

Humanism and the renaissance religion essay



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Humanism was a cultural movement that began early in the fourteenth century and was chiefly associated with the Renaissance during the 15th and 16th century. Wilkins defines Humanism as a “scholarly and initially reactive enthusiasm for classic culture, accompanied by creative writing in Latin on classic lines” (Wilkins, 1959, p. 169). Humanism became the most important intellectual movement of the Renaissance, thanks to the early efforts of Petrarch (1304-1374) and Boccaccio (1313-1375). Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) became a humanist manifesto of sorts (Davies, 1997, p. 95).

Humanism, of 19th century German coinage, is derived from the late 15th century Italian *humanista*, or “humanist”, a teacher of the “humanities”, or *studia humanitatis* (Wright, 1993, p. 155). *Humanitas*, from which *humanist* derives, is Cicero’s translation of the Greek *paedeia*, literally “cultural education” (Kenney, 1982, p. 258) or simply an educational and cultural program based on the study of the classics and coloured by the notion of “human dignity” (Kinney, 1986, p. xi).

The Renaissance humanist movement originated in Italy. It was through church and literary contacts with Italy that humanism spread to Britain in the first half of the 15th century. At first, some English patrons paid Italian secretaries and scribes to prepare for them “manuscripts of ancient and more recent texts” (Cannon, 2009, p. 336). According to Cannon, around c. 1500 the teachings of poetry, rhetoric, and those classical writers “neglected in the Middle Ages” had become appreciated at both Cambridge and Oxford universities (Cannon, 2009, p. 336).

Sir Thomas More (? 1477-1535) was one of England's greatest humanists, a Christian saint known for his piety, devotion, and integrity. He was also a Member of Parliament, a diplomat, an ambassador, and Lord Chancellor of England. He was also a man of great learning and wit. Associated with the northern Renaissance, he tried to wed the Christian ethos with ancient wisdom. In 1535, he was beheaded for not acknowledging Henry VIII's rule of the English church (Chesney, 2004, p. 163).

Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) is a Christian-humanist view of an ideal society. The book's real title is "The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia", which thus refers to Plato's *Republic*. More offers this vision not only as a mental idea, but also as one that humans can strive to create in this world (Hansen, 2006, p. 214). The text is a self-conscious effort by More to offer his readers a Christianisation of Plato's *Republic* (Starnes, 1990, p. 22). More's book fuses the practical implications of Cicero's *vita activa*, and the social radicalism of the New Testament (Peltonen, 2004, p. 10).

More's book, *Utopia*, is the last great Christian synthesis of the Renaissance. The Christian aspect of the synthesis is Christ's gospel of caring for the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. The Platonic, Republican tradition is the Greek aspect of the synthesis (Scott, 2004, p. 32). More wrote the *Utopia* with a satirical tone, allowing him to speak his truth while telling his deeper story esoterically (Sider, 2007, p. 139).

Utopia takes the form of a dialogue led by a Socratic wise man, Raphael Hytlodaeus. The first book sets the stage for all that is to follow, and the

second book is an exposition of the communal, social, and political arrangements of the Utopians (Starnes, 1990, p. 24). Scholars have identified a number of classical and Christian traditions that influenced More's conception of the polity described in Book II of Utopia. In addition to Plato's Republic, these sources are: Augustine's City of God, the ideals of the monastic calling; the pagan virtues of wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice; and the notion, derived from the Christian church fathers that private property arose as a consequence of original sin (Baker, 1999, p. 57).

Such sources clearly place More's Utopia within the framework of northern Christian humanist concerns. However, the "absurdities and contradictions" in Utopia seem to undermine the view that More was serious. The Greek roots of names create absurdities – the expression utopia is coined from Greek words and means "no place" (Donner, 1945, p. 2); Raphael Hytlodaeus' name is also unusual. His Christian name links him with the archangel Raphael and means "the healing of God", however his surname, Hythlodaeus, means "nonsense", therefore his name would mean something like "the healing (one) of God, knowing nonsense" (Starnes, 1990, p. 24).

The dialogue form, so familiar to Renaissance writers, allowed a writer to argue the opposite side of a case precisely to follow up its implications. Structurally, More's immediate model was Plato's Parmenides (Ackroyd, 1999, p. 425). In Utopia, More presents the "real" world in Book I and the "ideal" in Book II. In Book I, in the "Dialogue of Counsel," Raphael and "More" engage in the familiar humanist debate regarding "civic" duty: Should intellectuals stay aloof from public life or engage in politics? Raphael gives

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voice to the ideal of contemplation, while “ More” puts the case that Cicero made in *De officiis*, the case for action. Who wins the argument?

The case put by “ More” follows Cicero verbatim in places. Recognising this, it is possible to argue that More (the author) has “ refashioned Plato’s image of an ideal society in order to argue that service to the commonwealth, and perhaps the best state of a commonwealth itself, involves statecraft, diplomacy, and compromise” (Guy, 2000, p. 46). Hence, unlike Plato, whose ideal pointed to the only solution, More sought the best possible solution.

In conclusion, Utopia fuses the ideals of Plato’s Republic, the political pragmatism of Ciceronian humanism, and the social radicalism of the New Testament (Wegemer, 1998, p. 109). There are connections between Utopia and More’s own life. Utopia embodied More’s quest to understand the “ proper relationship between philosophy and public life” in an ongoing dialogue (Skinner, 2002, p. 224).

Francis Bacon’s fragmentary text, *The New Atlantis*, clearly offers an alternative to Thomas More’s humanist vision of Utopia. Though composed about one hundred years apart, the similarities between the two texts are striking. Both narratives take place on remote islands previously unknown to European explorers, and the stories are related by sailors who, having become lost at sea, discover the islands when blown off course by life-threatening storms. Both societies, though unknown to Christian Europe, have through some miraculous event become aware of and been converted to Christianity, and both have benefited from social reforms made by a wise and enlightened king. However, the differences are equally striking. In

More's Utopia, the problems the plague European society are ameliorated by a closely ordered communal society in which power and wealth are strictly controlled and evenly distributed. In Bacon's Bensalem, however, the well-ordered society is a result of prosperity that is itself the result of natural philosophy and technology; it is a society ruled by wise men who study of natural philosophers allows them to reap the benefits of God's creation for themselves and their fellow citizens. More's text is a somewhat pessimistic view of humankind, which suggests that the baser elements of our nature may only be suppressed through the most vigorous control. Bacon's New Atlantis is a much more optimistic text that hints at the relative perfectibility of human nature through art and science (Salzman, 2002, p. 28).

The New Atlantis was most likely written sometime in 1624 and was published posthumously in 1627 by Rawley along with the *Sylva Sylvarum* (Coquillette, 1992, p. 275). According to Spedding, "the story of Solomon's house is nothing more than the vision of the practical results which [Bacon] anticipated from the study of natural history diligently and systematically carried on through successive generations" (cited in Coquillette, 1992, p. 257). Rawley called it a fragment, and it clearly seems to be incomplete (Manuel and Manuel, 1979, p. 254).

Spedding's confidence in Bacon's intellectual integrity is impossible to confirm. Many of Bacon's philosophical texts are unfinished, while the aphoristic style of others makes them seem incomplete. It was, after all, a tenet of Bacon's philosophy that "scientific" communication should be incomplete, a goad to spur the auditor to further investigation. Whether it is complete or not, however, The New Atlantis offers an intriguing glimpse of a

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society led by wise men whose knowledge is secured by natural philosophy, “ not an ideal world released from the natural to which ours is subject, but of our world as it might be made if we did our duty by it” (cited in Coquillette, 1992, p. 258).

For the Renaissance humanist, the issue of character was of utmost importance. The idea humanist was the *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, the “ good man speaking well,” whose eloquence arose from “ a harmonious union between wisdom and style” and whose “ aim was to guide men toward virtue and worthwhile goals, not to mislead from for vicious or trivial purposes” (Gray, 1963, p. 498). Central to the appeal of *The New Atlantis* is the character of the Bensalemites. They possess, in Spedding’s words, “ sober piety”, “ serious cheerfulness”, “ tender and gracious courtesy”, “ open-handed hospitality”, “ fidelity in public and chastity in private life”, “ grave and graceful manners”, “ order, decency and earnest industry” (Bacon). In addition, the inhabitants of Bensalem were, for the most part, Christians, having encountered a mysterious chest containing the books of the Bible. They were equally well acquainted with the histories and mythologies of other lands, including those of the Far East and the Americas. This knowledge was gained both from their own travels to other lands and from travellers whom they had received throughout history.

The narrator of *The New Atlantis* meets a number of individuals whose actions demonstrate the character of the larger society of Bensalem. The first meeting between the ship’s company and a citizen of Bensalem takes place after they seek refuge in their harbour following a storm. The crew saw on the shore of the city “ divers of the people, with bastons in their hands, as

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it were forbidding us to land; yet without any cries or fierceness but only as warning us by signs that they made” (Bacon). When the Bensalemites deliver to the ship a scroll, which offers them sanctuary for sixteen days, as well as asking after their needs for food, water, medical treatment, or repairs to their ship, it is evident that theirs is a hierarchically-ordered, Christian society, acquainted with the world outside its borders, clearly cautious, but not apparently xenophobic. The ship’s company, who are put at ease by this encounter, inform the Bensalemites of the status of their ship and health and are later invited into a place called the “ Stranger’s House” where they are “ accommodated of things both for our whole and for our sick” (Bacon).

Given their belief in the possibility of language to achieve practical certainty and to move individuals to right action, the production and consumption of literary texts were acts of great importance for early Renaissance humanists. Quattrocento humanist rhetoric was situated within the context of civic humanism and allied to the virtue of prudence, or practical wisdom. Because the marker of the individual’s achievement of humanist values was eloquence, the art of rhetoric was critical to the humanist project. As it was practiced during the quattrocento, however, rhetoric was a “ truncated version of classical rhetoric” because it did not extend to legislative and legal settings (Kahn, 1985, p. 38). Rather, it was primarily epideictic rhetoric – the rhetoric of praise or blame. Unlike other scholars who stress the limitations on rhetoric and view quattrocento rhetoric as a precursor to a purely aesthetic form of the art, Kahn suggests that the conflation of rhetoric and poetics “ enlarges the sphere of literature, since the written text now takes on the functions of deliberative and judicial rhetoric” (Kahn, 1985, p.

38). Thus, the production of the work of literature, or any work of art, was a deliberative or prudential act, as was consumption of that work through the act of reading:

[P]rudence or practical reason that is deliberation about action in a social or political context is also at work in the artist's production of a work of art.

Prudence is, in this sense, the precondition of artistic decorum, just as it is of ethical decorum. As a result, the work of art is seen less as an object than as reflecting a certain process or activity or judgment. (Kahn, 1985, p. 39)

Consequently, "knowledge of the literary text can only be practical, since the interpretive practice of reading requires the same acts of discrimination, the same judgments of decorum, as does the author's practice of writing" (Kahn, 1985, p. 39). For the humanists, then, literary texts – and these included primarily poetry and drama, dialogues, and texts such as Philip Sidney's "Defense of Poesy" – were considered appropriate rhetorical activities that could lead individuals to right action in the realm of human affairs. Bacon's *New Atlantis* follows in this tradition and is intended to lead both the king and fellow citizens to the right action of embracing natural philosophy.

Civic humanism during the Renaissance was nowhere more fully developed than in England of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and texts such as Thomas Elyot's *Boke Named the Governour* and Thomas More's *Utopia*, were critical elements in the transmission of humanist values. Although they are generically very different – *The Boke Named the Governour* is an advice book to rulers while *Utopia* is a detailed description of the life and habits of

the citizens of a fictional island – both texts are concerned with the proper way to organise and govern society. Such texts, as Kahn has suggested perform an essentially rhetorical function, in that the act of reading was seen as a deliberative and prudential act. More's Utopia, for example, acted as a critique of various social ills, and offered as a solution a highly-structured communal society whose laws and customs were founded upon Christian and humanist values. Like his fellow humanists, Bacon was interested in improving society, and his New Atlantis, which is clearly a response to More's Utopia, offers the very different view of how to accomplish that goal (Salzman, 2002, p. 28).

Both More's Utopia and Bensalem of Bacon's New Atlantis are island societies, discovered by sailors lost at sea. More imagines a communal society in which power is diffused because its leaders are drawn from the general population and serve for limited terms. In Bacon's ideal society, the leaders are philosophers who are dedicated to the "proficiency and advancement" of knowledge as a means of improving their society. The social institutions in Utopia are based on humanist ethical principles; in The New Atlantis, ethical principles are derived from natural philosophy, and the pre-eminent social institution is a philosophical society. In Bensalem, nature is not only the source of material benefits, but serves a normative function as the source of knowledge from which serves as a basis for an ethical system. Bacon's blending of Stoic concepts with humanist values.

The leaders of Bacon's Bensalem are more reminiscent of the philosopher-kings of Plato's Republic. An essential difference between More's Utopia and The New Atlantis is that More assumes that society's resources are limited

and guards against discord by levelling class and monetary distinctions; Bacon suggests that the new philosophy will reduce discord because it creates an abundance of material goods (Price, 2002, p. 2).

With the political uproar of the English Civil War (1642-1648), saw the end to the British Renaissance. Nonetheless, humanism and classical culture continued to be a powerful influence in Britain. During the 18th and 19th century, architects designed new buildings applying the classical tradition, and education focused on Latin and Greek languages and literature (Cannon, 2009, p. 336).