

The President's Column

Recently I was fortunate enough to participate in an episode of the BBC Radio 3 debate programme *Freethinking*, which addressed the 500th anniversary of the publication of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. I was fortunate to be joined by John Guy, author of many important books on More's career and two politicians, the History-educated Kwasi Kwartung MP and Gisela Stuart MP. More's work, composed at the height of the complex Europe-wide movement we know as the Renaissance, was the product of a long engagement with the broad reception of Classical Antiquity, but also his deep and profound friendship with Erasmus, leading figure of Christian humanism, translator and editor of the Greek New Testament, alongside the ancient works of Cicero, Lucian and many others. These humanists recovered the great works of the Greeks and the Romans for the immediate use of Christian society, to provide standards in human virtue, ethical philosophy and models of political and social government.

Men like More and Erasmus wished to use their scholarship to reform or renovate the religious manners of their day. In particular Erasmus conceived of the message of Christ and the New Testament as a *philosophia Christi*. Christian society ought to focus on serving God by good and moral acts rather than the pursuit of ecclesiastical indulgences and doctrinal complexity.

We all agreed on one thing. More's *Utopia*, even after half a millennium, still had the ability to speak to our times, despite being rooted in a very different time and culture. More's short work consists of two parts, and while there is still considerable debate about the order of composition, which might indeed have some relevance for recovering More's intentions, it need not detain modern readers for too long. Book I contains a conversation among a number of speakers about the problems of sixteenth-century Christian society. It contains pretty hostile satire of fat friars, greedy lawyers and the rich who hang the poor for the most minor of crimes. More's speakers lament the fact that there were more laws protecting sheep than men. The hunt for military glory and wealth dominated elite culture. More constructs a debate about whether the philosopher figure (him?) ought to get stuck into offering political



advice, or retire to an isolated or rural solitude to ponder the best life. Drawing from Platonic debates, More's point is one that has a powerful resonance for modern politics. Does one need ideals in politics, or should the pragmatism of gaining power first, be more important? The two MPs on the panel had engaged positions on this, and were rather horrified at my suggestion that contemporary leaders ought to be encouraged to produce their own Utopias for the electorate.

In the second half of *Utopia*, More employed what his contemporaries called serious humour to lambast the idiocies of his times. Utopians lived a healthy and collective life. Everyone worked and played. All had homes, and education. Gold was used as toilet pots and luxuries were despised. Many preferred to be slaves in Utopia than free in Europe. Of course most of the humour derived from parodies of both classical and contemporary culture. Marriage partners scrutinised each other naked before making a decision. Divorce was legal. A rudimentary form of republican constitution replaced monarchy. Utopia of course meant 'no where'. Elements of Book II are entertaining: embodying the principle of creating a social and political life in which it was difficult to be selfish or sinful still appeals to many. Even so, many, both in More's time and since, have described the Utopian world as totalitarian and destructive of individuality. How serious More may have been is complex to answer. More

than likely he was building a world based on the principles of reason, which was why there were flaws in the recommendations. For him, the world needed God's grace to make it perfect. The agency for channelling that grace, for More and many of his associates, was the Church and scripture.

More's book has been republished frequently in the last five centuries, sometimes by religious thinkers, sometimes by rationalists. By the nineteenth century, socialists and even Marxists saw beauty and opportunity in the work and its recommendations. It has been translated into most major European languages. That the work still speaks to us in many different ways is testimony to its brilliance, but also to the need for ideals and imagination in the world of political ideas and communication. Nowadays most political manifestos are dry and technical manuals about fiscal regimes, debt and productivity. More's brilliance was to pose powerful questions about the nature of what it is to be human, and indeed to speculate about the potential role politics might have in advancing ethical perfectibility. He may not have been advancing a precise blueprint for the just society, but powerfully raising questions about what principles we should use in thinking about the nature of human sociability.

Returning to the past allows us to explore how other minds exercised their criticism of their worlds and what propositions they drew up for moral and environmental reform. More also allows us to think about the limits of human reason (we don't all agree that suicide or divorce are correct). Those differences are shaped by whether we have optimistic or pessimistic views about the nature of human beings, but also whether politics can or ought to aim at modelling or managing human conduct. More's book was ludic. Its playfulness has persisted, and is a remarkable platform for starting a discussion nowadays.

Justin Champion
President of the Historical Association