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THE CONCEPT OF INDIVIDUAL AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN MORE'S *UTOPIA*

Abstract: Following the history of utopia, we can see that its literary form always expresses a critical attitude in relation to the current social order. The beginning of the formal genre of utopian literature was the publication of Thomas More's Utopia in 1516. More's work partly continues the tradition of older texts that, since ancient times, have tried to define the principles of an ideal social community. The paper analyses the concept of individual and religious freedom in More's Utopia, trying to show how much this freedom is limited, controlled, and in the service of maintaining the stability of the social order. Such a concept is open to criticism because, among other things, it allows only a limited measure of personal decision-making.

Keywords: More, freedom, Utopia, order, control

1. Introduction

The history of the idea of a harmonious society, or Utopia, can be traced back to classical antiquity to works such as Plato's *Republic* and the comedies of Aristophanes. In the year 1516, the work that gave the name to the whole genre was completed, followed by a number of uto-

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pian novels in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, among which Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626) was the most well-known. The idea was further developed in the adventure novels of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within the genre of science-fiction; almost a half-century later, a rather pessimistic turn ensued: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) are two famous examples of dystopian literature from the first half of the twentieth century, while in the latter half revitalization of the genre took place in the growth of feministic utopian literature in the seventies.

According to Nikola Dedić (Dedić, 2009: 17–18), Utopia is a name given to an ideal state and implies radical negation of any existing social order, it is a project of an ideal society as a whole, critical towards actual governments and relations in society.

Miriam Eliav-Feldon (Feldon, 1982: 85) claims that utopias in the Renaissance were based on four motives: social justice, ethical life, eradication of individualism, and simplicity. These works describe ideal fictional societies as models of how people should organize their lives and live together. They explained in detail the essence of a well-ordered community at the same time offering a comparison with existing contemporary societies. They represented individuals in the context of a complex organized process of institutional and social progress that should be able to solve structural problems of the community regarding freedom and determinism, morality, law, and social justice. These utopian projects described how human society may look if modelled upon the system of government and stability of the societies of ancient Greeks and Romans. Most of them gave precedence to stability over social change and expressing differences. The conceptions set forth in Thomas More's *Utopia* and in similar books written by Campanella, Burton, and Bacon emphasized social justice, life of morality, the relations between individuals and state, and the absence of exploitation.

Perhaps exactly this specific feature of utopias in the renaissance is 'guilty' for the unfavourable reception of the utopian style of thinking in western political culture. This negative picture is perhaps best illustrated by R. Dahrendorf's (Dahrendorf, 1967: 139) contention that the

main characteristic of the utopian societies was to create conditions that would prevent conflicts, but there were no such conditions; hence, these societies at first implicitly call for different restrictions, subsequently, explicitly glorifying them.

L.T. Sargent (Sargent, 1982: 566–573) claims that utopias are important but dangerous and emphasizes that there has been a trend of critical evaluations about their importance, some of them holding that utopias lead to totalitarianism and violence, while others see them as essential elements conducive to freedom and civilization. He further claims that many utopias are, from the perspective of individual freedoms, in fact, dystopias; the reason being that their authors wishing to emphasize values such as equality, order, and security, tend to disregard individual freedom.

Zorica Đergović-Joksimović (Đergović-Joksimović, 2009: 73) thinks similarly that many of the classical utopias are interpreted today as dystopias because of the leading role of the state and severe restrictions imposed on the freedom of the individuals.

The complex system of controlling personal freedom led many critics to conclude that utopian totalitarianism is based on violence. On the one hand, R. Levitas (Levitas, 2001: 28), holds that, among other things, utopias represent human desire for a better life; J. C. Davis (Davis, 1981: 61) on the other, defines utopias as prioritizing social order at the expense of individual freedom, emphasizing that utopia is, in fact, a series of strategies of protecting social order 'facing' imperfections of human nature, among which wantonness is the most dangerous. For him, utopia is a state directed towards continually and completely disciplining people.

Hana Yoran (Yoran, 2005: 8–9) sees the quasi-totalitarian nature of the utopian society as a consequence of a social order that produces subjects lacking individuality and any capability of independent reasoning.

Although Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in 1516, gave the name to the literary genre, it represents a continuation of a long tradition of writings reaching back to classical antiquity in which the authors tried to establish the principles of an ideal community for human beings. However, due to a very elaborate system of control in More's ideal com-

munity, many critics consider it to be a totalitarian state.

George M. Logan (Logan, 1983: 7–35) thinks that the unpopular measures and institutions described in the book are the price More had to pay in order to realize more important goals. For example, the brutal foreign policy was necessary to preserve internal security and self-sufficiency of the state. To realize an important goal – equality and social stability – More had to sacrifice freedom and even individuality of Utopian citizens.

H.W. Donner (Donner, 1945: 77) claims that Utopia is not a country in which everyone acts reasonably because it is his/her choice to do so, but because they are coerced to such an extent that is unthinkable today. However, the citizens do not perceive this strictness as coercion, since laws are enacted for the benefit of everyone and they accept their freedom within the confines of the law, in other words, they identify their individual benefits with common good.

A. O. Kragset (Kragset, 2009: 7) thinks that Utopia with its patriarchal organization structure could hardly be understood as a society of equals. Thus, freedom in More's *Utopia* is always restricted.

This paper analyses the concepts of individual (personal) and religious freedom which More describes in the second part of his book showing how this freedom is limited and controlled serving the purpose of maintaining the stability of the social order.

2. More's *Utopia*

Thomas More is today considered to have been the leading intellectual of his time in England. His thorough knowledge of philosophical and political works in Greek and Latin greatly contributed to finding solutions to ethical and political problems he describes in his *Utopia* (1516). He started writing the book during his visit to Flanders in 1515 as a member of a delegation. More's book was the first to present a clearly defined project of an ideal community – Utopia; he simultaneously criticized the actual social order in 16th century England and sketched a project of a society more perfect in comparison with the one he kept alluding to. This is mirrored in the structure of the book. The first part

contains a fictitious conversation about the serious political and social problems in 16th century England and, more importantly, a critique of the contemporary legal and economic system, whereas in the second part, he offers a picture of an imagined, inexistent, perfect state in which he tries to solve those problems.

In the first part, More criticizes the English penal system that prescribed the death penalty even for minor offenses, thus showing that class division dominated the society. The root of all evils, according to More, was private property, a consequence of the feudal system that made possible an enormous wealth acquisition by the few and poverty of the many. In order to improve society, the most important thing to do is, More thought, to abolish private property and decentralize the government by selecting for office a group of people having certain moral qualities. He encouraged life-long education convinced that it should contribute to such a selection.

In the second part, More sketches an ideal society organized without hierarchy, in accordance with Christian moral principles, ideal legislation, and abolishment of private property. Utopia is a republic in which no individual can undermine general interest in order to gain selfish profit. There is a head of the state (the Princeps or Mayor), but in Utopia there are no coercive mechanisms exercising force upon citizens, in other words, there is no police, no army nor any privileged class the head of the state can rely on, in case he is denied support. In this aspect, Utopia approached an ideal, namely, the "rule of the people". In contrast with states of the period, the state of Utopia is a service to the citizens, it does not exist as a separate structure of institutionalized control and coercion, it has no representatives, no separate authorities at its disposition that are independent of the decisions made by the constituent parts of the state – the districts.

Although Utopia was conceived as a community of equals, at the same time, individual freedoms tend to be restricted. In this fictitious society, it is not possible to differentiate private and public life. Social stability should be promoted at the expense of personal freedom in every aspect of life. Social harmony is saved by controlling differences in human nature either organizationally or through modification. The

head of the household is the eldest male member, although the father and the husband do not have absolute power. The father takes care of the members of his family and supervises them while performing their chores. Hana Yoran (Yoran, 2005: 9) says that the family in Utopia remains a stable unit as long as it contributes to the society as a whole. Privacy and family life do not exist; people can enter and leave the house as they please, but families can be divided and can move only to those parts of the country that are sparsely colonized, where, for that reason, families are needed the most.

The Utopian social system is designed to block any personal ambition from taking power. More conceived Utopia in the spirit of patriarchal tradition, as a community ruled by a group of morally superior people. In Utopia there is no arrogance and excessive pride coming with social status and possession of material goods, no luxury, debauchery, and ostentatiousness. The working day lasts six hours; and the aim is that the citizens devote their time to spiritual development, instead of spending it on satisfying material needs. This idea of More's was indeed radical.

However, what we encounter in Utopia is incessant restricting apparently unrestricted freedom. The life of the citizens in Utopia is controlled to the minutest detail: their free time (1964: 99), the clothes they wear (1964: 102), the games they play (1964: 99-100), the place they sit in the refectory (1964: 108).

Even when in some cases departure from this routine is formally allowed, such departures are informally sanctioned. More (i.e., the narrator, Raphael) says that citizens in their spare time are free to do what they want; however, not idly wasting it away, but pursuing some pleasant activity, not necessarily connected with their job (1964: 99). It turns out, however, that there are only two such activities: attending public lectures in the morning, or further practicing their trade, voluntarily, of course. Education and work coincide, but communal usefulness is more valued than personal development or personal requirements. Not much different is the case of traveling. The description of traveling starts with almost unlimited freedom and ends up with almost total restriction. The citizen is free to go anywhere, but only with written permission

of the Mayor with the exact date of return. Wherever one goes, he/she must work, and continue practicing his/her trade. In case this rule is violated, the perpetrator is severely punished. (1964: 110). This pattern is repeated over and over again: at first, freedoms are proclaimed loudly and exultantly just to be gradually diminished, as the text goes further. More explains this by stating that the prohibitions are imposed only to those kinds of behaviour which the citizens of Utopia regard as unnatural. They try very hard to minimize differences among the members of the community. The same colourless outfit not only destroys vanity, but also the differences in status and trade that the garments of the Tudor period clearly showed.

In Utopia the public officials are elected by the people (More 1964: 97). The social order is based on discipline, control and surveillance. Their external policy is surprising though. They despise war and yet find many reasons to enter into conflict with others, either by giving military support to dubious 'allies' and 'friends' or if they find some territory suitable for settlement. This attitude to war may seem critical, but their treatment of one nation (the Venalians), used as mercenaries and exposed to most dangerous situations, for whom they care little whether they survive or die in battles, who are only wicked men to exploit (1964: 147) is barbaric. Similar cruelty can be observed in the treatment of citizens who violated some of the rigid Utopian rules – these being the internal enemies – punishable by slavery or death for committing vicious crimes such as debating questions of public interest outside the senate, adultery, fraud or leaving the place of residence twice without permit.

We agree with Ann Opsal Kragset (Kragset, 2009: 7) that these examples show the quasi-totalitarian nature of the Utopian society, its rigid structure and strict control over the lives of its citizens. Hierarchical societies do not offer equal opportunities to all their members – they do not allow people to take their lives into their own hands; citizens are not appreciated as individuals; their individual capabilities are valued as long as they fit in a position or role in the hierarchical structure.

In Utopia, the control of individual behaviour is considered necessary for the preservation of communal harmony. The comprehensive distribution of law, severe punishments, and a system of surveillance are

instrumental in keeping disobedient citizens orderly. Human happiness is considered to be the result of general prosperity and social stability; individual differences are eliminated for the sake of stability, and citizens are treated as equals, but obedience (conformism) becomes the means to achieve social harmony. Utopia as a state is concerned with taking care of every need its citizens deem important in their personal lives; bare necessities such as food, dwelling, education, job, leisure, interaction with others, freedom of expression, and active participation in making political decisions. Nevertheless, there is also a need to secure stability and prevent despotism, hence the oppression of individuals and groups within the society. More's Utopia has shown very clearly that it is impossible to achieve a balance between individual freedom and collective stability.

A great influence on Thomas More's views regarding Catholic Church and religious freedoms was Erasmus, a personal friend, who More considered the greatest theologian and thinker of his time. Erasmus attacked the Church whose officials justified the use of force against those who rejected the official doctrine and were considered 'enemies' of the Church.

After the Reformation, he was accused of undermining the authority of the Catholic Church and declared a heretic. More defended his friend from these accusations and was very much convinced that these attacks were the result of the hypocrisy of church dignitaries. These facts indicate that More considered such a position of the Church politically dangerous. As he rebelled against injustice and greed in political life, similarly he had a strong aversion to the authoritarianism of the Church.

In Utopia, there is no ecclesiastic hierarchy, but believers of various creeds perform common rituals. Those rituals which depart from the common ones are performed at home, within the family. Utopian priests represent common religion, not particular creeds, resembling more teachers or guardians of public morality than preachers of the holy sacrament.

Religious policy in More's imaginary state is clear to the modern reader. J. Nendza (Nendza, 1984: 430–432) thinks that institutions that promote religious tolerance should prevent controversy and contribute to peace in society. Moreover, the three religious doctrines all the

citizens must adhere to are exactly the ones established elsewhere in Utopia as necessary to limit pleasures. Utopos, the founder of Utopia, immediately after coming to power, established religious freedom: no one should be terrorized for what he believes (More, 1964: 154). Thus, the Utopian citizens got the freedom to believe whatever they wanted (More, 1964: 155).

At the same time, Utopos forbade the people to believe that there is no life after death and that the universe is governed by chance, not by god's providence. But no one was allowed to convert others or spread his own beliefs by force or by insulting other people's beliefs because that would lead, Utopos thought, to threatening social order and public morality. The Dead observe the acts of each individual "discouraging them from doing wicked deeds" (More, 1964: 103). The Utopians are under constant surveillance, and everyone should participate in religious activities. The laws against religious intolerance and hatred in Utopia should secure order in human interaction. However, it is not just religious tolerance that is at stake here, but this is about one of the fundamental mechanisms of maintaining society: life in accordance with religious principles is essential to preserving social order, since "it contributes greatly to the safety of the state, which is never seriously threatened except by moral defects arising from wrong ideas" (More, 1964: 159). This shows that the order as it is, satisfied the needs of the citizens and that every change would harm the community. In such a community the role of religion is to maintain stability of the order; therefore, the aim of introducing religious tolerance is essentially practical. Disputes and quarrels weaken the community because the citizens would be less prepared to defend it.

More showed in *Utopia* that the efforts to develop a perfect society in the Christian world had to face problems created by religious violence. His original strategy to solve these problems was to establish a new relationship between religion and power. The essential feature of this strategy was a version of religious freedom that did not allow the application of complicated doctrines and breaching of what he called legitimate rights of conscience. At the same time, it made it possible to legitimize those religious beliefs that More considered important for moral behaviour and to define religious customs he considered politi-

cally dangerous.

Thus, there were doctrines that Utopians simply *had to* accept; Utopian religious freedom was, therefore, restricted.

Frederick Jameson (Jameson, 2005: 32) noticed that More's *Utopia* functions as a spatial narrative and as a satire. As a spatial narrative, *Utopia* comprises the following representational models (of More's time): ancient Greece, as a model for the role of humanistic intellectual; Protestantism, synthesizing the principles of Plato's Republic with the idea of Christian communism – in which religion functions as the basic element of social cohesion – and medieval monastery, as a model of an isolated community based on the principles of discipline, harmony, and equilibrium. As a satire, *Utopia* comprises two narrative genres: the form of a constitution and the form of a political manifesto.

In both cases the question of restricting personal and religious freedoms pervading every aspect of private and public life of More's Utopian society remains the central issue troubling the ideal state.

3. Conclusion

When it was published, More's *Utopia*, for most of its readers represented a much better society the one in which they were living, because it had shown what was needed to mitigate discontents that had been described in the first book. Diligence, humility, prudence, altruism was ascribed to the inhabitants of Utopia. That is why the authentic desire for better life and the critique of actual social order has become synonymous with *Utopia*. However, personal freedoms are completely subordinated to the stability of the state. The comprehensive system of control and surveillance in Utopia are the consequence of the idea that any activity unconstrained can become a possible cause of rebellion and that, therefore, the differences between public and private should be eliminated. In Utopia relationships among people, individual behaviour, as well as religious beliefs and customs are regulated to the minutest detail, the consequence of which being that individuals in fact have no privacy and their personal freedom is thus restricted, in other words, the state controls the lives of its citizens. The social order is based on

discipline, control and surveillance, thus any free activity or individual initiative is abolished. Personal decisions and wishes are given up, for the state wants useful citizens contributing to common prosperity, not free thinkers who question and criticize the system. The state is ruthless towards its enemies and the citizens who violate the rigid rules imposed are severely punished. By strengthening its institutions of discipline and surveillance the state reduces the integrity and the freedom of personal decision making of the citizens and this reveals the dark side of the harmonious society. Maintaining control in addition to hierarchical structure is reminiscent to the functioning of totalitarian regimes. Therefore, the criticism that what appears as utopia may be sometimes closer to dystopia is justified.

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