

Steffen Hope
Postdoctoral researcher,
University of Oslo
steffenabhope@gmail.com

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THE FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN UTOPIAN THINKING IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which religion and science – broadly defined – have been used to construct and imagine ideal societies in the medieval and early modern periods. By examining how otherness is constructed through descriptions of religious practices, attitudes to religious plurality, technological marvels, and natural wonders, I argue that both religion and science serve to simultaneously enhance and bridge the gap between the intended audience and the ideal society. This dual function enables to authors of the ideal societies to ensure that the text in question communicates what makes a given society or condition ideal. In my analysis, I use sources from both the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period in order to emphasise the continuity in utopian thought in the period c.1000-c.1750. The selection of sources includes both widely-known utopian texts and materials that are rarely used in discussions of utopian thinking. The purpose of this selection is to demonstrate how early modern utopian literature is part of a longer historical trajectory.

Keywords: Utopia · saints · otherness · technology · history

1. Defining utopia¹

To modern scholarship, the concept of utopian literature is often regarded as a hallmark of the Early Modern Period, a kind of literature that is uniquely modern and that constitutes part of the imagined rupture with the preceding medieval period. The basis for this view appears to be that the

1 This article is based on the ninth lecture in the SCIFAS seminar series, delivered online February 20 2024, titled 'Science, faith and superstition in Utopia – continuity from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period' The article has developed the arguments of this lecture in different directions. I am grateful to Prof. Ljiljana Radenović for inviting me to give this lecture. I am also grateful to Dr. Max Naderer, whose discussions, insights and collaboration have been instrumental in shaping my thoughts on this subject. I also want to thank the anonymous second reviewer, whose detailed feedback was both kind and helpful. Finally, I am indebted to Dr. Shazia Jagot for her kind and crucial aid when I started exploring the topics of utopianism and alterity.

term 'utopian' can be dated with a degree of precision that is uncommon for historical concepts and terminology, namely the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516. However, More himself was part of intellectual and cultural continuums that reached back into the Middle Ages and the Greco-Roman world, and his worldview was shaped by the Latin Christian tradition which blended Jewish, Greco-Roman and Christian impulses in a way that continued to shape the framework of Western Europe for centuries to come. Consequently, while the term 'utopia' might have been new by 1516, the formulation of an ideal condition through the *topoi* used by Thomas More was based on well-established literary traditions (Vieira, 2010: 7; Pohl, 2010: 53). The present article will therefore follow a range of other scholars in using the term 'utopian' to talk about the various descriptions of ideal conditions that are found in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period (Coleman 1982: 2; Uebel, 2002: 18-31; Hoffarth, 2017: 46). In short, I base my argument on the idea that while the contexts that informed how people formulated ideal conditions changed significantly in the period c.1000-c.1750, the functions of utopian texts and the functions of the various *topoi* of utopian texts remain stable across these centuries.²

The main purpose of the present article is to examine the functions of religion and science – both terms broadly understood – in utopian thinking in the Latin Middle Ages and in early modern Europe. By comparing various texts from within this historical timeframe, I argue that despite changing historical contexts, broadening geographical horizons, technological change, and the fragmentation of Catholic religious hegemony, utopian thinkers employed descriptions of religion and science for a shared set of purposes. Descriptions of and reflections on religion and science were used to define and shape an ideal condition, and they also served to outline the otherness of this condition. The exact uses of either religion or science in defining the ideal depend on the textual work in question and its historical context, and these uses can vary greatly despite some shared features. The variation, however, depends not on whether a work is medieval or early modern, but on the purpose of the work in question. In the present article, I will therefore focus on some of the functions of religion and science in utopian texts, while also noting that there are several other functions that might be identified.

My working definition of a utopia is: a coherently conceptualised ideal condition found in time and/or space, formulated by an individual or a small group. In this definition, I follow Christian Hoffarth's point that the otherness of utopia need not be only spatial but can also be temporal (Hoffarth, 2017: 46). The ideal condition is, in other words, not only elsewhere but can also

2 I use this timeframe because it begins during the Benedictine reform, which impacted the growth of a monastic identity that saw itself as distinct from other parts of society. The endpoint reflects the rise of the Robinsonade as a literary genre. Although Robinsonades could also contain reflections on ideal societies, their emphasis on adventure and entertainment marks a new stage in the history of utopian thinking.

be in what I term 'elsetime'. I use this term because in many cases, the key question is not whether an ideal condition can be found in the past or in the future, but whether it can be recreated. Similarly, the most important point about the placement of utopia – in either space or time – is that it is not here and it is not now. Utopia can be longed for, either as a different place or as a different time, but it is the ideal condition of this location or time period that is the object of longing. Moreover, since one defining characteristic of utopian society is that it is not here and now, it does not matter whether the ideal condition is associated with a place or a time, as long as it can serve as some sort of benchmark or blueprint for the shaping or remaking of that society in the present or in the future.

Another important feature of utopian thinking which spans both the medieval and the early modern period is that those who formulated the ideal condition were often connected to some sort of elite. Writing about the Early Modern Period, Miguel Ángel Ramiro Avilés has noted that 'all the utopists are almost always close to power' (Ramiro Avilés, 2013: 27).³ This is also true for utopian thinkers of the Middle Ages. Those medieval agents who themselves formulated an ideal condition – whether it was the monastic world of Benedict of Nursia, its recreation in the Cistercian institutional identity (Berman, 2010: 10), the distant court of Prester John detailed by forgers in the court milieu of Frederick I, or Christine de Pisan's city of ladies – did have protection, patronage and employment from powerful agents, or were themselves in possession of some degree of power. Similarly, those who merely reported ideal conditions, such as Marco Polo, the author known as John Mandeville, or the anonymous author of *Konungs Skuggsjá* [The King's Mirror] (Johansson and Kleivane, 2018: 20-21), were also connected to elite circles.

Another aspect that needs emphasising is the otherness of utopia. In most cases, the ideal condition is marked by spatial and/or temporal otherness, for instance as a fertile island or a golden age in which the ideal ruler reigned. There are, however, different markers of otherness, many of which the Latin Christians inherited from the Greco-Roman tradition and the Jewish scriptures. Such markers include moral purity and technological advancements, both of which will be addressed in this article. The varied and sometimes complex matrix of markers of otherness found fertile ground in Latin Christian medieval literature. In the following section, I will describe some of these markers, and how they connect to the Latin Christian framework. In this discussion, however, it is important not to conflate otherness with ideal conditions. Granted, utopia will always be an other, and there will always be some sort of cultural otherness to any given ideal condition, regardless of whether the fundamental otherness is temporal, spatial, or a combination of the two. Nonetheless, not all forms of otherness are positive, and not all descriptions of otherness have an inherent utopian function. Whether the other is positive or negative depends on the author(s) of any individual utopian work.

3 '[T]odos los utopistas casi siempre están cerca del poder' (my translation).

2. Otherness and the Latin Christian framework

Aside from ideas about the ‘other’, various ideas about the physical world and about humanity were continued from the Greco-Roman tradition and adapted to the Latin Christian paradigm. Many of these ideas remained influential and active in the Early Modern Period, and here I will briefly mention some of those that are relevant for utopian thinking. First of all, the shape of the world as a sphere divided into seven climates and four cardinal points was crucial for establishing a universal horizon for the Latin Christian identity. This horizon placed Jerusalem in the centre of the world, and distinguished clearly between Christians and others. But the horizon was not static, and as the Christian commonwealth expanded new peoples came into the fold. Consequently, while the Early Modern Period saw a global expansion of the Christian horizon, similar expansions into Northern, East Central, and Eastern Europe unfolded in the Middle Ages.

Secondly, the Latin Christian framework also connected the physical world with the salvation history of the Christian religion. Since Christ had dispersed His apostles to the ends of the world – to use the formulation from Psalms 18:5 and Romans 10:18 – the post-Biblical tradition credited Christ’s apostles with the conversion of various distant peoples. For instance, both Thomas and Bartholomew were believed to have evangelised in India, Matthew in Ethiopia, Philip in Scythia, and Simeon and Jude in Persia. This connection between geography and history, and also religion, was a crucial feature in both medieval and early modern utopian thinking, partly because it helped shape expectations about otherness defined not by space or time, but by religious adherence.

Thirdly, with the connection between the quadripartition of the physical world and Christian salvation history, the Latin Christian tradition also established a scheme for historical thinking based on this combination of Biblical and Greco-Roman influence. This combination is perhaps most clearly seen in the first chapter of the second book of Paulus Orosius’ *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII* [Seven Books of History Against the Pagans], where he draws on the dream of Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Daniel, and sketches up a sequence of earthly kingdoms whose rise and fall would prepare the arrival of the fifth and final kingdom, namely that of Heaven (Oellig, 2023: 15). Each earthly kingdom is connected to a specific cardinal point: The Babylonians in the east, the Macedonians in the north, the Carthaginians in the south, and the Romans in the west. In this way, the shape of the world was linked to the shape of history, and it provided a scheme for not only systematising geographical information, but also historical information.

A fourth aspect of the Latin Christian framework that shaped utopian thinking across the medieval/early modern divide was a set of ideas about natural wonders. Roman writers like Pliny the Elder and Solinus – ultimately drawing on Greek writers – conveyed information about various natural wonders and the properties of various plants, animals and stones. These details became subsumed into the learned Latin Christian framework, in large part due to Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* [Etymologies] and *De Natura Rerum* [On the Nature of Things]. This fusion of Greco-Roman and Christian interpretations of the natural world had significant implications for the conception of otherness in the Latin Christian world, because works of natural philosophy would, more often than not, highlight natural wonders that were located elsewhere. Descriptions of monstrous animals, of gems with curative properties, and of curious plants provided solid anchor points for medieval and early modern utopists.

A fifth and final aspect to consider here is the shape of humanity. Together with natural wonders, the Greco-Roman tradition also contained various ideas about the variety of humanity. Several savage or monstrous humanoids populate the pages of the Greco-Roman writers and their Latin Christian inheritors, and these descriptions also shaped the way utopists imagined the other. As part of this otherness, we should note that misshapen human beings – together with misshapen animals or natural phenomena – were forms of *mirabilia*, wonders, that could serve as portents for things to come. In the Latin Christian context, *mirabilia* was closely aligned with the concept of *miracula*. While the latter tended to represent God's direct intervention, the former could simply be something that was not understood by human reason, although often *mirabilia* was likewise seen as messages from God (Ward, 1987: 4-5; Larrington, 2004: 95). Wonders – whether consisting of natural phenomena like comets or droughts, or of humans considered misshapen – were rife in medieval chronicles and natural histories. However, such reports were also part of the literary diet available to the early modern utopists. As noted by E. R. Truitt, '[w]onder is highly contingent on perspective, and is often evoked by the uncommon and the unfamiliar' (Truitt, 2015: 15). We might also say that the wondrous elements found in utopian thinking in order to elicit wonder were included because they were expected – they played on a register of familiar unfamiliar.

These forms of otherness – geographical, religious, physical, temporal – were all part of a frame of references on which the utopists of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period drew to formulate what they considered the ideal condition. As mentioned, how the ideal condition was shaped depended on the utopist's contemporary context, but the framework for imagining the other was shared across the centuries. This Latin Christian framework provided a way for utopists to employ religion and science, and to formulate their places in their respective ideal conditions.

3. The functions of religion in utopian thinking

Texts of utopian thinking employ religion in several ways, and in the present article I will only focus on two of the various functions that religion serves in descriptions of ideal conditions. First of all, religion can be used to bridge the chasm of otherness that separates the ideal from the real. Secondly, and conversely, religion can be used to widen this same chasm. These two functions can coexist in one and the same utopian vision, and they can be formulated through several means. Moreover, the term 'religion' can here cover a lot of different elements, ranging from theological discussions, encounters between various religious groups or traditions, reflections on faith, or the use of religious signifiers such as churches, priests, idols, and so on. I use this broad definition of religion in order to highlight the continuity of functions across the medieval/early-modern divide. This use is due to the changes in the religious scene of sixteenth-century Western Europe, with the end of Catholic hegemony and the emergence of numerous forms of Protestantism.

Bridging otherness

To bridge otherness is to provide some sort of access or common reference point between the ideal society and its audience. Since ideal societies are either inaccessible or only accessible with severe restrictions (Napoli, 2021: 474), there must be recognisable elements a) that enable the audience to envision the ideal society, and b) that allow the audience to understand that this society is ideal. The gap between the real and ideal might be bridged by comparative references, such as specific utopian spaces like the court or the city. However, one of the most effective means is religion.⁴ In the forgery known as *Epistola Presbiteri Iohannis* [Letter of Prester John], the otherness inherent in the many marvels and monstrous humanoids of Prester John's kingdom is bridged by his Christian piety, and makes him an object of possible alliance and diplomacy. Similarly, in Marco Polo's description of the realm of the great khan, the many forms of cultural otherness found both at court and in the kingdom at large are softened by the claim that the khan personally favours Christianity above all other religions (Marco Polo, 1824: 84-85). In *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* [The Book of the City of Ladies] (1986: 239-41), Christine de Pisan's ideal community brings together virtuous women from all of history, including non-Christian women, but the community's Christian belonging is safeguarded by the city's elite, described in the third book, namely the saints. Even in the case of fully-Christian utopian worlds, such as Benedict of Nursia's monastic community (2011: 4-9), it is the promise

4 The use of religion as a common denominator is not unique to Christian utopian thinking. It was also part of Greek utopian thinking, seen especially in the ideas about Ethiopians (Belanger, 2014: 106-09) and Hyperboreans.

of religious perfection and transformation that provides the main channel of connection between the monastery and the outside world. These works are all written in a world of Catholic hegemony and are aimed at audiences who share this hegemony. In the works written during and in the wake of religious schism in the sixteenth century onwards, or in a cultural sphere marked by greater religious variety, however, this hegemony was fragmented, but the function of religion as a bridge between the real and the ideal remained.

Already in Thomas More's *Utopia*, religious difference was one of the markers of otherness that set the distant island apart from European polities. The Utopians are not Christians, and they worship a wide variety of gods, 'some the sun, some the moon, and some the other wandering stars' (1895: 266).⁵ Yet we also learn that there are those who believe in a less defined, ineffable Creator, whose attributes come very close to the Christian God, to the point that when the Utopians learn about Christ, they recognise the goodness of His teachings (More, 1895: 267-68). In other words, the religious understanding of the Utopians is essentially Christian, yet without the knowledge of Christ. This closeness is what bridges the distance between More's audience and the ideal society of Utopia, and makes this society a religiously tolerant polity that is essentially Christian.

The basic idea that some cultures and some people are so naturally virtuous and good that they only need to learn about the existence of Christ to become Christians, was a well-established *topos* by 1516. In his description of the Javans, John Mandeville describes how they go about naked, as Adam and Eve before the fall, and that they practice natural religion, which is in essence Christianity without the knowledge of Christ (Paris. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, NAF 4515, ff.88v-89r). We also encounter this *topos* in the Alexander literature, where Alexander the Great meets the gymnosophists or Brahmins in Asia (Khanmohamadi, 2015: 33). Later iterations of this *topos* can be found in the curious English-language second part of *The History of the Sevarambians* (2006: 101), which recounts a Dutch expedition's encounter with a utopian society in the interior of the unknown Southern Land.⁶ The *topos* in question is found in a passage that describes how a group of women are made to dance naked by a philosopher's use of a talisman. However, because the Sevarambians are so virtuous this nakedness does not become lascivious, and the scene

5 '[A]liis Solem, Lunam aliis, aliis aliud errantium syderum' (my translation).

6 I here use the term 'Southern Land' to refer to the continental landmass that European navigators expected to find in the southern hemisphere in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The landmass was called Terra Australis Incognita, the unknown southern land. I use 'Southern Land' in order not to confuse this hypothetical, expected landmass with the area now known as Australia. While the name of the modern country is based on the early modern name, the term 'Southern Land' was in use before Australia's coastline was mapped and does not correspond to Australia as a geographical or political entity.

presents both moral purity and technological advancement. Similarly, the hermaphrodite Australians encountered by the hermaphrodite French castaway Sadeur in *La Terre Australe Connue* [The Southern Land, Known] (1676: 103-04) argue that they need no clothes because God created them naked. Moreover, the idea that the inhabitants of an ideal society only need to be taught Christian theology to become Christian is included in Tommaso Campanella's *La Città della Sole* [The City of the Sun] (1981: 36). The people of Taprobane know and revere Christ and the apostles as virtuous people, alongside Moses, Osiris, Muhammed, and Alexander the Great, but they do not know Christ's teachings. Consequently, once the people of Taprobane are introduced to the Bible, they will therefore be receptive to the Christian faith, according to Campanella's narrator.

In other ideal societies of the Early Modern Period, Christianity has already been introduced. The most famous example is perhaps Francis Bacon's Bensalem, which describes a technologically advanced ideal society in the Pacific Ocean. This society was miraculously converted through a letter from Saint Bartholomew, even though the apostle himself never set foot on the island. A more elaborate conversion can be seen in the anonymous *Sinapia* (2013: 44-45), where Christianity is brought to the eponymous peninsula in the Southern Land through the exiled Persian Sinap Ardschird, and where the conversion process is more gradual.

In all these cases, the ideal nature of any given people or society is formulated through a number of ways, such as a just government, religious freedom, absence of vice, or advanced technological knowledge. These societies have attained a degree of perfection and are located sufficiently far away for ordinary humans to have little or no access to them. And as perfection is a form of otherness that can sometimes frighten or create even greater distance, some common denominators are needed to open up these ideal societies to their intended audiences – whether it is a matter of allowing the audiences to access the societies themselves (as in the case of monastic communities), or whether it is a matter of enabling the audiences to imagine the society in question. When such a bridge is needed, shared religious sentiments provide an effective means of decreasing the otherness between the real and the ideal.

Enhancing otherness

Utopian thinking also employs religion as a way to emphasise or even increase otherness. This usage has two main forms. The first form pertains to religious perfection. In some cases of utopian thinking, the otherness consists of the high degree of perfection of religious thought, sentiment and practice in the utopian community. While these same descriptions might use proximity to Christianity, or Christian belonging, as a way to provide a point of contact with the utopian society in question, the religion of this

society might also be used as a way to emphasise the distance between the real and the ideal. The question of perfection is perhaps most clearly visible in descriptions of monastic societies, such as Benedict's *Regula* [Rule], where life in the monastery requires obedience to the rules and rejection of every human vice, which entails a transformation of the self. We might arguably see the same utopian dimension in lives of the desert fathers (Uebel, 2010: 32-34). The perfection of the utopian community can serve to provide a model for others to follow, or even a model against which the shortcomings of the audiences are cast in even stronger relief. This latter function can also be found in descriptions of non-Christian ideal communities. Mandeville's naked Javans, for instance, might serve as a foil for the Christian Europeans, who have misunderstood how to live virtuously (Khanmohamadi, 2015: 129). Similarly, in *La Terre Australe Connue*, the protagonist reflects about Australians that 'you would think that Adam had not sinned in them'.⁷ The religion of the Utopians in Thomas More's novel is marked by devotion and lack of fractious division (More, 1895: 270), while the Potuans of Ludvig Holberg's *Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum* [Niels Klim's Journey Under Ground] (1741: 90) practice religious toleration and prohibit commentaries on the holy scriptures (punished by exile). Attempts to discuss the essence of the divine is (punished by bloodletting and confinement in the city's hospital). The Potuans criticise several religious practices of Niels Klim's Danish-Norwegian contemporaries, and, as the antihero Niels admits, the arguments of the Potuans are so subtle that he is unable to counter them. Religion in these ideal societies – whether Christian or not – serves as a form of criticism against the shortcomings of their intended audiences, and an inspiration to improvement. Religion enhances otherness, but in these cases, it is the audiences who find themselves the lesser other.

The second form of the use of religion to enhance otherness, goes in a very different direction. In these cases, the utopian condition begins, or will begin, with the introduction of Christianity, and the native religion is a negative contrast to the perceived supremacy of the Christian religion. This form is perhaps most clearly seen in several medieval sources, above all various calls for crusade. For instance, the Magdeburg charter of 1107/08 (1937: 250-251) calls for war against the Slavs, describing their human sacrifices to the god Pripegala. The ideal condition can only be achieved, according to those issuing the charter, by the extermination of the pagan religion and the introduction and safeguarding of Christianity. The argument that the ideal condition begins with the introduction of Christianity can also be found in non-violent iterations. In book 4, chapter 30 of Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* [Deeds of the Bishops of the Church of Hamburg] (1917: 178), the Norwegians are said to have been driven to piracy by their poverty, but with their conversion to Christianity they have learned

7 Translated by David Fausett (De Foigny, 1993: 59). The original quotation is: 'en droit facilement qu' Adam n'a pas péché en eux' (De Foigny, 1676: 104).

to 'be content with their poverty'.⁸ In the liturgical office for the feast of Saint Sunniva and the Saints of Selja, composed in Bergen around 1170 and found in the *Breviarium Nidrosiense* [The Nidaros Breviary] (1519: 710), the arrival of a group of Irish Christians on a Western Norwegian island in the late tenth century sees the establishment of a colony of Christian perfection – which is ultimately undone by the arrival of hostile pagans – where they live 'in great abstinence and poverty'.⁹ Another iteration of the idea of Christianity being crucial to the initiation of the ideal condition and the golden age is seen in *Sinapia* (2013: 44-45), where the true utopian society begins with the coming of Sinap Ardaschir, whose defence of the country and good rule made the various cultures of the peninsula 'gradually embrace the Christian religion'.¹⁰ The basic idea that the introduction of Christianity will bring about an even better age can also be found in some societies where religion is already described in positive terms, as in the case of Campanella's (1981: 68) Taprobane mentioned above.

The functions of science in utopian thinking

The modern term 'science' is anachronistic when discussing medieval and early modern texts, so in this article I will use it as generally as I have used 'religion'. Consequently, the term covers natural wonders and human-made wonders, natural philosophy, art, and technology. The inclusion of so-called scientific material in utopian descriptions can have several functions, but I will focus on two issues. First of all, the presentation of a naturally ideal location provides the basis for a utopian society, and reflections on natural wonders thereby explain what enables the ideal condition in any given place. Secondly, however, reflections on human-made wonders – or sometime even divine wonders – show how the ideal condition has been realised through technological advances.

The basis for an ideal condition: natural wonders

Much of the learned literature of the Latin Christian Middle Ages and early modern Europe was dedicated to what we often call natural philosophy, which included descriptions and reflections on the nature and properties of stones, plants, animals, and sometimes even peoples or countries. Such material was part of the geographical descriptions of the Greco-Roman period, and many ideas from these texts provided a register of signifiers for the medieval and early modern utopists. Natural phenomena were a marker of otherness, and could be used to demonstrate how a given society or location could achieve the ideal condition. Either nature itself could furnish the requisite starting-point, or nature could be tamed in order to prepare for a utopian

8 '[P]aupertate sua contenti esse' (my translation).

9 '[I]n multa abstinencia et paupertate' (my translation).

10 '[P]oco a poco abrazando la religión cristiana' (my translation).

community. An example of the former is found in the thirteenth-century Norwegian pedagogical treatise *Konungs Skuggsjá*, where a father tells his son about the world. Here, Ireland is described as having an abundance of saints and no snakes, meaning that it is the land itself that gives Ireland a utopian dimension (1920: 51-63). A similar quality can be seen in *La Terre Australe Connue* (1676: 178-79), where Australia has no insects, or in the *History of the Sevarambians* (2006: 86), where the soil rejects transgressors by giving them deformities. These markers of a terrain prepared for an ideal condition hark back to the Garden of Eden, but described through elements from Greco-Roman geographical writing.

As a contrast to the wonders of Ireland in *Konungs Skuggsjá* (1920: 63-69, 78-83), the father tells about the various monsters of the Greenland Sea, where the untamed wildness and remoteness of this region are markers of a condition that is far from ideal. However, it is not so much the wildness itself that prevents Greenland from becoming an ideal place, but rather that it remains untamed. In other words, where nature itself does not provide the utopian foundation, an ideal condition can be achieved by taming nature. This process of taming or controlling the natural wonders and humanoids of a remote region can be seen in the *Epistola Presbyteri Iohannis*. This ideal king has in his realm 'leopards, wild donkeys, white and red lions, white bears, white blackbirds, silent cicadas, griffins, tigers' and so on (2015: 46-47), and he governs fauns, satyrs, centaurs and giants – even the otherwise ungovernable Amazons (2015: 55). Similarly, in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1668: 130-33), a castaway enters a subterranean empire, and becomes its empress and comes to govern a wide variety of human-animal hybrids. The natural wonders of these realms mark the areas as other, but it requires the right kind of ruler to turn the other into an ideal other. A variation of this motif can be seen in the stories of the Christian desert fathers, whose hermitages in the desert constituted a taming or colonisation of the wild, thereby making it an ideal place – perhaps not of plenty, but at least of sufficiency, and of divine contact. The otherness of the land provides, in other words, a foundation for the ideal condition, but this condition has to be achieved, whether it is through virtuous living, the correct religious belief of its ruler, or, as we shall see next, the technological skills of its inhabitants.

The realisation of utopia: human-made wonders

While natural wonders served to explain how an ideal condition could exist in a given location, human-made wonders served to demonstrate that the ideal condition was achieved. These wonders sometimes consisted of great feats of engineering, such as the channel dug on the orders of King Utopos in order to make Utopia an island, the Australians' practice of levelling mountains to prevent birds or enemies from making strongholds in them, or the buildings of Taprobane described by Tommaso Campanella. Wonders can

also be exemplified by technological achievements. Perhaps most famously, the experiments conducted by the inhabitants of Bensalem have resulted in a highly advanced society which ensures the sustenance of its people, exemplified by their production of artificial meat (Bacon, 1660: 78-85). In *Epistola Presbyteri Iohannis*, Prester John's palace is not only described in its many marvellous details, it also 'resembles in image and likeness the palace that the apostle Thomas designed for Gundoforus, the king of the Indians; its workshops and other buildings are similar in every way' (2015: 56) – a description that connects technology and piety to prove the utopian qualities of the priest-king's realm.¹¹ Similarly, Marco Polo (1824: 94) recounts an impressive fountain at Kubilai Khan's court, which serves to emphasise his realm as an ideal condition. To the same effect, Margaret Cavendish (1668: 50-57) describes how the subterranean empress' human-animal hybrids were employed to the best of their various skills, which enabled phenomenal advances.

There is, however, a correlation between land and society that confirms whether the ideal condition has indeed been achieved, and whether a place truly is utopian. Just as several utopian texts suggest that the introduction of Christianity is the true catalyst of the ideal condition, a place is not utopian merely by virtue of its technological advancements. While Marco Polo used the technological wonders of the khan's court to amplify its utopian qualities, William of Rubruck's (1839: 309) account of a fountain in Karakorum, made by a French smith, is presented in the context of realistic reporting which gives no room for utopian raptures. Similarly, Liutprand of Cremona describes a wonderful mechanical throne in Constantinople in the sixth book of his chronicle *Antapodosis* [Retribution] (1998: 149). Yet when describing the Byzantine court in his account, *Relatio* [Account], of an embassy to Constantinople, Liutprand's acerbic comments prove that the technological abilities of the Greek do not ensure them a status as an ideal society. In *La Terre Australe Connue* (1676: 231-56), the initial impression of utopian perfection is contradicted by the genocidal practices of the hermaphrodite Australians.

Conclusions

Utopian texts are part of a broader contemporary discourse, and are usually composed in order to convey an argument and sometimes even to have an impact on contemporary trends and events. The components of these texts therefore serve a specific function, or sometimes several functions, that contribute to the thrust of the author's overall purpose or argument. The breadth of utopian literature is such that the common motifs of ideal conditions can be levied in a wide variety of ways, and the function or functions of certain

11 Translated by Keagan Brewer. See *Epistola Presbyteri Iohannis*, 2015: 80, 'ad instar et similitudinem palatii, quod apostolus Thomas ordinavit Gundoforo, regi Indorum, in officinis et relique structura per omnia simile est illi'.

elements can vary. Mapping some common trends in how utopian thinking employs its constituent elements can help us understand both the continuity of thought that straddles the medieval/early modern divide, and also to understand why these elements are being used. I have here used 'religion' and 'science' as broad categories that comprise several motifs, simply because this generalisation helps identifying shared aspects that could be overlooked in parameters that followed rigid periodisations more inflexibly.

Religious motifs are typically employed in a balance of two related but not easily combined functions, namely to both bridge and enhance otherness. Despite the apparent contradiction, this balance serves to explain why any given condition is ideal, while simultaneously enable its audience to envision and to understand how this condition could be ideal. Descriptions of churches, priests, and idols used nomenclature from the Latin Christian tradition in order to convey features of ideal societies in remote places – even if that place was merely a monastery outside the city. Religion could also be used as a catalyst for the ideal condition, whether that catalyst should be initiated forcefully – as suggested by calls for crusade – or little by little, as suggested by the anonymous author of *Sinapia*.

Like religion, science also had many different functions in utopian thinking. Here, the enhancement or bridging of otherness also played a part, but these functions operated in a different manner when motifs from natural philosophy or technology were involved. While various scientific wonders did serve to formulate otherness, there were two functions that were more important. First of all, natural wonders served to prepare the audience to accept that the society in question was ideal, because the wonders of the land itself enabled the ideal condition. Secondly, technological advancements could serve as proof that the inhabitants of the land had achieved the ideal condition, either because of the skill involved in the crafting of human-made wonders, or because of how these wonders improved the condition of the inhabitants.

While science and religion have slightly different functions in utopian thinking, they nonetheless operate in connection with one another. Scientific motifs could demonstrate the utopian quality of a place or a society, but often it was the religious motifs that provided the final proof that a condition was ideal. The wonders of Prester John's realm were combined with his Christianity. The advances of Utopia and Potu were partly due to their religious tolerance. The near-magical skills of the Sevarambian philosophers were rendered acceptable due to their piety. Technological advancement alone was, however, not sufficient for a condition to be ideal.

Imagining ideal conditions is a polemical act, and what is considered ideal might differ depending on individuals, society, or a broader historical context. Using familiar motifs, both moral and technological, is a way to present the argument that the condition imagined is ideal, and thereby ensuring that the argument itself has greater effect. This is not to say that

specific utopian descriptions necessarily had a real-world impact beyond the world of letters. However, as the world of letters is a part of the wider world, the way the ideal condition was formulated and imagined could affect how the audiences of utopian texts contributed to their contemporary contexts. Understanding how science and religion functioned in imagining the ideal might therefore help us understand how people in various historical contexts were influenced to act.

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