

## Introduction

*But the poor person does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny.*

Gustavo Gutiérrez,  
*A Theology of Liberation* (1973)

This volume is a sequel to my book, *A Tale of Two Theologians* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2017). *A Tale of Two Theologians* focusses on the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Michael Amaladoss as they construct a theology relevant to Third World economies afflicted by exploitation and oppression. Disowning the life of jet-setting intellectuals, these two theologians are known for their pastoral work with the poor and the marginalized. They declare a different world is not only possible but necessary.

The quest for a better society has its origin in utopian political projects such as Plato's *Republic* (c.381BC) and Marx's vision of the proletariat in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Baptizing this utopian tradition, as it were, Gutiérrez and Amaladoss attempt to build the kingdom of God on earth by improving civil institutions so that all people can lead lives with adequate basic necessities.

The search for a better world has always existed throughout our history, partly because, as Jesus said, the poor are always with us (Mark 14:7). The ancient Greeks envisaged an ideal society in the *polis* or city-state, while the Romans dreamed of an idyllic past in Virgil's Arcadia. The book of Genesis in the Old Testament describes a utopian Eden managed by Adam and Eve. In modern times, we imagine a society where technology offers all kinds of conveniences and creature comforts, from

smart phones to driverless cars. Utopias as conceived by the ancients accepted the fact that resources were limited and human wants unlimited. Thus, their “ideal society” was one that stressed simplicity and restricted luxurious consumption. In contrast, modern-styled utopias are places of abundance. Furthermore, inequality was acceptable in ancient utopias, such as in Plato’s *Republic*, but in modern utopias, the emphasis is on equality.<sup>1</sup>

This work seeks to provide a selection of utopian writings representing Western tradition, Thomas More, Ignacio Ellacuría, Teilhard de Chardin, and representing Eastern tradition, Confucius, Mo Tzu and Kang Youwei. Despite coming from different cultures and eras, these writers, not surprisingly, have much in common in their quest for a better world, especially in their emphasis on compassion for humanity, social justice and peace. Instead of labelling utopias as “Western” and “non-Western,” Jacqueline Dutton prefers to use the term “intercultural imaginaries,” which she feels is more appropriate for the study of several traditions that seek to build a better world.<sup>2</sup> These intercultural imaginaries, steeped in their own local traditions and worldviews, pre-dated More’s *Utopia*. Social dreaming or the desire for a better life is essentially a universal concept.

Utopian studies appear to have gone out of fashion among scholars since the publication of Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and the barrage of criticism it attracted over the idea of liberal democracy as the final destination in the evolution of human society. Are we then losing hope that a better world is possible when we have experienced a loss of faith in globalization and universalist notions such as human compassion, peace, justice and democratic equality? It has become clear in the last decades that a classless global society in which people of all nations can enjoy the same opportunities, such as access to decent housing, healthcare, and education, cannot be achieved easily.

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1. The American and French Revolutions championed the principle of egalitarianism: Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 13. Facebook, a social media website, plans to make the world a better place. Chief executive Mark Zuckerberg wants to use his social network to “build communities” and to “bring the world closer together.” In terms of social structure, Zuckerberg believes Facebook is “probably one of the larger institutions that can help empower people to build communities.” One of his recent interests is to make the world a less divisive place: *South China Morning Post*, Monday, 2 July 2017, C8.
  2. Jacqueline Dutton, “‘Non-western’ Utopian Traditions,” in Gregory Claeys, *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 224.

There were two significant attempts made in the twentieth century to create a classless society: on one hand, the Marxist proletarian revolution resulting in the abolition of private property and entrepreneurship; on the other, the welfare state proposed by western intellectuals to ensure equality of opportunity for our children and modelled on the Scandinavian countries. Many thinkers and politicians now have little faith in these two so-called utopian scenarios.<sup>1</sup>

It is not philosophical speculation, but rather historical narrative that can help us to envisage a better future, according to Richard Rorty. Specifically, we need to tell a story about what has happened and what we hope may happen in the near future. Written more than five hundred years ago, Thomas More's *Utopia* is surprisingly popular to this day and is included in the reading list of humanities studies because it tells a thought-provoking story with multivalent meanings. Hence, this present work starts with More's *Utopia* and a focus on his impassioned plea for social justice. More's discussion on the plight of the poor, the issues of private property, religious tolerance and his criticism of Western society is cleverly woven into an engaging story.

The stories that people tell regarding their country or the birth of an ideal society constitute their community as nation. In other words, "nation is narration."<sup>2</sup> Philosophers in their discourse, however, tend to start with notions like "truth," "identity," "self," and "subject." Such an attempt seems to lead to the conclusion that they have lost hope and are unable to construct any narrative of progress that could become a reality in the future. "A turn away from narration and utopian dreams toward philosophy seems to me a gesture of despair."<sup>3</sup>

Globalization is supposed to increase the wealth of nations by removing trade and communication barriers. Unfortunately, because of the lack of national control of laws, money accumulated by global trade is either stashed away by super-rich multinationals (for tax avoidance purposes) or taken over by criminal organisations. This situation only widens the gap between the corporate rich and the working poor (and not between developed and developing nations, as was once commonly believed). The absence of a global polity means that the rich can do what

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1. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1999), 230-31.
  2. Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, and Andrew Mycock, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation: Historiography and Other Genres," in *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media and the Arts* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 1-16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qdcqbq.5>.
  3. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 232.

they choose to increase their wealth and influence even more. In the end, says Rorty, there are only two socially influential groups: “the super-rich and the intellectuals.”<sup>1</sup> The latter group attempts to study the harm done by the former through international talking shops which are generally viewed as harmless and impotent. These jet-setting intellectuals need to take on a more activist role in helping to mold the social and economic policies of political leaders, ultimately to create a more just and equitable world.

More importantly, without the support of men and women who struggled, fought, and died for a just and equitable world, the idea of utopia would remain no more than vapour-ware, confined only to intellectual discussion, without practical, economic benefits. As a historical programme, utopia refers to the heroic efforts of people to establish a qualitatively different society with a new set of social relations – utopia is meant to be dynamic and revolutionary. In the tradition of Thomas More, utopian thought is a driving force in history because of its subversive nature.<sup>2</sup>

Fátima Vieira holds that “utopias are by essence dynamic . . . born out of a given set of circumstances, their scope not limited to a criticism of the present; indeed, utopias put forward projective ideas that are to be adopted by future audiences, which may cause real change.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, utopia has two aspects: a denunciation of the existing order and the annunciation of a new world to come. The intolerable situation borne by the poor and marginalized needs to be denounced and the hope for a better future needs to be announced to prevent despair and cynicism. These two aspects of utopia, denunciation and annunciation, must be carried out in *praxis* – in concrete historical situations.<sup>4</sup> In other words, they must go beyond purely verbal level – they call for specific political actions.

Possessing a utopian consciousness and hope implies an attempt to establish a better world or a vastly improved state of life but it does not mean searching for a perfect life. It is based on the belief that a different world is possible. More’s *Utopia*, for example, provides an account of a vastly improved society; however, human nature is not perfect as crime still exists. With good management and government, we can have a better

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1. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 233.
  2. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 232.
  3. Fátima Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia,” in Claeys, *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, 8.
  4. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 233.

world. “Perfection,” is fundamentally a theological concept although it is related to utopianism in some ways. A perfect life is an ideal not attainable here on earth for mere mortals. Utopian communities were built in the past and may be realisable in the near and distant future with all their imperfections and limitations.

## Outline and Sequence of the Work

Chapter one explores Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) highlighting his concern for the poor and his criticism of European society at that time. This chapter calls our attention to More’s indictment of his own native land and his pleas for social justice. More presents the Utopians as non-Christians who are nevertheless open to Gospel values. A religiously pluralistic nation, Utopia’s commonwealth is meant to be a challenge to More’s so-called Christian contemporaries.

The present economic and political systems in the Third World have failed to provide everyone with adequate food, shelter, and healthcare, let alone education. Therefore, there exists an urgent need to find an alternative way of government. Chapter two examines the writings of the Jesuit martyr, Ignacio Ellacuría (1930-89) and others, regarding their vision of a different world, a “civilization of poverty,” that upholds the centrality of compassion. Critical of the institutional Church, Ellacuría’s emphasis on the messianic aspect of Christianity involves the liberation of the whole person and the transformation of society into a more humane one.

Associated with utopian ideas, assisted by technology, globalization boasts of removing economic and social barriers, uniting the world as one global village, promoting mutual understanding and a constructive interchange of ideas. Unfortunately, globalization has in fact led to the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor nations. Dominated by multinational companies and driven by the relentless pursuit of profit that threatens to destroy the environment, globalization is in reality a form of cultural imperialism, *Americanization* to be specific. Chapter three studies the Church’s social teaching that attempts to promote the humanization of the market and the protection of local cultures against the onslaught of globalization that claims to be universal.

Related to life in the *polis* or city-state and influenced by Christianity, Western utopias look towards the future and the world to come. Eastern utopias, on the other hand, are identified with agrarian life and the Golden Age in primitive times as evident, for example, in the Peach Blossom arcadia of Tao Yuanming. In the tradition of Thomas More,

Western utopia means “no place,” whereas Chinese utopia generally refers to “a better place.” Chapter four explores an alternative vision of utopia with a focus on the humanistic and social-relationship teachings of Confucius (551-479BC) and concludes with the economic success story of Singapore that adopts certain pragmatic aspects of Confucianism as its ideology.

Chapter five focusses on the utopian vision and teachings of Mo Tzu (470-391BC), whose thought – known as Mohism – was at one time a challenge to Confucianism. Mo Tzu stresses the universality of love that resembles Christianity. His ideal world is one that emphasises simplicity and frugality because he believes we can only live luxuriously and extravagantly at the expense of others. Not keen on creating an egalitarian society, Mo Tzu’s interest is in meritocracy. In this chapter we examine his vision of an ideal society in his discourses on “Honouring the Worthy,” “Identifying with One’s Superior,” “Universal Love,” “Against Offensive Warfare,” and “The Will of Heaven.”

Considered the first political utopian writer in China, Kang Youwei (1858-1927) was a leader of the Hundred-Day Reform Movement of 1898. He sought to introduce Western ideas that could co-exist with conservative Chinese traditions. Chapter six examines Kang’s best work, *Datong shu* (*The Book of Great Unity*), where he lays out a blueprint to construct a better world with principles drawn from Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Written with utopian consciousness, Kang aims to unite not only his long-suffering nation, but the world at large, by abolishing social, political and economic boundaries, and institutions that are deemed harmful to humanity.

Teilhard de Chardin’s understanding of a united humanity was linked to his experience in Asia where he envisages the possible unity of diverse faiths such as Christianity, Buddhism and Daoism. A model of utopian hope, he perceives religious beliefs in terms of the energy that fused people’s faith and ability to forge a better life. A Christian and a supporter of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution at the same time, Teilhard believed in the convergence of all things, including religions, in the kingdom of God at the end of time. In chapter seven, we examine Teilhard’s understanding of the convergence of religions culminating in the Christ, “the Alpha and Omega.” Finally, this work concludes with a critique of Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* by holding that the end of history had arrived in the person of Jesus Christ.