Christian humanist, wrote according to his vision of the *res publica* and reframed the *Assertio* as doing the same, while Fisher and Powell responded to Luther according to their capacities as academic clerics. The same theological principles lay beneath their positions, but while Fisher unadornedly but clearly articulated his explanations, Powell subjected Luther to the full force of his rhetorical prowess. These four men each approached the reformers according to their stations, defending the past according to their present. They imbued their writings with elements personal to them, and so contributed to the ongoing evolution of orthodoxy in the process.

Chapter 3

English Conservatism and Justification

For historians of early modernity, the moment that ignited the Reformation and sent western Christendom into a frenzy is well known. On 31st October 1517, Martin Luther (allegedly) nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.¹ These were ninety-five criticisms of the practice of granting indulgences, certificates that remitted a person of the earthly punishments prescribed for his sins.² On the basis of his opposition to indulgences, Luther developed the teaching that has become synonymous with Reformation thought: *iustificatio sola fide*, the idea that one can only be justified through faith alone.³

The concept of justification is rooted almost entirely in the epistles of Paul, though its antecedents are in Old Testament terms for “righteousness,” a word referring to behavioural conformity with the standard set by God.⁴ A righteous person is one who God deems to meet this standard and justification is the process by which conformity with it is attained or declared to be attained.⁵ During the first few decades of the twelfth century, the inner workings of this process, known as the *processus iustificationis*, were developed.⁶ The original formulation was threefold, but there was variation in what these three parts were. Peter Comestor (d. 1178) saw it as consisting of the “infusion of the first grace, the contrition of the heart, and the remission of sin,” though he elsewhere described it as consisting of

¹ This common story about the promulgation of Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* is likely a myth. For this, see Richard Rex, *The Making of Martin Luther* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1.

² Peter Marshall, *1517: Martin Luther and the Invention of the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25.

³ Rex, *Making of Martin Luther*, 20-21.

⁴ Michael Parsons, “‘Everything is Forgiven by Grace.’ Justification in the Reformation – A Brief Introduction,” in *Since we are Justified by Faith: Justification in the Theologies of the Protestant Reformation*, ed. Michael Parsons (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁶ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 71.

“the infusion of grace, cooperation of free will, and its consummation.”⁷ It could also be found without mention of grace, like in the *Sententiae* commentary of Hugo de Sancto Charo (d. 1263): “abandonment of sin, the intention not to sin further, and remorse for past sins.”⁸ From the end of the twelfth century onwards, however, a fourfold formulation became more common. Peter of Potiers (d. 1215) described the parts as “the infusion of grace, a movement arising from grace and the free will, contrition, and the remission of sin,” a formulation also provided by William of Auxerre (d. 1231), and while Thomas Aquinas also adopted a fourfold scheme, he described it as involving “the infusion of grace; the movement of the free will directed towards God through faith; the movement of free will directed against sin; and the remission of sin.”⁹ The inclusion of contrition in some of these schemes helped pave the way for the widespread association of justification with the sacrament of penance in the thirteenth century, which we discuss in detail below.¹⁰

As the medieval period entered its last two centuries, adherents of the *via moderna*, like William of Ockham, Robert Holcot, and Gabriel Biel, came to understand the *processus iustificationis* with a covenantal theory of humanity’s relationship to God.¹¹ They believed

⁷ *Ibid.*, 72; for the second quotation, also see Petrus Comestor, “Sermo XVII, In Coena Domini,” in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, Vol. 198, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1855), 1769: “Iustificatio etiam in tribus consistit, vel notator: in gratia infusione, in liberi arbitrii cooperatione, tandem in consummatione.” McGrath attributed the first quotation to Peter Manducator and then referenced the second from Peter Comestor in such a way that these names could be perceived as belonging to two different people; they belonged to the same theologian. For this, see David M. Foley and Simon Whedbee, “Introduction,” in *Peter Comestor: Lectures on the Glossa ordinaria*, ed. David M. Foley and Simon Whedbee (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2021), 1.

⁸ “Peccati desertio, propositum non peccandi de cetero, dolor de peccato praeterito.” Hugo de Sancto Charo, *Sentenzenkommentar*, lib. 4, quoted from Artur Michael Landgraf, *Dogmengeschichte der Frühscholastik*, Band I, Teil 1 (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1952), 299; also cited in McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 72. The English translation has been modified slightly from that provided by McGrath. The reader should note that McGrath cites this passage as being from volume three of Landgraf’s *Dogmengeschichte*, but if one translates Landgraf’s band-teil scheme into eight volumes, this is volume one.

⁹ “Sciendum est autem quod ad iustificationem impii quatuor occurrunt: infusio gratiae, motus surgens ex gratia et libero arbitrio, contritio, peccatorum remissio.” Petrus Pictaviensis, “Sententiarum Libri Quinque,” in *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina*, Vol. 211, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1855), 1044; for Auxerre and Aquinas, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 73-74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

that while human works did not in themselves have intrinsic value for God, God unilaterally imposed a covenant between humanity and himself in which he promised to reward good works with salvation.¹² The phrase “*facere quod in se est*” was used to describe humanity’s part in this covenant: one need only “do what lies within oneself” to attain everlasting life.¹³

On its surface, this view seems to hark back to the position of Pelagius, a fifth-century theologian, later deemed a heretic, who found himself at odds with Augustine on the question of justification.¹⁴ Contrasting with Augustine’s emphasis on humanity’s fallen nature and the need for God’s gift of grace to attain salvation, Pelagius argued for human soteriological autonomy. Humans, he believed, themselves hold the capacity for salvation by way of merit – their good works.¹⁵ Indeed, the charge of Pelagianism was hurled at the *via moderna* as far back as 1344, when Thomas Bradwardine of Merton College, Oxford, published *De causa Dei contra Pelagium*, in which he attacked the soteriology of his peers as being “Pelagian.”¹⁶ Bradwardine’s approach rested on the importance of God’s grace and humanity’s sinful nature; he argued that “a person is righteous by faith alone without preceding works” and “works follow the justified and do not precede one to be justified.”¹⁷ With his dependence on Augustine’s anti-Pelagian writings, Bradwardine initiated what Heiko Oberman refers to as an “Augustinian renaissance” and laid the groundwork for the thought of John Wycliffe and Gregory of Rimini, the latter of whom godfathered the *schola Augustiniana moderna*, a subset of the *via moderna* that took Bradwardine’s approach to

¹² *Ibid.*, 141-142.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141-144; McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85-86. Arnoud S.Q. Visser, *Reading Augustine in the Reformation: The Flexibility of Intellectual Authority in Europe, 1500-1620* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 118.

¹⁵ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 82-84.

¹⁶ Bradwardine, *De causa Dei*.

¹⁷ “Sequuntur enim opera iustificatum, non praecedunt iustificandum, sed sola fide sine operibus praecedentibus sit homo iustus.” *Ibid.*, 394; Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, 10. While Oberman believes that Bradwardine followed Augustine, McGrath argues that he was instead relying on Aristotelian metaphysics; for this, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 128.

justification.¹⁸ Adherents of the *via moderna* of course denied that their views were Pelagian. They believed themselves to skirt around the Pelagian heresy because they denied that works have intrinsic value; the value of good works, as they saw it, is not in the works themselves, but in the value that God promised to place on them by way of his covenant with humanity.¹⁹

Oberman contends that the *schola Augustiniana moderna* was influential in the development of Luther's *sola fide* approach to justification, but the extent of this influence has been scrutinised by Alister McGrath who argues that Luther could not have come into contact with this *schola* until 1519, a few years after his soteriological revelation, as Luther's division of the Augustinian Order (which he entered in 1505) adhered to the *via moderna*.²⁰ Facing this disagreement, Mark Ellingsen insists that there is still ample evidence for Luther's strong Augustinian allegiance, which was characterised by a humanist interest in Augustine's original texts, particularly the anti-Pelagian writings, rather than scholastic exegetical interpretations of Augustine's thought.²¹ Whatever the case, something changed for Luther after 1514. In his lectures on Romans between 1515 and 1516, Luther ceased to posit a *facere quod in se est* position on how one comes to possess the grace necessary for salvation. Instead, he echoed what appears to be a strictly Augustinian view: thoroughly corrupted by sin, the human will is incapable of willing anything good. God must therefore give his grace freely, of his own accord, to undeserving humans for them to be able to direct

¹⁸ Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, 8-11; McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 86-87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-86.

²⁰ Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, 77-80; McGrath, *Intellectual Origins*, 103-104.

²¹ Mark Ellingsen, "Augustinian Origins of the Reformation Reconsidered," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1 (2011): 15-16.

their will towards good.²² This grace was and is given through Christ by way of faith. For Luther, “faith” did not refer to simply believing in Christian teachings. Rather, it denoted a marriage of sorts: Luther saw it as a commitment shared between Christ and the believer, a response the believer has to God which results in Christ being really and personally present in the believer.²³ *Sola fide* does not therefore mean that it is because of faith that one is justified. It means that the conditions for justification have all been provided by God, and one need only “accept and receive it.”²⁴ In short, in the process of justification, Luther deemed God to be active and humans to be passive – a contrast with the more active role that the *via moderna* gave to humanity.²⁵ With the connection between grace, faith and justification, a clearer expression of Lutheran teaching may be rendered as “justification by grace through faith alone.”²⁶

With this new soteriology, Luther and his followers chipped away at the foundations built by the Church over the preceding centuries, and how English conservatives responded to two of these soteriological changes is the subject of this chapter. The chapter’s first section examines how Henry VIII, Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell defended the Church’s traditional conception of the sacrament of penance in the wake of Luther’s alterations to it. It outlines the sacramental history of penance and where Luther disagreed with it in the early 1520s, and then details the debate between attritionists and contritionists that took place from roughly the twelfth century into the post-Tridentine world. The section then explains existing secondary accounts that situate Fisher in this

²² Aaron O’Kelley, “Luther and Melancthon on Justification: Continuity or Discontinuity,” in *Since we are Justified by Faith: Justification in the Theologies of the Protestant Reformation*, ed. Michael Parsons (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 32-33.

²³ McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 154.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*; for more on this teaching and its history, see Parsons, “Everything is Forgiven by Grace,” 1-15.

debate, and then shows how the exclusive attention he has received has left early sixteenth-century English penitential theology open to generalisation. Fisher's position on penance has been taken as representative of English conservative penitential theology as a whole. But Fisher was unique among his peers in positing a largely Scotist attritionism that allowed for extra-sacramental justification. Henry VIII and More both seemed to reject the possibility of extra-sacramental justification, and while Henry VIII was an overt attritionist, More's place in this debate was more obscure – though he seemed to at least respect the state of attrition. Ever the lover of humanist learning, Powell offered no indication of his views on the modes of sorrow involved in the sacrament of penance. Instead, his defence of this sacrament was a classic example of Christian humanist polemic, one undergirded by a combination of the conservative devotion to ecclesiastical universality with humanist political philosophy. In its entirety, therefore, this section evidences the ways in which English conservative soteriology reflected the expected eclecticism of late medieval orthodoxy, and highlights some of the factors influencing its expression and evolution.

Whereas previous chapters, and indeed the first section of this chapter, show how the intellectual backgrounds and social environments of England's conservatives influenced their treatments of reformist theology, we have yet to see whether reformist theology itself had any impact on the composition and nature of conservative theology. This is a question we begin to address in this chapter's second section, which considers how Thomas More coped with the emergence of new conceptions of faith among the reformers. It focusses on More's criticism of William Tyndale's distinction between historical and feeling faith, a division Tyndale derived from Philipp Melancthon, and makes two observations. The first is that existing literature examining the exchange between More and Tyndale has recognised that More appealed to the longstanding traditions and consensus of the Church to reject

Tyndale's ideas on faith, but it has not seen that this was more than a mere argument for More. It was his entire epistemological basis rooted in his conception of orthodoxy. The second observation builds on the first. It is that More's appeal to the longstanding traditions of the Church was so central to his thinking that he conceived of, framed and refuted Tyndale's distinction between historical and feeling faith in the context of a three-hundred-year-old distinction between actual and habitual faith to which reformers did not subscribe. In other words, the Church's established pedagogical and epistemic traditions were both More's *principium* and *modus operandi*, irrespective of the new ideas emerging in western Europe.

The Sacrament of Penance and Justification:

One of the major casualties of Luther's reforms was the sacramental system of the established Church. Since the Council of Florence in 1439, the Church considered there to be seven sacraments: baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation, penance, extreme unction, marriage and ordination.²⁷ In the years following 1517, Luther contended that for something to be deemed sacramental, it needed to be a form of the Word that was instituted by Christ, and it needed to convey forgiveness of sins and be connected with some kind of external sign.²⁸ With these three requirements, he cut the number of sacraments from seven to three: baptism, the Eucharist and penance. In 1519, he composed three sermons on the sacraments, with one sermon dedicated to each of these three, and on 18th December 1519, he wrote a letter to the German theologian George Spalatin in which he stated that no one should expect to see him write on any other sacraments, for he recognised only the three

²⁷ Robert Kolb, "Martin Luther," in *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb and David A. Johnson (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 136.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

about which he had already written.²⁹ In 1520, however, Luther's views on the sacramental status of penance became more opaque. He first affirmed and then denied that penance is a sacrament in his *De captivitate Babylonica* and continued to give mixed indications of its sacramentality for the remainder of his life.³⁰ Sacrament or not, Luther's perception of penance's structural composition was drastically different from convention as he uprooted an understanding of its structure that had endured since the time of Peter Lombard (d. 1160).

In Lombard's formulation, the sacrament of penance consisted of two components, one external and one internal. The external component referred to the three elements of the sacrament itself, namely expressed contrition (*compunctio cordis*), oral confession (*confessio oris*) and satisfaction of works (*satisfactio operis*), which consisted of actions like prayers, pilgrimages or the purchasing of indulgences.³¹ The internal component was "the inner reality (*res*) or grace (*gratia*) of the sacrament, namely contrition and remission."³² As Lombard's *Sententiae* grew in popularity over the latter portion of the twelfth century, this formulation became the accepted norm, and it contributed to the eventual association of justification with the sacrament of penance formalised by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.³³

Luther did away with Lombard's tripartite structure. He kept only contrition and confession, albeit with some theological modifications. With his emphasis on divine

²⁹ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, ed. and trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 128.

³⁰ For the complexities of Luther's thought on penance, see David Bagchi, "Luther and the Sacramentality of Penance," *Studies in Church History* 40 (2004): 119-127.

³¹ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 173 and n. 25; the relevant passages discussed in n. 25 may be found in Peter Lombard, *Libri IV Sententiarum, Libri I et II*, 2nd ed., ed. Collegii S. Bonaventurae (Quaracchi: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1916), IV, d. 22, c. 2; d. 11, c. 2; and d. 8, c. 7.

³² McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 173.

³³ *Ibid.*, 174-175; for a detailed account of the history of confession before Lateran IV, see Alexander Murray, *Conscience and Authority in the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 17-49.

forgiveness over human agency expressed in his *sola fide* soteriology, Luther rejected satisfaction entirely. Divine dispensation, he believed, is absolute and the only necessary satisfaction for our sins was made by Christ's sacrifice on the cross.³⁴ Contrition remained significant for Luther and indeed he dissuaded people from confession who did not have it. But rather than being something to be relied upon, as the traditional teaching held, true contrition flowed naturally from faith in the divine promise of God, just as good works did.³⁵ As for confession, Luther maintained that it was important for troubled consciences and enabled one to hear the comforting word of God through another, but he disputed the need for sacerdotal confession (confession to a priest); he believed that one could simply confess to "a brother or sister."³⁶

Luther's new vision of penance naturally stoked hostility among our four authors. John Fisher, Henry VIII, Thomas More, and Edward Powell all jumped to defend the traditional tripartite rendition of the sacrament, and their respective treatments of the issue reveal their place within medieval intellectual currents dating back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Situating these authors within these earlier currents is the purpose of this section, for doing so exemplifies English conservative theology's embodiment of late medieval orthodoxy through its inherent eclecticism and addresses a generalisation about early sixteenth-century English soteriology found in the work of Ashley Null. But before getting to the state of scholarship on this subject, our analysis and its implications, it is

³⁴ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 121-122; Jonathan Trigg, "Luther on Baptism and Penance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 319.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

³⁶ For confession and troubled consciences, see Bagchi, "Luther and the Sacramentality of Penance," 127; for Luther against sacerdotal confession, see Trigg, "Luther on Baptism and Penance," 318-319.

necessary to first outline the medieval disagreements on penance in more detail because our discussion is predicated entirely on them.

At the heart of the divide is a distinction between attrition and contrition. What these concepts entailed and how they were understood with regard to the sacrament of penance varied between individual theologians and changed over centuries. The first to distinguish between them were Alan of Lille (d. 1203), Praepositinus (d. 1210), and Stephen Langton (d. 1228), but there was little explanation of what the terms meant; in this early stage, “attrition” denoted any penitential act that fell short of contrition.³⁷ As the distinction became more concrete, the difference between attrition and contrition became attributable to the source of one’s sorrow for sin. Attrition was seen as inferior for being rooted in servile fear of punishment and eternal hellfire, whereas contrition was regarded as sorrow that arises from a love of God.³⁸

As the thirteenth century continued, the difference between attrition and contrition became defined by Aristotelian metaphysics. Aristotle held that things move from a state of potency to a state of actuality, a state of potential existence to a state of actual existence.³⁹ Beginning with the works of Alexander of Hales (d. 1245) and William of Auvergne (d. 1248), this Aristotelian formulation was adopted to distinguish between attrition and contrition.⁴⁰ Attrition was understood to be in a state of potency – it was *unformed* sorrow – while

³⁷ Gordon J. Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition at the Council of Trent* (Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1955), 40.

³⁸ Drawing on Pierre Adnès’s *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Henry Ansgar Kelly has suggested that this distinction between attrition and contrition was “new” and began in the fourteenth century, but Gordon Spykman has shown it to have emerged long before this time. Pierre Adnès, “Pénitence,” *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Vol. 12, Book 1 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), 972-973; Henry Ansgar Kelly, “Penitential Theology & Law at the Turn of the 15th C,” in *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 262; Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 41; for the distinction in general, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 177.

³⁹ Ian Christopher Levy, “Nicholas of Lyra (And Paul of Burgos) on the Pauline Epistles,” in *A Companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages*, ed. Steven R. Cartwright (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 274-275; for more information on this area of Aristotle’s metaphysics, see Mark Sentese, *Aristotle’s Ontology of Change* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

⁴⁰ Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 41.

contrition was regarded as in a state of actuality; it was *formed* sorrow.⁴¹ The efficient cause in this formation was grace.⁴² Into the twelfth century, there was confusion over how grace could be understood due to the different roles it could take at a given time.⁴³ For our purpose, we need only understand *gratia gratis data* (actual grace) and *gratia gratum faciens* (habitual or sanctifying grace), a distinction established by the thirteenth century and prevalent in the thought of Bonaventure (d. 1274) and Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274).⁴⁴ In Aquinas's formulation presented in his *Summa Theologiae*, *gratia gratis data* was understood as the divine influence "given over and above the realm of nature" that influences human will and inclines it towards the morally good while *gratia gratum faciens* was grace infused in the human soul considered tantamount to human participation in the divine being.⁴⁵ Other than by John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), who did not believe that actual grace was necessary and instead attributed meritorious actions to the Holy Spirit's cooperation with the human will, those in a state of attrition were understood to possess actual, but not sanctifying grace, while those in a state of contrition were seen as possessing sanctifying grace.⁴⁶ Thus, one's sorrow was believed to move from an unformed state (attrition) to a formed state (contrition) with the infusion of sanctifying grace.⁴⁷

With the differences between attrition and contrition now established, we can consider the two broad categories of thought which related these two conceptions of sorrow to justification and the sacrament of penance. The first of these categories was contritionism. Under the contritionist scheme, the sacrament of penance is "the *occasio* and

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; Kelly, "Penitential Theology & Law," 245.

⁴² Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 41.

⁴³ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 103-107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 111-112; Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 106; Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae," I-II, q.111, a.1.

⁴⁶ For Scotus and actual grace, see Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 111; for sanctifying grace and contrition, see Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 48-51; Kelly, "Penitential Theology & Law," 269-270.

⁴⁷ Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 48-51.

conditio sine qua non of justification.”⁴⁸ Simply put, contritionists believed that contrition is necessary for one to partake in the sacrament of penance and become justified; attrition is insufficient for receiving the sacrament. The godfather of the contritionist movement was Peter Abelard (d. 1142), but it was developed later in the twelfth century by Peter Lombard, who took contrition as the sole precondition for forgiveness in the sacrament.⁴⁹ Other noteworthy contritionists included Thomas Aquinas, Gabriel Biel, and Martin Luther.⁵⁰

Gordon Spykman has suggested that while Aquinas was a contritionist, he was of a more moderate variety than Biel and Luther.⁵¹ This moderation came from his belief that while one in a state of attrition could receive the sacramental sign and the word of absolution in penance, this person could not fully participate in the sacrament because attrition is insufficient for the infusion of sanctifying grace.⁵² According to Aquinas, attrition cannot *become* contrition; instead, contrition *replaces* attrition “as a new act of the will.”⁵³ The transition is a break between two unbridgeable concepts that happens independently of the sacrament.⁵⁴ For this reason, according to Spykman, Aquinas can more legitimately be regarded as a contritionist, but it is a very different contritionism to the harsher line taken by Biel and Luther, both of whom saw attrition as “morally ignoble.”⁵⁵ This wording, however, gives the impression that Biel and Luther had no use for attrition. But Heiko Oberman has found that Biel still saw attrition as a “first step” towards contrition, and given Biel’s remark

⁴⁸ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 176.

⁴⁹ R. Emmet McLaughlin, “Truth, Tradition, and History: The Historiography of High/Late Medieval and Early Modern Penance,” in *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 39; McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 175.

⁵⁰ For Aquinas and Biel, see Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 69-70. For Luther, see *ibid.*, 90-113.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 60-61; Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum*, IV, d.17, q.2, a.1, n. 214-215. Also see Kelly, “Penitential Theology & Law,” 245-246.

⁵⁴ Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 61 and 69.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 59-70 and 88.

in his commentary on Lombard's *Sententiae*, that "by fearing hell, one avoids evil; and by avoiding evil, one corrects oneself and begins to desire good... and thus, one begins to love God," Oberman appears to be correct.⁵⁶

Spykman's characterisation of Luther's contritionism, however, seems accurate. Luther described his contritionism in his *De captivitate Babylonica* of 1520, and stated that while "a contrite heart is a great thing" (*Magna res est cor contritum*) it is only found where there is "ardent faith" (*ardentis fidei*); contrition, in Luther's view, flows naturally from faith.⁵⁷ As for attrition, Luther minced no words on his negative view of the concept: he railed against it as "invented" (*finxerunt*), as "abolishing contrition" (*universa contritio aboleretur*), and expressed disdain that it was taught in the Church: "Oh the intolerable wrath of God, that such things should be taught in the church of Christ."⁵⁸ Comparable sentiments were expressed by Luther a year later in his *Grund und Ursach aller Artikel*.⁵⁹ Whereas contritionists before him retained some level of respect for attrition, Luther evidently had little use for the idea.

The second category relating attrition and contrition to penance and justification was, of course, attritionism. Whereas contritionists held that attrition was insufficient for receiving the sacrament of penance, attritionists believed it to be a first step in the salvific process. Some, like William of Auvergne and Bonaventure, deemed attrition to be all that

⁵⁶ "Timens enim iehennam/mala cauet: et ex eo quo mala cauet/se corrigit et incipit bona desiderare... et sic incipit amare deum..." Gabriel Biel, *Gabriel in quartum librum sententiarum* (Basel, 1508), IV, d.14 q.2 a.3, dub.3; Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 157.

⁵⁷ "Magna res est cor contritum, nec nisi ardentis in promissionem et conminationem divinam fidei... Fide autem obtenta, contritio et consolatio inevitabili sequela sua sponte venient." I have deviated from Steinhäuser, Ahrens and Wentz's translation in rendering "magna" as "great" instead of "precious." Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Gii^r; Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 84.

⁵⁸ "O iram dei insustentabilem, haecine Ecclesia Christi doceri." Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Gii^r; Luther, "Babylonian Captivity," 84.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther, "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles," in *The Works of Martin Luther, Volume 32: Career of the Reformer, Volume Two*, ed. George W. Forell and Helmut T. Lehmann and trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 41.

was required for one to partake in the sacrament, and through the sacrament, attrition would become contrition through the infusion of sanctifying grace.⁶⁰ But perhaps the most famous attritionist was Scotus, who developed a concept of extra-sacramental justification. Scotus argued that if justification through the sacrament of penance was dependent on contrition, it would render the sacrament effective *ex opere operantis* (from the work of the agent), an heretical position, rather than *ex opere operato* (from the work performed).⁶¹ To remedy this, Scotus proposed two ways in which one can be justified after falling into a state of mortal sin. The first, *per modum sacramenti*, was by way of minimal attrition (*parum attritus*): the sinner is attrite for sins committed, but to a lesser or insufficient degree to receive sanctifying grace.⁶² The sacrament of penance is therefore necessary for the attrition to be converted into contrition through the infusion of sanctifying grace.⁶³ The second was by way of congruous merit (*per modum meriti de congruo*): the sinner is attrite to a greater degree and may therefore merit and receive sanctifying grace by congruity.⁶⁴ Attrition is here turned into contrition without the sacrament of penance. The sacrament is effectively bypassed as one receives sanctifying grace without it.⁶⁵

This debate between attritionists and contritionists persisted in theological circles through to the Council of Trent and beyond, and some research has been done to situate Fisher in this controversy.⁶⁶ Richard Rex has argued that despite his generally Scotist alignment, Fisher explicitly rejected the notion of congruous merit in his *Confutatio* of 1523, but Thomas P. Scheck, apparently echoing Edward Surtz's account from 1967 and Ashley

⁶⁰ Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 48 and 51.

⁶¹ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 176-177.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 177; Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 76.

⁶³ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 177.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*; Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 76.

⁶⁵ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 177.

⁶⁶ Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 4; Ronald K. Rittgers, "Penance and Indulgences," in *Martin Luther in Context*, ed. David M. Whitford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 86.

Null's from 2000, has challenged Rex's position.⁶⁷ Fisher, according to Scheck, did endorse Scotus's concept of congruous merit in his *Confutatio*, and so posited both justification through the sacrament of penance and extra-sacramental justification.⁶⁸ Scheck, Rex, and Surtz, as well as Joel R. Gallagher, who examined the Scotist influence on Fisher's Good Friday Sermon from 1521, though not with a focus on grace and justification, have claimed that understanding Fisher's soteriology is important because of the theological influence Fisher's work had over the Council of Trent (1545-1563).⁶⁹ Fisher was one of the few theologians cited during the council's proceedings on faith's role in justification, so his soteriology gives insight into the nature of Tridentine Catholicism along with an understanding of wider conservative theology in the Church's early exchange with Luther.⁷⁰

Yet there is something missing. To set our eyes only upon Fisher prevents us from seeing whether he stood alone in these apparently Scotist soteriological convictions or whether he reflected a more widely accepted theology in early sixteenth-century England. Was the English influence on the council's proceedings confined to a theological anomaly or did the council's endorsement of Fisher equate to the council endorsing the English conservative position from decades before? Ashley Null has regarded Fisher's description of penance and justification in his *Confutatio* as "reflecting the English consensus on penitential matters" and has claimed on this basis that the two-method attritionist approach associated with Scotus was the "typical" soteriological position in early sixteenth-century England.⁷¹ But

⁶⁷ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 62-63; Surtz, *Works and Days*, 206; Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 77-81; Thomas P. Scheck, "Bishop John Fisher's Response to Martin Luther," *Franciscan Studies* 71 (2013): 496.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 497.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 465, 491 and 506-509; Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 87; Surtz, *Works and Days*, 199; Joel R. Gallagher, "The Scotist Soteriology of John Fisher in his Good Friday Sermon on Christ's Passion," *Franciscan Studies* 78 (2020): 171-172.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 171-172; Surtz, *Works and Days*, 199.

⁷¹ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 47-49.

with no investigations comparing Fisher to his peers, is Null correct? Examining the thought of Fisher alongside some of his contemporaries on this theological issue helps answer these questions, and, for the purpose of this thesis more broadly, shows how the English defence of the traditional view of penance in the early Reformation followed the late medieval conception of orthodoxy: it was an overarching consensus derived from differing theologies, and these differences existed as products of the Church's past combined with the individual social and intellectual contexts of the authors supporting it.

Thomas P. Scheck's depiction of Fisher's Scotist dependence on the question of justification and the sacrament of penance relies heavily on the seventh article of the *Confutatio*, "Optima poenitentia nova vita," but further evidence of it may be found in both the first and sixth articles.⁷² In article one, Fisher distinguished between the weaker sorrow of attrition and the more profound contrition that comes when attrition is infused with sanctifying grace. Responding to Luther's claim that no one is able to explain the concept of attrition, Fisher cited several passages from Scotus and, relying on the Aristotelian differentiation between states of potency and actuality explained above, Fisher said that a "formless displeasure" (*displacentia licet informis*) is originally required for one to attain absolution through the sacrament of penance; through this, one comes to contrition (*per illam sit contritio*).⁷³ While not in itself indicative of an alignment with the Scotist notion of extra-sacramental justification, this article shows that Fisher was an attritionist. He explained the *parum attritus*, the minimal attrition required for one to participate in the sacrament of penance, and suggested that it becomes formed (becomes contrition) through the sacrament.

⁷² Scheck, "Bishop John Fisher's Response," 494-496; for the seventh article, see Fisher, *Confutatio*, CXCI-CCIX.

⁷³ "Sufficit enim quae aliqua displacentia licet informis praecedat, et tunc ille capax est absolutionis sacramentalis, et per illam sit contritio." *Ibid.*, XCIII.

We are better able to classify Fisher's attritionism as largely Scotist in orientation when we move to the next page, for it is here that Fisher evidenced support for extra-sacramental justification:

Therefore, since the path of contrition, or formed attrition, is no less harsh and uncertain for sinners, they teach this other path through the reception of the sacraments, which is much milder and more secure because nothing is required except no obstacle of unbelief or mortal sin. And this is the reason that moves them to teach that there is such great efficacy in the sacraments.⁷⁴

Fisher did not openly state that this "path of contrition" is that brought about by *meritum de congruo*, but the fact that he supplemented this comment with the mention of an alternative path through the sacraments, one that is "more secure," suggests that contrition brought about by congruity, and with it the Scotist concept of extra-sacramental justification, is precisely what he had in mind.

Fisher's most open endorsement of extra-sacramental justification and *meritum de congruo* was in the sixth article of his *Confutatio*, in a response to Luther's criticism of the established Church's conception of contrition:

You are not so ignorant, Luther, (though you pretend otherwise) as to be unaware of what the disputants think about contrition. They believe that a sinner, by natural means and with the general influence and help of God, can consider the sin committed by himself as offensive to God, as a turning away from God, as an impediment to reward, and as an inducement to punishment. Therefore, his will can detest the sin thus considered. And in this movement of detestation, he proceeds until grace is finally infused by congruity. With grace infused, the same movement, which was previously called "attrition," is now called "contrition." You see, therefore, that contrition (which is prepared in the aforementioned ways) is formed by charity. Attrition, however (which includes the consideration, collection, and detestation of sins), is completely unformed. Nevertheless, the same thinkers believe that it arises from faith and other gratuitous gifts of God, which are above nature but without charity.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ "Quoniam igitur via contritionis, seu attritionis formatae, non minus esse dura, quae incerta peccatoribus, iccirco viam hanc alteram, per sacramentorum susceptionem, multo mitiorem, et securiorem docent, ut pote ob quam nihil exigitur, nisi ut non ponatur obex vel infidelitatis vel peccati mortalis. Et haec est causa quae movet eos docere, tantam inesse sacramentis efficaciam." *Ibid.*, XCIII.

⁷⁵ "Non usquae adeo rudis es Luthere (quanquam id dissimules) ut ignores quid disputatores de contritione sentiant. Existimant enim peccatore, ex naturalibus, cum generali influxu, et auxilio dei posse confiderare

Fisher provided a clear explanation of the difference between attrition and contrition and noted that attrition is turned into contrition by the congruous infusion of sanctifying grace. He confusingly supplemented this explanation, which suggests that contrition is formed by sanctifying grace, with the statement that contrition is “formed by charity,” but this is not, in fact, a contradiction and further evidences Fisher’s allegiance to Scotus: for Scotus, sanctifying grace and the virtue of charity were one and the same.⁷⁶ This passage therefore shows that Fisher echoed Scotus’s view of penance and indicates, as Scheck has already noted, that Fisher could not have rejected *meritum de congruo* as Rex has claimed.⁷⁷

Despite calling Rex’s assessment into question, Scheck does not venture to comment on the potential reason for it. Doing so provides an opportunity to see where Fisher deviated from Scotus in his conception of extra-sacramental justification, which, in turn, illustrates some of the heterogeneity within Fisher’s thought and the theological consideration that likely created it. Rex’s comment is based on an apparent misreading of the *Confutatio*’s sixth article (quoted above), which, as we have just seen, very clearly exhibits a Scotist alignment.⁷⁸ This misreading, however, likely arose from Rex’s interpretation of article thirty-six of the *Confutatio*, which he cites in his initial comment that Fisher rejected the concept of *meritum de congruo*.⁷⁹ This thirty-sixth article argued in favour of human free will, the subject of the next chapter. Responding to Luther’s objection to the notion that one can

peccatum ab se commissum, ut offensivum dei, et ut aversivum a deo, ut impeditivum praemi, et ut supplicii inductivum: ac proinde posse voluntatem eius, peccatum sic consideratum de testari. Et in hoc detestationis motu, pergere donec ex congruo tandem insundatur gratia. Insusa vero gratia, iam idem motus (quae pridem dictus erat attritio) contritio dicit. Vides itaque contritionem (quae modis antedictis parat) charitate formatam esse. Attritionem vero (quae discussione illam et collectionem et detestationem peccatorum complectit) penitus informem esse. Verum tamen eadem opinant ex fide simul et aliis donis dei gratuitis proficisci, quae supra naturam sunt, sed citra charitatem.” *Ibid.*, CLXXXV.

⁷⁶ Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 108.

⁷⁷ Scheck, “Bishop John Fisher’s Response,” 494-495, n. 101.

⁷⁸ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 216, n. 62.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63 and 224, n. 107.

prepare oneself to be saved by God's grace, Fisher noted that while there are some who propose that one in a state of mortal sin can act morally well without grace, and God will then confer grace upon this person as a reward, he did not share these sentiments himself.⁸⁰ According to these other disputants, Fisher explained, the person is able to prepare himself "not by merit, but by congruity" (*non quidem ut ex merito, sed ut ex congruo*) for God's gift of grace.⁸¹ Fisher went on to describe this position as being potentially erroneous (*is tamen eorum error, si quis fuerit*) before insisting that one cannot at all prepare oneself for the gift of God's grace; that is, one cannot act morally well without the initial help of God: "Without the assistance of God who knocks from the outside, no one could prepare himself for grace."⁸²

Regardless of his use of the phrase "ex congruo," Fisher was not actually distancing himself from the concept of congruous merit. He was rejecting the premise that one can act morally well without the aid of God's grace. He was effectively shielding himself from charges of Pelagianism. In this point, Fisher was, in fact, moving slightly away from Scotus, who was willing to grant that the Holy Spirit cooperated with the human will in the performance of meritorious acts (of which attrition is one), but did not see the need for a classification of actual grace (*gratia gratis data*) in his position on extra-sacramental justification.⁸³ Null has suggested that Fisher was drawing from Gregory of Rimini's notion of prevenient grace (a subset of actual grace) here.⁸⁴ But given that Aquinas was the second most popular scholastic theologian at Fisher's Cambridge after Scotus and, as we saw in

⁸⁰ "Quoniam ex disputatoribus nonnulli, quorum iudiciis ipse non subscribo, sentiant eum, qui mortali peccato gravatus sit, absque speciali auxilio gratiae, posse bene moraliter agere, ac proinde praeparare posse, non quidem ut ex merito, sed ut ex congruo, deus sit daturus gratiam." Fisher, *Confutatio*, DCI.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² "Sine auxilio dei qui foris pulsatur, nemo posset ad gratiam parare sese." *Ibid.*

⁸³ Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 111.

⁸⁴ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 77 and 79; for the nature of prevenient grace including its relationship to actual grace, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 107-108 and 112.

Chapter 1, Fisher's eucharistic theology drew on Aquinas, it is just as plausible that Fisher was simply infusing his primarily Scotist alignment on penance with a touch of Aquinas.⁸⁵ Aquinas believed that any positive act of the human will is influenced by actual grace, and attrition is a positive act, one that is preparatory for receiving the sacrament of penance.⁸⁶ Either way, this passage referenced by Rex is not so much an example of Fisher rejecting *meritum de congruo* as it is an instance of him layering his theology to sidestep a potential vulnerability. It is evidence for how his theology was itself a reflection of late medieval orthodoxy as the "daughter of time:" it blended different historical soteriological systems to pre-emptively circumvent an anticipated criticism relevant to his time.⁸⁷

We have now seen, as the majority of existing scholarship has shown, that Fisher was an attritionist in his penitential theology. He endorsed the Scotist position of extra-sacramental justification with a minor modification, demonstrating the pragmatic eclecticism of his theology. Turning now to the writings of Thomas More and Henry VIII's *Assertio*, we see that attrition was at the very least seen positively in early sixteenth-century England. But both More and Henry VIII, in contrast with Fisher, did not seem to endorse extra-sacramental justification, suggesting that Fisher's penitential theology cannot be taken as the English norm. There was a diversity to the soteriology of England's conservatives reflective of the expected heterogeneity of late medieval orthodoxy.

Oddly enough, Thomas More never seemed to use the word "attrition." The words "contrition" or "contrite" were used repeatedly in his texts, usually in reference to contrition

⁸⁵ For Aquinas's popularity at Cambridge, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 19.

⁸⁶ For Aquinas and actual grace, see Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 111 and McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 110-112; for Aquinas and attrition, see Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 59-62.

⁸⁷ For the phrase "daughter of time," see Tracy, "Erasmus and the Arians," 7.

as part of the sacrament of penance.⁸⁸ But “attrition” or “atrite” were never employed. Nevertheless, More demonstrated his understanding of the distinction between these two forms of sorrow once. While interrogating Tyndale’s conception of free will and its relationship to repentance in the *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer* (1532-1533), More gave two possible explanations for the sorrow that lies beneath repentance: the first was one that stems from “the loue and reuerence” that one has for God; the second was “fere of hell / whiche fere is but seruyle and bonde.”⁸⁹ As Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck recognised in their commentary on More’s *Confutation*, the first corresponded with the theological concept of contrition while the second corresponded with attrition, though More did not include that contrition is formed by sanctifying grace while attrition is not.⁹⁰ With More’s frequent reference to contrition, examples of which are considered below, combined with this apparent neglect for attrition in More’s religious works, it is tempting to classify More as a contritionist – and indeed this is a possibility. But a subtle jab at Luther and Tyndale when More described these two forms of sorrow in his *Confutation* suggests that More may still have had attritionist sympathies despite his neglect of the term itself. After describing attrition, the fear that is “seruyle and bonde,” More quips that this form of sorrow is “not metely for such holye folke as Luther and [Tyndale].”⁹¹ “Metely” means “fitting” or “sufficient,” and for More to pair a statement that attrition is

⁸⁸ For example, see More, “Dialogue Concerning Heresies,” 349; Thomas More, “Supplication of Souls,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 7: Letter to Bugenhagen, Supplication of Souls, Letter Against Frith*, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Marc’Hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 191; More, “Confutation,” 212, 214, 409-410 and 868; Thomas More, “A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 12: A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, ed. Louis L. Martz and Frank Manley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 97.

⁸⁹ More, “Confutation,” 457.

⁹⁰ Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck, “Commentary,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 8: The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 1600.

⁹¹ More, “Confutation,” 457.

insufficient for justification in the eyes of Tyndale and Luther with a sarcastic comment that they are “holye folke” is to stab at their strict contritionism.⁹² At a minimum, More must have regarded attrition as an important element in the penitential process, even if he was not himself an attritionist.

As described above, the late medieval contritionists, like Aquinas and Biel, still saw attrition as a valuable first step towards contrition despite their belief that one in a state of attrition could not participate fruitfully in the sacrament of penance. While More evidently saw value in attrition, the instances in which he mentioned the role of penance in the salvific process give no obvious indication of whether he believed that someone in a state of attrition could participate in the sacrament and, through it, have attrition turned into contrition as an attritionist would hold. Penance was only mentioned in passing in More’s *Responsio* of 1523, and it was in reference to indulgences.⁹³ It was treated in some detail in More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, but the focus was largely on confession and how Tyndale changed certain words in his translation, like “penance” to “repentance” and “contrite heart” to “troubled heart.”⁹⁴ Where we get better insight into More’s views on penance in relation to justification is in his *Supplication of Souls* (1529) and *Confutation* (1532-1533). In the *Supplication*, More wrote:

There ys nor can be eny synne commytted in the world so sore / so greuouse / nor so abomynable / but that yf a man wurk wyth goddys grace by contrycyon and heuynes of hart / wyth humble confessyon of mouth & good endeouour of penaunce and satysfaccyon in dede / agaynst hys thought word and dede by whych god was offended / he shall obtain of goddes goodness reysyon / forgyuenes / and pardon.⁹⁵

⁹² For the definition of “metely,” see Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck, “Glossary,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 8: The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi, and Richard J. Schoeck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 1744.

⁹³ More, “Responsio,” 329.

⁹⁴ For confession, see More, “Dialogue Concerning Heresies,” 349-351; for Tyndale’s translations, see *Ibid.*, 290.

⁹⁵ More, “Supplication of Souls,” 191.

“Penance,” as it is used here, does not denote the sacrament of penance, but the penitential actions synonymous with satisfaction. Nevertheless, the entire sacrament is discussed in the passage as a whole. More listed the sacrament of penance’s three parts – contrition, confession and satisfaction – and said that together they bring about forgiveness of sins. But he gave no information on the state in which one approaches the sacrament, whether it can be received by one in a state of attrition or whether contrition is required from the outset.

The same ambiguity is found in his *Confutation*, written a few years later. More remarked twice that when sin causes people to lose the initial sanctifying grace instilled through baptism and “become the chyldren of the deuyll,” they may “be borne of god agayne by grace thorowe penance, and become the chyldren of god agayne.”⁹⁶ We are told that one is justified “by grace through penance,” but the state of sorrow in which one receives the sacrament – whether attrition is enough or contrition is necessary – remains unclear. While More exhibited sympathy for the state of attrition, therefore, he may either have been an attritionist or a more lenient contritionist than Luther, like Aquinas and Biel before him.

Henry VIII was far more liberal in his references to attrition than More, and so his sympathies with attritionism are much less opaque. The first instance of this attritionism is seen in the *Assertio*’s treatment of Luther’s emphasis on the importance of contrition in the salvific process. In an attempt to show that Luther’s refusal to concede to absolution for the attrite is unsustainable, the king noted that Luther praised contrition as being “a great thing” that is “not easily had,” but then “he [commanded] everyone to be certain that they have it”

⁹⁶ More, “Confutation,” 429 and 438. The quoted passage is from page 429. There is a slight variation in the wording on page 438, but the idea is otherwise entirely the same. For a similar example, see *Ibid.*, 852.

and that their sins will therefore be forgiven.⁹⁷ The king then presented three options or categories of persons to whom God may have promised justification through the sacrament of penance. The first were those who are “contrite,” but the king asked “how can a person know that he has obtained [forgiveness] if he is unable to know if he is sufficiently contrite?”⁹⁸ “No one,” the king continued, “knows the amount of contrition required for mortal sin.”⁹⁹ As this sufficiency is unknown, the king supposed, then God may have promised forgiveness to the “attrites”– “those who are less contrite than the greatness of their sins requires.”¹⁰⁰ If Luther agreed with this, as the *Assertio* seems to suggest he would given his belief that people can be certain of their absolution, then he endorsed the attritionism he “rebuked” (reprehendit) others for endorsing.¹⁰¹ The third option was those who harbour “no sorrow at all” (nihil omnino dolentibus) for sins; if God has promised absolution to these individuals, the *Assertio* argued, then he surely has “promised it to the attrite” (promisit attritis).¹⁰² To conclude, the text claimed that “if Luther admits only contrition... then no one can be certain of his absolution” and “Luther’s certain and undoubted confidence in absolution would have perished, or been false and erroneous.”¹⁰³ In other words, Luther’s rejection of attritionism seemed to fall back upon itself.

The effectiveness of this argument is debatable, but what is significant for our present purpose of examining underlying variations in English penitential theology is the

⁹⁷ “Magnam rem docet esse Contritionem, nec facile parabilem. Jubet omnes habere pro certo, et indubitate credere, propter verbum promissionis, omnia sibi peccata esse dimissa...” Henry VIII, “*Assertio*,” 322-323.

⁹⁸ “Nam quomodo scire se potest obtinere promissum, qui se scire non potest satis esse contritum?” *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ “Nemo enim novit mortalium omnium quantum Contritionis exigat mortale peccatum.” *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ “Quod si veniam promisit Deus parum (pro sceleris mole) contritis, tunc promisit his, quos isti vocant attritos...” *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ “Et iam cum his consentit Lutherus, quos reprehendit.” *Ibid.*

¹⁰² “At si promisit Deus nihil omnino dolentibus, magis promisit attritis, hoc est utcumque dolentibus.” *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ “Quamobrem, si tantum Contritionem admittit, hoc est sufficientem dolorem, nemo certus esse potest se esse absolutum, et sic Luthero perierit, aut falsa fuerit et erronea absolutionis certa ilia et indubitata fiducia.” *Ibid.*

Assertio's apparent endorsement of attritionism. The king began by saying that "God promised to forgive sins only through penance" to those in the three stated categories and then suggested that Luther should reserve a place for the attrite in the sacrament because no one can be certain that he is in a state of contrition.¹⁰⁴ This was a view that had some precedent among attritionists. Bonaventure, for instance, believed that the attrite may receive the sacrament of penance with the hope that, through it, their attrition would be turned into contrition.¹⁰⁵ The reason, he believed, was that while absolution is dependent on contrition, no one can be sure that he possesses the sanctifying grace that forms contrition.¹⁰⁶

On the page immediately following this presentation of the three categories of sinners, Henry VIII offered his clearest endorsement of attritionism: "Attrition, by means of the sacrament of penance, is made contrition."¹⁰⁷ The idea that attrition "is made" or "becomes" (*fieri*) contrition through the sacrament of penance was of course the cornerstone of attritionism and was endorsed by attritionists like William of Auvergne and Bonaventure.¹⁰⁸

Thus far, we have seen that Fisher and Henry VIII were both attritionists in their penitential theology. While there is some ambiguity in More's position such that he could either have been an attritionist or a moderate contritionist, he still regarded attrition sympathetically. This net-positive view of attrition in established English theology of the 1520s and early 1530s is not entirely surprising. These authors were each directing their

¹⁰⁴ "Nam Deus aut his duntaxat per Poenitentiam promisit peccata remittere, qui quantum peccati moles exigit, ante conteruntur, aut his etiam qui minus, aut denique remittit et illis, qui nihil conteruntur omnino." *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 51.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ "Ex Attritione per sacramentum superveniens fieri Contritionem: sacramentum enim supplere quod deest homini." Henry VIII, "*Assertio*," 324-325.

¹⁰⁸ Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 48 and 51.

positions against Luther, who, as has been explained, was an ardent contritionist, so any kind of positive view of attrition would undoubtedly have made their polemics more effective. This is not to detract from wider intellectual context, however: it must be remembered that English theology in the early sixteenth century was defined primarily by the *via antiqua*, the school dominated by the thought of Scotus and Aquinas.¹⁰⁹ Scotus was, as we have established, one of the foremost attritionists, and while Aquinas was a contritionist, he was of the more mild variety who still saw attrition in a positive light, just as More did. For these authors to have taken the positions that they did is therefore very much in line with the prevailing intellectual currents in England at the time. There was, however, a crucial difference between the penitential theologies of Fisher on the one hand and More and Henry VIII on the other. As we have already seen, Fisher posited a form of extra-sacramental justification that was largely an echo of Scotus. More and Henry VIII both left no room for extra-sacramental justification and instead regarded the sacrament of penance as the sole means through which one can obtain absolution after losing sanctifying grace through sin.

More's insistence on the necessity of the sacrament for justification is found in both his *Supplication* and *Confutation*. Beginning with the *Supplication*, recall the passage quoted above:

There ys nor can be eny synne commytted in the world so sore / so greuouse /
nor so abomynable on / but that yf a man wurk wyth goddys grace by
contrycyon and heuynes of hart / wyth humble confessyon of mouth & good
endeuour of penaunce and satisfaccyon in dede / agaynst hys thought word and
dede by whych god was offended / he shall obtain of goddes goodness reyssyon
/ forgyuenes / and pardon.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ For the *via antiqua* in English thought, see Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 19-21; for Aquinas, Scotus and the *via antiqua*, see McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 80-81 and 295.

¹¹⁰ More, "Supplication of Souls," 191.

The sentence is structured as a conditional: justification for the greatest of sins is predicated on contrition working *with* confession and satisfaction. The possibility of justification by contrition alone, without the other parts of the sacrament in a manner brought about by *meritum de congruo*, is not recognised, suggesting that More believed that justification only comes through the sacrament of penance.¹¹¹

More presented a similar idea in his *Confutation*. He asserted that God instituted the sacrament of penance for the purpose of reconciling people to him after they fall into sin, and added that “without [this sacrament] they yt after baptysme fall agayne to synne, do lese the frute of theyr baptysme...”¹¹² In other words, after falling to sin, one must partake in the sacrament of penance to be restored to the state of righteousness initially conferred through baptism. Once again, More seemed to exclude the possibility of extra-sacramental justification.

Henry VIII’s position on extra-sacramental justification was much the same. In the king’s previously cited argument in favour of attritionism, the three levels of sorrow that may bring one absolution (contrition, attrition and no sorrow at all) were predicated entirely on the statement that God promised to forgive sins “only through penance” (*duntaxat per Poenitentiam*) to those in these three categories.¹¹³ This qualification is in itself a strong indication that Henry VIII did not believe justification could take place without the sacrament of penance. But further evidence of this view is found in Henry VIII’s discussion of baptism earlier in the *Assertio*. In an argument comparable to that in More’s *Confutation*, Henry VIII

¹¹¹ There is an instance in *Supplication of Souls* when More says that “penaunce” or other “recompence” are needed for justification, which on its surface seems to be a statement in favour of extra-sacramental justification, but “penaunce” appears to refer to the works required in satisfaction here, not the sacrament itself. For this, see More, “Supplication of Souls,” 176.

¹¹² More, “Confutation,” 213.

¹¹³ “Nam Deus aut his duntaxat per Poenitentiam promisit peccata remittere, qui quantum peccati moles exigit, ante coneruntur, aut his etiam qui minus, aut denique remittit et illis, qui nihil coneruntur omnino.” Henry VIII, “Assertio,” 322-323.

drew on Jerome to explain that after one falls into “the hands of the devil” and loses grace, one can only be restored to the state of righteousness conferred in baptism through penance: “Without Penance, he cannot escape [the hands of the devil], or be renewed to such a Condition that Baptism may be profitable to him.”¹¹⁴ The king’s discussion of confession, one of the three parts making up the sacrament, also suggests that Henry VIII understood penance to be essential. The king offered paraphrases of James 5:16, “confess your sins to one another,” and Isaiah 43:26, “declare thou thy wickedness that thou mayest be justified.”¹¹⁵ These were supplemented with appeals to Ambrose, “no man can be justified from sin if he does not confess his sin,” and John Chrysostom, “he cannot receive the grace of God, unless he be cleansed from all his sins by confession.”¹¹⁶ In each of these cases, no room was left for extra-sacramental justification through *meritum de congruo*. Absolution was described as only coming through the sacrament itself.

While Fisher, Henry VIII, and More all saw penitential value in attrition, Fisher evidently stood alone in his conviction that one could be justified extra-sacramentally – but why? The reason likely lay at the intersection of the individual intellectual backgrounds of these three authors and their target audiences. Irrespective of Fisher’s close alignment with Aquinas on eucharistic metaphysics, Scotus remained the more popular authority (even if only slightly) at the English universities in the early sixteenth century, and Fisher’s *Confutatio* was his first major treatise against Luther and one of his most theologically extensive.¹¹⁷ It was composed by one of England’s most theologically erudite minds for Europe’s

¹¹⁴ “Qui e Dei gratia decidit in manus daemonum, e quibus absque Poenitentia non reponitur in eum statum, ut Baptismum ei rursus prodesse possit.” *Ibid.*, 302-303.

¹¹⁵ “Divi Jacobi: ‘Confitemini alterutrum peccata vestra’... per Esaiam ait Dominus: ‘Tu dic iniquitates tuas, ut justificeris?’” *Ibid.*, 330-331. The actual passages from the Vulgate are James 5:16 (Vulg.): “Confitemini ergo alterutrum peccata vestra;” Isaiah 43:26 (Vulg.): “Reduc me in memoriam, et iudicemur simul; narra si quid habes ut iustificeris.”

¹¹⁶ “Non potest... gratiam Dei accipere, nisi purgatus fuerit ab omni peccato per Confessionem.” *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 20.

theologically learned, so it could expound on the intricacies of penance and justification in detail. This was not the case for Henry VIII's *Assertio* and the relevant texts by More. As we saw in the previous chapters, Henry VIII's *Assertio* defended established Church teachings with elementary theology and, in the case of utraquism, questionable opinions that deviated from the prevailing norm. And while More possessed high levels of theological knowledge, his *Supplication* and *Confutation* were both written in English; they were part of the body of texts written in the vernacular at Cuthbert Tunstall's request to reach a wider audience.¹¹⁸ It is difficult to dispute that penitential theology insisting on the absolute necessity of participating in the sacrament of penance for justification is the easiest to understand, and a theology in which attrition can *become* contrition is easiest of them all. In fact, the fourteenth-century English theologian John Burgh mistook Aquinas as believing that attrition can transform into contrition for this very reason.¹¹⁹ With this in mind, the simplicity of soteriology that excluded the possibility of extra-sacramental justification likely played a role in this difference between Fisher on the one hand, and Henry VIII and More on the other.

In the case of More, his political thought may also have had some bearing over this element of his sacramental theology. We have noted a few times that the humanist concept of the *res publica* was central to how conservative Christian humanists, like More, approached the reformers. For them, the Church was the foremost community, and the reformers were a threat to its integrity.¹²⁰ Joanne Paul has explained that, developing on Augustine, More saw pride as the greatest threat to communal unity (indeed, he saw the reformers as motivated by pride) and he therefore sought to stamp out its sources, one of

¹¹⁸ Paul, *Thomas More*, 85.

¹¹⁹ Kelly, "Penitential Theology & Law," 245-246.

¹²⁰ For these discussions, see pages 84-85 and 146-147.

which was hierarchy, and promote a level of equality.¹²¹ Extra-sacramental justification, though rooted in a love of God, may have conceivably been regarded as a fount of pride because it creates a hierarchy in the salvific process: those with a more developed sorrow are placed above the attrite, such that they may bypass the sacrament of penance. If Paul is correct, More may well have insisted on the absolute necessity of the sacrament for justification in the spirit of promoting equality and preserving religious unity: every baptised person who had lost *gratia prima* through mortal sin could only be justified through the three parts of the sacrament, contrition, confession and satisfaction.

For the first time in this thesis, Edward Powell, not Henry VIII, is the anomalous author. Despite spanning some twenty-eight pages, his defence of the sacrament of penance offers no insight on his place in the debate between attritionists and contritionists. Instead, it is an archetypal example of Christian humanist polemic. At its core are two fundamental problems that Powell saw with Luther's views on justification. The first aligns with the late medieval conception of orthodoxy: Luther deviated from the catholic (universal) understandings of "faith" and the soteriological process. At the beginning of his commentary on penance, Powell censured Luther for treating the sacrament "in a way far from catholic" by gutting it of its three parts.¹²² He later argued that Luther was "far from saying anything catholic" and claimed that whenever Luther "boasts that he has hit the mark of truth" is "precisely where he is the most heretical."¹²³ Powell then used this charge of heresy to juxtapose Luther against the "orthodox people" (*populo orthodoxo*) he was trying to sway

¹²¹ Paul, *Thomas More*, 26-28 and 83.

¹²² "Proinde est quidem hodie: quod satis doleam: Lutherum virum esse capite tam insano et parum christiano, ut sacramentum poenitentiae modo longe secus quam catholice tractet." Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 86^r.

¹²³ "Tantum igitur abest, ut vel de fide, vel de divina promissione quicquam catholice dicat, ut cum veritatis scopum se attigisse praecipue iactitet, ibi haereticum maxime deprehendas." *Ibid.*, fol. 91^r.

from the catholic path.¹²⁴ Much of Luther's error, Powell suggested, came from his animosity towards his superiors in the Church, both past and present. He raged "against the supreme pontiffs, his own fathers," neglected God's teaching that "we owe reverence to our superiors," and failed to heed the warnings in the Bible of what happens to those who rebel against established authority.¹²⁵ He ignored the fate of Absalom, who in 2 Samuel 18 became stuck in a tree and was eventually killed for betraying David, and disregarded what happened to Dathan and Abiram, who were swallowed by the earth for rebelling against Moses in Numbers 16.¹²⁶ In short, Luther was wrong, according to Powell, because he deviated from the common, universal way, both in his teachings and in his disregard for the authority within it, and this put him at odds with the "orthodox."

The second problem Powell saw in Luther's soteriology was the threat it posed to the established social order. It was a humanist concern rooted in the idea of the *res publica* and communal stability. This is seen, for example, in the same passage as the biblical references above. Powell asserted that God taught that if we disagree with our superiors, we should not strike "them down with curses."¹²⁷ Instead, we should do what Christ did when he noticed faults in his disciples: "He did not rebuke them publicly, but met with them in private and in secret to correct their faults... preserving both their reputation and name."¹²⁸ Thomas More held the same idea. In his *Confutation*, he wrote that if a religious or secular ruler has gone astray, this must be discussed with him through "confessours and counsaylours," not publicly, lest it bring his name "in sclaunder amonge the comen people" and "diffame"

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ "In summos pontifices patres suos insanit... Ipse nec Absalonis suspendio, nec Datan et Abiron inaudito supplicio ammoneri volens. Porro superioribus nostris reverentiam... deus ipse... nos docet." *Ibid.*, fol. 87^v.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ "Hoc pacto [Deus] insinuans rectores nostros, si quid sinistre ab illis geritur: nostris tunc maledictis non feriendos." *Ibid.*, fol. 87^v-88^r.

¹²⁸ "Publicitus tamen nunquam, sed seorsum secretoque, de reformandis criminibus, eos conveniebat... eos, salvo nomine et integra fama, clam et occulte corrigeret." *Ibid.*, fol. 88^r.

him.¹²⁹ Likewise, in his *Apology*, More argued that if a law ran “agaynst a law of god,” then this should be addressed through “secrete aduysse and counsayle,” not through publicly circulated books as this can “geue the people occasyon to haue the lawes in derysyon.”¹³⁰ As Joanne Paul explains in relation to More, these ideas were rooted in the humanist concern for the *res publica* and communal stability.¹³¹ To hold a commonwealth together, animosity could not be sown against its leader, and popular confidence in him needed to be preserved.¹³² Powell evidently approached Luther with this same philosophy. Indeed, he appealed to stability again in his discussion of Luther’s vision of faith in relation to penance. He complained that Luther’s teaching of salvation *sola fide* “abolishes all penance, grants mortal beings permission to sin through faith alone, destroys all good works, and invites sins to all, extinguishing all fear of God.”¹³³

Between his association of “catholicity” with what is orthodox, and criticism of Luther for deviating from the universal way on the one hand, and desire to preserve the cohesion of the *res publica* on the other, Powell was a quintessential conservative Christian humanist in his defence of penance. He showed how the conservative cause – the late medieval conception of orthodoxy – had become wedded to the humanist movement, and this remained evident in how Powell defended each of penance’s traditional three parts.

In defence of contrition, Powell argued as follows:

If contrition and consolation inevitably follow obtaining faith alone, why did Christ say, “ask and you shall be given, seek and you will find, knock and it shall be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7)? Why did he command, “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17)? Why did he order, “if any man will come after

¹²⁹ More, “Confutation,” 590-591.

¹³⁰ Thomas More, “The Apology,” in *Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 9: The Apology*, ed. J.B. Trapp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 96-97.

¹³¹ Paul, *Thomas More*, 10.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ “Fidem... nunc Lutherus sic docet: ut omnem poenitentiam aboleat: et ex fide, ipse peccandi licenciam mortalibus faciat: cuncta opera bona perimat: ad omnia peccata invitet: et timorem dei universum extinguat.” Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 90^r.

me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt.16:24)? Indeed, why does Christ himself throughout the Gospel, so often and in so many words, command, impress, and impose penance? He might rather have said, with your instruction, “have faith, and penance and consolation will inevitably follow,” as you say is fully explained in its own place – but I know not where, unless it is where stags discard their antlers and hares catch crabs.¹³⁴

In classically humanist fashion, Powell blended biblical scholarship with *pysma*, the practice of asking a series of rhetorical questions popular among humanist polemicists, to highlight where Luther deviated from the ecclesiastical norm. He then ended with a polemical suggestion that Luther draws his ideas from a fantasy land.

In his defence of confession, communal stability was Powell’s foremost concern. The worry we witnessed before, that widespread knowledge of a leader’s faults could be detrimental to a community’s cohesion, extended to the wider population in this second part of penance. Like Luther, Powell saw confession as divinely ordained based on Matthew 3:6, “they were baptised by John in the Jordan, confessing their sins,” and 1 John 1:9, “if we have confessed our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins.”¹³⁵ But he protested against Luther’s belief that confession to a priest was unnecessary and one could simply confess to “a brother or sister” (*fratri aut sorori*).¹³⁶ He argued that under Luther’s scheme, people are “compelled to reveal themselves through public confession” and “disgracefully stain their own name.”¹³⁷ With this “common revelation of their crimes, they

¹³⁴ “Nam si sola nacta fide, poenitentia et consolatio inevitabili sequela venient: Cur dixit Christus: Petite, et accipietis: quaerite, et invenientis: pulsate, et aperietur vobis? Cur ipse mandavit: Agite poenitentiam, appropinquabit regnum caelorum? Cur iussit: Si quis vult venire post me: tollat crucem suam: et sequatur me? Imo cur passim in evangelio, toties et tot verbis, poenitentiam Christus suis mandat, infigit, inculcat? quando potius dixisset, te praeceptore, habite fidem: et poenitentia ac consolatio inevitabili sequela venient: quemadmodum plene suo, inquis, dicitur loco: sed ignoro quo: nisi forte ibi, ubi cerui abiiciunt cornua: et lepores cancri captant.” The biblical citations embedded in the English are my own. *Ibid.*, fol. 91^v-92^r.

¹³⁵ “Matthaei. 3. dicitur. Baptizabanter a Ioanne in Iordane, confitentes peccata sua. Et iterum. 1. Ioannis.1. Si confessi fuerimus peccata nostra: fidelis est deus et iustus: qui remittet nobis peccata nostra.” *Ibid.*, fol. 92^v. Note that Powell’s Latin quotations differ from the Vulgate here.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 93^v; Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica*, sig. Giii^v; Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 88.

¹³⁷ “Hi, authore Luthero, publica fascinatorum suorum confessione, cogantur se ipsos prodere: nomen suum foede maculare.” Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 93^r.

render themselves utterly infamous.”¹³⁸ Powell went on to insist that confessions “cannot be public, or exposed before everyone’s eyes... they must be hidden and secret.”¹³⁹ One reason he gave for this was the preservation of the established order. Luther, he argued, was “overturning divine order” and acted “in opposition to everything, disregarding not only divine but also human laws.”¹⁴⁰ His other reason was based on what he described as a scriptural command: “‘Take care of a good name,’ because a good reputation is indeed an especially advantageous and necessary thing for the edification of neighbours, which no one condemns, unless the person is cruel to himself and unjust to his neighbour.”¹⁴¹ The corresponding passage is Sirach 41:15, but it makes no mention of edifying neighbours. It merely reads: “Take care of a good name, for this shall continue with thee more than a thousand treasures precious and great.”¹⁴² In fact, no mention of educating one’s neighbour is mentioned in Sirach 41 at all. This interpretation was imposed on the passage by Powell, though there was some precedent for it. Denys the Carthusian (d. 1472), a theologian and mystic from present-day Belgium, presented this interpretation of Sirach 41:15 in his *Enarratio in librum Ecclesiastici, Sermones de sanctis* and *Sermones de tempore*.¹⁴³ Powell

¹³⁸ “Et communi suorum criminum revelatione, se ipsos prorsus infames reddere.” *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ “Nec ipsa quidem poterit esse publica, ante oculos omnium propalanda...confessio peccatorum... oportet occulta sit et secreta.” *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ “Lutherus... divinum ordinem subvertens... adeo omnia ipse in tranverso (sic) agit: leges non minus divinas quam humanas, data opera, temerans.” *Ibid.*, fol. 94^r.

¹⁴¹ “Curam habe de bono nomine: quia bona profecto fama, ad proximorum aedificationem, res est in primis conducibilis et necessaria: quam nemo, nisi qui in se ipsum crudelis, et in proximum iniquus est: contemnit.” *Ibid.*, fol. 93^r.

¹⁴² “Curam habe de bono nomine, hoc enim magis permanebit tibi quam mille thesauri pretiosi et magni.” Sirach 41:15 (Vulg.).

¹⁴³ Dionysius Cartusianus, “Enarratio in librum Ecclesiastici,” in *The Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. Database, accessed 18th July 2025), cap. 41, ver. 15, pg. 250, col. 2, lin. 31; Dionysius Cartusianus, “Sermones de sanctis tam ad saeculares quam ad religiosos,” in *The Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. Database, accessed 18th July 2025), sermo. 4, vol. 1, pg. 38, col. 2, lin. 17; Dionysius Cartusianus, “Sermones de tempore tam ad saeculares quam ad religiosos cum enarrationibus epistularum et evangeliorum dominicalium,” in *The Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. Database, accessed 18th July 2025), sermo. 1, vol. 1, pg. 317, col. 2, lin. 13. For details of Denys’s life, see Kent Emery Jr., “Denys the Carthusian,” in *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jorge J.E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 243-244.

must have derived it from an earlier authority, but its community-minded sentiment would have appealed to his interest in the *res publica*, which, as we have already seen, appeared to be a guiding force in his discussion of penance as a whole.

Powell's treatment of satisfaction is short compared to his discussion of the other parts of penance, likely because he felt he adequately refuted Luther's rejection of it in his dismissal of *sola fide*. What Powell did write specifically about satisfaction was purely stylistic. He first explained how Luther's soteriology "destroys" (interimit) satisfaction by suggesting that God has little care for fasting, prayers, almsgiving and works, and employed polyptoton, a rhetorical device in which derivatives of the same word are employed together, to accentuate his point: "Then [Luther], satisfying no one himself, even destroys satisfaction."¹⁴⁴ In his later and slightly more detailed account of satisfaction, Powell highlighted what he perceived to be a contradiction in Luther's thought:

Luther does not only want no satisfaction to be made to God for sins, but he also says that [God] is only satisfied through the faith of the contrite heart. Although this is so blatantly false that it does not need our refutation, yet the liar should not be so forgetful. For he said before that "all sins are expiated by faith alone in the promise of God."¹⁴⁵

He then returned to his rhetorical images by describing Luther as "changing rigging and oars along with weapons" and bringing "forth a different shield" in his idea of "faith alone of a contrite heart," and concluded with a polemical jab aimed at Luther's apparent inconsistencies: "You think, O Luther, that you will then have boldly triumphed, if you have boldly contradicted yourself in all things."¹⁴⁶ The entire argument, with its imagery and

¹⁴⁴ "Deinde et satisfactionem, ipse nemini satisfaciens, ita quidem [Lutherus] interimit." Powell, *Propugnaculum*, fol. 86^v.

¹⁴⁵ "Non vult modo Lutherus: ut pro peccatis deo ulla satisfactio fiat: sed sola, inquit, fide cordis contriti illi satisfit. Hoc tametsi in propatulo tam falsum fuerit: ut nostra confutatione non egeat: tamen mendacem non decuit esse immemorem. Nam antea dixerat: Cuncta peccata expiari sola fide promittentis dei." *Ibid.*, fol. 98^r.

¹⁴⁶ "Nunc autem rudentes et remos simul cum armis commutans: Asserit ea targi, sola fide cordis contriti. Putas enim Luthere: quae tunc fortiter viceris: si in cunctis tibi ipsi fortiter contradixeris." *Ibid.*, fol. 98^{r-v}.

literary tropes, is a fine example of Powell's strong humanist inclination that we have seen multiple times already.

If we return now to the questions raised at the beginning of this section by Scheck, Surtz, and Gallagher's observations that Fisher was the most influential English theologian during Trent's deliberations on justification, we can draw some conclusions. Despite his influence during the council and contrary to Null's contention, Fisher's penitential theology was not actually representative of English penitential theology at this early stage of the Reformation. He stood alone in endorsing extra-sacramental justification. Henry VIII and More, by contrast, supported only intra-sacramental justification. Powell, as we have just seen, offered no insight on this question. He was more preoccupied with Luther's deviation from the penitential norm and the social instability that this could create, a concern brought on by his strong penchant for humanist learning. Taken alongside each other, these four men's discussions of penance were truly a representation of what orthodoxy entailed in this period of history. There were different perspectives on what was important, different theological views that, at times, seemed conflicting, and these differences were informed by varying levels of theological erudition, philosophical concerns, or the intended audiences of authors. But they all contributed to the consensus that was the whole.

Seeing the New Through the Old: Thomas More and the Faiths of Reformers:

In this era of postmodernity when historians have come to pluralise the past, conceiving of "Reformations" instead of "the Reformation" and "Christianities" instead of "Christianity," scholars have become increasingly attuned to the fluidity of Reformation ideas.¹⁴⁷ Alister McGrath has shown that despite embracing Luther's *sola fide* soteriology, English

¹⁴⁷ For examples, see Haigh, *English Reformations*, Lindberg, *European Reformations*, and Cameron, *European Reformation*, 2nd ed., 1.

evangelicals retained an older conception of justification than that held by Lutherans after about 1530.¹⁴⁸ English evangelicals adhered to the traditional Augustinian view that one is *made* righteous as the relationship between the person and God is restored, while Philipp Melanchthon, who took a leading role in the development of Lutheran theology in the 1530s, developed what is known as a forensic view of justification.¹⁴⁹ According to this position, the *aliena iustitia Christi* is conferred upon a person through faith, and he is then *proclaimed* righteous by God.¹⁵⁰ Robert J.D. Wainwright and Colin M. Donnelly have also noted differences between the Wittenberg reformers and English evangelicals, and both have stressed the importance of appreciating the intellectual independence of individual theologians as a result.¹⁵¹ Wainwright demonstrates that William Tyndale adapted Luther's soteriology and offered a vision of righteousness that placed the greatest emphasis on love for divine law, and Donnelly illustrates Thomas Bilney's deviation from Luther in insisting that works commanded by divine law, like sacramental confession, were necessary for justification, while invented human laws, like performing penitential acts, were not.¹⁵² But what did England's conservatives do when faced with these kinds of developments? Did their arguments change to meet them? Of our four authors, only Thomas More wrote against England's first evangelicals, and in examining his treatment of faith in his *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (1532-1533), this section provides some perspective on the answers to these questions. For the thesis more broadly, we saw in previous chapters how English conservatism reflected the evolving nature of late medieval orthodoxy due to the impact

¹⁴⁸ For the English evangelicals, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 228-230; for Melanchthon and forensic justification, see *Ibid.*, 209-211.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Luther also started to develop a conception of forensic justification early in the Reformation; for this, see O'Kelley, "Luther and Melanchthon," 33-34.

¹⁵⁰ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 209.

¹⁵¹ Robert J.D. Wainwright, "William Tyndale on Covenant and Justification," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 13, no. 3 (2011): 369; Donnelly, "'Wherefore Amend Your Lyves,'" 66.

¹⁵² Wainwright, "William Tyndale," 353-372; Donnelly, "'Wherefore Amend Your Lyves,'" 63-79.

that intellectual backgrounds and immediate social environments had on our authors of investigation. The analysis in this section considers whether reformist ideas themselves had any impact on conservative theological discourse.

In response to More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* of 1529, William Tyndale wrote *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* in 1531.¹⁵³ It was in reply to this (and to some extent the ideas of Robert Barnes) that More composed his *Confutation*, and despite all the attention it has garnered, scholars have been largely preoccupied with the work's literary elements along with its biblical interpretations and translations.¹⁵⁴ This is the case in the writings of E. Flesseman-van Leer, Allan K. Jenkins and Patrick Preston, David Weil Baker, Jamie H. Ferguson, and Gabriela Schmidt.¹⁵⁵ While some analyses have included discussion of More's rejection of the two kinds of faith described by Tyndale – historical faith and feeling faith – they have followed this pattern of being concerned primarily with hermeneutics, leaving us with only a fraction of the story and little regard for the theological perspectives from which More approached Tyndale's ideas.

Tyndale's differentiation between these two kinds of faith had its origins in Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* of 1521. It was here that Melanchthon introduced the concept of historical faith, which he understood as an "opinion" (*opinionem*) that what is

¹⁵³ David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 269; Tyndale, "Answer to Sir Thomas More," 5-215.

¹⁵⁴ More wrote against Barnes in the eighth book of his *Confutation*; for this, see More, "Confutation," 831-992.

¹⁵⁵ E. Flesseman-van Leer, "The Controversy About Scripture and Tradition Between Thomas More and William Tyndale," *Dutch Review of Church History* 43 (1960): 156-163; Allan K. Jenkins and Patrick Preston, *Biblical Scholarship and the Church: A Sixteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (London: Routledge, 2007), 81-148; David Weil Baker, "The Historical Faith of William Tyndale: Non-Salvific Reading of Scripture at the Outset of the English Reformation," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2009): 661-692; Jamie H. Ferguson, "Faith in the Language: Biblical Authority and the Meaning of English in More-Tyndale Polemics," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 43, no. 4 (2012): 989-1011; Gabriela Schmidt, "More Unites Them Than Divides Them: Thomas More and William Tyndale as Translators of the Bible," *Moreana* 62, no. 1 (2025): 65-86.

said about the biblical past is true.¹⁵⁶ Because this form of faith does not rely “upon the divine mercy promised in Christ,” it is not salvific.¹⁵⁷ Tyndale first adopted this distinction between an historical and salvific faith in his 1528 *Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, referring to the former as “an opinion or fained faith” and the latter simply as “faith.”¹⁵⁸ He used it again three years later in his *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, where he called them “historical faith” and “feeling faith” respectively.¹⁵⁹ In this last text, Tyndale provided an analogy to more clearly illustrate this dichotomy. To have historical faith, he explained, is like believing that a city was conquered by Turks based on the word of another person.¹⁶⁰ Tyndale regarded this as a weaker form of faith because if someone more trustworthy later informed us that the city was not conquered, then we would assume the first person lied and our faith would be lost.¹⁶¹ Salvific or feeling faith, by contrast, is not dependent on the word of a third party. It is the kind of belief a person would have from witnessing and experiencing the conquering of the city, as if he “were there present when it was won, and there were wounded, and had there lost all that he had.”¹⁶²

Tyndale saw historical faith as the faith of the established Church, but he believed that this faith defined by “comen fame and consent of many” corroded scriptural revelation.¹⁶³ For him, religious truth was conferred by God through feeling faith.¹⁶⁴ It was a

¹⁵⁶ Philipp Melanchthon, “Loci Communes,” in *Philipp Melanchthon, Loci Communes 1521, Lateinisch-Deutsch*, 2nd ed., trans. Horst Georg Pöhlmann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1997), 214; Philipp Melanchthon, “Loci Communes,” in *The Loci Communes of Philipp Melanchthon*, trans. Charles Leander Hill (Boston: Meador Press, 1944), 176; Baker, “Historical Faith,” 663 and 674-675.

¹⁵⁷ “Est itaque fides non aliud nisi fiducia misericordiae divinae promissae in Christo.” Melanchthon, “Loci Communes” (1997), 216-218; Melanchthon, “Loci Communes” (1944), 177; Baker, “Historical Faith,” 674-675.

¹⁵⁸ William Tyndale, *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (Antwerp, 1528), fol. ix^v-x^r; also see Baker, “Historical Faith,” 675.

¹⁵⁹ Tyndale, “Answer to Sir Thomas More,” 50.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 50-51; Ferguson, “Faith in the Language,” 999.

¹⁶⁴ Tyndale, “Answer to Sir Thomas More,” 51.

uniquely personal experience, disconnected from traditional pedagogy, and this deviation from the norm enabled Tyndale to justify his unconventional teachings, like his decision to render “ἐκκλησία” as “congregation” instead of “church,” and “μετανοέω” as “repent” instead of “do penance” in his 1526 translation of the New Testament from Greek into English.¹⁶⁵ When Ferguson, Baker, and Jenkins and Preston describe More’s rejection of Tyndale’s dichotomy of faiths, they all note More’s frequent appeal to the consensus of the Church. Ferguson observes that More was “fond of opposing individual heretics... to fifteen hundred years of ecclesiastic consensus;” Baker remarks that More believed the “combined force of consensus over the centuries [would] prevail” over the reformers; and Jenkins and Preston note that, for More, “tradition and the consensus of the faithful” were the two “tests to apply to determine the truth of conflicting interpretations of scripture” – the latter of which they call the “decisive criterion.”¹⁶⁶ Indeed, More belaboured the importance of enduring tradition and consensus in his *Confutation*:

But our doctours of these eyghte hundred yeres laste passed / all whome thys worthy wylde gose calleth draffe, do consente and agre wyth the olde holy doctours of the tother .vii. hundred yere a fore. And as well all those olde whom he dare not call but holy, as these other thousande whom he calleth draffe, drawe by one lyne all the mayny, to dreue Tyndale as a drudge of the deuyll out of Crystes chyrche for an heretyke.¹⁶⁷

Ferguson does not offer much more on Tyndale’s two faiths than this, but Baker and Jenkins and Preston also touch on More’s belief that Tyndale’s notion of feeling faith could lead to pedagogical anarchy.¹⁶⁸ Because of the inward nature of feeling faith, there is a level of uncertainty inherent to it. No one can be sure who possesses it, and because there is no

¹⁶⁵ Ferguson, “Faith in the Language,” 999; for Tyndale’s controversial translation choices, see Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 148-149.

¹⁶⁶ Ferguson, “Faith in the Language,” 999; Baker, “Historical Faith,” 684; Jenkins and Preston, *Biblical Scholarship*, 138-144.

¹⁶⁷ More, “Confutation,” 713; for another example, see *Ibid.*, 810-811.

¹⁶⁸ Baker, “Historical Faith,” 682-683; Jenkins and Preston, *Biblical Scholarship*, 141.

“good outwarde cause,” each person “muste defende hys fayth by hys onely felynge.”¹⁶⁹ As More suggested, this leads to an endless cycle of self-authentication: if “the Turkes and the lewes... defende theyr faythes” in this way and a Christian “can no ferther saye but that he feleth his to be trewe, & eche of theyrs false / may not eche of them answere hym that they fele theyrs to be trewe and hys false?”¹⁷⁰ As these three scholars have acknowledged, More saw the consensus of the Church as the “good outwarde cause” missing from Tyndale’s theory. It was the final arbiter of religious disagreements and the key to divine truth.¹⁷¹

While secondary literature has recognised that ecclesiastical consensus was central to More’s refutation of Tyndale, serving as his primary argument against the evangelical’s differentiation between two faiths, it has not appreciated the origin of this appeal. It was more than just a “test” or “decisive criterion,” to use the phrases of Jenkins and Preston.¹⁷² By pointing to the consensus of the Church, More was, as should now be evident, toeing the conservative line that had been toed for centuries. He was voicing the very definition of “orthodoxy,” as it was then understood. For More and his peers, Tyndale’s belief that the “comen fame and consent of many” could be discarded was not simply an imprudent recipe for chaos – it was nonsensical.¹⁷³ But even in recognising the importance of historical consensus, existing secondary literature’s interest in scriptural hermeneutics over theological intricacies has enabled another feature of More’s rejection of Tyndale’s dichotomy of faiths to be overlooked: his use of an older distinction between faiths to understand and refute Tyndale’s.

¹⁶⁹ More, “Confutation,” 812.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 812.

¹⁷¹ Baker, “Historical Faith,” 682-683; Jenkins and Preston, *Biblical Scholarship*, 141-143.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 142-143.

¹⁷³ Tyndale, “Answer to Sir Thomas More,” 50-51.

According to More, one of the problems with Tyndale’s distinction between historical faith and feeling faith was that it could not explain the soteriology involved in infant baptism. Augustine’s theory of original sin, a damnable condition passed down to every human being since the Fall, had the implication of condemning infants who died without having been baptised.¹⁷⁴ Baptism washed away original sin, and infused the infant with saving grace, imputing righteousness upon it.¹⁷⁵ It also infused the infant with faith, for according to Hebrews 6:11, “it is impossible to please God without faith.”¹⁷⁶ There was some speculation as to how exactly this was possible given that an infant possesses no capacity for rational thought. Bernard of Clairvaux and Peter Comestor both proposed that a child could be justified due to the faith of others, while Peter Abelard, doubtful that infants are capable of faith, suggested that children who die before obtaining rational faculties “are given a perception of the glory of God at their death, so that charity may be born within them.”¹⁷⁷ Towards the end of the twelfth century, a generally accepted solution was found in Aristotle’s idea of ἕξις (*habitus* or habit) presented in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹⁷⁸ For Aristotle, habit was essentially virtue in the realm of morality.¹⁷⁹ It was acquired through a process of habituation, in which virtue was practised and mastered over a period of time, becoming inherent to one’s disposition.¹⁸⁰ The *habitus* of Aristotle was absorbed into

¹⁷⁴ For Augustine and original sin, see William E. Mann, “Augustine on Evil and Original Sin,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, 2nd ed., ed. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 106-107; for original sin and baptism, see Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (London: Routledge, 2016), 65.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 65-67.

¹⁷⁶ “Sine fide autem impossibile est placere Deo.” Hebrews 11:6 (Vulg.). I have changed the wording of the Douay-Rheims translation; McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 170.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; Maarten Wisse, “*Habitus fidei*: An Essay on the History of a Concept,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no. 2 (2003): 174.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 174-175 and n. 9; for detailed accounts of Aristotelian habituation, see Karen Margrethe Nielsen, “Guided Practice Makes Perfect: Habituation into Full Virtue in Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *Habit and the History of Philosophy*, ed. Jeremy Dunham and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (London: Routledge, 2023), 22-36; Margaret

Christian theology, giving rise to a distinction between *virtus in actu* and *virtus in habitu*, found as early as Alan of Lille's *Theologiae regulae*, and the general idea of actual and habitual relations with respect to God.¹⁸¹

An actual relation was understood as a relation in which God was “thought of and willed as the end,” while an habitual relation was an actual relation that became habit.¹⁸² For example, a person might feed the poor for God’s sake, giving food while consciously thinking of God – this is an *actual* relation to God. Once this same person feeds the poor so frequently that it becomes second nature and God is not actively considered in the process, it is an *habitual* relation. This distinction was adopted to differentiate between actual and habitual faith, and in the context of infant baptism, it provided theologians with an explanation for how children could have faith prior to possessing rational faculties: when an infant was baptised, God infused it with habitual faith.¹⁸³ This was sufficient for the infant to receive salvation if it died soon afterwards, and because of the lack of consciousness required for habitual faith, it nullified the problem of children having faith despite being too young to possess rationality. The distinction between actual and habitual faith thus became common among thirteenth- and fourteenth-century theologians, including Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Gabriel Biel, and Thomas More approached Tyndale’s discussion of historical and feeling faith with this earlier medieval distinction top of mind.¹⁸⁴

Hampson, “Aristotle on the Nature of *Ethos* and *Ethismos*,” in *Habit and the History of Philosophy*, ed. Jeremy Dunham and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (London: Routledge, 2023), 37-50.

¹⁸¹ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 170.

¹⁸² Thomas M. Osborne, “Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus on Individual Acts and the Ultimate End,” in *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages: A Tribute to Stephen F. Brown*, ed. Kent Emery Jr., Russell L. Friedman, and Andreas Speer (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 352.

¹⁸³ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 170.

¹⁸⁴ For examples, see Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum*, IV, d.17, q.2, a.1, n. 214-215; Bonaventure, “Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi,” in *Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia, Tomus III*, ed. Patribus Collegii A. S. Bonaventura (Quaracchi: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1887), III, d.35, dub.2; Gabriel Biel, *Gabriel in tertium librum sententiarum* (Basel, 1508), III, d.23, q.2, a.1. Also see, Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 69.

When noting the challenge that baptism seemed to pose for Tyndale's dichotomy of faiths, More acknowledged the importance of faith to infant baptism by referencing Hebrews 6:11, and said that in baptism, God "infounded into [infants] his grace, the habyt of fayth hope & cheryte," and asked Tyndale "which kynde of fayth is this? the hystorycall fayth or the felyng fayth?"¹⁸⁵ More was begging the question, philosophically speaking: he approached Tyndale's distinction between historical and feeling faiths with the presupposition that a "habyt of fayth" is involved in baptism. Further evidence of this question begging is seen later in the passage. After supposing that an infant could not be infused with historical faith because "chylde haue not yet neyther redde nor herd many storyes," More concluded that Tyndale must believe they are infused with feeling faith:

God gyueth vunto euery chylde in the baptysme the habyte of that fayth that is suffycyent for saluacyon / but that is sayth Tyndale none but the felynge fayth / ergo by Tyndale the felynge fayth it is, wherof the habyt god infoundeth into euery chylde in the baptysme.¹⁸⁶

But the idea of habitual faith is not found anywhere in Tyndale's *Mammon, Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528) or his *Answer to Sir Thomas More*.¹⁸⁷ More was conceptualising Tyndale's theology according to a medieval framework to which Tyndale himself did not seem to subscribe.

The full extent of this reconceptualisation is shown immediately after the passage just quoted. Having established that Tyndale must consider feeling faith to be the habitual faith infused upon an infant through baptism, More surmised that Tyndale might argue that "the habyte of fayth is no fayth, bycause it is not actuall fayth."¹⁸⁸ But "yf habytuall fayth be no

¹⁸⁵ More, "Confutation," 822. Note that More mistakenly cited the biblical passage as Hebrews 10.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 823.

¹⁸⁷ Tyndale, *Mammon*; William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, in "A Critical Edition of William Tyndale's *The Obedience of a Christian Man*," ed. Anne Maureen Richardson (PhD diss., Yale University, 1976), 1-324; Tyndale, "Answer to Sir Thomas More," 5-215.

¹⁸⁸ More, "Confutation," 823.

fayth at all for lacke of actuall thynkyng theruppon,” More argued, then “dyeth euery man out of the fayth that happeth to dye in hys slepe,” even if he had “actuall fayth when he went to bedde.”¹⁸⁹ The reason was that no one is “saued for the fayth that he onys had, but for the fayth that he hath and in whyche he dyeth.”¹⁹⁰ More evidently believed that, for Tyndale, the ability to reason was inseparable from faith, both historical and feeling. And he appears to be correct: historical faith depended on one’s ability to grasp the telling of stories and feeling faith was experiential, involving an active appreciation of first-hand occurrences.¹⁹¹ But just as Tyndale did not present a notion of habitual faith, the concept of actual faith *qua* actual faith is wholly absent from his *Mammon*, *Obedience* and *Answer to Sir Thomas More*.¹⁹² What is significant here, though, is not only that More presupposed the existence of habitual faith when approaching Tyndale’s ideas, but that he then anticipated an objection by Tyndale that was itself based on the medieval distinction between actual and habitual faith, and then refuted this objection with the help of this same distinction. In short, More conceived of and dismissed Tyndale’s conception of historical and feeling faith in the context of three-hundred-year-old theology to which Tyndale did not appear to adhere.

Tyndale was not the only reformer whose ideas More framed in this way. Later in his *Confutation*, More wrote that while the “chyrche teacheth that the habytuail fayth is in the chylidren sufficyent” for salvation, Martin Luther taught “in his boke that he maketh agaynst the Anabaptistes... that the yonge chylidren haue infounded the very actuall fayth in dede.”¹⁹³ The book More was referring to was Luther’s *Von der Wiedertauf an zwei Pfarrherrn*, published in 1528, and as with Tyndale, the distinction between actual and

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Tyndale, “Answer to Sir Thomas More,” 50-51.

¹⁹² Tyndale, *Mammon*; Tyndale, “Obedience,” 1-324; Tyndale, “Answer to Sir Thomas More,” 5-215.

¹⁹³ More, “Confutation,” 824.

habitual faith never appears in its pages.¹⁹⁴ Luther came to openly reject this distinction in 1545, when he called them “mere tokens” derived from mixing “Aristotelian philosophy and theology” that have “obscured faith,” but he expressed disapproval of faith being described as a “habitus” as early as his *Von den guten Werken* in 1520.¹⁹⁵ With this in mind, the absence of references to actual and habitual faith in *Von der Wiedertauf* was likely deliberate, stemming from Luther’s principled rejection of the concepts themselves. But what, then, was More referring to? Luther argued that infants can have faith and “believe” even if “they do not speak or understand,” but the only evidence he provided was scriptural and it gave no insight into the workings of the phenomenon he was proposing.¹⁹⁶ He cited the story of Herod the Great’s slaughter of innocent children described in Matthew 2:16, and claimed that while the children were under two and “could not speak or understand... they were holy and blessed.”¹⁹⁷ He also quoted Matthew 19:14, “the kingdom of heaven belongs to children,” but the most relevant reference was to the story of John the Baptist in Luke 1:41: while Elizabeth was still pregnant with John, Christ spoke through his mother, Mary, causing John to leap in Elizabeth’s womb.¹⁹⁸ Luther interpreted this leap as evidence for John already having faith despite not yet possessing rational faculties.¹⁹⁹ It was an *act* of faith,

¹⁹⁴ Schuster, Marius, Lusardi, and Schoeck, “Commentary,” 1670; Martin Luther, “Concerning Rebaptism,” in *The Works of Martin Luther, Volume 40: Church and Ministry, Volume Two*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

¹⁹⁵ For 1545, see Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” in *The Works of Martin Luther, Volume 8: Lectures on Genesis, Volume Eight*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and trans. Paul D. Pahl (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 261; for the date of these lectures, see Jaroslav Pelikan, “Introduction to Volume 8,” in *The Works of Martin Luther, Volume 8: Lectures on Genesis, Volume Eight*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and trans. Paul D. Pahl (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), x. For 1520, see Martin Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” in *The Works of Martin Luther, Volume 44: Christian in Society, Volume One*, ed. James Atkinson and trans. W.A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 26.

¹⁹⁶ Luther, “Concerning Rebaptism,” 242; for little insight, see More, Schuster, Marius, Lusardi, and Schoeck, “Commentary,” 1670.

¹⁹⁷ Luther, “Concerning Rebaptism,” 242.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*; John S. Oyer, “The Writings of Luther Against the Anabaptists,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 27, no. 2 (1953): 105. The translation of Matthew 19:14 is from Luther, “Concerning Rebaptism,” 242.

which could conceivably be seen as emblematic of the medieval concept of actual faith, which was always active, as opposed to habitual faith, which was passive in infants. Again, More appears to have read the thought of the reformers through the lens of medieval theology, and he reformulated their ideas according to the teachings of this older tradition.

When faced with theological developments in the Reformation, More evidently remained steadfast in his constitution. As existing scholarship has recognised, he appealed to the consensus of the Church in his opposition to Tyndale's distinction between historical and feeling faith, but as we know from the early pages of this thesis, this was more than just an argument. It was the foundation of More's theology, inseparable from his conception of what was orthodox. It was so intrinsic to his thinking that he drew on longstanding theological concepts, like the distinction between actual and habitual faith, to understand, frame, and ultimately challenge the thought of his opponents – even when they personally rejected these concepts. An earlier generation of Reformation historians, those antedating the revisionists, might have taken this stubborn dependence on medieval ideas as an indication of the frailty of conservative theology. Conservatives like More, they would argue, were so stuck in their ways and tone-deaf to their interlocutors that they failed to see that the reformers had little use for the ideas to which the conservatives were holding them. Such a view, of course, misunderstands conservative thinking. For conservatives, the Church and its teachings were living history. Divine truth was revealed in its consensus, and the didactic mechanisms for understanding it, like the distinction between actual and habitual faith, were passed down through the Church's succession of doctors. It mattered little what reformers like Luther and Tyndale thought of traditional pedagogy. Conservatives saw it as the only legitimate way of thinking, and they thought and lived accordingly.

Conclusion:

In the realm of justification, the roots of our tree of English conservatism were just as varied as we saw in our discussion of eucharistic theology. John Fisher, Henry VIII and, to some extent, Thomas More, were united in positing attritionist views of penance, but the paths they took to reach this seemingly common end varied in direction. Far from representing the “typical” English position on penance, Fisher was the only one of these theologians to endorse a Scotist theory of extra-sacramental justification, albeit one modified slightly to avoid charges of Pelagianism. Henry VIII and More both insisted that the only road to justification after losing sanctifying grace was through the sacrament of penance itself. Two seemingly opposing theories therefore existed among England’s conservatives, but it was a contradiction entirely permitted within the parameters of Church teaching, and one that remained into the Council of Trent and beyond.²⁰⁰ Indeed, it was a discord archetypal of the “polyphonic harmony of many,” to use Jaroslav Pelikan’s phrase, that characterised late medieval orthodoxy.²⁰¹

Edward Powell may not have directly contributed to this debate on the sorrow involved in penance, but his defence of the sacrament’s traditional tripartite structure was representative of the organic nature of late medieval orthodoxy. The ideas supporting Church teachings, and the ways they were communicated, changed with the times, and Powell’s penchant for humanist learning was a notable example of this; it showed that our tree was still growing in the early sixteenth century. Powell was fundamentally concerned with Luther’s deviation from what was seen as universally believed (what was catholic) and so remained committed to the integrity of ecclesiastical consensus as it had been passed

²⁰⁰ Spykman, *Attrition and Contrition*, 4.

²⁰¹ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, Vol. 4, 79.

down. But for Powell, social stability was of similar gravity. His defence of penance, and confession in particular, was influenced by the humanist interest in the *res publica*. Considering this alongside his frequent rhetorical jabs, we can say that new branches shaped in a humanist style were growing over the more stringent scholastic methodologies of preceding centuries.

Thomas More's refutation of William Tyndale's distinction between historical and feeling faith likewise remained grounded in the consensus of the Church, orthodoxy as it was then perceived. And More's strategy of framing and rejecting Tyndale's ideas in the context of actual and habitual faith, a centuries-old distinction to which reformers did not adhere, speaks to the resilience of our tree of conservatism as it stood in the early Reformation. It drew its strength from the bequests of its history, and it did not matter how violently the reformers rustled its branches with their new definitions and revolutionary theories, they would not break.

Chapter 4

English Conservatism and the Freedom of the Human Will

One question that has never ceased to be in vogue is that of the nature of free will. Its origins were in the philosophical schools of Greek antiquity, where the concept, as we currently understand it, emerged among the Stoics.¹ In a Christian context, Justin Martyr (d. c. 165) was the first to treat it with some manner of detail, and it was later expounded by the early fathers, including Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Augustine.² As we saw in the previous chapter, free will became central to the *processus iustificationis* around the end of the twelfth century, and indeed the concept raised moral and ontological questions inseparable from soteriology.³ Is evil attributable to God? Do we have any control over our destiny? Are we culpable for any wrongdoing if our actions are predetermined? These questions were, perhaps inadvertently, brought to the fore of theological debate with Luther in the early sixteenth century, and how they were considered by the reformers' English opponents is the subject of this chapter.

As was the case in many areas of theology, the introduction of Aristotelian philosophy into Latin Christian thought in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries spurred a paradigm shift in understandings of human free will.⁴ Aristotle did not himself posit a concept of *a will*; rather, he had a concept of one's ability *to will* or want something.⁵

¹ Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, ed. A.A. Long (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 2-3.

² For Justin Martyr and the early Apostolic Fathers, see Matthew Knell, *Sin, Grace and Free Will: A Historical Survey of Christian Thought, Volume I: The Apostolic Fathers to Augustine* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2017), 21-25; for Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen respectively, see *Ibid.*, 35-43, 55-63 and 77-90; for Augustine, see *Ibid.*, 183-191 and 211-237; for more detail on Origen and Augustine's views on the will, see Frede, *A Free Will*, 102-124 and 153-174.

³ For this discussion, see pages 155-156.

⁴ Tobias Hoffmann, *Free Will and the Rebel Angels in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 1.

⁵ Frede, *A Free Will*, 19-20.

According to his theory of action, choices follow judgements about what is worth choosing, meaning that bad choices follow from faulty judgements.⁶ Before the thirteenth century, ideas about free will were based on second-hand readings of Augustine elucidated by the likes of Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Peter Lombard.⁷ Common to all their theories was the assumption that, if we can be held morally responsible for our actions, we must have the freedom to control them.⁸ With the subsumption of Aristotle's theory of action into discussions of the human will in the 1220s, the focus shifted from the relationship between free will and sin towards the relationship between the capacity for free choice on the one hand, and the intellect and will as two distinct powers of the soul on the other.⁹ What then emerged was a broad division between intellectualists, like Siger of Brabant (d. c. 1284), Godfrey of Fontaines (d. c. 1306), and to a moderate degree, Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274), and voluntarists, like Henry of Ghent (d. 1293), John Duns Scotus (d. 1308), and William of Ockham (d. 1347).¹⁰ While there were of course differences between their theories, those in the former camp generally conceived of free agency as rooted in the intellect, while those in the latter saw it as rooted in the will.¹¹ But despite these differences, there was an overarching consensus that free will exists. People could choose to will salvation, and with the help of God's grace, they could direct their actions towards it.

In the early years of the Reformation, this consensus came under fire. Luther challenged it in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, wherein he stipulated in the thirteenth

⁶ Hoffmann, *Free Will*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1 and 22.

¹⁰ For a detailed history of the debates between intellectualists and voluntarists, see *Ibid.*, 31-160; also see Tobias Hoffmann, "Intellectualism and Voluntarism," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, Vol. 1, rev. ed., ed. Robert Pasnau and Christina Van Dyke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 414-427.

¹¹ Hoffmann, *Free Will*, 5.

article that, since the Fall, free will has existed “in name only.”¹² The fourteenth and fifteenth articles subsequently explained that free will can do good only passively, though it retains its active capacity for the committing of evils.¹³ This idea was reiterated in Luther’s *Assertio omnium articulorum* of 1520, in which he argued that everything occurs out of absolute necessity and free will is therefore a label or fiction removed from reality.¹⁴ This text gave way to a debate between Luther and Erasmus on the nature of human free will which has been the subject of the majority of the scholarship on this issue as it occurred in the 1520s.¹⁵ Erasmus responded to Luther in 1524 with his *De libero arbitrio*, which drew largely on quotations from both the Old and New Testaments to present a conservative perspective on the human will in which God (or divine grace) was defined as the *causa principalis* of salvation, and human free will was the *minus principalis*.¹⁶ Erasmus was accused of Pelagianism for this formulation, and indeed his definition of “free will,” a “power of the human will by which man may be able to direct himself towards, or turn away from, what leads to eternal salvation,” has been the bane of many of Erasmus’s apologists attempting to duck these accusations.¹⁷ But Pelagianism was a common charge hurled against proponents

¹² “Liberum arbitrium post peccatum, res est de solo titulo, et dum facit quod in se est, peccat mortaliter.” Martin Luther, *95 Theses, the Heidelberg Disputation, and Other Theological Propositions Concerning Penance, Indulgences, Remission of Sins, Etc* (Wittenberg, 1550), 11; Martin Luther, “The Heidelberg Disputation,” in *The Works of Martin Luther, Volume 31: Career of the Reformer, Volume One*, ed. and trans. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 40.

¹³ “14) Liberum arbitrium post peccatum, potest in bonum, potentia subiectiva, in malum vero activa semper; 15) Nec in statu innocentiae potuit stare activa, sed subiectiva potentia, nedum in bonum proficere.” Luther, “95 Theses, Heidelberg Disputation,” 11; Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” 40.

¹⁴ Andrea Vestrucci, “Recalibrating the Logic of Free Will with Martin Luther,” *Theology and Science* 18, no. 3 (2020): 367; Luther, “Defense and Explanation,” 92.

¹⁵ For example, see Matthew Knell, *Sin, Grace and Free Will: A Historical Survey of Christian Thought, Volume II: From Anselm to the Reformation* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2018), 209-216; Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 156-181; and Vestrucci, “Recalibrating the Logic of Free Will,” 358-382.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 367; Desiderius Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio* (Mainz, 1524).

¹⁷ “Porro liberum arbitrium hoc loco sentimus, vim humanae voluntatis qua se possit homo applicare ad ea quae perducunt ad aeternam salutem, aut ab iisdem avertere.” *Ibid.*, sig. B3^r. Desiderius Erasmus, “De libero arbitrio,” in *Collected Works of Erasmus, Vol. 76: Controversies: De libero arbitrio, Hyperaspistes 1*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and trans. Peter Macardle and Clarence H. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 21; Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 158-159.

of traditional soteriology in general, even if only for polemical reasons, and Erasmus never shed the dependence on divine grace that set conservative theologians (in their own view anyway) apart from Pelagians. Luther responded to Erasmus's treatise in 1525 with his *De servo arbitrio*, in which he doubled down on his convictions regarding the human will. Soteriology, he argued, is strictly under divine purview, and to attribute any part of the salvific process to humanity detracts from the divine nature.¹⁸ The consequence of his view was that true free will is attributable to God alone.¹⁹

Whereas this exchange between Luther and Erasmus has seen significant scholarly focus, analyses of English conservative perspectives on free will are usually on the cursory side and are few and far between. This is rather surprising given that John Fisher devoted an entire section of his *Confutatio*, one spanning some seventy-six pages, to Luther's views on the human will a year before Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio* was published.²⁰ Some discussion of the will features in the introductory material of the Yale editions of the *Complete Works of Thomas More*, but it is merely descriptive and provides little by way of critical analysis.²¹ Edward Surtz and Richard Rex both touch on free will in their respective treatments of Fisher, but Surtz does not trace Fisher's ideas on the will to his medieval forebears, nor does he juxtapose Fisher against his peers, leaving us with a conception of Fisher's position on free will somewhat divorced from its wider context.²² And the perspective presented by Rex, as we will see shortly, is not supported by the primary sources.²³ T.A. Kenyon wrote an

¹⁸ Vestrucci, "Recalibrating the Logic of Free Will," 367-368; Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio Martini Lutheri ad D. Erasmum Roterodamum* (Wittenberg, 1562).

¹⁹ Vestrucci, "Recalibrating the Logic of Free Will," 368.

²⁰ Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLI-DCXVII.

²¹ Germain Marc'hadour, "The Historical Context," in *The Complete Works of Thomas More, Vol. 6: A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Thomas M.C. Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard C. Marius (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 459-461.

²² Surtz, *Works and Days*, 214-234.

²³ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 124-128.

intriguing piece published in 1983 in which he discussed More's conception of free will in *Utopia* (1516), but as is discussed below, he relies heavily on More's later writings and does not consider the fact that thought is not stagnant from one year to the next, let alone over nearly two decades.²⁴

This chapter seeks to remedy this gap and provide some understanding of the state of English conservative thought on the human will in the 1520s and early 1530s. Its contributions to wider historiography are twofold, and these contributions correspond with the two analytical sections of this chapter. The first section surveys the literature on Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio* and gives special attention to how his hope for theological compromise with the reformers shaped his writing on free will. It shows that this optimism has often been neglected by scholars examining Erasmus's position on free will, yet it influenced the style and composition of his *De libero arbitrio*. When this optimism is understood and juxtaposed against more traditional conservative writings on the will, like the section in John Fisher's *Confutatio*, we see that there was a spectrum within conservative theology emblematic of the heterogeneity of late medieval orthodoxy. Moderates like Erasmus were on one end and more ardent traditionalists, like Fisher, were on the other.

The chapter's second section contrasts Fisher's well formulated position on free will early in the Reformation with the lack of information on the subject found in comparable works by Henry VIII and Thomas More from the early 1520s. It then traces the evolution of English objections to the Lutheran conception of a passive human will and highlights a gradual movement towards argumentative unity over the course of the 1520s. In doing so, it

²⁴ T.A. Kenyon, "The Problem of Freedom and Moral Behaviour in Thomas More's *Utopia*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (1983): 349-373.

demonstrates that, like the process that was late medieval orthodoxy, some aspects of English conservatism were moulded by the Reformation. It was under the pressures of reformist thought that English conservatives were forced to develop and elucidate their views on free will. They may have adhered firmly to the longstanding consensus that free will exists and is central to the salvific process, but some of their ideas evolved and crystallised due to the circumstances around them.

Given Powell's prominence in the earlier chapters of this thesis, it should be noted that an analysis of his work does not feature in this chapter. Powell made no mention of the will in his *Propugnaculum*. As no other writings of his are extant, we cannot comment on his understanding of the human will beyond a conjecture, based on his strict alignment with the teachings of the established Church, that he would have adhered to the traditional view that the human will is active in the salvific process.

The Conservative Extremes: Free Will in the Thought of John Fisher and Erasmus:

Among Europe's early sixteenth-century Christian humanists, there is scarcely a name more ingrained in the minds of historians than that of Erasmus. But despite his fame, Erasmus was not initially eager to become involved in Reformation discourse. In the movement's earlier years, he kept largely silent on what was happening across Europe, a quiescence that Brian Cummings has attributed to personal religious motives: by remaining silent, Erasmus could enable ecclesiastical reform while avoiding charges of heresy towards himself.²⁵ In 1521, he wrote letters to both Pope Leo X and the Lutheran reformer Justus Jonas insisting that he had never read Luther's writings, purportedly attempting to save face within the established

²⁵ Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 147.

Church.²⁶ Likewise, in 1523 Erasmus distanced himself from Luther's cause in his *Spongia*, a text written in response to the Lutheran Ulrich von Hutten's charges that Erasmus was a fair-weather friend who always sided with the victors, but his address of the text's preface to Zwingli has been described as an attempt to remain favourable in the eyes of proponents of the evangelical movement.²⁷ When it became clear that Erasmus's reluctance to involve himself would cost him the respect of Catholic patrons, however, he was forced to engage with the reformers directly, and he chose the freedom of the human will as his battle ground for doing so.²⁸

Erasmus cast his first stone at Luther with *De libero arbitrio*, published in 1524. When Luther responded with *De servo arbitrio* in 1525, Erasmus wrote on the subject of the will again in *Hyperaspistes* I and II in 1526 and 1527 respectively.²⁹ Even though he entered the fray on the side of conservatives, Erasmus's position on free will, particularly in *De libero*

²⁶ "Lutherum non novi, nec libros illius unquam legi, nisi forte decem aut duodecim pagellas, easque carptim." Desiderius Erasmus to Pope Leo X, 1520, in *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami, Vol. IV: 1519-1521*, ed. P.S. Allen and H.M. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), 345; Desiderius Erasmus to Pope Leo X, 1520, in *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1122-1251 (1520-1521)*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 50. "Lutheri libros hactenus non vacavit legere." Desiderius Erasmus to Justus Jonas, 1521, in *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami, Vol. IV: 1519-1521*, ed. P.S. Allen and H.M. Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), 487; Desiderius Erasmus to Justus Jonas, 1521, in *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1122-1251 (1520-1521)*, trans. R.A.B. Mynors (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 202-203; Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 147.

²⁷ For Erasmus as a fair-weather friend, see Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 148; for Erasmus and the preface being addressed to Zwingli, see James D. Tracy, "Introductory Note: The Sponge of Erasmus Against the Aspirations of Hutten," in *Collected Works of Erasmus, Vol. 78: Controversies: Spongia, Detectio praestigiarum, Epistola, contra pseudevangelicos, Epistola ad fratres inferiores Germaniae, Admonitio adversus mendacium, Purgatio adversus epistolam Lutheri*, ed. James D. Tracy and Manfred Hoffmann (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 24; also see Desiderius Erasmus, "The Sponge of Erasmus Against the Aspirations of Hutten," in *Collected Works of Erasmus, Vol. 78: Controversies: Spongia, Detectio praestigiarum, Epistola, contra pseudevangelicos, Epistola ad fratres inferiores Germaniae, Admonitio adversus mendacium, Purgatio adversus epistolam Lutheri*, ed. and trans. James D. Tracy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 30-32; Desiderius Erasmus, "Spongia adversus aspergines Hutteni," in *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, Vol. IX-1, ed. C. Augustijn (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1982), 117-118.

²⁸ James D. Tracy, "General Introduction," in *Collected Works of Erasmus, Vol. 78: Controversies: Spongia, Detectio praestigiarum, Epistola, contra pseudevangelicos, Epistola ad fratres inferiores Germaniae, Admonitio adversus mendacium, Purgatio adversus epistolam Lutheri*, ed. James D. Tracy and Manfred Hoffmann (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), xi.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

arbitrio, came under heavy criticism by his peers. They saw Erasmus as being too sparing in his prose and too forgiving of Luther, as though he was insincere in his conservatism and hiding an affinity for the reformers. Alberto Pio, Prince of Carpi, complained in 1526 that Erasmus merely discussed free will in *De libero arbitrio* without making any firm pronouncements in favour of it.³⁰ Erasmus's "modesty," he charged, was "unbefitting, foolish, and timid."³¹ Similarly, in 1525 Jacques Masson (also known as Jacobus Latomus), a theologian at the University of Leuven, ridiculed the exchange between Erasmus and Luther on free will, though less forwardly than Pio, and then outlined his own understanding of the conservative position on the subject.³²

Scholars writing on free will in the 1520s are familiar with the controversies around Erasmus's discussion of the topic and yet their analyses collectively highlight an historiographical paradox.³³ Despite their acknowledgements of the issues that other theologians took with Erasmus's work on the will, literature on free will as it was understood in the 1520s remains preoccupied entirely with the exchange between Luther and Erasmus. In other words, Erasmus, though purportedly on the fringes of conservatism where free will was concerned, is the primary voice of conservatism presented in existing literature. We see this, for instance, in Charles Trinkaus's "The Problem of Free Will in the Renaissance and Reformation," which considers the exchange between Erasmus and Luther, in addition to earlier discussions on free will by Italian humanists, like Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola,

³⁰ Erika Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics II: 1523-1536* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf Publishers, 1989), 115 and 117-118; Alberto Pio, *Ad Erasmi Roterodami expostulationem responsio accurata et paraenetica, Martini Lutheri et asseclarum eius haeresim vesanam magnis argumentis, et iustis rationibus confutans* (Paris, 1529), fol. 26^v-27^r.

³¹ "Da veniam meae libertati, indecora, inepta et timida visa mihi est cum multis modestia tua." *Ibid.*, fol. 27^r.

³² Jacobus Latomus, *Opera quae praecipue adversus horum temporum haereses conscripsit* (Leuven, 1550), fol. 174^{r-v}; Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics*, 9 and 13.

³³ For example, see Trinkaus, "Introduction," lxxvii-lxxviii; Rummel, *Erasmus and his Catholic Critics II*, vii; Kroeker, "Erasmus and Luther," 100-101.

Lorenzo Valla, and Pietro Pomponazzi, but there is no mention of other authors who wrote against Luther on the will from the same period.³⁴ Far more recently, the writings of Brian Cummings, Matthew Knell, and Andrea Vestrucci on free will only consider the debate between Luther and Erasmus; the concept in wider theology from the period is entirely ignored.³⁵

Cummings attributes this fascination with Erasmus and Luther's exchange on free will to the celebrity status of the two authors.³⁶ While it may be classified as resulting from historical fame, the historiographical tendency to focus on the reformers from 1517 onwards, the shortcoming that is a starting point of this thesis, is likely to blame as well. The first of Luther's works concerned entirely with the will was his *De servo arbitrio*, and as this was a response to Erasmus, the exchange between the two men is a natural point of analysis for historians and theologians alike. Indeed, in the previously mentioned works of Knell and Vestrucci, the primary concern is with the thought of Luther. Erasmus is only discussed because of how Luther structured his *De servo arbitrio*. But to consider only Erasmus and completely miss the role of other theologians in this important debate of the early Reformation gives us a diminished sense of European conservative theology and, by extension, a false sense of history. Its implications are twofold. Firstly, it has caused us to lose sight of the ecclesiastical optimism that lies at the heart of Erasmus's writings on the will, namely his desire to mitigate the vitriolic schism that had occurred in western

³⁴ For Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, see Charles Trinkaus, "The Problem of Free Will in the Renaissance and Reformation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10, no. 1 (1949): 56-57 and 59-60 respectively; for Luther and Erasmus, see *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁵ Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 144-184; Knell, *Sin, Grace and Free Will*, Vol. II, 207-217; Vestrucci, "Recalibrating the Logic of Free Will," 358-382.

³⁶ Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 148.

Christendom and promote civil theological discourse.³⁷ The second flows somewhat from the first: in the rare case when another early sixteenth-century conservative theologian's views on free will are considered, namely John Fisher in Richard Rex's discussion of his theology, this other conservative authority is misleadingly likened to Erasmus.³⁸ Together, these implications have precluded us from appreciating conservatism as the spectrum that it was, with the harsh tone and greater propensity to draw on medieval theology of men like Fisher on the one end and the temperance of Erasmus on the other. This section endeavours to illustrate these two extremes and evince the need for historians to consider perspectives on the will posited by proponents of conservative theology who have hitherto remained in shadow.

Given the amount that has been written about Erasmus's role in this exchange on free will, it is best to have an overview of his argument and what has been said about it before juxtaposing it against Fisher's defence of free will in his *Confutatio*. As was briefly explained in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, Erasmus's discussion of free will was based primarily on scriptural passages supplemented with references to mainly patristic, though occasionally scholastic, authorities. He held that God (or divine grace) is the *causa principalis* of salvation while the human will is the *minus principalis*.³⁹ Corrupted by sin, he believed, the human will is incapable of being directed towards anything good on its own. It requires the help of God's grace. Free will, however, nevertheless exists because it cooperates with grace to propel one towards salvation. Erasmus illustrated this idea with a metaphor towards the end of *De libero arbitrio*: it is like a child who walks shakily, but

³⁷ Greta Grace Kroeker has recently brought this optimism back into the light: Kroeker, "Erasmus and Luther," 95-100.

³⁸ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 124. Thomas P. Scheck also compared Fisher and Erasmus, but this was a broader comparison than just free will; for this, see Scheck, "Bishop John Fisher's Response," 491-492.

³⁹ Vestrucci, "Recalibrating the Logic of Free Will," 367.

nevertheless autonomously towards the apple held in his father's hand.⁴⁰ In this example, the child is too young to walk. He still tries, but falls while attempting to do so. The child's father helps him back up and shows him an apple placed a short way off. The young child wants to run towards this apple, but would fall again if he tried to do so because his limbs are too weak. He therefore relies on the guiding hand of his father for support and direction, and with this paternal aid, he is able to reach the apple, which is then given to him by his father as a reward. The child relies entirely on his father in approaching, reaching and ultimately obtaining the apple, yet he has still done something on his own: he has chosen to lean on his father's hand and obey his direction. For Erasmus, a person's path to salvation is the same as the child's path towards the apple: he must rely on God's grace but has the capacity to accept both God's grace and direction. This autonomy is free will.⁴¹

The essence of this position is by no means untraditional, but Erasmus's methodology has been interpreted in different ways. Erika Rummel regards Erasmus's approach as defined by an underlying Christian scepticism in the Pyrrhonian sense: Erasmus, she explains, considered scriptural and patristic passages that appeared to either endorse or deny free will in his deliberations on the topic.⁴² Finding evidence on either side of the divide, Erasmus remarked that he would be happy to suspend judgement on the matter in the manner of the Sceptics, but as ambivalence is not a path open to Christians, Rummel explains, Erasmus deferred to the authority of the Church, which has always endorsed an active free will.⁴³

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. F7^v-F8^v; Erasmus, "De libero arbitrio," 80-81.

⁴² Erika Rummel, "The Theology of Erasmus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31. For a similar perspective, see Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 164.

⁴³ Rummel, "Theology of Erasmus," 32.

Cummings, writing two years before Rummel, denies that Erasmus was a religious sceptic; in fact, citing similar perspectives in the writings of Hubert Jedin and Johan Huizinga, he believes that Erasmus's apparent scepticism has been overstated.⁴⁴ He frames the exchange between Erasmus and Luther on free will as a "literary quarrel" centred on biblical hermeneutics.⁴⁵ The crux of Erasmus's argument, according to Cummings, is an "ought implies can" principle: the number of exhortations to do good in the Bible indicates that humanity has the capacity to do this good. Humanity must therefore have a degree of autonomy of will, a free will capable of being directed towards good. We will take a closer look at this principle below as Fisher made a similar argument, but for Cummings, this principle enabled Luther to charge Erasmus with grammatical Pelagianism: even though Erasmus conceded that a person can only do good with the help of God's grace, his reliance on biblical commands as evidence for an active free will entailed that humanity must be able to fulfil these commands without grace.⁴⁶

This principle is also relevant in the work of Aku Visala and Olli-Pekka Vainio, but it is not as central to their reading of the exchange between Luther and Erasmus. They see the debate on free will in philosophical rather than literary terms. At play were three principles, which they refer to as follows: (1) the "Anti-Pelagian Constraint," which holds that humans cannot will any good on their own without the help of divine grace; (2) the "Responsibility Principle," that humans are morally responsible in the eyes of God; (3) free will, the definition for which they take as self-evident. In their characterisation, Erasmus argued that the Responsibility Principle requires free will to exist, whilst Luther claimed that Erasmus

⁴⁴ Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 172.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 and 174-175.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

must reject free will because it is at odds with the Anti-Pelagian Constraint.⁴⁷ The “ought implies can” principle, which is so central to Cummings’s analysis, merely serves as a support for the Responsibility Principle in the eyes of Visala and Vainio, and can be found in theological debates long before the sixteenth century.⁴⁸

These authors provide varying conceptions of Erasmus’s method in his debate with Luther on free will, but very little has been made of the perspective with which he approached this debate, and this perspective inevitably shaped his method of argumentation. Greta Grace Kroeker has recently noted that Erasmus’s work on free will, particularly his *De libero arbitrio*, was defined by a “theology of compromise.”⁴⁹ He worked hard in this treatise, she claims, to avoid asserting too firm a position on free will and left room for doctrinal disagreements.⁵⁰ However much Erasmus disagreed with Luther’s hostile tone and schismatic tendencies, he did agree with some of his criticisms of Church corruption, monastic extremism and clerical ignorance, and was committed to theological moderation and civil discussion.⁵¹ By juxtaposing Erasmus’s treatise with the harsher position of the will presented by Fisher, this analysis follows Kroeker in finding that Erasmus’s *De libero arbitrio* was shaped by an ecclesiastical optimism that placed him on the moderate end of the conservative spectrum.

Before getting into the argumentative details of Erasmus and Fisher’s discussions on free will, it is worth appreciating the different tones they established for themselves at the

⁴⁷ Aku Visala and Olli-Pekka Vainio, “Erasmus versus Luther: A Contemporary Analysis of the Debate on Free Will,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62, no. 3 (2020): 311, 313 and 318-322.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 319; for ought implies can and earlier debates, see Jesse Couenhoven, “The Indicative in the Imperative: On Augustinian Oughts and Cans,” in *Free Will and Classical Theism: The Significance of Freedom in Perfect Being Theology*, ed. Hugh J. McCann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 71-92.

⁴⁹ Kroeker, “Erasmus and Luther,” 98-99.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

beginning of their respective writings on the subject. Erasmus, staying true to his optimistic outlook, began *De libero arbitrio* by framing the debate on free will as just another disagreement in the realm of scriptural interpretation: “Among the many difficulties encountered in Holy Scripture,” Erasmus claimed, “there is hardly a labyrinth more impenetrable than that of free will.”⁵² By framing his treatise in this way, Erasmus put himself on the same plane as Luther, who, as Erasmus himself acknowledged, only gave theological credence to the authority of scripture.⁵³ Positioning his work as a simple discussion of scriptural interpretation set the tone for an amicable exchange between theologians within the universal Church. It avoided the more critical ostracisation of Luther that one expects to find in a conservative polemic and so reflects the moderate optimism with which Erasmus approached this debate in 1524.

Fisher began his treatment of free will in his *Confutatio* in a manner quite different from Erasmus’s more courteous spirit. He first noted Luther’s claim that free will has existed only in name since the Fall and then immediately synonymised Luther’s view with heresy. Fisher proclaimed that free will has always been “like a rock to the presumptuous and exceedingly bold minds of heretics, upon which those who struck suffered a serious shipwreck.”⁵⁴ He then employed the tactic common among conservative theologians of the period: he constructed a genealogy of heresies related to the subject at hand to portray his opponent as simply another link in the long chain of heretics who have troubled the Church

⁵² “Inter difficultates, quae non paucae occurrunt in divinis literis, vix ullus Labyrinthus inexplicabilior quam de libero arbitrio.” Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. A2^r; Erasmus, “De libero arbitrio,” 5.

⁵³ “Iam quando Lutherus non recipit auctoritatem ullius scriptoris, quantumvis approbati, sed tantum audit Scripturas Canonicas, sane quam libens amplectar hoc laboris compendium.” Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. A7^r; Erasmus, “De libero arbitrio,” 14.

⁵⁴ “Liberum arbitrium praesumptuosis, et plus satis audacibus haereticorum ingeniis, semper velut scopulus erat, in quem impingentes grave sunt naufragium passi.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLII.

since its beginnings.⁵⁵ He described the Manicheans as having posited the existence of two minds in an individual, one good and the other evil, with the former associated with the spirit and the latter with the flesh.⁵⁶ They regarded these two minds as being in “mutual conflict” and they believed free will to be incapable of avoiding the sins brought on by the evil mind.⁵⁷ Fisher then made a brief comment on the Jovinianists, whom he described as denying that baptised people can sin, before turning his attention to the Pelagians, who believed that “free will, by its own strength, can avoid each and every sin” and that grace is unnecessary for doing good.⁵⁸ Fisher then ended his enumeration with mention of the Wycliffites, who, he claimed, denied freedom of choice under the belief that “everything happens by a certain necessity and nothing at all happens by chance.”⁵⁹

Heresies involving free will were not afforded nearly as much time in Erasmus’s *De libero arbitrio*; at least they were not concentrated in one area of the treatise nor were they presented as a primary element of criticism. They were scattered throughout and used to supplement Erasmus’s claims. For instance, Erasmus referenced both Manichaeus and Pelagius in his discussion of faith, but as examples of those who have taken the wrong path when trying to “extricate themselves from [the] difficulties” found in the tension between “the justice and mercy of God” (which Erasmus thought was quelled by free will) – they were

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; for the commonality of this practice, see Cameron, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Post-Reformation,” 100; for other examples of this, see pages 43-45 and 82-84.

⁵⁶ “Manichei primum, duas in homine mentes faciunt alteram, quam dicunt malam, et substantiam quamdam mentis adversae, nimirum eandem, quam et nos vocamus concupiscentiam carnis. Alteram aiunt esse mentem bonam, quam et nos vocamus spiritum.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLII.

⁵⁷ “Has duas asserunt in hominibus mutuam habere conflictum, quum caro concupiscit adversus spiritum, et spiritus adversus carnem.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ “Iovinianistae... negent quempiam accepto regenerationis lavacro, peccare posse... Post hos exorti sunt Pelagiani, quorum haeresis est, quod liberum arbitrium, suis viribus quodque peccatum vitare posset: neque egeat gratia, qua bonum faciat, sed qua facilius operetur.” *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Emersit demum et Vviclesus, cuius sectatores asserunt, cuncta necessitate quadam provenire, et nihil omnino fieri contingenter...” *Ibid.*

not cited as part of a harsh attack on Luther.⁶⁰ Similarly, early in his treatise, Erasmus advised his readers that if he seemed to match Luther “on the basis of scriptural testimonies and sound arguments,” they should consider “the long list of highly learned men approved by the consensus of very many centuries” who shared Erasmus’s view.⁶¹ He then listed them:

Origen, Basil, John Chrysostom, Cyril, John Damascene, and Theophylact...
Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine... Thomas,
Scotus, Durandus, Capreolus, Gabriel, Giles, Gregory, [and] Alexander... not to
mention the authority of the many universities, councils, and popes.⁶²

In denying free will, Erasmus then asserted, Luther was preceded only by Manichaeus, Wycliffe, and the fifteenth-century Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla.⁶³ Unlike Fisher’s more forceful enumeration of historical heresies, Erasmus cited them here to show his readers that Luther’s teachings deviated far from the perennial norm. He did not employ the word “heretic” in this passage, but pointed to the consensus of the Church, the very definition of “orthodoxy,” and urged his readers to adhere to it. Evidently, the consensus that lay at the heart of conservative theology, and indeed Fisher’s thought as we saw in previous chapters, was central to Erasmus’s theology as well. He just conveyed it far more gently than Fisher.

⁶⁰ “[Quando libertas arbitrii tollitur] non video quo pacto possit explicari quaestio de iustitia, deque misericordia dei. Ex huiusmodi angustiis, cum sese non explicarem veteres, quidam duos deos facere coacti sunt... Manichaeus... duas in homine naturas somniavit, alteram quae non posset non peccare, alteram quae non posset non benefacere. Pelagius dum metuit iustitiae dei, plus satis tribuit libero arbitrio.” Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. F6^{r-v}; Erasmus, “De libero arbitrio,” 78.

⁶¹ “Et tamen illud interim lectorem admonitum velim, si scripturae divinae testimoniis ac solidis rationibus videbimur cum Luthero paria facere, ut tum denique sibi ponat ob oculos tam numerosam seriem eruditissimorum virorum, quos in hunc usque diem tot seculorum consensus approbavit.” Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. A7^r; Erasmus, “De libero arbitrio,” 15.

⁶² “Origenes, Basilius, Chrysostomus, Cyrillus, Joannes Damascenus, Theophylactus... Tertullianus, Cyprianus, Arnobius, Hilarius, Ambrosius, Hieronymus, Augustinus... Thomas, Scotos, Durandos, Capreolos, Gabrieles, Aegidios, Gregorios, Alexandros... utque interim semoveam tot Academiaram, conciliorum, ac summorum Pontificum auctoritatem.” Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. A7^r; Erasmus, “De libero arbitrio,” 15.

⁶³ “A temporibus apostolorum ad hunc usque diem, nullus adhuc scriptor extitit, qui in totum tolleret vim liberi arbitrii, praeter unum Manichaeum et Ioannem Vviclevum. Nam Laurentii Vallae, qui propemodum videtur cum his sentire, auctoritas non multum habet apud theologos ponderis.” Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. A7^r; Erasmus, “De libero arbitrio,” 15.

In summary, then, Fisher and Erasmus began their discussions of free will in two very different ways. Fisher rattled his sabre against Luther from his introductory paragraphs, levying the charge of heresy from the outset and tracing a line to Luther from the heretics of the Church's past. Erasmus, by contrast, was far more reserved. He tried to level with Luther and opened with a diplomatic tone reflective of the theology of compromise described by Greta Grace Kroeker. While he also referenced historical heretics, it was to supplement or contextualise his discussion; it was not a polemical strategy to chastise Luther. Erasmus and Fisher were apparently on two opposing ends of the same room, but as we will now see, this did not stop them from making the same argument against Luther.

Both Erasmus and Fisher posited a position on free will that seemed divorced from the thirteenth-century perspectives inspired by Aristotelian action theory. It was predicated on the definition of "sin" and its relationship to free will, much like the arguments posed by patristic authorities. The idea was that one cannot be culpable for an action – an action cannot be deemed sinful – if one does not possess the freedom to choose to act differently. If a man kills another man, the argument goes, he cannot be held responsible for the murder if he did not have the freedom to choose not to kill. For a person to be rendered guilty and endure punishment for actions not actually under his control would make God unjust.

Keeping with his intention of meeting Luther on his own scriptural plane, Erasmus took Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 15:14-18 as his starting point, using it as the very basis of free will:

God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel. He added his commandments and precepts. If thou wilt keep the commandments and perform acceptable fidelity forever, they shall preserve thee. He hath set water and fire before thee: stretch forth thy hand to which

thou wilt. Before man is life and death, good and evil, that which he shall choose shall be given to him.⁶⁴

Working from the notion conveyed in this passage that discretionary liberty was imbued in humanity from the time of creation, Erasmus enumerated passages first from the Old Testament, such as Deuteronomy 30:15-19 and Isaiah 1:19-20, and then from the New Testament, like Matthew 19:17 and John 14:15, that contain moral imperatives to show that evidence for an active human will permeates the entirety of the Bible.⁶⁵ The idea, as it has been described in other analyses of Erasmus's work, is that "ought implies can:" for scripture to contain directives like that in Isaiah 1:19-20, "if you are willing and obey me, you will eat the good things of the earth; but if you are not willing and will not obey me, the sword will devour you," statements that urge one to act a certain way and so insinuate that one has the capacity for choice, people must be able to choose.⁶⁶ They must, ergo, have an active free will.

In presenting this argument, Erasmus did invoke the writings of Church fathers, such as Tertullian, Augustine and Jerome, but these were largely supplementary supports intended to further exemplify the existence of the active free will that Erasmus's scripture-based argument already made clear.⁶⁷ Indeed, they tended to be referenced only after biblical passages were discussed. After the list quoted above of patristic and scholastic authorities who have endorsed an active free will, there was little mention of these authors

⁶⁴ "Deus ab initio constituit hominem, et reliquit illum in manu consilii sui. Adiecit mandata et praecepta sua: si volueris mandata conservare, conservabunt te, et in perpetuum fidem placitam servare. Apposuit tibi aquam et ignem, ad quod volueris, porrige manum tuam. Ante hominem vita et mors, bonum et malum, quod placuerit ei, dabitur illi." Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. B3^r. Translation from Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 157.

⁶⁵ Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. C1^v and sig. C5^r; Erasmus, "De libero arbitrio," 34 and 39-40.

⁶⁶ "Si volueritis et audieritis me, quae bona sunt terrae comedetis, si vero nolueritis, neque audieritis me, gladius vos consumet." Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. C1^v; Biblical translation taken from Erasmus, "De libero arbitrio," 34. For "ought" implying "can," see Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 161, and Visala and Vainio, "Erasmus versus Luther," 319.

⁶⁷ Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 158-159.

until the pages after Erasmus's scriptural discussion.⁶⁸ When they were mentioned earlier, they tended to be references to patristic interpretations of biblical passages or at least followed a more concentrated discussion of scripture.⁶⁹ There was very much an authoritative hierarchy in Erasmus's presentation of this argument. Scripture took precedence and patristic and (occasionally) scholastic authorities came second, which was in line with Erasmus's diplomatic approach to Luther. He focussed on scripture because it was the only authority that Luther purported to recognise, and he appealed to other authors merely to show that others came to comparable conclusions through scriptural readings similar to his own.

Fisher's presentation of this argument was somewhat of an inverse to that of Erasmus: patristic authorities were Fisher's starting point, while scripture was woven into his prose to bolster the *Confutatio's* argumentative force; there was no evident authoritative hierarchy. Fisher introduced the argument by referencing Augustine's *De vera religione*: "If we do not do evil by our own will, no one is able to be blamed or admonished at all."⁷⁰ He followed this with comparable references to Jerome, Ambrose and Tertullian, and only then invoked the reference to Sirach 15 that Erasmus depended on so heavily before returning again to patristic references with a mention of the thought of John Chrysostom.⁷¹ The argument was the same, but Fisher differed from Erasmus in how he reached and conveyed it. Fisher was not bound by Erasmus's self-imposed limitation of focussing on scripture because, as we saw from his initial vitriolic tone, he was less interested in promoting

⁶⁸ For the introductory list of early Church authorities, see Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. A7^v and Erasmus, "De libero arbitrio," 15; for Tertullian and Augustine after the discussion of scripture, see Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. F6^v and Erasmus, "De libero arbitrio," 78-79.

⁶⁹ For the scriptural interpretations of Jerome and Origen, see Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. D2^r and Erasmus, "De libero arbitrio," 47; for Augustine following a more concentrated scriptural analysis, see Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. B6^v and Erasmus, "De libero arbitrio," 30.

⁷⁰ "Si non voluntate malefacimus, nemo obiurgandus est omnino, aut monendus." Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLIII.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, DXLIII-DXLV.

dialogue with Luther and more concerned with defending the Church's traditional teachings. While Erasmus also sought to defend these teachings, he wrote with the perhaps quixotic hope that the schism that had occurred could be mended. Both men had a common goal, but different objectives in attaining it, and these differing objectives led to varying means of argumentation.

They also led to the use of different authorities and ideas. Fisher was, on the whole, far more willing to appeal to medieval theology than Erasmus, as is evident from Fisher's explanation of how he believed "freedom" to be understood in scripture. He described three divisions that were present neither in Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio* nor in his later *Hyperaspistes* I or II: *libertas naturae* (freedom of nature), *libertas gratiae* (freedom of grace) and *libertas gloriae* (freedom of glory).⁷²

Libertas naturae, as Fisher explained it, refers to the freedom "to will or not to will."⁷³ It involves day-to-day decisions like the freedom "to work in fields, to eat or drink, or to seek a wife" as well as choices to do bad, like to "worship idols, murder or commit adultery."⁷⁴ It is natural freedom of choice.

Libertas gratiae is a freedom enjoyed only by those "who exist in a state of grace and are godly."⁷⁵ It is the freedom one has when one is able "to will meritoriously" (meritorie velle), to wish to do good in the eyes of God, and it is only attainable with the help of God.⁷⁶

⁷² Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLVII.

⁷³ "Prima harum libertatum est esse posse velle, aut nolle." *Ibid.*, DXLVIII.

⁷⁴ "De bonis primum, ut velle in agro laborare, velle manducare et bibere... uxorem velle ducere... De malis vero subiicit, ut velle idolum colere, velle homicidium, velle adulterium facere..." *Ibid.*, DXLVII.

⁷⁵ "Et haec libertas non nisi piorum hominum est, et existentium in gratia." *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, DXLVIII.

Libertas gloriae is not something that is attainable in this life. It is a freedom from all corruption and is attainable only in heaven.⁷⁷ It enables one to effectively execute whatever one wills.⁷⁸

While Fisher claimed that these three classifications of freedom are found in the scriptures, scripture only explicitly mentions *libertas gloriae*.⁷⁹ It is named in Romans 8:21: “Because even the creature itself shall be delivered from the servitude of corruption into the *libertatem gloriae* of the children of God.”⁸⁰ The other two *libertates* are neither mentioned in the Bible, nor can they be found in Augustine’s writings on the will, which Fisher referenced in his discussion of the three *libertates*.⁸¹ They were adopted from what appears to have been a widely accepted distinction in medieval theology.

Edward Surtz attributes the distinction to the *Vocabularius theologie* (1517) of Johann Altenstaig, who derived it from the work of Gabriel Biel.⁸² Richard Rex has criticised Surtz for this, and insists that the tripartite division of freedoms used by Fisher was not scholastic, but instead a reflection of his patristic and scriptural dependence, which Rex uses to liken Fisher’s treatment of free will to that of Erasmus.⁸³ Rex argues that the distinction discussed by Altenstaig and Biel and cited by Surtz was one between freedom “from” necessity, sin and pain, not “to” nature, grace and glory. He claims that this is an “entirely

⁷⁷ “Ecce libertas gloriae, quae sola plena libertas est quaeque nemini mortalium in hac vita donatur, quum nemo sit hic liber a servitute corruptionis: sed hanc in coelis expectamus libertatem.” *Ibid.*, DXLVII-DXLVIII.

⁷⁸ “Tertia demum est, quicquid volueris, efficaciter exequi posse.” *Ibid.*, DXLVIII.

⁷⁹ “Sed est advertendum, quod in scripturis libertas trifariam accipi solet.” *Ibid.*, DXLVII.

⁸⁰ “Quia et ipsa creatura liberabitur a servitute corruptionis in libertatem gloriae filiorum Dei.” I have deviated from the Douay-Rheims translation for clarity. Romans 8:21 (Vulg.).

⁸¹ Aurelius Augustine, “De Libero Arbitrio,” in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, Vol. XXIX: Aurelii Augustini Opera, Pars II, 2*, ed. W.M. Green (Turnhout: Brepols, 1970), 211-321; Aurelius Augustine, “De gratia et libero arbitrio,” in *The Library of Latin Texts* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. Database, accessed 5th March 2024).

⁸² Surtz, *Works and Days*, 228 and 495, n. 30; Johann Altenstaig, *Vocabularius theologie* (Hagenaw, 1517), fol. CXXXIV^r.

⁸³ Rex, *Theology of John Fisher*, 124 and 247, n. 100.

different triad” and one “without the Pauline foundation.”⁸⁴ Rex also argues that Fisher’s tripartite division of freedom cannot be found in the works of Aquinas, Scotus, and Peter Lombard and instead was derived from Bernard of Clairvaux’s *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, which Rex describes as a “highly Augustinian and far from scholastic work.”⁸⁵ But several aspects of Rex’s interpretation invite reconsideration.

Firstly, Rex’s criticism of Surtz takes the three *libertates* as given in the dative case, “to,” as opposed to the genitive, “of,” though this may simply be a typographical issue in his endnotes as the genitive forms are given in the body of the text itself. More substantively, however, his complaint that Altenstaig’s freedoms are freedoms “from” rather than “to” (sic) overlooks the fact that the latter freedoms were derived from the former. This was the case in Altenstaig’s work, Clairvaux’s discussion of the three *libertates* in *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, as well as in the second book of Peter Lombard’s *Sententiae* and the respective commentaries of Aquinas and Scotus on the *Sententiae* – all of which engage with these three freedoms despite Rex’s belief to the contrary.⁸⁶

As the basis of late medieval theological education, Lombard’s *Sententiae* was the most widely accessed of these texts, and Fisher would certainly have read it (more so than Altenstaig’s *Vocabularius Theologie* mentioned by Surtz), so we will use it to explain the relationship between the freedoms “from,” as Rex calls them, and the three related

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 247, n. 100.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁸⁶ Altenstaig, *Vocabularius theologie*, fol. CXXXIV^r; Bernard de Clairvaux, “De gratia et libero arbitrio,” in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, Vol. III: *Tractatus et Opuscula*, ed. J. Leclercq and H.M. Rochais (Romae: Editiones Cistercienses, 1963), 170-171; Peter Lombard, *Libri IV Sententiarum, Tomus I, Libri I et II*, 2nd ed, ed. Collegii S. Bonaventurae (Quaracchi: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1916), II, d. 25, c. 8-9; Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum, Magistri Petri Lombardi Episcopi Parisiensis, Tomus II*, ed. R.P. Mandonnet (Paris: Sumptibus P. Lethielleux, 1929), II, d. 25; Joannis Duns Scoti, “Quaestiones in Liberum Secundum Sententiarum,” in *Opera Omnia, Vol. XIII*, ed. Luke Wadding (Paris: *Ludovicum Vivès*, 1893), II, d. 25. These three *libertates* are also found in the writings of Albertus Magnus; for example, see Albertus Magnus, “Super Matthaem,” in *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia, Tomus XXI, Pars I*, ed. Bernhardus Schmidt (Aschendorff: Monasterii Westfalorum, 1987), 198-199.

libertates in Fisher's *Confutatio*. The three *libertates*, *libertas naturae*, *libertas gratiae* and *libertas gloriae*, are the names of the freedoms that liberate us from three constraints on our being: *necessitas* (necessity), *peccatum* (sin) and *miseria* (Rex renders this as "pain," but we will henceforth refer to it as "misery," a more encompassing translation). The same Latin words were used for these constraints in the relevant texts of Clairvaux, Aquinas and Scotus, but Altenstaig used "coactio" instead of "necessitas" and "culpa" instead of "peccatum."⁸⁷ His understanding of them, however, was the same and the *libertates* themselves were unchanged.⁸⁸ These constraints took precedence in Lombard's *Sententiae*; he first explained the constraints and then discussed how we become liberated from them.

Beginning with necessity, Lombard explained that we all have freedom from necessity by way of our ability to make choices, for "where there is necessity, there is no freedom" and "where there is no freedom, there is no choice."⁸⁹ It is a natural form of freedom enjoyed by all of humanity, both the good and the bad – hence why freedom from necessity is *libertas naturae*.⁹⁰ Since the Fall, however, we have all been enslaved by sin, and "only those who the son liberates and restores by grace" become free from this servitude, rendering freedom from sin *libertas gratiae*.⁹¹ To support this, Lombard referenced 2 Corinthians 3:17: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."⁹² As for misery, it was

⁸⁷ Altenstaig, *Vocabularius theologie*, fol. CXXXIV'.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ "A necessitate et ante peccatum et post aequae liberum est arbitrium. Sicut enim tunc cogi non poterat, ita nec modo. Ideoque voluntas merito apud Deum iudicatur, quae semper a necessitate libera est et nunquam cogi potest. Ubi necessitas, ibi non est libertas; ubi non est libertas, nec voluntas, et ideo nec meritum." Lombard, *Sententiae*, II, d. 25, c. 8.

⁹⁰ "Haec libertas in omnibus est, tam in bonis quam in malis." *Ibid.*; "libertas vero a necessitate [est] per naturam." *Ibid.*, II, d. 25, c. 9.

⁹¹ "Est et alia libertas, a peccato scilicet... Hanc libertatem homo peccando amisit... Istam libertatem, quae est a peccato, illi soli nunc habent, quos Filius per gratiam liberat et reparat..." *Ibid.*, II, d. 25, c. 8; "Nam voluntas hominis, quam naturaliter habet, non valet erigi ad bonum efficaciter volendum vel opere implendum, nisi per gratiam liberetur et adiuvetur." *Ibid.*, II, d. 25, c. 9.

⁹² "Ubi Spiritus Domini, ibi libertas." *Ibid.*, II, d. 25, c. 8; 2 Corinthians 3:17 (Vulg.).

something with which humanity did not need to contend before the Fall, but it is now inescapable in our fallen state. Freedom from misery can therefore only be achieved when one is saved in the kingdom of heaven and there enjoys the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” described by Paul in Romans 8:21; this is *libertas gloriae*.⁹³

The three *libertates* in Fisher’s *Confutatio* evidently had a medieval precedent, and they were directly related to the three constraints that Rex believes were part of a different triad. The source of his interpretation may be that Fisher himself did not actually cite the three constraints of necessity, sin and misery as his starting point in the *Confutatio*. He began with the three *libertates*, and the three constraints were never named and only roughly corresponded with his explanations of the *libertates*. The necessity that Lombard considered avoidable by our discretionary capacities was not mentioned in Fisher’s discussion of *libertas naturae*, and freedom from sin arising from *libertas gratiae* was only implied through the idea that it enables one to “will meritoriously” (*meritorie velle*).⁹⁴ Similarly, Fisher’s account of *libertas gloriae* omitted any reference to “*miseria*.” Instead, he spoke of “*corruptionis*,” using the language of Romans 8:21.⁹⁵ The fact that Fisher named the three *libertates* but only indirectly referenced the three constraints on which they were based speaks to the extent to which this medieval triad must have been ingrained in his conception of free will. He was not simply quoting blindly from his predecessors, but integrated their ideas into his text presumably from memory, remembering the content but

⁹³ “Est iterum libertas a miseria, de qua Apostolus ait: *Et ipsa creatura liberabitur a servitute corruptionis in libertatem gloriae filiorum Dei*. Hanc libertatem habuit homo ante peccatum, quia omni carebat miseria et nulla tangebatur molestia, et plenius habebit in futura beatitudine, ubi miser esse non poterit. Sed in hac vita, quae est inter primum peccatum et ultimam confirmationem, nemo a miseria liber est, quia poena peccati non caret.” *Ibid.*, II, d. 25, c. 8.

⁹⁴ Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLVIII.

⁹⁵ “Ecce libertas gloriae, quae sola plena libertas est, quaeque nemini mortalium in hac vita donatur, quum nemo sit hic liber a servitute corruptionis...” *Ibid.*, DXLVII-DXLVIII.

forgetting some of the details, just as he did with his mistaken reference to Julia the Elder discussed in Chapter 1.⁹⁶

There is another discrepancy between Fisher's rendition of the three *libertates* and how they featured in earlier texts that further demonstrates Fisher's ability to seamlessly integrate this medieval model of freedom into his own thought. The scriptural passages that Fisher provided to support the three *libertates* do not entirely correlate with those in the *Sententiae*, the primary text from which Fisher likely derived this distinction. Both Fisher and Lombard drew on Romans 8:21 in their characterisations of *libertas gloriae* and both drew on 2 Corinthians 3:17, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom," to support *libertas gratiae*, though Fisher misquoted this as being 1 Corinthians 3.⁹⁷ Fisher's use of 1 Corinthians 9:4-5, 2 Corinthians 11 and Hebrews 10:26 to explain *libertas naturae*, however, was not shared by Lombard.⁹⁸ Likewise, Lombard's use of Romans 7:18 to explain *libertas naturae* and *libertas gratiae* was not echoed by Fisher, nor did Fisher cite Romans 9:16, which Lombard used to justify *libertas gratiae*.⁹⁹

Of the two most influential medieval theologians in early sixteenth-century England, Aquinas and Scotus, only Aquinas wrote biblical commentaries on the scriptural passages cited by Fisher in his elucidation of the three *libertates*. And if we consult the relevant commentaries, Aquinas only explicitly mentioned *libertas gloriae*.¹⁰⁰ This was in Romans 8:21, and so was mentioned only because it appears in scripture itself. *Libertas naturae* and

⁹⁶ For this discussion, see pages 79-81.

⁹⁷ Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLVII-DXLVIII; Lombard, *Sententiae*, II, d. 25, c. 8-9.

⁹⁸ Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLVII. Note that Fisher only provided the book and chapter number of the referenced passages; the verses included have been deduced by comparing Fisher's prose with the relevant Bible passages.

⁹⁹ Lombard, *Sententiae*, II, d. 25, c. 8-9.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Biblical Commentaries, Volume 37: Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, ed. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón and trans. F.R. Larcher (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 222-223.

libertas gratiae did not figure into Aquinas's commentaries on 1 Corinthians 9:4-5, 2 Corinthians 3:17, 2 Corinthians 11 or Hebrews 10:26.¹⁰¹ In all likelihood, therefore, these biblical citations, at least the ones that Fisher did not share with Lombard, were derived from his own biblical interpretation. He must have presupposed the truth of the three *libertates* and used them as a guide to inform his reading of these passages, further testifying to his ability and willingness to organically integrate medieval theology into his own thought and defence of free will.

Fisher's dependence on this well-established triad of medieval theology set him apart from Erasmus. Both men may have shared humanist inclinations, but they approached Luther with different aims and these varying aims took their texts in two different directions. Erasmus maintained that the divisions that had emerged across western Christendom were unnecessary, and he treated Luther with the regard of a fellow intellectual in a theological debate. His tone was notably accommodating, seeking only to show that Luther's position on the will was out of touch with scripture (and the consensus of the Church more widely), and he tailored his argument to meet Luther's *sola scriptura* methodology. Fisher, on the other hand, was critical of Luther from the beginning. He did not wish to show him as simply out of touch with Church teachings. He sought to completely discredit his views and present him as just another of the many "heretics" who plagued the Church over the centuries. While Fisher and Erasmus both made a case for free will with an argument based on the relationship between sin and the will (albeit with different emphases), Fisher's integration of

¹⁰¹ For Aquinas's commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians, see Thomas Aquinas, *Biblical Commentaries, Volume 38: Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón and trans. F.R. Larcher, B. Mortensen, and D. Keating (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 169-170 and 444; for Aquinas's commentary on the letter to the Hebrews, see Thomas Aquinas, "Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos Lectura," in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura*, 8th ed., Vol. II, ed. P. Raphaelis Cai (Rome: Marietti, 1953), 449.

medieval perspectives into his defence of free will, when no such theology existed in Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio*, shows that Fisher was more traditional than his more famous contemporary. Both men challenged Luther from under the roof of conservative theology, but they did so from opposite ends of the room.

Evidently, the historiographical tendency to read only Erasmus and Luther alongside each other has left us blind to the full scope of the early Reformation controversy on free will: Erasmus's intended theological diplomacy has been underappreciated, while the extremes of the conservative position have not been appreciated at all. With Fisher's position on free will now firmly placed at the other end of the conservative spectrum from Erasmus, it is clear that we should be including these more traditional perspectives in our analyses of this debate. Doing so brings a greater recognition of Erasmus's moderate, diplomatic theology and a more nuanced perspective of the opposition that Luther faced for his views on free will.

Unity in Time: The Gradual Agreement of English Conservative Defences of Free Will:

The other English authors who wrote on free will in the 1520s, Henry VIII and Thomas More, joined Fisher on the more traditional end of the conservative spectrum. The forgiving tone of Erasmus was absent from their respective writings on the will and they instead employed the same vilifying style as Fisher. As will be discussed in more detail momentarily, Henry VIII did not consider free will in his *Assertio* of 1521, but the text was nevertheless quick to clothe Luther in acrimonious garb. In his introductory note to the reader, the king asserted that it was his duty to defend the Church against "the most wicked enemy imaginable," who,

instigated by the devil, “spews poison” against the Church.¹⁰² Likewise in 1523, he described Luther and his followers as being part of a “seditious, pestilent and nefarious” conspiracy, both in general and in relation to free will, and in 1526 he regarded Luther’s views on free will as “the most wicked” (scelestissima) of all his “heresies” (haeresis).¹⁰³ Similarly, More insinuated in his *Responsio* of 1523 that Luther’s teachings on faith, works, and free will created a “Church of the wicked” (ecclesia malignantium), and he rebuked the Lutheran Johannes Bugenhagen between 1525 and 1526 for “pontificating impudently and arrogantly” (impie atque arroganter decernitis) on the disagreements of scholastic theology, including free will.¹⁰⁴ And in his *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer* (1532-1533) More directly equated the denial of an active free will with heresy.¹⁰⁵ These are not the words of men seeking civil discourse with their interlocutors. They are insults hurled by men sitting somewhere at the opposite end of the conservative cause from Erasmus’s theology of moderation.

Regardless of this polemical unity, however, the actual articulated positions of Fisher, Henry VIII, and More in favour of free will were anything but unified in the early 1520s. Fisher was the only one of our authors to have a developed (or at least fully articulated) position on free will at this time. His *Confutatio* of 1523, as we have just seen, presented a robust defence of free will that drew from patristic, scriptural and medieval thought. More

¹⁰² “At quum iam hostis exortus sit, quo nullus potuit exoriri malignior, qui daemonis instinctu charitatem praetexens, ira atque odio stimulatus, et contra Ecclesiam, et contra catholicam fidem vipereum virus evomuit...” Henry VIII, “Assertio,” 186-187.

¹⁰³ “Itaque nulla unquam factio fuit sediciosa, pestilens, nepharia, quae sic religionem omnem tollere, leges omnes obruere, mores omnes bonos corrumpere, respublicas omnes evertere machinata sit, ut nunc ista coniuratio Lutherana.” Henry VIII, *Epistola regia*, sig. A4^v; Henry VIII to Luther, 1526, 108. Rex accompanies the 1526 letter with an English translation made sometime between 1526 and 1527, but this analysis works exclusively with the Latin because it was the original language of the letter’s composition and the English translation took some liberties with the text; for information on this earlier translation, see Rex, “Introduction,” 21 and 36-39.

¹⁰⁴ More, “Responsio,” 176-177; More to Bugenhagen, 1525-1526, 32-33.

¹⁰⁵ More, “Confutation,” 149.

and Henry VIII, on the other hand, appear to have developed their views gradually over the course of the decade, perhaps even in tandem. This is not to say that they did not adhere to the traditional Catholic narrative of the human will being active in the soteriological process in their earlier days. It is simply to say that their objections to the Lutheran position became more openly expressed in their later writings, and likely only did so due to the pressures imposed upon them by reformist ideas. Examining this development thereby shows how English conservatism, like late medieval orthodoxy, evolved in accordance with the challenges it faced.

Within the English conservative corpus as a whole, we can eventually identify three objections to the reformist conception of a passive free will by the time the 1520s drew to a close. They were criticisms of the implications that a passive free will had for divine ontology and human ethics. The three objections were interrelated as each of them was derived, to some extent, from the argument for an active free will described in our comparison of Fisher and Erasmus. These objections were therefore also present in Fisher's *Confutatio* and Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio* from the first half of the 1520s. The first, which created the most worry among our conservative authors, was that to take the passive view of the will, as Luther did, is to ascribe evil to God, contravening his benevolent nature. The second, which at times was related to the first, was that God's commands are rendered somewhat pointless if one holds a passive view of the will. For instance, why would God bother to command that we pray for his help in bettering ourselves if our actions are predetermined? The third, which is to some extent comparable to the second, was that if we remove individual agency from a person's decisions under the presumption that he has no control over the good or evil he brings about, he would be unwilling to do much at all in striving to

do good or avoid evil; this is similar to the so-called “lazy argument” we find discussed in Cicero’s *De fato* and in a Christian context in Origen’s *Contra Celsum*.¹⁰⁶

The clearest indication of argumentative development over the course of the 1520s is provided in the writings of Henry VIII, where there is a curious discrepancy in the treatment of the will between the *Assertio* of 1521 and two letters written by the king in 1523 and 1526 respectively. The first of these letters was written to the princes of Saxony and described the threat that Luther posed both to religion and to society more generally.¹⁰⁷ As Richard Marius notes, it has been largely overlooked in secondary literature, though it has recently been discussed by Rex.¹⁰⁸

The second letter was Henry VIII’s part in a direct exchange with Luther, what Rex has referred to as “the second controversy” after the initial exchange in which the *Assertio* was composed.¹⁰⁹ In 1525, Luther wrote directly to the English king under the misconception that he had started to become more sympathetic to the Lutheran cause.¹¹⁰ It is unclear how this misunderstanding occurred, though it is generally assumed that Luther was misled by the displaced King of Denmark, Christian II, who spent the 1520s jumping between various royal courts trying to muster support to regain his throne.¹¹¹ Whatever the case, Luther’s letter was an obsequious one, attempting to make amends for the open hostilities and

¹⁰⁶ For Fisher and the first, second and third objections, see Fisher, *Confutatio*, DXLV and DLXXXVI, DL and DLXXXIII respectively; for Erasmus and the first, second and third objections, see Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. G1^r, sig. F4^{r-v} and sig. G4^v, and Erasmus, “De libero arbitrio,” 82, 75-76 and 87 respectively. Cicero, “On Fate,” in *Cicero: On Fate: & Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy IV.5-7 and V*, ed. and trans. R.W. Sharples (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991), 76-77; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ed. and trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 86-87; Tad Brennan, *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 270-287.

¹⁰⁷ Henry VIII, *Epistola regia*.

¹⁰⁸ Marius, “Sources,” 535; Rex, “Introduction,” 14-15.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-54.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13; Martin Luther to Henry VIII, 1525, in *Henry VIII and Martin Luther: The Second Controversy, 1525-1527*, ed. Richard Rex (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021), 67-73.

¹¹¹ Rex, “Introduction,” 13-14.

insults voiced towards Henry VIII in the *Contra Henricum* of 1522. In a letter composed in 1526 that was praised by Johannes Cochlaeus as one of the finest exposés of Luther's position on the will, the king made Luther's misunderstanding quite clear to him.¹¹² The tone was far from courteous, and the text enumerated the many issues that Henry VIII had with Luther's thought, from what he deemed to be a misuse of scripture and the Church fathers, to his position on justification and the human will.¹¹³

In the letter from 1526, Henry VIII remarked that Luther's degradation of the human will was "the most wicked" of Luther's heresies and "the very root" from which all the other errors of his "faction spring."¹¹⁴ With this in mind, the king outlined in some length the ramifications of Luther's position, covering the three bases described above. He charged that Luther undermined divine benevolence by "most atrociously blaspheming the justice of God" (*atrocissime blasphemans iusticiam dei*).¹¹⁵ Likewise, Luther rendered divine commands redundant by suggesting that a person's "evil deed... is not his own" as "everything is brought about by the eternal and unchangeable necessity of divine will."¹¹⁶ Luther also promoted individual inaction: who would "strive to do anything good," the king asked, "or care what evil he might devise if he has thoroughly convinced himself that... he is neither sufficient of himself nor able to cooperate with the grace of God?"¹¹⁷ If Luther's position on the will was so pernicious in Henry VIII's eyes, why was no mention made of it in the *Assertio*? For the king to attribute so much heretical weight to this element of Luther's

¹¹² Cochlaeus, "Brief Discussion of Luther's Response," 236-237.

¹¹³ Henry VIII to Luther, 1526, 74-135.

¹¹⁴ "Haec haeresis omnium quae unquam sunt exortae scelestissima... radix ipsa videtur ex qua pullulant universa scelera, quibus tam numerosis quam nocentissimis vestra grassatur factio..." *Ibid.*, 108.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ "Neque maleficium quod ab ipso fiat ipsius esse, ut in quo nihil omnino sua sponte perficiat, sed in quo producat omnia divinae voluntatis eterna et nulli mutanda necessitas..." *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ "Nam quis aut studebit aliquid facere bene aut curabit quid designet mali, qui quidem sibi semel penitus persuaserit se, ut aliquid faciat boni, neque ex se sufficere neque cum dei gratia cooperari aut aliquid prorsus agere?" *Ibid.*

thought, it is rather peculiar that it was not mentioned a single time in the text for which he was labelled “Fidei Defensor.” The *Assertio* was, of course, written as a defence of the sacraments and theology of the human will is not a sacrament, so it may be considered irrelevant to the text’s purpose. And given the polemical nature of the king’s 1526 letter, it is plausible that declaring Luther’s supposed degradation of the human will to be “the most wicked” of Luther’s heresies and the source of the errors of his sect is merely a rhetorical trope. But given that discussion of the will is *entirely* omitted from the *Assertio* and is suddenly considered to hold so much theological weight in 1526, around the time that the more well-known exchange on the nature of the will was taking place between Luther and Erasmus, this discrepancy is worth considering further.

The omission of the will from the *Assertio* and the weight with which it was treated in 1526 are the two extremes. Between them lies Henry VIII’s January 1523 letter to the princes of Saxony. In this correspondence, the king mentioned the will in brief. He did not afford it the same gravity he would in 1526, but he nevertheless explained that Luther “destroyed free will” and “crushed justice,” casting the “inevitable cause of all evils... on the one true God.”¹¹⁸ A transition therefore seems to have taken place between 1521 when there was no mention of Luther’s views on the human will, 1523 when Henry VIII made some comment on the implications of Luther’s views for God’s benevolence, and 1526, when the opposition to an active free will was considered the fount of all Lutheran errors.

If we consider the *Assertio* alongside More’s *Responsio* and Fisher’s *Defensio regiae*, there is yet a further discrepancy that highlights a gap between the king’s thought and that of his peers in the early 1520s, one that was mended as the decade progressed. These two

¹¹⁸ “Arbitrii libertatem destruat... iusticiam deprimat, et malorum omnium causam inevitabilem... in unicum illum vere bonum reiiciat.” Henry VIII, *Epistola regia*, sig. A4^v.

works defending the *Assertio* touched on the issue of the human will even though the text they defended did not. There were two instances in More's *Responsio* where he made his concern for the human will evident. The first was in his discussion of Luther's view of the Church. For Luther, More explained, the Church "consists only of good men" and this "congregation is known for certain by means of these three signs, baptism, the bread, and the gospel."¹¹⁹ But this gospel was that in the Lutheran image, wherein faith alone without works suffices for salvation, sins are consumed by faith such that no laws bind a Christian, and "there is no freedom of will but that the divine goodness is the necessary cause of human malice."¹²⁰

The second instance was in a criticism of the unimpeded freedom that More took as the logical consequence of Luther's soteriology. Under Luther's model, More contended, "no one would be forced, commanded, nor counselled, nor taught anything."¹²¹ More then dismissively said to let Luther believe that he makes his claims without a free will, and allow him to "impute all evil deeds to God," as he will be consigned to his fate.¹²²

Neither of these instances in which More's *Responsio* referenced Luther's position on the will is as detailed as what we find in More's later writings, like his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*. But the fact that More twice mentioned the implications of Luther's views for the goodness of God despite the omission of this area of Luther's thought from the *Assertio* indicates that he attributed a theological significance to free will that was not shared by the *Assertio*'s author at its time of composition. More and

¹¹⁹ "Ponit ecclesiam ex solis bonis constare, eam congregationem ait esse certam his tribus signis, baptismo, pane, et evangelio." More, "Responsio," 176-177.

¹²⁰ "Et quod nulla sit libertas arbitrii: sed divina bonitas necessaria causa sit humanae maliciae." *Ibid.*

¹²¹ "Adeo liber sit, et effrenis, evangelica libertate scilicet: ut neque cogatur quisquam: neque iubeatur: neque consulatur: neque doceatur quicquam..." *Ibid.*, 258-259.

¹²² "Credat tantum horum nihil libero se arbitrio facere: sed omnia mala imputet deo: firmam habeat fidem in promissione dei... Namque metus omnes, et inexorabile fatum subiecit pedibus, strepitumque Acherontis Averni." *Ibid.*

Henry VIII may have defended conservative theology against a common foe, but their views on free will would only align as the 1520s progressed.

Moving now to Fisher's defence of the *Assertio*, we have already seen that he had an in-depth position on the human will in his *Confutatio* in 1523. His treatment of the concept in his *Defensio regiae* of 1525 was meagre by comparison, possibly because the *Assertio* did not address it at all. Fisher raised the issue of the will as one of the various elements of theology undermined by Luther a few times in passing, and considered it with minor detail only twice.¹²³ Both times were with concern for God's benevolence. The first came early in his treatise and was formulated as an objection to Luther seemingly attributing evil to God. Luther, Fisher complained, "abolished the freedom of the will by his decrees, and declared God to be the author in us of both good and evil."¹²⁴ He continued voicing this objection with *pysma*:

How will there not be respect of persons with God, if he forces me to sin and produces nothing good in me except evil works? If he is the author of evil works in me and of good works in another, how does he not regard that person more favourably than me? How will he judge me justly according to works which are not mine, nor have I ever committed by the free will of my own volition?¹²⁵

The second instance was during Fisher's discussion of divine judgement. He suggested that Luther was a "false prophet" for "impiously proclaiming that God is the author of evil" and because Luther "destroyed free will" and asserted "that all things are done by necessity."¹²⁶ Neither of these remarks were made with reference to the *Assertio*. They were simply

¹²³ For passing mentions of free will, see Fisher, *Defensio regiae*, fol. 12^v and 19^f.

¹²⁴ "Sustulit insuper suis dogmatibus arbitrii libertatem [Lutherus], deusque proclamat in nobis bonorum et malorum autorem." *Ibid.*, fol. 6^r.

¹²⁵ "At quo modo non erit personarum respectus apud deum, si me deus adigat ad peccandum, et in me nihil praeter opera mala producat. Si mihi sit malorum operum author, et contra bonorum, alteri: quomodo non illius personam respicit benignius quam meam, aut quomodo iuste iudicabit me secundum opera, quae mea non sunt, neque libero meae voluntatis arbitrio patrauerim unquam?" *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ "Quis enim non pseudo prophetam appellabit qui deum tam impie malorum autorem pronunciat, qui liberum tollit arbitrium, qui necessitate cuncta prorsus agi non veretur asserere..." *Ibid.*, fol. 116^v.

included as addenda of sorts, showing that free will was on Fisher's mind even when defending a text that did not address it itself.

There was evidently a gap between the *Assertio* on one hand, and More and Fisher's respective defences of it on the other. More and Fisher apparently saw the will as holding greater importance than did the author of the *Assertio*. Of course, Henry VIII wrote his letter to the princes of Saxony in which he voiced concern for Luther's perceived degradation of God's benevolence around the time that the *Responsio* was published, and it was completed long before the *Defensio regiae's* publication. By this point, the king was on a similar trajectory to More and Fisher. But this does not negate the fact that he made no mention of the will in 1521 despite considering it to be of such paramount importance just a few years later. Something obviously triggered this change in Henry VIII's thought, and it likely had something to do with a direct or indirect influence from his contemporaries. Indeed, the fact that More and Fisher both defended free will in their respective defences of the *Assertio* suggests that this is probable. But before offering some further possibilities, it is worth noting that this gap between Henry VIII and his peers offers some further insight on the question of the *Assertio's* authorship. In both Chapters 1 and 2, we argued that Henry VIII was the primary authority behind the *Assertio's* composition because the theological ideas presented within it tended to be elementary or underdeveloped, and often wandered from the norm. The text's neglect of free will, when it was discussed by More and Fisher, is further evidence of this. And assuming that the king was at least the primary author of both the 1523 and 1526 letters, which seems to be the historiographical consensus, the increasing emphasis on the importance of free will depicted in these writings lends credence to this theory as well.

Whether Henry VIII was behind the 1523 and 1526 letters has been the subject of some speculation, albeit to a far lesser extent than debate over the *Assertio*'s authorship – presumably because they are not as well known. Richard Marius has suggested that More had some influence over both letters, and as for the 1526 letter in particular, Luther insisted that Henry VIII did not write it, Johannes Cochlaeus believed that the king did write it, and the most recent account by Richard Rex suggests that More had at least some influence over the letter's contents and style.¹²⁷ Given the thematic similarities and More's proximity to Henry VIII by way of membership in his Council since about 1518 and as Speaker of the House of Commons from 1523, this is certainly plausible.¹²⁸ This influence would help explain Henry VIII's apparent theological development regarding the human will, as it does coincide with More's own theological developments. But we should not rule out a potential Erasmian influence, particularly on the letter from 1526. James McConica and G.W. Bernard have both proposed that Henry VIII was an Erasmian for most of his life, though their perspectives have since been contested by Rex, who describes Henry VIII's religious beliefs before the 1530s as fitting "squarely within the parameters of 'traditional religion,' with little if any indication that Erasmus's influence had undermined his commitment to or investment in it."¹²⁹ Erasmus sent the king a draft of his *De libero arbitrio* early in 1524 before its formal

¹²⁷ For More and the letter of 1523, see Marius, "Sources," 536 and Richard C. Marius, "Henry VIII, Thomas More and the Bishop of Rome," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 10 (1978): 101; for Luther and the 1526 letter, see Martin Luther, "Ad Regis Angliae Conviciatorii Scripti Titulum, MDXXVII," in *Henry VIII and Martin Luther: The Second Controversy, 1525-1527*, ed. Richard Rex (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021), 164-165; for Cochlaeus and the 1526 letter, see Cochlaeus, "A Brief Discussion of Luther's Response," 232-237; for More and the 1526 letter, see Marius, "Henry VIII, Thomas More," 104-105 and Rex, "Introduction," 21-21.

¹²⁸ For the structure of Henry VIII's council, see William Huse Dunham Jr., "Henry VIII's Whole Council and its Parts," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1943): 7-46. For More as councillor and speaker, see Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography* (London: J.M. Dent & Son, 1985), 189-215.

¹²⁹ James Kelsey McConica, *English Humanists and Reformation Politics Under Henry VIII and Edward VI* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), passim; Bernard, *King's Reformation*, 228 and 237; Richard Rex, "The Religion of Henry VIII," *The Historical Journal* 57, no. 1 (2014): 2 and n. 3.

publication later that year.¹³⁰ It contained the three main objections to Luther's conception of free will outlined at the beginning of this section and which appeared in the king's letter from 1526, that Luther jeopardised God's benevolence, rendered God's commands redundant and encouraged inaction among people.¹³¹ Stylistically, Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio* and Henry VIII's 1526 letter were quite different, so we cannot go as far as to say that their shared use of these objections supports the idea that Henry VIII was, as McConica and Bernard believe, essentially an Erasmian. But given Henry VIII's early access to *De libero arbitrio*, Erasmus was probably at least somewhat influential in the king's increasing concern for free will as the 1520s progressed, even if only in argumentative material.

Thus far, we have seen that a discrepancy existed in writings by Henry VIII between 1521 and 1526 and a parallel discrepancy existed between the works of More and Fisher on one hand and the *Assertio* on the other. They suggest that Henry VIII initially neglected the significance of free will, but gradually came to appreciate its importance and the threat that Luther appeared to pose to it. His position on free will increasingly conformed to those of his contemporaries throughout the 1520s. Turning now to Thomas More, we see another instance of concern for the human will developing over the course of the 1520s. But whereas that of Henry VIII seemed to be a personal intellectual development under the influence of his peers, More's was an enhancement of articulation induced by the pressures of an intellectual adversary.

¹³⁰ Rex, "Introduction," 15.

¹³¹ For the benevolence of God, see Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio*, sig. B8^v, F4^f-F6^r and G1^f-G3^f; for the redundancy of God's commands, see *Ibid.*, sig. F4^v; for human inaction, see *Ibid.*, sig. G4^v. For the benevolence of God in English, see Erasmus, "De libero arbitrio," 33, 75-77 and 82-84; for the redundancy of God's commands in English, see *Ibid.*, 76; for human inaction in English, see *Ibid.*, 87.

As stated above, More's *Responsio* discussed the ramifications of Luther's position on the will twice. Both instances were focussed on the benevolence of God.¹³² It was not until More's letter to the Lutheran Johannes Bugenhagen written between 1525 and 1526 that we see the argument that divine commands are rendered redundant along with the concern for God's benevolence. The former was conveyed through *pysma*:

Why do you persuade people to do anything if there is no free will? Why do you urge me to pray, to give my neighbour good advice, enlarge his mind with learning, assist him with material goods? Why recommend all this if I am not able to do any of it?¹³³

More then made the point more succinctly, declaring that "if everything is caused by fate... then there is no reason at all for you to rouse men to virtue and castigate wrongdoing."¹³⁴

The concern for God's benevolence appeared a few pages later. "When he did away with the freedom of the will," More remarked, "Luther made our all-good, all-merciful God not the avenger, but the originator of sin."¹³⁵

These two common objections to Luther's perspective on free will were only joined by the charge that it encouraged inaction beginning with More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* in 1529. In his discussion of predestination and its implications, More began by pointing to its erosion of God's benevolence: "This execrable heresy maketh god the cause of all euyll / and such cruell appetyte as neuer tyraunt and tourmentoure had."¹³⁶ He then moved to highlighting how pointless God's laws become by asking what purpose "the prechynges and exhortacyons to the fayth [serue] / yf the herers haue no lybertye of theyr

¹³² More, "Responsio," 176-177 and 258-259.

¹³³ "Nam cur suades quicquam, si nulla est libertas arbitrii? Cur hortaris, ut orem, ut proximos consilio formem, doctrina promoveam, rebus adiutem, nec vitae meae parcam dum aliis prosim: si mihi nullo modo sit in manu, ut horum quicquam faciam?" More to Bugenhagen, 1525-1526, 82-83.

¹³⁴ "Si fato procedunt omnia, neque quicquam prorsus libere fit ab hominibus... nihil profecto causae reliquisti tibi, quor aut quenquam ad virtutem commoveas, aut castiges noxium." *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ "Clementissimum atque Optimum Deum, adempta voluntatis libertate, scelerum omnium non ultorem magis facit quam authorem." *Ibid.*, 98-99.

¹³⁶ More, "Dialogue Concerning Heresies," 402-403.

owne wyll.”¹³⁷ Finally, More pointed to the inaction it encourages among the population:

“What careth he what he dothe... For he shall thynke dyenge in his bedde or on the galows / cometh not after his deseruyng but hangeth all vppon destenye.”¹³⁸

These three objections were all presented again between 1532 and 1533 in More’s *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*. Early in the first book, More remarked that Luther and Tyndale would have us see God as taking more “tyrannouse delite in our payne, then euer had any tyraunt” when they took away “mannys fre wyll” and make us believe that “god alone worketh all our synne.”¹³⁹ Later in the text, in book seven, More presented renditions of both the objection involving directive redundancy and that involving inaction. He implied the former by saying that Tyndale mocks those whom he bids to “pray for the fayth” after teaching that “man can by hys wyll no more do towarde the gettyng of the fayth, then can the chylde in the begetyng of hys owne father.”¹⁴⁰ The latter was conveyed bluntly: in subverting free will, Tyndale encouraged people to “syt styll, and do nought,” leaving everything to God.¹⁴¹

Much as we saw in the writings of Henry VIII, More’s works seem to show a deepening concern for issues surrounding free will, or at least an increased tendency to discuss the will, as time went on. But as More was a prolific writer, we can take this analysis a step further and be more certain of both the development of his perspective over time and of the potential reason for its development. To do so, we must turn to his famous *Utopia*, published in 1516.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 403.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ More, “Confutation,” 72.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 799.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Utopia, literally meaning “no place,” was the manifestation of More’s political, social and religious musings.¹⁴² It was the representation of his ideal society, and one would therefore expect it to contain his ideas on free will. David Harris Sacks notes that the work surveyed the “relationship of means to ends and practice to theory in ways that questioned... the possibility of social reform solely through reasoned argument and persuasion and the belief in free will on which those methods depend.”¹⁴³ In his detailed account of freedom in *Utopia*, T.A. Kenyon asserts that, having the Fall at the fore of his mind, “More posited in *Utopia* a set of social institutions designed to reduce temptation, limit the available choices, and channel people’s wills in the requisite direction.”¹⁴⁴ But while a concept of *free choice* was certainly present in *Utopia*, any formalised notion of a *free will* was only present implicitly. No formal pronouncements about it were made. This has remained hidden by English translations of the text, as translators have been rather liberal in their choice of words. For example, in the edited translations by Mildred Campbell, and Edward Surtz and J.H. Hexter, “free will” appears as a translation for “sponte,” which is a far more casual word more akin to “freely” or “voluntarily.”¹⁴⁵ More did not actually formally refer to the “*liberum arbitrium*” until his *Responsio* in 1523.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, in his discussion of free will and the Fall in relation to *Utopia*, Kenyon draws almost entirely from More’s later works, namely his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer* and

¹⁴² Paul, *Thomas More*, 29.

¹⁴³ David Harris Sacks, “The Religions of the Utopians: Sin and Salvation in Thomas More’s *Utopia*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas More’s Utopia*, ed. Cathy Shrank and Phil Withington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 88.

¹⁴⁴ Kenyon, “Problem of Freedom,” 358.

¹⁴⁵ The Latin can be found alongside the English in Thomas More, “*Utopia*,” in *The Complete Works of Thomas More, Vol. 4: Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz and J.H. Hexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 1-247. For “sponte” as “free will” in Surtz and Hexter’s edited translation, see *Ibid.*, 180-181; they later rendered “sponte” as “voluntarily;” for this, see *Ibid.*, 184-185. For “sponte” as “free will” in Campbell, see Thomas More, “*Utopia*,” in *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More, Including Roper’s Life of More and Letters of More and his Daughter Margaret*, ed. Mildred Campbell (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1947), 123 and 127.

¹⁴⁶ For example, see More, “*Responsio*,” 176-177.

Treatise on the Passion from 1534 – texts written nearly two decades after *Utopia*.¹⁴⁷ This of course causes some issues for Kenyon’s analysis as it assumes that More’s thought was constant over this long period of time, but it also lends more credibility to our discussion above. More had a sense of free will when he wrote his *Utopia*, but it was only evident in practical terms. It took Luther drawing the Church’s position on free will into question for More to draw form from the abstract and properly articulate his position.

We have now seen that John Fisher, Thomas More, and Henry VIII appeared to be in different places regarding Luther’s idea of a passive human will in the early 1520s. Fisher’s position was already well developed by the time his *Confutatio* was published in 1523, but More and Henry VIII were a little further behind. The will did not appear on Henry VIII’s radar in 1521. While the king and More shared a concern for God’s benevolence in 1523, it was not until 1526 that Henry VIII added worries about the redundancy of divine commands and the encouragement of inaction to his list of objections. And it was later still, in 1529, that these three objections appeared together in More’s work, though More probably conceived of them together around 1526 if we concede to Rex’s view that he had some influence over the king’s second letter. This progression of thought suggests that while these three authors likely all endorsed an active human will from the Reformation’s beginnings, as this was the established Church’s position, it was with the influence of contemporaries and under the pressure of Lutheran thought that they were pressed to articulate their views and arrive on the same page.

¹⁴⁷ Kenyon, “Problem of Freedom,” 355-358. There is a citation of More’s translation of the *Life of Pico* within these pages, which was written in 1504, but this citation pertains to reason and evil rather than the human will explicitly; for more information on the *Life of Pico*, see Anthony S.G. Edwards, “Introduction: Life of Pico,” in *The Complete Works of Thomas More, Vol. 1: English Poems, Life of Pico, The Last Things*, ed. Anthony S.G. Edwards, Katherine Gardiner Rodgers, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xxxvii-lxix.

Conclusion:

In *Hyperaspistes I*, Erasmus rebuked Luther for not responding to the works of other prominent conservatives who wrote against him. He named Johannes Cochlaeus and Josse Clichtove among them, as well as Thomas More and John Fisher.¹⁴⁸ Five centuries later, this criticism remains relevant for both historians and theologians interested in debates around free will from the early sixteenth century. As we observed in our discussion of Fisher's *Confutatio* and Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio*, the general academic interest in the exchange between Luther and Erasmus has led to an historiographical paradox: despite noting how controversial Erasmus's work on free will was among conservatives, scholars tend to completely ignore the works of contemporaries. As a result, the underlying intention of Erasmus's *De libero arbitrio*, to foster civil discourse with Luther, has remained largely obscure in the literature, and men like Fisher have been misleadingly likened to Erasmus. But there was a spectrum among Europe's conservatives, and Erasmus seemed to be a solitary figure on its moderate end. Fisher, Henry VIII, and More, with their harsher tones, sat on its opposing side.

Even with this polemical unity, however, there was initially argumentative discord among England's conservatives. The objections of Fisher, Henry VIII, and More came to align only gradually over the course of the 1520s. It was thus in the fires of the Reformation that English conservative objections to the idea of a passive free will were welded into coalescence. This is similar to Peter Lake's findings of the dialectical relationship that existed

¹⁴⁸ Desiderius Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes diatribae adversus servum arbitrium Martini Lutheri* (Nuremberg, 1526), sig. A3^{r-v} and A8^v; Desiderius Erasmus, "Hyperaspistes Book 1," in *Collected Works of Erasmus, Vol. 76: Controversies: De libero arbitrio, Hyperaspistes 1*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and trans. Peter Macardle and Clarence H. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 97-98 and 108.

between later “Anglicanism” and puritanism; puritanism served as a “defining other” that enabled the formulation of what was then established English Protestant thought.¹⁴⁹

If we take a step back and return to our motif of the tree representative of English conservatism, this assessment of free will provides some further conclusions on the nature of its construction. Whereas previous chapters show the innate complexity of its root structure, with the tendency of authors to draw on different authorities to present teachings that sometimes seem contradictory, the difference between Erasmus’s approach to Luther on the one hand, and that of Fisher, Henry VIII, and More on the other provides an indication of the span of our tree’s root structure, albeit one that draws on wider European conservatism. Like the eclecticism inherent to orthodoxy in the late medieval sense, there was room for varying approaches to perceived heretics, arising from the different aims of conservative authors, so long as the teachings derived from the Church’s consensus were upheld. But it was an ongoing process: how their arguments or objections took form, how the branches of our tree took shape in the sky, were influenced by the forces around them. They developed in relation to their surroundings, but drew their materials for growth, the arguments and objections themselves, from their expansive roots.

¹⁴⁹ Anthony Milton, “Introduction: Reformation, Identity, and ‘Anglicanism’, c. 1520-1662,” in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume I: Reformation and Identity, c. 1520-1662*, ed. Anthony Milton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8; Peter Lake, “‘Puritans’ and ‘Anglicans’ in the History of the Post-Reformation English Church,” in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume I: Reformation and Identity, c. 1520-1662*, ed. Anthony Milton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 368-369.

Conclusion

Words are slippery things. They are paradoxically our most efficient means of communication but are so cloaked in ambiguity that they can foster more confusion than clarity. A word can spend centuries meaning one thing and then, in a single generation, come to mean something vastly different. This change can occur with such subtle haste that few realise it is even taking place. Instead, members of the old definitional guard stand perplexed by their revolutionary interlocutors, as if their lexical error is painfully obvious, and the revolutionaries remain so stubbornly steadfast in their own usage of the word that it acquires legitimacy of its own. Somewhere in this philological feud, the new definition becomes pedagogical convention and many of us go on oblivious to the fact that any change has occurred at all.

In the Reformation, “orthodoxy” underwent one of these seismic shifts in definition. Through the late medieval period into the sixteenth century, the concept denoted a consensus of the majority around the Christian faith. To be orthodox was, as John Fisher aptly described it, to “think rightly with the Church.”¹ Aligning with this ancient institution rendered one a beneficiary of a tradition bequeathed from generation to generation for over a millennium. It was a fluid tradition, susceptible to change where circumstances demanded it, and to be orthodox was to be both a devout heir of its aggregate conclusions and, for the theologically learned, an agent in its ongoing evolution. When the reformers challenged this tradition in the early sixteenth century, conservatives charged them with the weight of history and the might of universal, established precedent – but they never hit their mark. The world was changing, definitions with it, and the orthodoxy that was once under the

¹ “Cum ecclesia recte sentiunt.” Fisher, *Confutatio*, I.

exclusive stewardship of the majority began to fall from its grasp and acquire a new meaning. Universal consensus, tradition and continuity meant little to the reformers. As we observed in the foregoing pages, they cast aside or, in the case of Martin Luther, questioned transubstantiation, a teaching that had been in place for at least three hundred years. Luther also disputed the pronouncements of the Council of Constance on communion's administration, and in doing so, he challenged the legitimacy of a primary instrument for establishing consensus. Soteriologically, Luther contested the traditional path to salvation, reformulated the sacramental system that had been formalised at the Council of Florence in 1439, and subverted the freedom of the human will. Likewise, William Tyndale thought according to a new distinction between historical and feeling faith that he borrowed from Philipp Melanchthon, abandoning the accepted distinction between actual and habitual faith that had been used since the twelfth century. For the first time on a grand scale, religious truth in western Christendom was being identified outside the teachings of the established Roman *ecclesia*. This break was the origin of our association of "orthodoxy" with "doctrine," and of our current definition of "orthodoxy" as "right doctrinal opinion."

But Henry VIII (until the 1530s), Thomas More, John Fisher, and Edward Powell were members of the old guard. They aligned themselves with the *ecclesia*, upheld the importance of adhering to the consensus established within it, defended its customs and traditions and their evolution over time, and otherwise embodied the characteristics of late medieval orthodoxy.

In Chapter 1, we saw how these four men each based their arguments for the corporeal eucharistic presence on the longstanding consensus of the Church, but developed their positions in ways representative of their own personal inclinations in combination with the merging worlds of scholasticism and humanism. Henry VIII, the least theologically

learned of our four authors, delivered a defence of transubstantiation rooted primarily in basic medieval arguments clothed in a humanist polemical style. More, a lawyer by training, blended scholastic logic and learning with humanist rhetoric. Fisher and Powell, academic clergymen whose defences of transubstantiation were more firmly rooted in humanist methodology, relied heavily on classical tropes. They each helped usher the longstanding teachings of the Church into early modernity and shaped them according to the times. One of the qualities of late medieval orthodoxy that has confused many early modernists is that its connection to the *ecclesia* rather than to *doctrina* permitted a plethora of teachings under its roof, so long as the consensus of the Church was upheld. The end of Chapter 1 provided an initial sense of this pedagogical variation, as it showed that More's eucharistic metaphysics aligned with Scotus or the *via moderna*, while Fisher's aligned with Aquinas.

In Chapter 2, we saw our four authors defend conciliarism and the emergence of custom, two primary mechanisms for the evolution of orthodoxy, and they did so by again relying on different authorities. Fisher, More, and Powell all drew from the ideas of conciliarism's second phase, which was characterised by mixed governmental theories of the relationship between pope and council, though Fisher aligned most closely with Nicholas of Cusa while More and Powell seemed closer to Jean Gerson. Henry VIII, on the other hand, guided by his desire to annul his first marriage, espoused a conciliar theory more emblematic of the movement's third phase, which subordinated the pope to the council to such a degree that his function became more like that of an executive servant. Personal interests also played a role in Henry VIII's treatment of Luther's arguments in favour of *utraquism*, where he was unique among his peers in his focus on anti-clericalism. More refuted Luther by combining a Gersonian explanation for the evolution of custom with humanist political philosophy, while Fisher and Powell drew on more intricate details of

theology and canon law, but in different ways. Fisher did so as a measured theologian focussed on the details themselves while Powell did so as a forceful polemicist, burying the details beneath layers of humanist rhetoric. They recognised consensus, defended its evolution from different angles, and imbued it with flavours pertinent to them as individuals and to the environments in which they lived.

These themes were again witnessed in Chapter 3. England's conservatives defended the Church's established teachings on penance, but they had different means of doing so. Fisher, Henry, and More all at least respected attrition as a form of sorrow beneficial to justification. But whereas Fisher followed Scotus in believing that one could be justified without partaking in the sacrament of penance, Henry VIII and More followed a more widespread path of insisting that participation in the sacrament is indispensable for justification. Powell offered no insight on this issue, but he censured Luther for deviating from what was universally held in altering penance's traditional tripartite structure, and, ever the eminent humanist, the stability of wider society (the *res publica*) was central to his soteriological concerns. This chapter also provided some discussion on whether conservative thought was at all influenced by the ideas of the reformers, not just by the intellectual backgrounds of authors and the social environments in which they more willingly participated. It showed that ecclesiastical consensus and the teachings that arose therefrom were so rooted in More's thinking that it did not matter what revolutionary ideas about faith were devised by the reformers, More read and dismissed them through the lens of the Church's distinction between actual and habitual faith that had arisen three hundred years earlier.

In Chapter 4, we saw the extremes that existed in European-wide conservatism. Erasmus sat on the moderate end of the spectrum with what Greta Grace Kroeker has called

his “theology of compromise,” and Fisher, More, and Henry VIII resided on the more strictly conservative end.² They were harsher in tone than Erasmus in their treatments of Luther’s views on free will, and, as was evident with Fisher, this stricter conservatism facilitated the use of medieval ideas which the moderate Erasmus did not employ. The chapter further showed that, even if reformers did not necessarily influence the essence of conservative thought in early Reformation England, they influenced its articulation. Of Fisher, More, and Henry VIII, only Fisher had an established defence of free will in the early 1520s; More and Henry VIII developed their objections as the decade progressed.

A consensus of the majority defined by theological heterogeneity and evolving through time – this was orthodoxy in the late medieval period, and it is what our four authors reflected time and again over the course of this investigation. When David Bagchi observed that some conservatives “took a principled stand on their right to regard tradition as a legitimate source [of authority], and cited it freely,” and when Jamie H. Ferguson remarked that Thomas More was “fond of opposing individual heretics... to fifteen hundred years of ecclesiastic consensus,” this alignment with what conservatives saw as orthodox was what they were noticing, though they did not realise it.³ It is therefore a mistake for scholars to refrain from using “orthodoxy” in relation to the established Church and its teachings in the early Reformation. To do so entirely misses the essence of how conservatives conceived of Christian teachings and overlooks one of the fundamental issues they had with the reformers, namely that they deviated from the way of the majority institutionalised in the Church. If there is a word that historians should be cautious in using

² Kroeker, “Erasmus and Luther,” 98-99.

³ Bagchi, “Catholic Theologians,” 225; Ferguson, “Faith in the Language,” 999.

when describing the early Reformation, it is “doctrine.” As we saw in the introduction, the word was used more liberally into the early sixteenth century than we use it today; it was more akin to “learning,” “opinion” or a non-dogmatic teaching than to an unequivocal, binding teaching. Indeed, even William Tyndale used it in this earlier sense. In his *Obedience*, he described the established Church’s dependence on “Aristoteles doctrine,” and in his *Answer to Sir Thomas More*, he mentioned the “false doctrine and glosses” of the Pharisees and complained about the advances made by the “doctrine of Duns,” whose disciples, the Scotists, Tyndale called the “children of darkness.”⁴ If “doctrine” is going to be used in investigations of the early Reformation, it must be with some kind of prior qualification explaining its use.

At what point, though, should we start conceiving of “orthodoxy” and “doctrine” as we do today? When should we stop using “orthodoxy” in relation to the established Roman Catholic Church and begin using “doctrine” in the more dogmatic sense? These are questions for further research. Natalia Nowakowska has noted a change in how “doctrine” was understood at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), and the process of confessionalisation that began around 1550, in which the Catholic, Reformed, and Lutheran Churches attempted to define themselves theologically, was when these Churches are said to have acquired their respective orthodoxies – so the answer is certainly by the mid-sixteenth century.⁵ But there are likely multiple lines to be drawn that vary by region, and they will be largely dependent on the social and political circumstances taking place within these regions during the Reformation. In the case of “orthodoxy” in England, however, it might be helpful to draw a

⁴ Tyndale, “Obedience,” 29; Tyndale, “Answer to Sir Thomas More,” 43 and 75; similar examples may be found on *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵ Nowakowska, *King Sigismund*, 35; McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 10; Cameron, “Orthodoxy and Heresy in the Post-Reformation,” 103-104.

line at the summer of 1535, coinciding with the executions of John Fisher and Thomas More on 22nd June and 6th July respectively. These men were both executed for refusing to accede to the Act of Supremacy, and during his trial in Westminster Hall on 1st July, More's final argument before being sentenced to death was this:⁶

This realm, being but one member and small part of the Church, might not make a particular law disagreeable with the general law of Christ's universal Catholic Church, no more than the City of London, being but one poor member in respect of the whole realm, might make a law against an act of Parliament to bind the whole realm... and therefore am I not bound, my lord, to conform my conscience to the council of one realm against the general council of Christendom.⁷

More appealed to the consensus of the majority across the Christian west, a final grasp at the orthodoxy he had lived by his whole life, and which he defended dearly over the preceding decade, but it was to no avail. He was beheaded for treason five days later.⁸

Before drawing this investigation to a close, some concluding remarks must be made about our four authors. Beginning with Henry VIII, we can say with certainty that the *Assertio* was largely his own work; at the very least, he had the final say on the text's contents. As Alec Ryrie has noted, it was "no great piece of theology."⁹ Between its discussion of the substantial superiority of Christ's body without mention of its glorification, to its mild support for utraquism, it is highly unlikely that any theologian deemed illustrious enough to be behind the book's contents would have composed it as it was written. It did not cross the line into heresy, but it did stray from convention, and the fact that both More and Fisher appeared to subtly distance themselves from or otherwise reframe some of the text's contents is a further indication that it was the king's own work. Amateur though he

⁶ For the executions of Fisher and More, see Bradshaw, "Bishop John Fisher," 14-15 and Paul, *Thomas More*, 112-113.

⁷ Roper, "Life of Sir Thomas More," 248-250.

⁸ Paul, *Thomas More*, 113.

⁹ Ryrie, *Age of Reformation*, 87.

may have been, Henry VIII was still theologically competent. He was able to draw on older arguments to oppose Luther, like the appeal to Exodus 7:12 and grammatical distinction between “hoc” and “hic” in his defence of transubstantiation, and otherwise articulate a firmly attritionist penitential theology. But he was first and foremost a king: as we saw in our discussion of communion’s administration, his theology was filtered through the ambitions he held for his office and for himself.

The unitary image of Thomas More – the Christian humanist situated between the extremes of More “the man for all seasons” and More the religious zealot – which Richard Rex, Travis Curtright, and Joanne Paul uncovered in the last decade or so, came to light again in this investigation.¹⁰ More was unrelenting in his insults, as we mentioned throughout this thesis, but this was just part of standard humanist polemical practice. He was well versed in the intricacies of medieval theology and at the core of his religious thinking was, of course, adherence to the ways of the established Church. But as we saw in his treatment of communion’s administration, this adherence was just as much a part of his personal religiosity as it was guided by his humanist political philosophy: More defended the evolution of custom in the Church through the lens of the *res publica*, and he reframed the *Assertio* as doing the same. In addition to this strong humanist influence, however, More retained a unique reliance on logic. He was a versatile thinker, who employed syllogisms alongside humanist rhetoric to counter the reformers, showing the degree of interchangeability that was possible between scholastic and humanist methodologies. As More seemed to be an anomaly in the extent of his reliance on logic, this area of his thought would benefit from a more sustained investigation, perhaps one examining his earlier

¹⁰ Rex, “Thomas More and the Heretics,” 93-94; Curtright, *One Thomas More*, 1-14; Paul, *Thomas More*, 3-4.

humanist works for logical tendencies. We know he described Aristotelian logic positively in his 1515 letter to Martaan van Dorp, but was it employed before, or did he only begin using it against the reformers?¹¹ Such an analysis would shed further light on More's intellectual tendencies and development.

In the context of this investigation, John Fisher's response to the reformers was the most theologically rich and methodologically varied. He was a Thomist in his eucharistic metaphysics, but his penitential theology was primarily Scotist with a slight deviation towards Aquinas or Gregory of Rimini to sidestep charges of Pelagianism. He was a conciliarist, despite Surtz and Rex's suggestions to the contrary, and he drew on principles of canon law to defend the emergence of custom in the Church. His reading of scripture was influenced by medieval ideas, as was evident with his appeal to the three *libertates* in his discussion of free will, but his humanist training was just as integral to his theology. As we saw in his defence of transubstantiation, he explained the complete substantial change in the Eucharist with a reference to the transformation of an egg into a chick in the classical tale of Julia Augusta, matching the verbs in his re-telling of the story to those in Matthew's Gospel. His theology was a prime example of orthodoxy being the sum of its past and present: Fisher had one foot firmly planted both in long-established medieval teachings and in the more recent humanist fascination with antiquity.¹² Despite the renewed attention that this analysis has brought to his thought, however, Fisher's corpus of writings was large, and there is much that remains to be examined. Our discussion was limited to the Eucharist (including relevant discussion of conciliar authority), penance and free will, and so his *Confutatio*, which contains insights into other areas of Fisher's theology, like his views on

¹¹ More to Dorp, 1515, 23.

¹² Tracy, "Erasmus and the Arians," 7.

baptism and indulgences, would benefit from further analysis. Furthermore, we mentioned, but never analysed his *Sacri sacerdotii defensio*, as its contents were not relevant for our purpose. But an in-depth analysis of Fisher's defence of the priesthood would likely enhance our understanding of his ecclesiology.

Of our four authors, Edward Powell was the most archetypally Christian humanist. At every turn, his propensity for rhetoric and love for antiquity was evident, so much so that we sometimes needed to dig to find the theology beneath it. Indeed, his refutation of Luther's third and fourth arguments in favour of *utraquism* were essentially the same as Fisher's (the third depended on the distinction between the sacramental *res* and *signum* while the fourth depended on the principles of canon law) but were far more polemically driven and buried beneath Ciceronian references. He was Gersonian in his conciliarism, and the consensus of the Church and importance of adhering to ecclesiastical catholicity were at the core of his thought, but he modified traditionally conservative ideas to fit a humanist framework. As we saw in his defence of transubstantiation, he altered the conventional practice of linking perceived contemporary heretics with heresies from the Church's past to include links to devious figures from Greek mythology and Roman history. And in both his discussion of transubstantiation and defence of the traditional formulation of penance, Powell showed that the well-being of the *res publica* was a guiding light in his theology. As he has been largely ignored by historians, Powell is certainly worthy of further scholarly attention, and there is much left to be investigated in his *Propugnaculum*, such as his views on baptism and marriage. And given the sheer weight of his humanist tendencies, a comparison between his work and those of Erasmus would likely be fruitful for furthering our understanding of Christian humanism in western Europe.

But what of our tree of English conservatism that represented its embodiment of late medieval orthodoxy? Its fate through the period of confessionalisation and beyond would benefit from more in-depth investigations, but a glance at the last three ecumenical councils provides a preliminary clue. On 8th April 1546, the fourth session of the Council of Trent issued a decree on scriptural interpretation. No one, it said, was “to interpret the sacred scriptures” in a way that was “in opposition to that which has been and is held by the holy mother church” and no one could give scripture “meanings contrary to the unanimous consent of the fathers.”¹³ These sentiments were repeated at the First Vatican Council (1869-1870), which also pointed to “the perpetual agreement of the catholic church” as a primary authority.¹⁴ And emerging from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in 1964, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, spoke to the importance of universal consensus in its twelfth article:

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God. Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and

¹³ “Nemo... sacram scripturam ad suos sensus contorquens, contra eum sensum, quem tenuit et tenet sancta mater ecclesia... aut etiam contra unanimem consensum patrum, ipsam scripturam sacram interpretari audeat.” “Council of Trent, 1545-1563,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner and trans. Peter McIlhenny and John Coventry (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 664.

¹⁴ “Hoc quoque perpetuus ecclesiae catholicae consensus tenuit et tenet, duplicem esse ordinem cognitionis, non solum principio, sed obiecto etiam distinctum: principio quidem, quia in altero naturali ratione, in altero fide divina cognoscimus.” “First Vatican Council, 1869-1870,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner and trans. Ian Brayley (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 808; for echoes of the decree from Trent, see *Ibid.*, 803 and 806. Vatican I ended with a statement of the irreformability of papal pronouncements, irrespective of the consensus of the Church, that was reaffirmed at Vatican II, but longstanding custom and consensus remained authoritative. For an account of this statement of irreformability, see Richard S. Costigan, *The Consensus of the Church and Papal Infallibility: A Study in the Background of Vatican I* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life.¹⁵

Our tree does not appear to have died, nor does it seem to have withered. It was simply caught in the whirlwind of lexical changes itself and still appears to stand as a reflection of orthodoxy today, just that in the Roman Catholic image.

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican City: Vatican Council II, 1964), sec. 12, accessed 7th August 2025; for a discussion of this passage and consensus, see Francis A. Sullivan, "The Sense of Faith: The Sense/Consensus of the Faithful," in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 91-93; for historical consensus and the reception of doctrine in the modern Catholic Church, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Reception of Doctrine: New Perspectives," in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 95 and 104.

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