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The Role of Religion in Shaping Utopian Narratives

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Abstract

The current paper explores theological and sociopolitical outlooks on religion within both the conceptual framework of "Utopia" and the specific context of Thomas More's literary work "Utopia". The analysis defines "utopia as a philosophical concept that envisions a perfect society, establishing a foundation for understanding how religion functions within such an ideal state. The study further concentrates on Utopia, More's distinct work of English literature, evaluating the religious structure of its society, the roles played by various religious groups, and the conduct of religious ceremonies by the Utopians. Therefore, the study investigates how religion is portrayed in Utopia, drawing on interpretations from various religious scholars. Among the key highlights are the three functions of utopias like, change, criticism, and compensation. Additionally, the article studies how different religious utopias have been conceptualized both before and after More's work, including the Garden of Eden, the Millennium, Paradise Lost, and the contemporary vision of the New Jerusalem.

Keywords: Utopia, Religion, Thomas More, Ideal state, Religious groups, Atheism

1. Religion in Utopia

1.1 Introduction

Utopia is a book written by Thomas More. According to Alicino (2017), More coined the term in 1516 in his book *Utopia*. More illustrates that utopia is a representation of the perfect community, where the merging of reality and imagination occurs to bring a paradigm shift. Moreover, the foundation of utopian thinkers and scholars is the creation of an imaginary ecosystem where there are no problems that have historically been known to plague humanity. The inexistence of the complications of the current world creates the perfect world. Yet, the actualization of the utopian ideology would mean that the basis for such arguments ceases to exist, since that is the basis for utopian thinking proponents. In utopias, all the elements of society are in a perfect state, including the political, economic, social, and legal spheres. Also addressed in the utopias is religion. This analysis will present a review of religion in utopia (Kessler, 2002).

2. Utopia: A Definition

Multiple authors have defined utopia. Utopia is an emphasis on an unnatural and distant paradoxical goal that is unattainable, where the result is a perfect state of existence (Nendza, 1984). Prosic (2020) presents the definition of utopia in two realms: abstract and concrete. For abstract utopia, it is the absorption of complete imagination, where pure fantasy and wishful thinking take center stage. On the other hand, concrete utopia involves a balance between reality and dream. This is borrowing from history, making such an outlook achievable by practice, as opposed to the wishful thinking of abstract utopia. An example of a complex utopia is provided by Van der Veer (2016), who states that urban planning, where the planners ignore the current social realities and develop visionary developments that are later actualized, makes such endeavors utopian.

Utopia is the existence of a perfect world without the current constraints of humanity. Utopia is a critical principle that allows for the judgment and inspiration of the current state to become better and improved. Kessler (2002) defines utopia as the imagination of an ideal society developed by individuals, creating desired worlds through possibility. Ruiz Callejón (2019) gives a contrasting view of utopia. The author defines utopia as the act of not accepting the current situation and creating conditions that allow for the desired state. This is compounded by the argument that utopia arises from the human confrontation of negativity.

2.1. Religion in More's Utopia

The foundation of utopian thinking is credited to More in his seminal work on the topic. More (2016) provides that on the island of Utopia, there are various religious alignments, with individuals coming together to practice allegiance to a common supernatural being. These are the majority in the imaginary state, identified as Christians. Others worship the sun, planets, and moon, among others. All these worshiping groups agree on the presence of a supreme head. Eventually, with time, the different religions join the Christian group (Geoghegan, 2007).

More (2016) further shows that the utopians only mourn for a dead soul when they believe such departed soul's life was suddenly and unwillingly taken from him or her. They believe that God will not take the soul of those whose death is imposed since they don't want to gladly die. However, for normal deaths, the utopians believe that there will be happiness for the departed souls. This, they believe, accrues from God being pleased with the souls to gladly go to him without any reluctance. Thus, no need for mourning for such souls (Nendza, 1984).

Despising fortune-telling and divination based on superstition; the utopians accept miracles that occur without nature's aid. The utopians consider such miracles divine intervention from God. Such acceptance allows for divine intervention seeking from God in

the form of miracles in prayers, where people are seen in the cities praying to God. The cities have two groups of religious followers. Both groups of individuals devote their lives to practicing religion, neglecting scientific and literary paths. Yet, this does not constrain them from practicing good deeds. They participate in labor, tending to crops, the sick, and any other economic and social activity that brings them fulfillment, without criticizing those who don't work as they do not boast of their capabilities. As such, they work harder than slaves, for both private and public good (More, 2016).

More (2016) further shows that one group of devotees chooses not to marry, eat meat, or engage in any pleasures of life. The other group marries, eats meat, and engages in other pleasures that do not constrain their ability to practice their religious alignment. Society considers the first group holier, while the second as sensible. These priests are each given a church to head. Each city in utopia cannot exceed 13 priests. The priests are provided with substitutes who fill for them. As such, only seven priests are allowed to join a war, selecting seven replacements from the extra priests. Upon returning, the replacement priests take up their previous roles, while the returning regular priests take their leadership roles in the churches. To replace the regular priests, legal proceedings takes place. This can only occur when the regular priests pass on. The priests are only elected by a popular secret vote, upon which they are appointed by a college of priests (More, 2016).

More (2016) shows that priests are responsible for the leadership of divine worship. They further censor immorality besides acting on other religious functions. People regarded as a disgrace in society are brought before the priests, where they receive counseling and spiritual advice. Furthermore, under the priests' control, the sinners are excluded from any religious service. In utopia, this is people's greatest fear, the fear of wrongdoers being tortured. An additional role played by the priest includes teaching children on the island. Utopians rarely offer priesthood to women. Such an honor is only given to widows who are old, though such an act does not take place. In case a priest is involved in a crime, the Utopians do not punish him, but leave him to God for spiritual punishment. Given how highly the Utopians hold the priests, they have no power to punish them (More, 2016).

For religious celebrations, as More (2016) shows, the utopians engage in two celebrations each month: the first and last day of the month. These months are measured in moon orbits. For religious worship, the utopians use churches. The buildings are large and dim on the inside, constructed to accommodate many people. Thus, given the diverse religions, they all believe in one divine being. The preaching in the churches does not violate the beliefs of any sect. Prayers are developed such that no single religious group will have superiority over others.

Moreover, the religious sects are allowed to hold private celebrations without infringing on the beliefs of the others (More, 2016).

More (2016) further provides that the utopians have a confession ritual where, one day before going to church, the wives kneel at the feet of their husbands and repent their sins. The children, on the other hand, confess their sins before their parents. This allows for a clear conscience for all family members. If any of the family members have bad blood with people outside the family, he or she is not allowed to attend the last feast until such anger and hatred subsides. Attendance in the churches is signified by the separation of women and men, with the former sitting on the right and the latter on the left. The religion in Utopia does not allow for the sacrifice of animals. The logic is that, since God is merciful, shedding blood from creatures he has created is not satisfying. For sacrifices, the utopian religious sects burn incense and candles. Priest dress in robes of varying colors. For the congregation, they are required to only dress in white. In prayers, the worshipers recognize God as the supreme being, creator of everything, and the ruler over humanity (More, 2016).

3. Analysis of Religion in Utopian Narratives

Kessler (2002) states that utopian religion lies on the belief in dreams and doubtful hopes provided to the society, making no limitations on the religion an individual can seek for spiritual satisfaction. Utopian religion allows for a distinction between religion and human fears, where such a distinction allows for the elimination of the spiritual threats currently suffered by humanity. According to Kessler (2002, religious beliefs that are based on the foundation of leading a happy and fulfilling life can be made possible by the social change brought about by utopia. This concept appeared in More's mixing of political ideas and Christian beliefs to create the perfect social state.

As a founding principle in religion, hope is also key in the utopian state. Braga (2016) argues that religious utopia is a projection of the future. The author argues that both the Hebrew and Cristian religions have had utopias in the past and still believe in some today. For the Hebrews, utopia began with the story of Paradise Lost and continued to the Promised Land during Mose's time. In Christianity, utopia started with the Garden of Eden and led to Millennialism, followed by the belief in Celestial Jerusalem. Millennialism depicted a future perfect state of Christians, but when this fails to happen, they shifted their belief to Celestial Jerusalem. Religious freedom is based on the idea of future redemption, which religious utopia scholars assume.

Scholars have debated what religion would be like in a utopian state. Alicino (2017) argues that utopia and religion are founded on the same premise: that both exist from their relevance

to individuals who do not receive sufficient satisfaction from the current reality. The wishful thinking that both have revolves around the inexistence of scientific proof to justify the ideologies presented. It is critical to present religion in a utopia guided by several functions of utopia. These functions revolve around religious self-regulation in the ideal world. The functions include change, compensation, and criticism (Fernando et al., 2018).

3.1. Change

For the realization of the ideal state of affairs, change has to occur. According to Fernando et al. (2018), utopian visions develop into objectives that individuals pursue in the hope of getting to the ideal state. Such inspiration can develop as a result of cognitive or behavioral inspiration. Following the cognitive view, the vision creates an environment where debate, rationality, thoughts, and experimentation take deep roots. For the behavioral outlook, individuals in society engage in a collective of personal actions that inspire social changes. Through this lens, this analysis argues that religion in utopia is inspired by the change in the current state of belief in the supernatural, thus taking the behavioral form.

According to Nendza (1984), religion in utopia is not guided by any official allegiance. People in utopia have the freedom to choose their religious alignment. This is without infringing on the rights of other individuals in the ideal state of society. This approach shows that the goal is to create social change in religious beliefs towards an ideal state of spiritual identity and belief. Yet, despite the freedom from religious obligation, Nendza (1984) asserts that there is no tolerance for disbelief. Hence, atheism is not tolerated in utopia. People in utopia are obligated to believe in a theological high point, a supernatural being, as a point of religious beliefs. Alicino (2017) notes that religion in utopia is ordered in a way to enhance the good of the commonwealth. Hence the restriction from disbelief is a theological high point.

The religious scholarship has over the years provided contrasting views of the desired state of being. White (2017) provides that social constructionism is central to religion in utopia. The argument is that religion arose from political and historical conditions shaped by modern reforms, which aim to bring about change. The proponents of this outlook debate that societies follow discourses provided through historical and political conditioning, shaping their view on religion. Thus, according to this argument, religion cannot be attributed to cultural background, but rather a constant change in the social formation of the society. In utopia, religion provides a desired state of acceptance, so long as people are not atheists.

3.2. Criticism

Fernando et al. (2018) argue that the imagination provided by a utopian outlook allows for a comparison between the current and the ideal. It arises from the evaluation of the hoped-for and the state in which the people find themselves. Thus, the lower the level of achieving the expected satisfaction from the imaginary state of religion, the higher the level of criticism in the current society. This analysis argues that criticism and negative emotions occurring thereof are based on the self-discrepancy theory. According to Ferrara (2007), the self-discrepancy theory can be evaluated from three domains of an individual's ego. The first domain is actual, which represents the current state of an individual as reflected by others or oneself. The second domain, the ideal self, is the imagery aspirations and hopes of self that one would wish for self or others. Finally, the ought self is what one or other people in the society expect to possess in the current state, even though that is not what they have. In other words, this is the responsibility that accrues to an individual in the society. Taking this outlook on religion in utopia, criticism in the utopian state occurs when they ought and ideal do not reflect the envisioned state of belief.

3.3. Compensation

Nendza (1984) debates that as much as utopian thinking inspires pursuing the ideal state, such an outlook on religion can impede social engagement. As such, this state may arise where individuals engage in a fantasy without evaluating their existing state, leading to escapism. Such escapism leads to the disintegration of the current reality in spiritual life. The compensation function of utopia thus shows that in utopian thinking, the desired state ends up not being achieved.

In other words, in their 1984 debate, Nendza examines the dual nature of utopian thinking, particularly its implications for social engagement and spiritual life. While utopian visions can inspire individuals to strive for an ideal state, they can also create a counterproductive form of escapism. This escapism manifests when individuals, absorbed in the allure of an idealized future, neglect to address and improve their current realities.

In the context of religion, utopian narratives often portray an ideal spiritual or societal state that adheres to religious ideals. While this can serve as a powerful motivational tool, encouraging believers to pursue moral and ethical perfection, it can also lead to a detachment from the practical aspects of addressing contemporary social and spiritual issues.

Nendza argues that this detachment occurs because the focus shifts to an unattainable ideal rather than actionable change. The envisioned utopia, though inspiring, may remain perpetually out of reach due to the lack of engagement with present realities. This can result in a disintegration of the current spiritual or social order, as individuals become more invested in

the fantasy of a perfect state than in making tangible improvements to their existing circumstances.

Thus, the compensation function of utopian thinking reveals a paradox: while it motivates individuals to pursue a higher ideal, it simultaneously risks undermining efforts to achieve meaningful progress in the here and now. In the realm of religious utopian narratives, this dynamic highlights the challenge of balancing visionary aspirations with practical engagement in addressing real-world issues.

4. Conclusion

The analysis portrayed the depiction of religion in More's Utopia. It investigated utopia in More's discourse that illustrated elements of a society that has its political, economic, and social state in perfection, an ideal state that humanity seeks. The study demonstrated that religion in Utopia has emerged as a perfect state of being, where each individual has freedom of worship, so long as he or she is not an atheist, in addition to illuminating how the priests in Utopia play a crucial role, presiding over all religious functions. This paper further provided the functions that are key for religious utopia to take place. These functions are compensation, criticism, and change. Finally, it concluded that as an evolving state, religious utopia keeps transforming, given that the achievement of such visionary plans automatically eliminates the utopia, creating the desire for a new reality.

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