



Utopia and Religion: Required Beliefs and Motives

The conqueror Utopus instituted laws “for the sake of peace” and to “benefit religion itself” (204/49-52). These laws decreed that “everyone could practice the religion of his choice” (204/39-40), but also set forth religious beliefs that are strictly required: “he solemnly and strictly forbade that anyone should ... think that the soul dies with the body or that the world is not ruled by mere chance and not by providence” (204/72-74; see also 188/57-62). Reasons for this requirement are given at 204/75-205/2 and 188/49-189/1. Raphael also describes the major role of religious fear (*metus*) and terror (*terrorem*) in Utopian religions. He discusses *metus* several times (204/83, 84; 206/65; 208/22, 35-37), and calls it “the greatest and practically the only incitement to virtue.” He discusses *terrorem* at 208/71.

- How well would the required beliefs serve the two purposes given above by Utopus?

Utopian Priests: Number, Role, Status, and Power

Twelve priests and one high priest (*pontifex*) serve thirteen churches in each city of roughly 100,000: i.e., one priest for 7,500 people. Priests have four peacetime functions: “They preside over divine worship, attend to religious matters, and act as guardians of morality” (206/56-57); they educate “children and young people...devot[ing] no more attention to learning than to character and virtue” (206/71-73). This last function makes them “extremely useful in protecting the status of the commonwealth” (206/79-80). Regarding their status and power: we are told that “no magistrates are held in greater honor among the Utopians” (206/87-88), that “they are elected by the people in the same way as other magistrates” (206/51-2), that their power to excommunicate is among the most feared punishments (206/64-5), and that their spouses are among “the very finest” in the country. If they commit crimes, they are not accountable to anyone “but to God and their own consciences” (206/88-90). They have several wartime functions as well: see 207/27-53.

- What accounts for their power in war?
- What feats do they perform in war that are considered so astonishing that the priests are held to be “sacrosanct and inviolable,” having “genuine majesty” (207/24-53)?
- What is your assessment of the Utopian policy towards crimes among the priests? What would be the benefits of such a policy, and what attendant risks?
- What strikes you as good about these priestly functions? What strikes you as unusual? What is your assessment of the Utopian priests?

Comparative Religions and Christianity within Utopia

Within Utopia, we are told that many different types of religions are tolerated, but that over the years the Utopian people have gradually unified into the one that is “more reasonable” (203/62).

- What has impeded this unification? What has helped it? What seems to be meant by “more reasonable”?

The Utopians’ reactions to Christianity have been mixed: on the one hand, they adopt it easily; on the other hand, an excessively zealous convert is deemed intolerable by the authorities (203-204).

- How compatible does traditional Christianity seem to be with the other Utopian religions? How do the two special religious sects in Utopia (206/18-30) compare to the religious communities of Europe?
- Considering the actions of the congregation, the architecture of the church, and the prayers and content of the liturgy (207/62-209), how does Utopian worship compare to the prevalent modes in England at that time? What, for example, would be the striking contrast between the English Gothic churches and cathedrals compared to the Utopian churches?

Other Questions on Religion in Utopia

- At the end of *Utopia*, Morus says that the Utopian “religious beliefs and practices” seemed to him “quite absurd” (211/17-19). Why might he have said so?
- How do Utopian religions compare with the mythological, natural, and civil religions that Augustine presents and critiques in Books 6-10 of Augustine’s *City of God*?