

Utopia - Book Summary

Book I

More tells how, when he was in the Low Countries on government business, he was introduced by his friend Peter Giles to Raphael Hythloday, a veteran traveler. The long day's conversation among the three men constitutes the substance of the book.

When More and Giles discover how widely Hythloday has traveled and realize the depth of his understanding of the governments of many nations, they propose that his knowledge is too valuable to waste and that he ought to enter the service of some monarch as councilor in order to employ his knowledge in the service of mankind. Hythloday discourses at length on the reasons for his reluctance to undertake such employment. First, he does not believe that, as things stand, his advice would be accepted. The majority of those presently sitting in royal councils invariably practice a system of flattery toward their superiors and of personal aggrandizement and would surely override his idealistic and philosophical proposals. In support of these convictions, he relates experiences during an earlier visit to England and cites two instances of policy-making in recent international power struggles.

This segment of Book I is conducted as a debate among the three men on the obligations of a man of experience and integrity to play an active role in the service of country and mankind. It is identified as "The Dialogue of Counsel."

In pursuit of the argument, Hythloday proceeds to a critical analysis of the patterns of law, government, economics, and mores among European nations and, most particularly, in England. His criticisms are directed specifically at the severity of the penal code, the gross inequities in the distribution of wealth, the unequal participation in productive labor, and the appropriation of farm lands for sheep grazing.

Book I represents the negative side of the picture which More intends to create, the statement of what is wrong with "civilization" in his time. A few incidental references comparing the state of affairs in contemporary Europe with the manners and government of a nation on a remote island called Utopia leads into the discussion in the second book.

Book II

The conversation of More, Peter Giles, and Raphael Hythloday is interrupted while they enjoy a pleasant dinner, after which Hythloday gives an account of the whole life pattern of the Utopians.

Geographical Features. At the outset, Hythloday gives some geographical data, the shape, the length, and the breadth of the island. He neglects, however, to mention the location on the map — that is, the latitude and longitude, but other specifics are calculated to give the reader a sense of a real place.

Country Life. A good deal of attention is paid to agriculture and country life, and it is explained that most of the inhabitants alternate city and country living at two-year intervals.

Cities. The number and location of the cities is specified, and the capital city, Amaurot, is described in considerable detail. The entire population engages in productive labor, thereby making it possible for them to operate on a six-hour work day. The few exemptions from farm labor or working at a trade are government officials and priests.

Officials. The leaders or government officials, chosen from the citizens of superior intelligence and integrity, are called the Philarchs and the Archphilarchs (sometimes referred to by their earlier titles of the Syphogrants and the Tranibors). The head of the government, elected by the Philarchs, is the Prince.

Occupations. Every person, with the exception of the officials and priests, practices a trade; and because of this full participation in productive labor, their needs are satisfied through a six-hour working day.

Community Life. Their houses are well built and uniform but unpretentious in style. So, too, is their clothing. The family is the unit of their society, and the oldest member is governor of the family. Thirty families band together about a great hall where they eat together, their food being well prepared by women well qualified for that work. Menial tasks are performed by slaves.

Traveling in the realm is permitted if one's services are not needed temporarily. Travelers will receive free hospitality.

Economy. The economy of the Utopians is of particular interest. Their markets are nothing more than supply houses where everyone is free to go and take what he needs without payment. They are able to produce an

abundance of food, so that they can export their surplus to foreign countries, which they exchange for gold and silver for the state treasury. There is no private property among the Utopians and they have no money. The wealth which they acquire by foreign trade is used only in time of war. The citizens are educated to despise jewels and precious metals and find their use by foreigners for ostentatious decoration to be ridiculous.

Learning. Their education is mainly directed toward useful learning, with the result that they have independently acquired the same skills and concepts as the ancient Greeks. They are much given to reading in their leisure hours.

Philosophy. The philosophical position that prevails among them enshrines reason as the foundation for all knowledge. This leads to the belief that a life pattern must accord with the dictates of nature; since nature prompts people to seek pleasure, pleasure is regarded as the goal of life. Pleasure is to be restricted only if it will prove detrimental to oneself or to other people. Furthermore, careful distinctions are made over the values set between pleasures of the body and of the mind.

Slavery. The slaves are mostly either criminals condemned for vicious crimes or prisoners captured in battle, though some foreigners are brought in for other reasons.

Euthanasia is advocated.

Marriage is held in the highest regard, and any breach of chastity is severely punished. When choosing a mate, one is permitted to see the other party unclothed in order to have a better knowledge of the person he or she is to wed for life.

Divorce is permissible, but only under special circumstances.

Cosmetics are scorned.

Magistrates never seek office nor wear distinguishing attire.

Laws. They have no lawyers. Their body of laws is brief and readily understood by laymen. An accused person pleads his own case with assistance from the judge.

Treaties and Alliances are avoided entirely because of lack of trust in the fidelity of parties in such agreements.

War is regarded as inhuman, something to be avoided if possible. Nevertheless, knowing that they must expect

involvement in military conflicts at times, they make careful preparations and have devised a method for conducting campaigns that has served them well. Also, their method of treating a defeated enemy with clemency has proved effective.

Religion. There is not a single religion throughout the nation, but a considerable variety of doctrines is permitted. There is uniformity in the belief in immortality, and, as a consequence of this, they have developed a cheerful attitude toward the approach of death. They regard atheists askance and refuse to let them hold office.

They have persons whose dedication to a life of service and sacrifice corresponds to the religious orders in the Christian church. Their priests are men of exceptional character and dignity. Their churches are large and very beautiful. The services are interdenominational in character.

When Hythloday and his companions instructed the Utopians in the teachings of Christianity, many of them became converts and were baptized.

Peroration. In a short passage, Hythloday sums up his views on the Utopian system, declaring it to be the best and only true commonwealth. It insures justice for all of its citizens, and because there is no private property, everybody owns a share in everything. The result is a nation of happy people, and the chief causes of dissension in other nations are avoided: greed, theft, social classes, party factions, and even murder. All other governments are viewed as conspiracies of the rich to keep the common people in subjection.

Conclusion. At the conclusion of Hythloday's discourse, More offers some remarks of his own indicating that he was not wholly converted to the Utopian system but that he regarded some of its features as meritorious and wished they might be adopted in Europe.