THE DEVELOPMENT OF A REFORMIST APPROACH TO MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY IN EARLY ENGLISH HUMANISM

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We have learned much during the past quarter century from intellectual historians about the emergence in early English humanism of a new attitude toward public life calling for the reform and renewal of society, politics, and religion. In their concern with reformist ideas having to do with the larger arena of public life, however, recent historians have neglected the importance of the new attitude toward marriage and family life clearly taking shape in early English humanism. The humanists themselves perceived that marriage and family life constituted the basic social and economic unit and provided the paradigm for all social relations. It was their conviction that in order to govern a city or a commonwealth a man must first be able to rule a household. The early English humanists came to encourage population growth and to realize that the survival of the commonweal depended upon marriage. For them, marriage was the best way of spiritually and morally improving the social order. These attitudes toward domestic life involved the humanists in the conflict between matrimony and celibacy which became a major issue in the English Reformation. To be sure, the Protestant reformers were the ones who finally brought about the rejection of the ethical dualism which exalted virginity above marriage and the repudiation of the rule of clerical celibacy. By tracing the development of a reformist approach to marriage and celibacy in early English humanism, however, the present study will attempt to show how much the humanist movement did to prepare the way for that revolutionary change in spiritual and moral values.

It has become customary to regard John Colet, the first great humanist of the English Renaissance, as a vigorous advocate of celibacy who

1 The most useful studies of this development have been W. Gordon Zeeveld, Foundations of Tudor Policy (Cambridge, Mass., 1948); Arthur B. Ferguson, The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance (Durham, N.C., 1965); James K. McConica, English Humanists and Reformation Politics (Oxford, 1965).
strongly adhered to the medieval idea of marriage as nothing more than a concession to human frailty. In fact, there are some who consider Colet’s position a significant indication of the ongoing strength of the medieval view of marriage insofar as he continued to advocate it despite his bitter criticism of scholastic theology and enthusiastic commitment to humanist culture. For D. S. Bailey, Colet’s interpretation of I Corinthians 7 "shows how little the thought of the Church had advanced during the Middle Ages in what relates to the essence of marriage and sexual relationship". He concludes that "nothing could illustrate better than Colet’s exposition the beliefs and prejudices which determined the attitude to sexual matters even of the best minds of the age". This standard view, however, misses the reformist outlook of Colet which is fundamental to his belief that those who lack continence should marry. It is precisely the development of this reformist outlook by Colet which helped to shape the changing attitudes toward marriage and celibacy during the early English Renaissance.

Applying his innovative method of exegesis to I Corinthians 7, Colet first seeks to determine how Paul answered the question asked by the Christians in Corinth about what they should do in regard to marriage. Paul’s wish was for the unmarried not to marry but to live single like himself in order to devote themselves to God in unity and simplicity. Yet since Paul did not know the special strength of each Corinthian, explains Colet, he decided against commanding all of them to abstain from marriage lest they be unable to do it. Out of a sense of realism, Colet emphasizes, Paul took into consideration the human frailty of the Corinthians and conceded marriage to those who needed it as a remedy for passion. The main aim of Paul, according to Colet, was to avoid evil and disorder and to preserve "all practicable good".

It is Colet’s own evaluation of what is good about marriage that has led to the conclusion that his outlook on it was essentially medieval. Colet declares that "marriage has nothing good in itself, save in so far as it is a remedy for necessary evil". The importance of marriage, for Colet, derives from its usefulness in preserving public order and preventing social evil. He points out: "In this way, to be sure, it is good: when

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3 Sexual Relations in Christian Thought, p. 165-166.
4 Enarratio in Primam Epistolam S. Pauli ad Corinthios, ed. and tr. J. H. Lupton (London,