

## Sir Thomas More, Christian Humanism and *Utopia*

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While we may ask many questions about Sir Thomas More, his writings and his life, those that look to his role in the Renaissance and the Reformation are some of the most intriguing. This essay will examine More's rhetoric prior to the Protestant Reformation and will study the influence of Christian humanism on his classic, *Utopia*. An intellectual movement led by More's friend Desiderius Erasmus, Christian humanism was a philosophy that touched on contemporary social, political, and religious concerns. In turn, these political and religious events and the influences they created shaped the Catholicism that More tried to save first through reform and then through defense of the Church's orthodox beliefs and practices. The goal of Catholic Christian humanism was to improve Europe by focusing on the value of what Erasmus called the *philosophia Christi*, the "philosophy of Christ." The *philosophia Christi* was born out of the drive for reform in both the Catholic Church and lay society and the rediscovery of the literature of classical antiquity. Humanists believed that the study of these ancient texts and original languages could restore to Europe long-forgotten skills, and, "applied to the texts of the Bible and of ancient Christian writers, would help Christendom to a purer and more authentic understanding of Christian truths." Erasmus and the humanists believed that these essential truths were embodied in the *philosophia Christi*.

Not only the leader of the humanists, Erasmus was also by far the most brilliant scholar of the Northern Renaissance. In a lifetime of effort, he too sought to reform Catholicism first by exhorting people towards a life of piety in works like the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (*The Handbook of a Christian Soldier*) and then through satiric attack, as in the *Encomium Moriae* (*The Praise of Folly*). I will discuss the significance of both *The Praise of Folly* and *Sileni Alcibiadis* (a selection from Erasmus' *Adagia*, or *Adages*) to give examples of the humanists' rhetoric and to illustrate the principles of humanism itself. *Sileni Alcibiadis* in particular serves as a guide to reading More's *Utopia* and its message correctly. Erasmus and More believed that Christianity ought to be both a way of truly living in the imitation of Christ and the goal of every good man. For nearly twenty years, the two worked together to forward this philosophy of life, religion, and political and social activism. Understanding these concepts is vital to reading and interpreting *Utopia*.

In *Utopia*, More expresses his firm faith in the potential reforms that could better all of Europe if only men embraced humanist education, service for one another, and the *philosophia Christi*. Following in the spirit of *The Praise of Folly*, More wrote *Utopia* when it was not yet so dangerous to criticize the faults of the clergy and the Church hierarchy, and when criticism did not yet mean absolute schism. He attacked the many faults of his fellow Europeans, and also specifically involved his native England in the dialogue, remarking through the main character, Raphael Hythloday, on everything from capital punishment to the corruption and parasitic qualities of courtiers and political advisors. At the heart of *Utopia*

is the humanist message, personalized by Thomas More: he believed that through the wisdom and examples of the Holy Scriptures, specifically by serving one another in the active Christian love found in the Gospels, and the guidance by the universal Church and its doctrines, society could better itself until the time that Christ returned to earth.

One of the key questions addressed in *Utopia* toward this end is whether or not a wise man should enter into public service, even if he does not believe that he will make a genuine difference through that service.<sup>1</sup> The answer is yes, because if even one king or cardinal can be brought into the *philosophia Christi*, the people around him will inevitably receive this reformed grace and be enhanced by it, “like water flowing in an uninterrupted stream”. The bulk of the other issues in *Utopia* mainly involve the Utopian customs and institutions as reported by Hythloday. Superficially, these practices seem to be equal, if not superior, to that of the European nations. On closer inspection, however, the reader finds that the Utopians are faulted and even corrupted, much like their European counterparts. The Utopians have taken their society as far as possible using the powers of reason, but More believes that without the Scriptures and the assistance of Christ and his Catholic Church, no society can be truly good. Many interpretations have not taken into account or have outright ignored More’s instructions of how to read his work. Several studies have therefore taken *Utopia* to be an endorsement of practices such as divorce, suicide and euthanasia, and lenient religious tolerance, instances that directly contradict the teachings of the Catholic Church. Far from accurate, More is actually showing how badly both the Church and its members need to reform their lives and to live according to Christ’s teachings. Peppering his text with examples from the New Testament, classical philosophy, and contemporary literature, More weaves a rich and complex picture of the world he lived in. However, *Utopia* never had much of a chance to take hold in Europe and complete the task that More had planned for it. First published in March 1516, it was only available for a short time before the Reformation of October 1517, when Martin Luther thrust himself and the *Ninety-Five Theses* into the center of religious consciousness by way of a church door in Wittenberg.

Sir Thomas More’s life and works ultimately demonstrate a substantial transformation in his emphasis on the role of the Catholic Church, its clergy, orthodox texts and doctrines, and his acceptance of certain reforming techniques. *Utopia* is the clearest possible expression of More’s pre-Reformation work and rhetoric, a hope-filled exhortation for improvement and a work of personal devotion and faith. In the remainder of this essay, I will show that the role of *Utopia* in the body of More’s work was to evoke a sense of duty in his fellow humanists and statesmen, and to encourage reform from within before the faults of corruption grew deeper.<sup>2</sup>

1. A large portion of my discussion of the question of royal service comes from a paper first written for Professor Andrew Weiner’s English 400 course, Fall 2003, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

2. The best and perhaps most detailed modern work, in both biographical and textual matters, is Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984). The four earliest and most utilized biographies include William Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More* (Chiswick, England: C. Wittingham, 1817); Thomas Stapleton, *The life and illustrious martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, in the translation of Philip E. Hallett, edited and annotated by E. E. Reynolds (Bronx, N.Y.: 1967); Cresacre More, *The life of Sir Thomas More, knight, lord high chancellor of England under King Henry the Eighth and His Majesty’s ambassador to the courts of France and Germany, by his great grandson, Cresacre More, esq.* London, J. Woodman and D. Lyon, 1726 (Athens, PA: Printed by the Riverside Press, 1941); and Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More, knight, sometime lord high chancellor of England, written in the time of Queen Mary*, vol. 186 (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1932).

### Erasmus, More, and Christian Humanism

By the time Sir Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in 1516, he had a large family that he supported by working as a lawyer in London. In addition to tending to his family, More was becoming politically active at this time. He was elected the Under-Sheriff of London in 1510, and served in that post until he joined the royal council of King Henry VIII in 1518.<sup>3</sup> Richard Marius notes that, “after 1511 his two marriages, his children, his growing household, and his offices fixed him irrevocably on the public stage.”<sup>4</sup> More would carry out his literary and political works on that same public stage in a time unsettled by war, civil strife, and religious scandal. When he was born in 1478, England was enjoying comparative stability under the reign the first monarch of the Tudor dynasty, the man who had ended the Wars of the Roses, Henry VII. It was during his reign that Thomas More received his education and formed many of his political and religious opinions. The generation which had endured the Wars of the Roses created a climate of uneasiness: having witnessed no less than three civil wars, the toppling of kings, and the “self-slaughter” of the nobility, “in terms of sudden and violent swings of the political pendulum there is no period in English history which can compete with this one.”<sup>5</sup> From early on, therefore, More was filled with apprehension towards unrest and a need for order and peace.

In addition, “religiously, the Europe in which More grew up was a single whole, consisting of Catholic States which acknowledged the central authority of the Pope, the Bishop of Rome.” However, the “supremacy of the Papacy and the unity of Christendom had suffered a series of wounds that would prove fatal” within More’s lifetime.<sup>6</sup> The Catholic Church had declined in prestige and spiritual influence long before the Reformation of 1517, attributable “to the worldliness, corruption and veniality rife among its official representatives, including, most signally, the papacy itself.” The need for reform, voiced long before More’s time, was well recognized by men of faith and of conscience.<sup>7</sup> Events such as the “Babylonian Captivity” of the papacy at Avignon (1309-77) brought with it a serious decline in the pope’s universal standing. Additionally, the disgrace of the Great Schism (1378-1417), with its “absurd and humiliating spectacle of anti-popes” added to the demand for reform within the Church itself.<sup>8</sup> At the behest of the Emperor Sigismund, the Council of Constance was summoned in 1414, resolving the matter in 1417. Despite hopes for greater internal reform, specific details in doctrine went relatively unquestioned at the Council; what was lacking was “forceful leadership at once conscious of an overriding religious mission and capable of harnessing religious discontent to the innovative tendencies of the age.”<sup>9</sup> The leadership sought emerged in Christian humanism, influencing reformers of all

3. Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 53-54.

4. Marius, *Thomas More*, 43.

5. John Gillingham, *The Wars of the Roses: Peace and Conflict in Fifteenth-Century England* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 50. The two main sources I used for this section in my honors thesis, J. R. Lander, *The Wars of the Roses* (Great Britain: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2000), and John Gillingham, *The Wars of the Roses: Peace and Conflict in Fifteenth-Century England* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), both provide a great amount of detail and very helpful analysis of the events. I also recommend looking to [HTTP://WWW.WAROFTHEROSES.COM](http://www.waroftheroses.com) for explanations, timelines, and map of the battles waged during the period.

6. Anthony John Patrick Kenny, *Thomas More* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 9.

7. Bernard M. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Longman, 1995), 1.

8. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 2.

9. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 1.

kinds, from Catholics like More to Luther himself. Thomas More's first substantive attempts to reform and redeem his society came through humanism.

Reardon cites the rediscovery of the "literature of classical antiquity, the *literae humaniores*," as the most potent influence on the intellectual perceptions of the fifteenth century, and a major component of the drive for reform and the birth of the humanist movement. The classical writings introduced "a standard of human cultural achievement by which Christian civilization might be judged." Furthermore, the studies that characterized the Renaissance "aroused a new critical spirit contrasting sharply with the narrowness and formalism of the theological tradition."<sup>10</sup> Humanists believed that the tools of scholarship could restore to Europe long-forgotten arts and sciences, and, "applied to the texts of the Bible and of ancient Christian writers, would help Christendom to a purer and more authentic understanding of Christian truths."<sup>11</sup> One of the primary principles of the movement was that study of the Bible in the original languages was essential for restoring society to this "truth."<sup>12</sup> Humanism was also a reaction against the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages and its endeavor "to systematize the faith by means of the resources of speculative philosophy."<sup>13</sup> Scholastic thought was dominated by Aristotelian logic and assumed that "all the things Christians believed, whether commanded in the Bible or sanctified by tradition, could be finally arranged in a grand system without contradictions." The best expression of the school's precepts is found in the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas.<sup>14</sup> More and the humanists were educated in the Scholastic tradition of Aquinas' work, Thomism. Thomism balanced between human reason, which might arrive at certain obvious truths, and guided instruction such as the revelation of Christian doctrine by the Scriptures and the Church, which influenced More's education and his depiction of rational pagans in *Utopia*.<sup>15</sup> Though More and his contemporaries accepted much of what Aquinas wrote, the methods of the Scholastics became driven toward a sort of relentless fact-finding mission, asking any and all questions which arose about the faith in order to resolve possible contradictions and mysteries.

Humanists viewed the Scholastic inquiries as both painful and divisive, and they strove to move beyond them. For More and Erasmus, the texts of the Holy Scriptures and the Church Fathers' writings ought to have claimed more attention than any medieval commentaries on the texts. In the ancient writings, they saw "a source whence Christendom might draw renewed intellectual vitality but a standard by which both church and society could be reformed."<sup>16</sup> Catholic humanists were optimistic about the possibility for reform, hoping that through the foundational texts they could "rediscover and re-create a world where people lived unselfishly, in a society of virtue, proving Christianity true, not by dead logic, but by living example."<sup>17</sup> Erasmus made it his life's mission to forward the *philosophia Christi*, in which

10. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 15.

11. Kenny, *Thomas More*, 8.

12. Kenny, *Thomas More*, 17.

13. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 16.

14. Marius, *Thomas More*, 74.

15. Ralph McInerny, *A First Glance at St. Thomas Aquinas: A Guide for Peeping Thomists* (London, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 7. The emphasis is McInerny's; his work is a very useful summary of Thomism, Scholasticism, and explains the principles of the school clearly and succinctly for further study.

16. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 18.

17. Marius, *Thomas More*, 70-71.

the “true way of piety is in following Christ.” For Christians, therefore, Erasmus believed that nothing should matter but the meaning and message “of Christ himself, “no empty voice” but, on the contrary, simplicity, patience, purity; in short, whatever He Himself taught.”<sup>18</sup> The best way to fully understand Christ’s messages was therefore through the Bible and the ancient patrician writings. The *Enchiridion*, *Sileni Alcibiadis* and *The Praise of Folly* are representative of Erasmus’ rhetoric, and both works influenced More heavily in his own early work.

By 1506, Erasmus published a devotional work called *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, the “handbook” or “dagger” of the Christian soldier. In this piece Erasmus set forth exactly what he meant by the *philosophia Christi*, which held much meaning for More: the “subject is the *imitatio Christi*,” a true imitation of Christ’s life, and “the emphasis is on the inwardness of true religion”. In the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus expresses his personal beliefs, “altogether minimiz[ing] the importance of external observances, which in his opinion only pander to superstition.”<sup>19</sup> He wanted to “create purity and simplicity in the inner person,” certain that a pure heart could generate good deeds without a cluttered liturgy.<sup>20</sup> Erasmus does not advocate a removal of the liturgy, clergy, Church from the lives of Christians, but he does look for the simplicity of the early Church in the work. While More put a heavier emphasis on the importance of the Church as an institution and the need for clergymen worthy of their office to guide people to salvation, the underlying principle of the two men’s works is the same: a return to Christ’s examples was necessary in order to cleanse the corrupted world around them. Marius argues that Erasmus “is not far from saying that the good Christian is the good citizen, and so it was that the ideas in the *Enchiridion* represented a quiet and enduring revolution in how educated and urbane people defined the nature of their religion.”<sup>21</sup> This is precisely the message that we will find at the heart of *Utopia*, in the dialogue between More and Raphael on the question of service and the duty of a good man in his society.

Erasmus did not have an entirely different aim for the *Encomium Moriae* (*The Praise of Folly*), published in 1511. Rather, he sought to address the serious goal of reform through harsh mockery and satirization of the corrupt world around him, including the Catholic Church and its leaders. In *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus turns to the “strain in the New Testament that held the Christian to be foolish in the opinion of the worldly-wise” and speaks in a monologue through the character of Folly personified. At its end, the work is one of devotion, “progressing in the Renaissance spirit from irony and pleasure to sobriety and instruction.”<sup>22</sup> *The Praise of Folly* is specifically useful for this essay because of its expression of the Silenus figure and for its reforming spirit. The Silenus figure is explained by looking to a later work which elaborates on its meaning, *Sileni Alcibiadis*, published in 1517 as a part of Erasmus’ extensive *Adagia*. The adage illuminates the way in which we understand *The Praise of Folly*, including Folly and what she is praising and criticizing and gives us an understanding of how to read *Utopia*. Erasmus writes, “If you remain on the surface, a thing may sometimes appear absurd; if you pierce through to the spiritual meaning, you will adore the divine wisdom.”<sup>23</sup> In one of his many demonstrations of this idea, he exclaims:

18. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 34.

19. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 34.

20. Marius, *Thomas More*, 82.

21. Marius, *Thomas More*, 83.

22. Marius, *Thomas More*, 89.

23. Desiderius Erasmus, *Sileni Alcibiadis*, in *Erasmus on His Times: A shortened version of The Adages of Erasmus*, ed. Margaret Mann Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 82.

But is not Christ the most extraordinary Silenus of all? If it is permissible to speak of him in this way-and I cannot see why all who rejoice in the name of Christians should not do their best to imitate it. If you look only on the face of the Silenus-image, what could be lower or more contemptible, measured by popular standards? Obscure and poverty-stricken parents, a humble home; poor himself, he has a few poor men for disciples, chosen not from king's palaces, not from the learned seats of the Pharisees or the schools of the Philosophers, but from the customs-houses and the fisherman's nets. Then think of his life, how far removed from any pleasure, the life in which he came through hunger and weariness, accusation and mockery to the cross...But if one may attain to a closer look at this Silenus-image, that is if he deigns to show himself to the purified eyes of the soul, what unspeakable riches you will find there: in such service to mankind, there is a pearl of great price, in such humility, what grandeur! in such poverty, what riches! in such weakness what immeasurable strength! in such shame, what glory! in such labors, what utter peace! And lastly in that bitter death there is the source of everlasting life.<sup>24</sup>

From this explanation, we see that Folly is not always praising when she comments upon situations, and not always deriding when she claims to be doing so. The Silenus figure is a literary device for Erasmus, a tool which he uses to heighten the seriousness of several works. The elements of *The Praise of Folly* that Erasmus takes as serious faults in the society around him are rather obvious, after the illustration from the *Adagia*. He infuses a living version of the *philosophia Christi* into the *Folly*, showing Christ's demonstrations of the way in which to live, as well as highlighting society's failure to live up to that example. Erasmus exclaims that we no longer even recognize Christ's message, choosing instead to ignore Him:

If at this point some wiseman, dropped down direct from heaven, should suddenly jump up and begin shouting that this figure whom everyone reverences as if he were the lord god is not even a man because he is controlled by his passions like an animal, that he is a servant of the lowest rank because he willingly serves so many filthy masters; or if he should turn to another man who is mourning the death of his parent and tell him to laugh instead because the dead man has at least really begun to live, whereas his life is really nothing but a sort of death; if he should see another man glorying in his noble lineage and call him a low-born bastard because he is so far removed from virtue, which is the only true source of nobility, and if he addressed everybody else in the same way, I ask you, what would he accomplish except to make everyone take him for a raving lunatic? Just as nothing is more foolish than misplaced wisdom, so too, nothing is more imprudent than perverse prudence.<sup>25</sup>

The failure of the laity to live in the imitation of Christ exasperated both Erasmus and More. However, Erasmus reserves his most caustic criticisms for those who should have led the flock in the right direction since the very days of Christ: theologians and the clergy, including the pope himself. The

24. Erasmus, *Sileni Alcibiadis*, 79-80.

25. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, Translated and with an introduction by Clarence H. Miller (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 44.

worldliness of the papacy and the higher clergy was a matter of serious concern for Erasmus, and his criticisms called to mind the Christ-as-Silenus figure that held a major part in his works. He also demonstrates that the actions of the papacy were not only against the spirit of the *philosophia Christi*, but that in fact such behavior was directly contradictory to the examples set by Christ and his disciples. Marius writes that *The Praise of Folly* is “a statement of the limits of the human intellect, made by the greatest intellectual of the sixteenth century.”<sup>26</sup> In addition to following one of Erasmus’ main goals stated in his work, Christian love for one another, More added a component to the *philosophia Christi*, found in *Utopia*: “Christians must believe the dogmas of the infallible Church before Christian love could be active.”<sup>27</sup> By combining the “Great Commandment” from the Sermon on the Mount, and the teachings of the Church, More expresses his greatest hope for Christian society.<sup>28</sup>

When called on to defend the humanist style of learning, *The Praise of Folly*, and Erasmus in his famous epistle to Scholastic Martin van Dorp, More expresses the set of central ideas that shaped his vision in *Utopia* and the remainder of his life and works. The combination of Scripture, the Church Fathers’ writings, and the decrees and practices of the Catholic Church are, in More’s eyes, the finest and most effectual manner in which both to reform and to maintain individuals and societies. More expresses the need for these crucial texts, the original languages of the Scriptures, and the humanist tool of rhetoric beyond dialectic in order to achieve a pure Christendom.

Do you really think, Dorp, that everything is thrown into confusion by Erasmus when he is engaged in an argument, and that he does not understand the nature of dialectics, or just exactly what a sophist is, and that he alone does not understand what practically all schoolboys know? I do believe that even you will admit that rhetoric is a very special gift of his, and if you grant him that, I do not see how you can so completely strip him of dialectics. Not the lowliest of philosophers were correct when they maintained that dialectics and rhetoric were no more distinct than are the fist and the palm of the hand, because what dialectics holds together more tightly, rhetoric unfolds more freely, and just as the former strikes with the point of the blade, so the latter by its sheer force completely prostrates and destroys.<sup>29</sup>

While not rejecting all of the conclusions reached by dialectic, More is much more in favor of the use of rhetoric. Professor Andrew Weiner remarks that More’s argument and defense of Erasmus “clearly suggests that rhetoric...can be a far more useful way of approaching a reader than the science of dialectics.”<sup>30</sup> An effective “discourse should not simply seek to present the truth; the truth

26. Marius, *Thomas More*, 91.

27. Marius, *Thomas More*, 91.

28. The Commandment from the Sermon on the Mount as found in the Douay-Rheims translation of the (Catholic) Vulgate Bible is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and with thy whole soul and with thy whole mind and with thy whole strength. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:30-32.

29. Sir Thomas More, “To Martin Dorp,” *The Selected Letters of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1961), 4: [15], 15.

30. Andrew D. Weiner, “Taking More Seriously: Cultural Criticism and Its Discontents,” Paper presented at the University of Wisconsin-Madison English Department Draft Group, February 1991.

must be presented in such a way that those who meet it love it.”<sup>31</sup> It is precisely this type of logic that More employs extensively in the *Utopia*, in the dialogue of service. He suggests that the kind of eloquent rhetoric used by Erasmus is the best way to convince others of a position (especially when they are predisposed to disagree with it), and is extremely effective for the chief goal of the Catholic humanists, to reform their society, states, and Church. If humanists’ works were effective in the correct way, then perhaps “the obstacles in fallen human nature could be overcome and a truly Christian commonwealth founded upon the philosophy of Christ might be erected.” *Utopia* itself is a case of rhetoric in use, published to encourage reform in a pleasing, eloquent, and therefore effective manner.

The above considerations set the scene for More’s masterpiece, and illustrate humanism’s impact on Thomas More’s ideas, style, and beliefs about society. *Utopia* is a continuation of the humanist tradition forwarded by Erasmus, with the ultimate goal of reforming not only the Church, but Christian society as a whole, specifically England. Moreover, *Utopia* is the work that placed More squarely at the forefront of the discussion of how to reform society, at the individual and institutional level. However, More’s ideas for reform were not to last in form proposed in *Utopia*, and the Catholic humanist techniques he supported had less and less influence over him as the Protestant Reformation progressed.

### *Utopia*

Regarded as a masterpiece and as his most enduring written work, the publication of *Utopia* placed Sir Thomas More fully within the intellectual debates of both the northern Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. Anthony Kenny states that *Utopia* is “a product of the energetic drive for reform characteristic of the best Catholic scholars before the Protestant Reformation made their advocacy of change more qualified and more cautious.”<sup>33</sup> We may also see More’s work, as Weiner argues, “in the context of his defenses of Erasmian humanism and of Erasmus’s presentation of the “*philosophia Christi*.”<sup>34</sup> *Utopia* is representative of the reforming movement and all that it hoped for, and embraces the major principles of humanism with certain additions that are entirely More’s.

In Book I of the two-part dialogue, More follows Erasmus’ example from *The Praise of Folly* by attacking the faults of Christendom through his proxy, the fictional character of Raphael Hythloday. From the introduction of this character, we sense that there may be some internal contradiction to More’s work and a conflict that must somehow be resolved; Raphael literally means, “the healing of God,” while Hythloday means, “the bringer of much nonsense.” In Book II, Hythloday narrates his experiences in Utopia, describing the social, religious, and political customs and establishments of the Utopians. Through this account, More draws comparisons to the European counterparts of these practices, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly. At the heart of *Utopia* is his own fundamental Christian humanist message: through the wisdom and examples of the Scriptures, the writings

31. Weiner, “Taking More Seriously,” 1991.

32. Weiner, “Taking More Seriously,” 1991.

33. Kenny, *Thomas More*, 1-2.

34. Weiner, “Taking More Seriously,” 1991.



of the Church Fathers, and the leadership of the Church, both individuals and societies can lift themselves up and live in the ways of God, “until all men are good” and all Europeans reach the “best state of a commonwealth.” *Utopia* demonstrates the need for reform and in a very clear manner it also offers More’s solution. In this section, I will examine *Utopia*’s crucial components: first, More’s prefatory letters, which accompanied the earliest editions of *Utopia*, and the impact of these letters on our interpretation of the work; second, the question of royal service and its significance to More, both personally and professionally; and third, Raphael’s description of the customs of the Utopians and their relevance in the work, and what More hoped to achieve by including them in his creation.

The letters prefacing *Utopia* introduce its author to his audience and suggest to the careful reader the appropriate manner to read the work and to interpret its most controversial passages. The first, and perhaps most important, function is to show that Thomas More was in no way serious about recommending all of the Utopian practices for his countrymen. Many interpretations of *Utopia* have spent a great deal of time explaining why More so seriously recommends radical changes for English society such as religious tolerance, suicide, euthanasia, and divorce as he does their piety, their rejection of outward and excessive wealth, and the piousness of their clergy. However, as Romuald Ian Lakowski argues in *Sir Thomas More and the Art of Dialogue*, reading *Utopia* as a “straightforward program for creating an ideal commonwealth” is far too simplistic and one-dimensional. Pointing to the complex ironies of the text and materials accompanying Books I and II, he writes,

The humanist readers of the early editions were not taken in, since they all shared in the same rhetorical culture as the author, and clearly appreciated the multiple layers of the text. The *Utopia* was not aimed at a mass audience. Unfortunately, many later readers have lacked the humanistic breadth of its author and first readers, and have ended up debasing the work.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the wide-ranging critical opinions of *Utopia* do not arise from a fault within or deficient portion of the work, but rather from the capabilities of the audience to grasp More’s message competently and in light of all the material he provides. David Weil Baker cautions in *Divulging Utopia* that “the reduction of *Utopia* to More’s “plot” of a “perfect commonwealth” would seem to ignore the ironic framing devices that do not allow readers to assume that More meant to “lay down” such a perfect commonwealth in *Utopia*.”<sup>36</sup>

In addition, “our uncertainty of response arises not because of More’s failure but from our inattention to the successive rewritings and additions More made to clarify the manner in which he wished us to read his work.”<sup>37</sup> Weiner reminds us that More sent two introductory epistles “to” Peter Giles, to be printed with the book as instructions to the sophisticated and educated reader how to read the work, and not make the mistakes in interpretation that has colored so many modern *Utopia* studies:

35. Romuald Ian Lakowski, “*Sir Thomas More and the Art of Dialogue*” (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1993), located at [HTTP://WWW.SHU.AC.UK/EMLS/IEMLS/WORK/CHAPTERS/CONTENTS.HTML#CONTENTS](http://www.shu.ac.uk/EMLS/IEMLS/WORK/CHAPTERS/CONTENTS.HTML#CONTENTS), on 10-06-03.

36. David Weil Baker, *Divulging Utopia: Radical Humanism in Sixteenth Century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 2.

37. Andrew D. Weiner, “Raphael’s *Utopia* and More’s *Utopia*: Christian Humanism and the Limits of Reason,” in *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 39 (1975), 2.

Clearly More endeavored to provide the reader with successively more and more information as an aid to comprehension. Since all these additions bear upon Raphael Hythloday or upon the fictiveness of the island, we may conclude that More's efforts in his revisions were intended to clarify the manner in which we are to take Hythloday and his tale.<sup>38</sup>

Lakowski contends that the end result of the prefatory letters is the distancing of both the reader and the author from the fictiveness of the *Utopia*:

The mixing of fact and fiction, and the elaborate claims to verisimilitude are not meant to confuse the educated reader; rather, he is in a sense being invited to participate in the dialogue itself, while at the same time being warned by the literary games of the prefatory letters not to confuse the world of Utopia with that of everyday reality.<sup>39</sup>

The idea of the letters being used as rhetorical devices calls to mind More's endorsement of rhetoric as the preferred method of persuasion in the above section, and shows that *Utopia* as a whole is a work of rhetoric unto itself. While several renowned contemporary humanists supported later editions of *Utopia*, we will focus on More's own instructions to the reader and examine their import.<sup>40</sup>

In More's first letter "to" Peter Giles (1516 edition), it is important first to understand More presents himself as a character in the fiction, as much of an invention as Hythloday or the island of Utopia. The real historical figure Thomas More is presenting the "persona" (fictional) More for the first time; while many of qualities of "persona" More are autobiographical, some are deliberately exaggerated for the benefit of the fiction. For example, in an implicit direction to the reader, he writes, "Just as I shall take great pains to have nothing incorrect in the book, so, if there is doubt in anything, I shall rather tell an objective falsehood than an intentional lie-for I would rather be honest than wise."<sup>41</sup> In this case, More is, in part, warning the reader to be aware of instances in the text that may seem to conflict with the Scriptures and orthodox Catholic teachings. Weiner offers further clarification on the matter, writing,

More is engaged here in trying to influence the way in which we see "persona" More. Given the difficulty in recognizing truth in a world where memory may fail and lead good men to disagree, "persona" More says that unless there is a consensus against him, he will be true to his inner sense of truth rather than cleaving to what another tells him is true.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, he is differentiating both himself as an author and *Utopia* from the works of the wise, preferring inner goodness to the outer characteristics of the critical Scholastic Schoolmen.

38 Weiner, "Raphael's Utopia and More's *Utopia*, 2.

39 Lakowski, "Sir Thomas More and the Art of Dialogue," 88.

40 *Utopia*, with Erasmus's *The Sileni of Alcibiades*, ed. and translated by David Wootton, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999) contains the letters from Bude to Lupset, Peter Giles to Busleyden, Busleyden to More, as well as contemporary critical analyses of *Utopia*.

41 Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 5.

42 Weiner, "Taking More Seriously," 1991.

More also discusses the problems that he knows the work will encounter as soon as it is published. By preemptively responding to the criticisms that will no doubt be launched at their works, humanist authors disarm such arguments, defeating them before they can even be proposed. He says,

So varied are the tastes of mortals, so peevish the characters of some, so ungrateful their dispositions, so wrongheaded their judgments, that those persons who pleasantly and blithely indulge their inclinations seem to be very much better off than those who torment themselves with anxiety in order to publish something that may bring profit or pleasure to others, who nevertheless receive it with disdain or ingratitude.<sup>43</sup>

Under the pretense of debating whether or not to publish the work, More creates a hostile environment for anyone who would criticize the work publicly, a common device in humanist works. Despite anticipation of ill treatment from some academic communities, at the end of the 1516 letter, More encourages Giles to publish *Utopia*, come what may.

In his second letter “to” Giles, written in 1517 for the second edition of *Utopia*, More gives even more guidance to his readers; much to his dismay, readers were taking him far too literally, not understanding that the work was a fiction. More does his best to deal with the frustrating situation by illustrating the goal of *Utopia*, quoting a portion of a letter that Giles had received commenting on the work. The comment reads, “if the account we are given is supposed to be truthful, then there are a number of things in it that border on the absurd; but if it is made up, then it has some features that seem at odds with More’s characteristically good judgment.”<sup>44</sup> The point of this statement is that many, if not most, of the practices of the Utopians appear at first glance to be good and useful, but on closer inspection truly are absurd and unrealistic. As shown in the above reading of *The Praise of Folly* and *Sileni Alcibiadis*, however, things are not always as they seem, especially in humanist literature.

It is, in fact, much to the credit of “More’s good judgment” that he includes such absurdities. The theory that Utopian practices are superior to those European is intended to spur readers to look for a way to reform their own lives, practices, institutions. More sees this as the ideal way in which to criticize European practices, and to advocate his ideal: a society of individuals that follows the ways of God, led by properly instructed rulers, pious clergymen, and educated virtuous men. His goal is first to reform the inner man (preferably an educated, intellectual person), and then the society of Man. He acknowledges the presence of questionable practices in Utopia, though not specifically naming which ones he is referring to, saying, “As if not a single philosopher among the many who have produced an outline for an ideal society, ruler, or private household had made the least proposal that needed to be changed!”<sup>45</sup> The point of leaving the “absurdities” in the work is that those who are sophisticated enough will understand which recommendations would be genuinely beneficial to society and which ones clearly conflict with the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church. Consenting to all of the recommendations and situations in *Utopia* is simply not acceptable. As Weiner’s suggests, More not only

<sup>43</sup> More, *Utopia*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Sir Thomas More, “More to Giles,” in *Utopia, with Erasmus’s The Sileni of Alcibiades*, ed. and translated by David Wootton, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), 166.

<sup>45</sup> More, “More to Giles,” in *Utopia, with Erasmus’s The Sileni of Alcibiades*, 167.

recognized these “absurd” instances, “he went out of his way to make them so. His reasons for doing so may be inferred from the manner in which he ironically claims to be maintaining the factuality of his work while making it finally clear to the “more learned” that *Utopia* is a fiction.”<sup>46</sup>

More extends his explanation of how to read the work, at once clarifying his reasoning in *Utopia* and limiting his audience to the limited few who could understand the Greek roots of the names he chose. In the correspondence leading up to its publication, More and Erasmus actually refer to *Utopia* by its Latin name, “*Nusquama*,” which also simply means “no place.” In the 1517 letter, More goes into explicit detail about *Utopia*, its meaning, and its composition:

Now, I don’t deny that if I had decided to write about the state, and I had had the idea of writing a story of this sort, then I might not have been unwilling to employ such a fiction by which the truth might slip into people’s minds a little more agreeably, as if smeared with honey. But I would have certainly managed my narrative in such a way that, while I might have actually intended the unsophisticated to be misled by their own ignorance, I would have left for the more educated some clues that would have made it easy for them to make sense of our undertaking. Thus I would have needed only to give such names to the ruler, the river, the city, and the island as would alert the more expert reader to the fact that the island was nowhere, the city a chimera, the river without water, and the ruler without subjects. This wouldn’t have been hard to do and would have been much wittier than what I actually did. You can be sure that if the obligation to produce an accurate account had not been overriding, I am not so stupid as to have actually wanted to use such barbarous and meaningless names as Utopia, Anyder, Amaurot, and Ademus.<sup>47</sup>

This letter is what Weiner calls an “open admission to the “more learned” members of his audience”, showing that “*Utopia* is a fiction and that the more absurd elements in it are designed to call the reader’s attention to this basic fact as a means of encouraging a literary reading”, and thereby a rhetorical meaning.<sup>48</sup> It is also a reminder of More’s ability to convince readers of his arguments, perhaps too well. In fact, many were so eager to believe in the island of Utopia that they missed the point of the work entirely. However, the reader must resist the tempting trap to read Hythloday’s description of Utopia as an entirely positive model for Europe. Weiner concludes:

Had we only this introductory material to work with, the careful reader could still keep enough detachment during Raphael’s discourse to see that Utopia is not to be mistaken for More’s ideal; apparently More worried about the possibility that Raphael’s impassioned indictment of European customs might break down that detachment. To prevent this, he sharpens and clarifies his ethical portrait of Hythloday in the additional material that he added to Book I.<sup>49</sup>

46. Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 19.

47. “More to Giles,” in *Utopia, with Erasmus’s The Sileni of Alcibiades*, 167. The literal translations for these place-names: Utopia meaning “Nowhere”; Anyder, “The Waterless River”; Amaurot, “City of Darkness”; and Ademus, “The Ruler without a People.”

48. Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 20.

49. Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 11.

Only pages into Book I, we see the initial clue that More inserted into the work itself to indicate that readers should not trust their early instincts about Raphael's tale, but to examine carefully what he has to offer. In this instance, Raphael reports that he won the favor of the mariners of Utopia

by showing them the use of the magnetic needle of which they had hitherto been quite ignorant so that they had hesitated themselves to the sea and had boldly done so in the summer only. Now, trusting to the magnet, they do not fear the wintry weather, being dangerous confident. Thus, there is a risk that what was thought likely to be a great benefit to them may, through their imprudence, cause them great misfortune.<sup>50</sup>

By making a direct analogy to the use of a compass, and therefore to reliance on one's own reason and on the wisdom (in this case science and its tool, the compass) of men, More had hoped to make clear the danger of accepting Raphael's recommendations at face value. Instead, he was forced to add additional material to Book I, and further elaborate his warnings about Raphael's character.

One of Thomas More's goals for *Utopia* is to lead the learned and virtuous in society, the humanists, not only to continue urging the reform of society and man, but also to take an active role in that renovation. Book I is mainly taken up with the question of royal service, and since we know that this is a period in which More debated whether or not to enter Henry VIII's service at Court, the dialogue had special timeliness and significance for him. More concludes that in order for society to be freed from its corruptions, it is the duty of good men as both citizens and Christians to serve those in power in order to better them; in turn goodness and virtue will flow from the very powerful to the ordinary individual. While the first end of *Utopia* is to reform Europe's individuals, beginning with influential men such as kings and cardinals and leading to society as a whole by including all of its members in the improvement, the second is to encourage the reform of Christendom's institutions. One of the most important of these establishments for More was the Catholic Church, which he viewed as necessary for the function of Christianity in Europe and abroad.

Within this question of service, we clearly see the "ethical portrait" mentioned by Weiner, which distinguishes Raphael Hythloday from "More," and the importance of virtue in the men who serve the public. There are many differences between "persona" More and Hythloday, and from the outset these distinctions color our understanding of Hythloday's responses to the suggestion that he enter the service of a king, as well as to "More's" responses. The first of these differences is an attachment to family and friends, and the responsibility that one has for such companions. "More," who has been away from his family for only four months misses them dearly, telling the reader that he needs the company of good friends in order to ease the "separation from [his] home, wife and children to whom [he] was exceedingly anxious to get back."<sup>51</sup> Raphael, on the other hand, has no feelings of obligation or attachment to his family, as related in the description of his voyage with Amerigo Vespucci. According to Giles, Hythloday "importuned and even wrested from Amerigo permission to be one of the twenty-four who at the farthest point of the last voyage were left behind in the fort."<sup>52</sup>

50. More, *Utopia*, 15.

51. More, *Utopia*, 11.

52. More, *Utopia*, 14.

Another point of distinction is love and loyalty for one's homeland, which "More" plainly exhibits. The first instance of this is "More's" praising of his sovereign, introducing Book I by telling us he was sent on his mission by "the most invincible King of England, Henry, the eighth of that name, who is distinguished by all the accomplishments of a model monarch."<sup>53</sup> He also shows his loyalty by specifically expressing his longing for his home in the aforementioned statement. Raphael, however, has so little attachment to his native country that "he was left behind that he might have his way, being more anxious for travel than about the grave. These two sayings are constantly on his lips: "He who has no grave is covered by the sky," and "from all places it is the same distance to heaven."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, Raphael feels little obligation to aid his family or friends. On "Giles'" suggestion that he enter into the service of a king for his benefit as well as theirs, Raphael replies, "As for my friends and relatives, I am not greatly troubled about them, for I think I have fairly well performed my duty to them already."<sup>55</sup> He feels that they "ought to be satisfied with this generosity from me and not to require or expect additionally that I should, for their sakes, enter into servitude to kings."<sup>56</sup> This view is very different from the one we have already received of "More", who desires all of the things for which Raphael has no emotion, and who is working for the benefit of his family; these differences all make "persona" More far more sympathetic to the reader than Hythloday.

The reader is abruptly asked to choose between two conflicting points of view, both of which address a chief question of the work: Should a wise man enter the service of a king, even if his words will have little or no effect on the public good? More the author argues in *Utopia* that even if a wise man is confronted with great resistance to his ideas, and cannot accomplish complete change in the system in which he is involved, he must continue to try because this is the duty of every good man; furthermore, he can work to overcome the resistance of others, and through the use of eloquence and rhetoric influence powerful men to reform inwardly. Once the rulers of a realm are reformed, the entire society will benefit from the advice of the wise man. Therefore, even though the task may be difficult, it is necessary if a society and the state will improve for the benefit of the people.

Raphael has several reasons for not entering the service of any king. In his first justification, he contends that to be a counselor at a king's service would be the same as being a slave to that service, as "those who serve are slaves."<sup>57</sup> When "Giles" suggests that Raphael could not only help his friends and the public good but also become happier in such service, Raphael will have none of it, responding that in fact he finds the very idea revolting. "Should I," he responds, "make it more prosperous by a way which my soul abhors? As it is, I now live as I please, which I surely fancy is very seldom the case with your grand courtiers."<sup>58</sup> Therefore, instead of being involved in the public good, Raphael is only concerned with his own personal desires and happiness and will not make any sort of sacrifice in order to help others.

53. More, *Utopia*, 9.

54. More, *Utopia*, 13.

55. More, *Utopia*, 16.

56. More, *Utopia*, 16.

57. More, *Utopia*, 16.

58. More, *Utopia*, 17.

“More,” however, contends that Raphael should still consider entering into state service, replying with the idea of political theory that will control the rest of *Utopia’s* argument:

But it seems to me you will do what is worthy of you and of this generous and truly philosophic spirit of yours if you so order your life as to apply your talent and industry to the public interest, even if it involves some personal disadvantages to yourself. This you can never do with as great profit as if you are councilor to some great monarch and make him follow, as I am sure you will, straightforward and honourable courses. From the monarch, as from a never-failing spring, flows a stream of all that is good or evil over the whole nation.<sup>59</sup>

From this point on, More argues that this is the part of the wise man and the duty of every good man, a role that must be played despite the difficulty that may be encountered. Disagreeing, Raphael argues that since his opinions will never make a difference, he should not even attempt to counsel a leader. He attributes the failure of his ideas to the other people who already surround leaders such as kings and cardinals, who are corrupted and would stand in the way of his policies and progress. He says,

among royal councilors everyone is actually so wise as to have no need of profiting by another’s counsel, or everyone seems so wise in his own eyes as not to condescend to profit by it, save that they agree with the most absurd sayings of, and play the parasite to, the chief royal favorites whose friendliness they strive to win by flattery.”<sup>60</sup>

Raphael states that if a newcomer were to ever introduce an idea or policy, the courtier listeners would inevitably reject the proposition, “as if their whole reputation for wisdom were jeopardized.”<sup>61</sup> He points out that advisors often guard their own good position and reputation, only to the detriment of the government and its people. He denounces such “proud, ridiculous and obstinate prejudices,” and cites it as one of the reasons for which he cannot enter into service.<sup>62</sup>

Hythloday follows his rejection of services with a lengthy example from the time he spent in England, when he visited Cardinal Morton (whose household More had served in as a boy) and discussed matters of policy with him as a guest in his court. In one respect, Hythloday’s digression is a “denunciation of the rapacity of the English upper classes, whose unscrupulous greed and passion for luxury destroy the livelihood of the poor and make them first starve, and then steal, and then hang for stealing,” and it reflects Thomas More’s cognizance of England’s social problems.<sup>63</sup> In another, it is a fundamental component of *Utopia’s* two-part construction, by relating the two seemingly disjointed books to one another. Just as Raphael needed to tell a lengthy example about Cardinal Morton and England to make his points clear about men and society, so did More in writing this work, and more specifically through Book II itself, to influence his own contemporaries in all of Christendom. In this

59. More, *Utopia*, 17.

60. More, *Utopia*, 18.

61. More, *Utopia*, 18.

62. More, *Utopia*, 19.

63. Kenny, *Thomas More*, 40.

way, the structure of *Utopia* becomes unified, and helps the reader better understand all of its elements in relation to one another as a work of artistic rhetoric with a specific goal in mind.

Raphael reports that the meeting with Cardinal Morton took place at the time of the Cornish Rebellion, almost twenty years before, in 1497.<sup>64</sup> By 1516, all of the recommendations that Raphael makes in the meeting with the Cardinal had been put into law to deal with exactly the same problems but with no effect on the corruption of the nation and the destitution of the people. Lakowski argues that the setting of this episode “back in the recent past, and of having Hythloday report the conversation at Cardinal Morton’s table to “persona” More, obviously serves to detach and insulate More-as-Author even further from his artistic creation.”<sup>65</sup> However, it also reflects More’s feelings that the solution to society’s ills is not to enact as many laws as possible, as recommended by Raphael, but to reform each man from within, beginning with those with the most influence over the nation, through humanist methods and the acceptance of the *philosophia Christi*. As long as the actual problems in humanity’s makeup, and greed, pride, and other corruptions in the hearts of men persist, individuals and society would continue to suffer. As Weiner points out,

to More and every contemporary reader of *Utopia* it would have been obvious that measures of a different kind were needed, that external restrictions of human behavior, however logical they may appear to be, are not the best way to cure social ills.<sup>66</sup>

In a specific example of Hythloday’s denunciation of the English, he questions the death penalty, giving a long case of how this punishment is contrary to God’s will:

God has said, “thou shalt not kill,” and shall we so lightly kill a man for taking a bit of small change? But if the divine command against killing be held not to apply where human law justifies killing, what prevents men equally from arranging with one another how far rape, adultery, and perjury are permissible? God has withdrawn from man the right to take not only another’s life but his own. Now, men by mutual consent agree on definite cases where they may take the life of one another. But if this agreement among men is to have such force as to exempt their henchmen from the obligation of the commandment, although without any precedent set by God they take the life of those who have been ordered by human enactment to be put to death, will not the law of God be valid only so far as the law of man permits? The result will be that in the same way men will determine in everything how far it suits them that God’s commandments should be obeyed.<sup>67</sup>

Weiner notes that while “Raphael again insists that only unswerving allegiance to God’s commandments,” in this denunciation of the English laws, he actually “violates this standard fairly consistently” throughout both books of *Utopia*. The issue is therefore not whether man can live under the Law so much as it is to what extent man can live according to the laws of his own reason.<sup>68</sup>

64. Lakowski, “Sir Thomas More and the Art of Dialogue,” 97.

65. Lakowski, “Sir Thomas More and the Art of Dialogue,” 97.

66. Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 12.

67. More, *Utopia*, 29-30.

68. Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 13.



For example, within a few pages of this declamation, Raphael promotes the practices of a people called the Polylerites to the Cardinal, describing their society's handling of criminals, and also giving examples of crimes for which these criminals can be executed.<sup>69</sup> To the surprise of everyone, Cardinal Morton is interested in hearing the idea, suggesting that the only way to know whether or not it is productive is to try it out, since "it is not easy to guess whether it would turn out well or ill inasmuch as absolutely no experiment has been made," and should the experiment fail, the condemned could still be put to death with no injustice to anyone.<sup>70</sup> Much to Raphael's irritation, all those around the Cardinal then praise his ideas, which they had just scorned. His anger is chiefly caused by the brunt to his own pride: "When the Cardinal had finished speaking, they all vied in praising what they had all received with contempt when suggested by me, but especially the part relating to vagrants because this was the Cardinal's addition."<sup>71</sup> The executions of the Polylerites are just as much against God's laws as are those of the English, but all of this was overlooked by both Raphael and the courtiers in their haste to gain the cardinal's favor. For instance, the excessive English punishment of theft with the death penalty is an obvious example. More heinous than this are the laws and practices which cause theft in the first place, from the neglect of soldiers who have fought in wars giving either life or limb for the sake of their country and then being forced into beggary because of their injuries, to the practice of fencing in public grazing lands for sheep for the greedy benefit of a few wealthy landowners, to the expulsion of tenants from land they and their families have lived and worked on for generations. As Hythloday exclaims, "what remains for them but to steal and be hanged!"<sup>72</sup> These very real English situations would have directly confronted More's readers, and made them realize that a different solution was needed for their problems.

Notwithstanding all of the discourse against it, "More" still contends that Raphael should seek to enter the service of a king, not only because his ideas on policy would benefit society, but also because if Hythloday could persuade himself "not to shun the courts of kings, [he] could do the greatest good to the common weal by [his] advice. The latter is the most important part of [his] duty as it is the duty of every good man."<sup>73</sup> The duty of every good man, then, is to serve the public good and not merely his own personal preferences and desires. Because he is only able to think of himself, as shown both in this instance and in the "ethical portrait" laid out in the beginning of Book I, Raphael rejects both the notion and the necessary responsibility.

Despite the fact that Raphael can voice positive conceptions of social responsibility, he does not accept the proper role in enacting those principles. For instance, he sees the responsibility of a good king as not only as avoiding warfare, but also to

look after his ancestral kingdom and make it as prosperous and flourishing as possible, love his subjects and be loved by them, live with them and rule them gently, and have no designs upon other kingdoms since what he already possessed was more than enough for him.<sup>74</sup>

69. More, *Utopia*, 33-34. Literally, Polylerites means "The People of Much Nonsense."

70. More, *Utopia*, 34-35.

71. More, *Utopia*, 35.

72. More, *Utopia*, 25.

73. More, *Utopia*, 39.

74. More, *Utopia*, 43.

He defines this idea further, comparing the duty of a king to the “duty of the shepherd insofar as he is a shepherd, to feed his sheep rather than himself.”<sup>75</sup> In this way, *Utopia* gives us both the duty of a good and wise man, and the duty of a good king. While Raphael might be able to grasp these ideas on the surface, as might a reader of Thomas More’s work, the more important step is to put the ideas into action, and to do good in the world, despite the resulting personal concessions.

“More” concedes that imposing new ideas on those who are unwilling to listen is difficult, but he urges Raphael to employ the method of rhetoric, an instrument by which nearly anything is possible. We have seen in the Letter to Dorp how confidently Thomas More the author feels about the powers of rhetoric, and that idea is reinforced here. He argues forcefully, saying, “there is another philosophy, more practical for statesmen, which knows its stage, adapts itself to the play in hand, and performs its role neatly and appropriately. This is the philosophy which you must employ.”<sup>76</sup> “More” tells Raphael of the benefits of rhetoric in a manner reminiscent of the Letter to Dorp:

So it is in the commonwealth. So it is in the deliberation of monarchs. If you cannot pluck up wrongheaded opinions by the roots, if you cannot sure according to your heart’s desire vices of long standing, yet you must not on that account desert the commonwealth.<sup>77</sup> You must not abandon a ship in a storm because you cannot control the winds. On the other hand, you must not force upon people new and strange ideas which you realize will carry no weight with the persons of conviction. On the contrary, by the indirect approach you must seek and strive to the best of your power to handle matters tactfully. What you cannot turn to good you must at least make as little bad as you can. For it is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good, a situation which I do not expect for a great many years to come!<sup>78</sup>

As Weiner reminds us, “the importance of reading the works of the Christian humanists particularly and of humanists generally with an awareness of their bias in favor of the rhetorical mode cannot be overstressed.”<sup>79</sup> Weiner also points to a quotation from Jerrold E. Seigel, who has noted that

to Renaissance humanists, “eloquence meant, above all, persuasive power. The orator sought to teach and to entertain his hearers, but most of all move them, to persuade them. This was his proper task. As a man of eloquence he was a leader in public assemblies; his speech gave him power over other men. The public nature of rhetorical eloquence distinguished it from the wisdom of the philosopher.”<sup>80</sup>

In the suggestion of a public stage and the playing of the proper public role, we have a powerful instance in which we can see even more how *The Praise of Folly* helps us to understand a part of *Utopia*’s message. In addition to advocating rhetoric, More likens the duty of service to appearing in a play, a role

75. More, *Utopia*, 46.

76. More, *Utopia*, 49.

77. More, *Utopia*, 49.

78. More, *Utopia*, 50.

79. Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 6.

80. Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 7.

that Raphael ought to accept without question, and without concern about receiving praise for his ideas:

Would it not have been preferably to take a part without words than by reciting something inappropriate to make a hodgepodge of comedy and tragedy? You would have spoiled and upset the actual play by bringing in irrelevant matter—even if your contribution would have been superior in itself. Whatever play is being performed, perform it as best you can, and do not upset it all simply because you think of another which has more interest.<sup>81</sup>

*The Praise of Folly* also likens our lives to performances on a stage. We can see that the two works help us to understand the increasing sense that the wise man cannot shirk his duty to counsel without grave consequences. In the best and clearest example of this thought, Folly asks,

If someone should try to strip away the costumes and makeup from the actors performing a play on the stage and to display them to the spectators in their own natural appearance, wouldn't he ruin the whole play? Wouldn't all the spectators be right to throw rocks at such a madman and drive him out of the theater? Everything would suddenly look different: the actor just now playing a woman would seem to be a man; the one who just now had been playing a young man would look old; the man who played the king only a moment ago would become a pauper; the actor who played god would be revealed as a wretched human being. But to destroy the illusions in this fashion would spoil the whole play.<sup>82</sup>

The language in Folly's statement shows that she is referencing the Silenus figure who has appeared throughout her narrative, and who plainly represents Christ. Much of the imagery is the same, and as always in these references, Folly makes sure to note that the lay people would reject such a figure, just as in their impiety they reject Christ. The passage includes much of the "opposite" imagery found in Folly's Silenus examples, and in Erasmus' work of the same name. The fact that "More" recognized that as a counselor, one might be forced to "spoil and upset the play" reinforces our readings of these works as a sort of intellectual dialogue between their authors. Moreover, if the counselor ends up acting like the Silenus figure, and therefore like Christ, he is fulfilling what More the author sees as the good man's duty. In a final emphasis of this point, Folly says,

Now the whole life of mortal men, what is but a sort of play, in which various persons make their entrances in various costumes, and each one plays his own part until the director gives him his cue to leave? Often he also orders one and the same actor to come on stage in different costumes, so that the actor who just now played the king in royal scarlet now comes on in rags to play a humble servant. True, all these images are unreal, but this play cannot be performed in any other way.<sup>83</sup>

These stage metaphors increase our impression that "More's" argument towards service is not only the more persuasive but also perhaps the correct choice between the two presented in Book I. We can

81. More, *Utopia*, 49.

82. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 43.

83. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, 43-44.

see that while Raphael is quite close to understanding his duty, his selfish need for personal pleasure overrides his obligation. His own contentions employ the imagery of a critical Silenus figure, which he himself recognizes as Christ:

To persons who had made up their minds to go headlong by the opposite road, the man who beckons them back and points out dangers can hardly be welcome. But, apart from this subject, what did my speech contain that would not be appropriate or obligatory to have propounded everywhere? Truly, if all the things which by the perverse morals of men have come to seem odd are to be dropped and absurd, we must dissemble among Christians almost all the doctrines of Christ. Yet He forbade us to dissemble them to the extent that what He had whispered in the ears of His disciples He commanded to be preached openly from the housetops. The greater part of His teaching is far more different from the morals of mankind than was my discourse.<sup>84</sup>

Raphael expresses that ultimately, he knows that society would most benefit from the adoption of Christ's ways, exclaiming on the matter several times more in the dialogue. Most importantly, he identifies the chief obstacle preventing men from doing their duty:

Nor does it occur to me to doubt that a man's regard for his own interests or the authority of Christ our Savior—who in His wisdom could not fail to know what was best and who in His goodness would not fail to counsel what He knew to be best—would long ago have brought the whole world to adopt the laws of the Utopian commonwealth, had not one single monster, the chief and progenitor of all plagues, striven against it—I mean, Pride.<sup>85</sup>

What makes this realization so significant is that it is precisely Raphael's own pride which has prevented him from serving anyone, neither the state, nor his society, nor his friends and family. Totally unable to recognize his own primary fault or overcome it, Raphael continues to denounce those who are unable to overwhelm this same liability:

Pride measures prosperity not by her own advantages but by others' disadvantages. Pride would not consent to be made even a goddess if no poor wretches were left for her to domineer over and scoff at, if her good fortune might not dazzle by comparison with their miseries, if the display of her riches did not torment and intensify their poverty. This serpent from hell entwines itself around the hearts of men and acts like the suckfish in preventing and hindering them from entering on a better way of life.<sup>86</sup>

We can therefore clearly see that one purpose of *Utopia* is that through Thomas More's own rhetoric, and the examples discussed by Hythloday, he can exhort men to abandon their own pride, and engage in reforming their societies. In addition, the initially negative appearance of service and all of its

84. More, *Utopia*, 51.

85. More, *Utopia*, 150.

86. More, *Utopia*, 150.

obligations are actually benefits, which should be willingly accepted. It is in this way that we should understand not only the question of service as posed in *Utopia*, but the work as a whole, as an exhortation for reform.

It is with that conclusion to the question of service that we may now turn to Book II of *Utopia*, and examine some of the “absurdities” mentioned in the prefatory letters of More and the humanists. In the remainder of this section, I will discuss a few of the instances that are actually positive, and which More may genuinely be recommending for Europe. I will show the most obvious “absurdities” in Hythloday’s description of Utopia, obvious because they clearly conflict with the Scriptures and patristic writings, the orthodox practices of the Church, or the qualifiers for inclusion in More’s interpretation of the *philosophia Christi*. More intertwines these instances with each other, in order that it not be blatantly obvious which customs are absurd and which are not. We will therefore examine them, for the most part, as they arise.

One of the most controversial aspects of the Utopian society, which others studies have heavily commented upon, is the fact that it is a communist society. Sharing everything they have, from their homes (which change possession every ten years), to food and meals, to the amount of labor that each Utopian man must perform every day, Hythloday remarks that “the whole island is like a single family.”<sup>87</sup> In addition, the Utopians seem to have a general yet abundant contempt for money and visible wealth:

they have devised a means which, as it is consonant with the rest of their institutions, so it is extremely unlike our own-seeing that we value gold so much and are so careful in safeguarding it-and therefore incredible except to those who have experience of it. While they eat and drink from earthenware and glassware of fine workmanship but of little value, from gold and silver they make chamber pots and all the humblest vessels for use everywhere...Moreover, they employ the same metals to make the chains and solid fetters which they put on their slaves. Finally, as for those who bear the stigma of disgrace on account of some crime, they have gold ornaments hanging from their ears, gold rings encircling their fingers, gold chains thrown around their necks, and, as a last touch, a gold crown binding their temples. Thus by every means in their power they make gold and silver a mark of ill fame.<sup>88</sup>

On the surface these practices exemplify the messages of the New Testament, which command men to reject money, to give to the poor, and to amass riches in heaven rather than a treasure on earth. As W. E. Campbell explains, the *Acts of the Apostles* describes the communism of a kind that existed in the early Christian Church: “we are told that the early Christians “were persevering in the doctrine of the apostles, and in the communication of the breaking of bread and in prayers...And they that believed were together and had all things in common. Their possessions and goods they sold and divided them all according as each had need.”<sup>89</sup> However, the difference between the Utopian practice and the

87. More, *Utopia*, 83.

88. More, *Utopia*, 85-86.

89. *Acts* ii, 42-45, quoted in W. E. Campbell, *Erasmus, Tyndale, and More* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1949), 94-95.

Christian does not arise from communism itself, but rather the motivations for which it is employed. While “the Utopians hold all goods in common as a means of maximizing every man’s individual wealth,” Weiner reminds us that in contrast “the primitive Church held all things in common both because materials goods were of no importance to them and because they had no doubts that their Father would provide everything that they might need.” Moreover, “as the root of all evil changes from money to pride,” in both books of the work, the cure changes as well: “Utopian communism may be a satisfactory remedy for man’s desire for wealth, but only Christian humility springing from faith, hope of salvation, and charity can end all of man’s pride, contention, and “fear, grief, care, labours, and watchings.””<sup>90</sup>

In a rather obvious reference to the Scholasticism of medieval theologians, Hythloday reports that the Utopians

never have a discussion of happiness without uniting certain principles taken from religion as well as from philosophy, which uses rational arguments. Without these principles they think reason insufficient and weak by itself for the investigation of true happiness. Though these principles belong to religion, yet they hold that reason leads men to believe and admit them.<sup>91</sup>

While Raphael does not comment much on this practice, More’s attacks on the Scholastic methods show that he does not view them as beneficial to society, though some of the principles of Thomism were acceptable. In fact, it is the Utopian reliance on reason and wisdom that undoubtedly assures us that Utopia is the “Praise of Wisdom” demanded by Martin van Dorp in 1514 when he was so offended by *The Praise of Folly*. While accepting the Thomist principle that through natural reason, individuals and societies might reach certain truths, without the guidance of faith, the Church, and the revelation of Christ’s message, rational pagans like the Utopians can only come to a limited point of understanding truth.

For example, the Utopian view of pleasure, the only custom with which Hythloday openly disagrees, is an exaltation of reason and earthly wisdom, like the hedonistic pagan philosophy of Epicurus. The Utopians divide pleasures into two classes, being either of the soul or of the body. Hythloday states that “to the soul they ascribe intelligence and the sweetness which is bred of contemplation of truth,” while bodily pleasures either fill “the sense with clearly perceptible sweetness” or consist “in a calm and harmonious state of the body.”<sup>92</sup> He reports “they believe that human reason can attain no truer view, unless a heaven-sent religion inspire man with something more holy.”<sup>93</sup> For More and his readers, that heaven-sent religion had already been in existence for fifteen hundred years-of course, Christianity. More believes that it is Christianity, as Erasmus says in *The Sileni of Alcibiades*, “which alone of all the others really does bring what everyone is trying to get, in some way or another-happiness.”<sup>94</sup> Through Raphael’s disagreement with the custom of

90. Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 25.

91. More, *Utopia*, 92.

92. More, *Utopia*, 98-99.

93. More, *Utopia*, 102.

94. Erasmus, *Sileni Alcibiadis*, 80 and Weiner, “Raphael’s Utopia and More’s *Utopia*,” 23.

pleasure,

More induces us to read this section very carefully; by making the Utopians' argument compelling through a rhetorical tour de force, he persuades us to agree; by pointing out the necessity for an extension to bring this philosophy into accord with the philosophy of Christ, he begins the process by which, as his conclusion [later] suggests, the "best state of a commonwealth" may be achieved.<sup>95</sup>

Returning to the more obviously strange Utopian customs, we look to their view of marriage and divorce. Raphael reports that while "marriage is in principle lifelong," it may be broken by adultery. The Utopians also allow divorces in rare cases, when "the intolerable wayward manners of either party" provide grounds for divorce and the remarriage of the unoffending spouse. It is the secular authority that evaluates these exceptional cases, and in some instances approves divorces. Such a case might be that when "the man and woman cannot well agree between themselves, both of them finding with whom they hope to live more quietly and merrily, that they, by the full consent of them both, be divorced asunder and married to others." The "sanction of the senate" is the deciding voice in a divorce, though not before the parties "carefully gone into the case. Even then they do not readily give consent because they know that it is a very great drawback to cementing the affection between husband and wife if they have before them the easy hope of a fresh union."<sup>96</sup> Raphael's suggestion that the cases in which a divorce is granted are lamentable is more than an understatement. Though ancient pagans allowed divorce, it is clear that this is not an option that More felt should be available to Christendom. He took marriage very seriously, not only because it was one of the seven Catholic sacraments, but also because of the attitude towards it in the New Testament and in the patristic writings. The New Testament's numerous analogies between Christ as the bridegroom and the Church as the bride would have only strengthened More's feelings on the subject, and motivated him against any endorsement of this kind of policy. In addition, the fact that the secular authority handled an issue of marriage, traditionally a matter for the ecclesiastical courts, is all the more surprising, and one that More would have rejected. Raphael also reports that the Utopians' punishment of adultery, an ultimate violation of the sacrament, is "the strictest form of slavery."<sup>97</sup> If a guilty party should be fortunate enough to be released from bondage and "relapse into the same offence," the "penalty is death. For all other crimes there is no law prescribing any fixed penalty."<sup>98</sup> While at first glance the idea of punishing adultery seems somewhat logical, the overly harsh punishment, and again by secular authorities, removes the possibility for More actually supporting the custom.

The Utopians also allow both suicide and euthanasia. It seems that these practices were little impacted by any religious hesitations on the part of the Utopians, though it contradicts the teachings in the Scriptures, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the practices of the Catholic Church.

95. Weiner, "Raphael's Utopia and More's *Utopia*," 23.

96. More, *Utopia*, 111.

97. More, *Utopia*, 111.

98. More, *Utopia*, 112.

Hythloday explains:

But if a disease is not only incurable but also distressing and agonizing without cessation, then the priests and the public officials exhort the man, since he is now unequal to all life's duties, a burden to himself, and a trouble to others, and is living beyond the time of his death, to make up his mind not to foster the pest and plague any longer nor to hesitate to die now that life is torture to him but, relying on good hope, to free himself from this bitter life as from prison and the rack, or else voluntarily to permit others to free him. In this course he will act wisely, since by death he will put an end not to enjoyment but to torture. Because in doing so he will be obeying the counsels of the priests, who are God's interpreters, it will be a pious and holy action.<sup>99</sup>

More's language in this passage is deliberately provocative, encouraging his readers to realize the contradiction between the Utopian practice and what moral and religious rules they should have for themselves. In Renaissance Europe, suicide was not regarded as "pious and holy," but blasphemous and damnable. Euthanasia would be called murder, and the guilty punished by first the ecclesiastical and then secular authorities. While pagans did these things and viewed them as acceptable, for Christian society they were intolerable. The Utopians have only minor restrictions on their custom of suicide: "if anyone commits suicide without having obtained the approval of priests and senate, they deem him unworthy of either fire or earth and cast his body ignominiously into a marsh without proper burial."<sup>100</sup> David Weil Baker has suggested that this passage both underscores the dangers of configuring reason and religion too closely together:

For on the one hand, the Utopian priests combine religion, medicine, and rhetoric, as do the angel Raphael and Christ. On the other hand, Utopia's religious leadership takes this consideration to an extreme that, albeit perhaps not so shocking to modern sensibilities, was abhorrent to sixteenth-century Christianity.<sup>101</sup>

We should be sure to remember that while Raphael literally means, "the healing of God," the earthly, reason-based wisdom of the Utopians has clearly been taken too far at this point. This is a part of More's suggestion that reason alone is insufficient in matters of religion (a rejection of Scholasticism alone), and that the supernatural revelation of Christianity and the guidance of the Church, along with a humanist education, are necessary in a successful society.

The theme of warfare is one that permeates *Utopia* from beginning to end, and reflects More's reservations about entering into armed conflict. Hythloday reports that, "War, as an activity for only for beasts and yet practiced by no kind of beast so constantly as man, they regard with utter loathing. Against the usage of almost all nations they count nothing so inglorious as glory sought in war." Much like the contradictory denunciation of the death penalty in Book I, the rest of his description of Utopian military affairs is filled with the many exceptions for which they go to war. Utopians are obliged to help

99. More, *Utopia*, 108-109.

100. More, *Utopia*, 109.

101. Baker, *Divulging Utopia*, 55.



their friends in times of war, “not always indeed to defend them but merely sometimes also to avenge injuries previously done to them.”<sup>102</sup> In addition, despite what appears to be disgust for money, Utopians severely punish offenses to their friends in “money matters-but not wrongs done to themselves.”<sup>103</sup> We are told that “their one and only object in war is to secure that which, had it been obtained beforehand, would have prevented declaration of war,” but despite this, the Utopians have a multitude of other justifications for invading other territories, and exacting severe punishments.<sup>104</sup>

The violence of the Utopians is illustrated in the manner in which they colonize new lands. When the population of any Utopian city grows beyond a specified quota, a group is sent to colonize “on the mainland nearest them, wherever the natives have much unoccupied and uncultivated land”. The colonizers first attempt to live with the native people in peace, merge customs and practices, and to make use of land that was previously seen as “poor and barren to the natives.” If, however, the inhabitants

refuse to live according to their laws, they drive from the territory which they carve out for themselves. If they resist, they wage war against them. They consider it a most just cause for war when a people which does not use its soil but keeps it idle and waste nevertheless forbids the use and possession of it to others who by the rule of nature ought to be maintained by it.<sup>105</sup>

From such contradictions as these, we can infer More’s distaste for war, a feeling that he would have collected from the lessons in the New Testament. In addition, his own experiences in the matter, both lingering wariness in England after the Wars of the Roses and Henry VIII’s clumsy attempts at war in France, would have increased this sentiment.

The final section of *Utopia* considers the religious beliefs and practices of the Utopians, the most considerable expression of More’s *philosophia Christi*. This section is useful as we come to the final examination of More’s work as a classic work not only of the Renaissance, but also of the Reformation. The ideas he expresses here are fundamentally the same as those he will expound in his polemic works, and in his Tower writings, though the emphasis later shifted drastically. Utopian religion is similar, on the surface, to European Catholicism, but with some critical differences. For example, instead of having a single, unified Utopian version of Christianity, instead “there are different kinds of religion not only on the island as a whole but also in each city.” While some worship the sun, the moon, one of the planets, or a “man conspicuous enough for either virtue or glory” in the Utopian past, “the majority, and those by far the wiser, believe in nothing of the kind but in a certain single being, unknown, eternal, immense, inexplicable, far above the reach of the human mind, diffused throughout the universe not in mass but in power.” Like Christian beliefs about God, the Utopians “attribute the beginnings, the growth, the increase, the changes, and the ends of all things as they have perceived them. To no other do they give divine honors.”<sup>106</sup> Before the arrival of Europeans to the island, the Utopians had gradually been departing “from this medley of superstitions and are coming to unite in that one religion which seems

102. More, *Utopia*, 119.

103. More, *Utopia*, 120.

104. More, *Utopia*, 120.

105. More, *Utopia*, 76.

106. More, *Utopia*, 130.

to surpass the rest in reasonableness.” The mention of an individual’s sense of “reasonableness,” using wisdom rather than personal faith to evaluate one’s religion, indicates to us that More clearly thinks that relying solely on such wisdom is not sufficient for religion or society, and that through teaching, the revelation of the true faith would become clear. He strengthens this suggestion when Raphael says that the variety of beliefs in Utopia would have disappeared long ago,

had not whatever untoward event, that happened to anyone when he was deliberating on a change of religion, been construed by a fear as not having happened by chance but as having been sent from heaven—as if the deity whose worship he was forsaking were thus avenging an intention so impious against himself.<sup>107</sup>

Religious toleration in Utopia is also a topic on which much commentary has been made, and several authors have argued that More was in favor of such tolerant practices as the ones described in this section at the beginning of his literary career. Simply put, Thomas More the author was not in favor of the type of religious freedom described by Raphael at any point, a detail made very clear by the example of a religious zealot who excites the people to the point of riot over differences in religions, despite the same basic beliefs. While the new Christian converts are not persecuted, the possibility for danger exists specifically because of the Utopians’ ancient institution, “that no one should suffer for his religion.”<sup>108</sup> Utopus, the founder of Utopia, had decreed that it

should be lawful for every man to follow the religion of his choice, that each might strive to bring others over to his own, provided that he quietly and modestly supported his own by reasons nor bitterly demolished all others if his persuasions were not successful nor used any violence and refrained from abuse.<sup>109</sup>

Unlike Catholicism, the Utopian religion has very few dogmas, both because the founder “was uncertain whether God did not desire a varied and manifold worship and therefore did not inspire different people with different views,” and because he thought it “both insolence and folly to demand by violence and threats that all should think to be true what you believe to be true.”<sup>110</sup> He believed that if handled prudently, in a quiet and modest way, the truth would eventually overpower any false religions. The few exceptions that Utopus decreed were set down in dogmatic form, which each Utopian must believe, or risk exile from any respect or service in society:

He conscientiously and strictly gave injunction that no one should fall so far below the dignity of human nature as to believe that souls likewise perish with the body or that the world is the mere sport of chance and not governed by any divine providence. After this life, accordingly, vices are ordained to be punished and virtue rewarded.<sup>111</sup>

Those who disagree with these fundamental beliefs are barred from speaking their “opinion in the pres-

107. More, *Utopia*, 131.

108. More, *Utopia*, 133.

109. More, *Utopia*, 133.

110. More, *Utopia*, 133-134.

111. More, *Utopia*, 135.

ence of the common people,” but are permitted and encouraged to do so “in private before the priests and important personages”, because the Utopians are so “sure that such madness will in the end give way to reason.”<sup>112</sup> Again, the reliance on reason, rather than a basis in faith like the *philosophia Christi*, demonstrates that More is not actually advocating this sort of system. Reason and wisdom alone are not sufficient, and have only resulted in the corruption and degradation of More’s society. It is this sort of quiet counseling of heretics that was the model followed not only by Christian humanists but also by ecclesiastical leaders before the Reformation and in its early stages. In fact, a single man being privately counseled by a more educated elder (an “important personage”) is the setting for More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. While in this instance the private counseling of an errant individual seems to be somewhat satisfactory for, we can begin to see the first hints of More’s idea that such reforming techniques are insufficient. This emphasis was strengthened a great deal in his later works.

Raphael describes a religious zealot who takes matters of faith into his own hands, and harangues those who have not converted to Christianity:

As soon as he was baptized, in spite of our advice to the contrary, he spoke publicly of Christ’s religion with more zeal than discretion. He began to grow so warm in his preaching that not only did he prefer our worship to any other but he condemned the rest outright...When he had long been preaching in this style, they arrested him, tried him and convicted him not for despising their religion but for stirring up a riot among the people. His sentence after the verdict of guilty was exile.<sup>113</sup>

The Utopian punishment of the newly converted Christian preacher suggests More’s definite reservations about allowing religious freedom and toleration in society for the reasons that it is dangerous in regard to civil peace, as shown in this example. More important than this, though, is the fact that zealots of any stripe might forward any belief they wish, leading themselves and other lay people away from the truths of the Catholic Church. Shouting the virtues of Christianity, as suggested by Raphael in Book I, “should not be taken to the point of popular tumults.” Baker notes that “in this case, the Utopians may reveal as much about the authorial More as Raphael and “More” the character,” because even in 1516, before the outbreak of the Reformation, “More had reason to fear the consequences of religiously inspired popular tumults.”<sup>114</sup> The most famous of all anticlerical heresy cases was that of the Richard Hunne affair of 1511-1514, which had shaken London nearly to the point of riot, and was an example of just the sort of thing that More feared for his city.<sup>115</sup> *Utopia* assesses critically

the reckless religiosity of those who preach their message without any regard to time, place, or circumstances. This critique cautions readers of *Utopia* that the passage from Utopian institutions to those of a particular time and place would be more difficult than Raphael imagines, and such a critique would later prove useful to More in his castigations of heretics, too.<sup>116</sup>

112. More, *Utopia*, 135.

113. More, *Utopia*, 132-133.

114. Baker, *Divulging Utopia*, 53.

115. For a detailed and excellent analysis of the Hunne affair, see Marius, *Thomas More*, Chapter 8 (123-142).

116. Baker, *Divulging Utopia*, 51.

Finally, let us examine More's treatment of the clergy and their relationship to society, which became a major issue in his polemic works as he defended the Catholic Church and its representatives from the onslaught of Protestant critiques and attacks. In his final chapter especially, but also throughout *Utopia*, he favors those men who can live morally and who follow certain rules of behavior in accordance with that moral code. The description of Utopian priests, which some scholars have gone so far as to describe as "groveling" towards the European clergy, reveal some of his feelings about the leaders of the Church and the example they should put forth:

Of these persons there are two schools. The one is composed of celibates, who not only eschew all sexual activity but also abstain from eating flesh meat and in some cases from eating all animal food. They entirely reject the pleasures of this life as harmful. They long only for the future life by means of their watching and sweat. Hoping to obtain it very soon, they are cheerful and active in the meantime. The other school is just as fond of hard labor, but regards matrimony as preferable, not despising the comfort which it brings and thinking that their duty to nature requires them to perform the marital act and their duty to the country to beget children. The Utopians regard these men as the saner but the first-named as holier.<sup>117</sup>

Because the Utopian priests are of extraordinary holiness, and are therefore rare among corrupted men, Raphael reports that they have very few. These priests play a large role in the Utopian society, not only in the practice of religion, but in daily life. This is an example of the humanists' belief that religion should pervade every aspect of one's life, in following the teachings of the Church. Raphael explains that the priests preside over divine worship, order religious rites, and are censors of morals. It is counted a great disgrace for a man to be summoned or rebuked by them as not being of upright life. It is their function to give advice and admonition, but to check and punish offenders belongs to the governor and the other civil officials.<sup>118</sup>

That the Utopian priests are popularly elected speaks to their high regard in the communities they serve, and as Baker states, was "a powerful critique of the pomp and rigid hierarchy of European Christianity." One of the marginalia written by Erasmus in the chapter "On Warfare", which describes the pacific tendencies of the priests, exclaims, "O priests far more holy than ours!"<sup>119</sup> These direct comparisons of the Utopian clergy in their genuine piety to the corruption of their European counterparts is a strong critique indeed, one born out of the fervent desire for change rather than pure mockery or derision. By putting the faults of bad priests on display, More hoped to move them to correct their faults, and restore dignity to the institution which they served. Baker writes that the

Utopian priests also represent the other side of what we have seen to be the antipriestly elements of Erasmian humanism. That is, Utopian priests, selected for their devotion to "letters," are humanists elevated to the position of a priestly order, one that dislodges, only to replace, the clerisy of the Church.<sup>120</sup>

117. More, *Utopia*, 138.

118. More, *Utopia*, 139.

119. Baker, *Divulging Utopia*, 69.

120. Baker, *Divulging Utopia*, 74-75.

Not only are the Utopian priests very holy, they are exempted from any secular punishments, a matter that he took very seriously. In *Utopia*, Raphael reports,

to no other office in Utopia is more honor given, so much so that, even if they have committed any crime, they are subjected to no tribunal, but left only to God and to themselves. They judge it wrong to lay human hands upon one, however guilty, who has been consecrated to God in a singular manner as holy offering. It is easier for them to observe this custom because their priests are very few and very carefully chosen.<sup>121</sup>

More justifies his exemption of the clergy from any sort of punishment by saying that, even if because of the faults in human nature a priest should commit a crime, because there are not an abundance of clergymen (as there are in Europe), they are

invested with no power except the influence of honor, it need not be feared that they will cause any great harm to the state. In fact, the reason for having but few and exceptional priests is to prevent the dignity of the order...from being cheapened by communicating the honor to many.<sup>122</sup>

More does not only make use of *Utopia* to critique the faults of kings, counselors, and clergymen. He also turns his attention to the lay people of Europe and compares their behavior with that of the Utopians. Drawing directly on the parables from the New Testament, More indicates that while Europeans attend mass because it is a habit and a show of outward piety, and without regard to the true meaning of the liturgy and of Christianity itself, the Utopians are far

...too scrupulous to attend with a troubled conscience. If they are aware of hatred or anger against anyone they do not assist at the sacrifices until they have been reconciled and cleansed their hearts, for fear of swift and great punishment. By knowing meaning as it is carefully handed down by the priests, they are reminded of God's benefits toward them and, in turn, of their own piety toward God and their duty toward one another.<sup>123</sup>

Here we can see the texts of the Bible directly utilized in More's work and how Erasmus' works help us understand how to read *Utopia*. Erasmus' goal in *The Praise of Folly* was to exhort Christians to love one another, and treat each other as well as they treat themselves, one half the Great Commandment of Christ. Here, More has included the other half of the Commandment from the Sermon on the Mount, that the people also love God and each other *more* than they love themselves, and with their whole selves. He clearly believes that with the instruction and guidance of the Church, led by a purified and pious clergy, each man might move himself and those around him to goodness. We are therefore reminded of the character "More's" statement that it will be sometime before all men are good, though he does not see it as an impossibility. We can also see how More imagines the *philosophia Christi* permeating all members of society, not only in the counselors of kings and the rulers themselves, but also in the leaders of the Church, and in every man and woman in a society.

121. More, *Utopia*, 140.

122. More, *Utopia*, 141.

123. More, *Utopia*, 143-144.

Thomas More obviously does not fully endorse the religious practices of the Utopians, as some of them are noticeably in conflict with the doctrines of the Church. While they do have pious priests and devout laypeople, they lack perhaps the most important tool of all, the Bible. As both Marius and Baker point out, although Raphael carries a rather impressive cargo of Greek books to Utopia, he does not bring either a Greek or Latin New Testament. This omission reinforces the undecided future of Utopian Christianity from the Roman church and its apparent proximity to Erasmian humanism are offset by the absence of the primary text.<sup>124</sup>

In addition, while the Utopians have their own priests, they have no Catholic bishop or clergymen living with them, further distancing them from the guidance of the true Church. Baker notes that *Utopia* is “indebted to Erasmus’ efforts to use the Bible and the model of the early Church fathers as a tool of reform. In particular, the apparent heterodoxies of Utopian religion and society [are] clearer if measured against the scriptural standard that Erasmus did so much to establish.”<sup>125</sup> More goes to great lengths to show that in order for humanity to be improved to the point of goodness, the discovery of truth envisioned by the Scholastic Thomists and that such pagans as the Utopians were capable of had to be combined with the revelation of Christianity, supplemented by aspects of the faith such as the clergy, guidance, and teaching of the Church, the ancient texts, and the humanists themselves.

*Utopia* deliberately concludes on a “neutral” standpoint on the part of the “More” character, whom the author was somewhat distanced from, but who obviously held some of his genuine viewpoints. He writes in a confidential tone that when Raphael had finished his narration,

many things came to my mind which seemed very absurdly established in the customs and laws of the people described—not only in their method of waging war, their ceremonies and religion, as well as their other institutions, but most of all in that feature which is the principal foundation of their whole structure. I mean their common life and subsistence—without any exchange of money. This latter alone utterly overthrows all the nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty which are, in the estimation of the common people, the true glories and ornaments of the commonwealth.<sup>126</sup>

By returning to the discussion of money, More has unified the two books of *Utopia*. The major concerns for each book, pride and money, are therefore only an issue of pride, which Weiner described above as the new “root of all evil.” As also noted above, the cure for this evil in society must be the one prescribed by God and the Church, in its practices and sacred texts, and ultimately found in the *philosophia Christi*. In the end, while “More” “...cannot agree with all that he said,” he readily admits “that there are very many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to wish for in our country than to have any hope of seeing realized.”<sup>127</sup> By focusing on these positive aspects, but also by highlighting the many negative aspects of his own society, we can clearly see that Thomas More’s hope was that reform would come before long, and that he would see the day when “all men are good.”

124. Baker, *Divulging Utopia*, 72.

125. Baker, *Divulging Utopia*, 50-51.

126. More, *Utopia*, 151.

127. More, *Utopia*, 152.

### Conclusion

Sir Thomas More fundamentally held one belief throughout the whole of his adult life: in order for both individuals and societies to survive and to be saved, men must give themselves over to the ways of Christ and to the legitimate leadership and laws of the universal Catholic Church. More's accentuation of service towards one another shifted in his later works, in that he first argued more in favor of the humanist technique of redirecting heretics and the obligation of wise men to serve their countrymen and sovereigns. He later wrote forcefully for harsh treatment of heretics in order to make examples of them, and for serving the companions of Catholic Christendom rather than of a specific sovereign nation. He always argued in support of service and meeting one's personal and public obligations, first by serving as a royal counselor in *Utopia*, and later by serving as a good Catholic leader and elder in his Reformation-period works. These transferences in stress and the rejection of a specific reforming technique do not add up to what some historians have accused More of—inconsistency and contradiction on the one hand and a violent obsession on the other.

In this essay, I have detailed some of the basic principles of Christian humanism, which were exemplified in the work of Erasmus and of More himself. More's vision of the *philosophia Christi* was at the beginning of his career much the same as Erasmus', that men should live up to the Great Commandment from the Sermon on the Mount, to love both God and each other with their whole selves. I have demonstrated that one of Thomas More's goals for *Utopia* was to lead the learned and virtuous in society, the humanists, not only to continue urging the reform of society and man, but also to take an active role in that renovation. The question of royal service was special personal and professional significance for More, and that question stayed with him for the remainder of his life. As stated, while the first end of *Utopia* was thus to encourage reform Europe's individuals, beginning with influential men such as kings and cardinals and leading to society as a whole, the second was to encourage the reform of Christendom's institutions. More actively attempted to become a part of the renovation of his society, both by entering royal service and by exhorting reform through his written works.

More later revived his deep concern for the Catholic laity, displayed in *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, published in 1529, as well as the humanist message that was at the heart of *Utopia*. The mission in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* was to correct an errant Messenger on orthodox doctrines of faith and to remove each seed of heresy from the Messenger's mind, the ultimate concern being the protection of uneducated and unguided minds and the stability of English society. In the *Dialogue of Comfort*, written in 1534 during his imprisonment, More continues his message of service and obligation toward one another, particularly in the explanation that it is the obligation of every good man to care for his neighbor as much as he does for God. The *Dialogue of Comfort* is More's expression of both of these kinds of love, both for God in his firm resolve not to transgress the canon laws of the Church, and for his fellow man as he labored to provide comfort and instruction to them through his writings and his own death. Whatever we may think of More's rather conscious decision to martyr himself for such a cause, we must admit that he firmly believed he made the right choice. His confidence in a greater kind of charity—salvation through Christ's suffering and death—led him to believe that his death was the only solution and means for him to save Christendom, when the tide of political events pushed aside the effects most of his written works and actions.

How did Sir Thomas More view himself and his works? How does this influence the way in which

we view More and evaluate his writings and actions, particularly in light of the bloodshed in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation? More saw himself as fulfilling each of his obligations, public and private, and this is the presentation that I have attempted here. More knew that he had a specific set of personal duties to carry out, as well as public obligations to the secular realm of his ruler, Henry VIII, and to his religious dominion, the Catholic Church. In each of his written works, More consciously worked to meet these burdens in the best way that he knew of and later ultimately created for himself. In this essay, I have detailed how *Utopia* is an example of such a pursuit. Rather than reading *Utopia*, written in 1516, against More's relentless pursuit of Protestant reformers like William Tyndale and Martin Luther in 1533, we should instead view it as More would have, in its contemporary context. It is in the light of Christian humanism and the goals of the *philosophia Christi* that we can best understand More's greatest and most insightful work.

More's life and works remain significant for us today because they comprise the broad wealth of historical, political, literary, and religious thought which has passed to the world we live in. Understanding More in his context, and other figures in crucial periods as the Renaissance and the Reformation. By evaluating the relationship between his religious beliefs, political role, and personal philosophies, we are led to clearer conclusions about the circumstances surrounding More's death and to new perspectives about his place in the development of the early modern political state. This ultimately leads to a better understanding of our own times, as the modern world faces similar challenges to diversity and tolerance. The role of the state in the interaction between religion and its citizens is of particular importance at a time when many believe that civil and religious liberties are being infringed upon by a government fearful of religious fanaticism. Looking to the language of reform and understanding, rather than of fear, distrust and hate, is undoubtedly more useful than waiting for the inevitable consequences of our exclusion and suppression of some of our citizens and their beliefs. Through this comprehension, and the knowledge of how such structures as the state, religion, and public understanding of how these bodies evolve, grow, and change into one another, we can find the means to make the best of the world we live in, and when necessary, create change.



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