

A Note on Humanism

The Renaissance was a transition from the mediaeval to the modern world, and this transition entailed a startlingly new "world-view."

E.g., the rise of **modern science** as the "old science" was freed from the restrictions of philosophy that had attempted to deduce what *had* to happen in the natural world instead of having observers draw conclusions from what *did*.

E.g., the era of **geographic exploration**, presupposing a mindset of risk-taking, cutting loose from the safe/conventional, eagerness to be rid of what one regarded as inhibiting (i.e., the exploration and self-insertion into what was thought to entail greater *human* significance.)

E.g., a new impetus w.r.t. **trade and commerce**, entailing cultural and intellectual cross-fertilization.

E.g., the appreciation of and rewarding of **individual effort** as the guild system (a collectivity of sorts) dissolved. (Collectivism never produces outstanding culture; culture atrophied under Stalin and Hitler.)

The Renaissance involved **political concentration**. Even though in Germany and Italy the pope and emperor were strong enough to prevent a melding of nation-states (there were 300 fiefdoms in Germany alone, each governed by a prince), national forces were rising everywhere in Europe. Everywhere princes, newly confident, were attempting to free themselves from papal control, one consequence of which was the jettisoning of an ecclesiastical mindset. Underlying this was the "right" of the individual to revolt against tyranny or against anything that suppressed the full flowering of one's humanity.

The Renaissance was enormously abetted by **paper and printing**. The massive emphasis on the literature of antiquity, not to mention the production of vernacular scriptures, as well as the huge tomes of the Reformers was possible only with paper and press. (Erasmus handled a book *reverently*.)

The Renaissance, recovering antiquity, provided new raw materials for thought and new vistas and visions for **self-making**. What it meant to be a human being was to be *forged* in light of what was now regarded as the *human* good. Here the move was away from heteronomy and towards autonomy.

Religion was a part of this movement: a shift from submission to an extraneous authority that cramped self-enrichment, a shift towards a more autonomous, classically informed *human* self-expression and self-projection.

Ancient learning and art were crucial here. Latin had never perished during the middle ages (it was the language of every educated person), nor had all familiarity with Greek literature. Now, however, there was a new zeal for the language and literature of antiquity. Whereas, for instance, Latin had always been the language of the church, government (diplomacy) and law, Latin was now recognized to facilitate an authentically *human* wealth. (Knowledge of a language -- any language -- always admits the knower to a *world*.) A study of the classics was deemed necessary not merely to gain access to content but also to appreciate (and reproduce) the beauty of literary form. It was felt that classical thought was both more rational (i.e., freed from mediaeval superstition and thought-forms) and more life-affirming. Greater scope was admitted for intellect (i.e., beyond philosophy and theology), affect, aesthetics, as well as an affirmation of sensuousness: the sheer exuberance of impassioned living. At first the church saw nothing inimical here, looking upon early humanism as a fresh appreciation of the manifold riches of the creation. Soon, however, an attempt was made to reconcile Christian thought with ancient philosophy. (Since humanism was chiefly a

literary rather than a phil'l movement, it didn't develop its own phil'l thought.) The "partner" with whom reconciliation was effected was Platonism. The Xn Platonists (whose greatest representative was likely Pico della Mirandola) shaped the Xn outlook in the direction of Platonism's intellectual presuppositions, ethics, and human self-exaltation. These Xn Platonists insisted that not only is Israel the progenitor of Christ, so is Hellenism. (NB humanism's undervaluation of the OT and its wicked antisemitism.)

At first the papacy supported the humanist resurgence. The biggest ecclesiastical boost came from Pope Nicholas V (1447-55). A great lover of books, he founded the Vatican library and gathered around himself both scholars and artisans. (Humanists were always concerned with beauty.) Julius II (1503-13) stated that the head of the church was also to demonstrate leadership in intellectual and cultural developments. He instructed Michelangelo to represent him as Moses: Julius II saw himself as the leader who brings the church out of intellectual/cultural oppression, through a wilderness, and into a promised land. This was not a concern with *mere* aesthetics; aesthetics were regarded as facilitating union with God, enjoyment of God.

As humanism spread north from Italy, its birthplace, it found the German universities resistant: the scholasticism not of Aquinas but of Occam and Biel had a firm hold. The ghost of Aristotle remained, however, and it was deemed necessary to rid the university of Aristotle if humanist learning was to thrive. Anyone assisting the overthrow was deemed an ally --like Luther. (Soon the humanists saw that Luther was setting aside Ar., as well as Occam and Biel, for a very different reason. At this point the Renaissance and the Reformation parted.)

When the new learning did penetrate Germany it did so chiefly through people who had been trained in the schools of the Brethren of the Common Life. They regarded the new learning not so much as cultural enhancement to be appropriated immediately (as happened outside Germany) but rather as a tool of educational reform, and thence a tool to reform the church and improve social life. (Later humanists didn't care about reforming the church.)

At the same time humanism was spreading among the middle class people of the cities, especially Strassburg, Augsburg and Nuernburg. (NB how largely the first two will figure in the Reformation.) Among these urban humanists were German poets and teachers who didn't magnify ancient paganism but rather insisted that *all* of life could be elevated and be found to have profounder significance as the mediaeval distinction between sacred and profane was collapsed.

Erfurt was the centre of German university humanism. Rufus Mutianus was its most prominent representative. Note his convictions, and note how they differed from the use that people from the BCL schools had wanted to make of humanism:

- Xy began a long time before the advent of Christ.
- the true Christ is not the God-man but the discarnate wisdom of God. (The true Christ can't be seized by human hands.)
- this discarnate wisdom is the true son of God, and it alights equally on Jews, Greeks and Germans.
- the natural law is written on our hearts and makes us partakers of heaven.
- scripture is "fabulous"=full of fables (like Aesop), and teaches moral truths.
- "There is but one god and goddess; but there are man forms and many names: Jupiter, Sol, Apollo, Moses, Luna, Proserpina, Mary." Humanists are aware of this; the ill-educated aren't, and therefore should continue to be told the fables.
- Mutianus denounced the veneration of relics, fasts, auricular confession, masses for the dead.
- he wanted to be rid of intellectual strait-jackets, but didn't want to break decisively with the church (like Erasmus); he (like most humanists) had no interest in the question that preoccupied the Reformers, righteousness=right-relatedness to God.

A most glorious exception to the above was Philip Melanchthon. He was a superbly trained humanist as well as the first systematic theologian of the Reformation. (After the death of Erasmus [1531] P.M. was the finest Greek scholar in all of Europe.)

Luther profited from a humanist environment but was not especially humanist trained (despite having attended Erfurt U.) and was never interested in humanism as such. Yet there were discernible affinities between Luther and the humanists.

[1] rejection of scholasticism:

H: scholastic theology is unnecessarily complex, obscure, unintelligible; a more elegant theological formulation is needed.

L: scholastic theology *is* intelligible -- and therefore should be recognized readily as anti-gospel.

[2] desire to return to patristics:

H: Patristics is a simple, understandable statement of Christian faith, devoid of fruitless speculation and incomprehensible scholastic Latin.

L: Patristics is closer to the NT era than is the mediaeval period, less distorted, less warped by a non-biblical logic.

Note: since the humanists esteemed antiquity, no one father was to be elevated (exception: Erasmus and Jerome.) For the Wittenberg theologians, Augustine was pre-eminent.

[3] desire to return to scripture:

H: *sola scriptura* = "not without scripture"

L: *sola scriptura* = "scripture as unnormed norm" (singularly used by the Spirit to acquaint us with the living Lord Jesus Christ.)

[4] interest in rhetoric:

H: an interest in eloquence as a cultural excellence.

L: an interest in preaching *the gospel*.

After 1520 the Reformation stood out in starker contrast with humanism. Humanists finally realized that their purposes and the Reformation's were not the same.

But note: non-humanistically trained pastors were the foot soldiers of the Reformation, dutiful church functionaries. Yet they never provided intellectual or organizational leadership for the Reformation. Subsequently they became the most rigidly scholastic Protestants, re-introducing an utterly scholastic mindset only with a Protestant vocabulary.

Humanist education remains important in the formation of Christians and clergy!

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