

7. THOMAS MORE

(London, 14th February 1478 – 6th July 1535)



Saint Thomas More was an English lawyer, social philosopher, writer, statesman and noted Renaissance humanist. He coined the word “utopia”, a name he gave to the ideal, imaginary island whose political system he described in his masterpiece *Utopia* (1516).

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- **1478**: born in London, son of a prominent judge, in **1492-94** he studied Greek and Latin literature at Oxford University, and started writing comedies.
- **1499** he started a lifelong friendship with the Dutch humanist **Erasmus of Rotterdam** and in **1501** he became a barrister.
- **1504**: he entered Parliament and earned a reputation as an honest and effective public servant.
- **1512-19**: he worked on a *History of King Richard III*, never finished but greatly influential on W. Shakespeare's play *Richard III* – in **1516** he finished and published *Utopia*.
- **1517**: he entered the king's service as a counsellor and personal servant and in **1521** he was knighted.



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- **1521:** More helped Henry VIII in writing his *Defence of the Seven Sacraments*, a repudiation of Luther's doctrine – Pope Leo X rewarded the king with the title *Fidei defensor*.

Martin Luther then attacked Henry VIII in print, calling him a “*pig, dolt, and liar*”. **More's rebuttal defended the supremacy of the papacy, the sacraments, and other church traditions** in a virulent language branding Luther an “*ape*”, a “*drunkard*”, “*lousy little friar*” and a lot more!



- **1523:** he was made Speaker of the House of Commons.
- **1527:** he refused to endorse the king's plan to divorce Queen Catherine of Aragon; nevertheless in **1529** he was the first layman to become Lord Chancellor.

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- **1532:** disapproving Henry's stance toward the church he resigned, citing ill health.
- **1533:** he refused to attend the coronation of Anne Boleyn, a matter which did not escape the King's notice.
- **1534:** after a series of false charges he was committed to the Tower of London because he refused to swear to the Act of Succession – in 15 minutes he was found guilty of treason.
- **1535** (July 6th): he was beheaded – his final words on the scaffold were “*The King's good servant, but **God's First***”.



More was **beatified in 1886** and **canonized** by the Catholic Church as a saint by Pope Pius XI **in 1935**.

The origin of the word “utopia”.

- “Utopia” comes from the Greek words:

Οὐ = “not” + **τόπος** = “place” + the suffix **-ία**

Οὐτοπία = “no-place-land”.

- In English, *Utopia* is pronounced exactly as *Eutopia* (i.e. **Εὐτοπία** in Greek meaning “good place”) something that More himself addresses in an addendum to his book:

“Wherfore not Utopie, but rather rightly my name is Eutopie, a place of felicitie.”

Utopia (1516)



- Thomas More is travelling in the Low Countries when he sees his friend, Peter Giles who introduces him to a well-travelled friend of his, Raphael Hythloday. Among the countries Raphael speaks about he tells them about a **Utopia**, which he thinks is ruled very well and is a **perfect country**.
- Utopian **towns** are all as identical as possible, with a max. of 6,000 families organized in groups of thirty headed by a magistrate called Philarch elected yearly. An Archphilarch overlooks every ten Philarchs.
- The Utopians' manner of life is unusual: **gold is of no value** thus everything is free – they spend their lives in the city and in the suburbs, living in each place for two years at a time.

Utopia

- **Laws** dictate that they are not to travel without a ‘passport’, obtained from the Prince and stating where they can travel. There are no lawyers in Utopia: defense in court is personal.
- **Marriages** are possible for women over eighteen, and men over twenty-two. Sexual encounters before marriage are prohibited as are polygamy and adultery.
- **Military discipline** involves everyone on a daily basis even though armies are preferably hired from outside: women are encouraged to join their husbands at war.
- As regards **religion** people are free but they must all believe in one Divine Being – it is forbidden to believe that the human soul dies with the body since

“degrading so noble a being as the soul, and reckoning it no better than a beast’s is not fit for a human being”. 7

Utopia: inexistent or ideal?

- Why did More write this work? Did he agree with the ideas he was propounding or was he making fun of his readers?
 - living a communal life, working for a public cause, searching for spiritual happiness, alternating work with leisure and study with games are **in line** with what we know about More's beliefs;
 - divorce, euthanasia, married priests, female priests, religious toleration seem to **jar** with what More stood and fought for.
- *Utopia* is thus primarily a story about a **journey** to an **imaginary place** told by an **imaginary man** with a strategically chosen name:

Raphael the **archangel** who guided Tobias & “opened” his father’s blind eyes

Hythlodæus (from the Greek *hythlos*, “nonsense” and *daíein* “give, spread”) means “dispenser of nonsense”!

