CHAPTER 11

Thomas More and Humphrey Monmouth: Conscience and Coercion in Reformation England

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What soever thou byndest upon erth, shall be bounde in heven, and what soever thou lowsest on erthe, shalbe lowsed in heven.¹

The words of Jesus to Peter recorded in the Gospel of Matthew—here in Tyndale’s translation of 1535—were of immense ideological significance in the Middle Ages. If we penetrate beyond the fractious contest between secular and papal powers for supremacy, the passage encapsulates a key point in this period about the legal personhood of rulers, namely that the laws of this world and the laws of the next were to be congruent. As John of Salisbury expressed it in the 1150s in his Polycraticus, the finest secular rulers were those who “strove to sanctify the whole globe as a sort of temple of justice by cultivating the most sacred laws.”² Christian rulers were able to do this through their knowledge of the scriptures and through the tutelage of the church. Pagan rulers were similarly capable, though with more limited horizons, through their regard for, and receptivity to, wisdom.³

How this was to happen in a fallen world became the focus of much scholastic investigation, especially with the increasing availability of the works of Aristotle. Where did the knowledge of right and wrong come from? In developing a theory of conscience, scholastic theologians and philosophers had surprisingly little to go on.⁴

³ John of Salisbury, Polycraticus, 45–46.
⁴ For the standard account of medieval conscience, see Timothy C. Potts, Conscience in Medieval Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
The word ‘conscience’ does not occur in the Old Testament, although the idea is clearly present, often conveyed by the use of the word ‘heart’. The New Testament was born into a more cosmopolitan world, and the word itself is present, borrowed, largely by Paul, from Koine Greek. Paul’s use of conscience was usually in rather peripheral areas and almost always in a negative sense. It is essentially retrospective, the presence in the mind of disquiet over past wrongdoing.

Patristic writings also provided less guidance than might have been expected. Origen, however, attempted to tease out the implications for conscience of Paul’s broader concept of law. Origen saw the necessity of a law beyond the Mosaic law, a law which applied to and was apprehended by all people at all times and in all places, in other words, natural law. He fused this idea of natural law with Paul’s ideas about conscience, and subsequently with an idea probably derived from the Stoics, *hegemonicon*, that is, that which governs a person’s heart. Conscience was now much more than just regret at moral failure. It was a matter of the alignment of the will with an external, divinely created law.

Origen’s ideas reached medieval scholastics in fragmentary form and through a Latin translation by Jerome, who used two different words for ‘conscience’, *synderesis* and *conscientia*. Linguistic or grammatical irregularities of this kind were always liable to be seized upon as significant by scholastic writers, and these imagined differences formed the basis of much scholastic

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7 1 Corinthians, Chapters 8 and 10:14–33.