

Foreword

If a perfect society is unattainable, why even try to attain one? If Jesus – God Himself – could not bring peace to the human race, what can human beings possibly do to achieve it? In *A Better World Is Possible: An Exploration of Western and Eastern Utopian Visions*, Dr Ambrose Mong deviates somewhat from his usual realm of academic inquiry to consider one of the most abstract and enticing subjects imaginable: the possibility that human beings could actually construct a utopia on earth. If it is admitted that those same human beings are individually and communally flawed and inherently selfish, why would one even waste time entertaining such a fantasy? This book demonstrates that, despite the apparent futility of the subject, many of the greatest minds in history have devoted considerable time – and ink – to creating imaginary worlds that they believed could serve as a template for the construction of an actual earthly paradise. But who, precisely, would waste so much effort on so useless a venture? As Dr Mong admirably shows, such concerns were very much the focus of various celebrated philosophers and theologians, Western and Eastern, who judged that the world could, with dedication and work, become an earthly wonderland.

Despite appearances, the current inquiry is not an abstract meditation but very much based in reality. What gave rise to Dr Mong's fascinating study was a hyperbolic comment made after a visit by Theodore Sorensen, an advisor to President John F. Kennedy, to Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew: "I now feel my life is complete; I have been to Utopia." Of course, anyone who is not a native or has not visited Singapore would

surely ask, “And how did this happen? Who was responsible?” In the minds of many, and in the opinion of Dr Mong himself, the person who worked this modern-day miracle was none other than Lee himself. Widely admired as one of the most enlightened, virtuous, and effective leaders of the twentieth century, Lee (reg.1954-2011) embodied many of the qualities and implemented many of the policies proposed by various utopian thinkers down through the ages. The selection of such thinkers arrayed by Dr Mong is impressive: Thomas More, Ignacio Ellacuría, Confucius, Mo Tzu, Kang Youwei, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Francis Fukuyama. Not bound by the parameters of one age, one geographical location, one social class, one philosophical system, or one faith, these thinkers witnessed strife and suffering but strove to look beyond the woes of their age. They sought to envisage a time and a place in which the causes of the turmoil experienced in their time would be eliminated through the use of intellect and the voluntary acceptance of the will to do good for all people.

Beginning with a consideration of what constitutes utopian thinking, Dr Mong segues into a discussion of what a “civilization of poverty” – a civilization of compassion – offers humanity, as opposed to the oft-asserted benefits of capitalism, which has been embraced by most of the nations of the world. As is evident, most of the world’s population has not benefitted from the capitalist system, and yet most governments continue to proffer the hope that eventually its benefits will trickle down to all people. Based as it is on the premise that consumer culture will necessarily improve the standard of living of the world’s population – a false hope, Dr Mong argues – capitalism bears a heavy price tag and is actually doing far more harm than good. But what elements are lacking such that capitalism, especially as it has been articulated in the West, has not delivered on its promises? Dr Mong answers the question concisely: capitalism values money but not the human person. But, while capitalism is currently the reigning form of utopianism that has captured the world’s imagination, other forms of utopian thought have not been lacking.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Dr Mong’s work is his sensitivity to cultural and religious differences. Rich in comparative analysis, this book reminds us that the search for a model of how to construct an earthly paradise is universal. And, whether the quest for utopia be undertaken from a philosophical, economic, political, or religious perspective, one element remains the same in all of them: the need to place the good of the human person at the center of the model. Any system that fails to promote the commonweal is destined to failure. Thus, in a very real way,

the search for utopia may be viewed as a quest for the commonweal, a truth that has been apparent to great thinkers in both the West and the East.

If such utopian models are available to humanity, then, returning to our original question, why does so much of the world's population continue to suffer? Dr Mong answers this query by allowing utopian thinkers to speak for themselves. As we find in the work of each of them, the good have been thwarted by the arbitrary social and intellectual norms that we human beings have constructed to protect our own interests, to the detriment of the common good. As Dr Mong shows so powerfully, careful analysis of the work of utopian thinkers makes obvious the many human flaws that increase human suffering. As we note what they urge, working backwards, so to speak, we deduce the many ways in which we human beings prefer to seek our own good to the exclusion of others. We invent philosophical arguments, political systems, racial categories, and even theologies, somehow imagining that the exclusion of some people will lead to utopia. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As a former Chairman of the Board of the United States Catholic China Bureau and a "Scholar of the People's Republic of China," I have often been asked to speak about China and the Chinese people. A very common question posed to me is: "Whither China? What do the Chinese Communists want?" Although baldly phrased, the meaning of the question is clear. In fact, the question seems to me to be a version of what utopian thinkers have always asked. The answer to the question is equally clear. The "Chinese Communists" want what all human beings want: to be loved, honored, and cared for, to have the opportunity to use our talents, to live comfortably and free from fear and coercion, to feel needed, and to live in peace with ourselves and others. If the answer to this human quest is so simple, why have we not attained earthly utopia? Dr Mong demonstrates that past utopian associations with philosophical and theological systems have largely been discarded in favor of secular states based on liberal democracy. In the mind of Francis Fukuyama, for example, liberal democracy is the hope of humankind rather than Christianity because it seeks utopia in this world, and not in a future kingdom of heaven. Dr Mong, or, as it might be more appropriate to recognize here, Father Mong, reminds us that Fukuyama has "missed out on realized eschatology." Roman Catholic theology, which obviously resides in the Roman Catholic Church, was given the mission to preach the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ for all peoples. Dr Mong, following the thought of Jacques Dupuis, argues that true utopianism may be found in this attainable reality in which, "In

spite of differences, members of different religious traditions are co-members of the reign of God in history, journeying together towards the fullness of God's kingdom.”

Dr Mong has written a comprehensive, balanced, highly informative, and enjoyable work that makes complicated material understandable for us all. What is more, thanks to Dr Mong's wonderful explanation of the many ways that we can strive to realize utopia here and now, they are even more accessible for us to put into practice.

Mark DeStephano, Ph.D.
Saint Peter's University
Jersey City,
New Jersey, U.S.A.

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