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Utopia and Religion in Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

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Abstract: When European writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries wrote about utopia or their vision of the best possible way to live, they usually included reflections on religion. Religion as it was known in their day was not perfect and had been criticized for causing numerous abuses. If a perfect or near-perfect society were to be imagined, it would have to include a perfect or near-perfect understanding of religion. This could range from atheism to a minimal religion which avoided all the institutional factors, to one in which detailed regulations governed all facets of religion and life. This article reviews and interprets the treatment of religion in a wide range of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century utopias. It concludes that some utopian writers set high goals for change, some settled for lesser reforms, and some left religion as it was while changing other parts of life.

Keywords: utopia; religion; Enlightenment; reform; ideals

1. Introduction

This article is an interpretation of the role of religion in a wide variety of European utopias of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All over the world, religion has always been a major factor in human life as far back as it has been recorded. In much of history, it has been a topic of controversy and efforts to get it right. Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may be distinguished from other periods and places as one of the periods in which religion was most called into question. Utopian thinkers of the period are no exception to this rule: they called religion into question in a variety of ways. This does not mean that they uniformly rejected it, but rather that if they did not reject it, they sought to control it, reform it, or perfect it. The one thing utopian writers could not do, and still be called utopians in this matter, was to leave religion as they found it. Utopianism came to be understood as a form of demanding change in which high ideals are spelled out.

Where to draw the line between reform and utopian ideals was never easy. People charged utopians with trying to change too much too fast, but others would think change could not come soon enough. One person's reform could be another person's utopia, and one person's utopia could be merely a reform to the next person. But if there is any agreement on the meaning of utopia, it is dissatisfaction with the status quo and a desire for major improvements. It is also the case that the conception of religion was much contested: what was religion to one was superstition, fanaticism, or heresy to another. This article reviews the connections among conceptions of utopia and religion in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in order to determine what they had in common and where they differed.

We start with the contexts of utopian writing in this period and move rapidly through some of the most influential utopias of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries since these were the works that most influenced later writers and set up some of the alternatives for understanding the roles of religion in utopias. When we get to the period known as the Enlightenment—late seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth—a wide variety of relationships between utopia and religion emerges. People could opt for atheism or deism as the best attitudes toward religion, but then generally had to keep these opinions

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in underground literature, since publication might have led to persecution. People could also opt for dead serious treatments of religion in utopia, or for satirical perspectives meant to criticize contemporary religion. Some utopias were very philosophical, putting forward abstract and general considerations. Others called for detailed regimentation of every aspect of life in addition to religion. Yet others were clearly intended to nudge contemporaries toward more tolerance and a Christian community. Finally, we shall briefly discuss some figures who were involved in attempts to carry out utopian ideals in the real world, plus an overview of the anti-utopian arguments that developed in response to utopian ideas. After all, part of the context of any literary philosophical genre is the people who react against it.

2. The Contexts

The contexts for utopian thinking were always the established institutions such as traditional monarchy or traditional republic, and the dogma of the established churches—Catholic in Southern Europe and Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican to the north. By definition, utopians contest such institutions and dogmas since they are the status quo, and utopians want to change them.

One last preliminary note: literally hundreds of utopian stories, plays, novels, tracts, and treatises were published during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even more circulated in manuscripts. An article of this length cannot mention all of them, nor even all of the relations between utopia and religion that they explored. What it can do is review relevant issues in a dozen famous utopian or anti-utopian writers (Bacon, Burke, Campanella, Condorcet, Fontenelle, Harrington, Hume, Kant, More, Saint-Pierre, Swift, and Voltaire) and fourteen less-well-known utopian writers or actors (Andreae, Haller, Holberg, La Roche, Leprince de Beaumont, Marivaux, Mercier, Meslier, Morelly, Novikov, Restif de la Bretonne, Veiras, Smith, and Struensee) that have been selected for offering a different twist or an original perspective in one way or another. It offers a sketch of enduring questions and representative answers, but there are very few such broad sketches in the literature (see Trousson 2001; Laursen 2016). By the very nature of the broad view offered here, it cannot go into any one of these utopias with the depth of the specialist. But without this sort of overview and wide interpretation, readers will not know where to situate the in-depth studies of individual utopias provided by specialists.

3. Religion in Utopias from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

When European writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took a position on utopia and religion, they had a tradition to draw on. It may be said in general that Plato's *Republic* was the first major philosophical utopia that had come down to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers as a model, although there were shorter works of utopian thought in ancient Greek, Roman, and Medieval times. In 1516 Thomas More gave currency to the word "Utopia" by describing an island where there was no private property and thus no theft, no hunger or want, and no political infighting (More 1999). The word itself comes from Greek roots that mean either "good [or happy] place" or "no place". His island was indeed a very different place than the England that More knew, and changing to live like his utopians would have shaken things up. Many of his ideals could also be seen by others as dystopian: the regimentation and control of everyday life would leave little room for freedom or individuality. The work was written in an *iocoserio* vein: we do not know if he really thought we could and should live like this. His account of religion is limited to the report that the Utopians worship the sun, the moon, and the stars. More himself died a martyr to the Catholic cause and was named a saint. So, utopia and religion have been interrelated from the beginning of the genre.

Key works in the utopian tradition of the early seventeenth century included Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602), written while the author was in prison for suspicion of atheism (Campanella 1981). In some matters, Campanella called for big changes. He virtually abolished the family, and sexual intercourse was directed by officials for breeding

purposes. Control over daily life was complete: sumptuary laws punished frivolous fashions such as cosmetics with death, and spies ensured obedience. Technology and organization of production ensured plentiful food, and the sciences would bring flying machines and ships without sails or oars. But in other ways, Campanella's utopia was ultimately conservative. Astrology played a major role in his worldview. Although he had been persecuted by the Spanish Monarchy and the Catholic Church, he internalized their values, and his utopia ended by condemning the Protestant heresy, praising the Catholics, and relying on Spain to spread the gospel around the world. Few later utopias would follow Campanella on these points.

Campanella was followed not long after by Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1619), a Lutheran utopia (Andreae 1999). In contrast to Campanella, Andreae made the family the fundamental unit of his utopia, and the death penalty was a last resort. He did not bother with flying machines but did rely on science to solve many social problems. Regimentation of daily life followed the pattern of More and Campanella, even to the point that differences of opinion did not exist. Andreae had no understanding of markets and commerce. His work gives us little or no sense that this utopia could actually be brought about: at most, it could inspire small communities of scholar–craftsmen who could be proud of Christian poverty.

Further background for the religion, science, and politics of the utopias of the eighteenth century was supplied by Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) and James Harrington's *Oceana* (1656). Bacon's utopia, named after the Atlantis of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, was centered around the House of Salomon. This was a state within a state, consisting of the scholars and scientists of the country, "dedicated to the study of the Works and Creatures of God" (Bacon 1974, p. 229). Its ambitions sound like those of all proud intellectuals: "the knowledge of Causes. . . and the enlarging the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (Bacon 1974, p. 239). The highest honors go to inventors. The most ambitious later Enlightenment utopia could not ask for more.

Bacon's utopia, although far away from Europe, was Christian, made possible because the people had received an ark containing the Bible and a letter from St. Bartholomew. Christian family life was honored, and there were daily services of praise to God for his marvelous works. The utopian aspect of the religious side of Atlantis was that the people actually lived in accordance with Christian ideals, not that they were changed in any significant way. Perhaps the idea of harmonious coexistence of Christianity and the latest natural science was Bacon's most important contribution to later utopias.

By contrast, Harrington promoted a backward-looking ideal, based on the gentry, or landed farmers. His Oceana was a Roman-style republic because the sword was in the hands of the middling property owners (Harrington 1977). He was anti-clerical but defended the role of the universities in religious education and anti-Catholic polemics. His was a militaristic society, based on a citizen militia, not a standing army. It was a transparent attempt to understand England in terms of Roman republicanism, which he argued was a necessary product of the distribution of land. This was one of the most important precursors of Marx's claim that the form of government follows the ownership of property. Harrington did not prophecy well: the book was published just before the return of the monarchy.

4. Utopia and Religion in the Enlightenment

Because of their push in the direction of change, utopians fit well with what came to be called the Enlightenment. We shall use this term although there is no accepted overall definition of the Enlightenment. It was contested at the time, with many people writing essays on its meaning, and now historians debate the many kinds of Enlightenment that have been identified. Nevertheless, the term is widely used with a general consensus on the family of ideas that it denotes, with the overall meaning emerging in use.

We shall keep these debates in mind, but for now, we shall just observe that utopian writings can be found in each of the Enlightenments of Paris and Edinburgh, of Berlin

and Naples, of Geneva and St. Petersburg (Robertson 2021, pp. 39–41). Even though the English like to say that they did not have an Enlightenment because they did not need one, there were nevertheless utopian writers in an English Enlightenment (Beiser 2014). And utopian writings were produced by representatives of what have been called the Conservative, Moderate, and Radical Enlightenments (Israel 2010). A key point is that the Enlightenment was international, with much communication across national and language barriers (Pagden 2013, p. 12). Most of the utopias considered in this article were translated and discussed in several languages.

It is a common misunderstanding to think that all of the Enlightenment was secular and irreligious. There certainly were anti-religious figures, but counting the heads of writers, mathematicians, and scientists who thought of themselves as Enlighteners throughout the eighteenth century, the vast majority were Christian Enlighteners who thought they were proving the works of God on earth (Laursen 2013). And among the anti-religious Enlighteners, it is obvious that much of their vocabulary and many of their goals were drawn from a pervasively Christian culture that they could not escape. There was also a Jewish Enlightenment, the *haskallah*, centered in Berlin but also active elsewhere (Freudenthal 2022). Despite the reputation of the Catholic Church elsewhere, there was even a Catholic Enlightenment in the countries of the Mediterranean and Latin America (Lehner 2016). When people wrote utopian writings, both Christian and anti-Christian, they usually said a lot about religion.

There were tensions within the Enlightenment among its various elements. On the one hand, one would not call a religion enlightened if there were not some elements of reason and rationality in it. On the other hand, many Enlighteners did not want to abandon their religions for the sake of secular rationality but rather to save their religions by reforming them. Moses Mendelssohn of the Jewish Enlightenment surely thought of himself as merely using reason to improve Judaism, and Immanuel Kant insisted that he could prove that an ever more enlightened Christianity would be as close as a religion could be to a purified "religion within the bounds of bare reason" (Palmquist 2016). Some people at the time agreed that it was possible to purify a traditional religion by the use of reason, and some accused Kant and other such purifiers of covertly abandoning religion and spreading atheism (Laursen 2024).

Some Enlighteners were not very interested in politics. They concentrated on advancing mathematics and natural science and innovating in philosophy. But other Enlighteners had a political angle. Respect for every individual was part of the democratic ideology of some Enlighteners (Israel 2010). Other Enlighteners were republicans, allowing for degrees of citizenship and slavery, and usually for gender distinctions in political life. There was also Enlightened Absolutism, the idea that monarchs were best situated to carry out the changes that Enlightenment called for (Blom et al. 2007). Each of these added a religious dimension to politics.

In their opposition to the status quo, Christian and Jewish Enlighteners tried to discover new things about the world and integrate them with their religion. Agnostic or atheist Enlighteners tried to develop a new understanding of the world without reliance on religion. Reason and rationality were some of the key tools of all of them, but they also usually made room for sentiment and sensibility. The focus was different in Naples from what it was in Edinburgh, but the general attitudes were similar.

Inspiration for the Enlightenment came from several sources. The body of travel literature, which had built up in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made it clear that there was no agreement all around the earth on what was the right religion. Science and technology were also giving people more of the control over nature and their lives that they had previously sought from religion, which could give them hope of obtaining more control over their social and political conditions as well. Growing wealth and freedom in commercial society led to ideas of progress that went beyond the traditional Christian notions of progress. We shall trace elements of all of these developments here.

5. The First Major Enlightenment Utopian Text

Denis Veiras's *The History of the Sevarambians* (1677–1679), originally published in English and then in French, was the first full-scale utopia of the Enlightenment (Veiras 2006). It turned utopian literature into entertainment, with everything from romantic tales to science fiction, but there was also an undercurrent of serious proto-Enlightenment philosophy, including a critique of priestcraft and miracles and a thinly veiled description of a Spinozistic, materialist religion. On the one hand, Sevarambia is credited with full liberty of conscience, such that nobody can oppress a neighbor on the grounds of religion, and government offices are not subject to any religious test. On the other hand, there were public religious ceremonies that everyone had to attend, and Muslims were not tolerated at all.

There was no separation of church and state in Sevarambia: the Viceroy was also the High Priest of the Sun. To deflect charges of superstitious idolatry of the sun, the point was made that the sun was no more than a minister of an invisible and supreme being. Although the immortality of the soul was debatable, Veiras conceded that most people believed in an afterlife that included punishment for sins in this life. Some of the description of the false religion replaced by the Sevarambian religion is thinly veiled critique of Christianity: the alleged presence of a religious impostor in many temples at the same time is an analogy to the Real Presence of the Catholic mass. There are many false miracles, and violence is used to suppress those who doubt a miracle. But the utopian regime that replaces the false one also relies on pious fraud to keep the common people in awe, and a wide gap between the understanding of religion of the intellectuals and that of the common people is taken for granted. Religion originates in curiosity and contemplation and should be kept under the control of political leaders. Veiras promotes a combination of Machiavellian politics and benevolent despotism in order to bring about and maintain his utopia.

6. Atheism and Clandestine Manuscripts

Veiras's *Sevarambians* was clearly a major source for Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle's *History of the Ajaioens* (1768) because there are references or echoes in almost every chapter (de Fontenelle 1998). This text was written in 1689 but not published until 1768, which reminds us that there was a large clandestine literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of which was utopian (Paganini et al. 2020). This literature, mostly in French but also in Latin and other languages, often remained in manuscript because it was too subversive for publication and would have landed authors and printers in jail if it had been published. The first of the clandestine atheist manuscripts, the *Theophrastus redivivus* of 1659, was not published until 1981 (Anonymous 1981). One by one some of the other manuscripts, like Fontenelle's *Ajaioens*, were published earlier, often in the late eighteenth century when censorship was somewhat relaxed in some places.

The name of the people in Fontenelle's title was a neologism which meant "the atheists". His utopia described an alternative to the France of his day in almost every important respect. It replaced the Christian view of the world with the Epicurean "ex nihilo nihil fit" and the eternity of the world and provided a materialist view of man and the mortality of the soul. Secular morality replaced Christian morality, a democratic constitution replaced absolute monarchy, and an egalitarian society replaced the legal inequalities that prevailed. The economy was agrarian communism, and literacy was universal. Pierre Bayle's suggestion that a virtuous society of atheists was possible was portrayed in action in this utopia. The Golden Rule was derived from natural law, with no need for religion. At least two aspects of this utopia might not be admired today: it relies on slavery, and women are taught to read but not to write because they play no part in political life. In any case, Fontenelle's work represented one extreme on the continuum of what could be done with the utopian tradition with respect to religion: an atheist utopia. A prominent later author in this atheistic and materialistic tradition was Jean Meslier, whose work remained in manuscript for a long time (Meslier 2009).

7. Serious and Satirical

One of the most famous utopian texts of the early eighteenth century was the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's *Project for Perpetual Peace in Europe* of 1713 (de Saint-Pierre 1713). This was not fiction, but utopian in the sense that many readers took it as an unrealistic dream, impossible to ever be carried into action. But the author clearly intended it as a serious project, which could be carried out if only the leaders of European nations would try it. He tried to show them that it was in everyone's self-interest to create a league of states that would prevent the outbreak of war and allow nations to live in peace. Gottfried Leibniz and Jean-Jacques Rousseau responded to Saint-Pierre's work, and there are echoes of it in the ideas of Immanuel Kant.

Saint-Pierre defended himself against charges that he was too idealistic by denying that people can be expected to act on Stoic, Socratic, or religious principles, and that he only expected them to carry out his project on the basis of enlightened self-interest. The motives he appealed to were fear, utility, and interest, although the outcome would be utopian. Although he called himself a cosmopolitan, like many Europeans of his time he thought that Christianity was the most rational and tolerant religion and might eventually become the universal religion. This would not be a dogmatic and institutionalized religion, but a simple religion based on peace and love of one's neighbor.

A variation on this extreme was provided by Part Four of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) which described a utopian island inhabited by intelligent horses called Houyhnhnms and very unintelligent human-like beings called Yahoos (Swift 2008). Remarkably, nothing at all is said about the rational and humane Houyhnhnms' religion. On the one hand, this could be taken to imply that rational beings would not have one; on the other hand, Swift was a lifelong fervid supporter of the Anglican Church, in which he held a Deanery and had sought higher preferment. In other writings, he satirized a variety of errors and excesses of the clergy, but there is no reason to believe that he was promoting atheism. He may have chosen not to say anything about the Houyhnhnms' religion in order to avoid any controversy, but then he may have lost control over readers who wondered why he did not say anything. In any case, the book was one of the most widely read of all utopian writings throughout Europe.

Most of the foregoing utopias were set on faraway islands, but Enlightened Danish-Norwegian man of letters Ludvig Holberg set *The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground* (1741) beneath the surface of the earth (Holberg 1960). This allowed him to use the unknown civilization of trees underground to criticize human society on the surface of the earth. On the one hand, it had progressive innovations: there was equality of the sexes in matters such as education and office-holding, and there were no ranks and titles and no privileges from birth. But it was also conservative in some respects: the laws were not supposed to have changed for 500 years; books were censored; and hereditary monarchy was deemed the best form of government. Holberg's book was soon translated into at least half a dozen languages.

Holberg's treatment of religion was short, precisely because he thought religion could and should be summarized in short. The confession of faith in his utopia was only a bit longer than the Apostle's Creed and required unanimous belief in adoring a Supreme Creator who cares for the world. Methods of worship were not regulated; piety and prayer were found mostly in actions of love. Atheists were tolerated if they did not openly attack religion. Beyond that, it was prohibited to comment on the sacred books or dispute about the essence of God or the nature of spirits and souls. Everyone was encouraged to follow the dictates of their own consciences. Religion could not be the subject of academic study because it was so simple, and any discussion of abstruse questions was forbidden.

Utopian islands could also be found in the theater of the Enlightenment. Pierre Marivaux's *The Island of the Slaves* (1725) enacted a servant's utopia, where former slaves were the new masters, and former masters were now slaves (Marivaux 1725). His *The Colony* (1750) gave equal political power to women (Marivaux 1750). There would be no lasting vengeance against the former masters and the formerly tyrannical males, but

rather all would live in equality and love. Although he was a friend of the naturalist and deist Helvétius, Marivaux's plays showed no anti-Christian bias but rather reenacted the egalitarianism of the early Christians.

8. Religion in Philosophical Utopias

Enlightened utopian writing was not always fiction. Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume wrote his "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" (1752) as a speculative political philosophy. Officially, he was an anti-utopian: "It is not with forms of government, as with other artificial contrivances; where an old engine may be rejected, if we can discover another more accurate and commodious, or where trials may safely be made, even though the success be doubtful. . . To tamper, therefore, in this affair, or try experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be the part of wise magistrate. . . and though he may attempt some improvements for the public good, yet will he adjust his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution" (Hume 1985, p. 512). This sums up the debate between reform and utopia from the side of reform, but then Hume goes on to develop a grand project that others would recognize as a utopia. Hume rejects Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* as "plainly imaginary" and asserts that Harrington's *Oceana* "is the only valuable model of a commonwealth, that has yet been offered to the public" (Hume 1985, p. 514). But Hume disagreed with three points in Harrington's plan and then went on to provide his own, to which, he says, "I cannot, in theory, discover any considerable objection" (Hume 1985, p. 516). But others might: for one thing, there is a minimum wealth requirement for participation in politics so that poor people cannot make trouble in politics.

Religion does not play a major role in Hume's "Idea". A council of religion and learning is chosen from among the senators and inspects the universities. Perhaps the most important thing is that religion is firmly under the control of the government: the magistrates name rectors or ministers to all parishes. A Presbyterian church government (elected by the faithful) is established, and its highest court is an assembly of all the presbyters (elders) of a county. In case they become too independent of the government, the magistrates may take any cause from them and determine it themselves and may remove any presbyter from office. We know from other writings of Hume that on the one hand, he did not believe in miracles and the stories that justified the traditional religions, and on the other hand, he believed that religion was a useful tool for disciplining the ignorant.

Another Scottish thinker, Adam Smith, called himself a moral philosopher and also offered a form of utopian thought in his construction of the theory of liberal markets in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) (Smith 1981). Although he wanted to eliminate inegalitarian and inefficient privileges and monopolies, he was certainly not a utopian communist. But he was utopian in the sense of calling for major change, away from government-regulated markets and toward freedom of trade, which was his panacea and utopia. Some of the major changes that implied included eventually moving the Parliament of Great Britain from London to New York. Such major changes justify thinking of him as a radical utopian, not the conservative he is sometimes seen as today.

Free markets are sometimes seen as immoral, but they were not to Smith. His *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) supplied the religious dimension of his thought: nature itself gives all men a religious feeling (Smith 1982). All men believe by nature in reward and punishment in an afterlife, and all men believe that virtue is rewarded in this life, he asserts. Markets are subject to natural moral standards, to which revealed religion only adds its imprimatur. Such an optimistic view of human nature is a common feature of utopian thought. Smith employed it to justify a great deal of individual freedom. In *The Wealth of Nations*, he did not hesitate to combine the vocabulary of free trade with that of religion, exclaiming that "to prohibit a great people. . . from making all that they can of every part of their own produce, or from employing their stock and industry in the way

that they judge most advantageous to themselves, is a manifest violation of the most sacred rights of mankind" (Smith 1981, p. 582).

9. Total Control in Some Utopias

At the other end of the spectrum, regimentation and control were the pattern in the mid-eighteenth-century utopias by Frenchmen of the High Enlightenment such as Morelly, Mercier, and Restif de la Bretonne. Étienne Gabriel Morelly's *Basiliade* (1753) was a society of egalitarianism, vegetarianism, utilitarianism, and sexual freedom under a benevolent autocrat (Morelly 1753). God created men to help one another, and that implies communal ownership and distribution of God's bounty. Everyone competes to work for the common good, and God is never angry at his creations. People obey their king because they recognize the value of coordinating action.

Morelly's *The Code of Nature* (1755) provided detailed rules for how to live in an ideal and virtuous communist society, now adding that it should be a representative democracy instead of autocratic (Morelly 1755). By law, people will be taught that the creator of the universe cannot be known except by his works and that he is infinitely good and wise. The only oracle of his will is the feeling of sociability of humans, and only through sociability can one understand what God is. Any further speculation in theology is forbidden.

Louis-Sébastien Mercier imagined a future in *The Year 2440* (1770) in which intellectuals behaved like Carthusian monks in their single-minded pursuit of knowledge (Mercier 1772). His future Paris is united in belief in an omnipresent God, who is the source of happiness. Only a soul without love could be an atheist, he says. But this is an ideal religion, and Mercier is merciless in his critiques of eighteenth-century institutionalized Christianity. In the future religion, there will be no intermediaries between God and individuals, and the latter must feel the relationship in their hearts. The practice of religion is mostly the practice of morality, but fortunately, the law of nature is engraved in every heart. According to this law, God is not a vengeful or vindictive God, but rather a beneficent one. Mercier's utopia follows the ideas of Gottfried Leibniz in assuming that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

Nicolas-Edme Restif de la Bretonne was a prolific author of many utopian novels and plays. Among the better known, his *The Southern Discovery* (1778) was an imaginary voyage to a quiet, egalitarian society called Metapatagonia (Restif de la Bretonne 1778). The Metapatagonians criticize the hypocrisy of Christians who do not live in accordance with their religion, but their natural religion bears a resemblance to primitive Christianity. Their authoritarian society sounds like a utopian feudalism.

Restif's *L'Andrographe* (1777) advanced rigid and detailed rules for a total regimentation of society as in ideal communism (Restif de la Bretonne 1777). Literally hundreds of pages of rules spell out how to live in every aspect of life, which makes for slow reading for those who do not conceive of the world in terms of legal rules. There are serious punishments for those who do not conform. Restif tried to demythologize Christianity, but he also called the New Testament the most republican and the most democratic of books. Religion was to be taught by reading the New Testament, and the church would be a small enterprise dedicated mostly to public ceremonies celebrating a humanitarian religion with a minimum of theology—a rather Protestant approach. Christian communism was his inspiration, even though he attempted to distance himself from it. Restif never doubted the existence of God, but God and nature were one for him.

10. Religion in Didactic Utopias

In the German-speaking world, Bernese aristocrat and polymath Albrecht von Haller wrote several didactic utopian political novels in the early 1770s. *Usong: An Eastern Narrative* (1771) was the story of a virtuous Mongol prince who visited Egypt, China, and Venice, conquered the Persian Empire, and ruled it with his Chinese bride (von Haller 1772). Haller thought of it as his *Telemachus*, referring to Fénelon's work of 1699. Like Fénelon, his novel made the paradoxical case for enlightened absolutism as a form of

republicanism, combining monarchical rule with republican virtue. In this utopia, religion has civic purposes. Usong refuses to persecute the pagan fire-worshippers who are good citizens and is grateful to Islam for teaching monotheism. Nevertheless, he separated church and state, forbidding priests from being judges because he saw the fate of kings in the West when priests obtained power. His second wife was a Christian, and he tolerated her religion. Just before he died a Waldensian converted him to Christianity, saving Haller's utopia for Christianity at the last moment.

Haller's *Fabius and Cato: a Piece of Roman History* (1774) told the story of an ideal republican constitution (von Haller 1774). It was a counter to the radical democratic and anti-Christian republicanism of Algernon Sydney and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, intended to vindicate the rights of society against the insatiable demands for individual rights. The ancient skeptic Carneades, clearly representing Rousseau, is represented as advising that the gods are inventions of the poets and that we can do without them because nature can produce everything we need. Cato has him expelled from Rome because he will take from us the fear of an ever-vigilant God and put nothing in its place. Republicanism is no good without God in Haller's vision.

11. Equality and Christian Communalism

As we have seen, some of the foregoing utopias were communist, abolishing private property not only in the means of production but in housing, food, and in some cases even clothing. This sort of utopia was no mere reform or minor adjustment but called for major changes from the prevailing religious, political, and economic order. Religion was a key part of the almost total regimentation and regulation of daily life required in order to maintain equality and order. This would seem to reflect a recognition that there is something about equality that humans will not accept spontaneously, and they have to be forced into it. Religion is mostly conceived as a mechanism of that force. If that is true, this sort of utopianism is a sad indictment of human nature.

One of the ironies of utopian communism was that one of its chief sources was the tradition of Christian communalism. Communism in general has its deepest roots in Christian theology and moralism, which is also a sort of utopianism. The irony is that many modern communists have hated the Christian church and done their best to distance themselves from it, even though it is their ancestral archetype. Although Voltaire believed that everything Christian was backward, one should keep in mind that most Enlighteners thought of themselves as Christian Enlighteners (Laursen 2013). It is also important to recognize that Christian ideals did not necessarily favor the status quo. There were a number of women writers in the period who fashioned ideals of Christian communism into women's utopias. Examples are Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont's *The New Clarice* (1767) and Sophie von La Roche's *Appearances at Lake Oneida* (1798) (Leprince de Beaumont 1767; von La Roche 1798).

12. Utopia and Religion in Action

Utopianism was not merely a matter of texts and readers. Enlightened political leaders from the Marquis de Pombal in Portugal to Catherine the Great in Saint Petersburg and Frederick the Great in Berlin tried to put a range of utopian ideas into practice through the power of enlightened absolutism, sometimes by suppressing traditional religious practices. Many elements of the ideas that made the French Revolution possible were utopian, even if the results were not always as it was hoped they would be.

The fate of much Enlightened utopianism can be seen in the efforts of the circle around the printer V. I. Novikov in late eighteenth-century Moscow, who took advantage of an Enlightened decree in 1783 allowing private ownership of printing presses (Faggionato 2005). Novikov and his friends thought that they could combine Enlightenment, Masonic lodges, Rosicrucianism, pantheism, mysticism, hermeticism, and Russian Orthodox religion. They thought of themselves as carrying on the Christian utopianism of Andreae, at the same time bringing it up to date with French and German Enlightenment thinking. Their ideas

have been well-characterized as "unconscious subversion" because they apparently really believed they could combine all of this with absolute monarchy and religious orthodoxy (Faggionato 2005). But Catherine saw the subversive potential and had Novikov imprisoned for four years. Censorship was established in Moscow in 1796.

Novikov was working from below, but an example of a utopian political actor who was working from high in the political establishment was Johann Friedrich Struensee, a German physician who became prime minister of Denmark in 1770 partly on the strength of his successful inoculation against smallpox of the heir to the throne—a typical Enlightenment innovation. In one and a half years in power, he issued over 1800 cabinet orders, many of them carrying out Enlightenment ideals such as reforming the army, abolishing controls on the press, and eliminating many of the excessive numbers of religious holidays in the name of economic efficiency. A materialist and atheist, very little of the status quo was sacred to Struensee. He thought he knew the right way to live, that it was very different from the way life was being lived, and that he could order other people to conform to his ideas. Any one or a few of Struensee's reforms may have been salutary. But his attacks on every established interest as well as the prevailing sense of religion, most obviously signaled by sleeping with the Queen, alienated too many people. Stepping on too many toes, Struensee was soon removed in a coup d'état and beheaded, drawn, and quartered (Laursen 2000).

Voltaire's reaction to the Struensee affair captures the strengths and weaknesses of this paragon of the Enlightenment's strategies for attaining utopia (Laursen 2002). As a man of letters, he much appreciated Struensee's declaration of freedom of the press. When he heard about it, he penned a poem of flattering praise for the King who had authorized Struensee's power. Throughout his life, he tried to use what leverage he had with enlightened monarchs such as Frederick the Great and Catherine the Great to get them to enact enlightened reforms. But when Struensee fell and Enlightenment was repressed in Denmark, Voltaire simply fell silent.

13. Critics of Utopianism and Religion

One cannot not fully understand utopianism until one understands its critics and the alternatives. Voltaire's reaction makes it clear that the spectrum from the status quo to reform to utopia begins with a real possibility of Epicurean withdrawal and quietism. In the spectrum from doing nothing to doing something to doing too much, it may be better to do nothing than to do too much. This preference is reflected in Voltaire's other writings as well, and makes it clear that he oscillated between quietism and reform, but generally rejected utopianism. He dedicated a lot of energy to piecemeal reforms such as protesting the judicial murders of Calas and Sirven, but carried his activism no further. His famous story, *Candide* (1758), explores the high-minded ideals of philosopher Gottfried Leibniz about this being the best of all possible worlds (de Voltaire 1977). It includes a short utopian sketch of an Inca Eldorado, where mud is gold, everyone is friendly, eats well, and listens to music, and everyone is a priest, which means that there is no separate caste of priests to burn people who do not agree with them. But this is not a serious utopia, just criticism of Europe. *Candide* ends by counseling retreat into one's garden. There is something of a parallel here to his attitude toward religion. He was famous for the saying, "Ecrasez l'infâme", by which he demanded the end of Christianity for its many abuses and scandals, but he did not propose the radical substitute of atheism but rather the lukewarm alternative of deism.

Perhaps the greatest anti-utopian theorist of the Age of Enlightenment was Irishman Edmund Burke (Burke 2000). He has often been considered a conservative because he opposed the utopian excesses of the French Revolution. But he was a reformer on four out of the five major issues of his day: he favored Irish emancipation, voting reform, concessions to the North American colonies, and direct rule of India instead of farming it out to the East India Company. He even prosecuted the English Governor General of India for corruption, indicating how far he was willing to go in pursuit of reform. He is better understood as an Enlightened Reformer than as a conservative. He was also anti-utopian

in religion. He defended the palaces of the bishops on the grounds that they would have no influence over the wealthy and powerful if they were not respected by the latter, and such people only respect people who live in palaces. It was important for the church to gain the respect of the wealthy and powerful because there were no other checks on the wealthy and powerful. Bishops living in palaces was actually a way of protecting the poor. Confiscating the bishops' palaces in France and giving them to the lawyers did not help the poor in any way, he argued. This is anti-utopianism in religion at its most ingenious.

Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant ostensibly rejected the utopian mentality with specific reference to Plato's Atlantis, More's *Utopia*, Harrington's *Oceana*, and Veiras's *Sevarambia* (Kant 1991, p. 188). He, too, was a reformer, not a typical utopian. Violent revolutions do not bring about real change, he wrote. It is enough if monarchs rule in the spirit of republicanism and allow public debate to move people's hearts and minds in the direction of progress. But his "Idea for a Universal History" (1784) and *Perpetual Peace* (1795) argued that the hearts and minds of the people and their rulers can be changed by ideas alone and that when they do constitutional government will emerge peacefully and harmoniously (Kant 1991). The end product will be a democratic peace among the nations of the world. This certainly has the ring of utopianism to it. According to his philosophy of history, if we believe something like this, we will make it happen.

Kant's religious philosophy also contains recognizable features of utopian thought. In *Religion Within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793), he argued for a religious cosmopolitanism according to which all moral people understand themselves as members of a single world-wide community of religious believers, regardless of local religious institutions (Palmquist 2016). For his Christian readers, he cast this community as Christian, but he made it clear it would include any rational moral religion. If every Enlightened person had taken this vision literally, it might have meant the end of all traditional religions.

14. Utopia and Change

Many utopian thinkers idealized a static perfection, following Plato's idea that if you have it right nothing should change. Some enlightened utopians, however, recognized that the ideal society might involve constant change and evolution. The Marquis de Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) expressed faith in the infinite progress of science and morality (de Condorcet 1988). The French and the Anglo-Americans were his models of the most enlightened, most free, and most exempt from prejudices of all peoples. The very expression of that thought, however, undermines his last point, because it sounds like he has his own prejudices. Nevertheless, he understood in principle what a dynamic utopia might be like.

Unfortunately, the subsequent reputation of utopian thinking was closely associated with the French Revolution. That meant that the Terror, the starvation in the countryside, and the rise to power of Napoleon after the Revolution tainted the reputation of utopian thinking. Marx later wrote of "utopian socialists" as the wrong-headed ones, naïve and unrealistic compared to his own scientific socialism. As is well-known, his attitude toward religion was that it was the opiate of the people.

15. Conclusions

At this point, we may be ready for an assessment of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century utopia and religion. On the one hand, few Europeans went along with Voltaire's conclusion to *Candide* that the best thing to do was to cultivate your own garden. Independent thinking, the reassessment of existing religious institutions and habits, and the discovery of new ways of thinking about religion or living without it often led to utopian ideals.

On the other hand, the more elaborate utopias tended toward stifling regulation and regimentation. The more serious utopians were humorless party men, obsessive, dogmatic, paranoid, and cruel in their proposals for ways in which to get everyone to agree with them. Their utopias could be wooden, mechanical, contrived, and emotionally impoverished.

They tended to sacrifice freedom, individuality, and creativity for order, virtue, and their ideas of correctness in religion.

Nevertheless, we must not forget that the status quo could also be regimented, wooden, and contrived. Rapid and dislocating change may be cruel, but established customs and traditions can be cruel, too. We cannot always stay where we are.

Utopianism is often inspiring and moving, and has the merit of showing us where to go. So Enlightenment-style utopian religious ideals could help people find the direction for change. Utopian thinking about religion could serve as a beacon to orient lesser reforms. It could inspire, where plodding reformers failed to inspire. Even if we do not take seriously everything utopian writers say—and maybe they did not either—their speculations may point us in the right direction. They are certainly better propaganda than the dry treatises of many of the step-by-step reformers.

The religions of Enlightenment utopias could go too far. But the Voltaire-style disenchantment that makes us want to give up can go too far, too, and what we need is both. Either extreme could lead to hopelessness, and life without hope is not as rich as life with hope.

Perhaps it is best to think of the spectrum from doing nothing to reform to utopia as rather a pendulum than a static spectrum. One can swing too far on either end, or if one has been out on one end for a while it may be wise to swing back to the other. But if life and religion do not contain some measure of stability, some measure of reform, and some measure of utopia, they will be impoverished.

An Enlightenment utopian future for religion might be an all-around toleration, and a union of all denominations in a worldwide religion of peace, equally open to Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, and a thousand other sects. That is not going to happen soon. But the utopian ideal can orient us to try to get along peacefully and to understand and tolerate each other in the meantime. What we learn from the Enlightenment is that the best life probably contains some measure of each of the status quo, reforms, and utopian goals in religious matters.

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