THE BEST STATE OF A COMMONWEALTH AND THE NEW ISLAND OF UTOPIA

A truly golden handbook, No less beneficial than entertaining By the distinguished and Eloquent Author

THOMAS MORE

Citizen and Sheriff of the famous City of London,

An Intorduction to More's Utopia

Plato's <u>Republic</u> was written just after the Peloponnesian Wars and it was not until two thousand years later that another major political and social philosophy appeared. This new philosophy appeared in 1516 in the form of More's <u>Utopia</u>. Within five years it had been published in most of the countries on the European continent and had gone through seven Latin editions.

There were many reasons for the widespread popularity of More's book. Until More's Utopia the Christian concept of life after death had been the only possible escape for the down-trodden, debt-ridden peasant. In the Sixteenth Century "the Kingdom of Heaven as a utopia of escape ceased to hold men's allegiance when they discovered other channels and other possibilities." More's Utopia then in a sense became a substitute for the Christian utopia. Utopia was also popular because it was plausible. More took advantage of a timely subject and situation by using the travels of Amergo Vespuccis in the New World as the basis for his book. In 1507 Four Voyages an account of the explorations of Vespuccis had been published by Martin Waldseemuller. In this account he tells of the twenty-four men Vespuccis left in the New World. This is where More's story takes over. Raphael Hythlodaeus is supposedly one of the men left behind. From there he proceeds to show us the Utopian way of life through his descriptions of their government, war, religion, pleasure and ideals.

There are many popular interpretations of More's <u>Utopia</u>.
Russell Ames summerizes these interpretations and we shall examine them:

- 1."a fantastic escape from unpleasant reality"
- 2."a blueprint for a better society which More thought men might soon establish"

More's book could not be really be considered a blueprint but more likely a tool to shame Londoners into to realizing their poor conditions and the people of England into realizing the incapabilities of their church and government.

- 3.a better society which More desired but did not believe possible"
- 4."a better society which might exist in some far-off time"

We may reinforce this idea with the closing sentence of More's book where he says;

But I freely admit that there are many features of the Utopia Republic which I would like-though hardly except-to see adopted in our states

5."a reconstruction of medieval social virtues"
This point may be explained by the words of this quote;
"Uoptia applies a combination of principles of the medieval guild and medieval monastary to a disciplined carefully regulated community, which denies itself most of the luxuries and devotes itself to virtues," Utopiane clothed themselves simply and their homes contained only the bare necessities.
They abstained from many earthly pleasures such as drinking, hunting, and gambling there things were characteristic of the monk.

6."a revival of primitive Christian communism" More in the final pages of <u>Utopia</u> explains;

Quite apart form such things as their military tactics, religions, and forms of worship, there was the grand absurdity on which their whole society was based, communism minus money.

- 7."a speculative portrait of rumored American societies like that of the Incas"
- 8."a strictly rational philosophic construction minus Christianity for the purpose of moral instruction"

When we examine this statement we may follow the thinking of Coulton as he discusses the "virtues" Utopia was created to show how far a society could advance on the natural virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude) without the aid of the theological virtues (faith, hope, charity). Ite has been said if a society as great as More's can be built on the natural virtues could be built with all the virtues?

9."a pleasant fable written by a humanist for the amusement of himself and his scholarly friends"

This point is baked up by the alphabet and poetry that More invented to hoax the unintellectual and delight the intellectual. But it may be said he used his joking to create an atmosphere in which he could disclaim any responsibility for a view that might be considered subversive.

10."a fruit of classical studies following Plato's Republic"

Many times in Utopia we can trace More's ideas to ancient writers, as we see in this reference to Plato;

Besides, though they might be annoyed by what I said, I don't see why it should be thought so fantastically out of the ordinary. Its' not as if I'd recommended the system operated in Plato's imaginary Republic, or in Utopia today. Now that, while undoubtly better than ours, might well strike them as rather odd, because it is based on commercial ownership instead of private ownership.6

- ll."an early plan for British imperialism"
- 12."a Christian humanist account of a scholar's
 paradise where philosophers are kings and the
 church is purified"
- 13."a description of a desirable and possible organization of city republics"
- 14, "a society constructed as the direct opposite to England for the purpose of disquising social criticism"

More created a society opposed to the English system of nobility. Coulton describes More's creation beautifully, "The theme of the whole book is the terrible waste in human affairs which is created simply by muddle and want of method; and above all, the labor that runs to waste because so many lives in idleness (the nobility) while others drudge from dawn to dark like brute beasts (peasants); whereas, by patient application and good will, the work might be apportioned that none had so disgracefully little to do and none was so inhumanly overburdened."

The following are discussions of the topics as presented in More's Utopia:

Utopia on Religion

"Apparently he considers it possible that God made different people believe in different things, because He wanted to be worshipped in many ways."

"On the same principle, their churches contain no visual representation of God, so that everyon e is free to imagine Him in whatever shape he chooses, according to which religion he thinks best. Nor is God addressed in any special names there. He is simply called Mythras, a general term used by everyone to designate the Supreme Being, whoever he may be."

"So he left the choice of creed an open question, to be deciced by the individual according to his own ideas, except that he strictly forbade his people to believe anything so incompatible with human dignity as the doctrine that the soul dies with the body, and the unive se functions aimlessly, without any controlling providence."

Through these quotations we can see the general philosophy of the Utopians as far as religion and the tolderance for the beliefs is concerned. In their society no religion is forced, but each man has the right to convince another derson of his beliefs if he does it "peaceably, gently, quietly, and soberly, without hasty and contentious rebuking and inveighing against others."

The setting up of the church government in Utopia was a direct critisim of the ineffecient clergymen that existed in England at this time. He did this by having a very limited number of of priests that were very religious and holy. (In England at this time there was an excess of priests.) He also had two types of priests. There was one group that abstained from all earthly pleasures. The other group had no objection to pleasure as long as it did not interfere with their work. Priests were elected by the community-thirteen in each city and an opening could only be created by a death.

The following is a Utopian prayer;

o, God I acknowledge Thee to be my creator, my governor, and the source of all good things. In thank Thee for all Thy represent the blessings, but especially for letting me live in the happiest possible society, and practise what I hope is the truest religion or social system would be better and more acceptable to Thee, I pray Thee in Thy goodness let me know it, for I am ready to follow wherever where Thou shalt lead me. But if our system is the best, and my religion is indeed the truest, then keep me faithful to both of them, and bring the rest of humanity to adopt the same way of life, and the same religious faith unless the present variety of cree is is part of Thy inscrutable purpose. Grant me an easy death, when Thou takest me to Thyself. I don't presume to suggest whether it be late or soon, but if it is Thy will, I would rather come to Thee by a most painful death, than be kept too long away from Thee by the most pleasant of earthly lives.

Utopia on War

The Utopians hate war and will do everything they can do to keep themeselves out of war. But if they are drawn into war they will do everything and anything to make sure they are the victors. In otherwords in their warfare the "ends justify the means." Their causes for war are few. If a fellow Utopian is killed because of the aggression of another nation they will go to war. They will also go to war if "a people hold a piece of land for no justifable reason and their people refuse to cooperated with the utopians, the will take the land by force."

Every able bodied citizen is trained in warefare every day. But nobody is forced to fight, and no wife is forced to stay home if her husband is sent overseas to fight. And as far as peace treaties they refuse to sign a paper that might get then involved in another war:

Human nature constitutes a treaty in itself, and human beings are far more effectively united by kindness than by contracts, by feelings then by words.

Utopia on Crime and Government

"In otherwords, you create theives, and then punish for stealing."/2 With these powerful words More proceeds to tell what can be done about the high rate of crime in England at this time that was caused by soldiers that we turned to theives and tramps. Between the wars, mercenary troops, with their wages cut off, moved around the countryside attacking merchant trains and occasionally plundering peasant villages. More stated his solution to end crime through four points:

- Reduce the number of people that are kept doing nothing
- Stop the rich from cornering markets and establishing virtual monopolies.
- 3. Revive the agriculture and wool industry, so that there's plenty of honest useful work for the great army of the unemployed-by which I mean not only the exixting theires, but tramps and idle servants who are bound to become theires eventually.
- 4. Make a law that anyone that is responsible for the demolishing a farm or country twon must either rebuild it himself or hand it over to one how's willing to do so. (This was used to discourage to looting and wasting of land).

Utopia on Wealth and Pleasure

In our competitive world and in our race for wealth, prestige, and success, More's philosophy may seem absurd, but many times it is painfully truthful today. More proposes a world without money where each man is equal according to wealth. He proposes a world where each man has something to do instead of placing a burden on a few people. He proposes a world where power, dignity, wealth, and fame are unheard of. Here are some of these views:

"And the moment money goes, you can say good-buy to fear, tension, anxiety, overwork, and sleepless nights. Why even poverty itself, the one problem that one always seemed to need money for its solution, would promptly disappear if money ceased to exist."

"No living creature is naturally greedy except in fear of want or in the case of human beings, from vanity, the notion that your better than people if you can display more superfluous property than they can. But there if no place for that sort of thing in Utopia."

"Nobody owns anything, but everyone is rich-for what greater wealth can there be than cheerfulness, peace of mind, and freedom from anxiety?/3

The Utopians are simply in their lives as seen in their dress, homes, and recreation. Their dress and home are all the same, Thus they acheive, "maximum durability with a minimum of labor." Their loose fitting work overalls lasted seven years and their woolen cloaks last equally as long. They feel that cloths are to clothe a person not to enhance his beauty or to give him pleasure. Here is how they feel:

"In the catrgory of illusory pleasure addicts they include themkind of persons I mentioned before, who thinks himself better than other people because he's better dressed than they are. Actually he's just as wrong about his cloths as he is himself. From a practical point of view, why is it better to be dressed in fine woolen thread than in course? But he's got it into his head that fine thread is naturally superior, and that wearing it sonehow increases his own value. So he feels entitled to far more respect than he'd ever

dare to hope for, if he were less expensively dressed, and is most indignant if he fails to get it."/3

Their recreation and pleasure is also based on this type of reasoning. They distain the pleasure we receive from beautiful ring or painting. They have divided their pleasure into two types: Physical and mental. The physical pleasure include eating when hungry or just merely scratching oneself when the need arises. In otherwords physical pleasures are ones that involve the functioning of the body. "Mental pleasures include the satisfaction one gets from understanding something or from contemplating truth. They also include the menory of a well spent life, and the confident expectation of good things to come." //

Thomas More--His Life

- February 7,1478 Thomas More is born in London on Milk Street. He grew up in this area and attended St. Antony's School.
- 1491 placed in the household of Cardinal Morton the archbishop of Canterbury to study and serve Morton.
- 1492 More was sent to Canterbury Hall, Oxford. This where he got his first taste of "new learning". The new learning subjects included music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, French, violen, and Greek.
- 1494 More's father, a successful lawyer of the day, had wished his son to be a lawyer, but in Oxford he was being influenced too much by the "new learning" and disreguarding his studies of law. In 1494 More was admitted to New Inn to study law.
- Inn. Amoung his friends at this time were Lily and Colet he also and met Eramus. He also revived his syudies of the Greek and Latin as we see from this quote, "The balance of his facilities seemed to be restored by a revival of the antagonistic sentiment of humanism which he had imbibed from the Oxford circle of friends."
- 1499-1503 He lodged near the Charterhouse and studied under a Carthusian monk. "He wore a sharp shirt of hair next to his skin, scourged himself every Friday and other fasting days, lay upon the bare ground with a log under his head, allowed himself but four or five hours' sleep." After a

- year of this life he abandoned the idea but he remained religious throughout his life.
- 1504 More sat in the Parliament of 1504 to contest the demands of King Henry VII for money for the wedding of Princess Margaret. His influential speech convinced Parliament that the subsidy for the wedding should be decreased by 3/15. Henry VII was so angry that he had More's father sent to the tower. Upon this action More withdrew from public life. At this time More met Cult and his three daughters. More fell in love with the second oldest daughter but was forced to marry the oldest daughter because she could not bear for her younger sister to be married before she was.
- 1505 married Jane Cult and settled inBucklersbury. Eramus visited More and on one of his visits Eramus wrote Moriae

 Enconium in honor of More.
- 1509 King Henry VII died, so More was now free to continue in a public career. He was elected Bencher of Lincoln's Inn.
- 1510 appointed under-sheriff of London. During his term of office he lived in Antwerp and it was there he sketched out the idea for <u>Utopia</u>.
- 1512 More represented the Merchants of the Staple in the negotiations with the Merchant Adventures.
- 1515 member of the embassy sent to Flanders to negotiate with the Hanse. During this embassy he wrote book II of <u>Utopia</u> and later in the same year he wrote book I.
- 1517 He helped restrain the rioters when a mob of London apprentises attacked foreign merchants. He was later a member of the city delegation asking for the king's pardon for the rioters. Also in 1517 he went with an embassyto

- Calais to settle trade disputes and became a member of the king's council.
- 1520 Members of a commission for concluding a commercial treaty with Emperor Charles V. Also during this year he met with the Hanse at Bruges.
- 1521 knighted and made subtreasurer
- 1523 appointed speaker of the House of Commons and justice of the peace.
- 1524 made high steward of Oxford
- 1525 made high steward of Cambridge
- 1529 With Cuthbert Tunstal, bishop of London, he attended the Congress of Camrai where peace was made between France and the empire.
- 1529 With the fall of Thomas Wosley he became Lord Chancellor.
 Henry VIII took great delight in More's company.
- 1532 More resigned his chancellor ship when troubles began to arise over the validity of the divorce of Henry VII and Queen Catherine.
- 1533 Act of Restraint of Appeals severed judicial lines between England and Rome.
- June 1, 1533 King Henry VIII married Anne Boleyn despite the words of the Pope and she was crowned.
- April 13, 1534 More was called to Lambeth to confirm by oath the Act of Succession which declared the king's marriage with Catherine void and the one with Anne valid. More was willing to take the oath, but he didn't because it.
- April 17, 1534 More was imprisoned in the tower for refusal to sign the oath
- 1534 The Act of Supremecy established the king as the supreme

head of the Church of England and the Treason Act made it high treason to deprive the king of this title.

July 1, 1535 - More was tried at Westminister Hall for refusal to affirm the king's supremecy, his correspondence with Fisher during his imprisonment, and his denial to state that Parliament had the power to make the king the head of the church.

July 6, 1535 - More is beheaded on Tower Hill and buried at the chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula in the tower.

December 29, 1886 - beatified

May 19, 1935 - cannonized

The Utopian Alphabet

A Specimen of Utopian Poetry

ELEBORD OF BOORD COTO SO ESPICATION OLIPPOPA ENTRE CO O PODOR DE COTO DE COTO

The Same Transliterated

Utopos ha Boccas peu la chama polta chamaan.

Bargol he maglomi baccan soma gymnosophon

Agrama gymnosophon labarembacha bodamilomin

Volvala barchin heman, la lavolvola dramme pagloni.

A Word for Word Translation

Utopos me General from not island made island.

Alone I of-lands all without philosophy

State philophycal I-have-formed-for-mortals.

Willingly I-impart my-things, not-willingly

I-accept better-ones.

The Printer to the Reader

The Utopian alphabet, good Reader which is promised in the above epistle, I have not mow added here, because I have not as yet the true characters or forms of the Utopian letters. And no marvel, seeing it in a tongue much stranger to us than the Indian, the Persian, the Syrian, the Arabic, the Egyptian, the Macedonian, the Slavonian, the Cyprian, the Scythian, etc. Which tongues, though they are nothing so strange amoung us as the Utopian is, yet their characters we have not. But Itrust, God willing, at the next printing hereof to perform that which now I can not; that is to say, to exhibit perfectly to thee the Utopian alphabet. In the mean time accept my good will. And so fare thee well.

The end of the afternoon
Discourse of
Raphael Hythlodaeus
Oh the laws and customs
Of the island of Utopia,
Hither to know but to few,
As reported by the
Most Distinguished and
Most learned man,

MR. THOMAS MORE

Citizen and Sheriff of London

FINIS 16

- 1. This was the title page from the first edition of
 Thomas More's Utopia.
- 2. Turner, Paul. Utopia (Maryland: Penguin Books, 1965.)
- 3.I have quoted Russell Ames from Mildred Campbell's book The Utopia of Sir Thomas More (New York: The Classics Club, 1947.)
- 4.Sturtz, Eward. <u>Sir Thomas More-Utopia</u> (Massachusetts: Yale University, 1964.)
- 5. Coulton discusses the virtues in relationship to

 <u>Utopia in his Medieval Panorma</u> (Cambridge: 1949)

 p. 664-680.
- 6.Turner, Paul. Utopia. (Maryland: Penguin Books, 1965)
- 7.Coulton, G.S. opiccit.
- 8. Turner, Paul op. cit.
- 9. Ibid.
- 10. Ibid.
- llIbid.
- 12. Ibid.
- 13. Ibid.
- 14. Ibid.
- 15. This note to the reader was printed in the first edition of Thomas More's <u>Utopia</u> to explain the new Utopian alphabet.
- 16. This was the final page of More's first edition of Utopia.

Bibliography

- Bolt, Robert. A Man for All Seasons. (New York: Random House, 1962.)
- Campbell, Mildred. The Utopia of Sir Thomas More.

 (New York: The Classics Club, 1947.)
- Coulton, G.S. <u>Medieval Panorama</u>. (Cambridge: 1949) pg.664-680
- Maynard, Theodore. <u>Humanist as Hero</u>. (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1957.)
- Sturtz, Edward. <u>Sir Thomas More-Utopia</u>. (Massachusetts: Yale University, 1964.)
- Turner, Paul. Utopia. (Maryland: Penguin Books, 1965.)