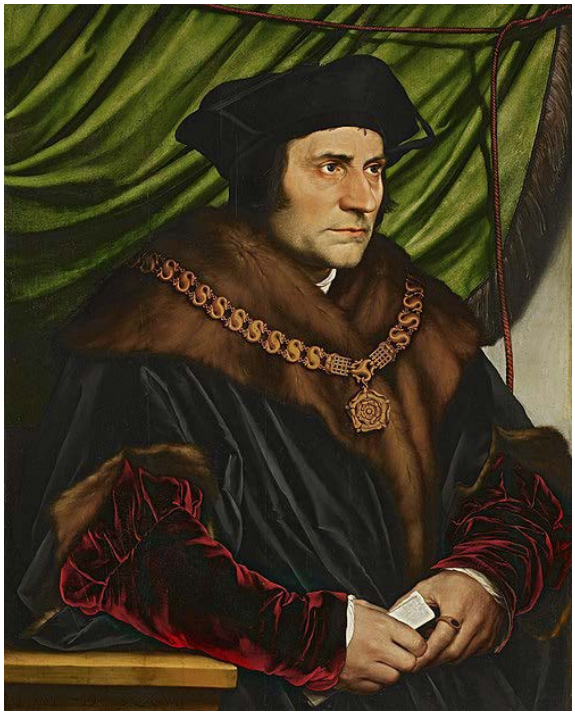
Utopianism in an Early Globalized World (1500–1540)

Introduction

The word “utopia” was invented by a humanist from England named Thomas More in a Latin treatise published in 1516 with that name. The title was a joke because in Greek *utopia* means “nowhere” or “no place.” More used it as the name of a fictional island in the Americas that had enough similarities to England for readers to easily recognize that he was offering a satirical commentary on his home country.

One of the most striking features of More’s Utopia is its uniformity. The cities are all laid out the same. The people’s language and traditions are all the same. Clothing is all the same. Property is held in common, so there is no income inequality. In some ways, life looks totalitarian and repressive. Local officials ensure that everyone works their fair share. People need to get governmental permission to leave their town, even just to visit friends. As More commented:



Sir Thomas More, 1527.

> *Now you can see how nowhere is there any license to waste time, nowhere any pretext to evade work—no wine shop, no alehouse, no brothel anywhere, no opportunity for corruption, no lurking hole, no secret meeting place. On the contrary, being under the eyes of all, people are bound either to be performing the usual labor or to be enjoying their leisure in a fashion not without decency.*[1]

In Utopia, people do not make immoral choices because there are no opportunities for them to do so. Further, breaking rules—discussing politics outside the senate, traveling without permission, having sex outside of marriage—could be punished with a life of enslavement.

More's book is riddled with word games and puns that offer sly winks to readers familiar with the culture and politics of his day. Clearly, he meant to offer a blend of social commentary and entertainment, not a template. In that sense, More's *Utopia* fits into a genre of humanist writings advocating social reform not through

1. Thomas More, Utopia, ed. Eward Surtz (Yale University Press, 1964), 82–83.

Key Terms:

Thomas More

Reformation

Printing press

Peasants' War

Münster

Vasco de Quiroga

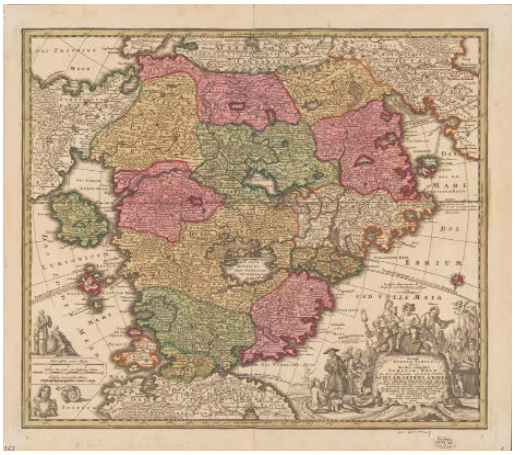
Audiencia

Encomienda

Santa Fe de México

Santa Fe de la Laguna

formal proposals, but through more ambiguous means. There are thus parallels between *Utopia* and writings by humanists who preceded him, like Christine de Pizan and Filarete. He too offered a dialogue that playfully blended reality and fiction, describing a world that could never actually exist in order to criticize the world around him that did.



Map of Utopia by Thomas More, 1518.

That said, in the years since these earlier humanists lived, Europeans' understanding of the earth and their place on it had been blown apart. Explorations down the coast of Africa had introduced them to powerful states like the kingdom of Kongo. Voyages across the Atlantic Ocean had made them aware of immense land masses they had not realized even existed, and introduced them to peoples, animals, and plants previously unfamiliar to them. Such experiences raised profound questions about their place in the universe. During Thomas More's lifetime, that is, the scope of Europeans' sense of known unknowns had radically expanded. Such a situation offered a context for him to creatively reimagine what might be possible in the world.

Portrait of Martin Luther, 1528.

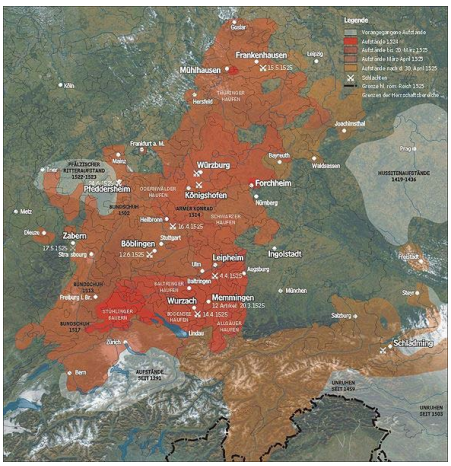
Developments taking place within Europe also contributed to an upsurge in utopian thinking in the 1520s. The Reformation, the term for the breakup of Western Christianity that began the year after *Utopia* appeared, profoundly destabilized standards of truth and opened up new vistas for building possible futures. Starting around 1520, areas that had previously been united within the medieval church divided into competing camps, each with mutually exclusive claims to truth about the nature of salvation and the relationship between humans and God. Debates also broke out about what authorities or means could be used to resolve such debates. In the 1520s, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther, became the leading voice of the dissenters, who called themselves "evangelicals." The new technology of the printing press became widely deployed as a tool to gain supporters and to share information and propaganda in the heated debates over truth that roiled Europe. The merging of such developments—widespread discontent with the existing social order, an intellectual movement that upended conventional means of ascertaining truth, a new technology that could be used to manipulate popular opinion, and learning about the existence of Americas—meant that many in early 16th-century Europe felt that the world was out of joint. During this period, some envisioned ideal communities that

Contrasting Reformation-era images of the life of Christ parodied in contrast to the pope's life and government, presenting an ideal and villainous contrast.

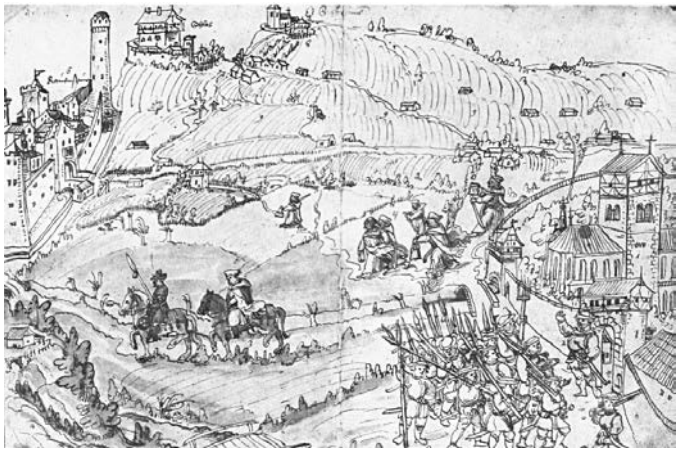
proved inspiring (and, for some, terrifying).

In this context, there were opportunities for all kinds of utopian re-imaginings. One such early effort was written by the Franciscan friar Johann Eberlin von Günzburg (c.1470–1533). Sometime in 1521, Eberlin left his order to join the evangelicals and, soon after, wrote a work called *Fifteen Confederates* (*15 Bundgenossen*), a set of pamphlets offering political and religious commentaries. The eleventh of these described an imaginary ideal state called Wolfaria. Like More's Utopia, Eberlin's Wolfaria was not intended as an actual blueprint for rebuilding society, but offered readers a social critique of the world they lived in by offering an idealized alternative. In Wolfaria, ordinary people elected their own political leaders, priests and bishops, who were all accountable to the public interest. Eberlin was also concerned about the supposed decline in respect for marriage: his imaginary state did not permit married people to dance with anyone but their spouse, banned brothels, and punished adultery with death. Eberlin also displayed an anxiety about threatened gender binaries: he required all men to wear a beard so no one could confuse them for women!

In the 1520s, opportunities for re-thinking what might be possible also inspired commoners who resented restrictions placed on them by social elites to imagine what might be possible. One dramatic example emerged with the Peasants' War, which started in the Black Forest region of the German lands in mid-1524 with peasant uprisings calling for economic, political, and religious liberties. The following year, groups as large as 13,000 people were sacking monasteries and castles, and calling for support from urban residents and miners who shared their complaints against nobles and other elites. By spring 1525, the rebels numbered some 300,000, calling for increased self-governance and expanded rights over land, labor, and resources. In the context of the Reformation, their case was stronger because they drew on biblical texts to justify their action. By June 1525, however, the rebels had been violently suppressed. Tens of thousands



Map of the major conflicts in the German Peasants' War, 1525 (above); Armed peasants during the German Peasants' War (below).



Abbots and monks flee the German Peasants' War, 1525.

lay dead, their vision for an egalitarian state defeated with them. While the splintering of authority and truth claims of the Reformation inspired the creative utopian writings of Johann Eberlin von Günzburg, the Peasants' War made clear the destabilizing results if ordinary people sought to use the same opportunity to rebuild society in practice.

A supporter of the Peasants' War being burned, 1525.

The Reformation's swirling mix of apocalypticism, populism, and uncertainty about standards for determining truth climaxed in the German city of Münster in 1534–1535. The drama started with a preacher named Melchior Hoffmann who believed that he offered the voice of God, claiming that Christians should accept re-baptism to the true faith before the Second Coming of Christ. Even after his imprisonment in 1533, Hoffmann's teachings spread, with followers imagining that Münster would become the New Jerusalem.

Followers sell their property for their move to Münster in 1534.

Followers of this prophetic vision flocked to Münster, received by the preacher Bernhard Rothmann and a Dutch arrival, Jan Matthijs, who proclaimed himself a prophet of God. After his followers won city elections in February 1534, Matthijs began to build a Christian utopia based on his reading of the New Testament. His government abolished private property and money and banned all books except the Bible. By March, Matthijs established a dictatorship under his divine rule. Matthijs was so sure of his divine favor that he led a poorly organized military campaign against princely forces assembling outside the city, during which he was killed. Following his death, another Dutch arrival, Jan van Leiden, declared himself God's prophet and established a new Christian constitution that called for capital punishment for murder, theft, lying, slander, greed, quarrelling, and insubordination to husbands, parents, or the government. By August 1534, Van Leiden's government also introduced polygamy, abolished most holidays, renamed the days of the week and the alphabet, adopted new naming conventions for infants, and required people to submit their remaining wealth to the government. Van Leiden became ever more tyrannical, executing anyone who challenged his policies, sometimes nailing their body parts around the city as a warning to others. By June 1535, two dissenters of Van Leiden snuck out of Münster, informing the troops outside about weaknesses in the city's defense. In the battle that followed, defenders of the city's radical rule were routed. Soon after, Van Leiden and his fellow

Portrait of Jan van Leiden.

The city of Münster, under siege in 1534, as portrayed in 1535.

Cages on St. Lambert's Church, Münster, where the bodies of Münsterites were hung in 1535, still there today.

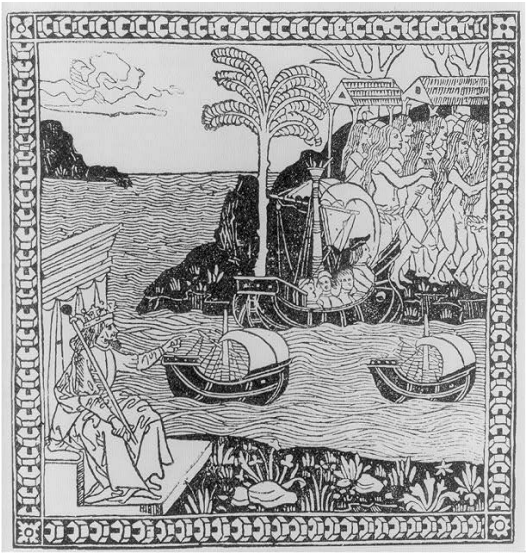
leaders were publicly tortured and killed, their corpses hung in cages from a church tower (the cages are still there today). The early 16th century thus saw expanding explorations of utopian possibilities in Europe, both in literary examples like Utopia and Wolfaria, but also in radical real-life experiments like in the Peasants' War and at Münster.

Early colonial settlement building in the Americas

When people living in Europe and the Americas began encountering one another in significant numbers, most everyone had their understanding of the cosmos, and their place in it, upended. Among Europeans, speculations flourished. Had they found the Garden of Eden? Would these discoveries finally lead to the unification of all the world's peoples? Would such discoveries bring about the Second Coming of Christ? In the early 16th century, all sorts of imaginative possibilities circulated. Among Europeans, optimistic and even utopian hopes proliferated for what these new developments might make possible, often drawing on various strands of utopian thinking that we have been looking at so far.

Meanwhile, for Indigenous Americans the new realities of these early contacts proved dystopian. Most Europeans they encountered demonstrated a callous disregard for their humanity, prioritizing expanding their personal wealth and political power. Indigenous populations, first in the Caribbean and soon after on

the mainland, faced devastating diseases, widespread enslavement, and social collapse. In 1521, a months-long battle for the Mexica's capital of Tenochtitlán ended in a Spanish victory. From a Mexica perspective, Tenochtitlán had been the center of their known universe. Its quick collapse, which Cortés's soldiers accomplished only with massive support from the Mexica's enemies, including the Tlaxcala and Tetzcoco, undermined the Mexica's empire. By 1523, Tenochtitlán was a shadow of its former self. Many of its residents had been slaughtered, died of smallpox or other illness, or had fled for safety. The water system upon which the great city had been built was receding, and its once elaborate system of canals, bridges, and roads was badly damaged.



Depiction of King Ferdinand II Spain, pointing across Atlantic to Columbus landing in the Americas, 1493

1575 image of Mexico City, or Tenochtitlán.

As Mexica and other peoples of the region faced social and political collapse, the Spanish began building a colonial society under their role. Almost immediately, Cortés ordered the rebuilding of Tenochtitlán as Mexico City. Cortés's surveyor, Alonso García Bravo, drew up plans for this new capital city. Cortés's men then recruited (sometimes by force) local Indigenous people, whose homes and society had collapsed, to build up the new city, often using rubble from the pre-conquest buildings of Tenochtitlán. These workers were literally using the center of their old universe to construct a new colonial world in which they were the conquered subjects.

In the following years, Spanish architects drew up plans for other colonial cities—Veracruz, Oaxaca, Pueblo, Santiago de Querétaro, and more. After the collapse of the Incan Empire in Peru, in the 1530s, the Spanish introduced such settlement building in South America, including in San Miguel, Quito, and Lima. The government established elaborate rules guiding such construction. Building began with a plot (called a *traza* in Spanish) that was staked out with rope, starting with the central square and moving outward with public buildings and residences. Rules for these new communities bore some similarity to the utopian imaginings of humanists like Thomas More and Filarete. They envisioned a harmonious and obedient social and political order and showed a remarkable optimism about humans' ability to construct such a world. Yet the intention in this case was hardly utopian—the goal was to facilitate resource extraction and expand political authority in the service of the Spanish crown, not to promote an ideal human society. At the same time, the Spanish government had to accommodate its construction to the reality that most of its settlers were unruly sailors and soldiers, as well as other poor, unmarried, and uneducated men seeking personal profit. It also tried to restrict interactions between these men

1561 city plan for Mendoza, in present-day Argentina.

and Indigenous people, with varying degrees of success.

Outside the colonial cities, Spanish officials established the so-called *encomienda* system, through which the government permitted colonists to forcibly extract labor and goods from Indigenous peoples in exchange for the supposed "gift" of their conversion to Christianity. Hernán Cortés, from 1522 governor of New Spain, assigned these *encomiendas* to his captains and other supporters. The early years of Cortés's rule were chaotic and violent, as the governor sought to build a new colonial infrastructure and to punish mutinous armies. In the process of intra-Spanish conflicts, Cortés's troops devastated local populations, burning villages to the ground and robbing local peoples of their valuables. For Indigenous people, working conditions on the *encomiendas* were brutal even as resistance was ruthlessly suppressed. To make matters worse, diseases continued to devastate communities. Entire villages emptied as the death toll mounted and refugees from the new colonial order sought safety elsewhere. Early Spanish colonialism in New Spain thus stood in stark contrast to utopian visions of peace and order in the newly-encountered Americas that had been envisioned by Thomas More a decade earlier.

In 1527, the Spanish king responded to the chaos of early colonialism by establishing a royal court called an *audiencia*. As president of this court, the king named Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán, a nobleman who recently served as governor of Pánuco (just north of Veracruz), where he had already enslaved and sold thousands of natives and committed other atrocities. Guzmán's time as the president of the *audiencia* was marked by brutal attacks on his rivals among the colonists. Guzmán's *audiencia* demanded labor and tributes from Indigenous people, sold natives into slavery by the thousands, ransacked their villages for treasure, kidnapped native women, and captured and ransomed their leaders. This brutality only worsened the social fragmentation already underway. Some natives resisted, while others escaped the violence for protection among Catholic missionaries, who offered sanctuary in return for conversion. In the Americas, most victims of the violence were initially not in a position to envision possible utopias. Instead, they were grappling with social collapse.

Vasco de Quiroga's utopian settlements for Indigenous Americans

The tumultuous years of early Spanish colonialism in Mexico did create opportunities for Indigenous peoples and Christian missionaries to collaborate in envisioning and building improved situations. Such efforts mark a new mode of utopian thinking in the Americas. For that purpose, it is helpful to focus on two communities established by Vasco de Quiroga (1470/1478–1565), who arrived in New Spain in January 1531, shortly after the Spanish king formally abolished the

Portrait of Vasco de Quiroga.

first *audiencia*. Quiroga was a member of a second, reformed *audiencia*. In Mexico, he also oversaw the construction of two new utopian settlements that were designed to attract Indigenous people displaced from the violence and chaos of colonialism.

In New Spain, Vasco de Quiroga noticed villages emptied out due to smallpox, as well as refugees fleeing social collapse and widespread enslavement of native peoples to work on plantations, mines, and construction sites. He was convinced to offer a more compassionate form of colonial rule. He argued that the main justification for colonization of the Americas was saving souls; to serve this end, native peoples of Mexico should not be forced into slavery but afforded dignity as they learned Christian teachings. He built a utopian vision around a blend of respect for the humanity of Indigenous Americans, his optimism about their ability to achieve a more perfected human society, and his sense of Europeans' duty to guide them on this journey as if they were naïve children in need of instruction.

16 th century image of Purepecha people's religious practices.

Mere months after his arrival, Quiroga began plans to establish settlements that he believed would offer safety and salvation to Indigenous Mexicans. On August 14, 1531, he wrote to the Council of the Indies, the governmental body in Madrid that oversaw Spanish colonial policies. In his eyes, *los Indios* (as he called all Indigenous Mexicans, regardless of their language or culture) were a simple, obedient, and humble people who, like the apostles in the time of the early church, could help ignite a new era of Christianity if provided a nourishing environment to do so. His new "republics" offered them peaceful opportunities to live rewarding lives and learn of Christ's message. In his view, building new ideal Christian settlements for Mexico's peoples offered the opportunity to live out a spiritual and earthly perfection—something akin to Joachim of Fiore's Age of the Holy Spirit described in Reading 1—that would usher in Christ's Second Coming and the End Times. Within the year, the Council of the Indies permitted him to try his proposal.

Quiroga explicitly drew on Thomas More's *Utopia*, and other examples of European utopian thinking, in building his new pueblos. Quiroga even described More as a genius who had been "inspired by the Holy Spirit" to see opportunities for the Americas he could not yet have known were possible.[2] More's *Utopia* may have offered Quiroga imaginative possibilities outside his existing intellectual frameworks for understanding colonialism. To be clear, efforts by missionaries

to convince native peoples to settle in idealized Christian communities, free from the supposed corruptions of European colonialism, had begun even before Quiroga arrived in Mexico. Many of those other efforts drew on the Franciscan tradition of utopian apocalypticism described in Reading 1.

Contemporary view of Lake Pátzcuaro.

The first site of Quiroga's envisioned settlements was just southwest of Mexico City, in a pueblo established in 1532 that he called Santa Fe de México ("The Holy Faith of Mexico"). He recruited residents to move from Mexico City, and got them to help construct the new settlement, including a common building, a shared kitchen and dining area, a church, residences for Franciscan friars, and houses for residents. As more Mexica and other Nahuatl-speaking people moved to the new pueblo, Santa Fe de México expanded in 1534, 1535, and 1536. Quiroga believed that the Indigenous residents of the pueblo happily enjoyed simple lives of modesty, obedience, and hard work, just as if they were reviving the golden age of the early Christian church. Of course, Quiroga also pointed out that Spanish conquest of and governance over Mexico's indigenous peoples had been necessary to make this dream possible, as well as to introduce political order to a people who had been previously barbarous, living (as he wrongly claimed) without law or government.

In 1534, Quiroga established a second utopian community in the region of Michoacán, called Santa Fe da la Laguna ("The Holy Faith of the Lake") because it was located on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro, which the local Purépecha people viewed as sacred. Residents constructed buildings for living, cooking, eating, and worshipping, as well as a hermitage for Quiroga. In 1536, Quiroga became the first bishop of Michoacán and he moved to Santa Fe de la Laguna. In 1541, he began overseeing the construction of a cathedral there as well as a multilingual seminary to train Indigenous priests.

In both communities, Quiroga established strict rules for politics, economics, family, and religious practice. Each pueblo had a *rector*, a *principal* and three or four *regidores*, who oversaw magistrates (*jurados*), who would each supervise 30 *familias*, groups of roughly 10 to 16 couples from kinship networks and their children who lived as a unit. Both women and men were to work in the fields, but women's other work was limited to cloth making and weaving while men performed other tasks. Private property was not permitted, though residents did use money to buy and sell goods outside the towns, including with the colonial government. People had to wear identical clothing, and women were also required to wear veils over their clothes that covered their heads and bodies, following (as Quiroga believed) the teaching of the apostles. Leaving the pueblo required express permission from local government. Residents were also to be expelled for being "unruly, or outrageous, or a bad Christian, or getting drunk, or being too lazy, or refusing to obey these regulations, or doing anything

Portrait of Vasco de Quiroga.

against them, and being incorrigible in this, or going against the benefit and common good." Quiroga believed that such regulations protected against ambition, pride, and selfishness, and focused minds toward Christian simplicity and obedience. In 1533, Quiroga also wrote a summary of Christian teachings that was to be translated into Nahuatl or Purépecha for use by residents. He required participation in Catholic mass, including on feast days during the late summer harvests: the Feast of San Salvador (August 6), the Feast of the Assumption (August 15), and the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14). Quiroga never designed a street-level city plan for these pueblos as Filarete's did for Sforzinda. But his rules for an ordered society clearly shared priorities and values with those expressed in utopian writings by Filarete and Thomas More.

It might be tempting to imagine the regulations for Sante Fe de México and Sante Fe de la Laguna constituted an imposition of European hierarchies and cultural standards on the victims of colonialism, whose culture was being erased and replaced in a top-down process of subjugation and assimilation. That is part of the story. But let's also consider these villages from the perspective of the Indigenous peoples who lived in them. After all, the written sources for such utopian efforts were produced by Christian missionaries like Quiroga; we should not assume that the Mexica, Purépecha, and other peoples who moved to such communities wholly shared the understandings of those missionaries. When we consider their precontact lives, some interesting parallels appear. First, the daily life of most people in Mesoamericans on the eve of the Spanish arrival was already largely agricultural, blended with a mix of artisanal craftmanship that centered on familial and communal production. Family and social hierarchies also included gender divisions of labor in which women's work centered on weaving and cloth production. Quiroga's *familias* looked quite a lot like social units made up of small groups of families related by clan that existed before the Spanish ever arrived. Hospitals for the care of widows and poor women established by Quiroga seem to have been adapted from earlier women's community houses for training young women. In some ways, that is, it is difficult to determine where Santa Fe de México and Santa Fe de la Laguna imposed new social forms on residents or merely found European language to describe and justify social forms that Indigenous Mexicans already used to organize their lives.

Statue of Vasco de Quiroga today in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán.

A contemporary tile mural in Santa Fe de la Laguna, Michoacán, Mexico.

We can also understand the question of religious conversion from an Indigenous perspective. Missionaries had to translate complicated Christian concepts into vocabulary that was understandable in Nahuatl or other Indigenous languages. When they did so, they relied on translators, who played active roles in selecting wording that already had meaning to locals. For instance, missionaries used the Nahuatl word for sickness (*tlatlecolli*) for the Christian concept of "sin." That choice could convey the Christian understanding that sinfulness could spread and thereby posed a danger not just to individuals but to the community. For Nahuatl speakers, it also implied that external behaviors caused the illness, rather than something inherent to an individual's soul. *Tlatlecolli* also lacked the moral meaning of the word "sin," or its ramifications for the afterlife. Similarly, for the words "Devil" and "Satan" missionaries used the Nahuatl word *tlacatecolotl*, which refers to a type of shape-shifting shaman who could take animal form. The term lacks any sense of an immortal adversary to the forces of good. More generally, the Christian moral dichotomy between good and evil borrowed from the Mesoamerican distinction between order and chaos, both of which were required for the survival of the world and followed a single heavenly principle—*teotl*. In their understanding, order and chaos were not in moral opposition to one another, but were both equally necessary for the harmonic functioning of the universe. In the worldview of most Mesoamericans, including the Mexica and Purépecha, life was only possible from the repeated process of destruction and creation, which was repeated each sunrise and sunset. Thus, when Mexica and Purépecha in Quiroga's pueblos embraced Christian teachings, we should not assume that they understood them in the ways that missionaries intended. Instead, they retained the ability to fashion Christianity according to their own needs and interests.

While sympathetic commenters have sometimes exaggerated their growth, there is little reason to think that any more than a few hundred people lived in Quiroga's pueblos at a time. It is true that Quiroga's ability to secure royal

protection for them ensured their formal survival into the 18th century. But waves of epidemics in the 1540s and again in the 1570s tore through communities, exacerbated by the social dislocation caused by colonialism and its regimes of forced labor in plantations and mines. In the wake of these further calamities, Indigenous Mexicans built new futures for themselves. But Quiroga's efforts were too small and localized to play a key role in these later efforts at rebuilding. However, his villages do offer us an example of how some people in the 1530s were envisioning and attempting to create alternative possibilities for a more peaceful and secure future in the Americas during the early violent and chaotic years of European colonialism.

Artwork at the Vasco de Quiroga bus stop in Mexico City, 2024.

Conclusion

For many living through the 1520s and 1530s—whether Thomas More, Vasco de Quiroga, Johann Eberlin von Günzburg, or an ordinary peasant living in Germany or Mexico—the world had been turned upside down since their birth. As they came face-to-face with new technologies and new cultures, their understanding about what was possible for the future transformed too. For some, their world vastly expanded and offered seemingly endless possibilities. For others, it collapsed and had to be rebuilt from scratch. Whatever the case, utopian thinking provided people tools to visualize uncharted paths when so many features of life that had once seemed so sure had come into question. Certainly, in the 1520s and 1530s, the possibilities for what that future might hold felt open-ended and uncertain. As the decisions piled up in this new globalized world, however, the range of options they could imagine could expand at times, and contract at others.

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Farmer's leader Jäcklein Rohrbach is burned alive in Neckargartach, from Peter Harrer, Beschreibung des Bauernkriegs, 1551, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rohrbach-verbrennung-1525.jpg
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Detail from a biography of Vasco de Quiroga, depicting him stopping a Spanish explorer from whiplashing a Fray Jerónimo de Alcalá, Purepecha priests with attributes: spear and gourd, Relación de Michoacán, ca. 1540, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Relaci%C3%B3n_de_Michoac% C3%A1n_Purepecha_priests.jpg

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