

### **Reading Guide for Thomas More's *Utopia***

Last semester, we read St. Augustine's *City of God* as a foundational model for Christian politics. Augustine urges Christians to reserve their civic hopes for the heavenly City of God, and to collaborate with the earthly city only on limited ends like peace and material goods, since earthly politics are motivated by violence and greed. Augustine's experience of the Roman empire is often taken to promote Christian realism, that is, a modesty about political projects in the earthly city and a skepticism about larger social programs outside of the Church. But other scholars (like Professor Veronica Ogle) suggest that Augustine's two cities are closely interconnected; the earthly participates in and derives its partial reality from the heavenly. Christians can connect their citizenship in the Church to larger political projects beyond the Church.

In the diversity of the Catholic intellectual tradition, the counterweight to St. Augustine's ancient Christian realism is St. Thomas More's modern Christian utopianism. This semester we will explore this alternative approach to the Catholic political imagination. Thomas More (1478-1535) was a lawyer, judge, and humanist scholar who advised Henry VIII but remained loyal to the Catholic Church during the English Protestant Reformation to the point of martyrdom. *Utopia* is one of his first works, written in 1516 when he was 38. Pope Pius XI canonized More as a saint in 1935, and in 2000, Pope St. John Paul II declared More the patron saint of politicians. ***Please read the full text of Utopia before January 22 and consult the reading guide below.*** It is just under 100 pages and an easy read, at least on the surface.

In Seminar 4 (January 22), Jason Blakely and Amy Cannon will guide us into the text of *Utopia* and suggest different approaches to More's project. In Seminar 5 (February 26), Professor Vincent Lloyd from Villanova University will join us in person as a special guest. Professor Lloyd's recent book on prison abolition (*Break Every Yoke*, 2020) represents a contemporary Christian utopian project reminiscent of More's ideas. In Seminar 5, the Junior Fellows will be asked to share their own responses to More and Prof. Lloyd (details to come). Finally, in Seminar 6 (March 26), we will consider some episodes in modern Catholic politics with Sr. Kathy Schneider, and then conclude with a visit from a local monastic community in Los Angeles—a living model of Catholic utopianism.

## UTOPIA, BOOK I

### *How to approach the book*

- More prefaces *Utopia* with a letter to Peter Giles. What are the different contexts of *Utopia*: personal, familial, religious, literary, economic? How do these suggest we read the book? Some scholars suggest that More's *Utopia* invents a new literary genre. How would you describe the genre of the book? (pp. 5-8)
- What activity was More doing right before Peter introduces him to Raphael? What might More be telling us with this detail? (9-10)
- Who is Raphael Hythloday? (11-13) What is Raphael's defense of the contemplative life? What danger does he see in a misguided "reverence for times past," or what we might call nostalgic realism? (14-15)

### *Christian responses to poverty and injustice*

- Raphael tells a long story about a layman lawyer and Cardinal Morton, a dialogue within More's larger dialogue. In this episode, they debate a proposal made by Raphael about responding to poverty and injustice in their own society as Christians. What is Raphael's proposal? What is the lawyer's response? (16-24)
- What is the alternative policy of the Polylerites? Why does More bring them up now? (23-24)
- What does the fool say about the poor, and how should we interpret his remarks? (25-27)

### *Alternatives to realism*

- Why does Raphael say it is worthless to appeal to philosophical principles when advising kings, i.e. using philosophy in political deliberations? (27-33)
- What kind of philosophy is best for political engagement, and why? (33-34)
- How does Raphael relate the Christian imagination to political realism? (34)
- What is the foundation of injustice according to Raphael? How have the Utopians overcome this? (35-38)

## **UTOPIA, BOOK II**

### *Economic order in Utopia*

- In Book II, Raphael describes how Utopia operates as an ideal political community. How is labor organized in Utopia? How do the cities relate to the surrounding countryside? (38-48)
- How are households, public health, and dependent care organized in Utopia? (49-54)

### *Moral order in Utopia*

- What is the moral philosophy of the Utopians? (54-61)
- What virtues do the Utopians practice, and how do they view pleasure? (61-66)
- What are the Utopians' views on education, slavery, and sexual ethics? (67-73)
- What are the Utopians' views on criminal justice and war? (73-84)

### *Christianity and Utopia*

- What are the religious practices and theological beliefs of the Utopians? How are they related to Christianity? Why do you think More decided to end his account of Utopia with religion? (84-93)
- What is a true commonwealth, according to Raphael? What vices destroy a commonwealth, from Raphael's Christian perspective? (93-96)
- What do you make of the curious ending of *Utopia*? How does it influence how you read the book in retrospect? (96-97)