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The Role of Christian Spiritual Utopian Themes within the Evolution of Utopian Understanding

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Abstract:

The thesis statement for this report posits that Christian spiritual utopian themes have impacted the evolution of utopian understanding. As such, the history of Christianity has been affected by a wide range of variables impacting how it has evolved and, in turn, shaped the Christian community. Visions of how Christianity can evolve and shape in this manner have been realized within spiritual utopian themes. This phenomenon impacts our understanding of the utopian concept. Such analysis will benefit from clarification regarding a general understanding of what is meant by utopia and providing markers for framing utopia.

Keywords: Utopian Themes, Christianity, Church Mission, Religion, Counterculture

Introduction:

The history of Christianity has been affected by a wide range of variables impacting how it has evolved and, in turn, shaped the Christian community. Visions of how Christianity can evolve and shape in this manner have been realized within spiritual utopian themes. This phenomenon impacts our understanding of the utopian concept. Such analysis will benefit from clarification regarding a general understanding of what is meant by utopia and providing markers for framing utopia.My thesis statement purports that Christian spiritual utopian themes have impacted the evolution of utopian understanding. The literature on utopia is broad and varied. However, the most widely referenced historical work on utopia is Utopia, by Thomas More, published in 1516. One will see it frequently acknowledged in the introductory pages of more contemporary works as a significant foundation for our understanding of utopia. More explained that utopia is a blend of "eutopia" (the good place) and "outopia" (no place). Charles Erasmus provides additional context in defining utopia through clarification that utopia is based on the Greek words for "no place" and definition of "dystopia" as a bad place. Levitas elaborates with explanation that utopia is a view of the future world that is not yet fulfilled, perceived as desirable, critical of existing society and will not happen without deliberate collective action . This action concept is amplified in the contrast that thought is to ideology as action is to utopia; that is, ideology is the foundation for utopian action . Reflections on utopian themes are often associated with generalization. "Utopia is in itself a discourse outside of time and space, action that is unlikely to be realized." Such thinking is often speculative but it is in this speculation that innovative ideas can be fostered and nurtured into practical realities that can ultimately be implemented. It is within this speculation that the Christian church can make significant advances in domains that may never be addressed in any meaningful way so this kind of reflection can be exceedingly beneficial. The term utopia has been linked to a wide range of religious groups and movements. Such groups have included churches, sects and

cults (though a comprehensive list of utopia categories would be far more in number). Berry provides definitional boundaries for these types of groups. Churches are large denominations that seek to include others and identify with the dominant culture (i.e. Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, etc.). Sects are smaller groups that have broken away from large denominations, have a more strict regulation of behavior, exercise more control of their members and identify less with the dominant culture. Cults promote religious perspectives that are not acceptable in the dominant culture. Among these categories one can recognize the common denominator of the dominant culture as a defining element. Utopia has also been associated with other, more general, types of groups and efforts within the larger cultural domain. Our contemporary understanding of utopia, in the latter half of the 20th century, is often connected with the counterculture of the 1960-70's in the United States. The clarification of this phenomenon places it within the evolution of utopia. It does so by describing utopian variables that have also existed with more historical utopian ventures. With such focus it is important to remember societal developments and events must be interpreted with regard to the context of the time period they existed within and that we should not use standards of today to evaluate phenomena from an earlier time period. At the same time we can learn from reflection on developments and events from the past and use such lessons as inputs to understanding we formulate today.

Counterculture is a term that describes the 1960-70's youth culture which, among other things, actively rejected primary aspects of the dominant culture and replaced them with a more liberal lifestyle. In The Making of a Counterculture, Theodore Roszak defined counterculture as: 1) a youthful revulsion at technocracy (technology/bureaucracy), 2) preference for spontaneity over artificiality, and 3) reassertion of life and joy over impersonal organization. In The Greening of America, Charles Reich explained counterculture as being based on perception by the young of contradiction between stated ideals of the parental generation and their actual lifestyles. He clarified six crises within this contradiction: 1) disorder and corruption, 2) decline of democracy, 3) absence of community, 4) poverty (in contrast with affluence), 5) exploitation of technical resources (instead of expanding human resources) and 6) a sense of loss of self. This idea of a counterculture rests within the existence of subculture and contraculture. Yinger sees subcultures as groups that are part of the larger culture but also set apart from the larger culture via unique beliefs or objectives. Cohen narrows in on contraculture, that exists as a type of subculture, by explaining it stands in opposition to important aspects of the dominant culture. Berry delineates the countercultural utopian groups in the 1960's-70's by four common traits they tended to share. First, a rejection of the established order as unjust and chaotic. Second, stressing the possibility of improvement and perfection. Third, returning to the land (rural areas) as road to

perfection. Fourth, stressing positive feelings via common ownership of property and ways of living.

The aforementioned description of counterculture conveys elements that could be recognized in reconfigured form within other periods in addition to the 20th century. Thus, this type of counterculture can be recognized in other periods. It is worth noting some of the key cultural variables that provided impetus for this particular counterculture help to effectively place it in a historical context. This is to say that there are societal frameworks that repeatedly present themselves across the historical evolution of any country and lessons learned from such past frameworks offer insights with directions we are going today and may consider in future deliberations. In Voyages to Utopia, William McCord outlined five contextual factors that promoted this counterculture. These circumstances, while unique, served to create a unique common denominator for what evolved during that period. First, a climate of dissent existed with protests related to the anti-war movement, civil rights and various societal institutions. Second, permissive public policies allowed for production of birth control pills, enlargement of welfare programs, and creation/distribution of psychedelic drugs. Third, encouragement by the mass media in the form of sympathetic support for liberal cultural themes. Fourth, the baby boom perpetuated a very significant youth culture that evolved into a dominant cultural force. Fifth, affluence and tolerance grown out of the prosperity of the times. These five contextual factors typically shed light on social issues that were challenges in that particular time period and, as such, offer foundation recognizing similar kinds of issues that present themselves in other time periods. That is, many of these macro type issues are tied to the human condition and even though society may advance technologically it may revisit challenges from the past that are associated with human behavior in general terms. Lessons from the past can offer applicable insights in the present. Many utopian communities were started during this period. Some lasted less than a year. Many lasted a couple years. Some still exist today. They became known as "intentional communities." Such congregations are understood as "communities where members can enjoy what they choose from mainstream America while being embraced in the comfort of communitarian values". In America's Utopian Experiments, Brian Berry explains four themes are common in such intentional communities. Transformation—-of the person and the planet. Being part of a larger vision for a better life. Cooperation—-through the pooling of financial and human resources. Holistic approaches to health—-through alternative medical approaches (i.e. herbs, acupuncture, massage, etc.) and being responsible for your own health. World Networking—-by connecting and cooperating with similar types of communities to promote shared visions and interests. The previous paragraph conveys progressive foundations that can be used to inspire innovative thinking that can further find application in the social order. One needs to be open to thinking beyond

typical routine matters to be able to recognize these themes not just as challenges but as opportunities. It is worth noting that such challenges can concurrently serve as significant opportunities. The role of capitalism can be woven into the fabric of how utopian visions evolve in such intentional communities. It typically has involved utopian ideals that respond against the ills of capitalism but, as we move into the 21st century, we can see how capitalism itself has been interpreted as a framework for promoting utopian themes. The more capitalist societies have been recognized as producing more wealth than any others in history, have sustained environments where political freedom not only exits but flourishes, and societal problems such as poverty, inherited privilege and mass ignorance have been minimized . McCord sees capitalism as depending on and encouraging individualism, personal initiative, creativity and liberation from tradition.

The information society that we are moving through poses phenomena that can be interpreted as fitting within the concept of utopia. "Computopia" is based on the virtual community that is created on the worldwide web. As such, communication barriers are broken down, the transfer of information is promoted and networking is enhanced. This serves as a breeding ground for interaction, trade and capitalist interests . Similarly, the internet recreates the town meeting in modified form .

Many have feared that the new communication technologies would be used to suppress the human spirit by totalitarian powers. It has happened but, overall, they've been far more liberating than restricting. For instance, China and the former socialist countries of eastern Europe tried to control their people with technology but, on a larger scale, the people have used the technology to seek greater freedom from such controlling interests.

Regardless of the context (rural, urban, online, etc.), there have been common themes within 20th century utopian movements that have carried on into the 21st century. McCord recognizes three basic themes. Focus on simplicity whereby participants are seeking a simpler communal life where natural goodness can blossom. Focus on God by creating a genuinely religious social order that reflects God's wishes (or that of a supernatural being). Focus on self-actualization that perpetuates the search for a more creative and abundant life.

Similarly, the evolving "New Age" vision exemplifies a category of present day utopian vision that stresses three commensurate components. First, holism that emphasizes the interdependence of all systems. Second, earth awareness that encourages the importance of maintaining ecological balance. Third, human rights regarding the rights of people to have meaningful input with their destiny and to transform their lives .

Any discussion of 20th century utopian movements will benefit from consideration of the promotion of socialism (and socialist communes for example) in China. Socialism was very much hailed as offering an idealistic option to capitalism. In contrast, Yongjia Liang offers the assessment that "regulating Christianity . . . . was a process in which the state power attempted to remove the Christian transcendence with a utopian and communist one." This creates a framework whereby those in power can seek to promote notions of utopia as a political strategy but merely exchange one belief system for another within the utopian structure.

At this point it is helpful to be mindful of how Christian spiritual utopian themes can help to frame modern day phenomena insofar as offering interpretations that can open the mind to possible solutions that may otherwise not be considered. Many of the present day challenges that are experienced have their roots in human nature and recognition of human nature variables allows for being able to interpret present day circumstances in more detailed ways. It offers a great sense of historical context.

Taken together, these aspects of contemporary utopian visions create a picture of a work in progress. The evolution of the utopian concept rests upon the earliest writings of more but, at the same time, it is consistently undergoing redefinition that reflects the context of the times the redefinition is occurring within. Thus, the striving for utopia is consistent over time but the understanding of it is subject to reinterpretation.

The historical evolution of utopia, in turn, reflects an impact by utopian themes on the historical progression of society overall. Levitas recognizes four functions the concept of utopia has served in historical progression. First, by making the present relative it undermines the belief that life, in its current form, is inevitable and cannot be changed. Second, by making the future relative it acknowledges there are various options that can be pursued in the future that will result in varied realities. Third, it promotes change by exposing the relativity of the present and the future. Fourth, by offering analysis of the existing society it conveys a vehicle for criticism of the status quo.

No social structure exists within a vacuum. That is, there will be internal and external variables that affect how it progresses and, in turn, the social structure will create variables that will affect other constituencies. An example of this phenomenon is seen in the utopian surges linked to the economy. For instance, economic conditions that depress asset values, destroy wealth and produce social disruption tend to provide fertile ground for alternative communities based on experimentation with the economic system, role of the individual, concept of family and private property[24]. Conversely, when crisis conditions end and economic opportunities evolve, many people will return to the mainstream seeking personal freedom and individual gain. Socialism tends to flourish when capitalism sags and capitalism tends to flourish when socialism sags. When confronted with the option to choose between experimental utopia and individual gain, most people will choose individual gain in the long term.

Economic concerns are a significant factor in understanding outcomes associated with racism and sexism and the desire to minimize or eradicate those outcomes. Orelos posits that "a coalition of blacks and whites and men and women is absolutely necessary to

fight against two spectral evils: racism and sexism." This illustration is indicative of a scenario that can be framed in terms of points on a continuum and such framing allows for charting a course toward resolution. As such it contrasts between what is an achievable goal or mere utopian speculation.

Notions of utopia are relevant to understanding the plight of constituencies associated with the black diaspora. The circumstance "not only suggests that utopia occupies an important place in the diaspora, but also that there is a vast body of literature, art and music on which a utopian hermeneutics could provide enlightening perspectives." It is through such innovative perspectives that societal challenges can be interpreted through varied lenses in a manner than can produce alternative solutions for consideration.

Millenarian religious movements offer an example of how the new millennium, or "new beginning," concept impacts the understanding of utopia. Berry clarifies such an interpretation conveys the five variables of judgment day and subsequent salvation will be: 1) collective (the true believers will find salvation as a group); 2) terrestrial (salvation will be embraced on earth); 3) total (life on earth will be totally transformed); 4) imminent (the change will be soon and sudden); 5) supernatural (it will be guided by a nonhuman force).

Millenarian groups are broken down into apocalyptic and progressive groups. Apocalyptic millenarian groups believe the new millennium/beginning will arrive when a huge crisis occurs whereas progressive millenarian groups believe the new millennium/beginning will arrive when perfection is achieved.These groups are further characterized through the apocalyptic belief in militancy, mass movements, and focus on salvation versus the progressive belief in withdrawal, small insular communities and search for perfection.

There are perspectives that associate Christian origins, egalitarianism and utopia. From these perspectives come generally embraced notions regarding such themes. "The widely held hypothesis that the historical Jesus and the kingdom of God movement were egalitarian . . . . similar to those of other ancient utopian writings and movements" is a commonly accepted view.
This kind of foundational point of view offers support for promotion of commensurate egalitarian practices today. As such, the role of such utopian thought offers insight with the past, present and how the future can be embraced on a large scale.

The Christian spiritual utopian themes that are inherent in considerations related to reflections of Christian origins, egalitarianism and utopia concurrently offer seasoning that can benefit applications in present day challenges associated with notions of utopian themes. This awareness of biblical lessons for the present day can inspire thinking that goes far beyond the standard landscape linked to problem solving and conflict resolution. The new communication technologies exemplify how modern evolutions typically revolve around readily familiar frameworks but stressing new (to us) content that is typically benefiting and

challenging the social order on concurrent levels and via seemingly unrelated venues.

The Islamic State offers illustration of an end-of-time utopia whereby their belief in a coming end-of-time functions as a primary indicator for understanding their thinking and subsequent actions based on that frame of reference. "This means that the challenge for the United States and its transatlantic allies engaged in the fight against IS (Islamic State) isto accurately apprehend the logic of the group's rhetoric, so as to articulate a sound communication strategy;" This situation exemplifies how understanding the utopian rhetorical themes expressed by a group can be foundation for combating the impact of those themes.

The "simple life" utopians offer an example of how the notion of simplicity is linked to religious virtues of Christ, as exemplified in the life of Thomas Bilney. There are three common assumptions found in the among "simple life" utopians: 1)they regarded people as being essentially good, 2) they stressed that an existence close to nature brings out the best spiritual qualities in people, and 3) they were egalitarian.

Emphasis on simple life ideals have notable appeal with orientations associated with Christian spiritual utopian themes. Focus on the simple life meanings resonate with moving through life in a mindful manner that reflects depth of thought and understanding. This, in turn, echoes the ethos promoted in biblical orientations that stress benefits of living our lives in a deliberate manner that keeps the individual oriented in his/her faith. This has benefits for the individual, group, organization, community, nation and world.

There are significant criticisms of simple life utopians. This framework is recognized as being comfortable in the short term but lacking in the area of long-term considerations. There are three primary criticisms. First, rule of law is circumvented when formal law is replaced by community opinion as a means of social control. Second, the decentralized nature of their insular communities promotes a lack of awareness and concern for what goes on beyond their borders. Three, their rejection of city life and technological advancements retards the progression of humankind.

Beyond some of the aforementioned categories of utopias are more general considerations regarding the historical evolution of humans as planners. In very general terms there are three stages that characterize humans as planners. These stages progress in chronological order.Multiecological humans evolved beginning 200 million years ago (at the time of the earliest tool-using hominids) until roughly 1700. During this period humans evolved biologically as a result of planning related to their adaptation to their physical environments. This was a period of environmental determinism. That is, cultural practices evolved from, and adapted to, the habitat whereby different environments produced different cultures.

Supraecological humans existed between 1700-1850. During this period humans became more technologically determined. Thus, they had more control over their environment rather than being subjected to it. This created a move toward global homogeneity and the

notion of universal standards such as how capitalism led to monetary units (money), which led to cost/profit calculations in human affairs, which led to the importance of assets/possessions, which led to the foundation of the "rat race" tempo of life.

Monoecological humans have existed from 1850 to present. This period has seen humans gain more and more control over the technology that they've tamed the environment with. This has increased global interconnectivity for good and for bad. Such interconnectivity is evidenced in world wars, the gold economic standard, phone connectivity and education. Cost/profit calculations affect the concept of time (i.e., time is money) which eventually leads to information being viewed as a commodity. World resources are seen as finite, which introduces questions regarding if status quo promotes a long-run collective good, which suggests that self-interests should be more secondary to societal interests. This results in an emphasis on mass transit over individual cars, smaller living quarters rather than larger houses, less materialism, etc.

Any speculation on humans as planners must consider, in even more basic terms, the human condition and human passions.There are 12 primitive passions that exist within social orders. Five are sensory. They are linked to sight, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling. Four are affective (regarding our affect on others). These include friendship, ambition, love and familism (parenthood). Three are distributive: "composite" seeks to unite, "cabalist" seeks group spirit/espirit de corps and "butterfly" seeks variety. It is these 12 primitive passions that will perpetuate the cultural variables and societal norms.

A central focus within this report has to do with Christian spiritual utopian themes and how they are manifested in our lives today. Such an orientation provides focus but it also provides foundation for interpretations that peel back layers of understanding in a deliberate manner that allow for self-study and attention to matters having to do with varied organizational groupings that exist within the social order. Such organizational groupings can evolve with varied degrees of relevance whereby the meanings they represent today may not reflect the meanings they depictedin an earlier time.This report acknowledges a wide range of utopias and groups, individuals & phenomena that maintain some type of utopian vision. Thus a fairly broad conceptual framework regarding utopia is being employed. It is worth delineating among utopian groups and groups that can be defined as permanent utopias.The degree of permanence can be a factor when one is considering the degree of relevance that the utopia has for the larger society. There are five criteria of permanent utopias. First, they must exist for at least 25 years. Second, they must be able to recruit volunteers (who are committed to the utopian vision). Third, they must establish economic viability (their economic plan must work internally and externally). Fourth, they must seek to improve life for all humans in addition to their own membership (at least theoretically). Fifth, they should have a broad based popular appeal with a universal message. This historical framework for utopia provides a general means for understanding the concept of utopia, whether it be a permanent utopian group, more temporary utopian group, a group with a utopian vision or merely some sort of utopian ideal that does not have a well-defined following. There are obviously a variety of other considerations that can narrow this conceptualization but this framework will enhance the ability of the reader to better grasp the common threads among the varied forms of utopian themes presented in this collection. Ideas related to utopia tend to be theoretical and are reflected upon in the abstract but the relevance of utopian visions present a clear consideration. They offer unique insights. "Utopian visions are, then, important, practical, and at least potentially consistent with pragmatism: we need utopian thought because what we imagine as desirable future possibilities determines how we will organize ourselves in the present." Thus, utopian visions can be understood as providing an organizational conception for establishing a foundational sense of who it is, why it is, from whence it came, where it is and where it is going.

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