

The Historical Context of *Utopia*

Published in 1516, Thomas More's *Utopia* has a quality of universality, as revealed by the fact that it has fascinated readers of five centuries, and has influenced countless writers. To better understand this iconic work, it's helpful to have an introduction to the period of which it was the product, the Renaissance.

The publication of *Utopia* followed Columbus's first voyage to America by only 24 years. *Utopia* preceded by just one year Luther's publication of the Ninety-five Theses that fomented the Protestant Reformation. Michelangelo had completed his four years' labor on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in 1512. Henry VIII had recently come to the throne of England (1509), was still married to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, and was being guided in his government by Cardinal Wolsey as his Lord Chancellor. Some of the principal literary figures of More's generation were Erasmus, Ariosto, Machiavelli, and Castiglione, along with More himself. One of the great periods in Western art was in full swing with Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian heading a long list. The chief explorers in the first decades after Columbus were Vasco da Gama, John Cabot, Amerigo Vespucci, and Balboa.

The outlook and the life style of Western people were greatly affected by certain achievements of the Renaissance period; namely, the invention of printing, the development of gunpowder, and the improvement of navigational instruments and ship designs. Somewhat later than those developments, but still important contributions of the Renaissance, were the Copernican revolution in astronomy and the development of the telescope by Galileo. All of these factors not only produced substantial changes in people's lives, but they also generated a charged atmosphere of excitement and curiosity throughout Europe.

The "classical revival" was at the center of the intellectual and artistic agitation of the age. It involved a realization—or rediscovery—that a very great civilization had flourished in ancient Greece and Rome and a conviction that conscientious study and imitation of that civilization offered the key to new greatness. The Renaissance artists studied ancient works of architecture and sculpture, not only for their form and technique but also for their spirit. Renaissance scholars came to appreciate the literature of the ancients as a storehouse of wisdom and eloquence, and through their study they acquired attitudes and developed tastes of enormous value: to challenge dogma, to recognize the authority of nature, and to regard living a full life in "this world" as an opportunity and an obligation. They came to believe in their right to accept and enjoy physical beauty and the whole sensory world. Finally they acquired a sense of the

worth of the individual and of the dignity of man. Growing gradually out of these concepts came the philosophy of “humanism” and the magnificent achievements in the fine arts.

The religious history of the period is a dramatic one. Christianity, which for more than a thousand years had been represented throughout all of Western Europe by one church, the Roman Catholic Church, experienced a tremendous upheaval during the 16th century. The first overt action of revolt came in 1517 when Luther defied the authority of Rome. That marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, the consequences of which were that Europe was divided into numerous divergent sects and into warring camps. Actually, all of that turmoil occurred after More wrote his *Utopia*, but the causes of the Reformation were of long standing and had been a source of concern to conscientious Christians for at least two centuries. Among the principal evils alleged in the attacks against the church were arbitrary exercise of papal authority, greed of the clergy as revealed in the selling of pardons and of church offices, and the traffic in holy relics. Intelligent people were indignant over the propagation of superstitions to anesthetize the common people, and social critics were bitter over the enormous opulence of the church amid the poverty and squalor of the majority of Christians.

In the decades immediately preceding Luther’s break from the church of Rome, many devout Catholics were vocal in their criticism of practices authorized by the church as well as by the shameful conduct among the clergy. Eventually the critics broke into two groups. Luther and the other leaders of the Reformation, despairing of remodeling the established church with its ingrained fallacies, severed their connections with Rome and declared a new authority. Another party of critics strove for reform within the established church toward which they maintained an absolute loyalty despite its manifest faults. Among them, one of the most articulate and effective writers was Erasmus, More’s close friend; and in the same camp, though not expressing his views so vociferously, was More also, whose aspirations toward a more truly Christian way of life are revealed through his plan of *Utopia*.

Italy was unquestionably the fountainhead of Renaissance civilization. As early as the 14th century, men of enlightenment, notably Petrarch and Boccaccio, were introducing Renaissance concepts and proclaiming a new allegiance to classical antiquity, and through the 15th century a feverish development toward new attitudes and styles marked the work of brilliant artists, scholars, philosophers, and men of letters. Through most of the 15th century, the achievements were predominantly Italian, but by the beginning of the 16th century the movement was spreading to other countries of western Europe; at the same time that Italy was

losing her political independence through conquests by French, Spanish, and Austrian armies, she gradually yielded her preeminence in the arts and letters to France, Spain, and England.

England, in the year 1500, was emerging from a century of grim civil wars during which the cultural life of the country had deteriorated to a deplorable state. It was not until 1485 that the civil wars were ended by the victory of Henry Tudor, Earl of Richmond, at Bosworth Field, establishing the Tudor dynasty with the crowning of Henry Tudor as Henry VII. During the next 118 years under the reign of the Tudors, especially through the long reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, England attained the status of a first-rate European power and produced a flourishing culture scarcely equaled in all the history of Western civilization.

One of the first signs of renewed enlightenment in England, after the rude and bloody 15th century, was the appearance of a group of “humanist” scholars that flourished at Oxford and in London in the early decades of the 16th century, notably John Colet, William Latimer, Thomas Linacre, Reginald Pole, and Thomas More—a group that Erasmus pronounced both congenial and distinguished.

The name of “humanist,” in the Renaissance, meant one who was trained in the study of Latin and Greek languages to the point of easy familiarity, who had read widely in those literatures, who had adopted the ancients’ attitude toward man on earth, and who believed that the prescription for enlightenment in modern society was to be found chiefly through the study and imitation of those ancient classics.

A serious dilemma presented itself as a result of this newfound devotion to the ancient sages because of the apparent conflict between pagan classicism and Christian doctrine. It became a matter of deepest concern for all Renaissance thinkers to find an accommodation of the two doctrines—the philosophy of Plato and the teachings of Christ. As a result of their dual allegiance, we get the term which describes the movement, “Christian humanism.” The successful adaptation of double devotion is seldom better illustrated than in the works of Thomas More, especially in *Utopia*.