

## Theological Designs: Religion in Utopia

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As with so many aspects of life in Utopia described by Hythlodæus, the practice of religion becomes odder and odder with greater attention to it.

One of the first things to strike a reader about the religion of Utopia is its reasonableness. Hythlodæus describes the attributes of the Utopian god in this way:

They believe in a single divinity, unknown, eternal, infinite, inexplicable, beyond the grasp of the human mind, and diffused throughout the universe, not physically, but in influence. Him they call their parent, and to him alone they attribute the origin, increase, progress, changes and ends of all things; they do not offer divine honours to any other.<sup>1</sup>

As any educated Christian reader of More's day would recognize, these attributes are all known to human reason. This official religion of Utopia is a religion a philosopher could subscribe to. It is clearly distinguished from superstition, that is, from religion based on the worship of nature or of heroes.

At the same time, the Utopians are a religiously tolerant people. While there is an official religion whose priests are part of the governance of the island, superstition is tolerated; indeed, Utopus suggested that variety in religion is, in itself, a good thing.<sup>2</sup> Thus the citizens of Utopia are free to worship as each sees fit. This is, perhaps especially to moderns, an attractive feature of Utopia. But as with so much in Utopia, things are not exactly as they seem. More pushes us to think more deeply.

Consider Christianity in Utopia. Hythlodæus and his companions have brought Christianity with them. Unfortunately, a new convert is over zealous. Hythlodæus reports:

As soon as he was baptized, he took upon himself to preach the Christian religion publicly, with more zeal than discretion. We warned him not to do so, but he began

to work himself up to a pitch where he not only set our religion above the rest, but roundly condemned all others as profane, leading their impious and sacrilegious followers to the hell-fires they richly deserved. After he had been preaching in this style for a long time, they arrested him. He was tried on a charge, not of despising their religion, but of creating a public disorder, convicted, and sentenced to exile.<sup>3</sup>

Hythlodæus concludes his story of the convert and his punishment with this comment about the Utopians: "For it is one of their oldest rules that no one should suffer for his religion" (97). What is one to make of this rule stated at precisely this moment? Hythlodæus takes it, as the Utopians take it, that the Utopians were suffering – at least made uncomfortable – by the over-zealous preaching of the new convert. Of course, such discomfort is not permitted in Utopia for – according to the rule – no man should suffer for his religion. And so to restore right order, the Christian is sent into exile. For the Utopians he does not suffer for his religion, but for disturbing the peace.

Thomas More has made the overzealous Christian obnoxious; as Christians can sometimes be. But is the problem really simply his obnoxious zeal? Or is there, perhaps, something about Christianity, beyond the unpleasantness of some of its adherents, that is truly unsettling, even threatening, to Utopia. The one claim of Christianity mentioned in the discussion of the overzealous Christian is its claim to be the one true religion. The Utopians say that they hope they have the truest religion but are open to another (103). Christianity is apparently an exception. Let us look more closely to consider the role of religion in Utopia as presented by Hythlodæus.

We might note first the explicit limitations to utopian religious tolerance:

The only exception was a solemn and strict law against anyone who should sink so far below the dignity of human nature as to think that the soul perishes with the body, or that the universe is ruled by blind chance, not divine providence. (95)

Now why would this be the one doctrine utterly unacceptable in a religion? The answer to this question tells us much about religion in Utopia. The chief good in Utopia is, of course, pleasure. Although we are told that this pleasure is ordered according to virtue, the particulars of this are never spelled out. What is spelled out on several occasions is the essential role of fear in keeping Utopians from the immoral pursuit of pleasure. The principal fear is fear of punishment after death at the hands of a divine judge. Hythlodæus speaks of "a religious fear of the gods, which is the greatest and almost the only incitement to virtue."<sup>4</sup> Curiously, the divine attribute of judge so common to Utopian life is not counted among attributes first attributed to the utopian god. Thus, the man who would deny the immortality of the soul and assert no order to the universe is a danger not to truth but to the social order. The high official religion maintains the doctrines, indeed knowable by reason, of immortality and divine providence, not because they are true but because the welfare of the commonwealth depends upon it. Religion is useful to the

<sup>1</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, edited by George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 93.

<sup>2</sup> More, 94-95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 102; see also 95-96.

commonwealth; better yet, religion in Utopia is ordered to the good of the commonwealth.

That the religion of Utopia is ordered to the good of the commonwealth is quite taken for granted by Hythlodæus. Indeed, he seems essentially approving of it. But is Thomas More of one mind with Hythlodæus? Perhaps. But we would do well to proceed with caution.

The situation presented by Hythlodæus would certainly be troubling to any student of St. Augustine's *On the City of God*. And one of the things we know about Thomas More is that he was indeed a student of *On the City of God*, having publically lectured on it early in his career. In this great work of Christian antiquity, Augustine undertakes to defend Christianity against its pagan detractors. Among Augustine's many concerns is precisely the subordination of religion, pagan and otherwise, to the good of the Roman Empire.

At the heart of Augustine's analysis is the question of just what the purpose of religion is. If the pagans were not entirely clear on the answer; Augustine is clear on the Christian answer. Christianity is about happiness, specifically the happiness that is eternal life in union with God in love. That, as Augustine famously argues, is the City of God. The City of God as it exists invisibly among men in history is precisely the city defined by its love of God. In this love, man finds his only true and abiding happiness. When man has any other ultimate object of love, he will be unhappy and it is precisely this disordered love that characterizes the city of man in which man seeks his happiness and is ever frustrated in the quest. In short, all should be ordered to God. All is in the service of the City of God. In this is happiness.

If one looks to the classical options for human happiness, one usually finds a list of six contestants: wealth, power, pleasure, honor, contemplation, and virtue. The utopians insist that human happiness is not found in wealth and have banned it. Although they are mighty good at exercising power, the utopians do not seem to see it as a particular source of happiness. As for the remaining contestants, the utopians are rather indecisive. They say pleasure is the highest good, to be sure, but they say as well that it is, at least for some, the pleasures of contemplation, a contemplation, it should be noted, of nature and not of God. Honor plays a decisive role in the social order of Utopia, but not in utopian speculation about happiness. The utopians themselves admit they debate as to whether virtue is an end in itself or not.

Remarkably to a Christian, nothing in the utopian understanding of happiness is ordered to the love of God. Certainly the love of God that characterizes the City of God is absent from Utopia. Does it matter? Yes, because it is at the heart of all human happiness. As St. Augustine argued, the Roman Empire was fundamentally contradictory and disordered, indeed unhappy, because its loves were disordered; so too, we find Utopia is disordered and an unhappy place.

I regularly ask my students if they would like to live in Utopia. None has yet. Even though the utopians insist that they live in the best of all human societies, I can find no one who wants to live in it. Even more to the point, the man who presents it to us and sings its praises could not, on his own principles, be happy there. No one who refuses service to the common good and insists that his principle in life is "I do as I will" could be a happy citizen of Utopia.

So what makes Utopia so fundamentally unattractive and contradictory? Could we tinker with a few features of it and make it the ideal commonwealth it promises to be? I think not. A key provided by More is the question of religion and specifically

the problem of Christianity. Utopia is the city of man, a city driven by human loves (perhaps as they insist very noble human loves). These loves, however, are insufficient to satisfy the human heart. No human construction can do so; only God can.