



Augustine's treatment of the best way of life in *The City of God* profoundly influenced the perspective of the medieval and Renaissance world. Scholars have conjectured that *The City of God* must have played some important role in More's construction of *Utopia*. More gave a series of public lectures on Augustine's work fourteen years before writing *Utopia*; he considered Augustine to be his preeminent moral authority apart from the Bible; and most importantly, he recognized that *The City of God* radically altered the classical interpretations of the best way of life for a human being. As one classic and patristic scholar put it, "The City of God is an answer to Plato's Republic, which it eventually replaced in the West as the most authoritative account of the manner in which man should live in the city."<sup>1</sup> Discerning the relationship between More's work and Augustine's is challenging.

When More gave his lectures on Augustine's *City of God* in 1501, he seems to have studied this work in an effort to understand the nature and limits of political life. As the early biographer Stapleton relates, More's lectures were written "not ... from the theological point of view, but from the standpoint of history and philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Appreciating the depth of *Utopia* as well as its wit depends in large measure on understanding how More incorporates Augustine's account into his own treatment of political philosophy.

### Key Principles in Augustine's *City of God*

1. No perfect society ever will or ever can exist (19.17, 20, 27).
2. No Christian can doubt that any rational creature from any country has a human nature that is capable of being redeemed (16.8, 19.11, 12.21, 14.1).
3. All human beings are subject to unruly passions and the vain imaginings that arise from pride (9.3-5, 14.3).
4. Each and every soul is properly ordered only when its love is firmly anchored in the contemplation of God, and this love regulates the balance between the active and the contemplative life (11.2, 14.3, 19.1-4).
5. The two fundamental types of society – i.e., the city of God and the earthly city – exist everywhere (14.1, 13, 28; 15.1) and they intermingle throughout history (1.35, 18.54).
6. Great security is never given to any people and therefore it is folly to look for security in this world (17.3).

### Comparing Utopian Claims with Augustinian Principles

- Raphael relates that *Utopia* has a 1,760-year history (177/88) in which civil wars and natural catastrophes have never affected their civic life (178/44-6, 210/36-51, 211/1-10); *The City of God* teaches that war and catastrophes both natural and moral always have and always will plague human societies (19.5).
- *Utopia* is "not only the best but the only kind [of commonwealth] worthy of the name" (209/35-6); *The City of God* denies that a truly just commonwealth is possible here on earth (19.20-21).
- The Utopians live a life of pleasurable leisure and consider great self-denial "truly insane" (188/73, 193/5); *The City of God* argues that personal peace is attained through a life-long struggle that involves personal self-denial (19.4). *The City of God* considers "nothing more disgraceful and monstrous" than holding pleasure as the end of life (5.20).
- *Utopia* considers its own institutional arrangement as the one and only way of bringing about peace and justice (173, 209/7-9, 211/1-7); *Utopia* is uniform in its social customs, such as choice of home, dress, or leisure activities (177/66-7; 179, 186; 181, 190-91). *The City of God* considers virtue the key to some measure of peace and justice and argues that there are a range of institutional ways of bringing that about (19.10, 17); *The City of God* is indifferent to customs if these do not directly violate the law of God (19.17).
- *Utopia* professes toleration of religious pluralism but requires uniformity in matters of social custom that affect the state (203-4; 206/79-81, 211/1-4); *The City of God*, on the other hand, requires unity regarding teachings about God's nature and the worship due him (19.17).
- Like Raphael, Utopians consider the institutional arrangement of private property as ultimately responsible for social and personal evils (173/12-17, 210/38-62); Augustine maintains that ills in the city of man arise as a consequence of man's free will; the fault is not in gold, but in the human heart (12.6).

**Question to consider:** Are there other ways in which the Utopian way of life reflects or contradicts the principles set forth in *The City of God*? What, for example, do both works teach about "soundly and well-trained citizens"? How do you assess the relationship between More's thinking and Augustine's?

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Fortin, *Political Idealism and Christianity in the Thought of St. Augustine*, Villanova, PA: Augustine Institute Press, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Stapleton, *Life of Sir Thomas More*, trans. Philip Hallett (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1928), 8-9.