

# Thomas More and his "Utopia"

Post by "Joshua" of August 31, 2023 at 10:56 PM

Part One

I will do as much as I can in a reasonable amount of time to draw together the Epicurean aspects of More's project in writing *Utopia*. The first thing to observe is the title, which is a clever play on words--the prefix *ou-* is a term of negation, while *εὖ-* in Greek means *well* or *good*, as in words like *εὐδαιμονία* (good spirit) and *εὐάγγελος* (good news, and the origin of *evangelism*). "Good Place" and "No Place" all in one breath--and for Thomas More it was certainly "No Place". For Thomas More, no culture on Earth could possibly sustain the kind of society described in this book.

The setting for this story is the early sixteenth century. The followers of John Wycliffe, a dissident fourteenth century English priest, were circulating a version of the Bible translated into Middle English (the English of Chaucer) in the teeth of Catholic orthodoxy. One of the men he inspired, a Czech theologian named Jan Hus, was executed at the Council of Constance in 1415 two years before the rediscovery of the manuscript of Lucretius. *Utopia* was published in 1516, about 15 years before the final break with Rome over the issue (or should I say, the lack of any male issue) of Henry VIII, and while the author was a hardline Catholic who likely wanted nothing more than a thoroughgoing return of England and Europe to the Catholic faith, it was increasingly apparent that the Vatican's hold on Northern Europe was becoming tenuous at best. The church was breaking apart--Thomas More was, evidently, wistful for a solution through compromise--a solution seemingly out of reach. The solution when it finally did come was religious toleration, as expressed by John Locke in his *Letter Concerning Religious Toleration* in [1689](#);

Quote

All the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing. Whatever profession we make, to whatever outward worship we conform, if we are not fully satisfied in our own mind that the one is true and the other well pleasing unto God, such profession and such practice, far from being any furtherance, are indeed great obstacles to our salvation.

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The care, therefore, of every man's

soul belongs unto himself and is to be left unto himself. But what if he

neglect the care of his soul? I answer: What if he neglect the care of his health or of his estate, which things are nearer related to the government of the magistrate than the other?

...

No way whatsoever that I shall walk in against the dictates of my conscience will ever bring me to the mansions of the blessed. I may grow rich by an art that I take not delight in; I may be cured of some disease by remedies that I have not faith in; but I cannot be saved by a religion that I distrust and by a worship that I abhor.

...

[And finally, the rub]

Lastly, those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the being of a God. Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all; besides also, those that by their atheism undermine and destroy all religion, can have no pretence of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration.

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Two more detours; the first, a [letter](#) from Poggio Bracciolini to Niccolo Niccoli in 1417--the year Lucretius was discovered--about his experience of the Baths of the German town of Baden;

Quote

"I wrote to you from Constance, on the first of March, if my memory be correct, a letter, which, if it came to hand, I imagine made you tolerably merry. It was rather long, and pregnant with wit. I gave you in it a long account of my Hebrew studies, and passed many jokes upon my tutor, a stupid, unsteady, and illiterate man; which indeed is the general character of those who are converted from Judaism to Christianity. But I am inclined to suspect, that this letter, and another which I addressed to Leonardo Aretino, did not reach their destination. Had you received my epistle, you would surely have answered it, were it only with the view of congratulating me on my new course of study, which you have so frequently exhorted me to undertake. I cannot find that the study of Hebrew adds to my stock of philosophical knowledge; but it so far promotes my acquaintance with literature, that I am thereby enabled to investigate the principles which St. Jerome founded his translation of the scriptures. But I write to you from these baths, (to which I am come to try whether they can remove an eruption which has taken place between my fingers) to describe to you the situation of the place, and the manners of its inhabitants, together with the customs of the company who resort hither for the benefit of the waters. Much is said by the ancients of the pleasant

baths of Puteoli, which were frequented by almost all the people of Rome. But in my opinion, those boasted baths must, in the article of pleasure, yield the palm to the baths of Baden. For the pleasantness of the baths of Puteoli was founded more on the beauty of the circumjacent country, and the magnificence of the neighbouring villas, than on the festive manners of the company by which they were frequented. The scenery of Baden, on the contrary, has but few attractions: but every other circumstance relating to its medicinal springs, is so pregnant with delight, that I frequently imagine that Venus, and all her attendant joys, have migrated hither from Cyprus. The frequenters of these waters <sup>61</sup>so faithfully observe her institutes, so accurately copy her manners, that though they have not read the discourse of Heliogabalus, they seem to be amply instructed by simple nature. But I must in the first place give you an account of my journey hither.

...

In this day's journey we saw the Rhine precipitating itself from a considerable height, over craggy rocks, with a sound which seemed to express the indignation of the river at being thus impeded in its course. When I contemplated this sight, I recollected the stories which are related concerning the cataracts of the Nile, and I did not wonder that the people who live in the vicinity of those waterfalls, were deprived of their hearing by their noise, when a river of so comparatively small a magnitude, that with respect to the Nile it may be denominated a torrent, may be heard to the distance of half a mile. The next town is Baden, which word, in the German language, signifies a bath. Baden is a place of considerable opulence, situated in a valley surrounded by mountains, <sup>62</sup>upon a broad and rapid river, which forms a junction with the Rhine, about six miles from the town. About half a mile from Baden, and on the bank of the river, there is a very beautiful range of buildings, constructed for the accommodation of the bathers. These buildings form a square, composed of lodging houses, in which a great multitude of guests are commodiously entertained. Each lodging house has its private bath, appropriated to its tenants. The baths are altogether thirty in number. Of these, two only are public baths, which are exposed to view on every side, and are frequented by the lower orders of people, of all ages, and of each sex. Here the males and females, entertaining not hostile dispositions towards each other, are separated only by a simple railing. It is a droll sight to see decrepit old women and blooming maidens, stepping into the water, and exposing their charms to the profane eyes of the men. I have often laughed at this exhibition, which reminded me of the Floral games of Rome. And I have at the same time admired the simplicity of these people, who take no notice of these violations of propriety, and are totally unconscious of any indecorum. The baths belonging to the private houses are very neat. They too are common to males and females, who are separated by a partition. In this partition, however, there are low windows, through which they can see and converse with, and touch each other, and also drink together; all which circumstances are matters of common occurrences.

...

Besides these various pastimes, there is also another, which is a source of no small gratification. There is a large meadow behind the village, near the river. This meadow, which is shaded by abundance of trees, is our usual place of resort after supper. Here the people engage in various sports. Some dance, others sing, and others play at ball, but in a manner very different from the fashion of our country. For the men and women throw, in different directions, a ball, filled with little bells. When the ball is thrown, they all run to catch it, and whoever lays hold of it is the conqueror, and again throws it at somebody for whom he wishes to testify a particular regard. When the thrower is ready to toss the ball, all the rest stand with outstretched hands, and the former frequently keeps them in a state of suspense, by pretending to aim, sometimes at one, and sometimes at another. Many other games are here practised, which it would be tedious to enumerate. I have related enough to give you an idea what a numerous school of Epicureans is established in Baden. I think this must be the place where the first man was created, which the Hebrews call the garden of pleasure. If pleasure can make a man happy, this place is certainly possessed of every requisite for the promotion of felicity.

...

Hence it happens, that the name of jealousy, that plague, which is elsewhere productive of so much misery, is here unknown. How unlike are the manners of these people to ours, who always see things on the dark side, and who are so much given to censoriousness, that in our minds the slightest suspicion instantly grows into full proof of guilt. I often envy the apathy of these Germans, and I execrate our perversity, who are always wishing for what we have not, and are continually exposed to present calamity by our dread of the future. But these people, content with little, enjoy their day of life in mirth and merriment; they do not hanker after wealth; they are not anxious for the morrow; and they bear adversity with patience. Thus are they rich by the mere disposition of their minds. Their motto is, "live while you live." But of this enough — it is not my object to extol my new friends at the expense of my countrymen. I wish my epistle to consist of unqualified good humour, that I may impart to you a portion of the pleasure I derived from the baths of Baden."

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I cite this letter merely to demonstrate that in learned circles in the Renaissance, the Epicureans were beginning to get the kind of reputation which they deserved and not one that was surreptitiously foisted upon them. A reputation for enjoying innocent pleasure, not burdening oneself by fear of the future and of death, and of considering themselves rich in their enjoyment of what they have and not spoiling it by lusting for what they lack. It's not perfect, but it's not a bad start--Epicurus the inveterate glutton is falling away, and his fall reveals far more accurately (if not completely) his real nature--Epicurus the Philosopher.

The second necessary excursion in prelude to Utopia is into the travelogues of the Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci, born 1451. There are two sets of documents relating to Vespucci's voyages to the New World; the first is a letter addressed to Piero Soderini, and it was published in Florence in 1505. The second set of documents contains several letters written to the Medici family--and here's the thing; no one knows for sure if the first letter, the "Soderini Letter" was genuine or a forgery. The Soderini letter describes four voyages; the Medici letters only describe two. According the Soderini Letter, Vespucci arrived on the continents that still bear his name *before* Christopher Columbus! The Medici letters put him there after; no one knows for sure.

What does matter is that these letters were enormously popular reading all over Europe. Think of how many people around the world tuned into the Apollo 11 moon landing--now imagine if instead of barren rock, Neil Armstrong had stumbled into an inhabited world thriving with strange life and strange people--people no European had ever contacted before. The discovery of the New World was without exception the most startling and mind-altering occurrence to have happened since the fall of Rome. There was stuff here, interesting stuff, that neither the Hebrews nor the Greeks had ever encountered, never written about, never left reams of advice and council on what to do with it all. When Lucretius wrote eloquently about an infinity of inhabited worlds, no one in the Renaissance could possibly have taken his words so thoroughly to heart as to imagine that that very century would put them into contact with one of these other worlds, though right here on Earth.

So I don't know if the [Soderini Letter](#) was a clever patriotic forgery meant to secure the palm for Florence in discovering the New World--the point is that the ideas that letter contained were at the core of a momentous change in European affairs. And it is this letter, this strange, alien document, which pulls the name of Epicurus out of the mists of the far distant past and places it squarely in a hesitant and uncertain future.

#### Quote

After humble reverence and due commendations, etc. It may be that your Magnificence will be surprised by (this conjunction of) my rashness and your customary wisdom, in that I should so absurdly bestir myself to write to your Magnificence the present so-prolix letter: knowing (as I do) that your Magnificence is continually employed in high councils and affairs concerning the good government of this sublime Republic. And will hold me not only presumptuous, but also idly-meddlesome in setting myself to write things, neither suitable to your station, nor entertaining, and written in barbarous style, and outside of every canon of polite literature: but my confidence which I have in your virtues and in the truth of my writing, which are things (that) are not found written neither by the ancients nor by modern writers, as your Magnificence will in the sequel perceive, makes me bold.

...

for as saith Petrarch, I should be another man than what I am. Howbeit soever I grieve not: because I have ever taken delight in worthy matters: and although these trifles of mine may not be suitable to your virtues, I will say to you as said Pliny to Maecenas, you were sometime wont to take pleasure in my prattlings: even though your Magnificence be continuously busied in public affairs, you will take some hour of relaxation to consume a little time in frivolous or amusing things: and as fennel is customarily given atop of delicious viands to fit them for better digestion, so may you, for a relief from your so heavy occupations, order this letter of mine to be read: so that they may withdraw you somewhat from the continual anxiety and assiduous reflection upon public affairs.

...

I pursued this intent [trade] about four years: during which I saw and knew the inconstant shiftings of Fortune: and how she kept changing those frail and transitory benefits: and how at one time she holds man on the summit of the wheel, and at another time drives him back from her, and despoils him of what may be called his borrowed riches: so that, knowing the continuous toil which main undergoes to win them, submitting himself to so many anxieties and risks, I resolved to abandon trade, and to fix my aim upon something more praiseworthy and stable: whence it was that I made preparation for going to see part of the world and its wonders: and herefor the time and place presented themselves most opportunely to me: which was that the King Don Ferrando of Castile being about to despatch four ships to discover new lands towards the west, I was chosen by his Highness to go in that fleet to aid in making discovery: and we set out from the port of Cadiz on the 10th day of May 1497, and took our route through the great gulf of the Ocean-sea; in which voyage we were eighteen months (engaged): and discovered much continental land and innumerable islands, and great part of them inhabited: whereas there is no mention made by the ancient writers of them: I believe, because they had no knowledge thereof: for, if I remember well, I have read in some one (of those writers) that he considered that this Ocean-sea was an unpeopled sea: and of this opinion was Dante our poet in the xxvi. chapter of the Inferno, where he feigns the death of Ulysses, in which voyage I beheld things of great wondrousness, as your Magnificence shall understand.

...

and so we sailed on till at the end of 37 days we reached a land which we deemed to be a continent: which is distant westwardly from the isles of Canary about a thousand leagues beyond the inhabited region note within the torrid zone:

...

we made towards the land, and before we reached it, had sight of a great number of people who were going along the shore: by which we were much rejoiced: and we

observed that they were a naked race: they shewed themselves to stand in fear of us: I believe (it was) because they saw us clothed and of other appearance (than their own): they all withdrew to a hill, and for whatsoever signals we made to them of peace and of friendliness, they would not come to parley with us: so that, as the night was now coming on, and as the ships were anchored in a dangerous place, being on a rough and shelterless coast, we decided to remove from there the next day, and to go in search of some harbour or bay, where we might place our ships in safety: and we sailed with the maestrale wind, note thus running along the coast with the land ever in sight, continually in our course observing people along the shore: till after having navigated for two days, we found a place sufficiently secure for the ships, and anchored half a league from land, on which we saw a very great number of people

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For so much as we learned of their manner of life and customs, it was that they go entirely naked, as well the men as the women. They are of medium stature, very well proportioned: their flesh is of a colour the verges into red like a lion's mane: and I believe that if they went clothed, they would be as white as we.

...

they are very light footed in walking and in running, as well the men as the women: so that a woman recks nothing of running a league or two, as many times we saw them do: and herein they have a very great advantage over us Christians: they swim (with an expertness) beyond all belief, and the women better than the men: for we have many times found and seen them swimming two leagues out at sea without anything to rest upon.

...

these people have neither King, nor Lord, nor do they yield obedience to any one, for they live in their own liberty

...

they have no judicial system, nor do they punish the ill-doer: nor does the father, nor the mother chastise the children and marvelously (seldom) or never did we see any dispute among them: in their conversation they appear simple, and they are very cunning and acute in that which concerns them: they speak little and in a low tone: they use the same articulations as we, since they form their utterances either with the palate, or with the teeth, or on the lips: note except that they give different names to things. Many are the varieties of tongues: for in every 100 leagues we found a change of language, so that they are not understandable each to the other.

...

they sleep in certain very large nettings made of cotton, suspended in the air: and although this their (fashion of) sleeping may seem uncomfortable, I say that it is sweet to sleep in those (nettings): and we slept better in them than in the counterpanes. They are a people smooth and clean of body, because of so continually washing themselves as they do. Amongst those people we did not learn that they had any law, nor can they be called Moors nor Jews, and (they are) worse than pagans: because we did not observe that they offered any sacrifice: nor even had they a house of prayer: their manner of living I judge to be Epicurean: their dwellings are in common: and their houses (are) made in the style of huts, but strongly made, and constructed with very large trees, and covered over with palm-leaves, secure against storms and winds: and in some places (they are) of so great breadth and length, that in one single house we found there were 600 souls: and we saw a village of only thirteen houses where there were four thousand souls: every eight or ten years they change their habitations: and when asked why they did so: (they said it was) because of the soil which, from its filthiness, was already unhealthy and corrupted, and that it bred aches in their bodies, which seemed to us a good reason:

...

The wealth that we enjoy in this our Europe and elsewhere, such as gold, jewels, pearls, and other riches, they hold as nothing; and although they have them in their own lands, they do not labour to obtain them, nor do they value them. They are liberal in giving, for it is rarely they deny you anything: and on the other hand, liberal in asking, when they shew themselves your friends.

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That will have to serve as part one of this story. Tomorrow we shall enter Utopia.