

Summary of ideas in Moore's Utopia

Thomas More was born in London in 1478 and followed his father's profession as a lawyer, eventually becoming an MP. Then in 1529 he became Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII. However, his firm allegiance to Church tradition made him oppose his king's attempts to obtain a divorce and to reform the church. By December 1533 Moore had been forbidden to publish his writings and the next year found him imprisoned in the Tower of London. On July 6th 1535 he was beheaded and in 1935 More was canonized by Pope Pius XI.

Moore published Utopia in 1516 and since that time the word has become the name for a whole genre of speculative writing and ideology, also being retrospectively applied to works like Plato's Republic, upon which Utopia is largely based.

The word Utopia is constructed from two Greek words: TOPOS meaning PLACE and OU meaning NO. Thus Utopia is "nowhere" or an imaginary place. It is also a pun on the word EU meaning good or perfect. So Utopia can also be a perfect place that is non-existent.

Some commentators interpret Moore's Utopia as a blueprint for an ideal society that would be desirable to achieve. Others think it is simply a veiled criticism of contemporary European society. It may be both in some senses. Utopia also contains the idea of taking a rationally organised society to its logical conclusion - without the benefit of revealed religion - something of which Moore himself - would have disapproved.

Here are the main features of Utopian society.

Geography

Utopia is an Island and so has no problems with contended borders.

Community

Towns are well planned and there are no hovels or slums. Everyone has a adequate housing with a garden in which to grow vegetables for the family. And everyone is well trained in farming.

Family

Utopian society is well-ordered with traditional family structure and elders, who are heads of households much respected.

Marriage

Women do not marry before 18 and men marry at 22. Pre-marital sex is severely punished. This is not a free-love utopia!

Education

All children are given a good education and adults give up spare time to assist in education.

Social structure and organisation

Utopia is a rationally structured society. It is peaceful and harmonious and there is a minimum conflict.

Government

Government is by delegates being elected to represent local communities.

Law

Minimal law and no lawyers.

Politics and war

Utopians have no interest in territorial expansion and make no alliances with other nations. They are basically pacifist but they will fight in defensive conflicts if necessary, preferring to employ mercenaries to do the actual fighting and where possible to outwit their enemies and thus avoid bloodshed.

Work

All Utopians work willingly and only need to work 6 hours a day. Everyone does some farming and so is a food producer. They have no interest in luxury, fashion, gold or jewels and no interest in accumulating wealth. Greed is not known amongst them.

Slaves

The country has slaves but these are either condemned criminals or poor labours from other lands.

Property & Economics

Utopians do not use money as they do no trade and they works for the common good. Early Christian communism is reflected in attitudes and practices in relation to property. It may also be inspired by the virtues of the monastic life to which Moore was attracted in early life.

Similar to Marx's dictum: "To everyone according to his needs - from everyone according to his abilities" (From the Communist Manifesto - but probably not coined by Marx)

Religion and Superstition

The Utopians have no access to revealed religion (ie, Christianity) and so the religion and society of Utopia represent what you would get just through the exercise of pure reason (or so Moore thought). They study astronomy but as they are not superstitious in any way they are not interested in astrology – which Moore describes as a deceit.

Some Utopians worship the sun, some the moon or some worship virtuous men - but all believe that there is one God and that the soul is immortal. However, there is no compulsion in belief. Citizens are free in matters of religion.

Ethics

Utopians define virtue as life according to nature and they condemn hunting as a pastime. Pre-marital sex, prostitution, adultery, gambling, theft and drunkenness, are outlawed and severely punished.

Medicine

The sick are well looked-after but if someone is terminally ill the priests advise suicide. However, while suicide in the context of illness is acceptable, euthanasia by the doctors is not.

It is important to remember that More did not agree with everything in Utopia. There is no doubt that More was opposed euthanasia even though it was practiced by the Utopians.

Utopia is an imaginary society where people have designed the best society they could conceive of with the use of natural reason. However, they have been denied the truths of divine law. As Peter Ackroyd points out in his recent biography of More (The Life of Thomas More, Nan A. Talese, Doubleday, 1998.), "That is why they encourage euthanasia, condone divorce and harbour a multiplicity of religious beliefs - all of which actions were considered dreadful by More himself and by Catholic Europe. This may be no ideal commonwealth, after all, but a model of natural law and natural reason taken to their unnatural extreme."