

Conclusion: Utopias around 1600 and Today



A perfect Christian utopia?

Let's finish off this module with two very contrasting utopian visions from the early 17th century. In 1619, the Protestant Johannes Valentinus Andreae (1586–1654) wrote a utopian treatise that imagined a perfect world. Perhaps more than any other utopian author we have looked at so far, Andreae was committed to the idea that humans can produce a perfect society, which (as it turned out) closely matched the values and beliefs of the German Lutheran tradition in which he was raised. Andreae's book, *Christianopolis*, outlined his plans for a Christian utopia using many of the literary tropes that had begun with Thomas More: a world traveler from Europe gets shipwrecked and accidentally discovers a new ideal land across the ocean, and returns to Europe to share information about it. At the time that he wrote, Andreae served as pastor in a German village. But he also had deep ties to a group of fellow theologians who were committed to the spiritual renewal of a German Lutheran tradition they felt had grown mechanical and uninspired.

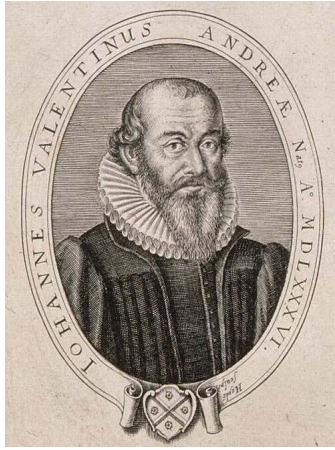
The ideal city that Andreae imagined was orderly and peaceful, ruled by pious and wise magistrates and populated

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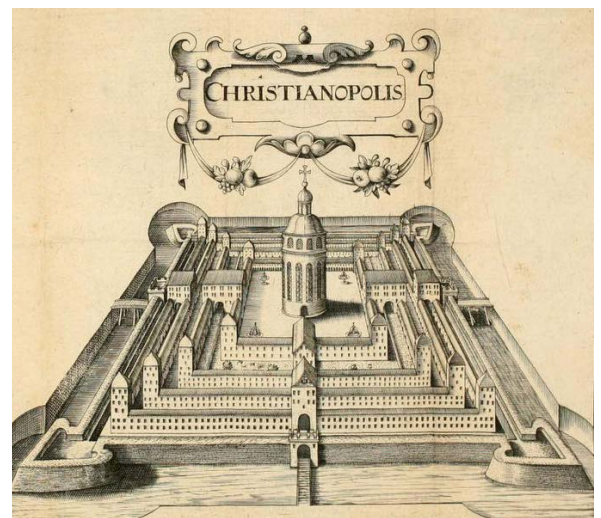


Johannes Valentinus Andreae.

by dutiful and faithful citizens. Christianopolis had a robust and diverse workforce producing everything anyone needed. At the same time, residents had no need for currency. They also shared property in common and wore the same plain clothing. Andreae also seemed to suggest that such a complete social harmony could be achieved with an almost totalitarian regulation of beliefs and behaviors, including a dramatic censorship regime, as well as firm patriarchal control of men over women. There is no doubt that such a vision reflected the pastor's genuine commitment that order would be achieved by the strict disciplining of society. After all, following a visit to Geneva in 1611, he celebrated what he thought was their success in implementing this kind of oversight over people's lives:

While I was at Geneva, I noted something ... I will remember with nostalgia till the end of my days. Not only does this city enjoy a truly free constitution, it has besides, as its particular ornaments and means of disciplines, the guidance of social life. By virtue of the latter, all the mores of the citizens and even the slightest transgressions are examined each week, first by neighbourhood supervisors, then by the aldermen, and finally by the senate itself, according to the gravity of the case or the obduracy and insolence of the offender ... The resultant moral purity does so much honour to the Christian religion, it is so constant with it and so inseparable from it, that we should shed our bitterest tears that this principle is unknown or completely neglected in our own circles; all men of good will ought to labour for its restoration. Indeed, if religious differences had not made it impossible for me, the harmony of faith and morals of Geneva would have bound me there—and so from that I have striven with all my energy to provide the like for our churches.¹

By this point, Geneva's religious uniformity and purity was more of a myth than a reality. Still, clearly Andreae valued the dream this myth represented. And he maintained a lifelong commitment to promoting a global Christian brotherhood dedicated to eradicating all of society's ills through the teaching of his version of piety. Of course, such a Christian utopia never existed. But that did not keep Andreae and those like him from attempting to create it.



Visualization of Andreae's ideal city, Christianopolis.

1. John Warrick Montgomery, *Cross and Crucible: Johann Valentin Andreae (1586–1654), Phoenix of the Theologians*, vol. 1 (Martinus Nijhoff), 43–44.

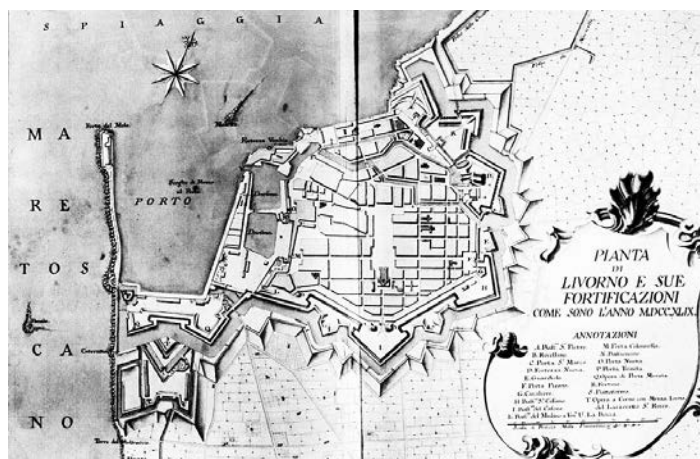
A perfect commercial utopia?

Now, let's turn to something of the opposite. Today the city of Livorno is a bustling Italian sea port for commerce and tourism, drawing merchants and visitors from around the world, and serving as the key conduit to the ocean for the city of Florence. Unlike all the utopian experiments and intentionally planned cities we have studied thus far, Livorno is performing pretty much the tasks that it had originally been assigned in the 16th century: enriching Florence and its region by bringing in goods, people, and services from around the world by sea. If part of the premise of these lessons on the history of utopias is that humans are usually poor at imagining and then building ideal futures for themselves, then in some ways Livorno bucked this trend. Let's consider why that might be.



An 18th-century bird's eye view of Livorno from the west.

In the 1540s, the duke of Tuscany, Cosimo I de Medici, first dreamt of building the city of Livorno in some malaria-infested marshlands along his coastline. To attract new migrants, he issued a series of welcome letters, specifically targeting non-Catholics (especially merchants in the Jewish diaspora) to move to his new city. In 1551, Cosimo even promised non-Christian immigrants immunity from investigation by the Roman Inquisition into their beliefs and practices. He also began financially investing in the construction of the new city, including fortifications, a port, houses, warehouses, and administrative buildings. Where there had formerly been mostly swampland, a new city started to emerge, with the primary goal of becoming a mercantile hub for the Mediterranean. However, in the context of intense anti-Jewish sentiments across much of Western Europe, including in Tuscany, it is not surprising that such offers attracted few of the wealthy merchants they targeted. In the 1570s and 1580s, Cosimo I's successor, Francesco I, again tried to lure non-Christian merchants to Livorno. Yet, the government's simultaneous willingness to welcome the militant crusading order of the Knights of St. Stephen to settle in Livorno sent a mixed message. This duke too found few takers of his offer.



An 18th-century aerial view map of Livorno.

Francesco I's successor, Ferdinando I, issued a formal public proclamation that turned Livorno from a stagnating planned community into a thriving vision for the future. Ferdinando issued the Livorno Constitution (*Constitutione Livornina*) on July 30, 1591, offering guaranteed rights and protections to immigrants—

including Jews, Muslims, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox—willing to move to the planned city. Two years later, the duke issued a revised version that expanded voting rights for non-Catholics and granted them limited jurisdiction to govern their own faith communities. Such guarantees offered permanency and stability that non-Christians so often lacked in Christian-ruled lands during the 16th century.



Grand Duke Ferdinando I de Medici overseeing the construction of fortifications for Livorno.

Copies of the new constitution circulated through diplomatic channels, but were also printed, so the invitation spread far and wide. Livorno started attracting migrants of a variety of faiths and ethnic groups from around the Mediterranean. By 1598, there were still only about 500 residents. But by 1609, as the word got out, the number rose to 5,800 in 1609, climbed to nearly 8,000 by 1616, and kept growing after that. New immigrants included Jews from across the diaspora, Greek Orthodox Christians, Protestants from northern Europe, and Muslims from the Ottoman Empire. By the time that Johannes Valentinus Andreae was envisioning a Lutheran utopia based on religious uniformity and strict discipline, Livorno had become famed for its religious pluralism and culture of permissiveness.

Livorno's tolerance toward non-Catholics fostered its economic vibrancy. Its ports brought in tobacco, sugar, and chocolate from the Americas and coffee, spices, dyes, and precious stones (diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and pearls) from the Indian Ocean. Such long-distance trade also brought an increase in production of crafts for distribution around the Mediterranean, including valuable weapons, coral, and silk manufacturing. Expansion also lured manual laborers to build the expanding city. Wealthy residents fueled the growth of markets for luxury goods locally, like the trade in paintings, fancy furniture and clothes, and extravagant foods. By the mid-17th century, its favorable terms for capital investment and permissiveness toward religious minorities led it to replace Venice as the chief trading port linking the Ottoman Empire and northern Europe. From the perspective of Livorno's vibrant culture of religious pluralism, it might look like an experiment in utopianism that resonates more with 21st-century values of respecting minority rights and protecting religious freedom than Joannes Valentinus Andreae's theocratic utopianism.

And yet, Livorno's thriving market economy also included the buying and selling of human beings. This model city, that is, also became a leading center of slave trading for the Mediterranean. The enslaved were mostly Muslims—especially of Arabic and Turkish backgrounds—but included Christians and Jews as well. Enslaved people were held in a fortified barracks called the *bagno*. Many enslaved people had been captured by the Knights of St. Stephen, while others had been captured by pirates, privateers, and merchants who operated out of Livorno. Most slaves were ransomed or sold off elsewhere in the Mediterranean, sometimes to supply the large demand for unskilled labor as galley slaves. Enslaved workers also contributed labor to build the very fortifications and infrastructure of Livorno that made it a trade center. Other enslaved people worked as laborers in the



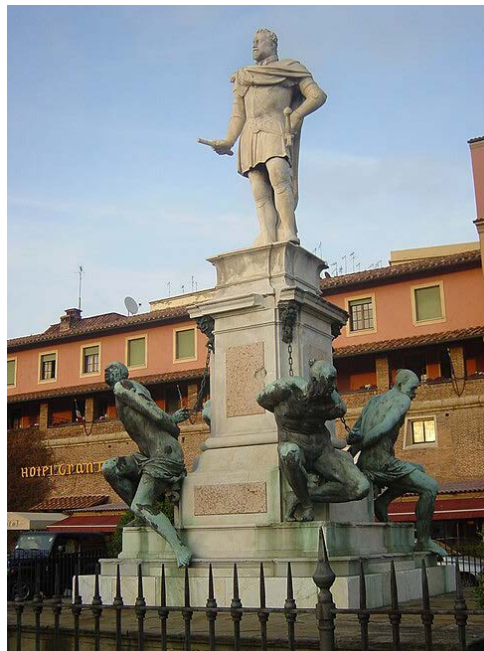
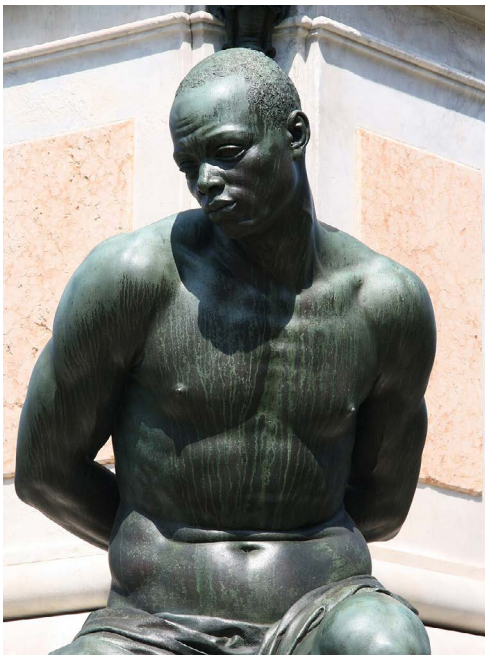
The last remaining part of Livorno's bagno complex, today in a parking lot outside the city's Government Palace (Palazzo del Governo).

areas around the *bagno*, providing services to keep trade moving through the city's docks.

So important was slavery to Livorno's economic prosperity that in 1595, Ferdinando I commissioned a statue of himself to be erected at the city's docks, welcoming anyone who arrived by ship, whether merchant, sailor, or slave. The statue, which was completed in 1626, showed the duke

(who had died in 1610) standing triumphantly over four cowering slaves. While Livorno's actual enslaved population had been ethnically and religiously diverse, the four men depicted here were all Black Africans—a symbol of the emerging racist global order of the era that was starting to transform life in Europe, the Americas, and West Africa.

More than any of the other utopian cities imagined or built in the 16th century that have been discussed so far in these lessons, Livorno best anticipated the world's future of an ascendant European mercantile economy imagined and then intentionally built through the forceable capture of peoples, and their involuntary deployment in the service of expanding European mercantile economies. To us, it seems like a legacy of contradictions and cruelty. From the perspective of the duke (as evidenced by the statue of himself he commissioned), it was an expression of his own utopian vision of the triumph of commerce.



The Four Moors statue in Livorno, completed in 1626.

The meaning of 16th-Century utopias for today

The early years of the 16th century were marked by a dramatic transformation in people's understandings of their place in the universe, whether those people lived in the kingdom of Kongo, in central Mexico, Brazil, city-states of the Italian peninsula, or elsewhere in the Atlantic World. They learned of new peoples and places they had never heard of before and had their understanding of their own place in the cosmos challenged in fundamental ways. As these interactions unfolded, it was not clear to anyone how the future might look. As they experienced these uncertain times, all sorts of people imagined possibilities for themselves by conjuring up idealized or utopian places that might emerge.

Some authors have suggested that such utopianism is inherently a totalitarian mode of thinking. From one perspective, they have a point. After all, it can emerge out of a restless dissatisfaction with the world as it is, and a desire to impose one's ideological vision on other places and people. For some social critics, then, utopian thinking when adopted uncritically and inflexibly can lead to coercive, repressive, and violent suppression of dissent that turns into dystopian nightmares. When idealism is blind and unyielding, that is, it can be at its most dangerous.



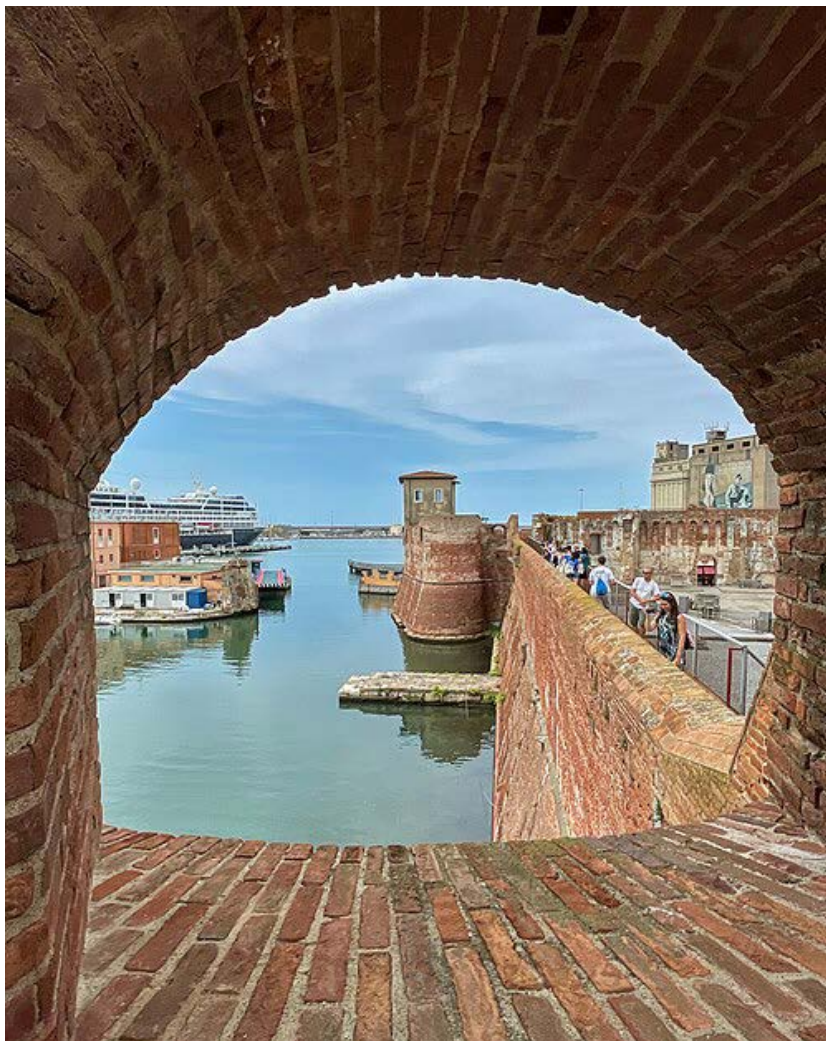
Contemporary view of Livorno's Fortezza Vecchia.

Given the dangers facing the world today, reasonable humans can and should be cautious about idealistic, even utopian, fantasies that promise vague notions of progress that can solve the challenges we face in the world. Certainly, if one were looking

for a lesson from the history of utopian thinking in the 16th century, one could conclude that we ought to be cautious about overly optimistic visions for the future, especially if they are offered by individuals who have a financial or other personal interest in the outcome they are offering. Why should we trust their visions any more than the promises of Spanish monarchs, for instance, who assured ordinary people in the Americas, Africa, and Europe that they would all benefit from the technological advances, gainful employment, and eternal salvation offered by a global Catholic empire under their rule?

But there are other ways to think about these lessons that provide us with more hope. After all, if there is anything that Thomas More can teach us, it's that one opportunity of utopian thinking is to be able to look beyond what seem like the established norms of our existing society and envision alternatives. Such a

practice can disrupt and destabilize complacency in our daily lives. The goal, in this way of thinking, might not be so much to imagine alternative blueprints or roadmaps as much as offering us the ability to think beyond the limits of our present day. The point of utopias, that is, can be to open up the imaginative possibilities for the future that allow us to see beyond the meaningless banality of a word like “progress.” The concept of “progress,” as we too often use it, implicitly aligns itself with its users’ dreams of a single invariable path for the future, while treating their opponents’ ideas as obsolete. It thus sets up sometimes unhelpful moral dichotomies and offers inflexible ideas of what can and should come next, thereby foreclosing possibilities. Utopian thinking, by contrast, can provide us with a means of seeing beyond such limited visions. Rather than reinforcing our preexisting worldviews and assumptions, such a practice can allow us to experiment with alternative ways of thinking that can help us move beyond the polarized rhetoric or entrenched ideas of our moment. In fact, all of us can sometimes benefit from thinking outside the very real norms that constrain our daily lives. Humans can get trapped and confined by what we see around us. When treated with an open mind, that is, utopias can offer us tools to imagine possibilities beyond those limits.



A view from the ramparts of Livorno's Old Fortress, built in the 16th century.

Further Reading

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Image Citations

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Portrait, Johannes Valentinus Andreae, 1650, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:-Johannes_Valentinus_Andreae..._\(1586-1654\),_Bust-e,_3-4_%C3%A0_dr._m%C3%A9d._ov._avec_armoiries_-_btv1b10207392c.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:-Johannes_Valentinus_Andreae..._(1586-1654),_Bust-e,_3-4_%C3%A0_dr._m%C3%A9d._ov._avec_armoiries_-_btv1b10207392c.jpg)
Johann Valentin Andreae, Reipublicae Christianopolitanae descriptio, Argentorati 1619, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plan_der_Stadt_Christianopolis_-_Tafel_1.jpg

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Itinerario d'Italia, di Francesco Scotto, In questa nuova Edizione abbellito di rami, accresciuto, ordinato, ed emendato... Roma: Stamperia del Bernabo e Lazzarini, 1747, plate between 190 and 191, Public Domain.
Architectural plan of the town of Livorno, Warren Atlas, 1749, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Livorno_map_of_the_town_\(1749\)_by_Warren_Atlas_01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Livorno_map_of_the_town_(1749)_by_Warren_Atlas_01.jpg)

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