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“A PLACE CALLED ‘NOWHERE’: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF ST. THOMAS
MORE’S ‘UTOPIA’”

By:

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ABSTRACT

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St. Thomas More's *Utopia* has been the subject of considerable debate over the past 75 years. It claims to be concerned with the 'best state of a commonwealth', but how is it concerned? It is a strange little book that records a fictional dialogue between More, his friend Peter Giles, and a very impulsive and opinionated traveler named Raphael Hythloday. Hythloday has recently returned from a voyage, and the *Utopia* is mostly taken up with a detailed account of the bizarre customs, laws, and rituals of a people he encountered in a place called Utopia. Hythloday praises them as the best and wisest people. More remains skeptical, but does acknowledge that certain of the Utopian practices have merit. The reader is therefore left wondering whether More created this fictional commonwealth to provide a model for reform, or whether he created it as a satire. This thesis has sought to contribute to the wealth of research on this topic, by interpreting the enthusiasm of Hythloday and the skepticism of More as evidence that More did not intend the *Utopia* to be taken literally, but neither did he intend for it to be read solely as satire. He meant for the *Utopia* to be a springboard for discussion and debate. He meant to create a platform to address issues plaguing European commonwealths. I have come to this conclusion by interpreting the *Utopia* within its historical and literary context. In this thesis I examine the circumstances of the *Utopia*'s publication and distribution; the intellectual and cultural influences of Renaissance England, and More's immediate circumstances in the year 1515 when he wrote the *Utopia*. I then move from a general study of the *Utopia* to a more concentrated study of its content where I provide a character analysis of More, Giles and Hythloday. I also examine the inconsistencies inherent within the pages of the *Utopia*, as well as the inconsistencies that existed between More's life and the ideals he seemingly espoused within

the *Utopia*. Lastly, I examine the *Utopia* in comparison to many of More's other works on the subjects of religion and property such as the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, and More's letters, poems and prayers.

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A great debt is owed to my parents who helped me immensely with their very caring, loving and practical support over the past two years. My in-laws have also been a source of significant encouragement, and I would like to thank them. Lastly I would like to thank my beautiful wife who saw me at my best and worst throughout every stage of this project. I thank her for her loving support which often sustained me when I was feeling overwhelmed by it all. To all of you, I express my heartfelt gratitude and sincere thanks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	Page ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	Page iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	Page v
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	Page 1
CHAPTER 2: INTERPRETING UTOPIA: A SURVEY OF MOREAN HISTORIOGRAPHY	Page 6
CHAPTER 3: INTERPRETING UTOPIA: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?	Page 15
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY	Page 30
CHAPTER 5: "A NONE TOO WITTY LITTLE BOOK": THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF UTOPIA'S PUBLICATION AND DISTRIBUTION	Page 42
CHAPTER 6: THE HISTORICAL MILIEU OF MORE'S UTOPIA: THE INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF RENAISSANCE ENGLAND	Page 54
CHAPTER 7: THE HISTORICAL MILIEU OF MORE'S UTOPIA: THE QUESTIONS OF THE BEST STATE OF A COMMONWEALTH AND THE VALUE OF COUNSEL	Page 63

CHAPTER 8: THE NATIONALIST, THE REALIST, AND THE FANATIC: THE
CHARACTERS OF THE UTOPIA

Page 89

CHAPTER 9: “TREADING HERETICS UNDER OUR FEET LIKE ANTS”: RELIGIOUS
TOLERANCE IN THE UTOPIA

Page 100

CHAPTER 10: “FOUNDED ON NO GOOD REASON”: PROPERTY AND MONEY IN THE
UTOPIA

Page 130

CHAPTER 11: CONCLUSION

Page 154

NOTES

Page 164

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Page 174

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Saint Thomas More, the English humanist of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, remains one of England's most controversial and complex figures. He is most famously known for being executed for refusing to acknowledge King Henry VIII's divorce of Catherine of Aragon for Anne Boleyn and for repudiating Henry VIII's claim to supremacy over the Church of England, favoring instead the traditional preeminence of the Pope over all of Christendom. However, More's notoriety began, at least in scholarly circles, long before the events of the 1520's and 1530's. His notability started in 1515 when, on a mission to Prince Charles in the Netherlands, he penned a peculiar little book entitled the *Utopia*. It is a record of a fictional conversation or dialogue that took place between More, his friend Peter Giles, and a bizarre traveler named Raphael Hythloday. Most of the book is taken up with Hythloday's account of faraway places where he has discovered "towns and cities and states full of people, governed by good and wholesome laws."¹ He spends the majority of his account describing the manners, customs, laws, and ordinances of the residents of the fictional island commonwealth of Utopia. As Giles introduces Hythloday to More he states, "there is no man this day living that can tell you of so many strange and unknown peoples and countries,"² and indeed everything about the unknown Utopians is strange.

They are a society that is ruled by tradition, as husbands and fathers are the patriarchal heads of their households and priests are subject not to the laws of the state but to the laws of God, yet they are also a modern community that permits the right to divorce for both men and women. They sanction euthanasia for their terminally ill and dying. They also hold all their property in common and their society is completely devoid of money. They eat in common halls,

wear the same clothes and share houses, and even have a weird custom of allowing a man or woman to see their potential spouse naked before their wedding so that they can know with certainty whether or not they want to commit sexually to that person. Even though they do not regard private property as valuable within their own society, they are willing to fight wars to defend the land and property of their neighbors; however they do not fight themselves but hire mercenaries from other nations. Interestingly, when they do fight, they fight as families, husbands, wives, and children. In many ways they are a people whose laws and customs seem to be contradictory and inherently inconsistent, and altogether unusual when compared to the traditions and practices of fifteenth century Europeans. Yet even more puzzling is the question of why More wrote this book. What was his purpose in inventing these people?

Quentin Skinner, the famous Cambridge historian, observes: “Almost everything about Thomas More’s *Utopia* is debatable.”³ And indeed every detail of the *Utopia* has been debated and discussed, and although there have been several compelling arguments made for More’s general intentions in writing the *Utopia*, and even though many quintessential works have been published on this topic, there has been no explanation yet that has been so thoroughly convincing that it is completely uncontested. The twentieth century especially has seen an impressive amount of literature written on the subject of More’s *Utopia*, with many prominent historians, philosophers, literary critics and political theorists adding their thoughts to the ever growing corpus of research. So what is the objective of More’s *Utopia*? This thesis will aim to explore this question and will hopefully add more insight for debate and discussion into the mass of interpretations that have already been provided as we seek to unravel the intriguing mystery that is the *Utopia*.

We know from the full title of More's *Utopia*, *A Fruitful and Pleasant Work of the Best State of a Commonwealth and of the New Island Called Utopia*, that More's work is primarily concerned with the 'best state of a commonwealth.' But how is it concerned? There are two main schools of interpretation that take in many of the divergent readings of the *Utopia*. The first school is based on a traditional Catholic perception of More that sees him as a conservative and staunch defender of the faith. More wrote the *Utopia* to provide Europe with real solutions to their social and political problems, if not to provide them with a ready-made program or model of socio-political and religious reform. The commonwealth of Utopia is therefore an example of the best state of a commonwealth. The second school is rooted in a more modern perception of More that emphasizes his humanism and his love of satirists like the Assyrian rhetorician Lucian. According to this school, More did not intend for his *Utopia* to be taken seriously. He wrote it as a satire to attack and mock various aspects of traditional and medieval English society, culture and religion.

These are the two most prominent historiographical schools in Morean scholarship and most academics have contributed mildly differing analyses of the *Utopia* based primarily on the conclusions of these two major interpretive camps. This thesis will approach the *Utopia* in a different way. What if More did intend his *Utopia* to be taken seriously, but he did not necessarily intend it to be taken literally? What if he wrote the *Utopia*, not to provide England with a model of reform, but to give insight into some of the problems that plague commonwealths and to make people aware of the issues preventing England from progressing to a more just and virtuous society? What if More used the *Utopia* to create a platform to discuss the political, social, cultural and religious difficulties facing English society in the fifteenth century by inventing a fictional commonwealth against which the European commonwealths

could compare themselves to see what their strengths and weaknesses are and to warn them, the Europeans, of what kind of a society they will need to become if they do not change or improve their attitudes, perspectives and practices where needed? What if More wrote the *Utopia*, not with the goal of constructing a worldview for his readers, but with the ambition of providing a springboard for debate and discussion? What if the end of the *Utopia* is meant to be the beginning of a conversation?

This thesis will seek to explore this interpretation of More's great work and extrapolate on these themes. I will begin by providing a brief survey of Morean historiography and will give an overview of some of the more influential interpretations of the *Utopia*. I will then examine some of the methodological difficulties that have led to such a variety of interpretations, and I will explain some of the benefits and shortcomings of the various methods that have been used. I will then describe the methodology I have used in interpreting the *Utopia* and will provide reasons to justify my approach. In short, I will not be interpreting the *Utopia* as a book with a consistent message or as a text that can be understood apart from the biography and bibliography of its author. I will be interpreting the *Utopia* within the literary context of More's greater body of works including his letters, poems, and dialogues, and I will be interpreting the *Utopia* not only within the historical context of Renaissance England and More's immediate circumstances when he wrote the *Utopia*, but also within the broader context of More's political years and his later life. I will embrace the inconsistencies within the pages of the *Utopia* as intended by the author, and I will not seek to reconcile the inconsistencies between More's life and the ideals he espouses in the *Utopia*, but will accept these external inconsistencies as intended by the author as well.

In the next three chapters I will examine the circumstances of the *Utopia*'s publication and distribution to demonstrate that More intended his readers to receive the *Utopia* as a serious socio-political treatise that needed to be debated and discussed. I will then move to an analysis of the historical circumstances in which the *Utopia* was penned, and I will investigate not only the immediate circumstances of the year 1515 when the *Utopia* was written, but also the broader context of the intellectual and cultural climate of Renaissance England and of More's own personal experiences and influences and how all of these contributed to the content, style, themes and objectives of the *Utopia*.

Lastly, in the latter three chapters, I will move from a general study of the *Utopia* to a more concentrated study of the content of the *Utopia*. I will start with a character study of the individuals involved in More's dialogue, and will consider how the personalities, histories, experiences, and interactions of these characters help us better understand how More intended his *Utopia* to be read. I will then examine some of the more controversial and highly debated passages of the *Utopia*, namely the passages on religion and property. I will compare these portions of the *Utopia* to More's other writings on the subjects of religion and property to help us get a more full and complete understanding of More's worldview. I will also examine the inconsistencies that exist between More's life and the ideals he espouses in these sections and will demonstrate that these inconsistencies are not a hindrance to our understanding of the *Utopia*, but they help us to not only comprehend More's intentions in composing these sections, but also More's purposes in writing the *Utopia* as a whole.

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETING UTOPIA: A SURVEY OF MOREAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

There is little consensus in More scholarship as to what *Utopia* is all about. How did More intend it to be read and understood? Was it meant to be a wholly satirical work? Was it meant to be a serious work of socio-political theory? Or was More attempting to create a platform to discuss Europe's social, political and religious issues by contrasting the unusual political ideas of the Utopians with the chaotic politics of Europe? The question could also be stated, which More is writing *Utopia*? Is it More the lawyer, public servant and religious ascetic or is it the More who loved the works of Lucian and who encouraged Erasmus to pen his *Praise of Folly* while living under More's roof in England. Scholars at both ends of the spectrum and everywhere in between have continuously debated and discussed these questions, especially since the publication of R.W. Chamber's magisterial work *Thomas More* in 1935. As Chambers observed:

Public commemoration is not for the leaders of the losing side... Whilst the works of other great figures of English literature were being carefully edited, no scholar had been courageous enough to tackle More's works... More's reputation is sure to be re-established, as knowledge concerning him increases, as his writings come to be more and more widely known, and their place in the history of English prose appreciated.⁴

The long-held Catholic interpretation of *Utopia*, expounded in Chamber's text, was that the *Utopia* was "a serious socio-philosophical document tinged only occasionally with topical satire."⁵ Chamber's text was considered for some time as the definitive work on the subject of Thomas More.⁶ However, he was not the first to defend the idea that More meant what he said in the *Utopia*.

Marxist historian Karl Kautsky published his work *Thomas More and his Utopia* in 1888 in which he claims that *Utopia* was intended to be a ready-made program to show princes how to govern. In his foreword to the 1959 edition, Russell Ames states, “The content of these works (*Utopia* and other works like it) was profoundly realistic but their forms were fantastic, for absolute monarchies did not permit the direct statement of social truth.”⁷ In other words, More’s *Utopia* is a direct attack on the social evils of his day and the solutions he offers were meant to be taken seriously, but in order to distance himself from the issues should his ideas cause him trouble with the Tudor authorities he clothed his critique in the fantastic story of an ideal commonwealth located on the shores of a distant continent, whose name, Utopia, is Greek for “nowhere”. Many Marxist historians would agree with Kautsky that “his (More’s) political, religious and humanistic writings are today only read by a small number of historians. Had he not written *Utopia* his name would scarcely be better known today than that of the friend who shared his fate, Bishop Fisher of Rochester. His socialism made him immortal.”⁸

In more recent times, historian Eric Nelson has also claimed that More meant what he said in the *Utopia*, and he argues for a Skinnerian reading of More’s *Utopia*. According to Nelson, the *Utopia* was written during the revival of Greek learning in Europe, and that More and his humanist friends were among the first Englishmen to study Greek and make a polemical point of preferring Greece to Rome. It was also written at a time when Erasmus was being attacked for using the Greek New Testament to correct the Latin Vulgate. More therefore wrote his *Utopia* with the intent of dramatizing a confrontation between the values of the Roman republican tradition and those of the rival commonwealth theory based on Greek ethics. More suggests that Greek advice looks like nonsense when it is seen from a Roman perspective, but for More, it is that nonsense which yields the best state of a commonwealth.⁹ Nelson bases his thesis

on More's closing statement in which he rejects many of Hythloday's proposals as unreasonable.

Nelson states:

More's rejection of the Utopian system as 'absurd' is precisely the result the reader is led to expect. Every time Raphael outlines the sort of Utopian advice he would give if he were a councilor, his interlocutor dismisses it as absurd or out of place, and adds that such advice would be greeted with derision by his fellow Europeans...A frustrated Hythloday is forced to insist that his advice should not be rejected as 'outlandish to the point of folly' and his ideas as 'outlandish and absurd' simply because they run counter to 'corrupt custom'. None the less, he knows full well that they will be, and the reader is not surprised when 'More' ends up rejecting Hythloday's advice as nonsensical and contrary to *publica opinio*.¹⁰

Hythloday, therefore, represents the Greeks and More represents the Romans, whose politics were the most influential in Europe. For the Romans, justice and liberty meant that every citizen had an imperative to do no harm and to respect private property. The Roman account: "defines liberty as a status of independence, of being under the guidance of one's own sovereign will (as opposed to being a slave), and exalts it as the source of civic virtue. It understands virtue, in turn, as a disinterested commitment to the public good, together with the will and agency necessary to act on behalf of this commitment."¹¹ It is believed that this dedication to justice will allow for the cultivation of the common good, concord, peace, and glory for the state. Therefore citizens should be actively involved in society, performing their office, promoting the glory of their family, and securing their own honor and fame.¹² In his 1515 edition of the *Adagia*, Erasmus states that Christian Europe has inherited two Roman pathologies: the love of glory and the love of wealth: "The Roman law permits men to repel force with force; it permits each person to pursue what is his; it approves of commerce; it allows usury, so long as it is in moderation, just as it extols war as a glorious thing, so long as it is undertaken for the sake of (what is his)."¹³ The Utopians however, having based their society on Greek ethics, believed differently: "In a society of private property...where 'money is the measure of all things'...the

worst citizens will tend to rule...which Hythloday, following Plato, calls contrary to nature.”¹⁴

Therefore the Utopians:

Because all their property is held in common...are able to favor the most excellent members of society- those who should rule by nature. In domestic matters... ‘wives act as servants to their husbands, children to their parents, and generally the younger to their elders’, while government is reserved for those who ‘from childhood have given evidence of excellent character, unusual intelligence, and a mind inclined to the liberal arts.’¹⁵

For the Greeks, injustice was caused by private property and the extremes of wealth and poverty it created resulted in the slothfulness of the rich and the brokenness of the poor. Under these circumstances, rule would never go to the best man. The Greeks believed in the abolition of private property or at least fairer and more equal distribution of wealth, and this would result in the best men governing, who would then secure justice through the rule of reason and teach the citizens virtue. The Romans would have scoffed at the idea of holding all things in common, but it is precisely this communalism that Hythloday claims is the solution for all the social ills of the commonwealth. Therefore Greek wisdom is nonsense when seen from a Roman perspective. This is why, according to Nelson, More uses Greek names that translate as ‘nonsense’ or ‘non-existence’ in English to describe this ideal community: Hythloday means ‘distributor of nonsense’; the Polylerites are a people of ‘much nonsense’; the Achorians are a people ‘without a country’; Utopia itself is ‘no place’; Ademus, Utopia’s governor, is an official ‘without people’; the river Anyder is ‘without water’ and it runs through the capital city Amaurot which means ‘the unknown city’.¹⁶

Nelson’s reading of the *Utopia* runs counter to George M. Logan’s popular interpretation which suggests that More’s *Utopia* was written as a reaction against some of the progressive ideas in Italian city-state theory (ideas which would be formalized in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*).

The *Utopia* was meant to be an Erasmian defense of the traditional humanist or neo-Stoic program which had traditionally informed the political ideology of the Italian city-states.¹⁷

Nelson argues however, that the ideology of the mainstream Italian civic humanists was neo-Roman, and therefore More could not have been defending them because his *Utopia* is rife with anti-Ciceronian rhetoric such as a repudiation of active citizenship, private property and the Roman cult of glory. It is also a polemic against Ciceronian humanism. Nelson claims we must “part with the conviction that Erasmian political theory embraced the neo-Roman case.”¹⁸

Other scholars have also defended More’s *Utopia* as a serious work of socio-political theory. In a recent article Robert Shephard interpreted the *Utopia* as a treatise on international relations by stated that “the interactions of the Utopians with their neighbors provide a model for the impact More intended *Utopia* to have on Europe.”¹⁹ Sanford Kessler claims that the *Utopia* was written to reveal the merits of religious freedom. Kessler states, “I believe that More’s account of religious freedom in *Utopia* is a deep and original contribution to Western political thought. I also surmise that More favored religious freedom for Christians when writing *Utopia*, and that he designed Utopian religious freedom to serve in some sense as a model for Europe.”²⁰ These scholars, and others, would agree with Hythloday when he says, “Now I have declared and described unto you, as truly as I could, the form and order of that commonwealth, which verily in my judgment is not only the best, but also that which alone of good right may claim and take upon itself the name of commonwealth or public weal.”²¹ And they would agree with Peter Giles that this island of Utopia, “far excels Plato’s commonwealth” and that “all people should wish to know.”²²

Many other scholars have argued the *Utopia* is a wholly satirical work. These scholars would agree with C.S. Lewis that, “Its (the *Utopia*’s) place on our shelves is close to *Gulliver* and *Erewhon*, within reasonable distance of Rabelais, a long way from the *Republic* or *New Worlds for Old*.”²³ The interpretation of *Utopia* as a conscious and consistent work of satire was made most popular in the nineteen sixties and seventies by such scholars as A.R. Heiserman, R.C. Elliot, John Traugott, T.S. Dorsch, W.J. Barnes, Warren Wooden, and the “Yale Critics”- Harry Berger Jr., R.S. Sylvester and Robbin S. Johnson.²⁴ They challenged the long-held Marxist and Catholic interpretations which had been largely uncontested since Chamber’s work. As Warren Wooden stated in an article he wrote in 1977, “This is an exciting time for students and critics of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*.”²⁵ Since then, numerous articles and books have been published emphasizing different aspects of the *Utopia*.

P. Albert Duhamel emphasizes the medievalism of the work. More purposefully structured his *Utopia* as a scholastic would. The scholastics believed that “nothing in Scripture should be urged on the authority of Scripture itself but that whatever the conclusion of independent investigation should declare to be true, should, in an unadorned style, with common proofs and with a simple argument, be briefly enforced by the cogency of reason, and plainly expounded in the light of truth.”²⁶ More was not a scholastic by any means, but he structured his work as a scholastic would to show the limits of such a method and what kind of society it produces. Therefore, according to Duhamel, the *Utopia* is a satire because it is an anti-scholastic work, but it is written in a medieval style.²⁷

Hubertus Schulte Herbruggen emphasizes the conflict between the ideal politics of reasoning *scholastic philosophia* and the *philosophia civilior* of realistic politics, and states that

the *Utopia* is a paradigm: “To the former belongs the sphere of ideality and pure theory, to the latter reality and practice. The former has its place in learned debate amongst friends, the latter in real politics, being ‘the Art of the Possible’. Ideals may be discussed, they can never, alas, be made real.”²⁸

Richard Sylvester, in his momentous article “Si Hythlodæo Credimus”, argues that the *Utopia* is a work that is half serious and half satire. The reader is meant to trust Hythlodæus, at least for a little while, but then is also supposed to be wary of where Hythlodæus’s conclusions may take them. Sylvester states that Hythlodæus’s inability to see how ultimately defective the Utopian state really is is evidence of his own weaknesses and moral failure. Hythlodæus, who starts off as a wise traveler open to dialogue and possible alternatives to Utopian practice, quickly becomes lost in his monologue and ends up being led off to supper by More who takes him by hand:

How is one to interpret this final gesture? Should we think of a father watching over his child, a sage protecting and yet drawing on his disciple?...More is perhaps also indicating that Hythlodæus, once so proudly independent, so all-knowing and so all-seeing, now needs a helping hand quite desperately...More’s great book, then, is a plea for both engagement and detachment, both dialogue and monologue, in matters that concern the best state of a commonwealth.²⁹

Still other scholars have seen within the *Utopia* its frivolity as a jeu d’esprit. C.S. Lewis observes, “It may mean that the whole book is only a satiric glass to reveal our own avarice by contrast and is not meant to give us directly practical advice.” *Utopia* is “a holiday work, a spontaneous overflow of intellectual high spirits, a revel of debate, paradox, comedy and (above all) of invention, which starts many hares and kills none.”³⁰ Many other scholars have also seen within the *Utopia* its modified Platonism,³¹ its Aristotelianism,³² and its Augustinianism.³³

Recent Morean scholarship has turned more towards a synthesis of these two major interpretative traditions. Logan states that, “synthesis is in fact the primary imperative of Utopian scholarship at the present time.” Logan also notes that, “the central insight of each tradition is valid and important (that is the historical tradition of interpreting the *Utopia* within the context of Erasmian humanism and its parallels with classical Greek and Latin works and the literary tradition that focuses on More’s use of irony and the technique of a layered narrative); but since readings of the first kind often flatten More’s subtle book into a communist manifesto, while those of the second can trivialize it as a *jeu d’esprit* or a book about its narrators, synthesis is a great desideratum.”³⁴ One such synthetic interpretation is offered by Dominic Baker-Smith in his text *More’s Utopia*. Baker-Smith observes that as a literary work, the *Utopia* does not “propose a course of action but rather seeks to induce a new attitude or quality of mind.”³⁵ He also notes that from the beginning of the book to the end, “The reader is continuously subjected to rhetorical controls which complicate response and work against any easy identification with a single view.”³⁶ Therefore, Baker-Smith concludes that neither of the principal characters in More’s dialogue should be regarded as the author’s mouthpiece. Through the powerfully argued, largely opposed positions of Hythloday and ‘Morus’, “we are made aware of issues and possibilities, but not of positive recommendations.”³⁷

A.G. Harmon argues that the *Utopia* is an example of a Ciceronian rhetoric. It is a debate between Raphael and More on their theories of counsel, and whether or not rhetoric is useful in persuading audiences towards acceptance of truth and substance, and whether or not that rhetoric is best delivered with simplicity or adornment. Raphael’s theory is anti-rhetorical, plainspoken, and “unyielding in its quest for virtue and unqualified clarity. In modern criticism, its critics might call it the discourse of demonization, one that allows its opponent no room for dialogue

and affords him no means of access.”³⁸ In the end, Raphael sees no point in advising kings, because they must either fully accept his truth as he demonstrates it to them, which they would not do because kings do not listen to philosophers, or he’s wasted his time. More’s theory is rhetorical, and one of acquiescence or complicity: “The only way to gain an audience is through the play, the poem, the speech- the proper naming of things.” Harmon observes, “Morus’ position calls for civic engagement. In the end, a remove from society will not do. No one can answer questions alone. Questions cannot even be asked alone, at least not so as to benefit any but the questioner.”³⁹ For More, the philosopher is a “player who must perform as best he can within the play that is being performed, and not upset everything simply because another play is of more interest to him.”⁴⁰ In this way, More is representative of Cicero who believed that statesmen had greater courage and spirit than philosophers who never take risks. The *Utopia* is said to be a Ciceronian rhetoric, because it presents all views for the readers’ consideration without disposing of any. By the end of the oration, Hythloday’s opinions have not changed and yet More is not entirely convinced of the rightness of Hythloday’s proposals and still has many questions. This is distinguishable from a Socratic dialogue in which one side is clearly victorious over the other.⁴¹ In other words, the *Utopia* has presented two perfectly viable options on counsel, and how these arguments will work practically is left to the discretion of the reader.

Harmon observes:

Utopia does not give answers to the difficulties faced by the counselors of the time, but prompts them to face the difficult questions. A mind prepared to look at a problem was better prepared to attain its resolution. Understanding something like the height of Everest- being disabused of sophistries on what it meant to face it- was a good way towards achieving Everest. Although encountering the problem might still cause the soul to blanch, it would not be the first time it had blanched- not if the mind had prepared the soul for confrontation. And in many ways the humanist’s goal was to prepare the soul to see life’s questions for what they were, and to deal with them honestly.⁴²

CHAPTER 3

INTERPRETING UTOPIA: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

All this variety begs the question- How could one seemingly straightforward text written by an honest, well-educated and well thought out English humanist, with a clear-thinking legal mind, have so many widely varying and contradictory interpretations attached to it? One of the chief reasons is that *Utopia* is a socio-political text, whether it was written to be a satire or a serious treatise, and therefore historians, political thinkers, and literary critics will interpret it according to their own contemporary social and political interests and circumstances. Their interpretations become flawed because they are based not on the social, political, economic, and religious context of early Tudor England, the context in which More wrote, but they are based on the interpreters contemporary political context. Karl Marx pens his manifesto and suddenly Marxist scholars are interpreting More as a communist, and hailing his *Utopia* as one of the earliest and greatest works of socialist theory. After all, Hythloday himself states, “I do fully persuade myself that no equal and just distribution of things can be made, nor perfect wealth ever be among men unless their proprietorship be exiled and banished.”⁴³ Yet as we read the *Utopia* it becomes obvious that this interpretation is not quite so clear-cut. While Hythloday is extolling the virtues of the Utopian’s communalism, More himself claims that he is of the contrary opinion and goes on to give a great defense of private property:

For methinks men shall never live wealthily there, where all things are held in common. For how can there be abundance of goods or of anything, where every man holds back his hand from labor? Where regard for his own gains drives him not to work, and the hope that he has in other men’s toil makes him slothful. Then when they are pricked with poverty, and yet no man can by any law or right defend for his own that which he has got with the labor of his own hands, will not there of necessity be continual sedition and bloodshed? Especially since the authority

and reverence of magistrates will be gone; for what place it can have with such men, among whom there is no difference, I cannot devise.⁴⁴

Hythloday replies: “But if you had been with me in Utopia and had personally seen their fashions and laws, as I did, who lived there five years and more...you too would grant that you never saw people so well ordered, but only there.”⁴⁵ Hythloday does not really offer any kind of substantive reply to More’s concerns. The summation of his reply is simply that he saw it work in Utopia for five years and therefore it must be instituted everywhere. For a work of socialism, More gives a very good synopsis of why private property and social class distinctions are important for a society’s work ethic and for the maintenance of law and order, and yet Hythloday does not seem to have much to say in response. It seems as if he is dodging the bullet by reminding More that he did not live on the island and did not see these laws and customs in action, therefore how could he know what he is talking about. It is evident that there is more to the *Utopia* than merely an exposition of socialist theory. There is a dialogue taking place in which one of the central characters is himself the author of the dialogue, and he is expressing concern about living in a society where proprietorship is “exiled and banished.” At the end of Hythloday’s elaborate and detailed discourse on the perfections and inherent goodness of the Utopian’s commonwealth, More relays that “many things came to mind, which in the manners and laws of that people seemed to be instituted and founded on no good reason...yea and chiefly, that which is the principal foundation of all their ordinances, that is to say, the community of their life and living, without any use of money.”⁴⁶ Again the author of the dialogue expresses concern over the socialist foundations of the Utopian society.

There are many other inconsistencies with a Marxist interpretation as well. For instance, the Utopians are willing to go to war to defend the private property of their neighbors. There are

slaves in Utopia. There is still crime and theft in Utopia, and thieves are punished by forced communal labor and are marked out as different from the general populace. Also, far from being true Marxists, More's Utopians abhor atheism and irreligion. Atheists are considered to be less than human, having traded the higher nature of the soul for the "vileness of brute beasts' bodies."⁴⁷ They are deprived of all honors, excluded from all offices and rejected from all public administration in the commonwealth because, "he (the atheist) would study either with craft secretly to mock, or else violently to break the common laws of his country, in whom there remains no further fear but of the laws, nor any further hope beyond the body."⁴⁸ Because these godless brutes believe there is no immortality of the soul and no fear of punishment in the afterlife, the Utopians believe these people to be "of an unprofitable and base and vile nature"⁴⁹ and are confident they would have no reason for keeping any external objective law, only their own internal and subjective laws. Religion is certainly not viewed as the 'opium of the people' in Utopia.

It is clear that for a historian to pick one contemporary political or social issue and then stand on their soapbox and expound on how the *Utopia* supports their position on that issue is to miss out on the breadth and depth of More's work because any idea or thought that is not consistent with the interpreters personal agenda is brushed over, neglected or thrown out. It also does a great disservice to our understanding of More's intentions. In regards to this kind of method of interpretation, J.H. Hexter observes, "They (speaking of the More scholars of his day) have tended to treat *Utopia* as a grab-bag of ideas. This enables each writer to pull out the ideas that best suit his own taste, to exalt those ideas above the others, and thus to impute to More a hierarchy of conceptions elegantly coincident with the writer's own predilection."⁵⁰

A second reason for the variety of interpretations of *Utopia* may be a problem of sources. Scholars are reading More's *Utopia* through the lens of Plato's *Republic* and his *Laws*, Aristotle's *The Politics*, Augustine's *The City of God*, Seneca's *De Otio* ('On Leisure'),⁵¹ Cicero's *De Officiis*,⁵² the works of Lucian, and Plutarch's *Life of Agis*,⁵³ to name a few. It is known that More joined Erasmus in translating the dialogues and orations of Lucian into Latin in 1505, and said that Lucian "everywhere reprimands and censures, with very honest and at the same time very entertaining wit, our human frailties. And this he does so cleverly and effectively that although no one pricks more deeply, nobody resents his stinging words."⁵⁴ It is also known that, while at Oxford, More carefully studied Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, the Greek and Roman historians, and the Church Fathers, especially Augustine, whose *City of God* was the subject of More's public lectures given at St. Lawrence Jewry in 1501. More himself was considered to be a "Christian Socrates"⁵⁵ and a "Christian English Cicero"⁵⁶, and it has been recorded that he used a signet ring with the image of Titus, the Roman ruler who was believed to have embodied many of the ideals of humanism.⁵⁷ Hythloday also lists many of these authors when he describes to More and Giles the books he took with him on his fourth voyage with Vespucci; the books which he found most profitable and therefore left them with the Utopians:

They have from me the most of Plato's works, more of Aristotle's, also Theophrastu on plants...of authors who have written on grammar, they have only Lascaris. For Theodorus I carried not with me, nor ever a dictionary but Hesychius and Dioscorides. They set great store by Plutarch's books. And they are delighted with Lucian's merry conceits and jests. Of the poets they have Aristophanes, Homer, Euripides, and Sophocles in Aldus' small print. Of the historians they have Thucydides, Herodotus, and Herodian. Also my companion, Tricius Apinatus, carried with him medical books, certain small works of Hippocrates and Galen's *Microtechne*.⁵⁸

Although Cicero and Seneca are not mentioned in this list, Peter Giles mentions to More that Hythloday only studied the philosophy of the Greeks believing that, "there is nothing extant

in the Latin tongue that is to any purpose, saving a few of Seneca's and Cicero's doings."⁵⁹ More would seem to agree with Hythloday as he wrote a letter to Oxford in 1518 stating that "to the Greeks we owe all our precision in the liberal arts generally and in theology particularly; for the Greeks either made the great discoveries themselves or passed them on as part of their heritage. Take philosophy, for example. If you leave out Cicero and Seneca, the Romans wrote their philosophy in Greek or translated it from Greek."⁶⁰

It is obvious that More was very well-read and very knowledgeable. It is obvious too that many of these sources, if not all of these sources, influenced More as he penned the *Utopia*. Unfortunately, scholars have often commented on *Utopia* as if it were inspired by only one of these sources, or at least only one of the above mentioned authors. It is either Greek or it is Roman; Platonic or Aristotelian; Senecan or Ciceronian; medieval or humanistic; Erasmian humanistic or Italian civic humanistic; there is no in-between. Yet More's work is so wide-ranging in its content that it could encompass a great many of these sources and more. Edward Surtz observes:

The works most generally used by writers on the prince or the state (at the time of More) are the three classics: Isocrates' *To Nicocles*, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, and Aristotle's *Politics*. Patrizi mentions Isocrates...as one of two authors who...are now being read by everyone in Italy. Erasmus had published a modified translation of Isocrates' treatise in 1516...Cyrus, held to be the ideal prince by the Renaissance, became widely known through the fifteenth century translations by Poggio Bracciolini and Francesco Filelfo. Since the thirteenth century, Aristotle's political thought had been dominant in the Western tradition...From the foregoing paragraph it is quite evident that the study of the classical sources can proliferate and multiply to infinity. One might turn...to Polybius, Suetonius, Dio Chrysostom, Pliny, and Marcus Aurelius. Their ideas are frequently repetitive or reminiscent of older writers.⁶¹

Surtz goes on to quote Isocrates: "The truth is that in discourses of this sort we should not seek novelties...but, rather, we should regard that man as the most accomplished in the field who

can collect the great number of ideas scattered among the thoughts of all the rest and present them in the best form.”⁶² Surtz concludes:

To date, no single source, nor any series of sources, has been designated as the original or originals which More follows closely for any sizeable portion of his work...More's masterpiece, then, is partly conventional and partly original. Conventional is the basic depiction of the best state, hitherto executed mostly through the medium of the best ruler or rulers. More certainly knows many works with this theme, classical, medieval, and humanistic. He is impressed by them and indebted to them. But he has no intention of being dominated by them. He renews them, he improves on them, he transcends them- it is the old story of one literary type inexorably supplanting another.⁶³

Is it not possible then that all these sources inspired More? Is it not possible that More built on a foundation already laid for him; that he stood on the shoulders of giants, and yet when he reached the top he had something original to say? Many of these philosophers and their works helped shape More's opinions; they probably helped give structure to his work; and they probably helped him discern which were the most important societal issues to discuss, but that does not mean that More's *Utopia* is entirely a Lucian satire or a critique of Plato. More's ideal state borrowed from classical, medieval, and humanistic texts, and from this carefully and purposefully selected bibliography, emerged his own ideas. Therefore, to understand the *Utopia* does not require exclusively an understanding of *The Republic* or *The City of God*, but it does require an understanding of who More, the man, was.

A third reason for the variety of interpretations of *Utopia* is that scholars have often looked for one consistent uniform theme or idea throughout the *Utopia*. It will be this one theme or idea which will be the key to unlocking the whole of the *Utopia* and will lead to our reading and understanding it as More would have wanted us to. There are, however, many inconsistencies for every consistency in the *Utopia*. For instance, in Book I, Hythloday recounts a discussion he had with a cardinal and a layman in which he argued that theft does not warrant

the death penalty: "I think it not right now just that the loss of money should cause the loss of a man's life. For my opinion is that all the goods in the world are not the equivalent of a man's life."⁶⁴ Hythloday goes on to give a very detailed defense of his position, with arguments ranging from the Law of Moses to the practical dangers of giving the same punishment to a thief as to a murderer (you give no incentive for a thief to not murder those whom he is robbing because his fate will be same whether his crime is theft or homicide, and he has less of a chance of getting caught for theft if he kills the only witness to the crime). Hythloday then discusses the customs of the Polylerites, a Persian people whose land is "well and wisely governed."⁶⁵ Hythloday extols the virtues of their penal system and explains how the punishment fits the crime. Thieves are forced to pay full restitution whether in cash or in kind to the rightful owner of the stolen goods and they then become common laborers of the commonwealth, and are marked out as such by distinctive clothing, a distinctive haircut and the tip of one of their ears is cut off. So far Hythloday's uses of the Polylerite's laws as an example of virtuous justice seem consistent with his position on the death penalty. However Hythloday then proceeds to describe how the laborers are to interact with one another and the society around them. If they receive money from friends, both the giver and the receiver are punished by death. If a laborer gives a free man money, for any reason, it is death for both of them. If a laborer casts away his badge which labels him as a laborer, it is death. It is also death for a laborer to be seen outside of the precincts of his shire, as well as to talk to a laborer from another shire. It is death for a laborer to run away and it is death for any other laborer who conceals a laborer's plan to flee. Although there is indeed no death penalty for theft, the death penalty seems to be used quite liberally for several other seemingly lesser crimes. The Polylerites do appear to be a "people of much nonsense" as the Greek

meaning of their name suggests,⁶⁶ and yet Hythloday praises them as a people “well and wisely governed.”

It is very difficult to pinpoint one consistent theme or idea in the *Utopia*. There are places where More’s *Utopia* is very modern in its outlook. It mentions that priests are allowed to marry: “The priests...take for their wives, the chiefest women in all their country.”⁶⁷ Also, women are not excluded from the priesthood; however they must either be old women or widows. In terms of marriage, the *Utopia* states that a woman is not to be married before she turns eighteen and a man before he turns twenty-two. If a married man and woman find others “with whom they wish live more quietly and merrily,”⁶⁸ they can divorce with the permission of the council. In terms of end of life issues, the *Utopia* mentions that, with the sanction of the priests, someone who is suffering horribly from some illness can “dispatch himself out of this painful life, as out of a prison or a rack of torment, or else suffer himself willingly to be rid of it by others.”⁶⁹ Euthanasia is permissible in *Utopia*. These and many other points may make the reader feel like the chief theme of the *Utopia* is a breaking away from traditionalism, and that More is a radical liberal born before his time. However, the *Utopia* is also littered with several passages that reinforce traditionalism. For instance, before the Utopians go to the church to celebrate the holy days, which are the last days of the months and years, “the wives fall prostrate before their husbands feet at home and the children before the feet of their parents, confessing and acknowledging that they have offended either by some actual deed, or by the omission of their duty, and desire pardon for their offence.”⁷⁰ The husband remains the patriarchal head of the home in More’s *Utopia*, and his wife and children are obedient to him. And although the *Utopia* contains some modern views on divorce, adultery is punishable by death (albeit if the culprit is caught a second time in adultery). Also, in an age of rampant anti-clericalism, which was a chief

mark of the Reformation and its breaking away from tradition and ritual, More's *Utopia* gives subtle approval of the supremacy of ecclesiastical courts over common law courts when he states that Utopian priests come under no public judgment, but are left to God and themselves if they commit any offence. This was a very traditional stance to take in Renaissance and Reformation England.

It is apparent from these few examples that very little consistency exists within the *Utopia*. To try and carry one theme or idea consistently throughout the entire work is to neglect the many aspects of More's *Utopia* and causes the interpreter to smooth over or explain away the inconsistencies, thereby doing great injustice to a complex and multi-faceted work. Richard Marius observes, "It is too much to ask that a book like *Utopia* be fully consistent, and we would all be well served if scholars admitted the inconsistencies and stopped trying to make *Utopia* walk on all fours like a bad metaphor."⁷¹ Marius concludes that the inconsistencies are most likely the result of the circumstances of its composition; that More felt rushed to get it done.⁷² This interpretation does not sit well though, as Erasmus mentions that More wrote Book II at his leisure in the Netherlands. It could be said then that Book II was carefully written, but Book I was written hastily, however, in his prefatory letter, More apologizes to Giles for taking almost a year to present him with a copy of the *Utopia* which he had expected to have within a month and a half. It seems that no rush was put on More to get it done. It also seems unlikely that More would have taken his time to carefully word his first Book (Book II), to only then attach a speedily and negligently written second Book (Book I) which could compromise the integrity of the text and confuse its message. Erasmus does mention that after More had written Book II, "he added the first off-hand. Hence there is some unevenness in the style."⁷³ However, Ernest Reynolds explains Erasmus statement as follows:

Perhaps Erasmus meant that the actual writing was done rapidly and not the working out of the ideas. Erasmus was referring to the Latin style of More which was fluent, even colloquial at times, but without the elegance that Erasmus would have preferred. This was probably due to the fact that Latin was a living language for Thomas More as for many of his contemporaries, and he wrote as he spoke.⁷⁴

I do agree, however, with Marius that *Utopia* cannot be interpreted as one consistent whole. I believe that its inconsistencies were intended by the author and that it is by embracing these inconsistencies that More's intentions in writing this seemingly convoluted text can be discerned.

A final reason why the interpretations of More's *Utopia* have so widely varied is the apparent contradiction between the ideals More espouses in his *Utopia* and the life that he lived. For instance, Utopia is a land of religious tolerance. Hythloday recounts how when King Utopus conquered the land he did not establish a universal religion, but allowed for a diversity of religions: "he dared define and ordain nothing unadvisedly, as doubting whether God, desiring manifold and divers sorts of honor, might not inspire sundry men with sundry kinds of religion. And this he thought...a sign of arrogant presumption, to compel all others by violence and threatenings to agree to the same that he believed to be true."⁷⁵ Hythloday explains that King Utopus did all this hoping that the one true religion would make itself manifest through reason, and all other vain superstitions would be done away with. He feared that if men kept fighting over religion "the best and holiest religion would be trodden underfoot and destroyed by vain superstitions, even as good corn is by thorns and weeds overgrown and choked."⁷⁶ It was because of this religious freedom that Hythloday was able to preach the gospel of Christ and many of the Utopians took to the Christian faith with great zeal, and many were washed in the holy waters of baptism. It is also clear that the Utopians had no difficulties converting to Christianity because their pagan religions were not so far removed from Christianity. Even

though King Utopus did not establish a universal religion, he established three transcendent principles by which all religions needed to adhere: Everyone must believe that there is a God who has created all things and governs them; that the soul does not die and perish with the body, but is immortal; and that in the afterlife, good deeds are bountifully rewarded and bad deeds are severely punished. Hythloday would argue that these are the ends by which Christ is the means. As long as a person's religion includes these three principles, the Utopian's are free to have whatever religion they wish and they are free to try and persuade people to convert to their religion, so long as it is done "peaceably, gently, quietly, and soberly, without haste and contentious rebuking and denouncing others."⁷⁷ Even atheists are dealt with kindly, despite their lack of spirituality. They are not punished nor are they forced to change their minds, they are simply required to not discuss their opinions with the common people, however "among the priests and men of gravity they do not only permit but also exhort him to dispute and argue, hoping that at last his madness will give place to reason."⁷⁸

These rules for religious dialogue are not merely theoretical in Utopia; Hythloday saw them practically applied to one of his converts to Christianity who disputed his new-found religion too severely:

They also who do not agree to Christ's religion frighten no man from it, nor speak against any man who has received it, save one of our company...He, as soon as he was baptized, began against our wills, with more zeal than wisdom, to reason on Christ's religion...he not only praised our religion above all others, but also utterly despised and condemned all others, calling them profane, and the followers of them wicked and devilish and children of everlasting damnation...they laid hold of him, accused him and condemned him to exile, not as a despiser of religion, but as a seditious person and an inciter of dissension among the people. For this is one of the most ancient laws among them, that no man shall be blamed for reasoning in the support of his own religion.⁷⁹

This approach to religious dialogue would have helped calm the storms of Protestant and Catholic fanaticism in reformation Europe. However, the very author of this treatise on religious tolerance was himself one of the most fervent haters of Protestantism and attacked them venomously with his pen. He was most certainly not peaceful, gentle, quiet or sober, and he had no problem denouncing others. When he became Lord Chancellor in 1529, “the Smithfield fires recommenced.”⁸⁰ Smithfield was a great marketplace outside of London where heretics and other criminals were executed. Six Lutherans were burned during More’s chancellorship, and over forty others were imprisoned. There has been some debate as to how involved More was in these executions. As a layman, he could not pass sentence on heretics, only the Bishop in the church court could do that. The extent of his responsibility would be the issuing of writs for arrest and execution.⁸¹ However, whether he was or was not personally responsible for the executions, he most certainly did not oppose them. In his 1529 *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* he says:

But as for the heretics rising among ourselves and springing from ourselves, they are in no way to be tolerated, but are to be suppressed and overcome at the outset. For by any covenant with them, Christendom has nothing to win. For as many as we allow to fall to them we lose from Christ. And from all of them we could not win to Christ one the more, even if we won them all home again, because they were our own before.⁸²

It was in this same *Dialogue* that More took on the famous case of Richard Hunne.

Hunne was a reputable London merchant of considerable wealth, who in 1511 experienced the death of his five year old son. As was the custom, the parish priest, Thomas Dryffeld, demanded the dead boy’s winding sheet as a mortuary fee. Hunne was furious at the insensitivity of the priest and of the church who gave him the power to make petty demands at a time of family grief. Hunne refused to pay. Threats and insults between Hunne and Dryffeld continued for some time, until in October 1514, Hunne was arrested and sent to the Lollard

Tower, a prison which was part of St. Paul's Cathedral. Bishop Fitzjames of London took the case. Hunne's Whitechapel house was searched, and Lollard writings and a Wycliffe Bible were found. Possession of literature of this nature was considered sufficient grounds to sustain a heresy charge in the church courts. Hunne's preliminary examination took place on December 2 and on the morning of December 3, Hunne was found hanging by the neck from a beam in his prison cell. Many in London believed Hunne's suicide had been staged by the bishop and his agents. Despite public opinion, Fitzjames continued the case against the deceased Hunne, pronounced him guilty of heresy and handed his dead body over to the secular authorities for burning. This meant that the crown could confiscate all the condemned man's possessions. Hunne was destroyed and his family was left with nothing. This was obviously a highly controversial case and it aroused much resentment against the church, especially when Cardinal Wolsey intervened to crush any attempts at justice by charging Fitzjames' chancellor, Charles Joseph, for murder. The issue was a hot one, and when parliament assembled in 1515, the Commons demanded full restitution for Hunne's family, and fresh new laws on mortuary fees and clerical privileges.⁸³ It was into this high-profile case that More threw himself in his *Dialogue*. He came through as a staunch defender of the Church, and denounced Hunne as a heretic whose death, however encompassed, was justifiable.

Although Hunne did indeed own some Lollard literature and his own English Bible, it is entirely possible that he was nothing more than a curious man; a curious man whose anti-clerical feelings were exacerbated by the cruel and thoughtless treatment he received at the hands of the Church directly after the death of his son, whose arrival into the world had caused rejoicing just five weeks earlier. For More to condemn this man so vehemently, a man who could have been

won over, or at least silenced, by a “peaceful, gentle, quiet, and sober” approach, shows that religious tolerance, although a virtue in his *Utopia*, may not have been a reality in his life.

William Roper, More’s biographer and son-in-law, recounts a conversation he had had with More, around the time that King Henry VIII was starting to seek out ways of divorcing Catherine of Aragon, in which More expressed his opinions on the heresies of his day: “I pray God that some of us, as high as we seem to sit upon the mountains, treading heretics under our feet like ants, live not to see the day that we gladly would wish to be at league and accord with them, to let them have their churches quietly to themselves, so that they would be content to let us have ours quietly to ourselves.”⁸⁴ Not exactly the words of a man willing to accommodate the co-existence of multiple religions in one place. There seems to be no room for dialogue in this statement.

Another inconsistency between More’s life and the ideals he espouses in the *Utopia* is the way in which More lived materially. In the *Utopia*, Hythloday thunders against private property and praises the Utopians for abandoning proprietorship and money, yet More himself was a wealthy landowner. Roper tells us that when More quit the office of the Chancellor, he sold his lands reserving for himself an estate, which he would be able to live in until he died and which he could bequeath to his wife, his son’s wife, and his daughter Margaret and son-in-law William. As Chancellor then, More owned multiple properties.⁸⁵ Roper also tells us that More had his own private place which he called the new building, which was built on the large property of his mansion house. The new building had a personal chapel, a library, and a gallery. More could be found there on Fridays, “from morning to evening, spending his time duly in devout prayers and spiritual exercises.”⁸⁶

More also had multiple servants. In More's letter to Peter Giles explaining his delay in completing the *Utopia* he says:

I leave no time for myself, I mean for my book. For when I come home, I must converse with my wife, chat with my children, and talk with my servants. All of which I reckon and count as business, since it must of necessity be done; and done it must needs be, unless a man would be a stranger in his own house. And in some way a man must so fashion and order his circumstances and so govern and deport himself as to be merry, jocund and pleasant with those whom either nature has provided, or chance has made, or he himself has chosen to be the companions of his life; yet so too as not to spoil them with too much easy behavior and familiarity, and not, by too much tolerance toward his servants, make them his masters.⁸⁷

The *Utopia* is also not More's only work on the subject of riches, poverty and private property. In 1534 More composed *The Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* in which he presents a far more favorable view of private property. More, who is represented in the dialogue as old and experienced Anthony, is giving advice to his young and rich nephew Vincent on how to deal with violence and persecution (it is important to note that More wrote this while a prisoner in the tower of London). Vincent questions Anthony on what Christ meant when he told people to give away all that they have and embrace a life of voluntary poverty. Anthony responds:

Yes, he did say that 'whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:33). But what he meant by that is made clear by something else he said just a few sentences before: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). Here Christ our Savior clearly means that none can be his disciple unless they love him so far above all their own kinfolk, and even their own life, that for love of him they will, rather than forsake him, forsake all of the above. So by those other words he obviously means that whoever does not renounce and forsake in his own heart, in his own affections, everything he ever has, such that he would rather lose it all, every bit of it, than grievously displease God by holding on to any part of it- that person cannot be his disciple...but that everyone should give everything away, or that no one should be rich or even moderately affluent- I find, as I say, no such commandment.⁸⁸

Anthony's answer is a striking contrast to Hythloday's answer. It would seem to the reader of both the *Dialogue* and the *Utopia*, that More is a very divided person. This has led

some scholars to read the *Utopia* as the work of young idealist, whose opinions changed as he became more immersed in the realm of politics and the realities of the world. Other scholars have said there was no change. More never had these ideals; his *Utopia* is satire and irony. The real More is the Anthony of the *Dialogue* and not the Hythloday of the *Utopia*. Still, other scholars would argue that the real More is a combination of both Anthony and Hythloday, and that they represent the debates and discussions going on within More's own mind. Therefore the *Utopia* does display some of More's character, but so also does the *Dialogue*.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

It is easy to see how all of these factors have created difficulties of interpretation for More's *Utopia*. It is a complex work, and More is a complex man. How then do we find our way through this maze of complications to a more full and complete understanding of More's *Utopia*. Firstly, More's *Utopia* needs to be read within his historical context and not within our contemporary political and social context. It does not matter whether you are a Communist, a Catholic, an Anglican, a Lutheran, a religious fanatic, a libertarian, an egalitarian, a feminist, a liberal, a conservative, a pacifist, an imperialist or an environmentalist, the question that matters is how would More's contemporaries have understood the *Utopia*? It also needs to be studied within the limits of his historical understanding and not within the broadly conceived parameters of our contemporary understanding of history. Historians have the benefit of looking back and seeing the flow of English intellectual, cultural and political history and its broad implications, but More did not have that benefit. J.H. Hexter observes, "During the current century historians tended to see in the wars of the early 1500's the conflicts of nascent nations struggling into

existence under the aegis of rulers. But More saw only the insatiable greed for glory and possessions of warrior-tyrants.”⁸⁹ Therefore, a second question that matters is, what did More and his contemporaries understand about their society?

Secondly, as important as it is to compare and contrast More’s *Utopia* with the political, social and religious works of his most admired predecessors, it is just as important to understand the *Utopia* within the context of the debates and discussions More was having with his contemporaries. Surtz observes that as much as More is indebted to classical writers and thinkers, “It must never be forgotten...that this classical learning and wisdom has been modified by Christian history, Italian modernization, English political tradition, European excitement over the New World, and, most important of all, More’s originality and artistry.”⁹⁰ It is important to note that what I mean by contemporaries is not those men who were simply part of More’s time, but those men who were actively part of More’s life. I agree with Hexter that although More was concerned, albeit in a different way, with many of the same matters that concerned Martin Luther and Niccolo Machiavelli, he did not know these men personally in 1515 and, therefore, their writings and ideas were probably not influential for More at this time in his life.⁹¹ However, there are many men who More did know, and he even makes special mention of a few of them within the pages of the *Utopia* itself. In his introductory remarks, he makes mention of Cuthbert Tunstall, “a man beyond compare, and whom the King’s Majesty of late, to the great rejoicing of all men, did appoint to the office of Master of the Rolls.”⁹² Tunstall accompanied More on his diplomatic mission to Flanders to debate political matters with the King of Castile on behalf of King Henry VIII. It was on this mission that More supposedly met with the fictional Hythloday to discuss the best state of a commonwealth. More then proceeds to introduce us to his illustrious humanist friend Peter Giles, a citizen of Antwerp, who More frequently visited while in

Flanders. More would have his readers believe that it was through Giles that he was first introduced to the well-learned and well-traveled mariner Hythloday. More says of Giles that he is, “a man of honest reputation there in his country, and also appointed to high offices, worthy truly of the highest. For it is hard to say whether the young man be in learning or in honesty more excellent. For he is both of a wonderfully virtuous behavior, and also singularly well learned.”⁹³

The names of other prominent men who may have influenced More are recorded in several letters that were published alongside the *Utopia* in the 1516 edition. There are letters from Erasmus, William Bude, Jerome Busleyden, who was a rich pluralist churchman, a friend of More’s chief-of-mission, Tunstall, as well as of Erasmus, and there were also letters from John Desmarais of Cassel, and of course, Peter Giles. These were the men with whom More was dialoguing, especially Erasmus who was very deeply involved in the publication and distribution of the *Utopia*.⁹⁴ It is safe to say that Erasmus probably had the greatest impact on the writing of *Utopia*, seeing as how the majority of the letters written which centered on the *Utopia*’s publication in 1516 and 1517 were either to or from Erasmus. There are also many other friends which could have influenced More’s thinking prior to his sitting down to write the *Utopia*, namely John Colet, William Grocyn, William Lily, Thomas Linacre, Hugh Latimer, Lord Mountjoy, Richard Pace, John Stokesley, John Clerk, John Fisher, and others. All of this is to say that a proper study of the *Utopia* requires a comparative analysis of the thoughts and ideas of More’s immediately relevant contemporaries as they were in dialogue with him and the ways in which they influenced him as he took on the task of composing the *Utopia*. It seems that this can be accomplished most effectively by a review of More’s personal letters sent to and from these men around the time that the *Utopia* was being written, and around the time that it was first

published and received, as well as a study of the intellectual and cultural context of renaissance and reformation England.

A proper study of the *Utopia* also requires a comparative examination of More's other relevant and contextual works and letters. There are discrepancies between the *Utopia* and some of More's later writings, and this has caused some scholars to speculate that the More who authored the famous letter to Dorp and the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* is the real More rather than the More who authored the *Utopia*, just as some surmise that the Machiavelli of the *Discourses on Livy* is the real Machiavelli and not the Machiavelli of *The Prince*. The *Utopia* is therefore out of character for More and is inconsistent with his greater body of works which express his true convictions and beliefs. Although an interesting interpretation, it seems unlikely that an author would ever create a work that was completely devoid of their personality and absolutely removed from their convictions.

Hexter explains the discrepancies between More's *Utopia* and his later works as indicative of something altogether different. In describing the state of mind of both More and Machiavelli as they created their great political texts, Hexter observes:

Sustained imaginative vision is indeed like being possessed; it is not necessarily progressive or cumulative or even readily preserved intact. It is a dizzy height which a very few men scale once or twice in a lifetime and fewer still attain more often. When such vision is turned on the ways in which men live together, it may bring some facets of human affairs into focus with a fierce brilliance, but in so doing it is almost bound to throw whole spans of men's experience, the visionary's as well as others', into the shadow. The greatness of a book which does this lies not in its harmony but in its intensity. This is why afterwards the writer of such a book may seem not to advance from it but recede from it. In regaining his balance he loses some of his impetus...the convictions the books express are not so much repudiated as drawn back into the setting from which something like poetic inspiration had momentarily freed them. They are not consciously rejected but integrated with their writers' previous habit of thought and thereby transmuted and toned down.⁹⁵

This interpretation, like the interpretation before it, relegates the *Utopia* to the world of fairy tales. Hexter has More writing the *Utopia* in a state of higher consciousness, and it is only when More descends from Mount Sinai to live among mortals that reality finally catches up with him and he is tragically forced to alter and simplify his radical opinions to conform to the bloodless, compromising and fragile political and religious context in which he found himself. Although it is tempting to view More as a hopeful idealist dragged kicking and screaming into reality, he was not. For Hexter's interpretation to work, More would have had to have comprehended very little about the realities of life in 1515. This is simply not true. More was not freshly out of St. Anthony's or Oxford when he wrote the *Utopia*. He had served as a Reader at Furnival's Inn, a Burgess in the Parliament of King Henry VII, and as one of the under-sheriffs of London before writing the *Utopia*. Previous to the *Utopia*, More had started writing his famous biography of King Richard III, which read more like a dark study on tyranny and corruption. Also, while his *Utopia* was being printed and distributed he served as a member of the King's council and as a judge in the Court of Requests, also known as the Poor Man's Court. It was around this time also that King Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey were trying to procure More for their services, but More resisted. As Erasmus told Ulrich Von Hutten, "He (More) was formerly rather disinclined to Court life and to any intimacy with princes, having always a special hatred of tyranny and a great fancy for equality...He could not even be tempted to Henry VIII's Court without great trouble, although no one more courteous or less exacting than this Prince could be desired."⁹⁶ This does not sound like the description of a sheltered idealist. More understood the world. The *Utopia* itself was a critique of England and even though he paints the picture of an ideal commonwealth he openly and honestly admits that "it is not possible for all things to be well, unless all men are good- which I think will not be this good many years."⁹⁷

The *Utopia* should, therefore, not be interpreted as the fanciful ramblings of an unengaged visionary sitting on his mountaintop, nor should it be interpreted as a hiccup in More's literary career. The *Utopia* is not separate from More's reality, nor is it separate from his other body of works. Could not the *Utopia* be More's attempt at engaging his society with a work that went beyond pure theory and endeavored to spark people's imagination and curiosity with tales of a far and distant land with strange customs, rituals and laws? Could not the More who wrote the *Dialogue* also be the More who wrote the *Utopia*? Perhaps studying the *Dialogue* and the *Utopia* side by side would yield greater results as to what More intended in his *Utopia*, it might also give a more full and complete picture of what kind of a person More was and what he truly believed.

More has an extensive bibliography. Though he is known primarily for his *Utopia*, More also authored 281 Latin poems, ten English poems, two histories, four Platonic dialogues, a response to Bioethius' famous *Consolation of Philosophy*, numerous theological reflections and polemics, and a remarkable stream of letters to family and friends.⁹⁸ Many of these works, most notably his dialogues and religious treatises, deal with the very same issues presented in the *Utopia*, especially his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and *His Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*. His letters, especially those written to his eldest daughter Margaret while he was in prison awaiting execution, also reveal his heart and mind on many of the exact same issues that plagued him as he penned his *Utopia*. Between 1515 and 1520, Mores' greatest and most memorable writings, other than the *Utopia*, were all defenses of Erasmus' teachings and especially of his new translation of the New Testament to correct the inaccuracies of the Latin Vulgate. More wrote his famous letters to Oxford, to Dorp, to Edward Lee, and to a Monk, in these years. A comparative analysis of these relevant works of More's bibliography with his

Utopia will illuminate his intentions and meaning far more than an evaluation of his medievalism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Augustinianism, or an examination of his debt to Lucian, Seneca, Cicero and Plutarch.

Thirdly, the inconsistencies within the work and between the work and the life of its author should not be harmonized or glazed over or explained away, but they should be embraced as clues as to how More intended the *Utopia* to be read. Read More's final words as he goes off to dinner with Hythloday:

When Raphael had thus made an end of his tale, many things came to my mind, which in the manners and laws of that people seemed to be instituted and founded on no good reason, not only the fashion of their military arts, their rites and religions, and others of their laws, but also, yea and chiefly, that which is the principal foundation of all their ordinances, that is to say, the community of their life and living, without any use of money, by which practice alone all nobility, magnificence, worship, honor and majesty, the true ornaments and honors, as the common opinion is, of a commonwealth, are utterly overthrown and destroyed. Yet because I knew that he was weary of talking, and was not sure whether he could bear that anything should be said against his opinion...therefore, I praising both their institutions and his account of them took him by the hand and led him to supper...as I cannot agree and consent to all the things he said, though he is without doubt a man singularly well learned, and in all worldly matters exactly and profoundly experienced, so must I needs confess and grant that there are many things in the Utopian commonwealth which in our cities I may rather wish than hope for.⁹⁹

I believe this closing paragraph is the key to understanding More's *Utopia*. More makes it very clear that he finds many of the Utopian institutions to be quite unreasonable. He specifically mentions "the fashion of their military arts, their rites and religions" and "the principal foundation of all their ordinances...the community of their life and living without any use of money." More then proceeds to say that although he cannot agree or consent to all the things that Hythloday describes, there are things within the Utopian commonwealth that More would wish to see implemented in England, but he recognizes that that is probably not realistic: "For it is not possible for all things to be well, unless all men are good- which I think will not be

this good many years.”¹⁰⁰ This tells me that More intended the inconsistencies and difficulties of interpretation within his work, because he wanted his *Utopia* to be read, not as a ready-made program of reform, but as a springboard for the discussion of ideas. What More has done with the *Utopia* is he has created a commonwealth which allows for a real critique of the social problems of Tudor society, but which does not always offer solutions that are immediately obvious and clear, nor are they necessarily easily applied. The reader is then forced to think which solutions are feasible and which are not for the problems of political corruption and social injustice in Tudor England. This gives great meaning to the inconsistencies which are endemic to the work. Marius observes that More “conceived the idea of *Utopia* as a latter-day Platonic *Republic* intended to show Europeans how much better reason was than the wicked habits into which they had fallen. As a Christian, More could not hold that reason was perfect, and his wit would lead him to throw in details to show how even reason could be silly.”¹⁰¹ The inconsistencies in thought are not the result of More being comical or the result of him being negligent and careless because he felt rushed to get the completed work to Giles. The inconsistencies purposefully exist so that we are required to stop and think. The reader must follow the Utopian customs to their logical conclusions and creatively transpose those customs into English society to decide what is relevant and plausible. This forces the reader to analyze English society in depth and inquire into possible reforms which are suitable to the specific crises plaguing it. More however does not leave the reader entirely alone in this venture. He often cautions his reader not to take Hythloday’s propositions at face value, but to consider the possible ramifications of them if they were fully implemented. Consider the example given earlier of the Polylerites and their practice of punishing thievery through forced labor rather than through capital punishment. At first Hythloday’s arguments against the death sentence as a

deterrent to stealing, especially in a political and economic system that makes stealing a necessity for survival, seem quite logical and persuasive and his praise of the Polylerites seems reasonable and justified, however by the time he is done listing all the other offences for which enslaved thieves are punished with death by the Polylerites, the logic and morality of Hythloday's original position seems lost; buried under the excessive killings committed to punish seemingly lesser crimes. The reader is forced to read through Hythloday's argument again and consider at what point he becomes derailed. In this way I disagree with Baker-Smith's thesis that the *Utopia* does not offer any definite solutions or positive recommendations.¹⁰² Although it is true that there is a lot of interpretive freedom in the *Utopia*, More does provide his readers with a considerable amount of guidance as to what is right and what is wrong or what could be wrong with Hythloday's proposals. He does this by offering rebuttal to certain of Hythloday's remarks while not offering any kind of response to others. More also specifically lists the greatest problem areas for him with Hythloday's suggestions in his concluding statement.

More also mentions that when giving advice to kings, "you must with a crafty wile and subtle art endeavor, as much as in you lies, to handle the matter wisely and handsomely for the purpose, and that which you cannot turn to good, so order that it be not very bad."¹⁰³ In other words, to ask for the very best outcome is unrealistic, however it is possible to avert a very bad outcome, which is better than nothing. More may be hinting that although many of the Utopian laws and customs cannot be fully implemented, and indeed many of them should not be implemented at all, some of them can be partially implemented or implemented in some other geographically and politically unique way that allows for a better than nothing outcome. More acknowledges that he can only wish for, rather than hope for, many of the things in the Utopian commonwealth, because he recognizes that man is inherently wicked and sinful and therefore no

society will ever be perfect. This is probably the reasoning behind naming his fictional commonwealth “no-place”.

Lastly, just as More’s bibliography is crucial for understanding the *Utopia*, so too is his biography. Many scholars have again shrugged off the inconsistencies between More’s life and the ideals he espouses in his *Utopia* as evidence that the *Utopia* is either a satire or a onetime event. However, it is obvious that More invested much of himself into his fictitious island. For example, Erasmus mentions how More “likes to dress simply, and does not wear silk, or purple, or gold chains, except when it is not allowable to dispense with them.”¹⁰⁴ This rejection or strong dislike of material flamboyance is central to Utopian society. There are many similarities between More and his creations, the Utopians, therefore the inconsistencies must have meaning as well. Are there actual inconsistencies, or are we wrongly interpreting the *Utopia*? If there are inconsistencies, why do they exist? Why does More pour his heart out through Hythloday one second and then brazenly oppose him the next? A comparative analysis of More’s biography and the *Utopia* is critical for our understanding of More’s purpose.

Fortunately many scholars have taken on the task of being More’s biographer. In the past century, three prominent biographies have emerged, written by R.W. Chambers, Richard Marius and Peter Ackroyd, Marius’ being the most eminent. However, there are also four early biographies written by people whose knowledge of the man and his times are far more intimate than our own- Erasmus, William Roper, Nicholas Harpsfield, and Thomas Stapleton. These biographies have often been shunned as being too biased and historically inaccurate. Chambers describes Harpsfield’s account as, “as much a manifesto as, later, was Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* on the other side.”¹⁰⁵ However I think these sources are still very valuable, not only because they

were written by men who knew More, but because they humbly admit the shortcomings and failings of their attempts at immortalizing the memory of More. Erasmus starts his portrait of More for Ulrich von Hutten by stating that:

I do not think it easier to make a likeness of More than of Alexander the Great, or of Achilles; neither were those heroes more worthy of immortality...Nevertheless I will try to draw a sketch, rather than a portrait, of the entire man, so far as daily and domestic intercourse has enabled me to observe his likeness and retain in my memory. But if some diplomatic employment should ever bring you together, you will find out how poor an artist you have chosen for this commission; and I am afraid you will think me guilty of envy or of willful blindness in taking note of so few out of the many good points of his character.¹⁰⁶

William Roper, in the introduction to his biography of More, states:

I, William Roper (though most unworthy), his son-in-law by marriage with his eldest daughter...have thought it therefore my part to set forth such matters touching his life as I could at this present call to remembrance. Among which, very many notable things, which should have been remembered, have through negligence and long continuance of time slipped out of my mind. Yet to the intent that the same shall not all utterly perish, I have at the desire of divers worshipful friends of mine...declared as much thereof as in my poor judgment seemed worthy to be remembered.¹⁰⁷

Neither of these men were going for total accuracy, rather they wanted to share those things that stood out in their minds about More and have the historians fill in the gaps later.

Another slight against the use of these biographers is made by Hexter:

While other lives of More written during the sixteenth century may not be so polemical (referring to Harpsfield's account), they all focus on More's later life and especially his martyrdom. They see the candidate for canonization through the saintly aura that surrounded More on the scaffold, their martyr-hero through the distorting medium of the Catholic Counter-Revolution. Therefore they play down the humanist More, the dearest friend of Erasmus...This alone makes their biographies almost useless for our purposes (that is the study of More's *Utopia*), since 1515-16 makes the point of maximum convergence of the trajectories of More and Erasmus, the time when the area of opinions and sentiment shared between them was greatest...all these biographies provide no guidance to the immediate milieu of *Utopia* in the mind of Thomas More in 1515-16.¹⁰⁸

Although it is true that these biographies concentrate on More's defense of the Catholic Church and his martyrdom, it is not true that they are devoid of information pertinent to the mind of More in 1515-16. Alistair Fox observes:

The utopian quality of the book can be seen in the extent to which More created the Utopians in his own image. They share his contempt for material ostentation, as attested by their simple monastic garb and their debasing use of gold for chamber pots and slaves' fetters, and of jewels for children's toys. They, too, believe that the secret of a happy life consists in the cultivation of the mind and achieve the same kind of communal domestic order for which More strove in his own household. Specifically, he projected into the Utopians his own fondness for gardens, his liking for music, his delight in fools, and his receptivity toward foreign guests.¹⁰⁹

Almost all of these traits are mentioned in his early biographies. Though they are not heavy on the details of why he wrote the *Utopia*, they are very enlightening as to his character, his likes and dislikes, his passions, and his views on politics, education, family and religion, and these things are essential. Also, even though much of their content dates to later on in More's life, it seems unlikely that More's entire being changed between the *Utopia* and the scaffold. In fact, many of his ideals seemed to have been resurrected by the Anne Boleyn affair, and by his imprisonment and impending execution. Therefore, these biographies will be used side by side with the more contemporary and historically accurate biographies, to give a well-rounded view of More, the man.

In this paper, I will inquire into the meaning of More's *Utopia* by placing it within its historical context, and by embracing its inconsistencies, both internal and external, as purposefully intended by the author, and by comparing it with his other relevant works and with his own biography, so that both More and his *Utopia* can be understood in a more full and complete way. More's *Utopia* will be treated, not as a satire, but as a socio-political work that was written, not to present a ready-made model, but to make people think about the causes and

potential cures for the social ills of their day and about the costs and benefits of creating a just and virtuous commonwealth. By creating a fictional island society where everything seemingly ran smoothly, but often at the expense of individualism and reason, More was attempting to create a platform to discuss the social, political and religious issues of his day by contrasting the bizarre political ideas of the Utopians with the chaotic politics of Europe.

Before we endeavor to interpret the *Utopia* using this methodology, it is important to firstly explain why I am establishing the *Utopia* as a serious socio-political work at the outset, and for this we turn to the circumstances of the *Utopia*'s publication and distribution.

CHAPTER 5

“A NONE TOO WITTY LITTLE BOOK”: THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF UTOPIA’S PUBLICATION AND DISTRIBUTION

In his famous essay on anti-scholastic satire in the *Utopia*, Warren Wooden observes that, “The scholastics did not perceive the attack on their methodology, and some of them even fell into the trap of taking the *Utopia* for a literal transcript of an actual conversation.”¹¹⁰ Wooden mentions how the joke would have only been obvious to a select few: “This private dimension of the satire accounts for More’s initial plan to print and circulate the work only among his friends...Such a reading also accounts for the neglect of the work by the humanists only a few years after its publication...even More wrote in 1517 that the work was hardly worth reprinting.”¹¹¹ That More’s work was neglected only a few years after its publication is not entirely accurate. More’s *Utopia* was in fact a very popular little book. He sent it to Erasmus and Giles to be printed and the first edition of the *Utopia*, in the original Latin, came from the press in Louvain in 1516. A second edition appeared in Paris in 1517, and then another in Basle the

following year, and in 1519 there were editions published in Florence, Vienna, and Venice.

Translations were soon in demand, and the *Utopia* was translated into German, French, Italian, and Dutch. Oddly enough, the first English translation, that of Ralph Robinson, did not reach the public until 1551.¹¹² More's apparent retreat from the *Utopia* in 1517 could simply have been an act of humility or perhaps he was uncomfortable with the success of his book, because he did not particularly like it himself as an author is often displeased with his own work. He had doubted from the very beginning whether *Utopia* was worth printing or not. He felt it would not be well received:

Howbeit, to speak the very truth, I am not yet fully decided myself whether I will publish my book or not. For the natures of men are so diverse, the fancies of some so wayward, their minds so unkind, their judgments so corrupt that they think those who lead a merry, gay life, following their own sensual pleasures and carnal lusts, are in much better state and condition than those who vex and trouble themselves with cares and efforts to put out and publish something that may be a profit or pleasure to some, but which others nevertheless will take disdainfully, scornfully, and unkindly.¹¹³

The opposite being true may have startled More and the fame he was receiving may have embarrassed him. His humility and reluctance to accept the success of his book remains consistent throughout his correspondence. In a letter to Erasmus, dated October 31, 1516, More writes: "I am happy that my *Nowhere* meets the approval of my friend, Peter; if such men like it, I shall begin to like it myself."¹¹⁴ In a similar letter to Archbishop William Warham, dated January 1517, More writes:

I would beg your Lordship to accept a none too witty little book...It was written in undue haste, but a friend of mine, a citizen of Antwerp (Peter Giles) allowed his affection to outweigh his judgment, thought it worthy of publication, and without my knowledge had it printed. Although I know it is unworthy of your high rank, your wide experience, or your learning, yet I venture to send it, relying on the generosity with which you habitually encourage all men's literary endeavors.¹¹⁵

More's comment that the *Utopia* is "a book which I think clearly deserves to hide itself away forever in its own island,"¹¹⁶ is therefore not a result of his knowing that it is a silly and useless book, but is rather the result of his own humility and his own insecurities about whether or not it is a well-written text. He was, after all, writing about very weighty and timely issues.

It could also be that in an effort to legitimize the *Utopia*, More wanted it to seem like he did not deserve the glory, Hythloday did. The island of Utopia was his discovery, and its laws and customs were studied, memorized, and eloquently explained by him, not More. In his letter to Giles, More asks him to show his book to Hythloday:

By this way you will perceive whether he is quite willing and content that I should undertake to put this work into writing. For if he is minded to publish and report his own labors and travels himself, perchance he may be loath, and so would I be also, that by publishing an account of the Utopian commonwealth, I should anticipate him and take from him the flower and grace of novelty of this his story.¹¹⁷

The circumstances of the publication and distribution of *Utopia* suggests that More did not intend his book to be read by only a select few of his friends. And that he did not intend it to be read solely as a satire or a joke. It seems very unlikely that More, a lover of learning and writing, and the author of such sharp and biting tracts as the letter to Dorp, would spend what little leisure time he had in the Netherlands, writing a silly satire meant only to poke fun at a select group of schoolmen and meant only to be read and understood by a handful of fellow humanists. Around the time that More was sent to the Netherlands, his life, by his own account, was very busy indeed:

One while, I am every day putting my time on law matters- on some as pleader, on some as hearer, on some as an arbitrator with my award to determine, on some as an umpire or a judge with my sentence finally to declare. Another while, I am going one way to see and visit friends, another way about my own private affairs. At time I spend almost all day abroad with others, the rest at home with my own. I leave no time for myself, I mean for my book. For when I come home, I must converse with my wife, chat with my children, and talk with my servants. All of

which I reckon and count as business, since it must of necessity be done; and done it must needs be, unless a man would be a stranger in his own house... When then do I write? All the while I have said no word of sleep, nor yet of eating, on which a great number waste no less time than they do on sleep, wherein almost half the lifetime of a man creeps away. I then win and get only that time which I steal from sleep and eating. Which time is very little and yet is something.¹¹⁸

Yet while in the Netherlands, he found himself with quite a lot of time on his hands and very little to do. Why would More spend this time writing a lengthy joke?

It is also important to notice that, as was mentioned earlier, More attempted to legitimize his *Utopia*. He went to great lengths to have his imaginary tale wrapped in a veneer of realism.

Mildred Campbell observes:

More's letter to Peter Giles, a friend in Antwerp, and Giles' letter to Jerome Busleiden, as well as the Verses and the note from the Printer to the Reader...are all a part of the mechanism designed to lend reality to the tale. Device of this kind, partly borrowed from the classics, were much in favor among the humanists, who with obvious enjoyment went to great pains to endow their works of imagination with all the earmarks of reality.¹¹⁹

More's *Utopia* is exceptionally well-endowed with earmarks of reality. In the introductory remarks to Book I, More presents the conversation he had with the mythical Hythloday as if it actually happened. He discusses historical facts, such as his trip to Flanders as an ambassador for King Henry the Eighth. He uses the names of real historical figures, such as Cuthbert Tunstall, and Peter Giles. Giles himself is involved in the conversation with Hythloday, adding yet more legitimacy to More's tale. More gives a very detailed description of Hythloday and even uses a well-known historical event to explain how Hythloday came to be on the island of Utopia. In the *Four Voyages of Amerigo Vespucci*, Vespucci speaks of a garrison of twenty-four men who were left behind on the coast of Brazil. Hythloday is introduced by Giles as follows:

Because of the desire that he had to see and know the far countries of the world, he joined himself in company with Amerigo Vespucci, and in the three last voyages of those four that are

no in print and abroad in every man's hands, he continued still in his company, saving that in the last voyage he came not home again with him...he got license of master Amerigo...to be one of the twenty-four which in the end of the last voyage were left in the country of Gulike.¹²⁰

It is also interesting to note that in the account Vespucci gives of his second voyage in 1501, he mentions his visit to a strange people living in an unidentified part of "those regions", who held all their possessions in common. Readers of Vespucci's account would have seen the similarities between the customs of Amerigo's strange people and Hythloday's Utopians. This and the story of Hythloday being left behind on Vespucci's fourth voyage, gave great legitimacy to More's work. It seems unlikely that More would have played on the masses' insatiable appetite for travel stories and their unquenchable interest in the New World and the bizarre societies and religions of its unknown lands and peoples, simply to play a prank on the scholastics way of rationalizing theology. More had a greater intent.

More continues to legitimize the *Utopia* by writing a letter to Giles expressing frustration over not being able to remember where Hythloday had said Utopia was:

For neither did we remember to inquire of him nor he to tell us in what part of the new world Utopia is situated. I had rather have spent a great sum of money than to have this knowledge escape us, both because I am ashamed to be ignorant of the sea in which that island lies...also because there are with us certain men, and especially one virtuous and godly man, a professor of divinity, who is exceedingly desirous of going to Utopia...that he may further spread our religion.¹²¹

More also questions Giles on the length of the bridge at Amaurote, the capital of Utopia, and asks him to clear up these minor matters for him the next time he speaks with Hythloday, either face to face or in writing. He adds that, "I verily think it will be well if you show him the book itself. For if I have missed or failed at any point, or if any fault has escaped me, no man can so well correct and amend it as he can." More desires this, "that in this my book there neither be found anything which is untrue nor anything lacking which is true."¹²²

Giles also legitimizes the *Utopia* by writing a letter to Jerome Busleyden, a fellow humanist, a wealthy cleric of Brussels, founder of the College of the Three Languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Latin) at Louvain, and, as he is addressed in Giles' letter, Counselor to the Catholic King Charles. Giles praises Utopia as a most worthy commonwealth which, "as it far excels Plato's commonwealth, all people should wish to know."¹²³ Giles casually mentions how he was with More when Hythloday was describing the ideal state of the Utopians: "Yea, even though the man, with his simple eloquence, did so explain and declare the matter that he plainly enough appeared to be reporting not things which he had learned of others only by hearsay, but what he had with his own eyes seen and thoroughly viewed, and with which he had a long time been acquainted."¹²⁴ To add even further authenticity to the fictional event, Giles gives a glowing commendation of Hythloday: "A man he is truly, in my opinion, as regards the knowledge of regions, peoples, and worldly experience, much surpassing even the very famous and renowned traveler Ulysses; such a one indeed as for the space of these eight hundred years past I think nature has not brought forth his like into the world; in comparison with whom Vespucci may be thought to have seen nothing."¹²⁵ Giles goes on to explain how both he and More missed Hythloday's description of the geographic location of the island of Utopia. Apparently it was a fluke, for at the very moment that Hythloday was speaking on this subject, one of More's servants whispered in his ear and Giles was unable to hear Hythloday because "one of the company, by reason of a cold taken, I think, on shipboard, coughed out so loud that he took from my hearing certain of his words." However, Giles assures Busleyden that, "I will never pause or rest until I have got the full and exact knowledge thereof; so far that I will be able perfectly to instruct you, not only in the longitude or true meridian of the island, but also in the right latitude thereof, that is to say, in the elevation or height of the pole in that region."¹²⁶ Giles is, however,

very uncertain as to how he will perform this promise, because apparently there is very uncertain news of Hythloday's whereabouts or of whether or not he is even still alive. He is either dead, in his own country, or he has returned to Utopia. Giles then proceeds to dissuade Busleyden's doubts, if he still has any, about the existence of Utopia:

Now as regards the point that the name of this island is nowhere found among the old and ancient cosmographers, this doubt Hythloday himself very well dispelled. 'For it is possible enough,' quoth he, 'that the name which it had in old time was afterward changed, or else that they never had knowledge of this island; since now in our time divers lands are found, which to the old geographers were unknown.'¹²⁷

Having said all this, Giles concludes: "To me it seems a work most unworthy to be long suppressed, and most worthy to go abroad into the hands of men, yea, and under title of your name to be published to the world...because no man is more fit and meet than you with good counsels to further and advance the commonwealth."¹²⁸ Giles is kind enough to include in his letter a copy of the Utopian alphabet as well as a meter of four verses in the Utopian tongue which portrays the strange beginning of the Utopian commonwealth and its happy and wealthy continuance.¹²⁹ Giles even goes the extra mile of attempting to translate the meter, even though it is written in "a tongue much stranger to us than the Indian, the Persian, the Syrian, the Arabic, the Egyptian, the Macedonian, the Slavonian, the Cyprian, the Scythian etc..."¹³⁰ The meter translates:

My king and conqueror, Utopus by name, A prince of much renown and immortal fame,
Has made of me an isle that erst no island was, fraught full of worldly wealth, pleasure and
solace. I, the one of all without philosophy, have shaped for man a philosophical city. As I in me
have nothing dangerous to impart, so better to receive I am ready with all my heart.¹³¹

The Yale edition of the *Complete Works of St. Thomas More* has Giles translating it a little differently, but the subject matter remains the same:

IUtopus, my ruler, converted me, formerly not an island, into an island. Alone of all lands, without the aid of abstract philosophy, I have represented for mortals the philosophical city. Ungrudgingly do I share my benefits with others; undemurringly do I adopt whatever is better from others.¹³²

It is interesting to note that in this way the island of Utopia does serve as a perfect model for Europe. The Utopians are always sharing their benefits, but they are always striving to improve themselves by learning from others.

Not only did the readers of the *Utopia* get a sample of the Utopian alphabet, but John Desmarais, an orator at the University of Louvain, also provided Thierry Martens, the 1516 publisher of the *Utopia*, with an eminent artist's sketch of the island of Utopia.¹³³ Hythloday's fictional nephew, Anemolius, a Poet Laureate, also provides six lines on the island of Utopia:

The ancients called me Utopia or Nowhere because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato's republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence. Deservedly ought I to be called by the name of Eutopia or Happy Land.¹³⁴

More's efforts to legitimize the *Utopia* go even further. On September 3, 1516, More sent the prefatory letter and the *Utopia* to Erasmus and committed all the publishing details to him. On September 20, he asked Erasmus to supply recommendations not only by scholars but especially by statesmen. On October 17, Erasmus suggested that Giles address his preface to Busleyden rather than to himself, which Giles agreed to do. His letter to Busleyden, with the alphabet and the meter, appeared on November 1, and Busleyden replied to Erasmus on November 9. On November 12, Gerhard Geldenhauer sent word to Erasmus that Thierry Martens had agreed to print the *Utopia* and that Desmarais was supplying a sketch of Utopia. Desmarais also wrote a Utopian letter to Giles on December 1, 1516. The 1516 edition of the *Utopia* contains the map, the alphabet, Giles' letter to Busleyden, Desmarais' letter as well as a poem he wrote, verses by Geldenhauer and Cornelius de Schrijver also appear, as well as Busleyden's

letter to More, and of course, More's letter to Giles (the preface).¹³⁵ This provided the first edition of the *Utopia* with quite a lot of authentication. Several of these letters appear in the Yale edition, and it is necessary to quote some of them at length here in the order in which they appear in the *Complete Works*, so that the writers' attempts to legitimize the *Utopia* by portraying it as a serious treatise and complimenting it as a most excellent record of Hythlodæus's discourse may be noted. In these letters it is also interesting to note the various ways that More's friends received the *Utopia*. They all appreciated something different about More's work. Some read it as a ready-made model; others read it as a warning. Still others read it as a commentary on the sources of social evils and as a commendation of various virtues, while others read it as an example from which to glean ideas and possible solutions when contextualized. Even within these letters there is no specific interpretation offered, however, there are hints, and all of them suggest that the *Utopia* is meant to be useful, helpful and positive. I have italicized the portions of these letters that I feel most accurately summarize the writer's thoughts on the *Utopia*.

In a letter to John Froben, the father of Erasmus' godson, Erasmus states: "For these reasons we have sent you...his *Utopia* so that, if you think well, they may go out to the world and to posterity with the recommendation of having been printed by you. Such is the reputation of your press that, if it is known that a book has come from the house of Froben, that is enough to have it *please the learned world*."¹³⁶

In a letter to Thomas Lupset, William Bude states:

We owe the knowledge of this island to Thomas More, *who has made public for our age this model of the happy life and this rule of living*. The discoverer, as More himself reveals, is Hythlodæus, to whom he ascribes the whole account. On the one hand, Hythlodæus is the one who has built their city for the Utopians and established customs and laws for them; that is to say, *he has borrowed from them and brought home to us the pattern of the good life*. On the

other hand, beyond question it is More who has adorned the island and its holy institutions by his style and eloquence, who has embellished the very city of the Hagnopolitans according to precept and rule, and who has added all those touches that bring grace and beauty and impressiveness to the magnificent work.¹³⁷

Bude concludes: "Now I pay him (More) the highest possible love and veneration for his island in the new world, Utopia. The reason is that *our age and succeeding ages will hold his account as a nursery of correct and useful institutions from which every man may introduce and adapt transplanted customs to his own city.*"¹³⁸

In his letter to Giles, John Desmarais wrote:

With greater urgency, I beg you, most learned Peter Giles, to see, as soon as feasible, to the publication of *Utopia*. *Whatever pertains to the good constitution of a commonwealth may be seen in it as in a mirror. Would that, just as the Utopians have begun to receive our religion, so we might borrow from them their system of public administration...* Utopia owes much to Hythlodæus who has made known a country unworthy of remaining unknown... In turn, not the least part of the thanks which are due... must be shared with you: it is you who will bring into public view both Hythlodæus' discourse and More's written account. It will serve as a great delight for all- and bring even greater profit *if they weigh all its elements carefully.*¹³⁹

John Desmarais also wrote a poem praising the New Island of Utopia:

Brave men were the gift of Rome, eloquent men the gift of lauded Greece, frugal men the gift of famous Sparta, uncorrupted men the gift of Marseilles, hardy men of Germany. Courteous and witty men were the gift of the land of Attica. Pious men were once the gift of renowned France, wary men of Africa. Munificent men were once the gift of the land of Britain. *Examples of the different virtues are sought in different peoples, and what is lacking in one abounds in another. The total sum of all virtue once for all is the gift of the island of Utopia to earth-born men.*¹⁴⁰

Gerhard Geldenhauer writes the following verses to the reader *Utopia*:

Reader, do you like what is pleasant? In this book is everything that is pleasant. Do you hunt what is profitable? You can read nothing more profitable. If you wish both the pleasant and the profitable, this island abounds in both. By them you may polish your expression and improve your mind. *In this book the very sources of right and wrong are revealed* by the eloquent More, the chief glory of his native London.¹⁴¹

Cornelius de Schrijver says to the reader:

Do you want to see new marvels now that a new world has been discovered not long ago? *Do you want to learn ways of living different in nature from our own?* Do you want to know the

sources of the virtues? Do you want to uncover *the original causes of the world's evils* and to experience *the great emptiness lying concealed at the heart of things*? Read these pages which the celebrated More has given us in variegated color- More, the honor of London's famous men.¹⁴²

In his letter to More, Jerome Busleyden wrote the following about *Utopia*:

In no other way could you have better or more rightly secured this object than by holding up before reasonable mortals themselves that *ideal of a commonwealth, that pattern and perfect model of morality, whose equal has never been seen anywhere in the world* for the soundness of its constitution, for its perfection, and for *its desirability*. It far surpasses and leaves a long way behind the many celebrated and much lauded commonwealths of the Spartans, Athenians, and Romans...Today there are scarcely any remains or ruins to be seen of their great catastrophe. Hardly are their names properly recorded by any history, however old and far-reaching. Such notable disasters, devastations, destructions, and calamities of war our commonwealths one and all will easily escape provided that *they organize themselves exactly on the one pattern of the Utopian commonwealth and do not depart from it, as they say, by a hair's breadth*. By doing so, they will at last most fully recognize by the successful reality how greatly they have benefitted by the service you have rendered them. Especially will they have learned thereby how to *keep their own commonwealth safe, unharmed, and triumphant*. Accordingly these states will owe you a great debt for saving them in their hour of need...Meanwhile, farewell, and continue successfully to devise, execute, and perfect ever fresh benefits for the commonwealth. They will make the commonwealth eternal and you immortal.¹⁴³

There were other letters as well. On December 4, 1516, More wrote to Erasmus to tell him of Tunstal's approval and then expressed his thanks in a personal letter to Tunstal himself. On January 4, 1517, Lord Mountjoy thanked Erasmus for a copy of the *Utopia*, and sometime in that same month, More wrote letters to Archbishop Warham, Antonio Bonvisi, and an unknown courtier, all on the subject of the *Utopia*. There were also several letters sent to and from Erasmus in praise and recommendation in February. On December 15, 1516, More confessed that "he was expecting the *Utopia* from day to day."¹⁴⁴ Even in the later translations of the *Utopia* into vernacular languages, the editors authenticated it. Lando's 1548 translation of *Utopia* into Italian was prefaced with an essay by a fellow *poligrafi*, Anton Francesco Doni, which read: "you will find in this republic, which I present to you, the best customs, good orders, wise regulations, holy teachings, sincere government, and regal men; the cities are well established, as

are the offices, justice and mercy.”¹⁴⁵ All of this is to say two things. Firstly, that if More intended his *Utopia* to only be read by a select few people he went about making that happen in a very peculiar way. By March 1, 1517, less than 4 months after Martens agreed to print the *Utopia*, Erasmus was already talking to More about a new and revised edition. Also, if he only intended the *Utopia* to be read exclusively as a satire, he went about doing it in an even more peculiar way. He went to tremendous lengths to authenticate his *Utopia* as a record of an actual conversation, with an actual person, about an actual place, and he saw to it personally that his book was not only approved of by fellow humanist philosophers and theologians, but by statesmen, men of power and influence who gave direct counsel to Kings. More states that he intended to give a copy of the *Utopia* to Cardinal Wolsey himself, “if my friend Peter had not, without my knowledge, as you know, ravished her of the first flower of her maidenhood.”¹⁴⁶ He made sure that copies of his book made it into the hands of men like Tunstall, Le Sauvage, Busleyden and Bude. In a letter to Erasmus, dated October 31, 1516, More states:

I am anxious to find out if it (the *Utopia*) meets with the approval of Tunstall, and Busleyden, and your Chancellor (John Le Sauvage, the Chancellor of Castile); but their approval is more than I could wish for, since they are so fortunate as to be top-ranking officials in their own governments, although they might be won over by the fact that in this commonwealth of mine the ruling class would be completely made up of such men as are distinguished for learning and virtue. No matter how powerful those men are in their present governments- and, true, they are very powerful- still they have some high and mighty clowns as their equals, if not their superiors, in authority and influence...I expect, therefore, that those men will also give their approval to my work, and I am very anxious to have it.¹⁴⁷

Why would More do this if he was only poking fun at the scholastics, or the Romans, or the Greeks? Why would More have it distributed so widely if the point of his book could only be perceived by his close circle of friends? Clearly, More intended his *Utopia* to have an actual impact. He wanted it to be read thoughtfully by thinking people, and this is not to say that it is devoid of humor and satire, but that is not its main focus. Marius observes:

More never gave the slightest hint in any of his correspondence about *Utopia* that he intended to play as elaborate a game as the new critics have imagined. Nor did anyone who wrote prefaces of praise for the book let slip the thought that the Utopian commonwealth was intended to be a bad place...The fundamental quality of *Utopia* is conscience, the sense that something has gone terribly wrong with Christian Europe.¹⁴⁸

It is with this in mind that we will now attempt to interpret More's famous work, starting with an examination of the historical context and the intellectual and cultural climate in which More composed the *Utopia* and how these affected the content and objectives of the book.

CHAPTER 6

THE HISTORICAL MILIEU OF MORE'S UTOPIA: THE INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF RENAISSANCE ENGLAND

It is not the aim of this chapter to give a thoroughly detailed account of the historical context of sixteenth century England and Europe. Such work has been accomplished by scholars such as Quentin Skinner, Hexter, Baker-Smith and others. The aim of this chapter will be to briefly provide some historical context to the intellectual climate and culture of the Renaissance England in which More wrote the *Utopia* to help us better understand why More decided to write a book dealing with the subject of the best state of a commonwealth. I will specifically examine the rise of Christian humanism and the revival of classical education and biblical Christianity and how these events led to a renewed interest in the classical questions of whether philosophers should give counsel to kings and what constitutes the best state of a commonwealth, the two principal questions with which *Utopia* deals.

Christian humanism, most famously championed by Erasmus, believed that Christianity had become sterilized by Aristotelian philosophy and Roman law, and that this poisoned version of Christianity was what was being taught in the law and theology faculties of the universities of

Christendom. Hexter, in describing the mindset of Erasmus and others, observes that this teaching, “when it did not engage professional logicians in noisy but sterile arguments, this process led them to something worse. It set them to seeking ways to bring the teaching of the Son of God, who set Himself over against the ways of the world, into accord with Aristotle’s philosophy and Roman law, which accepted the world, never looking or thinking beyond it.”¹⁴⁹ Christianity had, therefore, become very worldly. Men were to seek their own gain and build up their treasures here on earth. Everyone should seek to better themselves first and accumulate as much wealth, power, and honor as possible for the family. Force could be met with force, if it was justified. Vengeance belongs to the wronged, not just to the Lord, and war, if it was a just war, instead of being seen as a dreaded and terrible thing, was viewed as being glorious.¹⁵⁰ Christendom was being driven, therefore, not by a love of the Savior and of His Word and Church, but by a love of money and power, and this had resulted in a society of greed, pride and tyranny, three things which the humanists abhorred. True, biblical Christianity was dead. The heart of Christ had been taken out of it. The Word of God had been distorted, twisted, abused, and shredded. Heartless and dispassionate, Christianity had been reduced to an empty ritualistic gesture. Hexter observes:

To stimulate life in such a body (the dead body of Christianity) it must be put through ever more exacting and ever more numerous formal and mechanical motions. What are the motions? Pilgrimages, worship of relics, hagiolatry, fasts, rites of all sorts, degenerating at the worst into sheer superstition and magic-mongering. And who beat the drums for this vain parade? The beneficiaries of course: the monks with their collection of relics, the ignorant friars, the lordly bishops. It cannot be otherwise. Once the teaching of Christ is rationalized away, there is nothing left but external acts of sacerdotally certified and clerically sponsored busy-work.¹⁵¹

This lamenting of the state of Christendom was frequently the subject matter of Erasmus’ works, his *Praise of Folly*, his *Colloquies*, and his *Adages*. The humanists probably could not help but be reminded of the words of the prophet Isaiah to the nation of Israel:

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? Saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of red beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and Sabbaths, the calling of new assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.¹⁵²

Soulless ritual offended God then, surely it must be offending God now. And the lawless conduct of the monks, friars and bishops who perform these rituals are like the Levitical priests who offered their pious and holy sacrifices with hands full of blood. The humanists were deeply concerned with this, and curing this ill became the passion of the teachers of the New Learning, such as John Colet and William Grocyn.

The aim of education in early sixteenth-century England was very career-oriented. The system was designed to create lawyers, administrators, physicians and theologians in a very uniform way. If you wanted to have an ecclesiastical career, you went to the universities and studied Latin, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy, and eventually philosophy and theology. The universities were almost exclusively devoted to men with ambitions for an ecclesiastical career. If you wanted to do a trade you would embark on a lengthy and difficult apprenticeship laid down by the masters of the various trade guilds. If you were the son of a nobleman or a gentleman you were often farmed out to one of the great households to receive an education in etiquette and social skills which would help you carry on the family's honor. More himself was sent to the home of Archbishop John Morton where he attended Morton and his guests for two years. Derek Wilson describes his duties as follows: "Setting up trestle tables in the great hall, serving wine from the ewers ranged on the buffets, ensuring that the oak livery cupboards in the sleeping chambers were charged with fresh food, packing the archbishop's

silver and gilt plate into the great iron-bound coffers when he travelled from one palace to another.”¹⁵³ Most every boy from a well to do family participated in such an arrangement at some point in their education.

If you wanted to be a lawyer you studied at one of the inns of Chancery. This was the vocation that John More wanted desperately for his son. Thomas More received his pre-university education at St. Anthony’s on Threadneedle Street, the leading grammar-school in London. The students there were taught Latin. They were taught how to read Latin, how to write Latin, how to dispute in Latin, and they were expected to memorize many Classical Latin texts and passages. St. Anthony’s was, of course, a very exclusive school, but all grammar schools were expected to have the same educational format, however the quality of the education from school to school was very inconsistent. Some students were taught by university-trained specialists while others were taught by a poor chantry priest with little to no knowledge of Latin.¹⁵⁴

From 1492 to 1494, More was fortunate enough to attend Oxford and get a taste of the new learning which was just beginning to make itself known there. He sat under men like William Grocyn, who taught Greek, and Thomas Linacre. Both men had just returned from Italy and were overflowing with enthusiasm for Renaissance humanism. As much as this was his element, More, out of a sense of duty to his father, would go on to study law at New Inn, where he received grounding in the mechanics of the English judicial system.¹⁵⁵ He then proceeded to Lincoln’s Inn where he listened to the readers expound from the standard great works and where he engaged in the “moots”, where points of law and their application were debated in Latin. This education soon established More as a reader at Furnival’s Inn. Lawyers trained at these inns were

often positioned as the most influential people in the land. Erasmus observed, “For remote as that profession (the law) is from true learning, those who become masters of it have the highest rank and reputation among their countrymen; and it is difficult to find any readier road to fortune and honor. Indeed a considerable part of the nobility of that island had its origin in this profession.”¹⁵⁶

Education in sixteenth century England was uniform and mechanical with similar outcomes expected of all. The humanists wanted more. They wanted to expand education to include not just a study of Latin and rhetoric, but of Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic, as well as the great works of antiquity and the church fathers. Their entire philosophy of education was different. Wilson observes, “For them (the humanists) the aim of education was not the training of men for their chosen station in life; it was to make better men, men morally and intellectually equipped to lead virtuous lives of service to God and King.”¹⁵⁷ More understood the value of this kind of a well-rounded education. Gerard B. Wegemer observes that even in his early years, “More seemed to realize that, whatever profession he would choose, he needed the philosopher’s understanding of human nature, the historian’s appreciation of his country, the theologian’s perspective on eternity, and the poet’s art of moving hearts.”¹⁵⁸ For the humanist then, the new learning required a reforming of the narrowly conceived curricula and a purging of the mind-numbing and meaningless texts of the medieval Scholastics. The Old and New Testaments needed to be read and studied in their original languages. They believed this would revive true Christianity and purify Christendom of its false doctrines and pagan religiosity, which they believed had been caused by the Scholastic’s endless synthesizing of Aristotelian philosophy with Christ’s teachings. To get an idea of how tedious and exacting medieval textbooks could be,

Wilson offers the following excerpt from one of those textbooks giving an exegesis on the dimensions of Noah's ark:

Now the fact that the ark is six times as long as it is broad and ten times as long as it is deep presents an exact likeness with the human body in which Christ was made manifest. For the length of a body from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot is six times the breadth, that is to say from one side to the other, and it is ten times its height, that is the measurement from the back to the belly, etc...¹⁵⁹

Tiresome studies like these were standard and it was expected of students to memorize these texts in the eight years they spent studying for their master's degree. John Colet's style of education was altogether different.

In 1497, having returned to Oxford from a long stay in Italy, Colet delivered a series of lectures on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The students were packed into the lecture halls to hear the thirty-year old scholar expound this famous biblical text. Wilson states that Colet "interpreted the Scriptures with a vividness and directness altogether unprecedented. He brought the epistle to life and actually presented Paul before his enthralled students as a real person. He set the apostle in his historical setting and then expounded the plain words of the text, applying them to contemporary life."¹⁶⁰ In lecturing on Paul, Colet taught that Paul was a tentmaker and therefore earned his own living to support his ministries. He did not take alms from the poor like the monks and friars were doing. He also taught that Paul made a voluntary collection for the saints at Jerusalem. He did not forcibly extort money from people through tithes and oblations. He also taught that salvation was by faith and that rites and ceremonies did not justify a man nor did they cleanse his soul of impurity. Colet's lectures were therefore very controversial and very anti-establishment, making them all the more popular with a generation of younger students who were disillusioned by what seemed to them to be an oppressive and outdated system.¹⁶¹

Although More had left Oxford by this time, Colet was no stranger to him. Erasmus had come to England in 1499 to hear Colet teach, and it was More who entertained him during this brief visit.¹⁶² No doubt they spoke at length about the ideas Colet was propounding at one of Christendom's most highly esteemed universities. A revolution was brewing, and they both knew it. It was actually Colet's teaching that inspired Erasmus to master the Greek language, which he took to with great enthusiasm. He subjected himself to intensive studies day and night for three years, continually asking his friends for books and for money for teachers. He rewarded his friend's generosity by embarking on one of the most ambitious projects of the Renaissance- a new translation of the Greek New Testament, the *Novum Instrumentum*, to correct the inaccuracies of Jerome's Latin translation, the Vulgate.¹⁶³ It was Erasmus' vision that if men everywhere could read the gospel, then surely they would begin to live by the gospel. In the preface to his *Novum Instrumentum*, Erasmus states, "I should wish that all good wives read the Gospel and Paul's epistles; that they were translated into all languages; that out of these the husbandman sang while ploughing, the weaver at his loom; that with such stories the traveler should beguile his wayfaring."¹⁶⁴ It was a project that would win him both high praise and fiery condemnation.

In 1504, Colet was made Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and in 1508 he founded St. Paul's School, which was soon to be a rival to St. Anthony's as the most prominent school in London. More frequently heard Colet preach from St. Paul's Cross, the most exalted pulpit in England, and often sat in on his lectures at the School. More also gave lectures of his own. Grocyn, who was by now vicar of St. Lawrence Jewry and a lecturer on the church fathers at St. Paul's, invited More to give a series of lectures on St. Augustine's *The City of God* at his church. More was only twenty-three years old and had no degree, but he lectured before an audience that included

“Doctor Grocyn, an excellent wise man, and all the chief learned men of the City of London.” It was “to his great commendation.”¹⁶⁵ As well as attending and giving lectures, More would also regularly meet with Colet in his home or join him for a walk along the riverbank to discuss important issues of the day. Wilson has described Colet and his disciples as “a self-conscious avant-garde clique who believed themselves to be leading a liberated generation of scholars.”¹⁶⁶ Colet’s disciples were not only students; they were educated clergy and laymen, gentlemen and lawyers, abbots and friars, and courtiers and royal tutors. The times were changing. Scholasticism and monasticism were on the way out and the study of languages and classical literature were on the way in. Between 1441 and 1546, a total of eight colleges at Cambridge and five at Oxford were founded or refounded. Henry VII’s mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort, founded Christ’s and John’s colleges at Cambridge, as well as several divinity professorships at both Oxford and Cambridge, so that students could receive free theological education. There were lectures on Greek and Hebrew, as well as arithmetic, geometry, perspective, cosmography, Arabic and Chaldea. Between 1511 and 1514, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge was none other than Erasmus himself. Students in these classes included Thomas Cramner, Hugh Latimer, Thomas Bilney, William Tyndale, Miles Coverdale, John Frith, and Robert Barnes, to name a few. Not only was humanism flourishing in the colleges, but Lutheranism and the Protestant reformation as well.

Lady Margaret also provided for public sermons to be preached by educated and well-qualified teachers. Public preaching was quite uncommon at this time, primarily because most parish priests were either unwilling or unable to deliver sermons. This was one of the chief humanist grievances that people were not being taught by the so-called religious leaders of the day.¹⁶⁷ For most people Christianity was a series of rituals and duties, it was not a lifestyle. To

earn salvation you paid your tithes and other duties, you received communion regularly, you made offerings to the shrines of saints, you contributed to the work of the church, you paid mortuary fees, wedding, funeral and burial fees, you sometimes paid for confession and to have a priest bring you communion when you were sick, you paid for dispensations for infringements of canon law, and you paid priests and monks to pray for your soul and to hold masses for your soul after you passed on. This is what many priests did for their congregations. They were often uneducated, often unqualified, often absent from their parishes, giving or denying communion, praying for the dead, and receiving an income from numerous taxes and fees under threat of excommunication and hellfire.¹⁶⁸ Therefore, Lady Margaret's initiative of public preaching and teaching was welcomed with open arms by the humanists.

With all of this revival of the Greek language and the great works of antiquity came a renewed interest in two of the most important questions of the ancient world: what is the best state of a commonwealth and which is better, to dedicate oneself to the business of the city or to abandon the city for the sake of leisure?¹⁶⁹ It is no surprise then that these are the two questions which the *Utopia* asks. Book I deals with the question of the value of civic engagement while Book II deals with the question of a just and virtuous society. No doubt the *Utopia* represents the debate More was having within himself about the usefulness of a public career and about what kind of a society he wanted to be an active part of. I will now deal more specifically with the immediate historical and biographical context of the year 1515 when More wrote the *Utopia*.

CHAPTER 7

THE HISTORICAL MILIEU OF MORE'S UTOPIA: THE QUESTIONS OF THE BEST
STATE OF A COMMONWEALTH AND THE VALUE OF COUNSEL

In the previous chapter I examined how the English Renaissance brought about a renewed interest in the wisdom of the ancients and the questions of the value of philosophers giving counsel to kings and the best state of a commonwealth, the two questions which More explores in his *Utopia*. Having now established the general reasons for why More chose to write a book dealing with these two questions and what some of his passions and desires were in writing and educating people, I will now examine more specifically why these two questions became so important to More in 1515. By examining the immediate context of More's life in 1515, we will understand how More chose the style and content of his work, and what his objectives were in writing it- namely to provide a platform to discuss England's political, social and religious issues. I will begin by examining the literary context of "Prince Books" which were being published all over Europe. This helps us understand More's choice of style. I will then discuss the circumstances of More's entrance into the King's service and how those circumstances immediately affected More in 1515 and how those circumstances shaped the content and objectives of the *Utopia*. Lastly, I will discuss how More's experiences are reflected in the pages of the *Utopia*, showing that the *Utopia* is not merely a socio-political treatise, but it is a personal work as well.

The *Utopia*, a landmark book in its genre, was not entirely unique in its style and content. Books' portraying what a just society looks like and how a righteous King would govern such a realm were becoming more and more commonplace. Machiavelli completed his *The Prince* at

the beginning of 1514; Seysell presented his *La Monarchie* to Francis I in 1515; Erasmus published his *Education of a Christian Prince* in 1516; and Bude completed *De L'institution du Prince* in 1519. These books became known as 'Prince Books' because they gave advice to princes on how to rule effectively. Humanists, such as More, felt these books were necessary because, "From the prince, as from a perpetual wellspring, comes among the people the flood of all that is good or evil."¹⁷⁰ Hexter observes:

A curious concatenation of *virtu* and *fortuna* had provided Western Europe with an array of vigorous monarchs- Ferdinand and Isabella, Henry VII and Henry VIII, the Archduke Charles who became Charles V, Francis I, even Louis XII- at a moment in history when, to rulers with a will to act, wide opportunities for decisive action in both foreign and domestic affairs opened up. At the same time the external limit on that will was solely the power of the other monarchs, and the limits within each realm were ill defined. The intention of the authors of books of advice to princes makes sense in such a context, however limited the efficacy of their labors...the books figured forth to actual monarchs the ideal of the perfect prince. In terms of more recent vintage, they sought to restrain the ids and the egos of monarchs by appealing to their ego-ideals and superegos.¹⁷¹

'Prince Books' addressed political and social problems, not by directly and plainly speaking about the issues, but by drawing a picture of the ideal dominion and the ideal king who governed it, against which a monarch could compare themselves. In speaking about his panegyric to Philip the Handsome, Erasmus states:

There is no such efficacious mode of making a prince better, as that of setting before him, under the guise of praise, the example of a good sovereign, provided you so attribute virtues and deny vices, as to persuade him to the former and deter him from the latter...that by having the image of virtue put before them, bad princes might be made better, the good encouraged, the ignorant instructed, the mistaken set right, the wavering quickened, and even the abandoned brought to some sense of shame.¹⁷²

More would seem to agree, as is evidenced by his advice to Thomas Cromwell:

Master Cromwell, you are now entered into the service of a most noble, wise and liberal prince. If you will follow my poor advice, you shall, in your counsel-giving unto his grace, ever tell him what he ought to do, but never what he is able to do. So shall you show yourself a true

faithful servant and a right worthy Counselor. For if a lion knew his own strength, hard were it for any man to rule him.¹⁷³

Although it could be debated whether More's *Utopia* can really be categorized as a 'Prince Book', as it is not exclusively a guide for monarchs on how to govern, it certainly follows the pattern of the popular political texts of the period in that instead of directly addressing the issues plaguing Europe it creates a fictional island commonwealth against which its European readers can compare their society and come to an understanding of the issues. These books were being widely received by Europe's monarchs. What better time for More to pen his *Utopia* then at a time when most scholars were debating the question of the best state of a commonwealth, and monarchs seemed willing to be educated on how to govern justly and benevolently. Henry VIII was seemingly no exception. Erasmus had many good things to say about the young King. In his letter to Von Hutten, Erasmus said of Henry VIII, "no one more courteous or less exacting than this Prince could be desired."¹⁷⁴ Also, in discussing More's appointment to Henry VIII's court, Erasmus states:

Such are the persons whom a wise King admits into his household and into his chamber; and not only admits, but invites, nay, compels to come in. These he has by him as constant witness and judges of his life- as his advisers and traveling companions. By these he rejoices to be accompanied, rather than by dissolute young men or fops, or even by decorated grandees, or crafty ministers, one of whom would lure him to silly amusements, another would incite him to tyranny, and a third would suggest some fresh schemes for plundering his people. If you had lived at this Court, you would, I am sure, give a new description of Court life, and cease to be *Misaulos* (a Court hater). However, you too live with so good a prince that you cannot wish for a better, and have some companions like Stromer and Copp, whose sympathies are on the right side. But what is that small number compared with such a swarm of distinguished men as Mountjoy, Linacre, Pace, Colet, Stokesley, Latimer, More, Tunstall, Clerk, and others like them, any one of whose names signifies at once a world of virtues and accomplishments?¹⁷⁵

Henry VIII was the hope of many humanists. He was a patron of learning, and as is evidenced by the list of names given by Erasmus, was fond of having fellow patrons of learning

as his advisers and personal companions, and he did indeed compel More to come into his household. Erasmus states:

King Henry in consequence would never rest until he dragged him (More) to his Court. 'Dragged him', I say, and with reason; for no one was ever more ambitious to be admitted into a Court than he was anxious to escape it. But as this excellent monarch was resolved to pack his household with learned, serious, intelligent and honest men, he especially insisted upon having More among them and is on such terms of intimacy with him that he cannot bear to let him go. If serious affairs are in hand, no one gives wiser counsel; if it pleases the King to relax his mind with agreeable conversation, no man is better company.¹⁷⁶

More was indeed very reluctant to enter Henry VIII's service, and many scholars have interpreted his hesitation as evidence that he despised public life and royal service. More's personal correspondence would certainly seem to confirm this interpretation. In a letter to Erasmus, More wrote, "You are wise in keeping yourself from being mixed up in the busy trifles of princes; and it shows love for me that you wish me rid of them; you would hardly believe how unwilling I am. Nothing could be more hateful to me than this mission."¹⁷⁷ Was royal service really so repugnant to More? Wilson claims it was not:

More's skepticism about courts and kings did not prevent his commending himself to the new monarch with an epithalamium on Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. He saw no contradiction in winning the patronage and friendship of Archbishop Warham, Morton's successor at Canterbury. His reputation as a wit and scholar won him many friends at court and we know that during Henry VII's reign he had access to the household of the royal children. There is no evidence that he deliberately shunned the limelight or declined the opportunities which his contacts brought him. He may have entertained doubts about the wisdom of entering the royal service but he kept those doubts for his private correspondence. In his public life he was completely involved in the system of patronage. He sought it and accepted it.¹⁷⁸

It is true that More did not entirely detest his position at the King's Court. In a letter to John Fisher, written circa 1517-1518, More states:

Much against my will did I come to Court (as everyone knows, and as the King himself in joke sometimes like to reproach me). So far I keep my place there as precariously as an unaccustomed rider in his saddle. But the King (whose special favor I am far from enjoying) is so courteous and kindly to all that everyone (who is in any way hopeful) finds a ground for

imagining that he is in the King's good graces...But I am not so fortunate as to perceive such signs of favor, nor so despondent as to imagine them. But the King has the virtue and learning and makes great progress in both with almost daily renewed zeal, so that the more I see His Majesty increase in all the good and really kingly qualities, the less burdensome do I feel this life of the Court.¹⁷⁹

So how do we explain More's uncertainty and indecision as he expresses it in his letters?

There are several possibilities. It may be that More's experiences with Henry VII marked him and made him wary of the value of offering counsel to kings. In his account of the life of More, Roper tells the story of how More, operating as a Burgess, caused Parliament to reject Henry VII's request for a tax to be granted for the marriage of his eldest daughter, who was to be the Scottish Queen. Roper recounts that a Mr. Tyler, who was present at the Parliament's last debate on the subsidy, told the king that a "beardless boy had disappointed all his purposes."¹⁸⁰

According to Roper, Henry VII took out his vengeance on More by locking his father in the Tower until More agreed to pay him a fine of a hundred pounds. So great was the King's wrath against More that Roper states, "Had not the King soon after died, he (More) was determined to have gone over the sea, thinking that being in the King's indignation he could not live in England without great danger."¹⁸¹ Although this matter may have left a bitter taste in More's mouth, it was not Henry VII who was calling him to the Court in 1516, it was Henry VIII, that "most victorious and triumphant King of England...in all royal virtues, prince most peerless."¹⁸² Henry VIII had proven himself to be more to More's liking than Henry VII. He had already filled the seats of his advisory committee with the more learned and wise humanists of England, and More was to be the crown. Henry VIII was a lover of music, theology and philosophy, and More knew it. That More may have been afraid that Henry VIII would turn out to be like his father is not an altogether unreasonable explanation for More's hesitancy, but it does not seem to be the best line of reasoning.

Another possibility is that More was still considering a cloistered religious and academic life, although obviously by 1516 he could not go so far as to take vows. Nicholas Harpsfield has most popularly espoused the view that More strongly desired the monastic life, by citing the years More spent living with an order of Carthusian monks in the Charterhouse of London, while studying law. It was possible for lay scholars to live in the Charterhouse for a time under monastic regulations without taking vows. However this explanation of More's hesitancy also seems unlikely. By the time Cardinal Wolsey had started to try and actively recruit More for Henry VIII's service, More had been out of the Charterhouse for some time. In speaking about More's time at the Charterhouse, Erasmus observes, "Therein he showed much more wisdom than the generality of people, who rashly undertake so arduous a profession without testing themselves beforehand."¹⁸³ Harpsfield concurs: "for he (More) continued after his foresaid reading four years and more full virtuously and religiously in great devotion and prayer with the monks...either to see and prove whether he could frame himself to that kind of life, or at least for a time to sequester himself from all temporal and worldly exercises."¹⁸⁴ It would seem that More tested himself with "watchings and fastings and prayers and such like exercises"¹⁸⁵ and found that the solitary religious life was not for him. However, it is important to remember that before More spent time at the Charterhouse, he had spent two years at Oxford, excelling greatly in his studies, so much so that Harpsfield observes, "if he had settled and fixed himself, and had run his full race in the study of the liberal sciences and divinity, I trow he would have been the singular and the only spectacle of this our time for learning."¹⁸⁶ More had only returned after two years because "his father minded that he should tread after his steps, and settle his whole mind and study upon the laws of the Realm."¹⁸⁷ It seems odd then that More, who had left his first love, the university, to become a lawyer to satisfy his father's expectations, would even consider the

possibility of taking vows at this particular time in his life. Ultimately, instead of vows, More had chosen to marry the eldest daughter of Mr. Colt, a gentleman of Essex with whom More had been lodging. Erasmus observes, “He resolved to be a chaste husband rather than a licentious priest.”¹⁸⁸ He had three daughters and a son by her and was determined to be very involved in their lives and education. Roper notes that More’s children were “brought up from their youth in virtue and learning, whom he (More) would often exhort to take virtue and learning for their meat, and play for their sauce.”¹⁸⁹ A husband and a father, More had also been called to the Bench and read twice. He also served, as we have seen, as a Burgess in the Parliament late into Henry VII’s reign and as one of the under-sheriffs of London. Roper states that More was held in such high regard for his performance of his duties that “before he came into the service of King Henry the Eighth, he was, at the request of the English Merchants, by the King’s consent, made twice ambassador in certain great cases between them and the Merchants of the ‘Steelyard.’ His wise and discreet dealing therein, to his high commendation...led his Highness to cause Cardinal Wolsey...to procure him for his service.”¹⁹⁰ Roper’s account is factually flawed here as More’s second embassy was not for matters between the English Merchants and the Steelyard but for the French merchants of Calais,¹⁹¹ however the substance of the argument remains the same- if More was desiring an entirely detached and isolated life of reading and writing, completely separate from politics, the law and society, he was doing the exact opposite of what he needed to do to make that happen. He got married, had a family, and was immersing himself more and more in a public career. Also, More’s humanist opinion was clearly such that a private religious or intellectual life was of very little profit to the world, and a Christian humanist’s duty was to preach Christ and teach holiness to a spiritually dead world that desperately needed life. In his

letter to a monk, More passionately defends Erasmus and vehemently attacks the monastic's total withdrawal from society and individualistic religiosity:

No matter what his (Erasmus') other characteristics may be, and they are splendid, as for his habit of roaming, which is the object of your rude attack, I would definitely not hesitate to prefer it to any one of your virtues, ever one in which you take greatest pride. I imagine that one who has a penchant for relaxation and shudders at hard work would rather squat with you than roam with him. If one looks at his hard work, he sometimes does more work in one day than your people do in several months; if one judges the value of his work, he sometimes has done more for the whole Church in one month than you have in several years, unless you suppose that anybody's fastings or pious prayers have as deep and wide an influence as his brilliant works, which are educating the entire world to the meaning of true holiness...God will prefer his use of the tongue to your silence, his silence to your prayers, his eating to your fasting, his sleeping to your vigils, and, in a word, everything you haughtily disdain in him, God will esteem much more than all the things that fascinate you in your way of life.¹⁹²

So why did More spend four years at the Charterhouse? Louis L. Martz offers an alternative explanation:

These devotions at the Charterhouse must have gone on concurrently with his work as a lawyer, for there is no evidence at all that he gave up his legal profession to enter upon a concentrated four-year retreat. Whether or not he actually lived in the Charterhouse remains uncertain...with More's habit of early rising, he could have performed his devotions for several hours in the very early morning, attended his legal business for most of the day, and returned to the Charterhouse for further devotions in the evening. As Harpsfield suggests...it appears that More used the Charterhouse as a place of meditation and prayer concerning his vocation, to perform what were later called "exercises of election"- spiritual exercises performed in order to see if he would follow a religious or a secular career. But his choice of the Charterhouse as the place to pursue these meditations does not necessarily indicate (as Harpsfield recognized) a tendency toward the monastic life. Everything else we know of More's activity during these early years indicates that he is tending toward a scholarly life in the world....a career in orders that would satisfy his religious instinct as well as his love of scholarship and literature, a career that might well lead to his office in the church and important influence in the affairs of state. We might think of this young More as a future Bishop of London, Archbishop of York, or Archbishop of Canterbury- all positions in which his legal training would have been of great advantage.¹⁹³

This interpretation fits better with what we know of More during these years. Obviously More gave up the ambition of gaining power within the church when he married, but that did not stop him from actively serving in an authoritative manner. Roper states: "And as little leisure as

he had to spend in the study of Holy Scripture and controversies upon religion and such other like virtuous exercises, being in manner continually busied about the affair of the King and the realm, yet he assuredly took care and pains in setting forth divers profitable works in defense of the true Catholic religion against heresies, secretly sown abroad in the realm,” so much so that the bishops considered themselves “discharged of their duty.”¹⁹⁴ Clearly More never gave up wanting to serve the Church in a leadership capacity. Perhaps this is why More allows priests to marry in the *Utopia*.¹⁹⁵ He may at least have played around with the idea. Nevertheless, it is evident that although More spent four years at the Charterhouse, at least every morning and evening, he was committed to becoming a lawyer, husband and father and therefore he was not considering a life of religious or academic isolation.

Therefore to what do we attribute his hesitancy? If it was not a reluctance to serve Henry VIII specifically or a desire to eventually withdraw from public life and royal service, what kept More from immediately accepting Henry VIII’s offers? The answer may lie in how confining More considered a life of service in the King’s court. More had complained in his prefatory letter to Giles that as a lawyer, not yet in the service of the King, he found very little free time for his personal studies and his books, especially his *Utopia*, for which he claims he was spared the time consuming work of research: “But now since all the cares, hindrances, and obstructions were absent, on which otherwise so much labor and effort would have been spent, and there remained nothing else for me to do but only to write plainly the story as I heard it told, that was indeed a slight thing and easy to be done.”¹⁹⁶ We of course know this is not true, and is simply part of More’s effort to legitimize the *Utopia*. More had to put a tremendous amount of creative thought into his imaginary world, and into the fictional character of Hythloday himself. Yet as More

defends his tardiness in getting a copy of the *Utopia* to Giles, he does realistically describe the busyness of his everyday life:

Howbeit for the dispatch of this little business (recounting Hythloday's tale of Utopia), my other cares and troubles left me almost less than no leisure. One while, I am every putting my time on law matters- on some as pleader, on some as hearer, on some as an arbitrator with my award to determine, on some as an umpire or a judge with my sentence finally to declare. Another while, I am going one way to see and visit my friends, another way about my own private affairs. At times I spend almost all day abroad with others, the rest at home with my own. I leave no time for myself, I mean for my book.¹⁹⁷

What affairs occupied More's time? Firstly, More was a student. He enjoyed reading, writing and translating works of theology and philosophy and there is no denying that it was in this capacity he felt most able, as is evidenced by his vastly diverse bibliography. However he was also a student of the law. In many ways he had been forced into law by his father. Erasmus tells us that so great was John More's hostility towards his son's liberal arts education that he almost disinherited him unless he came back from Oxford and studied law: "From his earliest years he (More) drank deep of good letters; and as a young man, he applied himself to the study of Greek and philosophy; but his father was so far from encouraging him in this pursuit, that he withdrew his allowance and almost disowned him, because he thought he was deserting his hereditary calling (English law)."¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, More committed himself to the law, even if only out of a sense of duty to his father.

Secondly, not only was More a devoted student and lawyer, he was also a deeply devoted son of the Church. Erasmus states, "However averse he may be to superstition, he is a steady follower of true piety, with regular hours for his prayers, which are uttered not by rote, but from the heart."¹⁹⁹ Roper also states, "Sir Thomas More's daily custom was, if here were at home, besides his private prayers with his children, to say the seven psalms, litany, and suffrages

following. It was also his habit nightly, before he went to bed, to go to his chapel with his wife, children and household, and there upon his knees ordinarily to say certain psalms and collects with them.”²⁰⁰ It is clear from this that he was not only a devoted Catholic, but also a devoted father and husband. Erasmus recounts that:

He (More) rules his whole household, in which there are no tragic incidents, and no quarrels. If anything of the kind should seem likely to happen, he either calms it down, or at once applies a remedy. And in parting with any member of his household he has never acted in a hostile spirit, or treated him as an enemy. Indeed his house seems to have a sort of charmed felicity, no one having lived in it without being advanced to higher fortune, no inmate having ever had a stain upon his character.²⁰¹

More was devoted to the education of his wife and children and even managed to have his second wife, Alice, comply to a daily routine of practicing the harp, the viol, the spinet, and the flute, even though she was a woman who was “already elderly...not naturally of a yielding character, and whose mind” was “occupied with business.”²⁰² Thomas Stapleton informs us that More taught not only his four children (Margaret, Elizabeth, Cecily and John), but eleven of his grandchildren as well.²⁰³ More was also an advocate of women’s education. In a letter to Gunnell, More states:

Nor do I think that the harvest will be much affected whether it is a man or a woman who sows the field. They both have the same human nature, which reason differentiates from that of beasts; both, therefore, are equally suited for those studies by which reason is cultivated, and becomes fruitful like a ploughed land on which the seed of good lessons has been sown. If it be true that the soil of woman’s brain be bad, and apter to bear bracken than corn, by which saying many keep women from study, I think, on the contrary, that a woman’s wit is on that account all the more diligently to be cultivated, that nature’s defect may be redressed by industry. This was the opinion of the ancients, of those who were most prudent as well as most holy. Not to speak of the rest, St. Jerome and St. Augustine not only exhorted excellent matrons and most noble virgins to study, but also, in order to assist them, diligently explained the abstruse meanings of Holy Scripture, and wrote for tender girls letters replete with so much erudition, that now-a-days old men, who call themselves professors of sacred science, can scarcely read them correctly, much less understand them. Do you, my learned Gunnell, have the kindness to see that my daughters thoroughly learn these works of those holy men. From them they will learn in particular what end they should propose to themselves in their studies and what is the fruit of

their endeavors, namely the testimony of God and a good conscience. Thus peace and calm will abide in their hearts and they will be disturbed neither by fulsome flattery nor by the stupidity of those illiterate men who despise learning.²⁰⁴

That More was deeply interested in his family's education is evidenced consistently by his correspondence. In a letter to his eldest, and dearest, daughter Margaret, he wrote: "I was delighted to receive your letter...I should have been still more delighted if you had told me of the studies you and your brother are engaged in, of your daily reading, your pleasant discussions, your essays, of the swift passage of the days made joyous by literary pursuits." He concludes: "I beg you, Margaret, tell me about the progress you are all making in your studies. For I assure you that, rather than allow my children to be idle and slothful, I would make a sacrifice of wealth, and bid adieu to other cares and business, to attend to my children and my family, amongst whom none is more dear to me than yourself."²⁰⁵ In another letter to his children, More wrote:

The Bristol merchant brought me your letters the day after he left you, with which I was extremely delighted...There was not one of your letters that did not please me extremely; but, to confess ingenuously what I feel, the letter of my son John pleased me best, both because it was longer than the others, and because he seems to have given to it more labor and study. For he not only put out his matter prettily and composed in fairly polished language, but he plays with me both pleasantly and cleverly, and turns my jokes on myself wittily enough. And this he does not only merrily, but with due moderation, showing that he does not forget that he is joking with his father, and that he is cautious not to give offence at the same time that he is eager to give delight...One thing, however, I admonish you, whether you write serious matters or the merest trifles, it is my wish that you write everything diligently and thoughtfully. It will be no harm, if you first write the whole in English, for then you will have much less trouble in turning it into Latin; not having to look for the matter, your mind will be intent only on the language. That, however, I leave to your own choice, whereas I strictly enjoin you that whatever you have composed carefully examine before writing it out clean; and in this examination first scrutinize the whole sentence and then every part of it. Thus, if any solecisms have escaped you, you will easily detect them. Correct these, write out the whole letter again, and even then examine it once more, for sometimes, in rewriting, faults slip in again that one had expunged. By this diligence your little trifles will become serious matters; for while there is nothing so neat and witty that will not be made insipid by silly and inconsiderate loquacity, so also there is nothing in itself so insipid, that you cannot season it with grace and wit, if you give a little thought to it.²⁰⁶

Family was central for More and he gave them as much of himself as he could.

Lastly, not only was More a devoted family man, but he was also a devoted friend.

Erasmus has famously said that More was “born and made for friendship.”²⁰⁷ Erasmus goes on to say:

Neither is he afraid of that multiplicity of friends, of which Hesiod disapproves. Accessible to every offer of intimacy, he is by no means fastidious in choosing his acquaintances, while he is most accommodating in keeping on with them, and constant in retaining them...when he has found sincere friends, whose characters are suited to his own, he is so delighted with their society and conversation, that he seems to see in them the chief pleasure of life...no one takes more pains in attending to the concerns of his friends.²⁰⁸

Erasmus concludes, “If anyone asks for a perfect example of true friendship, it is in More that he will best find it.”²⁰⁹

With his love for family and friends and his earnest desire to spend quality time with them, as well as his responsibilities as a lawyer and his passion for learning and teaching, More was obviously a very busy man, and he knew that the King’s Court would limit his freedom and time even more. This is most likely why More was hesitant to enter the King’s service, not because he despised monarchs or public service. More wanted to serve, but with the kind of unrestricted freedom that Erasmus enjoyed. In his letter to a monk, More says the following of Erasmus:

He spends his time only with those men approved for learning and goodness, and, as a result, his mind is ever nurturing some unborn idea, which eventually will be brought forth to the general profit of scholarship; but if he had preferred his own personal comfort, he would not be much healthier in body and also much richer in money, because rulers and leaders all over the world have been competing with one another to win him with their extraordinary offers. Since, wherever he is, he scatters abroad, as the sun its rays, his wonderful riches, it was only a matter of justice that comparable returns be made to him from all sides. Because he dedicates himself completely to the service of others and expects no personal reward in this life, I am sure that the all-kind God will repay him in that place where he would rather receive his reward.²¹⁰

Full time service for the King meant that reading and writing would be a luxury. The majority of his time would be spent at Court and then a small amount of the time remaining would be dedicated to his household and to his friends, and then whatever miniscule moments were left in the day or in the week could be spent on personal studies. More's prediction would prove to be correct. Roper recounts how often More was called on by the King:

When he (More) perceived that the King so much delighted in his talk that he could not once in a month get leave to go home to his wife and children (whose company he most desired) and that he could not be absent from the Court two days together without being thither sent for again, he, much disliking this restraint of liberty, began thereupon somewhat to dissemble his nature, and so little by little to desist from his former mirth so that he was thenceforth no more than ordinarily sent for by them.²¹¹

It may be that this is why More's Utopians made special exemption from manual labor for their "learned":

Scarcely 500 persons of the whole number of men and women, who are neither too old not too weak to work, are freed from labor....vacation from labor is also enjoyed by those to whom the people, persuaded by the commendation of the priests and the secret election of the syphogrants, have given a perpetual freedom from labor for learning. But if any one of them prove not equal to the expectation and hope conceived of him, he is forthwith plucked back into the company of artisans. And contrariwise, often it chances that a handicraftsman does so earnestly bestow his vacant and spare hours in learning, and through diligence so profits therein that he is taken from his manual occupation, and promoted to the company of the learned. Out of this order of the learned are chosen ambassadors, priests, tranibores, and finally the prince himself.²¹²

More knew that royal service would come at a great cost to his personal liberty, and therefore he hesitated to enter King Henry VIII's service because he wanted to make absolutely sure that it would be worth it and that his service would make an actual difference. This context provides two reasons for why More wrote the *Utopia* when he did and why. Firstly, the debate over the value of philosophers giving counsel to kings had now become a debate with very real and immediate and practical implications for More. It had moved from the realm of theory and speculation to that of reality, therefore More dramatized the debate that he was having within

himself using his characters More and Hythloday, and this is mainly the content that comprises Book I of the *Utopia*. The question of what constitutes the best state of a commonwealth had also become very personal for More, because now More was considering embarking on a public career that would directly deal with the political, religious and social issues of the English commonwealth at the highest level and his actions and advice would now have an actual impact. Therefore More needed to seriously consider his thoughts on the commonwealth, and the *Utopia* allowed him to create a fictional society where he could play around with some of his ideas. More had not yet formulated all of his opinions on these issues and so the *Utopia* was not written to provide a definitive worldview or ready-made model for socio-political reform. It was written to draw attention to the importance of the issues and provide a springboard for debate and discussion. It was written to formalize some of More's own personal thoughts and feelings on this all-important question of what a just and virtuous commonwealth looks like, but it was also written to formalize some of the thoughts of the Greek, Roman and medieval writers that he loved and studied on this issue, as we shall see.

Secondly, the dreaded sense of the impending surrender of his freedom and intellectual pursuits for service to the King gave More a sense of urgency to compose his thoughts and ideas on these subjects as soon as possible as he may never have another opportunity to do so. There was a sense of uncertainty for More as to whether or not he would ever have the time to write something substantive again, and this is why the *Utopia* is such a hodgepodge of questions and ideas on such a wide variety of subjects. More wanted to cover as much ground as possible.

The occasion for More to pen the *Utopia* finally came in the year 1515 when More was afforded the once in a lifetime opportunity of spending a year in Flanders on a diplomatic

mission with a minimal workload, away from family and friends and legal responsibilities. He was alone with his thoughts on these questions of counsel and of the best state of a commonwealth, and now he actually had a window of time to sit, uninterrupted and unhindered, and write his thoughts on these matters before deciding whether or not to enter the service of King Henry VIII. It only made sense for More to organize his thoughts into a socio-political treatise that gave an account of a fictional commonwealth against which his fellow Europeans could measure the rightness and justness of their own commonwealths. This was, as has been stated, a period in history in which the greatest minds were all writing “Prince books”- Erasmus, Machiavelli, Seyssel and Bude, among others. It was also a period in which a few enlightened monarchs were actually open to receiving advice from humanists- Ferdinand and Isabella, Charles V, Henry VII and Henry VIII, Philip the Handsome, and Louis XII and Francis I, most notably. What better time to write a treatise than the year 1515, when More had a year with limited responsibilities, an agreeable intellectual climate, and a favorable and receptive audience.

More, however, did not want this to be a treatise solely composed of his own thoughts and ideas, but he wanted it to contain some of the best writing of the ancients on these questions of religion, society, politics, family, education etc... and thankfully More was writing in a climate of renewed interest in the ancients, thanks to humanism and the New Learning. That ancient learning was principally in More’s mind in 1515 is evidenced by his letter written to Dorp in October 1515. Dorp had denounced Erasmus and especially his *Praise of Folly* and More felt he needed to respond. “I do not make much of the fact that you attack the *Folly*, that you inveigh against the poets, that you deride all the Grammarians, that you do not approve of the Annotations on Holy Scripture, that you are of the opinion a thorough knowledge of Greek literature is not pertinent- all of these points I do not make much of, since they are views each

man is free to hold without offending anybody.”²¹³ Dorp had chiefly condemned Erasmus’ translation of the New Testament, but he also condemned the reading of the Greek philosophers, the study of languages, and the call for religious reform proclaimed in Erasmus’ *The Praise of Folly*. More rushes to his friend’s defense and delivers a blistering rebuttal. In speaking on dialectics and grammar, More states:

In the study of grammar...it is enough to learn the rules which can help one to speak Latin and to understand what others have written in Latin, but not with worried mind to pursue numberless rules of grammar and to grow gray amid letters and syllables. So also, in the study of dialectics, I should think it enough, once a person has been taught the nature of words, the force of propositions, and after that the rules for syllogisms, to make immediate application of dialectics, as an instrument, to the other branches of learning.²¹⁴

More proceeds to discuss the rules of dialectics that both Aristotle and Porphyry propounded, but concludes that:

Neither of them proposed the sort of problems by which minds, still untrained and in need of more suitable formation, are held back rather than advanced...But now they (the teachers of More’s day) have introduced a jumble of senseless monstrosities, which were kept distinctly separate by the ancients, but are now given birth for the complete destruction of the liberal arts; and with regard to the absolutely pure tradition of the ancients, they have polluted everything by injecting their own filth...one Albert, professing to expound grammar, gave us some sort of logic, or metaphysics, or, really, neither of the two, but substituted for grammar sheer nightmares and wild imaginations. Yet this nonsensical nonsense was welcomed into public academies, even given excessive approval by a considerable number of men, so that practically the only person thought to carry any weight in the field of grammar is one who has attained the title of Albertist.²¹⁵

Later in his letter, More discusses the issue of Scriptural and theological ignorance and its impact on true piety. In order to get the full force of More’s words, it is necessary to quote this passage of More’s at length:

I shall not deny that here are men where you (Dorp) are and in every other place who know by heart many passages from Scripture. Some of these men have put forth the effort not just to commit passages to memory, which even uneducated monks and friars do, but much rather in order to understand them; these men have acquired such a facility with the language that they are capable of making a thorough study of the elaborate works of Jerome, Augustine,

Ambrose, and others of the same kind. These are the men I think who are most deserving of having their names placed on the list of theologians, even if they have never written a line, and even, by heavens, if they have not spent a full century on those trivial quibbles, not to mention if they have neglected them altogether. You too, if you are willing to admit the facts, will not deny that among so-called theologians there are on the other hand some who so set aside the books of Scripture that, once they have been set aside, they never take them up again, and who devote themselves so completely to this disputatious theology that they not only fail to take up poetry or rhetoric but practically consider as unimportant the most holy Fathers, and also the most ancient interpreters of the Scriptures, and certainly disregard the commentaries of those men on sacred writings as also the study of those writings; that is an established fact. Finally, they disdain all the things that are the finest, the most pious, the most Christian, and most worthy of true theologians, all those things which they call “positive”; they consider none of those things worthy of any exertion on their part, these men born for petty quibbles, matters that are obviously so much more important. And yet, even of those quibbles, they pursue most of all such as pertain least of all to piety or moral training. Therefore, I respect and look up to the former class of theologians; but I definitely do not regard the latter very highly. Still, my purpose is not to defend poetry and rhetoric against them, since I am almost as far removed from poetry and rhetoric as they are. However, they are almost as far removed from such studies as they are even from theology. From that they are so far removed that they are not farther away from anything else, except from the common feelings of humanity. This is true especially because they have added to an extraordinary ignorance of all subjects a perverted opinion on all sorts of knowledge, by means of which they so flatter themselves as to judge themselves alone capable of giving a ready interpretation, according to their own whims, of any piece of literature, even of Scripture, of anything they have heard on any occasion, although they have never seen the passage, have never looked into the work, and do not know in what context the passage occurs. As a matter of fact, they do not know whether the passage quoted really occurs in such a work or not.²¹⁶

These were the issues igniting the flames of More’s intellectual passions. As More sat down to take advantage of the time afforded him in Flanders and craft his *Utopia*, his mind was filled with thoughts on the wisdom of the ancients, both Greek and Roman philosophers and the Church fathers, as well as thoughts on Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* and his efforts to make the Word of God accurate and readable that it might change the hearts of men. He believed in the need for reform and change. However, as much as More believed the Church needed reform, he was not a Luther or a Tyndale or a Latimer, he was still a wholeheartedly devoted son of the Church. Roper states: “He secretly wore next his body a shirt of hair...He used also sometimes to punish his body with whips, the cords knotted, which was known only to my wife, his eldest daughter; whom for her secrecy above all others he specially trusted, causing her, as need required, to wash

the same shirt of hair.”²¹⁷ More was not a reformer in the sense that he wanted Christendom to break with the Roman Catholic Church. More wanted reform within the existing system, with the Pope remaining as Christ’s earthly representative, the earthly head of the Church. More was very committed to this, and he was eventually executed for it, desiring that all who were present at his execution would “pray for him, and...bear witness with him, that he would suffer death in and for the faith of the holy Catholic Church.”²¹⁸ This explains why the *Utopia* is such a mix of modern ideas and traditionalism, as well as why it contains so many references to such a great host of ancient thinkers. More wanted to bring to life the ideas of men like Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Augustine, Jerome, Plutarch and many others, for a generation that was being taught to forget them. More was bringing together the greatest ideas of the greatest thinkers on the very question that consumed the ancients and was now consuming the Renaissance humanists and their enlightened monarchs: what is the best state of a commonwealth? Here again, More was separating himself from the academics he so loathed, who spent all of their time drowning in mindless debates that had no resolution in sight, because the very rules they created to govern their dialogues and their use of language prevented them from ever coming to any kind of a satisfactory conclusion. Their petty squabbles would never advance knowledge and would never have an impact outside of the confines of the academies and monasteries. More wanted his *Utopia* to be different. He wanted it to be a good humanist book that sought not just to inform people, but transform people. He wanted it to be a book that tackled the subject matter of the *Republic* and made it relevant for sixteenth century England. He wanted to deal with the issues that plagued the common man, and therefore take the knowledge and wisdom of the ancients and connect it to the needs and experiences of human beings. Therefore More discusses the issues of poverty, private property, unjust taxes and wasteful royal spending, unjust wars, the hiring of

mercenaries, enclosures, excessive use of capital punishment, the uselessness of idle serving men, greedy landlords, and crime and increasing vagabondage, as well as many other themes, all of which were prevalent issues in early modern England. Hexter observes, “We may say of *Utopia* that it was what happened when in a period of leisure a humanist undersheriff of London on the fringes of high politics rethought the implications of Plato’s *Republic* under the influence of Holy Scripture, and before he was done, had to face the personal and ethical problems posed by an invitation to enter the service of his ruler.”²¹⁹ The *Utopia* therefore becomes very difficult to interpret if we try and read it as a book with a consistent theme or message or idea, and if we attribute its inspiration to that of only one source.

The *Utopia*, therefore, was written to create a platform to discuss Europe’s social, political and religious issues at a time when these issues weighed most heavily on More’s conscious and the discussion seemed most urgent. It accomplished this by causing the European reader to compare and contrast the unusual political ideas of the Utopians, which were informed by centuries of political, theological and philosophical writings and modern writings, with the chaotic politics of Europe. It is important to understand though that the island of Utopia was not created to portray an ideal society. Remember More’s concluding remarks: “When Raphael had thus made an end of his tale, many things came to my mind, which in the manners and laws of that people seemed to be instituted and founded on no good reason.”²²⁰ In other words, the Utopian commonwealth has flaws of its own, and the reader needs to be discerning to see which of their practices are corrupt and immoral and which are just and virtuous. In order to discern those differences within the Utopian society, the reader needs to be able to recognize the shortcomings of their own society first. This causes the reader to be honest about their own strengths and weaknesses. The *Utopia*, therefore, was written in part to describe the cancers that

existed within English society that were preventing it from progressing to a utopian state, or at least a just and moral society. Wilson observes, “More was a man of conscious, personally involved in the social, political and religious life of the realm. He was also a man of acute consciousness who perceived more clearly than most contemporaries just what was happening to the European Christendom which he loved. In *Utopia* he diagnosed more accurately than any other humanist the diseases from which society was suffering.”²²¹ Erasmus described More’s purpose in writing the *Utopia* in much the same way: “He published his *Utopia* for the purpose of showing what things create mischief in commonwealths, having the English constitution especially in view, which he so thoroughly knows and understands.”²²² For More, the cancer killing society is man’s innate wickedness; his pride, greed, idleness and licentious living. The Utopians deal very seriously with all these aspects of man’s sinful nature, both at the level of the common man and at the level of royalty, which is where repentance and virtue must begin so that it can flow down to the citizens. As Hythloday states:

But let him (the King) amend his own life, renounce dishonest pleasures, and forsake pride. For these are the chief vices that cause him to incur the contempt or hatred of his people. Let him live of his own, hurting no man. Let him not spend more than he has. Let him restrain wickedness. Let him prevent vices, and take away the occasions of offenses, by ordering well his subjects, and not suffer wickedness to increase, to be afterward punished.²²³

This is why *Utopia* sometimes appears more like a totalitarian regime than a society of liberty and happiness. The less freedom the citizens have, the less likely they are to sin:

Now you see how little liberty they have to loiter, how they can have no cloak or pretense for idleness. There are neither wine taverns, nor ale houses, nor brothels, nor any opportunity for vice or wickedness, no lurking corners, no places of wicked counsels or unlawful assemblies; but they are in full view and under the eyes of every man. So that of necessity they must either ply their accustomed labors or else refresh themselves with honest and laudable pastimes.²²⁴

What the Utopians consider to be honest and laudable pastimes are very similar to what More would consider to be honest and laudable pastimes:

All the spare time, that is, between the hours of work, sleep, and meat, they are permitted to spend every man as he likes best himself. Not to the intent that they should misspend this time in riot or slothfulness, but that being then freed from the labor of their own occupations, they should bestow the time well and thriftily upon some good science...For it is a regular custom there, to have lectures daily...After supper they spend one hour in play, in summer in their gardens, in winter in their common halls, where they dine and sup. There they exercise themselves in music, or else in honest and wholesome conversation. Diceplay, and such other foolish and pernicious games, they know not. But they play two games not unlike chess. The one is the battle of numbers, wherein one number steals away another. The other is one wherein vices fight with virtues, as it were in battle array, or a set field. In this game is very properly shown both the strife and discord that vices have among themselves, and again their unity and concord against virtues. And also what vices are repugnant to what virtues, with what power and strength they assail them openly, by what wiles and subtlety they assault them secretly, with what help and aid the virtues resist and overcome the power of the vices, by what craft they frustrate their purpose, and finally by what cunning or means the one gets the victory.²²⁵

It is difficult to state definitively just how much More agreed with his character

Hythloday's praises about this regimented and strictly enforced societal routine. Obviously More probably would not have objected to a royally decreed banning of alehouses and brothels. As Erasmus states, More had "an absolute distaste for tennis and dice and cards, and the other games with which the mass of gentlemen beguile the tediousness of Time."²²⁶ However, as distasteful as More found these activities to be, it does not mean that More believed the King should rule against people's liberty to do such things, to their own harm and detriment, and regulate how every citizen should spend every minute of every day. There is little room for self-expression and for freedom here, and therefore it is safe to say that More, a man who, as we have seen, loved his liberty, probably would not have fully agreed with these extreme measures of societal control. As we have seen, More inputted his own likes and dislikes into the *Utopia*, to give it his mark, as many great authors and artists have done with their work. More has disciplined himself and his family in this way, and therefore so do his Utopians. These passages could be read as More fantasizing or idealizing his own personal preferences in his society. However, it is possible that More has another motivation for including these radical passages. What More could also be

doing here is describing how central righteousness is to the well-being of the commonwealth, and how sin is to be regulated and prevented in a society ruled by law rather than by grace. It is not that More actually wants England to mimic the Utopians in this way, however it will need to if men and women do not change their hearts. The changing of men's hearts and their perspectives on the world is one of More's chief aims in composing the *Utopia*, as Erasmus has observed (More offers more of a commentary on the causes of social ills than the cures), and he accomplishes this by showing the radical extremes to which society will have to go if poverty is to be annulled and crime and cruelty extinguished, in a society where people refuse to live virtuously. They will be made to be virtuous by force. Marius observes:

The relentless openness of the society, the resolute eagerness of the Utopians to spend time with each other and to check up on what everybody is doing, the loathing of idleness- all are part of More's recognition of sin's terrible power...If the Utopians let down their guard for an instant, sin will rush in. In the midst of their paradise of reason and virtue, we are brought into the almost horrifying tension of More's awful view of human nature. Erasmus now and then said conventional things about the dangers of sin, but his view of human nature was fundamentally optimistic. Nowhere in his works do we find the intense, melancholy awareness of the inevitable power of sin in the best of humanity that we find habitually in More and that is assumed in the rigor of all Utopian customs and institutions.²²⁷

Only when sin is dealt with, either by a personal transformation or through governmental regulations, will the commonwealth be able to progress and be just and moral. Therefore the Utopians serve not only as a fictionalized society against which the Europeans can compare the rightness and justness of their own society in order to see their strengths and weaknesses and the causes of their weaknesses, but the Utopians also serve as a warning of what More believes his fellow Europeans will need to become if their societal weaknesses are ever to be made strengths again.

Having now discussed the historical context of the *Utopia* in some detail, it is interesting to notice just how many of the personal issues in More's life find their way into the *Utopia*. The *Utopia* is therefore not just an account of a fictional dialogue of ideas gleaned from ancient writers, but it is a very personal work as well. To know the *Utopia* is to know a little bit about More himself. For example, we have seen how More was forced into the law by his father. More was a committed lawyer, but he did not love the law and there were many aspects of his profession that he found loathsome. Interestingly enough, More's fictional commonwealth is devoid of lawyers and complicated laws which can be abused and misinterpreted:

They (the Utopians) have but few laws. For people so instructed and trained very few suffice. Yea, the thing they chiefly disapprove among other nations is that innumerable books of laws and expositions of the same are not sufficient. And they think it against all right and justice that men should be bound to laws, which are either in number more than can be read, or else blinder and darker than any man can well understand. Furthermore, they utterly exclude and banish all proctors and sergeants-at-law, who craftily handle cases, and subtly dispute of the laws. For they think it most fit that every man should plead his own cause, and tell the same tale before the judge that he would tell to his man of law. So shall there be less circumstance of words, and the truth shall sooner come to light when the judge with a discreet judgment weighs the words of him whom no lawyer has instructed in deceit, and when he helps and supports simple wits against the false and malicious circumventions of crafty persons. This is hard to observe in other countries, with so infinite a number of blind and intricate laws. But in Utopia every man is learned in the law. For, as I said, they have very few laws; and the plainer and more blunt that any interpretation is, that they approve as most just. For all laws, they say, are made and published only for the purpose that by them every man should be put in remembrance of his duty.²²⁸

More also makes provision for his Utopian children to choose different vocations from that of their parents: "For the most part every man is brought up in his father's craft....But if a man's mind turn to any other, he is by adoption put into a family of that occupation which he does most fancy...Yea, and if any person, when he has learned one craft, is desirous to learn another also, he is likewise permitted. When he has learned both, he follows whichever he will."²²⁹

We have also seen how More was progressive in his attitude towards the education of his daughters. More still believed that man was to be the federal head of his home and the Church, but women seemed to enjoy a greater standing in his home, and subsequently in the *Utopia*. For instance, women have equal rights to divorce their husbands and the council that decides whether or not to give consent to the divorce must consult with their wives before passing judgment.²³⁰ Also, both a husband and his wife have to agree to divorce before a divorce is even an option unless an act of adultery has been committed or one of the spouses has “intolerable, wayward habits”²³¹, in which case the divorce is immediately granted by the council for the wronged party. Most interestingly though, a husband cannot simply divorce his wife because he is displeased with her: “But for a husband to put away his wife for no fault but that some mishap is fallen to her body, this by no means will they permit. For they judge it a great mark of cruelty that anybody in their most need of help and comfort should be cast off and forsaken, and that old age, which both brings sickness with it and is a sickness itself, should be unkindly and unfaithfully dealt with.”²³² Oddly enough, the Utopians have a bizarre custom that is meant to prevent such displeasure from occurring. Before a marriage, “a grave and honest matron shows the woman, be she maid or widow, naked to the wooer. And likewise a sage and discreet man exhibits the wooer naked to the woman.”²³³ This was one of the few Utopian customs that Hythloday actually laughed at and considered foolish, yet the Utopians defend it as a wise practice:

All men are not so wise as to base their regard on the virtuous condition of the party. And the endowments of the body cause the virtues of the mind to be less esteemed and regarded; yea, even in the marriages of wise men. Verily, so foul a deformity may be hid under those coverings that it may quite alienate a man’s mind from his wife, when it may not be lawful for their bodies to separate again...it were well that a law were made thereby all such deceits might be prevented and avoided beforehand.²³⁴

However the Utopians state: “If such a deformity happen by any chance to occur after the marriage is consummated and finished, well, there is no remedy but patience. Every man must take his fortune, alas!”²³⁵ Despite what initially appears to be the complete absurdity of such a practice, Hythloday is forced to acknowledge that, “they only of the nations in that part of the world are content every man with one wife apiece.”²³⁶ Just as Hythloday found this practice to be ridiculous, we would assume that More felt the same way, and many scholars have understandably dismissed this passage as a joke, inserted by More to entertain his readers, however Marius interprets it differently: “There is nothing shocking about the idea when it is considered in the light of More’s own combination of sensuality and abstemious religion...If a man who might have become a priest married a woman to relieve himself sexually and to beget children, and then discovered when she undressed that neither sex nor children were possible, he might be said to have robbed God and himself.”²³⁷ Therefore it is entirely possible that More saw some value in this idea, even if he never intended to see it actually realized.

Lastly, we have seen how central family was for More, therefore it is no coincidence that it was also central for the Utopians: “For the women, when they are married at a lawful age, go into their husbands’ houses. But the male children with all the whole male offspring continue still in their own family and are governed by the eldest and ancientest father, unless he becomes a dotard...The eldest, as I said, rules the family. The wives are ministers to their husbands, the children to their parents, and, to be short, the younger to their elders.”²³⁸ So central is the family in Utopian society, that whole families, husbands, wives, children, kinsfolk, and relatives by marriage, will fight wars together as a unit to harden their resolve to not be conquered.²³⁹ Wilson states, “In *Utopia* the family was the basic unit of society; the centre in which education was imparted and the young brought up in the mores of the state; the place where skills were learned;

the cultural nucleus where civilized conversation, art and music were indulged in by all the adult members.”²⁴⁰ This was certainly true of More’s household.

There are many other examples of ways that More’s life intersects with the issues he raises in the *Utopia*, and it demonstrates how much More personally invested in his work. The *Utopia* is as much a product of the personality and experience of More as it is a product of the historical context of Renaissance England. Therefore the *Utopia* cannot be interpreted solely as a collection of thoughts from ancient writers, but neither can it be interpreted solely as More’s personal expression. It is a combination of both.

Through a study of More’s biography and the historical context of his writing of the *Utopia* it is evident why More wrote the *Utopia* when he did; why he asked the questions that he did; why he chose the topics and authors that he did; why he mixed serious socio-political commentary with personalized content; why he chose to be radical in some places and more libertarian in others; why he mixed traditionalism with modernism and humanism; and why he gave the character’s the personalities and philosophical stances that he did. I will now turn from a general study of the external influences on the *Utopia* to a more concentrated study of the content of the *Utopia* itself, starting where More does, with an introduction of the characters.

CHAPTER 8

THE NATIONALIST, THE REALIST, AND THE FANATIC: THE CHARACTERS OF THE UTOPIA

More takes the time to carefully introduce Hythloday before he begins his record of the dialogue that took place between Hythloday and himself, and therefore it is necessary for me to

also devote a chapter to introducing and examining the characters of the *Utopia*. Who Hythloday is as a person and how he presents his arguments in favor of the Utopian commonwealth and how More the character responds to that presentation is essential for our understanding of how More intended his readers to understand the *Utopia*. Hythloday and More have different personalities, histories, and experiences and therefore their ideas about the value of counsel to kings and what constitutes the best state of a commonwealth and their approaches to these subjects are very different, and it is within these differences that we get some perspective on what it is we are meant to do with the wealth of information that Hythloday supplies us with concerning the Utopian commonwealth. Even Giles, who is often overlooked, is a central character who we need to understand. Therefore, since Giles is often neglected, I will begin my character study with him. I will then move to a discussion of the character More and finally Hythloday.

Giles is the stalwart, unmovable. As interesting as he finds Hythloday's tales, they will remain tales to him. For him there is no commonwealth greater than England:

Surely...it will be hard for you to make me believe that there is better order in that new land than is here, in these countries that we know. For good wits are here as well as there, and I think our commonwealths are ancients than theirs; and in them long use and experience have found out many things beneficial to man's life, besides the many things here among us that have been discovered by chance, which no wit could ever have devised.²⁴¹

Giles is therefore representative of the type of man who loves to hear stories of faraway lands, but is utterly convinced that the society in which he finds himself is the greatest and most righteous, and is therefore in need of nothing. It cannot be improved upon, nothing needs to change. Society should go on just as it always has and always will. It is a very sheltered perspective.

The obvious objection at this point would be that Giles is More's friend and therefore More would not misrepresent Giles' opinions in his work. Giles was a humanist like More and believed that all Western monarchies were in need of reform, therefore why would More present Giles as the staunch defender of traditional medieval society. Firstly, we never hear from Giles again after this passage, although we know he remained for the duration of the discourse, therefore we do not know whether or not Giles' opinions change over the course of his fictional dialogue with More and Hythloday. It is left to the imagination of the reader. Perhaps Hythloday did make him believe, perhaps he did not. Also, Giles' statement does not assert that it will be impossible for Hythloday to convince him, it will simply be difficult, and Hythloday certainly rises to the challenge. Secondly, More's *Utopia* was not written to be an accurate portrayal of the political and social views of Giles and himself versus the views of the fictitious Hythloday. More wanted to create a dialogue that brought out several different perspectives on important issues, using his characters in distinct ways to push the dialogue forward in the direction he felt it ought to go. It is important to note that sometimes Hythloday speaks more clearly for the historical More than does the More of the *Utopia*. Neither does the character More always perfectly depict the views and opinions of the historical More. For instance, at the end of Hythloday's discourse, More mentions his reservations about the Utopian's communalism by stating: "Without any use of money, *by which practice alone* all the nobility, magnificence, worship, honor and majesty, the true ornaments and honors, as the common opinion is, of a commonwealth, are utterly overthrown and destroyed." It may be the common opinion, but it is not entirely More's opinion. Earlier in the dialogue More gave a very serious defense of private property, yet here his defense is "vapid and frivolous"²⁴² as Hexter would claim. Hexter observes that More's argument is frivolous, "not only from a present day point of view, but from More's own point of view and

that of every contemporary of his who thought seriously about politics. Not one of those contemporaries would have maintained for a moment that what mattered in a commonwealth were splendor, magnificence, and majesty. What mattered to them were order, harmony, justice, peace, and prosperity.”²⁴³ More’s convictions about wealth and pomp are clear. The issue fills the pages of the *Utopia*, especially with Hythloday’s description of the diplomatic mission of the Anemolians to Utopia,²⁴⁴ but it also fills the pages of some of his other works. In his *Dialogue of Comfort*, More states that King David’s glory was evident not when he was parading around in his royal attire but when he “taketh his wealth for no wealth, nor his riches for no riches, nor in his heart setteth by neither nother, but secretly liveth in a contrite heart and a life penitential.”²⁴⁵ This does not mean that More supported the abolition of wealth and private property, but all this is a subject for a later chapter.²⁴⁶ Here it is only necessary to point out that More did not always accurately represent himself in the *Utopia* and therefore there is no reason to believe that he did not do the same for Giles as well. Giles obviously did not mind as he praised the work far beyond what even its author felt it deserved.

The character Giles’ mind, therefore, is set, however the character More is far more willing to hear his companion’s tales as actual political discourse: “Therefore, gentle Master Raphael, I pray you and beseech you to describe unto us that island. And aim not to be short, but declare at length in order their lands, their rivers, their cities, their people, their manners, their ordinances, their laws, and, in short, all things that you think us desirous to know. And you shall think us desirous to know whatsoever we know not yet.”²⁴⁷ He weighs the pros and cons of Hythloday’s arguments and gives some of his ideas credence while at the same time sensitively and reverently expressing caution about the effects of the full and universal implementation of some of his other ideas: “Many things came to mind, which in the manners and laws of that

people seemed to be instituted and founded on no good reason.”²⁴⁸ More plays the part of the overly cautious realist who, although he enjoys the thought of a just society, he does not believe that real and substantial change is possible at any level. Therefore he acknowledges that there is a problem, but the solutions to that problem can only be minimal. The ideal might not always be achieved, but some synthesis, compromise or alternative can be mustered and that should be considered a good accomplishment. In response to Hythloday’s rant against civic responsibility, More states:

If evil opinions and naughty persuasions cannot be utterly and altogether plucked out of their hearts, if you cannot, even as you would, remedy vices which habit and custom have confirmed, yet this is no cause for leaving and forsaking the commonwealth. You must not forsake the ship in a tempest, because you cannot rule and keep down the winds. No, nor must you labor to drive into their heads new and strange information, which you know well will be all disregarded by those that are of wholly contrary minds. But you must with a crafty wile and subtle art endeavor, as much as in your lies, to handle the matter wisely and handsomely for the purpose, and that which you cannot turn to good, so order that it be not very bad. For it is not possible for all things to be well, unless all men are good- which I think will not be this many years.²⁴⁹

More believes in ideals, but he is also a realist who understands the wickedness of the world and that ideals are often not possible, however, some version of the good is better than no good at all. Hythloday is very much the opposite. He is impulsive and hotheaded. He knows his own mind. He, like Giles, is unmovable, however in a different way. Giles believes Europe is in a good state of affairs and its political stability and integrity is above reproach and beyond comparison in the world. Hythloday believes Europe is corrupt and decadent. So much so that it is not even worth it to try and save it. Hythloday is also very spontaneous and self-motivated, but also very self-absorbed: “His patrimony that he was born unto, he left to his brethren (for he is Portuguese born) and because of the desire that he had to see and know the far countries of the world, he joined himself in company with Amerigo Vespucci.”²⁵⁰ Hythloday tells More:

As concerning my friends and kinsfolk...I have no great regard for them. For I think I have sufficiently done my part towards them already. For the things that other men part not from until they are old and sick, yea, which they then are very loath to leave when they can no longer keep them, those very same things did I, when not only lusty and in good health but even in the flower of my youth, divide among my friends and kinsfolk. This my liberality I think ought to hold them contented, not to demand or expect that besides this I should for their sakes give myself in bondage to kings.²⁵¹

He left his family to discover the world, believing that because he left them his belongings he owes them nothing. His quest for knowledge and meaning has separated him from his family, his friends, his possessions and his country. He will not even use the knowledge he has gained on his voyages to help his country, believing that it is a waste of his time and talents—all kings are power hungry and irredeemable anyway, so why bother. Having therefore isolated himself from all these things, he is left alone with his thoughts and opinions with no external input, and More gives us the impression that he is more than happy with this arrangement: “Now I live at liberty after my own mind and pleasure.”²⁵² Hythloday is therefore a very extreme character. He is utterly convinced of the complete and inerrant perfection of his worldview, and therefore he cannot be reasoned or negotiated with. At the end of Hythloday’s discourse, More is full of questions, but does not dare confront him with his objections and concerns because, “I knew that he was weary of talking, and was not sure whether he could bear that anything should be said against his opinion; and especially because I remembered that he had blamed this fault in others, who are afraid lest they seem not wise enough, unless they can find some fault in other men’s inventions; therefore, I praising both their institutions and his account of them took him by the hand and led him in to supper.”²⁵³ That Hythloday would be offended at having his opinions questioned is not a clever observation made by More about Hythloday’s character, Hythloday himself stated as such at the beginning of his dialogue with More and Giles:

So then both the raven and the ape think their own young ones fairest. Then if a man in a company where some disdain and have contempt for other men's discoveries and count their own best, if among such men, I say, a man should bring forth anything that he has read was done in times past, or that he has seen done in other places, then the hearers act as though their whole reputation for wisdom were in jeopardy of being overthrown, and that ever after they would be counted for very fools, unless they could in other men's ideas pick out matter to reprehend and find fault at. If all other poor helps fail, then this is their extreme refuge. 'These things,' say they, pleased our forefathers and ancestors; would God we could be so wise as they were.' And as though they had wittily concluded the matter, and with this answer stopped every man's mouth, they sit down again. As if they would say, it were a very dangerous matter, if a man in any point should be found wiser than his forefathers were...if in anything a better order might have been set up than was by them, there we take fast hold, and find many faults. Many times have I chanced upon such proud, ignorant, perverse, and wayward judgments.²⁵⁴

Most humanists would applaud Hythloday's hatred for copout defenses. The irony here is that Hythloday is guilty of the very same crime for which he denounces and condemns his opponents. He is very hostile towards any dissent throughout his dialogue with More and Giles, and when confronted with a protestation, he flippantly responds: "But if you had been with me in Utopia and had personally seen their fashions and laws, as I did, who lived there five years and more, you would never have come away, but only to make that new land known here, then doubtless you too would grant that you never saw people well ordered, but only there."²⁵⁵ To put it another way- I have been there, you have not; I saw their customs and witnessed their laws in action, you did not, therefore I am right and you are wrong. How is this any better an answer to give than the people who base their whole arguments on what their forefathers did? Hythloday fraudulently bolsters his arguments by claiming exclusive knowledge, which Wegemer claims is More's allusion to Gnosticism.²⁵⁶ Hythloday's arguments also rest on his falsifiable philosophy of universalism- if it works there, it most certainly can work anywhere in the world. More rightfully counters this exclusive universalism. When Hythloday claims that philosophy has no place with kings, More responds:

Indeed...*this* school philosophy has not (a place with kings), which thinks everything suitable for every place. But there is another philosophy more civil, which knows, as you would say, her own stage, and thereafter orders and behaves herself in the play that she has in hand, playing her part accordingly with comeliness, uttering nothing out of due order and fashion. And this is the philosophy that you must use. Or else while a comedy of Plautus is playing, and the vile bondmen scoffing and trifling among themselves, if you should suddenly come upon the stage in a philosopher's apparel, and rehearse out of Octavia the place where Seneca disputes with Nero, had it not been better for you to have played the dumb person, than by rehearsing that which fitted neither the time nor the place, to have made such a tragical comedy or gallimaufry. For by bringing in other stuff that appertains not at all to the present matter, you must needs mar and pervert the play that is in hand, even though the stuff you bring is much better. What part soever you have taken upon you play that as well as you can and make the best of it; and do not therefore disturb and throw out of order the whole affair because another, which is merrier and better, comes to your remembrance.²⁵⁷

Hythloday simply replies, "By this means, nothing else will be brought to pass, but that while I go about to remedy the madness of others, I shall be even as mad as they. For if I would speak things that are true, I must needs speak such things. But as for speaking false things, whether that is a philosopher's part or no, I cannot tell; truly it is not my part."²⁵⁸ It is very black and white for Hythloday. Either he is allowed to tell the whole truth, as he has discovered and understood it, or he will tell nothing at all. More is less rigid and more flexible. For More, principles can be contextualized, compromised, re-envisioned or even withheld if it will serve the greater good. It does no one any good to bring the whole system down for the sake of one principle.

These are the three characters dialoguing in More's *Utopia*. We have Giles, the ardent nationalist who believes England to be the most just and moral of all societies, having been established for many centuries. We have More, the open-minded skeptic who believes in the need for reform, but is pessimistic enough about human nature to believe that complete reform is possible. And lastly we have Hythloday, an overly exuberant idealist who is so consumed with his own worldview that he is blind to its limitations, its immoralities and its impossibilities; he is

so drunk on his love for Utopia that he is completely unaware of his own inconsistencies and his distortions of the truth. His worldview is ultimately unrealistic as he believes that all of his proposals need to be fully and completely implemented in their totality in every political, societal, and cultural context, or none of them at all, for there is nothing redeeming or worthwhile in any other worldview. In this way I disagree with Sylvester's observation that Hythloday is led away to supper by More at the end of his discourse because he is exhausted from having defended an indefensible worldview and he is finally although unwittingly confronted with the inconsistencies and weaknesses of his argument.²⁵⁹ Hythloday is convinced of the rightness of his opinions to the bitter end, and no amount of reasonable objection will persuade him otherwise.

We as the reader are caught between these characters. We cannot be like Giles, for to be like Giles means that we are so proud of our history and heritage that we are blind to the failures and shortcomings of our society, and therefore we will never benefit from the wisdom and experience of others. We are most certainly not to be like Hythloday, unwilling to adapt or amend our policies to the specific societal context in which we find ourselves, and unwilling to share our opinions if there is any possibility of only half-hearted acceptance, criticism or rejection. Society would never move forward and no one would benefit in any way from our wisdom and experience, and therefore our wisdom and experience are ultimately of no value. In this way, Hythloday is representative of men who are so narrowly and unswervingly focused on their own worldviews, such as the scholastics of More's day, that they are unwilling to give heed to any ideas or credence to any ventures other than their own, such as the Humanism and the New Learning of renaissance England. They misquote and misrepresent in order to defend themselves and their position. One practical example of this is when Hythloday uses Plato as a

defense of why he refuses to use his knowledge and deep learning for the counsel of Kings and princes:

Wherefore Plato in a goodly simile declares why wise men refrain from meddling in the commonwealth. For when they see the people swarming into the streets and daily wet to the skin with rain, and yet cannot persuade them to come in out of the rain take to their houses, knowing well that if they should go out to them they would nothing prevail, not win anything by it, but be wet also in the rain, they keep themselves within their houses, content to be safe themselves, seeing they cannot remedy the folly of the people.²⁶⁰

Wegemer has rightfully pointed out however, that Raphael has taken Plato quite out of context. One of the central arguments of Plato's *Republic* is that philosophers should be Kings because they understand people and politics best. Wegemer states, "Raphael simply ignores this major and best-known idea of the *Republic*, that cities will achieve justice only when philosophers become rulers." In Book 6 of the *Republic*, which is where Raphael takes his quote, Plato is describing the different regimes and the different ways they will treat their philosophers. Some regimes will treat the philosopher "like a human being who has fallen with wild beasts," or "as a man in a storm, when dust and rain are blown about by the wind." When a philosopher finds himself in such a regime, it is then that he "keeps quiet and minds his own business." Under normal circumstances the philosopher can and should participate in the city.²⁶¹ Plato did so himself, although it did not always work out, as Raphael gloatingly mentions, such as with King Dionysius,²⁶² however the substance of the argument remains the same.

Therefore men like Hythloday are men who enjoy endless debate and discussion, but they don't actually want to use their knowledge for anything practical that might help people or change lives. However, it could be that More does not want us to totally resemble his character either. More's overly cautious character might be hinting at us not to be so pessimistic about humanity that we stop short of the mark and compromise on values and principles that we should

fight harder for and push forward with more diligence and determination. This was certainly the example of the historical More later in his life. The answer to the *Utopia* therefore lies somewhere between these three characters. As More's readers studied the Utopian culture and tried to determine which of their laws and customs would most benefit their own commonwealths, More exhorts them not to be blindly nationalistic like Giles, or radically and dangerously unrealistic like Hythloday, nor are they to be overly defeatist and all too willing to compromise like the character More. They are to be open-minded and honest, politically and socially responsible, discerning, and yet passionate and zealous as they wade through the wealth of wisdom and knowledge supplied by More, the ancients, the Church fathers, traditional Catholicism, Christian humanism and the New Learning, so that they might understand how their commonwealths can and should change for the better.

Having now examined the historical context of the *Utopia* and having established its characters and their perspectives and how those shape our understanding of the *Utopia*, I will now move to a study of two of the more difficult sections of the *Utopia*- the passages on religious tolerance and private property, and will seek to apply the methodology of reading these segments within the broader context of More's life and of his greater body of works to help us understand More's specific intent in these portions and how that relates to More's intentions for the *Utopia* overall.

CHAPTER 9

“TREADING HERETICS UNDER OUR FEET LIKE ANTS”: RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN
THE UTOPIA

The issue of Utopian religious tolerance is an area of considerable debate. More's context complicates the issue. More was a progressive humanist and therefore it is often presumed he saw the value of fostering equal understanding between the religions as a deterrent to violence and war, which would seem to be confirmed by what he wrote in his *Utopia*. However, from what can be read of More's life, his utopian vision of a society that encourages religious dialogue in the marketplace of ideas does not match up with his violently anti-heretical rhetoric during his more political years. G.R. Elton observes, "As William Ross, defending Henry VIII against Luther, he matched Dr. Martin in violence of abuse, a remarkable achievement. His controversial manners were bad: in his exchanges with Tyndale, he generally proved the more scurrilous of the two, and he was savage to St. German who had not been savage at all."²⁶³ John Foxe also noted More's savage nature. In speaking of More's *Supplication of Souls*, Foxe criticizes his calloused treatment of Simon Fish, stating that More was "sometimes scolding and railing at him, calling him a fool, witless, frantic, an ass, a goose, a mad dog, a heretic, and all that naught is."²⁶⁴ Not only was More savage with his pen, he was savage in his actions as well. There is an obvious discrepancy between how More describes the nature of religious dialogue in his *Utopia* and how he engaged in it himself in real life. Why did this inconsistency exist? Why did More seemingly abandon all of his previous convictions?

Many scholars have attempted to answer this question, but often their answers do not embrace the full scope of More's *Utopia*, nor do they take into account More's biblical and

religious worldviews and how these affected both the context of his fictional writings and of his political reality. The seemingly apparent inconsistency is the key to understanding how More intended these difficult passages to be read. There actually is no inconsistency. More never intended religious pluralism to take root in Europe. More's Utopians were tolerant of religious diversity because they felt that only through peaceful dialogue would the one true religion make itself known. For More, this religion was Roman Catholicism and Europe already had it, and More wanted his fellow Europeans to embrace their religion and zealously protect it from the heretics. I will explore this theme by establishing first of all that More was indeed a persecutor of heretics both in word and deed and by offering responses to some competing interpretations of what his motivations were. I will then examine the content of the passages in the *Utopia* which deal with religion within the broader context of More's biblical worldview and his other anti-heretical polemics, namely the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*.

Was More a zealous persecutor of heretics? Many scholars have used the events of More's Chancellorship to either praise him or condemn him. Many of the early hagiographers either blissfully ignore or belittle More's acts of cruelty or they uncritically view them as evidence of More's Catholic orthodoxy. The reformers, Tyndale especially, claimed that More's rapid conversion from an inclusive person as the author of *Utopia* to an exclusive person as Chancellor was motivated by nothing less than a desire for promotion.²⁶⁵ However, both of these interpretations are too simplistic and presumably biased. They do not embrace the complexities of More's *Utopia* nor do they give a full and honest account of More's thoughts and actions during the tumultuous years of the 1520's and 1530's in England. The hagiographers wanted to elevate him to the status of a saint, while the reformers wanted to discredit him. Neither of these

interpretations requires a full disclosure of the truth; therefore neither can be reasonably expected to provide all the facts.

It could simply be that More was responding to the political climate in which he found himself, and, not wanting to disappoint the King, decided to be as ferocious as was needed to satisfy the King's expectations. In his preface of Book One of his *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, More states that Henry VIII desired nothing on earth as much as "maintenance of the true Catholic faith." John Guy further explains:

Had not the King written his *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* against Luther, and many times issued and re-issued proclamations against heresy and heretics? Had he not personally sat in Star Chamber commanding as many J.P.s as could be assembled there to gather up heretical books? As Henry's 'unworthy' chancellor, More was morally obliged, as he reasoned, to follow the King's example. He must seek both to cleanse persons infected by heresy's foul contagion, and also to provide admonitory examples to those still in the clear. Strict punishment of heresy, More noted, was especially valuable as a deterrent. Even the burning of heretics was necessary in hard cases, when nothing would do but 'clean cutting out' of the part infected in order to safeguard the remainder of society. As the highest magistrate under the King, More also believed he had a fiduciary duty to suppress heresy by virtue of his chancellor's oath, and by 'plain ordinance and statute.'²⁶⁶

This account, however, does not sufficiently explain why More fought against heresy so vociferously after having written one of the earliest polemics seemingly admonishing freedom of religious expression. Henry VIII was indeed the *Defensor Fidei*, but was More's battle waged simply on the premise that it was what the King wanted and it was his duty because he took an oath? If religious intolerance was morally reprehensible to More, then why was he so public and so over-achieving in his persecution, imprisonment and execution of heretics? Had he compromised his conscience for duty? His sense of duty, as we have seen, had not prevented him from objecting to Henry VIII's divorce. According to his family, it was a seemingly minor issue. His own wife begged him to stop pursuing such a fool's errand:

I marvel that you, that have always hitherto taken for so wise a man, will now so play the fool as to lie here in this close and filthy prison and be content to be shut up among mice and rats, when you might be abroad at your liberty, and with the favor and good will both of the King and his Council, if you would but do as all the bishops and best learned men of this realm have done. And seeing you have at Chelsea a right fair house, your library, your books, your gallery, your garden, your orchards, and all other necessities so handsomely about you, where you might, in the company of me your wife, your children, and household be merry, I wonder what in God's name you mean still thus foolishly to tarry here.²⁶⁷

Yet he did tarry. He stayed true to his conscience all the way to the gallows. In a letter to his daughter, Margaret, More gave a defense of his decision to not swear the oath declaring King Henry VIII as Head of the Church, and stated the importance of conscience:

Whereto I answered that since in this case a man is not so bound in his conscience by a law of one realm, where there is a law of the whole body of Christendom to the contrary in a matter touching belief, as he is by a law of the whole body, even though there happen to be made in some place a local law to the contrary; the reasonableness or the unreasonableness in binding a man to precise answer stands not in respect or difference between beheading or burning, but, because of the difference in the charge to the conscience, the difference stands between beheading and hell.²⁶⁸

More stated that to swear the oath against his conscience would result in the loss of his soul, whereas to refuse to swear the oath according to his conscience would result in the destruction of his body.²⁶⁹ Obviously he chose the latter. Therefore, if More was so willing to die in opposition to the King on something so “foolish”, why would he so brazenly abandon his values on freedom of religious expression. Even if he felt that quenching heresy was the chief way he could serve his King, if that was his only justification, it most certainly does not explain why he pursued the persecution of heretics with such an unrelenting passion. Wolsey before him had not been so extreme. Guy observes:

Wolsey had...been no irrational or vindictive bigot, showing kindness to both Hugh Latimer and Robert Barnes, and tending to impede the efforts of the zealots on the episcopal bench. Wolsey was not a persecutor: he burned heretical books not men, and his legatine powers, far from launching an English inquisition, were used to override the bishops' jurisdiction, enforcing the cardinal's preference for the perpetual imprisonment of convicted heretics, rather than for burnings.²⁷⁰

There was no precedent for the radicalism that More was feeling pressured to follow. More became the radical precedent.

It was stated earlier in the introduction that there has been some scholarly debate as to how involved More was in the judicial process and whether More can seriously be held responsible for the executions of heretics during his chancellorship. After all it was the diocesan authorities who tried accused heretics and pronounced sentences. Chambers, one of More's staunchest defenders, states:

After Wolsey was succeeded by More as Chancellor, there was a sudden revival of religious persecution. It has been the custom to blame More for this. The charge against More overlooks the obvious fact that in their capacity of Chancellor, neither Wolsey nor More could have burnt a heretic. The trial of heretics was entirely a matter for the bishops and the Ecclesiastical Courts. In the very rare cases in which the death sentence was inflicted on an obstinate heretic, the civil power actually carried out the sentence, but the sheriff or other officer had nothing to do with condemnation or acquittal. As a layman, More could not have tried and sentenced heretics and More was very firmly of opinion that it ought to remain so.²⁷¹

More gives a similar defense of himself in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, but he also extends his defense to the bishops, claiming that the executions of heretics were entirely carried out by the secular authorities, and were not in any way influenced by the Church:

For here you shall understand that it is not the clergy that endeavors to have them punished by death...For after a first offense the culprit can recant, repudiate by oath all heresies, do penance for his offense as the bishop assigns him, and in that way be graciously taken back into the favor and grace's of Christ's church. But if afterwards he is caught committing the same crime again, then he is put out of the Christian flock by excommunication. And because, his being such, his mingling with Christians would be dangerous, the Church shuns him, and the clergy gives notice of this to the secular authorities- not exhorting the king, or anyone else either, to kill him or punish him, but in the presence of the civil representatives, the clergy not delivers him but leaves him to the secular authorities, and forsakes him as one excommunicated and removed from the Christian flock. And though the Church will not lightly or hastily take him back, yet at the time of his death, upon his request, with indications of repentance, he is absolved and taken back.²⁷²

Now More knows that the obvious objection to this way of thinking is that even if the clergy did not execute the heretics themselves, they basically condemned them to death by declaring them heretics and leaving them unprotected and undefended in the hands of the secular authorities. More responds:

I will not here enter into the question...of whether a priest can for any reason, and if for any, whether then for heresy, legitimately put or command the putting of anyone to death, either by explicit words or under the general name of right and justice. In that matter I could not lack reason, authority, or the example of holy men. But in this matter that we have in hand, it is sufficient that the bishop neither does it nor commands it. For I think no reasonable person will have it that when the heretic, if he went at large, would with the spreading of his error infect other folk, the bishop should have such pity on him that he would, rather than allow other people to punish his body, allow him to kill other people's souls.²⁷³

More acknowledges the objection to show his reader that he is aware of the controversy surrounding his views, and to give them some assurance that he has considered these matters, however he cleverly evades the full implications of the objection by stating that his textual space is too limited to give an appropriate response, and then he distracts the reader from the subject at hand by stirring up their consciences and reminding them that a multitude of souls is vastly more important than the body of one heretic. However, whether it was the civil authorities or the bishops or whether it was More himself who fanned the flames of punishment is irrelevant, because they were all involved, whether directly or indirectly. More, it seems, was more involved than he or Chambers would like to admit. More made it his mission to see that sheriffs complied with their legal duty to commit condemned heretics to the flames. More himself apprehended and questioned suspects. He even forcibly detained suspects in his home in Chelsea.²⁷⁴ This is a point that Chambers casually mentions in the close to the above quotation: "For brief periods, however, heretics were in More's temporary custody."²⁷⁵ Chambers responds

to two recorded incidences of More flogging heretics. Incidences which were recorded by More himself in his *Apology*. The first of the two incidences is the most intriguing:

What More admits is this. He accepted into his household a child from a heretical home. He once ordered this child to be flogged- not for holding heretical dogmas, but for teaching them to another child in the house. The households of great men filled in Tudor days some of the functions of a public school. Now, even if More had been the philosophic agnostic which some people think the author of *Utopia* ought to have been, yet, in fairness to the orthodox parents who had trusted their children to him, he could not have allowed these children to be taught an illegal doctrine, the holding of which might have made them liable to the death penalty when they grew up.²⁷⁶

Chambers, quoting More himself, attempts to justify More's actions by relating them to the standards of Tudor society and to the expectations of orthodox parents as well as to the ethical dilemma facing More of the possible future execution of the child should he continue uncorrected in the obscene teaching, nevertheless the issue here remains that More took it upon himself to have a child flogged for proselytizing another child. He did not leave it to the courts or the bishops; he initiated and ordered the process. Moreover, this one example of More's flogging a child for religious expression flies in the face of More's ideal of a religiously tolerant society. In *Utopia*, More has his "heretics" discussing their "heresies" with one another. Technically there are no heresies, except for religions that violate the three fundamental beliefs of Utopian spirituality. Here, however, More takes it upon himself to have a child beaten for sharing his dissenting views with another child. He brutally intervenes in an exchange of ideas, condemning one set of ideas, and punishing its adherent, while subsequently elevating another set of ideas, affirming its proponent. These hardly seem like the actions of a man who is tolerant and appreciative of diversity and debate. More could have dealt with it in a more sensible and peaceful manner, if the issue truly was how the child's parents would react and what society required.

Peter Ackroyd has pointed out that More took more direct action against heresy than just flogging a few heretics at his home in Chelsea. Ackroyd recounts the story of George Constantine, accused by More of carrying forbidden books. He was arrested and detained in stocks at Chelsea where More interrogated him for several days. A letter from an acquaintance of Constantine's, Stephen Vaughan, to Thomas Cromwell, reveals that More may have threatened Constantine with "tortures and punishments",²⁷⁷ and that several unnamed ministers actually did torture Constantine while he was in More's custody. Ackroyd surmises that More must be imagined in "the realm of subtle threat and innuendo."²⁷⁸ Considering that Constantine revealed all his companions, the method of smuggling, the name of the ship, and the secret marks placed on bundles of heretical material, it is not difficult to imagine that More did at least psychologically torture the heretic, if not physically. One of the traders Constantine named was a Benedictine named Richard Bayfield and as a result he was arrested and "well and worthily burned at Smithfield."²⁷⁹ More also led two public interrogations against John Tewkesbery, who was sentenced to death for harboring banned books. Victoriously, More stated that Tewkesbery lay in hell with "an hote fyrbonde burnynge at hys bake, that all the water in the worlde wyll neuer be able to quenche."²⁸⁰

One of More's most famous executions was James Bainham, who married the widow of Simon Fish, the author of the anti-clerical tract *Supplication for the Beggars*. Bainham was arrested and interrogated at Chelsea for owning heretical books. He was offered the choice of recanting or being burned. He spent two months in prison and eventually recanted, but then relapsed back into heresy and was burned on the last day of April, 1532.²⁸¹ Foxe records in his *Book of Martyrs* that Bainham said the following while he was being tied to the stake: "I come hither, good people, accused and condemned for a heretic, Sir Thomas More being my accuser

and my judge.” He then read aloud the articles of his faith and said: “God forgive thee, and show thee more mercy than thou showest to me; the Lord forgive Sir Thomas More; and pray for me, all good people.”²⁸²

It is clear that although More may not have been able legally to condemn any heretics himself or burn them himself, he was directly involved in the interrogation process, which could include torture and sentencing. He burned books and ordered arrests. He personally interrogated heretics at his home in Chelsea and flogged some of them, and ultimately he reinforced the powers of the Church and gave them abundant freedom to accuse, try and convict and he practically guided the secular authorities, forcing them unquestioningly to comply with the judgments of the Church. These are not actions of a man who just wanted to serve and impress the King. This is the mandate of a zealot; a man who to the very core of his being had an unwavering conviction about what he was doing. Ackroyd explains More’s mindset towards the heretics as follows: “These men anticipated the Antichrist who, as far as More was concerned, might soon be born among the wreckage of the world. Their words might tempt poor souls into eternal damnation. They had to be prevented by all and any means.”²⁸³ For More, all heretics deserved to be burned.

More was also a zealous crusader with his pen. He is the author of *The Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, which at half a million words is the longest religious polemic in the English language. It is written as a point by point response to Tyndale’s *An Answer unto Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, which itself was a response to More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*.²⁸⁴ Ackroyd observes:

These books represent the most important dialogue within English religious discourse, perhaps of any age. The confrontation between Tyndale and More embodies the struggle between the opposing tendencies of the period- inner prayer and belief against communal worship and ritual, faith against works, the direct inspiration of scripture against inherited orthodoxy, redemption through Christ rather than the sacramental system.²⁸⁵

For More, the maintenance of Catholic England depended on the outcome of this debate.

Ackroyd continues:

More had reached such a pitch of nervous intensity that he could not rest from the fight; his whole life and duty lay now in his battle to protect the Church. Late at night, after his extensive duties as chancellor were completed, he sat up by candlelight in his library at Chelsea; he wrote quickly, almost furiously, composing thousands of words each week through the summer and winter of that year (1531).²⁸⁶

More's polemics were exhaustive. They attempted to:

Anticipate every line of attack, to leave nothing undecided or undefended, to quibble and question and define and distinguish until his opponent sinks exhausted under the weight of his cross-examination...More felt obliged to reply (to the heretics) with discourses which try to stop up every gap, close any loophole, destroy every argument, with an urgency that is palpable upon the page; it is as if he were intent upon out-shouting or deafening his opponent.²⁸⁷

It is obvious that More did not want to understand the heretic's position or find some common points of reference. He wanted to win. He was completely consumed with the defeat of his enemy. For More, every minute detail needed to be thoroughly refuted and the heretic left buried under the weight of his argument. He did not want to leave him with any possibility of a foothold. More became, as C.S. Lewis observed, "monotonously anxious to conquer and to conquer equally, at every moment: to show in every chapter that every heretical book is wrong about everything- wrong in history, in logic, in rhetoric, and in English grammar as well as theology."²⁸⁸ Alistair Fox states that More wanted not only to refute his enemies, but he wanted to confute them and then destroy them, "or vanquish completely by force of arms...his opponent."²⁸⁹ Fox likens More's absolutist resolve to that of his own Utopians as they go to war: "They are not fierce in their first onslaught, but their strength increases by degrees through their

slow and hard resistance. Their Spirit is so stubborn that they would rather be cut to pieces than give way.”²⁹⁰ More would rather be cut to pieces than “let them (heretics) have their churches quietly to themselves.”²⁹¹ He feared the day that King Henry VIII and the English people would want to be “at league and accord with them.”²⁹² Marius observes:

His (More’s) fury at the Protestant heretics...has a touch of hysteria about it, and although we may exonerate him from old charges that he tied heretics to a tree in his yard at Chelsea and beat them, he was if anything inclined to an even greater savagery against them, for he cried for them to be burned alive, and he rejoiced when some of them went to the fire. This fury was not a bizarre lapse in an otherwise noble character; it was almost the essence of the man.²⁹³

It is clear that More was not simply trying to please his King by engaging in an ultimately insignificant polemical battle; More had willingly thrown, with reckless abandon, his whole body and mind into a total war against all forms of theological dissent. The historian and literary critic are therefore still left with the question of how to reconcile this aspect of More’s life with his ideal society; a society where a great variety of religions peacefully coexist despite their different views on God, salvation and worship. Not only do these religions share the same island, but they interact one with another, debating, discussing, and proselytizing each other in moderation. The followers of one Utopian religion were allowed to read the literature and hear the sermons of another religion without fear of persecution, imprisonment and death. Was this one of Hythloday’s wildly irrational notions that causes More to doubt the reasonableness of the Utopian regime, or was More’s idealized society truly defined by a sense of religious pluralism? Kessler claims that More intended his Utopian’s policy of religious toleration to be taken seriously and practiced in Europe. Kessler states, “I...surmise that More favored religious freedom for Christians when writing *Utopia*, and that he designed Utopian religious freedom to serve in some sense as a model for Europe...My reading of *Utopia* gives modern religious

freedom important Catholic, Renaissance roots.”²⁹⁴ He further explains, “More suggests that he did indeed favor religious freedom for Christians by presenting an attractive, albeit fictional, account of this principle’s political advantages. Chief among these was an end to religiously inspired violence caused by sectarian disputes, fanatic proselytizing, and attempts by government to enforce orthodoxy.”²⁹⁵ However, if this true, More’s future actions against heretics still do not make sense. Hexter considers it an “obvious anachronism” to try and reconcile More’s statesmanship in Reformation England with his views in 1515-1516.²⁹⁶ Kessler, however, believes there is some consistency. Kessler claims, “His (More’s) Utopians, as we recall, allowed no freedom to zealots or to others whose religious doctrines or practices were politically harmful. More believed that Protestant sectarians threatened legitimate Christian orders, and, if unchecked, would precipitate decades of religious war. Perhaps this fear, rather than concerns for doctrinal purity, account for More’s decision to punish Luther’s English followers.”²⁹⁷ There is, however, a significant discrepancy here. The Utopians punished their citizens for being too forceful in the defense of their religion, not for professing a different religion. Individual Utopians could have their own religion, and they could reason publicly in support of their religion, which would inevitably involve a comparison of their religion with the religion of a fellow citizen. This meant reasoned debate. How else would they defend their religion? Why else would a defense be necessary? Reasoned debate is quite different from the kind of statesmanship More engaged in as Chancellor. He punished people not only for professing another belief but for owning literature associated with another creed and for daring to express a heretical thought, whether publicly or privately. In Utopia, belligerent and aggressive proselytizers were exiled. Atheists were barred from holding public office, however, they were not punished and they were not forced to recant, they were only prohibited from expressing their thoughts among the

common people. More's heretics were imprisoned and tortured until they recanted or offered up information. Often they were executed, burned at the stake. Kessler's attempt at reconciliation between More's life and his ideals falls short of the mark here.

Hexter's explanation, that the *Utopia* has no bearing on More's later life, is also too simplistic. Undoubtedly More's opinions changed somewhat as he became more involved politically involved. Alistair Fox observes, "It does no service to More or More scholarship not to recognize that his experience of polemical warfare worked radical changes in him."²⁹⁸ This is true, but to go from dreaming of a world where all religions get along and learn from one another, to a world where total war is waged against everything un-Catholic is quite a drastic change. It is not merely a shift in his position or a re-ordering of his convictions, but it is the creation of an entirely new set of convictions that completely overshadow and nullify the old ones.

It could also be that More did not fully understand the nature of heresy at the time he composed the *Utopia*, but this also does not make sense. There were heretics when More wrote the *Utopia*. Heretics had been burned for centuries in England. As early as 1210 there is a recorded burning of an Albigensian. Lollards were burned in the fifteenth century, and in the one hundred years before More accepted the chancellorship, there were approximately thirty fires. Luther and Tyndale's books were being read in England at the time More wrote the *Utopia*. Heresy and its effects were obviously known by More in 1515, therefore it is inconsistent to say that he was oblivious to the reality of these things at the time he was pondering the question of the best state of a commonwealth.

At this point it could be argued that by the time More accepted the Chancellorship, heresy was becoming an actual threat to the stability of England and to the unity of Christendom as a whole, and it was not until More took political office that he saw heresy for the danger that it really was. Henry VIII's desire to divorce his wife was giving the reformers a foothold in politics. By the autumn of 1529, Henry VIII had read two Protestant polemics which had been supplied to him by Anne Boleyn: William Tyndale's *The Obedience of a Christian Man* and Simon Fish's *A Supplication for the Beggars*. Fish's polemic actually called on Henry VIII to reform the clergy by an act of Parliament. By mid-September 1529, members of Henry's court, mainly Suffolk and Norfolk, were openly canvassing support for a plan to attack the English Church. Also, Anne Boleyn and her father were pressuring Henry to declare Clement VII a heretic. By November 1529, Henry was openly condemning the Pope for being responsible for war and heresy, and he was starting publicly to question the Pope's authority. He was also beginning to hint through his ambassador at Rome, William Benet, that if the Pope did not grant his divorce swiftly, there would be a schism.²⁹⁹ These were troublesome times for English Catholics. John Guy observes,

For Thomas More, it was clear that the advocacy of Henry's divorce had loosed the king's mind upon a dangerous, even desperate course of action if it was carried out with any perception of its consequences... Within this context, Thomas More's motivation as Lord Chancellor assumes a strength of purpose. The crisis which threatened to disturb relations between *regnum* and *sacerdotium* in 1529 impelled him to a renewed appreciation of moral responsibility and public duty.³⁰⁰

For Guy, this is why More embarked on such an ambitious campaign against heresy. However, just as Fox claims it does a disservice to More scholarship to ignore or minimize the psychological and emotional impact of his polemical warfare, I believe it also does a disservice to More to assume that he was so naïve about the potential consequences of the religious

freedom that he prescribed in his *Utopia*. Religious dialogue will inevitably lead to dispute. Inevitably there will be division. Inevitably some religions will be forced to change or conform or compromise. And inevitably, some religions will fade into obscurity while others take the place of prominence. More had to expect that one of these scenarios was a possibility, even for Catholic England, and yet he devoted the entirety of the latter part of his life to fighting against the very possibility of such a scenario. How then is religious tolerance in the *Utopia* meant to be interpreted?

It is important to start with the premises that More himself lays out in the *Utopia*. More makes it clear that the Utopians are pagans. They are operating within the dark. They do not have divine revelation, and are therefore building the best society they can with what they understand of the universe from their limited reason and innate senses. Hythloday mentions that they have not even been exposed to Greek learning: “In the exercise and study of the mind they are never weary. When they had heard me speak of Greek literature or learning...they made wonderfully earnest and importunate entreaties to me that I would teach and instruct them in that tongue and learning.” Hythloday continues: “For I think that this nation took its beginning from the Greeks, because their speech, which in all other points is not much unlike the Persian tongue, keeps divers signs and tokens of the Greek language in the names of their cities and of their magistrates.”³⁰¹ Therefore the Utopians are a pagan nation, deriving their origin from the Greeks; they are always learning, always seeking new knowledge, always searching out ways to improve their society because they have not yet found absolute truth or absolute knowledge or absolute morality, as the Christians of More’s day felt they had found in Christ. The Utopians have no ultimate standard to measure the rightness and wrongness of their actions, therefore they base their laws and customs on what seems most expedient and culturally favorable. They are always

willing to hear new things- perhaps there is a better way: “For they delight to hear what is done in every land.”³⁰² Since they are unenlightened as to spiritual things they have a very limited knowledge of God, however, the Utopians understand that there is a God, and that he is the creator of the universe and that this creation is a testament to his existence, power and benevolence:

Some worship the sun as God; some, the moon; some, others of the planets. There are those who worship a man, who was once of excellent virtue and famous glory, not only as God, but also as the chiefest and highest God. But the most and wisest number, rejecting all these, believe that there is a certain divine power, unknown, everlasting, incomprehensible, inexplicable, far above the capacity and reach of man’s wisdom, dispersed throughout the world, not in size, but in virtue and power. Him they call the Father of all. To him alone they attribute the beginnings, the increasing, the proceedings, the changes and the ends of all things. They give no divine honors to any other but to him. Yea, all the others also, though they are of divers opinions, yet on this point agree all together with the wisest, in believing that there is one chief and principal God, the maker and ruler of the whole world, whom they all commonly in their country call Mithra.³⁰³

Hythloday further mentions that all of the Utopians would have come to a unanimous decision on that religion which “seems by reason to surpass and excel the rest”³⁰⁴, but they were held back by their superstitions. Should any tragedy befall a convert from one religion to another, the people interpreted it as God’s judgment and therefore a sign that that person’s former religion should not have been abandoned and should therefore not be abolished from the society. Therefore, although they are a rational and enlightened society, they are also superstitious, and Hythloday argues that only the superstitions keep them from agreeing on one religion.

Hythloday describes to us a people, who through reason and observance of the natural world, have deduced that there is a God, one all-powerful, all knowing God. There may be lesser gods, but there is only one chief God and this God wants to be known and worshipped. They

have also concluded, from reason and observation, that this God will hold them accountable for their actions and judge them for their wrongdoings once they have passed into the afterlife: “He (King Utopus) earnestly and strictly charged them (the Utopians) that no man should conceive so vile and base an opinion of the dignity of man’s nature as to think that souls die and perish with the body, or that the world runs by chance, governed by no divine providence. And they believe that after this life vices are extremely punished and virtue bountifully rewarded.”³⁰⁵ For those who are virtuous, the afterlife, which is an eternal state for the soul, will be a place of bliss, for those who are wicked, it will be a place of torment:

For they all believe certainly and surely that man’s bliss shall be so great that they mourn and lament everyone’s sickness but no one’s death, unless it is one whom they see depart his life reluctantly and against his will. For they take as a very evil token, as though the soul were in despair and vexed in conscience, through some private and secret foreboding of punishment now at hand, and were afraid to depart. And they think he will not be welcome to God, if, when he is called, he runs not to him gladly, but is dragged by force and sore against his will. They, therefore, who see this kind of death abhor it, and bury with sorrow and silence those who do so die. And when they have prayed God to be merciful to the soul and mercifully to pardon the infirmities thereof, they cover the dead corpse with earth. Contrariwise, for all who depart merrily and full of good hope, no man mourns, but follows the hearse with joyful singing, commending the soul to God with great affection. And at the last, not with a mourning sorrow but with a great reverence, they burn the body. And in the same place they set up a pillar of stone, with the dead man’s titles thereon engraved. When they come home they relate his virtuous manners and his good deeds. But no part of his life is so oft or so gladly talked of as his merry death.³⁰⁶

The apparent obsession that the Utopians had with a dignified death explains More’s mindset during his end of days as he awaited his execution in the Tower of London. Perhaps he thought back to these pages that he had written about having a glorious death, about not clinging to this life, about being welcomed affectionately by God into heaven, and perhaps he desired that people would speak of his ‘virtuous manners and his good deeds’, and that they would most fondly speak of his ‘merry death.’ Hexter’s complaint against many of More’s early biographers, Harpsfield especially, was that they focused almost entirely on his glorious martyrdom, making

his death the triumph of his life and a victory for the Catholic cause. However, it may be that that is exactly how More wanted to be remembered; that he wanted his exit from this life to eclipse everything that he accomplished while living it. Roper recounts how More would:

Talk with his wife and children of the joys of heaven and the pains of hell, of the lives of holy martyrs, and of their grievous martyrdom, of their marvelous patience, and of their passions and deaths, how they suffered rather than offend God, and what a happy and blessed thing it was for the love of God to suffer loss of goods, imprisonment, loss of lands, and life also. He would further say to them that upon his faith, if he might perceive his wife and children would encourage him to die in a good cause, it would so comfort him, that for very joy thereof, it would make him run merrily to his death.³⁰⁷

Roper gives many examples of More speaking in this way with his family: “If his wife or any of his children had been diseased or troubled, he would say to them, ‘We may not look to go to heaven at our pleasure in feather beds; it is not the way. For our Lord himself went thither with great pain, and by many tribulations, which is the path wherein he walked thither, and the servant may not expect to be in better condition than his Master.’”³⁰⁸

In a letter to his daughter, Margaret, dated around the time that More was imprisoned in the Tower awaiting his execution, he wrote about how the, “the fear of hell, the hope of heaven, and the passion of Christ” kept him going despite all odds. He continues to pray that God would deliver him, “when His will shall be, into His endless bliss of Heaven, and in the meanwhile give me grace, and you both, in all our agonies and troubles, devoutly to resort prostrate unto the remembrance of that bitter agony, which our Savior suffered before His passion on the Mount.”³⁰⁹

More’s prayers from his *A Treatise on the Passion*, reveal again this consistent desire for a holy death of martyrdom: “Good Lord, give me the grace so to spend my life that when the day of my death shall come, though I feel pain in my body, I may feel comfort in soul and- with

faithful hope of your mercy, in due love towards you and charity towards the world- I may, through your grace, part hence into your glory.”³¹⁰

Included in the pages of More’s *Prayer Book*, are his marginal annotations on Psalm 42 (More’s annotations in brackets): Why are you cast down, my soul, why groan within me? (In tribulation). Hope in God; I will praise him still, my savior and my God.” And again for Psalm 63: “O God, you are my God, for you I long; for my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water (longing for God). So I gaze on you in the sanctuary to see your strength and your glory (in tribulation and fear of death).”³¹¹ In these psalms, and in many others, More’s mind goes immediately to thoughts of suffering and martyrdom. This was More’s desire, to be given the opportunity to give up everything he had, literally everything, for the kingdom of God, and to mimic the suffering and horrific death of his Savior. This passion found its way into the worldview of the Utopians, albeit it manifested itself in a different way. The Utopians wanted to be welcomed into heaven and felt that this could not be accomplished if death was feared and entered into unwillingly. More wanted to enter heaven with the status of a martyr, dying for a savior he knew personally. Nevertheless, suffering and death themselves were also testimonies to the existence of God and the importance of a life lived well.

The Utopians, therefore, are almost Christians. They believe in one God. They believe in heaven and hell. They believe in eternal blessing and eternal punishment, and they believe in the immortality of the soul. The Utopians have arrived at all of these conclusions from reason and observation alone, and led R.W. Chambers to refer to the Utopians as the “rational heathens”.³¹² This doctrine of pagans achieving an incomplete knowledge of God from reason, conscience, and the testimony of the universe alone, without revelation, is perfectly consistent with More’s

Christian worldview. King Solomon, one of ancient Israel's greatest kings, writes about his deductions of the nature of the universe and humanity from a purely naturalistic (i.e. non-revelatory) framework, in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. He concludes the following:

I have seen the travail, which God hath to given to the sons of men to be exercised in it. He hath made everything beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end...I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him. That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past. And moreover I saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there; and the place of righteousness, that iniquity was there. I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.³¹³

The apostle Paul states much the same in his epistle to the Romans:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them: for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.³¹⁴

Paul continues with this theme in the sermon he presents to the people of Lystra in the fourteenth chapter of Acts:

And saying, Sirs, why do you these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.³¹⁵

And again in his sermon to the Athenian philosophers, the Stoics and the Epicureans, in the seventeenth chapter of Acts:

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the time before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if

haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.³¹⁶

Therefore Hythloday's account of the Utopians coming to an understanding of the existence of one all-powerful God, who created the universe, and who will judge men for their wicked deeds and reward them for their good deeds, and their coming to this understanding through reason and observation of the natural world alone is perfectly consistent with the biblical text and therefore with More's Christian worldview. Solomon and Paul agree that knowledge of a God who created the heavens, the earth, the land, the sea, and all living things, is deducible from the creation itself, and knowledge of immortality and judgment is deducible from our consciences and from the eternity set in our hearts. However, without revelation, the Utopians are missing out on a more full and complete understanding of God and of the gospel. Without revelation, they do not know who Jesus Christ is.

Hythloday brings the Utopians the revelation they are missing. Hythloday states:

But after they heard us speak of the name of Christ, of his doctrine, laws, miracles, and of the no less wonderful constancy of so many martyrs, whose blood willingly shed brought a great number of nations throughout all parts of the world into their sect, you will not believe with what glad minds they agreed to do the same, whether it were by the secret inspiration of God, or else because they thought it nearest that opinion which among them is counted chief... Verily, howsoever it came to pass, many of them consented to accept our religion, and were washed in the holy water of baptism.³¹⁷

So successful was the gospel in Utopia, Hythloday states that the Utopians were actually debating ordaining one of their own people to receive the priesthood so that they could have the sacraments administered to them in the absence of a Christian bishop. So inspiring is the Utopians' new-found faith and so hopeful is their reception of the gospel of Jesus Christ, More states in his prefatory letter to Giles, that there is actually a real historical English bishop who wants to become a missionary to Utopia: "there is a virtuous and godly man, a professor of

divinity, who is exceedingly desirous of going to Utopia, not for a vain and inquisitive desire to see novelties but with the intent that he may further and spread our religion, which has there already happily been started.”³¹⁸ Ultimately, this is what the religious tolerance in Utopia was meant to lead to- unity around a revelatory religion. Hythloday states that this was King Utopus’ initial purpose in instituting religious tolerance:

This law (speaking of the law that all proselytizing must be done without “unpleasant, seditious words”) did King Utopus make, not only for the maintenance of peace...but also because he thought this decree would make for the furtherance of religion. On which he dared define and ordain nothing unadvisedly, as doubting whether God, desiring manifold and divers sorts of honor, might not inspire sundry men with sundry kinds of religion. And this he thought surely a very improper and foolish thing, and a sign of arrogant presumption, to compel all others by violence and threatening to agree to the same that he believed to be true. Furthermore, though there is one religion which alone is true, and all others vain and superstitious, yet did he well foresee, that if the matter were handled with reason and sober modesty, the truth of its own power would at last issue forth and come to light. But if contention and debate on that question should continue, as the worst men are most obstinate and stubborn, and in their evil opinion most constant, he perceived that the best and holiest religion would be trodden underfoot and destroyed by vain superstitions.³¹⁹

Kessler points out, quite rightly, that King Utopus was uncertain whether God desired varied worship or whether there was one true religion. Religious freedom allowed for both possibilities.³²⁰ This is true, but there can be varied worship even within one religion, and the point remains that Hythloday expected God to reveal his nature and his will. Therefore King Utopus instituted laws of religious tolerance not because he felt that all religions had equal validity, but because he believed that without revelation it was arrogance to presume that one religion was the one true faith without evidence to that effect. Religion therefore, needed to be debated and discussed respectfully and reverently, but with the ultimate view in mind that there was one true religion and that through peaceful discourse it would make itself known with its own power. Religious tolerance was a means to an end. It served to unite all Utopians to the one

true religion once it was revealed, and all Utopians were conscious that this was the desired outcome of all religious practice, ritual and discussion. This is evident in how they pray:

At the end (that is of their religious ceremonies) the people and the priest together repeat solemn prayers in words, pronounced in set phrases, so made that every man may privately apply to himself that which is publicly spoken by all. In these prayers every man recognizes and acknowledges God to be his maker, his governor, and the principal cause of all other goodness, thanking him for so many benefits received at his hand, but chiefly that through the favor of God he has chanced to be in that commonwealth which is most happy and well ordered, and has chosen that religion which he hopes to be most true. In which respect if he errs, or if there is any other better than either of them and more acceptable to God, he desires him that he will of his goodness let him have knowledge thereof, a one who is ready to follow what way soever he will lead him. But if this form and fashion of commonwealth is best, and his own religion most true and perfect, then he desires God to give him a constant steadfastness in the same, and to bring all other people to the same order of living and to the same opinion of God, unless there is something in this diversity of religions that delights his inscrutable pleasure. In brief, he prays him that after death he may come to him, but how soon or late he dares not assign or determine. Howbeit, if it might agree with his majesty's pleasure, he would be much gladder to die a painful death and so go to God, than by long living in worldly prosperity to stay away from him.³²¹

It is clear from this prayer that the Utopians are seeking better to know a God who is at present obscure to them. They do not fully know who he is or what he desires, and so their prayers are simply that God would make that known to them so that they can live the way he wants them to. They pray that God would reveal his true religion and that all Utopians would conform to his will. Until that time, the Utopians worship as they best understand, and pray that God would be pleased with their diversity of religious expression. Obviously the co-existence and co-habitation of such a great variety of religious expressions has an explosive potential and King Utopus avoided outright discord by establishing laws against forceful proselytizing. Also, corporate worship is to be conducted diplomatically:

Although religion is not there the same among all men, yet all the kinds and fashions of it, though they are sundry and manifold, agree together in honor of the divine nature, going divers ways to one end. Therefore nothing is seen or heard in the churches, which seems not to agree impartially with them all. If there is a distinct kind of sacrament peculiar to any one sect, that they perform at home in their own houses. The public sacraments are so ordered that they

are no derogation or prejudice to any of the private rites and religions. Therefore, no image of any god is seen in the church, to the intent it may be free for every man to conceive God by his religion after what likeness and similitude he will. They call upon no peculiar name of God, but only Mithra, in which word they all agree on one nature of the divine majesty, whatsoever it may be. No prayers are used but such as every man may boldly pronounce without offending any sect.³²²

These times of worship are so revered by the Utopians that they dare not participate in them in an unworthy manner:

But on the holy days that are the last days of the months and years, before they come to the church, the wives fall prostrate before their husbands' feet at home and the children before the feet of their parents, confessing and acknowledging that they have offended either by some actual deed, or by omissions of their duty, and desire pardon for their offense. Thus, if any cloud of secret ill-feeling was risen at home, by this satisfaction it is blown away, that they may be present at the rites with pure and charitable minds. For they are afraid to come there with troubled consciences. Therefore, if they know themselves to bear any hatred or grudge toward any man, they presume not to come to the sacrament, before they have reconciled themselves and purged their consciences, for fear of great vengeance and punishment for their offense.³²³

This lack of revelatory guidance might also explain why the priestly "cast" is so revered and so exclusive in Utopia:

For to no office among the Utopians is more honor and pre-eminence given. Insomuch that if priests commit any offense, they come under no public judgment, but are left only to God and themselves... This custom they may easily observe, because they have so few priests, and choose them with such circumspection. For it scarcely ever chances that the most virtuous among a virtuous people, who by reason only of his virtue was advanced to so high a dignity, can fall to vice and wickedness. And if it should chance indeed- as man's nature is mutable and frail- yet because they are so few and promoted to no might or power but only honor, it is not to be feared that any great damage should happen and ensue from them to the commonwealth. They have such rare and few priests, lest if the honor were communicated to many, the dignity of the order, which among them now is so highly esteemed, should fall into contempt. Especially because they think it hard to find many persons so good as to be fit for that dignity, to the execution and discharge whereof it is not sufficient to be endowed with mediocre virtues.³²⁴

When there is no "holy book" against which religious instruction can be tested, those who are the instructors, the truth bearers of society, need to be people of exceptional moral character, because their wisdom and advice will go largely unchallenged. Even women are allowed to become priests in Utopia; however they must be widows and old women. For this

reason there are very few priests chosen, and they are excluded from political involvement to keep them humble and uncorrupted. Hythloday states:

But whereas it is their office to give good exhortations and counsel, it is the duty of the prince and the other magistrates to correct and punish offenders, except that the priests excommunicate from having any part in divine matters those whom they find exceedingly vicious livers. And there is almost no punishment more feared among them...For unless by quick repentance they prove the amendment of their lives to the priests, they are taken and punished by the council, as wicked and irreligious.³²⁵

Because these holy men are so pious, devout and untainted, they are greatly admired even by Utopia's neighbors:

These priests are not more esteemed by their own countrymen that they are by foreign and strange countries...While the armies are fighting together in open field, the priests a little to one side kneel upon their knees in their hallowed vestments, holding up their hands to heaven and praying first of all for peace, next for the victory of their own side, but for neither side a bloody victory. If their host get the upper hand, they run into the thick of the fight and restrain their own men from slaying and cruelly pursuing their vanquished enemies. If these enemies do but see and speak to them, it is enough for the safeguard of their lives. And the touching of their clothes defends and saves all their goods from plunder and spoil. This thing has raised them to such great worship and true majesty among all nations that many times they have safely preserved their own citizens from the cruel force of their enemies, or else their enemies from the furious rage of their own men. For it is well known that when their own army has recoiled and in despair turned back and run away, while their enemies fiercely pursued with slaughter and spoil, then the priests coming between have stayed the murder, and parted both the hosts. So that peace has been made and concluded between both sides upon equal and impartial terms. For there was never any nation so fierce, so cruel and rude, but held them in such reverence that they counted their bodies hallowed and sanctified, and therefore not to be violently and irreverently touched.³²⁶

More's priests are not passive observers, sheltered worshippers, or mountaintop theologians who never experience the real world, they are present right in the midst of the battle and they are willing to throw their own bodies between the swords of their citizens and of their enemies. These are selfless, devoted priests who are chosen by the people, consecrated by their fellow priests, commended to the education of the commonwealth's children, and entrusted with the spiritual task of knowing God and making him known to the people.

Through all these measures, the Utopians try to know God. They peacefully engage one another in discussion on religious topics and respectfully try to persuade and challenge one another; they pray sincerely to know the true religion; they seek the wisdom and advice of uniquely pious and devout citizens who devote themselves to learning about God and worshipping him; and they worship with genuine hearts hoping to have the light of the true religion make itself known in power.

Again, religious diversity and tolerance is a means to an end. It is not that all religions are viewed as equal. There is one true religion, and it cannot be discerned, understood and appreciated through conflict, obstinacy, stubbornness, or violence. It will only reveal itself through open debate. Therefore More's religious intolerance is not so inconsistent with the religious tolerance of his Utopians, when their tolerance is understood within this context. For More, the one true religion had been found in England- the religion of the Roman Catholic Church. This faith was being declared to the Utopians, whose freedom of religious discussion and exchange would invariably lead them all to a unanimous acceptance of the faith which had already been declared and accepted in England. The unity of the Church and of the faith was vitally important to More, and therefore the religious plurality of the Utopians seemed to him to be founded "on no good reason", but not because it was unreasonable for the Utopians, but because it would be unreasonable to transpose that practice into the commonwealth of England where the one true religion was already agreed upon and practiced. A commonwealth cannot survive if it becomes religiously divided. It is the foundation of a healthy and vibrant society, and this is exactly why More was so concerned about the heresies of his day. The English people already possessed what the Utopians were working towards, and More did not want that to be destroyed by the heretics. For More, there was a fundamental difference between his heathen

Utopians and the heretical English Lutherans. He describes it in his *Dialogue Concerning*

Heresies:

But yet heretics and heathens are two different cases. For in the event that the Turks, Saracens, and pagans were to allow the Christian faith to be peaceably preached among them, and that we Christians were therefore to likewise allow all their religions to be preached among us, and violence taken away by assent on both sides, I doubt not at all that the Christian faith would much more increase than decline. And although we would find among us those who would for the licentious liberty of those religions draw to the devil, yet so also would we find among them, I have no doubt, many a thousand that would be happy to leave that bestial pleasure and come to the Christian faith...But since violence is used on their side, and Christianity not allowed to be preached and accepted, those who would now allow that religion to be preached and taught among Christians, and not punish and destroy the doers of that preaching and teaching, are plainly enemies of Christ, since they would be content to allow Christ to lose his worship in many souls on this side, without anyone being won from the other side to take their place.³²⁷

For More, unenlightened heathens like his Utopians could be won for Christ because they were searching for the truth, and were waiting to readily accept it, whereas the heretics were trying to tear down the truth that had already been established. This made heretics far more sinister and destructive than heathens. Heathens were rich soil waiting for good seed to be sown among them. Heretics had tasted the truth and rejected it, and therefore they were beyond repentance, unfortunately for More, they were gaining prominence in England, even with the King.

Ackroyd excellently describes what most certainly would have been More's mindset during these turbulent times of religious upheaval. Ackroyd observes that for More the Church:

Was a visible church, with its own hierarchy and known places of worship, rather than a fleeting sect of believers; it was a Church with a proven tradition of faith reaching back for fifteen hundred years, which was transmitted in both and scriptural form. It possessed the authority of the apostles and the church fathers and had been guided by the Holy Spirit since the resurrection of Christ. It was a historical faith, established upon a consensus of the faithful. Its teachings were manifested in papal or conciliar decrees, whereby general opinion and traditional belief were given dogmatic force...Its divine origin was proved by miracles and reinforced by

pilgrimages. It was the mystical body of Christ, comprising the living and the dead. For More it was the vehicle of God's purpose and the paradigm for all earthly law and authority.³²⁸

Ackroyd continues:

There had been heresies and heretics before...but the situation of Christendom had never been more perilous. The Turks had moved as far west as Hungary and might one day threaten Rome itself, while the heretics of Germany and Switzerland were intent upon a more insidious destruction of the established order...He (More) linked them (the heretics) to the plague and to the abhorrent violence of the Peasants' Revolt in Germany, as well as to the sack of Rome. Heresy was a poison, an infection, a contagion attacking the body of Christendom. They (the heretics) scorned the sacraments of the Church and derided the notion of purgatory; they encouraged sexual license and were intent upon bringing 'all out of order'. They denied the Eucharist and reviled the Mass. They believed that the Church of Christ was fundamentally corrupted and should be swept away. More knew that all the certainties of inherited belief and the prevailing social order would thereby be destroyed; it would be tantamount to the collapse of the entire structure of the world.³²⁹

More knew that an attack on the clergy would lead to the confiscation of church lands and to the thefts of other properties, and to the desecration of the Mass and the abolishing of the other sacraments, and eventually to the overthrow of all authority and to the full reign of heresy in the pulpits of England, and More also knew that the Protestant writings that demanded all these things would appeal to King Henry VIII because they claimed that as King he was responsible to guide and protect the church of his country. No matter how much Henry despised certain aspects of Protestantism, he would be willing to swallow that bitter pill in exchange for full authority over the Church in England. This setting was the inspiration for More's biting tracts. In describing More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, Ackroyd observes:

The whole theme and purpose of his *Dialogue*...had been to celebrate that common culture which was under threat; by employing the stories and proverbs that were in the air around him and by drawing upon the resources of the medieval tradition of caricature and speech he was implicitly appealing to his audience to consider what would be lost if Christendom fell into schism. A religion and a way of life might disappear.³³⁰

When More was walking with his son-in-law Roper along the Thames, he explained that there were three things he wished to see “well established in Christendom.”³³¹ Roper, quoting More, recounts them as follows:

The first is, that whereas most of the Christian princes are at mortal wars, that they were at universal peace. The second, that where the Church of Christ is at present sore afflicted with many heresies and errors, it were well settled in a uniformity of religion. The third, that where the King’s matter of his marriage is now come into question, it were, to the glory of God and quietness of all parties, brought to a good conclusion.

Roper concludes: “Whereby, as I could gather, he judged that otherwise it (the King’s divorce) would be a disturbance to a great part of Christendom. Thus did it by his doings throughout the whole course of his life appear that all his travails and pains, without respect of earthly comforts, either to himself or any of his, were wholly bestowed and employed only in the service of God, the Prince, and the realm.”³³² This was More’s all-consuming passion, the unity of the Church and the preservation of the Roman Catholic religion.

At first glance it might appear that this all-consuming passion of More’s is inconsistent with the ideal he sets forth in his *Utopia*, but closer examination of the proper historical and theological context in which More was writing proves that his ideals and his biography are not inconsistent. More never intended this aspect of Utopian society to be emulated either in his own life or by European society at large. More, the character, was deeply disturbed by the thought of a religious melting pot and he warned the reader against imitating the Utopians on this point, but that does not mean that More, the author, intended this particular passage to be read solely as a satire just as much as he did not want it to be read as a serious proposal. The interpretation of More’s *Utopia* as a fictional socio-political work that was meant to be used by its readers as a platform to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the English commonwealth is perfectly

consistent with the interpretation of religious tolerance in the Utopian society as a means to an end that was meant to lead the Utopians into greater understanding and enlightenment. For More, Catholicism is a strength that England has, a strength his fictional Utopians wish they possessed and were striving to obtain, and any threat to the unity of that Catholicism was a danger to the very heart and soul of England, and this is why More is so brazenly intolerant of schismatic sects in his Catholic England while at the same time he is advocating for religious and spiritual dialogue in his fictional pagan nation of Utopia. That cooperation is what will lead the heathen from darkness into light. This is not to say that there are no principals of religious practice within the Utopian society that More would like to see followed in England, there are, such as their very exclusive selection of priests, their piety, their traditionalism, their theological humility and teachable spirits, and their sense of reverence and awe in their worship and sense of reality in their prayers, as well as perhaps their custom of allowing priests to marry. These were of course some of the main talking points of the renaissance humanists and religious reformers, but for More these points were meant to revive traditional Catholicism and create a greater sense of unity within the Catholic Church, thereby solidifying the authority of the Pope. They were not meant to create disorder and chaos. For More, a collective religious conscious was essential for the survival and well-being of a commonwealth. England had it. They were losing it. More needed to defend it.

By analyzing More's biography and bibliography it is clear that there is not an inconsistency between More's life and More's ideals as pertains to the issue of religious tolerance, but what about the issue of private property. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 10

“FOUNDED ON NO GOOD REASON”: PROPERTY AND MONEY IN THE UTOPIA

Property has long been a subject of intense debate in the world of political philosophy and legal theory. At the time in which More was writing his *Utopia*, the humanists of England generally endorsed the Aristotelian view of property. Aristotle affirmed that the defense of private property was indispensable for the well-being of a commonwealth. Thomas Aquinas echoed Aristotle's thoughts centuries later and expanded on his ideas in his “Quaestio” entitled *De Furto* in his *Summa Theologiae*. Quentin Skinner states: “Aquinas had argued...that private property is not merely legitimate but essential to the satisfactory conduct of political life.”³³³

Skinner continues:

One reason he (Aquinas) gives is that, if all things are held in common, everyone will avoid working and in consequence help to bring about a state of gratuitous poverty. But his main contention is that, in the absence of private property, endless confusion and quarrelling will be sure to arise, a state of disorder that can never be regulated and stabilized except by recognizing that some goods must be held privately and not treated as part of the common stock.³³⁴

Interestingly, this Aristotelian defense of private property was exactly the defense More used to rebut Hythloday. However, the importance of private property was not unique to Aristotle. Cicero, the great Roman thinker, stated that one of the chief duties of rulers and governments was to ensure that their societies had an abundance of goods. To do this, the right of all citizens to their property and to accumulate their own wealth was unalterably protected. Cicero vehemently denounced the idea that governments should enforce the equal distribution of material goods and property. Cicero stated:

Those who seek in this way to become the friends of the people are undermining the foundations of the commonwealth. For in the first place they are destroying harmony, which cannot possibly be sustained where money is taken from one person and given to someone else.

And in the second place they are subverting equity, which will altogether collapse if it ceases to be lawful for people to hold their own goods.³³⁵

This Aristotelian and Ciceronian view of private property and the accumulation of wealth was widely agreed upon by the humanists of sixteenth century England. There was debate, however, over whether or not excessive property and wealth equaled nobility. The belief of early modern English society, inherited from Aristotle, was that the nobility, those who held the right to hold high offices in society, were qualified by lineage and wealth. Quentin Skinner, in his well-known article *Thomas More's Utopia and the Virtue of True Nobility*, summarizes that:

To possess extensive riches, but without exercising the contemptible abilities required to amass them, is to be in a position to serve and benefit one's friends and community in a truly noble style of splendor and magnificence altogether denied to those who live in more modest circumstances... The underlying assumption is that wealth, far from being a hindrance to civic virtue, is one of the means to ensure its effective exercise.³³⁶

The humanists considered it ridiculous that people should be thought of as noble because of their parentage and because they inherited a large sum of money and possessions, which they themselves had not earned. For the humanists, whether or not someone was virtuous was what made them noble. Erasmus himself stated that the title of nobility should not unquestioningly be given to those who happen to be born to a privileged family, it should be awarded to those who "are formed in the image of their ancestors," and who "excel in those qualities that originally made them members of the nobility."³³⁷

Therefore the question of private property, which includes land, material goods and money, was central to the discussion not only of whether or not abundance was a detriment to justice within a commonwealth, but also about who should govern a commonwealth. Should it be ruled by a wise and virtuous philosopher-king (which was the Platonic view) or should it be governed by an active citizenry, whose worthiness to discharge their office was determined by

their lineage and inherited wealth? The question of property is therefore a very complex and controversial one, and More does not shy away from the debate, but gives his Utopians a very comprehensive philosophy on property and wealth. This worldview would seem to run counter-culture to English humanism as it is a rejection of the Aristotelian view of private property and is an endorsement of the Platonic view of property distribution. It is this philosophy which Hythloday believes is the crowning glory of the Utopian commonwealth; the fount from which all its virtuous achievements spring. At the end of his long discourse Hythloday states:

Now I have declared and described unto you, as truly as I could, the form and order of that commonwealth, which verily in my judgment is not only the best, but also that which alone of good right may claim and take upon itself the name of commonwealth or public weal. For in other places they speak still of the commonwealth, but every man procures his own private wealth. Here, where nothing is private, the common interests are earnestly looked to...where all things are common to every man, it is not doubted that no man shall lack anything necessary for his private use, so long as the common storehouses and barns are sufficiently stored. For there nothing is distributed in a niggardly fashion, nor is there any poor man or beggar. And though no man owns anything, yet every man is rich. For what can be more rich than to live joyfully and merrily, without grief and worry, not concerned for his own living, nor vexed and troubled with his wife's importunate complaints, nor dreading poverty for his son, nor sorrowing for his daughter's dowry? Yea, they take no care at all for the living and wealth of themselves and all theirs, their wives, their children, their nephews, their children's children, and all the succession that every shall follow in their posterity.³³⁸

Hythloday ecstatically praises the Utopians for their communalism and for their abolition, not only of private property, but of money as well. From observing the Utopians and their interactions, he concludes that when money is eliminated:

How great a heap of cares is cut away! How great a cause of wickedness and mischief is plucked up by the roots! For who does not know that fraud, theft, rapine, brawling, quarreling, brabbling, strife, chiding, contention, murder, treason, poisoning, which by daily punishments are rather avenged than restrained, die when money dies? And also that fear, grief, care, labors and watchings perish even the very moment that money perishes? Yes, poverty itself, which only seemed to lack money, if money were gone, would also decrease and vanish away.³³⁹

For Hythloday, many of the social problems that plague England are a result of the use of money, the political right to own private property, and the unhindered accumulation of wealth.

Hythloday rages:

Is not this an unjust and an unkind commonwealth, which gives great fees and rewards to gentlemen, as they call them, and to goldsmiths, and to others who are either idle persons, or else flatterers, and devisers of vain pleasures; and on the other hand, makes no considerate provision for poor plowmen, colliers, laborers, carters, ironsmiths, and carpenters, without whom no commonwealth can continue? But when it has misused the labors of their lusty and flowering age, at last when they are oppressed with old age, sickness, needy, poor, and indigent of all things, then forgetting their many painful watchings, not remembering their many and great benefits, it recompenses and requites them most unkindly with a miserable death. And yet, in addition to this, the rich not only by private fraud, but also by public laws, every day pluck and snatch away from the poor some part of their daily living... When I consider and weigh in my mind all these commonwealths, which nowadays flourish everywhere, so God help me, I can perceive nothing but a certain conspiracy of rich men procuring their own comforts under the name and title of commonwealth. They invent and devise all means and schemes, first how to keep safely, without fear of losing what they have unjustly gathered together, and next, how to hire and misuse the work and labor of the poor for as little money as may be.³⁴⁰

Hythloday does not refrain from providing More with specific examples. For instance, Hythloday complains of the English practice of enclosing fields and cultivated lands for sheep pastures for a greater profit without consideration for the welfare of the tenants and laborers:

For look in what parts of the realm grows the finest and therefore dearest wool, there noblemen and gentlemen, yea and certain abbots, holy men, God wot, not content with the yearly revenues and profits that were wont to flow to their forefathers and predecessors on their lands, nor content that they live in rest and pleasure while nothing profiting, yea much annoying, the public weal, leave no ground for tillage, but enclose all in pastures. They throw down houses; they pluck down towns, and leave nothing standing, but only the church, to make of it a sheep-house. And as though you were not losing great quantity of ground in forests, chases, lawns, and parks, those good holy men turn all dwelling places and all glebe-land into desolation and wilderness. Therefore, because one covetous and insatiable cormorant and plague of his native country may compass about and enclose many thousand acres of ground together within one fence or hedge, the husbandmen are thrust out of their own, or else by cunning and fraud, or by violence oppression are deprived of it, or by wrongs and injuries are so wearied that they are compelled to sell it all. By one means, therefore, or another, either by hook or by crook, they must needs depart, poor, silly, wretched souls, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherless children, widows, woeful mothers, with their young babes, and their whole households, small in substance and much in number.³⁴¹

Hythloday goes on to lament how these victims of greed are forced to sell everything they have to make money to buy food, are eventually forced to steal, and are then hanged for committing a small crime out of desperation to feed their starving families. They are hanged according to the laws of the very same rich men who deprived them of their means of survival to begin with. For Hythloday, this tragic scenario is avoided in a society where there is no money and all property is held in common.

Another example of Hythloday's discontent with English society is the practice of wealthy people hiring retainers of people to serve no purpose and who possess no skills other than to follow the wealthy around and make them look more regal:

First there is a great number of gentlemen who cannot be content to live idle themselves, like drones, on that which others have labored for... These gentlemen, I say, not only live in idleness themselves, but also carry about with them at their tails a great flock or train of idle and loitering servingmen, who never learned any craft whereby to get their livings. These men, as soon as their master is dead, or they are sick themselves, are forthwith thrust out of doors. For gentlemen had rather keep idle persons than sick men... Then they who for the time being are thus out of service, either starve for hunger, or manfully play thieves... then gentlemen, because of their pale and sick faces and patched coats, will not take them into service. And farmers dare not set them at work, knowing well enough that he is all unfit to do true and faithful service to a poor man with a spade and mattock for small wages and hard fare, who was daintily and tenderly pampered up in idleness and pleasure, and was wont with a sword and buckler by his side to strut through the street with a bragging look, and think himself too good to be any man's mate.³⁴²

Hythloday laments this waste of manpower. These men, instead of parading around, dressing ostentatiously and brandishing swords, serving solely as symbols of wealth and power, could be learning a trade and contributing to the betterment of society. For Hythloday, a society where there is no money and where property is held in common, avoids these useless displays of nobility and grandeur, because nobody needs to impress anybody else.

Therefore Hythloday is enthusiastically impressed by the Utopian's innovative and thought-provoking political philosophy of property and money. However, More is not quite so

enthusiastic. As Hythloday concludes his discourse, More admits that “many things came to mind, which in the manners and laws of that people seemed to be instituted and founded on no good reason.” He gives a list of the areas of greatest concern, but gives the most consideration to “the principal foundation of all their ordinances, that is to say, the community of their life and living, without any use of money.”³⁴³

More has good reason to be apprehensive. The imposition of such a philosophy on English society would have been far too dramatic a shift in thinking, and would have had incalculable effects. Yet as has been stated, More’s aim in writing the *Utopia* was not to provide Europe with a ready-made model for social and institutional reform. As Erasmus stated, More “published his *Utopia* for the purpose of showing what things create mischief in commonwealths, having the English constitution especially in view.”³⁴⁴ Hythloday himself declared that Utopia is the most virtuous commonwealth, but only according to *his best judgment*. Although More admires many aspects of Utopia, he makes it clear that he does not agree with Hythloday that Utopian society is unblemished and perfect. It has many flaws, and although it is a society supposedly built upon reason, More deems that many of its laws and institutions are inherently unreasonable, especially on this issue of common property and the eradication of money. This apprehension of the abolition of private property and money for the character More is reflective of the More of history, who we have seen was a landowner, with a considerable amount of wealth, and who employed servants. The reader is therefore left with two opinions: one colorfully expounded throughout the pages of the *Utopia*, and the other less a structured argument so much as a warning and an exhortation to critically analyze Hythloday’s position. More does give some sporadic defenses of private property, however, they are expressed as a series of questions rather than as dogmatic declarations. And that again is the

purpose of the *Utopia*, not to provide us with a new worldview, but to cause us to question our existing worldview so that we are either persuaded to make improvements or achieve certainty in the rightness and goodness of what we believe. More does not want us to walk away from the *Utopia* as unqualified communists, nor does he want us to simply dismiss Hythloday as a deluded optimist. Instead, he wants us to question the value we put on accumulated wealth and personal property in our societies, and whether these unhealthy preoccupations are indeed a detriment to justice.

I believe this is how More intended his readers to understand these passages on the Utopian philosophy of property and wealth. More was not providing his readers with a ready-made program of socio-political reform which would require the complete restructuring of European economic and social policies. He was giving his European readers insights into how their attitudes and customs surrounding money and property were causing problems within their commonwealths, and he wanted to challenge his readers to examine their perspectives and change them as needed. I will explore this theme by responding firstly to an alternative thesis put forth by Quentin Skinner which will require a re-reading of More's concluding paragraph. I will then examine More's other writings on the topic of property and wealth, as they relate to the *Utopia*, namely his letters, prayers and poems, and I will also examine the social and cultural contexts of the pomp and pageantry of the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII. I will then provide a comparative analysis of More's *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* with his *Utopia*, and will conclude with a study of how the communism of the Utopians led to a totalitarian regime that More would not have wanted for his fellow Europeans, demonstrating that communism was not More's desired solution for England's social ills.

Before discussing the historical and literary context of the property passages in More's *Utopia*, it is necessary to discuss Skinner's seminal essay on property in the *Utopia*, to which my analysis is indebted. Skinner's essay attempts to place More's *Utopia* within the context of the humanist's debates over the true meaning of nobility. For the humanists nobility was earned through virtuous behavior, whereas the common notion was primarily legal or economic, something bestowed on those who had been born into the right family and inherited the right fortune. This was considered a travesty by the humanists, and yet More's *Utopia* presents a society where the social difficulties of nobility of blood and wealth are not an issue, because gold is meaningless, property is held in common and money does not exist. The character More, who is representative of the humanists, is somewhat alarmed by Hythloday's descriptions of such a radical place and therefore makes several traditional, mostly Aristotelian arguments, for the necessity of money and private property. Yet Hythloday remains unmoved. Skinner observes:

What Hythloday shows in Book 1 is that, even if you uphold the rights of private property, you do not necessarily avoid the twin dangers of poverty and disorder. For in England, where the rights of property-holders are defended with extreme violence, the country nevertheless suffers from exactly those two social diseases. By contrast, what Hythloday shows in Book 2 is that, even if you abolish private property, you do not necessarily contract these social diseases at all. For in Utopia, where everything is held in common, the community is nevertheless described as one in which...there is no disorder, and where there is abundance of everything for everyone.³⁴⁵

I agree with Skinner that More presents us with an interesting contrast. More's assumption that communalism will inevitably result in idleness, social unrest and violence, is not necessarily universally valid. Individualism can easily cause the very same vices in societies. However, Skinner concludes that More's silence at the end of Book 2 is evidence that he was finally persuaded by Hythloday's arguments and could no longer defend his position that private property was essential for the maintenance of law and order in a commonwealth.³⁴⁶ Skinner

observes: “His (More’s) argument...is that if the Utopian system were to be instituted...the effect would be to overthrow the values conventionally attached to the concepts of nobility, magnificence, splendor and majesty.” Skinner continues: “It was precisely the ambition of More’s fellow humanists to overthrow just those conventional values.” For Skinner, “The implication seems inescapable: More is pointing out that, although the Utopian system may look absurd at first sight, it provides a means of overturning those very values which, according to the humanists themselves, were standing in the way of their own equation between virtue and true nobility, and in consequence standing in the way of enabling the best state of the commonwealth to be realized.”³⁴⁷ Skinner observes that the humanists- “liked to claim that they wanted above all to prevent inherited wealth from being treated as a criterion of true nobility. But on the other hand they continued to insist on the indispensability of private property, of hereditability and in general of ‘degree, priority and place’ as preconditions of any well-ordered society.” Therefore Skinner concludes:

The question we are left with at the end of the *Utopia* is whether we can really have it both ways. If we are serious about the claim that virtue constitutes the only true nobility, it may be incoherent simply to endorse the usual justifications for private property. It may instead be necessary to consider the Utopian case for abolishing it in the name of ensuring that virtue alone is honoured, and that the best state of the commonwealth is thereby attained.³⁴⁸

This is where I start to disagree with Skinner. Was More convinced by Hythloday’s arguments? Was More persuaded that the only way virtue could thrive in society was if property became common and money was eliminated? Was More indeed silent at the end of Hythloday’s discourse? It is true that More did not respond to Hythloday’s last outburst of accolades, but More tells the reader why he did not respond: “Yet because I knew that he was weary of talking, and was not sure whether he could bear that anything should be said against his opinion; and especially because I remembered that he had blamed this fault in others, who are afraid lest they

seem not wise enough, unless they can find some fault in other men's inventions; therefore..."³⁴⁹

More knew that Hythloday was exhausted, he also knew that he did not like to be questioned and considered it a show of self-righteousness on the part of the questioner, and therefore More kept his final doubts to himself. More's silence was a demonstration of discretion rather than an admission of defeat.

Also, at the end of Hythloday's summation, More confesses that he is distressed by the apparent irrationality of a society devoid of money and private property. More states that without these things "the nobility, magnificence, worship, honor and majesty, the true ornaments and honors, as the common opinion is, of a commonwealth, are utterly overthrown and destroyed."³⁵⁰ It is important to note that More states it is the "common opinion." It is not necessarily More's personal conviction that these things alone are the "true ornaments and honors" of a commonwealth. In this sentence, More is essentially saying two things. First, by mentioning the "common opinion" in his concluding remarks, More is lending some credibility to the view that the accumulation of wealth and private property results in nobility and magnificence in commonwealths. By claiming it is the "common opinion", More shows the reader that though he is somewhat in agreement with the popular attitude, he is nonetheless mildly hesitant that this common perception of wealth and property being the only things of value in commonwealths is universally and uncompromisingly true. Obviously as a humanist More believed that virtue and virtuous behavior should carry more weight in society than ostentatious display, however the amassing of wealth and the possession of private property can and does allow for competition, risk, and individual expression in societies and More does not see this as a negative thing. This is a theme I will return to later.

Second, More is telling the reader that the foundational beliefs of England are entirely in opposition to the foundational values of Utopia. In other words, for England to adopt these Utopian principles it would require a complete overhaul of the entire system and a thorough rethinking of the fundamental doctrines upon which English society has been built. Since More has already plainly stated he does not hold this particular aspect of the Utopian ideology to be reasonable, the reader is left with the impression that the costs may well outweigh the benefits. It is significant that More chooses to make this his closing thought on the question of wealth and property. More does not reiterate his Aristotelian defense of private property, presumably because he believes this point has been made and perhaps because he does concede the notion that violence and crime will always exist in society, even if people are allowed to own their own property. However, he is still not convinced that Hythloday's picture of the Utopian way of life is persuasive enough to warrant implementing the complete overthrow of England's well-established economic order. To do so would potentially create more chaos than could theoretically be averted. Is it worth it? More makes it obvious that he does not think so. The fact that poverty and violence are social ills that exist whether property is privately owned or held in common proves that the problem is not so much money and property, as it is people's attitudes towards them. The problems that Hythloday perceives in English society are not necessarily a result of the existence of money and the desire to privately own property, but they are the result of people's materialism and avarice and their total lack of care for their fellow man and sense of community responsibility. For More, the complete abolition of private property and money is a needlessly extreme solution to the difficulties that arise from issues of prosperity and affluence in commonwealths. Instead, he implicitly advocates a change in people's perspectives about the importance and centrality of these things.

More often spoke of the virtues and vices of wealth, property and status. As we have seen, More took his religion very seriously, and firmly believed that this world is not all there is. He considered the common impulse to accumulate as much money and material goods as possible to be quite a vain and deeply unsatisfying pursuit that would be revealed as utter folly in the afterlife. In his *Treatise on the Passion*, More prayed that God would keep him from the temptation to live his life in such a way as to waste it on the pursuit of riches and perishable goods: “O my sweet savior Christ- whom your own wicked disciple, entangled with the devil through vile wretched greed, betrayed- inspire, I beseech you, the marvel of your majesty with the love of your goodness, so deep into my heart that, in respect to the least point of your pleasure, my mind may set always this whole wretched world at nought.”³⁵¹ When More was in the Tower he likened the world to a “whole broad prison” filled with temptations, traps, and snares.³⁵² Marius observes that More spent his latter days lamenting over having “enjoyed the world as much as he had.”³⁵³ Indeed More’s last days were a time of reflection for him on the limited value of temporal, material possessions and worldly wealth.

Roper recounts how, in More’s last days, he was visited by his wife, who thought his persistence in not taking the oath was altogether foolish. She tried to persuade him to come to his senses by reminding him of his home at Chelsea, his house, his library and books, his gallery, his garden, his orchards and of course his family. He replied: “I see no great cause why I should much rejoice in my gay house, or anything belonging thereunto, when if I should by seven years lie buried under ground, and then arise and come thither again, I should not fail to find some therein that would bid me get out of the door, and tell me it were none of mine. What cause have I then to like such a house as would so soon forget its master?”³⁵⁴

More's Utopians seem to share this contempt for earthly treasures. Hythloday states:

In the meantime, gold and silver, whereof money is made, they (the Utopians) use as if none of them did esteem it more than the very nature of the thing deserved. And then who does not plainly see how far it is inferior to iron, without which men can no better live than without fire and water. Whereas to gold and silver nature has given no use that we may not well do without, if but the folly of men had not set it in high estimation for its rareness' sake. But on the other hand, nature as a most tender and loving mother has spread the best and most necessary things open abroad, as the air, the water, and the earth itself. And she has removed and hid farthest from us vain and unprofitable things.³⁵⁵

Gold and silver are symbolically devalued in Utopian society so that the citizens will not make the same mistakes as other nations have in needlessly warring for greater abundance of these things. The Utopians devalue gold and silver by making them the material out of which chamber pots and similar vessels are made. They also use it to make chains and shackles for their slaves, and those who commit an offense in Utopia are forced to wear rings in their ears and on their fingers, and chains around their neck, and some kind of headdress or head covering which are all made of gold, so that the Utopians citizens will start psychologically to equate gold and silver with shame and humiliation. Hythloday observes the psychological devaluation of these two precious metals and claims that: "these metals, which other nations do as grievously and sorrowfully give up, as in a manner from their own lives, if they should altogether be taken at once from the Utopians, no man there would think he had lost the worth of one farthing."³⁵⁶

The symbolic depreciation continues with the pearls and diamonds that are found by the seashore. Hythloday observes that the Utopians give them to their young children as toys. This results in an adolescent desire to separate oneself from such things, as a declaration of their passage into adulthood: "When they (the children) are a little more grown in years and discretion, perceiving that none but children do wear such toys and trifles, they lay them away even of their own shamefacedness, without any bidding of their parents, even as our children,

when they grow big, cast away nuts, trinkets, and dolls.”³⁵⁷ Hythloday recounts a humorous story about a group of foreigners called the Anemolians who came on a diplomatic mission to Utopia. They were apparently unfamiliar with Utopian customs, as their ambassadors came to Utopia all decked out in their finest clothes with impressive jewelry, gold, pearls, and precious stones. Hythloday mentions how their intentions were to “dazzle the eyes of the simple Utopians,”³⁵⁸ when in fact they were bringing derision on themselves because in the eyes of the Utopians these prominent politicians were adorning themselves with the apparel of prisoners, disgraced persons, and children. You can almost hear Hythloday laughing as he tells More about how the Utopians reacted to the diplomatic procession: “They (the Utopians) most reverently saluted the basest and most abject of them for lords, passing over the ambassadors themselves without honor, judging them by their wearing of chains to be the bondmen.”³⁵⁹ Even the Utopian children were confused. One child, apparently quite loudly, said to his mother: “Look, mother, how great a lubber still wears pearls and precious stones, as though he were a little child still.” The mother replied: “Peace son...I think he is one of the ambassador’s fools.”³⁶⁰ Hythloday cannot help but elaborate more on how confused the Utopians were by the supposed pomp of the Anemolian ambassadors: “Some found fault with their golden chains, as of no use or purpose, being so thin and weak that a bondman might easily break them, or else so wide and loose that when it pleased him he might pull them off, and run away at liberty whither he would.”³⁶¹ Eventually the Anemolians start to get the point, but rather than reacting with anger or insensitivity towards the Utopian’s customs, they in fact respond with curiosity and learn all of the Utopians’ “fashions and opinions.”³⁶² I think that the story on the devaluation of precious metals is inextricably linked to More’s main message on wealth and property in commonwealths. After Hythloday tells

More this story he gives tremendous insight into why the Utopian's think the way they do on this issue:

For these marvel that any man is so foolish as to find delight and pleasure in the glittering of a little trifling stone, who may behold any of the stars, or else the sun itself. Or that any man is so mad as to count himself the nobler for the smaller or finer thread of wool; which selfsame wool- be it now never so fine spun a thread- did a sheep once wear, and yet was she all that time no other thing than a sheep. They marvel also that gold, which of its own nature is a thing so unprofitable, is now among all people in such high estimation that man himself, by whom, yea and for the use of whom it so much valued, is in much less estimation than the gold. Insomuch that a lumpish, blockheaded churl, who has no more wit than an ass, yea, and is as full of worthlessness and foolishness, shall hold nevertheless many wise and good men in subjection and bondage, only for this, because he owns a great heap of gold. Which if it should be taken from him by any fortune raises up the low and plucks down the high, and be given to the most vile slave and abject drudge of all his household, then shortly after he would go into the service of his servant, as an augmentation or an overplus beside his money. But much more do they marvel at and detest the madness of those who give to those rich men, in whose debt and power they are not, but because they are rich; although they know them to be such niggardly skinflints that they are sure that as long as they live not one farthing's worth of that heap of gold shall come to them.³⁶³

More is quite simply arguing that gold is ultimately worthless. Gold has no real uses.

Gold does not make a person noble or virtuous. It does not define an individual's worth or personhood, and therefore it does not make sense that those who have the most gold rule over those who have none, and wage wars in which thousands die simply so they can obtain more gold. More says the same about clothing. When the wool is wrapped around the sheep's body it keeps the sheep warm, but gives the sheep no added significance, yet when it is shaved off and spun very thinly and made into a shirt, it makes the wearer of the shirt feel superior to other people. How does this make sense? More is attempting to give his readers perspective.

Temporal, material things are not that important, and they do not determine a person's worth. It is significant to remember the period in which More is writing these things. King Henry VII and Henry VIII were both royals obsessed with pomp and pageantry. Derek Wilson observes:

In the first year of his reign alone Henry VII found three major occasions to impress the people with his magnificence. The coronation ceremonies extended from 27 October to 13 November 1485. They had to be lavish. It was little more than two years since Richard III had proudly processed before his cheering commons and submitted himself in the Abbey to all the ancient ceremonies. At every point Henry surpassed his Yorkist predecessor. The feasting was longer, the pageantry more elaborate, the clothes and hangings more costly... The court was sumptuously entertained for Christmas and the festivities of the holy season were scarcely over before the realm was celebrating the union of the two roses on Henry's marriage to Elizabeth of York... Two months later he set out with his bride, his court and an armed retinue on a progress to the North... The king and queen were personally attended by a newly raised corps of two hundred royal bowmen, brilliantly equipped and meticulously drilled. They did not fail in their effect. Nor did the fine clothes of the royal party or Henry's ostentatious distribution of alms along the route.³⁶⁴

Henry VIII was not very much different from his father in this regard. He too enjoyed grand displays of splendor and majesty. When Henry went on campaign in France in 1513, his "personal entourage consisted of 600 armed men, secretaries, clerks, sewers (servers), grooms, gentlemen and pages of the chamber, chapel priests and choir to the number 115, his lutanist, his master of the jewel house, 14 horses 'with housings of the richest cloth of gold and crimson velvet with silver gilt bells of great value', numerous carts carrying clothes, armour and plate and a wooden house in prefabricated sections carried in fourteen wagons."³⁶⁵ However this event was nothing compared to the spectacle known as the Field of Cloth of Gold, a diplomatic meeting that took place between Henry VIII and Francis I on the border of the pale of Calais in 1520. Wilson states, "The chronicler Du Bellay called it 'le campe du drop d'or', the Field of Cloth of Gold, because of the acreages of that rich material used for clothes, horse trappings, tent and pavilion hangings."³⁶⁶ At this event, "The English King was accompanied by the papal legate (Wolsey), one archbishop, two dukes, one marquis, ten earls, five bishops, 20 barons, four Knights of the Garter, 70 knights, 200 members of the king's guard, and 569 assorted household servants and attendants. Each member of the entourage whose status merited it was allowed his own servants so that the total personnel was 3997 person (and 2087 horses). The queen was

equipped with a further 1175 persons and 778 horses.” According to Wilson, “many knights and barons virtually impoverished themselves by selling lands and manors in order to buy fine clothes, tournament armour, harness and victuals.”³⁶⁷ But this was the kind of lavish lifestyle that the court of Henry VIII was accustomed to, and one simply could not obtain a much-coveted spot in the royal party without incurring such expenses.

It is clear that More was familiar with royal shows of pageantry and it was probably on the forefront of his mind when he penned the *Utopia*. The excesses of the monarchy were an issue for many humanists at the time. In his *In Praise of Folly*, Erasmus, speaking as Folly, says:

Kings are baited with so many temptations and opportunities for vice and immorality, such as are high feeding, liberty, flattery, luxury and the like, that they must stand perpetually on their guard, to fence off those assaults that are always ready to be made upon them. In fine...after their reign here they must appear before a supreme judge, and there be called to an exact account for the discharge of that great stewardship which was committed to their trust. If princes did but seriously consider (and consider they would if they were but wise) these many hardships of a royal life, they would be so perplexed in the result of their thoughts thereupon, as scarce to eat or sleep in quiet. But now by my assistance they leave all these cares to the gods, and mind only their own ease and pleasure, and therefore will admit none to their attendance but who will diver them with sport and mirth, lest they should otherwise be seized and damped with the surprisal of sober thoughts. They think they have sufficiently acquitted themselves in the duty of governing, if they do but ride constantly a-hunting, breed up good race-horses, sell places and offices to those of the courtiers that will give most for them, and find out new ways for invading of their people’s property, and hooking in a larger revenue to their own exchequer.³⁶⁸

For More, there is nothing wrong with a little pageantry, but it becomes immoral when it becomes excessive and when it distracts the king from his actual duties and distances him from the real genuine needs of his people. In one of his Latin poems, More tells the following story:

A forest-bred peasant, more naïve than Faunus or a satyr, came into town. See there! The inhabitants have taken places on either side to fill the avenue, and throughout the city all one could hear was the cry, ‘The king is coming.’ The peasant was roused by the strange news and longed to see what the crowd was watching for so eagerly. Suddenly the king rode by, in full view, resplendent with gold, escorted by a large company, and astride a tall horse. Then the crowd really did roar: ‘Long live the king’; and with rapt expressions they gazed up at the king.

The peasant cried out, 'Where is the king? Where is the king?' And one of the bystanders replied, 'There he is, the one mounted high on that horse over there.' The peasant said, 'Is that the king? I think you are making fun of me. To me he looks like a man in fancy dress.'³⁶⁹

In other words, it is not the clothes that make the man, it is his character. It is not the pageantry that makes a king's office great, but rather what he does with his position. In many ways, this praise of substance over appearance filters into the realm of property as well. If people understood that wealth and property do not give them nobility then they would not be continually seeking to accrue more for themselves to the detriment of others. If people understood that wealth and property are not an excuse for idleness and selfish behavior, but are a tremendous privilege that comes with certain responsibilities and expectations, then people would not spend so frivolously and egoistically. If people understood that wealth and property have no value in and of themselves, and that there are virtues and ideals that are of greater value, then people would act differently towards each other and they would seek community and the common good rather than their own selfish ambitions and desires. More explains these themes further in his work *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*.

More's *Dialogue of Comfort* gives what most certainly appears to be a completely different view of property from that which More espouses in the *Utopia*. In the *Dialogue of Comfort*, More dramatizes a dialogue between Anthony, an elderly gentleman, and his young and rich nephew, Vincent, who wishes advice on how to deal with persecution. Most scholars agree that in this dialogue, Anthony represents More. In part of the dialogue, Vincent expresses feelings of guilt about possessing wealth and property when so many people around him are starving and impoverished, and Anthony attempts to give Vincent a more balanced perspective:

Now it is true, Nephew, that Christ invited people to follow him by embracing a life of voluntary poverty... Yes, he did say that 'whoever of you does not renounce all that he has

cannot be my disciple'. But what he meant by that is made clear by something else he said just a few sentences before: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.' Here Christ our Savior clearly means that none can be his disciple unless they love him so far above all their own kinfolk, and even their own life, that for live of him they will, rather than forsake him, forsake all of the above. So by those other words he obviously means that whoever does not renounce and forsake in his own heart, in his affections, everything he ever has, such that he would rather lose it all, every bit of it, than grievously displease God by holding on to any part of it- that person cannot be his disciple...Christ taught us, after all, to love God above all things, and we do not love God above all things if we keep, contrary to God's pleasure, anything that we have. For we show that we value a thing more than we value God when we are more content to lose God than it.³⁷⁰

Anthony continues:

People cannot, as you well know, live here in this world unless some individuals provide for many others a means of making a living. Not everyone can have a ship of his own; nor can everyone be a merchant without a stock. Not everyone can have his own plough. But such things, as you well know, must be had by somebody. And who could make a living as tailor if no one could put in an order to have a garment made? Or as a construction worker, or a carpenter, if no one could finance the building of either a church or a house? Who would be the makers of any kind of cloth if there were no one with the capital needed to put different groups of people to work? A man with only two ducats to his name would most likely be better off if he gave them both away and left himself not a penny, if he lost absolutely everything he had, than if the rich man who puts him to work every week were to lose half of his money; for then the poor man would probably be out of work. The substance of the rich is, indeed, the wellspring of the livelihood of the poor.³⁷¹

More's arguments are simple. Wealth and property are only vices if their possessor's perspective is wrong. If a person loves their possessions more than they love God or people, then they will be selfish, covetous and cruel. However if they love God and people more then they love their possessions, then they will have a healthy perspective and will see their abundance as a blessing and privilege and as a great responsibility and social obligation. Anthony goes on to say that God does bless some people with affluence, because it is necessary for some people within society to possess more so that they can spur society on to greater and greater advancements by funding new building projects and by providing for new job opportunities thereby allowing for a diversification of skills and talents. Wealthy people are necessary for buying goods, creating

markets, investing in businesses and initiatives, and for providing greater help for the needy and downtrodden. However, despite all this, Vincent continues to remain skeptical that wealthy people can have a clear conscience about keeping their wealth when so many people suffer.

Anthony continues his apologetic of wealth:

But now, Nephew, to answer your question as to how the rich can possibly with a clear conscience keep any wealth for themselves when they see so many poor people upon whom they could bestow it: They could not, indeed, do this with a clear conscience if they were obliged to bestow their wealth upon as many poor people as they possibly could. And we all would, in fact, be so obliged if we were expected to take at face value this command from our Savior: 'Give to everyone who begs from you' (Luke 6:30). For you could take this as meaning that all the poor folk you see are so specially committed to your charge alone, by God himself, that you are obliged to keep handing out things to every beggar who approaches you, as long as there is still a penny in your pocket. Actually, Nephew, that saying- like so many other sayings in Scripture...needs interpretation. For as Saint Augustine notes, Christ said 'Give to everyone who begs from you,' but he did not say 'Give them everything they beg for'...For by so doing, I would leave myself nothing.³⁷²

Anthony continues:

But now, Nephew....I am not obliged to give to every beggar who asks me for something. I am not obliged to believe every impostor I meet on the street who claims to be very sick. Nor am I obliged to consider all poor folk to be so uniquely committed by God to my charge alone that nobody else should give them anything of theirs until I have first given away everything of mine. I am not obliged to have such an evil opinion of everyone except myself as to think that unless I help, the poor folk will all die at once, since God doesn't now have left in this whole area any more good folk besides me! I may think better of my neighbors and worse of myself than that, and yet stand a good chance of getting to heaven by God's grace.³⁷³

Anthony basically surmises that wealthy people do have a social obligation, especially to their own families, their servants, and strangers that they welcome into their homes as guests. They even have obligations towards their deadliest enemies. However, they do not have an obligation personally to rescue every poor and needy person in their society. It is not right for one wealthy person to give up everything they have, while others never part with any of their wealth, but keep storing up more for themselves. There needs to be a sense of collective responsibility amongst those who have wealth, an arrangement of shared cooperation in helping

those less fortunate. As much as wealthy people have a duty to help their fellow man, they also have a right to keep some of what they earn so that they can live comfortably and take care of those who are in their charge.

At first this might seem completely contradictory to the message of the *Utopia*, but in many ways it is not. Remember, More is not supportive of Utopian communism. He is however, sympathetic to many of Hythloday's views of greed and corruption in English society. In fact, he is often in agreement with Hythloday. Therefore the reader of the *Utopia* is meant to understand that the pursuit of money and property has indeed tainted and degraded English society; however communism is not the answer. Communism will not resolve the problem, because money and property in and of themselves are not the problem. The problem is humanity and its obsession with wealth and property. What a healthy and truly prosperous commonwealth needs is a worldview similar to Anthony's. His worldview understands that individual accumulation of wealth and private property can be of a great social and cultural benefit to a commonwealth, but that wealth and private property can also be detrimental to a commonwealth if they are pursued selfishly and without the constraints of transcendent values and social responsibility.

In terms of the social and cultural benefits, it is important for the reader to see that Utopia is not necessarily a freer and happier society because they do not have money and hold property in common. The totalitarian version of communism that the Utopians instituted had created a society devoid of privacy and individual expression. Every house is built in the exact same way: "Every house has two doors, one into the street, and a postern door on the back side into the garden." Every house can be publicly accessed and every house belongs to every citizen: "Every man that wills may go in, for there is nothing within the houses that is private or any man's own.

And every tenth year they change their houses by lot.”³⁷⁴ Every citizen is expected to farm, although only for a time: “Agriculture is a science common to them all in general, both men and women, wherein they are all expert and cunning.”³⁷⁵ Every citizen conforms to a daily schedule: “For they, dividing the day and the night into twenty-four equal hours, appoint and assign only six of those hours to work, three before noon, after which they go straight to dinner; and after dinner, when they have rested two hours, then they work three, and upon that they go to supper. After eight of the clock in the evening, counting one of the clock as the first hour after noon, they go to bed; eight hours they give to sleep.”³⁷⁶ Although there is some freedom in how the Utopians are allowed to spend their spare time, there is a general expectation that “they should bestow the time well and thriftily upon some good science.” However, even their spare time is heavily regulated: “After supper they spend one hour in play, in summer in their gardens, in winter in their common halls, where they dine and sup. There they exercise themselves in music, or else in honest and wholesome conversation.”³⁷⁷ Everyone wears the exact same clothing: “While they are at work they are plainly clad in leather or skins that will last seven years. When they go forth abroad they cast over them a cloak which hides the other plain apparel. These cloaks throughout the whole island are all of one color, and that is the natural color of the wool.”³⁷⁸ And there are many more examples like these of how the Utopians share everything commonly and do everything uniformly. As Marius observes, “In some respects Utopia resembles a vast herd in which all the members move as one over a green and spacious pasture.”³⁷⁹ Marius further comments on this Utopian obsession with communion and togetherness and states that it is a protection against sin:

Sin in Utopia is what Augustine called *superbia*, the overweening pride that is the mother of all vice, the narcissistic adoration of the self as the center of the universe. The predominant school of theology in More’s time held that humility was the first step to salvation, that the

individual must acknowledge his own worthlessness before God's grace could begin to save him. Individual humility is the way of life in Utopia, where personal self-seeking is rigorously controlled by ritual, order, conformity, and mutual observation. Those who say that Utopian society is the monastery extended to whole families are much closer to the mark than those who see it as a book of serious political theory.³⁸⁰

There is definitely a monastic element to the *Utopia*, but there is also a sense that the Utopian commonwealth is a police state. "The relentless openness of the society, the resolute eagerness of the Utopians to spend time with each other and to check up on what everybody is doing, the loathing of idleness,"³⁸¹ these are all signs of a totalitarian regime, and for many scholars More comes across as very extreme for expressing these views through Hythloday. However, Marius concludes that More did not intend for this kind of tyrannical monasticism to be adopted in Europe: "The communism in *Utopia* was certainly a moral statement rather than a program for action, a statement directed partly against the greed of the rich in Christian Europe and partly against the enforced idleness that created beggars unable to find work unless they could be commanded by coin."³⁸² Marius' conclusion on this issue of property in the *Utopia* is very similar to my own; however I disagree with Marius' further conclusion that the *Utopia* "raises problems but not necessarily solutions."³⁸³ There are definitely instances in which this is true, but not here. More makes it clear that Utopian communism is unreasonable. However, More does concede that violence, crime, idleness, and social unrest will exist even where property is held privately and citizens are allowed to take risks and freely seek out their fortunes. More concedes this by not re-stating his Aristotelian argument. Therefore neither the socio-political extremes of the Roman respect for unfettered acquisition of wealth nor of communism are the solution. What is necessary is a change in people's hearts. If people used their wealth for the betterment of the commonwealth and the people around them, and understood that people have more value than property or possessions, then there would be a drastic improvement in how

commonwealths engage their citizenry and the world. This of course would require a revamping of the renaissance conception of nobility, in that nobility would no longer be granted to those who have a lot of wealth and the right pedigree, but it would be awarded to those who merit it through virtuous living. Commonwealths would also need to institute fairer and more socially conscious laws, and there would need to be a limiting of the excesses of the monarchy, court and parliament. The alternative is Utopia, a society where everyone wears the same clothes, performs the same duties, lives in the same houses and eats in the same dining halls. A society where nothing is private, not even your personal life, and nobody is different from anyone else. When More concludes that the common opinion is that money and property are necessary for nobility, magnificence, worship, honor, and majesty in commonwealths, he is not necessarily agreeing with it. He is saying that money and property do allow citizens uniquely to express themselves and advance themselves, and these are some of the things that are valuable and essential in European commonwealths, and without money, these niceties would be completely overthrown and destroyed. Obviously these niceties can result in greed, sloth and envy, and they had in England, but the issue is not the niceties themselves, but people's attitudes towards them. It may very well be that More is warning his fellow Europeans that if they do not change their mind-set from one of greed to one of generosity, and from one of selfishness to one of mutual responsibility, then the Utopian way of life may be their only option as a model for a just and virtuous commonwealth. More understood man's sinful nature, and he knew that men's hearts and minds could only be changed by the gospel and Jesus Christ. If this change did not occur then the only way justice and virtue could be achieved would be if they were forced to live under strict regulations and laws rather than under grace. Either way, change is necessary. Judging from his lifestyle, I think More preferred the former option. As Marius observes:

Later, when he (More) was doing battle against the Protestants, More savagely attacked the communism of the Anabaptists, who tried to put into practice the apostolic sharing of the book of Acts... Though in his ideal society More had all men hold things in common, he never gave the slightest hint that he favored rejecting private property in the real world that he saw every day... in More's own life his aim seemed to be to acquire as much for himself and his family as he honestly could.³⁸⁴

Again we see that there is no inconsistency between More's life and his *Utopia*. The *Utopia* and its complicated passages need to be understood within the historical context of More's biography and within the literary context of More's other works.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

It is clear that More's work the *Utopia* is as complex as its author. Some of the complexities that have arisen in Morean scholarship however have been more the result of scholars seeking to read too much into the *Utopia*, or limiting the *Utopia*'s potential. I have labored in this thesis to show that the *Utopia* cannot be understood solely as a satire, nor can it be interpreted as a manual for a ready-made model of socio-political and religious reform. The *Utopia* cannot be read solely through the lens of Plato or Aristotle or of any other philosopher, theologian or thinker, nor can it be seen simply as a war of ideas between the philosophies of Greece and Rome, or as a rebuke of scholasticism and medievalism or even as a response to or endorsement of humanism and modernism. The *Utopia* certainly cannot be appreciated apart from the biography and bibliography of its author. The *Utopia* was not a hiccup in More's life. More's mission to Flanders presented him with an opportunity to write down some of the questions he was asking himself and some of the thoughts and ideas he was formulating in his mind, ideas which would grow and mature and which he would elaborate on in later writings. The *Utopia* therefore does not stand alone in the corpus of More's writings; his works depend on each other, and each text gives a more full and complete understanding of More and his view of

the world. Those who were close friends of More would most likely have understood that, and would not have accepted the *Utopia* as the complete expression of More's thoughts. Nor would they have accepted it as a bad joke. Why would More, a serious scholar, waste the only extensive amount of free time he had had in years, and probably would have had for years to come, to write a lengthy pun that would only have been understood and appreciated by an exclusive circle of colleagues. It is too rich for that.

The *Utopia* is a multi-faceted, multi-layered work that expresses the heart and mind of a young More as he seeks to unite all the elements of his life into a comprehensive worldview. Perhaps this is chiefly why the *Utopia* does not provide its readers with a definitive worldview, because More himself did not have one at the time. He was still framing his convictions about the benefits of counsel and the best state of a commonwealth and he wanted his readers to join him on the journey. As I have been laboring to explain, More wrote the *Utopia* with the purpose of providing a fictional account of an altogether bizarre and very un-European commonwealth by which his fellow Europeans could compare and measure the rightness and justness of their commonwealth, and with the purpose of dramatizing a debate for his fellow humanists to show the points of contention on the issue of the value of philosophers providing counsel to Kings; a debate which More was having with himself at the time in which he penned the *Utopia*. More intended the *Utopia* to be a springboard for debate and discussion, therefore More intended the *Utopia* to be taken seriously, and he went to great lengths to legitimize the *Utopia* which I have shown by providing excerpts from letters, maps, songs and poems written by More himself and by his fellow humanists and friends. Obviously these friends knew it was a fictional account, but they understood More's intentions and aided More in his legitimating the *Utopia*.

I started my analysis as More starts his *Utopia*- by introducing the characters. Hythloday is a lover of Greek learning. He is so jaded by his contemporary society that he leaves his family and all he possesses, and devotes himself entirely to studying philosophy, history, science and literature, as he travels the globe, gaining knowledge and wisdom from all the civilizations of the world. He is more of a renaissance humanist, a modernist, a beacon for change. However, he becomes so obsessed with change that he does not perceive the things of value that already do exist in the English commonwealth. He becomes so consumed with the beauty and originality of Utopia that he becomes blind to just how immoral and unreasonable many aspects of their society actually are, however he will not allow himself to be criticized. He is utterly convinced of his own righteousness. He is so repulsed by the commonwealths of Europe that he refuses to even share his wisdom and knowledge with them. What he has learned is kept private and is therefore rendered useless for the public good. He will not allow what he believes to be the absolute truth to be questioned, debated or compromised in any way. For him, the Utopian model needs to be and can be fully and completely implemented, in every detail, in every religious, geographical, political and cultural context, without accommodation. It is this radicalism that frightens More.

For More there is much in the Utopian commonwealth that he admires, but there is also much that he finds alarming and unreasonable; things which would completely overthrow the well-established order of England, leading to even greater chaos and injustice. More would wish to see some of the Utopian customs realized in English society, but he does not believe that all Utopian practices are transferable without accommodation and adaptation, and he is firmly convinced that some of their laws and traditions should not be implemented at all, at least not within the cultural context of the English society in which he was writing. More is therefore

much more of a critical thinker. He is a realist, although he is also an idealist. In the midst of this dialogue between More and Hythloday, there is also Giles. He may seem to be a character of little significance because although he introduces the two disputers, he himself does not engage in their exchange. But that is exactly the point. Giles skeptically questions at the outset whether or not any commonwealth could be more just and virtuous than England, and then we never hear from him again. Whereas Hythloday has become so disillusioned with Europe that he believes it is beyond redemption and is subsequently so mesmerized by his love and adoration for all things Utopian that he lives blindly in a world of delusion and fantasy about how perfect their imperfect society is, and whereas More is honest about the flaws in English culture and is willing to listen and debate options to change them, and yet is a critical thinker who truly wants to do what is most just and virtuous, Giles is absolutely entrenched from the outset in his opinion that England is the ideal commonwealth and he will not be moved. Out of these three characters, More's attitude is the most ideal. He sees the bad in European commonwealths, but does not become so disheartened that he loses sight of the good as well, and he does not become so disenchanted that he commits himself to the first thing he sees that's different, which may be just as corrupt and immoral, albeit in different ways. He tries to honestly discern what is right and true; giving proper appreciation and critical attention to all points of view. He understands that to overthrow all the old traditions would not solve anything; it would simply create more chaos. The wisest course of action is to reform the existing system from the inside while holding to and promoting what is already good.

These are the characters that make up the dialogue that is *Utopia*. Since More is the recorder of this dialogue he gets to have the last word and his final paragraph, which has been quoted numerous times in this text, is, as I have stated, the key to understanding the *Utopia*.

Until More's concluding remarks, the reader might be under the impression that he or she is reading a ready-made program for social reform, or perhaps a bad joke, however More dissuades the reader of either of these notions in his finale. In it he makes several observances. First, he observes that many of the Utopian's "manners and laws" are "founded on no good reason."³⁸⁵ He makes specific mention of their military and religious practices, but also the very foundation of their society, that is a society devoid of money and private property. He does however mention that there are many other rites and laws that he deems unreasonable, but he does not go into specifics on which. This gives the reader liberty to question and discern for themselves, however, More does give more guidance by stating the greatest problems are with how the Utopians engage in warfare, as well as their policies of religious pluralism and tolerance, and their communism.

Second, he observes that there are some things within the European commonwealths that are noble and magnificent and worthy of worship, honor and majesty, and that if these things were to be done away with, the commonwealth would be "utterly overthrown and destroyed."³⁸⁶

Third, he observes that Hythloday's account is not persuasive enough. More states that he wanted to "weigh and examine the same matters, and talk with him more at length thereon."³⁸⁷ More is still not convinced that Utopia constitutes the best state of a commonwealth, and he is still full of questions and doubts. More does not know if this future dialogue will ever take place, but that does not mean it cannot happen among the readers of the *Utopia*. Hythloday has finished his thorough and complex account, but for More the conversation is just starting.

Fourth, More states unequivocally that he cannot condone many of the Utopian practices, however he urges his readers to respect Hythloday, because he observes that he is a wise and

learned man. Therefore he is advising his readers to take Hythloday seriously, but to be wary that they do not follow Hythloday to his fanatical conclusions.

Fifth, he observes that there are many worthy things that the Utopians have instituted in their commonwealth, but that they cannot be implemented in Europe, because Europe is not socially, politically or culturally ready to receive them.

In summary, More is telling his readers that Utopia is full of customs and laws, some which should be embraced and some which should be modified or shunned. The English commonwealth is no different. It has traditions and practices which should be cherished and some which should be altered or rejected. Therefore the reader is meant to think through Hythloday's arguments and examine the Utopian commonwealth in comparison to England's. However, the reader is cautioned to discern when Hythloday's arguments become illogical and inconsistent and to critically analyze the soundness of some of the Utopian customs, especially their military, religious and economic practices. The end of the *Utopia* is therefore the beginning of a conversation.

This is the simplest and I believe the most accurate interpretation of the *Utopia*- that it is the beginning of a conversation. Tragically this conversation has often been misdirected, as I have shown, by attempts to interpret the *Utopia* as having been inspired by one source, and by attempts to separate it from its historical context. These interpretive methods have led to confusion and difficulty. The *Utopia* cannot be read solely as a Platonic, or Aristotelian, or Augustinian, or Ciceronian or Lucian work. It is all of these works and many more. It is a dialogue. It is a synthesis of ideas; a mixture of the beliefs and opinions of a multitude of great thinkers, philosophers, politicians and theologians whose writings and polemics span several

centuries. It is a reflection of a More who loved learning and who believed that a truly educated person needed knowledge of the Bible and of the works of the Greeks, Romans and the Church Fathers and of history, philosophy, theology, literature, language, poetry and science. It is a reflection of an era known as the Renaissance that saw a revival in classical learning and the beginning of humanist schools that challenged their students to study beyond the scholastics and Latin, and to learn Greek and Hebrew and read the classics and the New and Old Testaments in their original languages and be transformed by instruction into godly men and women that actually sought to be better and more virtuous citizens. It is a reflection of a period in history that understood that the pure and undefiled religion of Christ had become tainted, abusive and stale and that the politics of kings like Henry VII and Henry VIII were corrupt and their laws intolerable and unjust. It is also a reflection of a turbulent period that saw the overthrow of many institutions and traditions which caused a great tension in many reformers who saw a tremendous value in both the old ways and the new. Questions and debates on issues of nobility, the value of counsel, and the best state of a commonwealth became vibrant, and many European monarchs were actually willing to hear advice on societal reforms. It is within this rich historical context that the *Utopia* comes alive. It is a complex work that deals with many issues and therefore no one source is its inspiration. More is its inspiration, and this exciting period in history was his inspiration, therefore the *Utopia* is more successfully interpreted within the historical context of Renaissance England and within the context of More's life and thought, then in the biographies and writings of other writers.

The conversation of the *Utopia* has also been derailed by attempts to interpret it as a consistent message. The *Utopia* cannot be understood apart from its internal inconsistencies. Its inconsistencies, irrationalities and ironies are deliberate so that readers can see what some of

Hythloday's unreasonable and ill-thought-out ideas look like when they are followed to their logical conclusions. For instance, we examined the Polylerites and their policy of enslaving thieves rather than executing them. However, once the thieves became slaves they could be executed for a whole host of other crimes, including attempting to elope or aiding another slave in their attempt to elope. They could even be executed for fraternizing with other slaves. As Hythloday extols and unabashedly defends the virtue of this practice, it quickly becomes clear to the reader that although Hythloday may be right in stating that execution does not prevent theft in society, enslaving criminals and executing them for every infringement of their serfdom, whether major or minor, will lead to even greater bloodshed and will completely negate the virtue gained by supposedly punishing thievery in a more just and compassionate manner. This irrationality causes the reader to ask questions about whether or not this practice, fully implemented, is in fact more just and virtuous. Is Hythloday right in saying that capital punishment is an excessive and immoral method of justice for robbery? Is the Polylerite method a viable alternative? Why or why not? Where does the Polylerite method of justice start to become untenable and unjust? What could be changed to make it better or more consistent with the original ideals? Without these internal contradictions, readers would not pause to consider the implications of the Utopian way of life.

Lastly, the conversation of the *Utopia* has been disrupted by attempts to interpret it apart from its external inconsistencies, meaning the apparent discrepancies between the way More lived his life and the ideals he espoused in the *Utopia*. Just as the *Utopia* becomes richer when understood within its historical context, so it becomes more meaningful when it is appreciated within the context of More's biography and his bibliography. As has been stated, the end of the *Utopia* is the beginning of a conversation, which is why More's later works are so vital for a full

and complete understanding of the *Utopia*. Whereas many scholars have seen the *Utopia* and the life and later writings of More as contradictory, I see them as complementary. I labored in my chapters on religious tolerance and property to demonstrate how a comparative reading of More's works and a closer examination of his life, most devotedly recorded by his many biographers, as well as his thoughts and feelings, most poignantly expressed in his personal letters, helps us more accurately interpret the portions dealing with these subjects in the *Utopia*. For instance, how could the More who wrote the *Utopia* with its praise of communism, also be the More who owned a large house with his own gallery and private library? Of course More owned property and employed servants. He was never promoting communism in the *Utopia*. He emphatically stated that he believed this was the most unreasonable of the Utopian traditions, and in his *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* he made it clear that property and money were not evil in and of themselves. What made them detriments to virtue and justice, were how people used and abused them, and how they loved them more than they loved God or their fellow man.

The same was true of the issue of religion. More did not abandon his values of religious broadmindedness, advocated for in the *Utopia*, and become a religious bigot because he was confronted during his political years with the realities of heresy. He never endorsed religious freedom to begin with. It too was deemed to be one of the unreasonable customs of the Utopians. For More, the ends justified the means. The Utopians allowed religious debate and discussion and diversity, because they were working towards developing knowledge of the one true religion, which More already knew was Roman Catholicism, the religion which England and the rest of Europe already possessed. In his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, More states that freedom of religious expression is necessary for pagans to come to Christ, but once Catholicism is

established, spiritual open-mindedness can only lead to division and apostasy, which is why More observed that the Utopian custom of religious tolerance is unreasonable within the European context. It would make no sense to implement such a practice in Catholic England. It could only result in heresy, chaos and the downfall of Europe. Heretics, like the Lutherans, needed to be stopped by any means necessary, even violence. This is how More is able to be a zealous persecutor of heretics while also being the author of the *Utopia*.

Both of these supposed external inconsistencies and their interpretations are consistent with the general thesis of this paper, which is that the *Utopia* was written as a springboard for discussion. More did not intend Hythloday's advice to be taken at face value, but to be scrutinized and examined within the European situation and context. Again, the *Utopia* is the beginning of a conversation, and this conversation has continued unto this present day. Even if scholars have not always properly interpreted the *Utopia*, the main mission of the *Utopia* has been fulfilled, in that almost five hundred years after it was written it is still generating questions and fuelling academic debates which will most likely continue for generations to come. It is a momentous work that still sparks the interest of intellectuals across a wide range of research fields including history, philosophy, literature, politics, theology and more. It has something for everyone, and as much as it is a fictional account, it is a very engaging work that gives us insights into a period in history and the life of a man. It has the feel of being a book that More wrote with a sense of uncertainty about whether or not he would ever have time to write another book again. It is a veritable hodgepodge of questions, ideas and concepts that More was wrestling with at a time of immense political, social and religious change in England, and which More would continue to wrestle with throughout his life. There is an obvious struggle present in the pages of the *Utopia*, as More grapples with the realities of a changing world and tries to

discover his place in it. There are elements within the *Utopia* that embrace modernity and yet there are elements that fiercely guard tradition and the old ways. There is a respect and admiration for Greek learning and wisdom, and for its transformative powers to heal the abuses of society, religion and education, and yet there is an appreciation for the medieval thinkers and for the commentaries and polemics of the Church Fathers and for the treasured unity of Christendom under the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. The *Utopia* is a beautiful and brilliant combination of all of these elements into a complex and timeless work that has caused unceasing debate for centuries. Despite all that has been written about it over the past few hundred years, the one indisputable authoritative interpretation of this text has not yet been offered. This stands as a powerful testimony to the breadth and depth of this magisterial work. This thesis has not even begun to exhaust the content of this work and ultimately it will only add one drop of perspective into a sea of perspectives. This is the genius that is the *Utopia*. More achieved his goal. More's desire to continue his conversation with Hythloday, to ask his questions and express his doubts, has been fulfilled by the multitude of readers who have picked up this book in its many translations and attempted to correctly understand it and apply its principles, whether rightly or wrongly. More has made this fictional account of the commonwealth of Utopia, as real and as engaging and as relevant as any of the histories of the real commonwealths of the world.

¹ More, Thomas, Sir, Saint. *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More including Roper's Life of More and Letters of More and His Daughter Margaret*. trans. Mildred Campbell, (Roslyn, New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1947), p. 20.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³ Skinner, Quentin. "Thomas More's Utopia and the Virtue of True Nobility." In *Visions of Politics*, ed. Quentin Skinner, pp. 213-244. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 213.

⁴ Chambers, R.W. *The Place of St. Thomas More in English Literature and History: Being a Revision of a Lecture Delivered to the Thomas More Society*. (New York: Haskell House, 1964), pp. 21, 25.

⁵ Wooden, Warren W. "Anti-Scholastic Satire in Sir Thomas More's Utopia," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 8, no. 2 (July 1977), pg. 29.

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- ⁶ Ibid., pg. 29.
- ⁷ Kautsky, Karl. *Thomas More and his Utopia*. (New York: Russell & Russell), 1959, p. ii.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 159.
- ⁹ Nelson, Eric. "Greek Nonsense in More's Utopia," *The Historical Journal* 44, no. 4 (Dec., 2001), p. 892.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 890.
- ¹¹ Nelson, Eric. "Utopia through Italian Eyes: Thomas More and the Critics of Civic Humanism," *Renaissance Quarterly* 59 (2006), p. 1032.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 1032. Nelson's interpretation of the Roman account is inspired by Quentin Skinner
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 1038.
- ¹⁴ Nelson, *Greek Nonsense*, p. 914.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 914.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 890-91.
- ¹⁷ Logan, George M. *The Meaning of More's Utopia*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 111. This interpretation is also espoused by A.G. Harmon and John Michael Parrish.
- ¹⁸ Nelson, *Utopia through Italian Eyes*, p. 1034.
- ¹⁹ Shephard, Robert. "Utopia, Utopia's Neighbors, Utopia, and Europe," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no. 4 (Winter, 1995), p. 843.
- ²⁰ Kessler, Sanford. "Religious Freedom in Thomas More's Utopia," *The Review of Politics* 64, no. 2 (Spring, 2002), pp. 207-208.
- ²¹ *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More*, p. 169.
- ²² "Peter Giles to the Right Honorable Jerome Busleiden," In *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More*, p. 176.
- ²³ Lewis, C.S. "Thomas More," In *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*. eds. Richard S. Sylvester and G.P. Marc'hadour, (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977), p. 391.
- ²⁴ Heiserman, A.R. "Satire in the Utopia," *PMLA* 78 (1963), pp. 163-174; Elliot, R.C. "The Shape of Utopia," *ELH* 30 (1963), pp. 317-334; Traugott, John. "A Voyage to Nowhere with Thomas More and Jonathan Swift," *Sewanee Review* 69 (1961), pp. 534-565; Dorsch, T.S. "Sir Thomas More and Lucian: An Interpretation of Utopia," *Archiv fur das Studium der Neueren Sprachen* 203 (1966), pp. 345-363; Barnes, W.J. "Irony and the English Apprehension of Renewal," *Queen's Quarterly* 73 (1966), pp. 357-376; Wooden, Warren. "Anti-Scholastic Satire in Sir Thomas More's Utopia," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 8, no. 2 (July 1977), pp. 29-45; Berger, Harry. "The Renaissance Imagination: Second World and Green World," *Centennial Review* 9 (1965), pp. 36-78; Sylvester, Richard S. "'Si Hythlodæo Credimus': Vision and Revision in Thomas More's Utopia," *Soundings* 51 (1968), pp. 272-289; Johnson, Robbin S. *More's Utopia: Ideal and Illusion*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).
- ²⁵ Wooden, pg. 29.
- ²⁶ Duhamel, P. Albert. "Medievalism of More's Utopia," In *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, pp. 236-37.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 249.
- ²⁸ Herbruggen, H. Shulte. "More's Utopia as Paradigm," In *Essential Articles*, p. 258.
- ²⁹ Sylvester, Richard S. "Si Hythlodæo Credimus: Vision and Revision in Thomas More's Utopia," In *Essential Articles*, pp. 300-301.
- ³⁰ Lewis, C.S. "Thomas More," In *Essential Articles*, p. 391.
- ³¹ Guegen, John A., "Reading More's *Utopia* as a Criticism of Plato," In *Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More*, ed. Michael J. Moore, (Boone, North Carolina, 1978), pp. 42-54.
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- ³³ Raitiere, Martin N. "More's *Utopia* and *The City of God*," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 20 (1973), pp. 144-68.
- ³⁴ Logan, George M. "Review: More's Utopia by Dominic Baker-Smith," *The Review of English Studies* 45, no. 178 (May, 1994), p. 247.
- ³⁵ Baker-Smith, Dominic. *More's Utopia*. (London and New York: HarperCollins Academic, 1991), p. xi.
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