

Moore's Utopia - Article from The Catholic Encyclopedia

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15243a.htm>

From Greek 'ou' no or not, and 'topos' place, a term used to designate a visionary or an ideally perfect state of society.

The name was first used by Sir Thomas More in his work entitled "De optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia" (Louvain, 1516), and has since been used as a generic term for political romances. Such a romance, to which More was indebted for many of his ideas, is Plato's "Republic". In this work Plato prescribes a communistic mode of life for the guardians and auxiliaries (not for the productive classes) of the State. The superior qualities of the guardian and auxiliary class were to be maintained by the practice of stirpiculture and state control of the bringing up of children. In the "Republic", the ends sought are political rather than economic. Sir Thomas More, on the other hand, does not confine his attention to the governing class but includes the whole social structure in his plan. He puts most of his narrative into the mouth of a certain Raphael Hythloday, a Portuguese traveller, who criticizes trenchantly the laws and customs of European states, and paints in glowing colours the ideal institutions which he had observed in a five years' sojourn among the Utopians. Hythloday contends that English laws are badly administered. The thief and the murderer alike are punished with death with no consequent diminution of the crime of theft. Means should be taken rather to see that men are not driven to steal. The servant class, for example, should learn trades, so that they need not have recourse to highway robbery when dismissed by their masters. Also some provision should be made for agricultural labourers that they might not follow a like profession when the arable lands were converted into sheep runs, a crying evil in England at that time. He contended further that most of the difficulties of European government grew out of the institution of private property. The objection is made that a nation cannot be prosperous where all property is common because there would be no incentive to labour, men would become slothful, and violence and bloodshed would result. Hythloday answers this objection by giving an account of the institutions and customs of the Utopians.

In the Island of Utopia lying south of the equator there are fifty-four cities of which no two are nearer together than twenty-four miles. The government is representative in form. From each city three wise and experienced men are sent each year to the capital to deliberate on public affairs.

The rural population live in farm-houses scattered throughout the island, each of which contains at least forty persons besides two slaves. For every thirty farm-houses there is a leader called a philarch. Ten philarchs together with their groups of families are under an officer called a chief philarch. The prince of the island is chosen for life by the philarchs from four candidates nominated by the people. He may be deposed if he is suspected of tyranny.

The laws are few in number and seldom violated. Among the Utopians agriculture is a science in which all are instructed. The children in the schools learn its history and theory. From each group of thirty farms twenty persons are sent annually to the neighbouring cities to make room for an equal number who come from the city to the country. In the course of time all have a taste of farm life.

In addition to agriculture each person is taught a trade. Usually he selects his father's trade, but if he desires to learn another he is allowed to do so.

The Utopians work only six hours a day but this is sufficient to provide them with all the necessaries and comforts of life, for the reason that there are so few idlers and that no time is spent in supplying useless or vicious luxuries.

In the cities groups of families have common dining-halls, although anyone who chooses to do so may dine at his own house. The menial service in these dining-rooms is performed by slaves, while the women of the various families by turns superintend the preparation of the meals.

When the Utopians have produced a supply sufficient to last them for two years, they use any surplus which they may have to carry on commerce with neighbouring nations, securing from them gold, silver, iron, and such other things as they need. They do not use gold and silver as money, since they have common ownership of property, but they procure it principally in order to hire mercenaries from among their neighbours.

In music, arithmetic, and geometry they are not surpassed by the Europeans, and in astronomy and meteorology they far outstrip them.

There are different varieties of religion, but their public worship is of such a general nature that they are able to worship together. All beliefs except Atheism are tolerated. Their ethics is Hedonistic and very few of them are attracted by an ascetic life.

Those convicted of heinous crimes are reduced to slavery, and persons sentenced to death in other countries are also procured as slaves. Children of slaves do not retain the status of their parents.

Persons afflicted with incurable and painful diseases are advised by the priests and magistrates to take their own lives. If they do not wish to do so, however, they are not compelled to. Those who commit suicide without the consent of the priests and magistrates are given dishonourable burial, and those who meet death cheerfully have their bodies cremated as a mark of honour.

Women are not allowed to marry under the age of eighteen nor men under the age of twenty-two. Much care is taken to make those contracting marriage acquainted with each other so as to avoid unhappy unions. Divorces are permitted for one cause, and only the innocent party may remarry.

The Utopian priests are of extreme holiness but their numbers are small. They are elected by the people by secret ballot. Women are not excluded from the priesthood, though few of them - and these widows and old women - are chosen. The priesthood is held in high honour.

The traveller concludes his account by attributing the happiness and concord prevailing in Utopia to the absence of private property.

It is sometimes asked whether More meant to have the proposals in the Utopia taken seriously. Undoubtedly he did not. They were merely a means by which he could call attention to some of the abuses of his day without being taken to task by the king for his freedom. While he shows that he appreciates the weakness of communism, he allows

Hythloday to present only its strength. Since More's day many ideal commonwealths in imitation of the Utopia have flourished in literature. Among the best known are:

Bacon's "New Atlantis" (1624), in which the author dreams of the happiness of mankind attained through the progress of the natural sciences;

Campanella's "City of the Sun" (1637), which emphasizes community of property and stirpiculture;

Harrington's "Oceana" (1656); Fénelon's "Telemaque" (1699); Cabet's "Voyage in Icaria" (1840);

Bellamy's "Looking Backward" (1889);

William Morris's "News from Nowhere" (1890);

Hertzka's "Freiland" (1891); and

H. G. Wells's "A Modern Utopia" (1905) and "New Worlds for Old" (1908).

Morley's "Ideal Commonwealths" contains an English translation of More's "Utopia" as well as of Bacon's "New Atlantis", Campanella's "City of the Sun", and other imaginary states.