
Realistic Optimism in Thomas More's Utopia

Though Sir Thomas More took an active role in politics and the corrupt government of King Henry VIII, he remained rooted in his political and religious convictions. Famous for his willingness to die rather than betray his ideals, More showed throughout his life a desire to avoid compromising his beliefs. This inner struggle to balance idealistic wishes with less appealing but more attainable practical realities was an important theme in More's Utopia. Though More harshly criticized the wrongs of European society in Book One of Utopia, he idealistically presented a radical view of a new society in Book Two to force others to consider possible changes to society and to make them realize their own potential in creating better solutions to the problems of the sixteenth century.

More expressed his discontent with the Church through Raphael's strong condemnation of the hypocrisies of the institution and those belonging to it. Preachers "have fitted His doctrine to their lives" because the "greatest parts of His doctrine are opposite" them, declared Raphael (More 23). Raphael felt the preacher's actions would only make them "more secure in their wickedness" (More 23). More also mocked the self-important friar who, angered by a fool's gibe, declared that "all that jeer us are excommunicated" (More 16). He disgustingly commented on the Cardinal's counsel, who "in earnest applauded those things" the Cardinal only liked "in jest" (More 16). More noted the pomposity of one counselor with "all the formality of a debate" saying, "I will make the whole matter plain to you" (More 11). More presented those surrounding the Cardinal as arrogant, mindless fools who had little religion or religious knowledge.

More disapproved of European government, war, and man because of their devastating effects on society. Government irked More not only because of its own corruption, but also because of its propagation of war and the unnecessary quest for land acquisition. More referred to soldiers as a "pestiferous sort of people" who were paid to be idle and whose presence was unnecessary (More 8). The soldiers became "feeble with ease", unable to fight and a waste of resources (More 8). Raphael denounced princes for applying themselves more to the "affairs of war" than the "useful arts of peace" (More 5). Although More sharply reprovved establishments contributing to the disturbing state of society, he chastised individual faults and flaws of human nature, as well. He criticized the "cursed avarice" of a few that makes many suffer, complaining not only of the upper class, but also of the "excessive vanity in apparel" and "great cost in diet" among "all ranks of persons" (10). More, irritated by the irrationality of war and the flaws of human nature, disparagingly wrote of the great costs of these continuing problems.

More strongly disapproved of society's treatment of the poor, seeing the rich's advantage over the poor as a great injustice. In defense of the poor he wrote, "They would willingly work, but

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

can find none that will hire them" (More 9). The rich "buy at low prices and sell at high rates", he said, leaving the poor no choice but to "beg or rob" (More 10). More showed his extreme disillusionment with the inequalities of society when talking of the gap between the rich and the poor. He accused society of "first mak[ing] thieves and then punish[ing] them", a true analysis of the rich's lack of concern for the troublesome poor (More 11). Incorporated into this was his outcry against capital punishment and cruelty. One of his impassioned arguments was, "God has commanded us not to kill, and shall we kill so easily for a little money?" (More 11). It is "absurd" for a thief and a murderer to be punished equally, he argued, as this will "incite" the thief to now kill the man he would have only robbed (More 12). More greatly supported the poor while attacking the rich for their greed.

In Book Two More explored new ideas for society, such as a lack of materialism and a communal atmosphere of equality and uniformity. More imagined a world in which everyone wore clothes "all of one color cast carelessly about them" (More 36) and switched houses "by lot" every ten years (More 31). People used gold as a "badge of infamy", trying to devalue the strange emphasis of other cultures on objects of no real worth (More 44). Utopians sent "overplus to their neighbors" (More 30) and "freely" (More 31) welcomed anyone into their homes, showing the true sense of communal identity that More envisioned. Agriculture was "universally understood" so that all were capable of working in the fields (29). Even the towns themselves were uniform; "he that knows one knows them all" (More 30). More constantly expanded on this theme of equality, giving even the Prince "no distinction" besides a "sheaf of corn" (More 61). This want of class distinction or material value constituted More's main radical social change.

More introduced a new religious and moral philosophy of tolerance in Utopia and also defended pleasure as a God-given gift. The Utopians considered "inquiries after happiness" without consideration of "religious principles" to be "conjectural and defective" (More 47). Utopians thought it the "maddest thing in the world to pursue virtue" (More 48), instead promoting pursuing one's "own advantages" (More 49). More advocated freedom to choose religion, as long as there was a belief in a "great Essence" (More 72). Utopians felt it "indecent and foolish" to intimidate someone into believing something that "did not to him appear to be true" (More 73). More supported the idea that if there really were one truth, it would "at last break forth and shine bright" (More 73). To keep the true religion from being "choked with superstition", all were free to believe "as they should see cause" (More 73). The priests were men of "eminent piety", and though respected, they had few distinctions (More 76). More's new, accepting, idealistic church was a very different concept from the European Catholic Church in existence.

More focused much of Book Two on his ideas on justified war and reasonable slavery. The Utopians felt justified in driving natives of their land if the natives didn't allow them to cultivate the land, since "every man has a right to such as is necessary for his subsistence" (38). They

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)

felt that there was a "partnership of the human nature", and partly because of this, they detested war as a "very brutal thing" (More 64). The only instance when they were willing to go to war was in case of loss of life of any Utopian or when a neighbor asked for help. Strangely enough, the Utopians did not object to using mercenaries or harboring traitors, deciding that the number of lives saved by a quick war compensated for this breach of morals. Their punishment system was also interesting and very different from Europe.

More presented contrasting books of Utopia to provide such an extreme example of change that people would be more willing to accept reasonable change. More said at one point that the bride and groom should see each other naked before marriage as even a "horse of a small value" was inspected thoroughly before being bought. More most likely did not expect people to agree to this unemotional, practical practice, but he might have wanted a couple to realize how important it is to be well suited to and familiar with each other. He also wrote of Utopians exchanging houses every ten years; this idea obviously was not very plausible, but the idea of less emphasis on personal property and social status was appealing. Gold does not have to be a symbol of infamy, but people might benefit from placing less importance on the acquisition of it. Avarice does not have to disappear, but nor should it dominate life. By criticizing every aspect of life in Book One, More startled people into wanting at least moderate change. More also hoped to provoke the average individual into analyzing the problems of European society and imagining new possibilities. More presented the problems in Book One, but as he said that Utopia was "absurd" at the end of his book, he made it clear that his answers were not real ones that he thought would actually work (More 85). Instead, he presented the problems so that others of his time could attempt solutions. More tried to stir the average man into saving society.

More's Utopia at first seemed like a preposterous attempt to determine which exact qualities a society would need to prosper but is actually about a society based on experimentation and gradual improvements over time. Though More uses Utopia as a model for European society, he admits its inability to exist and work as planned.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)