

CHAPTER SIX: THE HUMANISTIC RENAISSANCE

The term “renaissance” implies a flowering rebirth of learning, and is often used to denote fourteenth century Italy. Some historians consider the idea of such a rebirth to be a myth, suggesting that any truth renaissance took place during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.ⁱ

A Response to the Dark Ages?

Actually it is hard to see the previous thousand years as “dark ages,” as some would have it,ⁱⁱ considering the beautiful cathedrals that were built and the many wonderful inventions. These included the plow (and new planting techniques), buttons, the fork, clocks, spectacles, and modern paper, all of which are still in use.

An alternate opinion, held by those of the later Romanticist Era,ⁱⁱⁱ saw the Middle Ages as troubadours singing love songs, as happy peasant farmers working in the fields, and knights practicing their chivalry (a code of honor where commoners and even prisoners were treated respectfully). While this viewpoint is also unrealistic, we can admire the fact that chivalry kept warfare within limits (with the help of the church), something we cannot seem to do today.

How could those of the Renaissance (and the later Romantics) have misinterpreted the previous era? Probably because humans have a natural tendency to either glorify the past or denigrate it. It is much harder to see things as they actually are--a mixture of good and bad. Learning slowed during the Middle Ages, but it did not stop, as the university movement clearly indicates.

Many of the advances during the Renaissance were, in part, spurred by Greek ideas which resurfaced at the time. Sexually, the Renaissance was a very worldly time, with many “natural” children being born (a “natural” child is one that is born to singing people, apparently doing what

comes naturally).

The Renaissance was briefly interrupted by revival in Italy, led by Savonarola in the city of Florence. Savonarola preached eternal punishment, much like Jonathan Edwards of a later era and Jonah of an earlier era, and Florence repented. Savonarola then became the ruler of the city until some reacted to the new religion by murdering the preacher. Revival lasted only four years in an otherwise violent and worldly era.

Realism and Humanism

While the art and music of the early church had been simple but lifelike and alive, the influence of platonic philosophy had produced fine arts of a detached, mystical nature during the Middle Ages. With the coming of the Renaissance, realism became prominent, particularly in the art of the period. This may, in part, be attributed to the increased interest in Aristotle's philosophy which underscored the importance of the individual things of life, rather than other-worldly ideals.

In both the art and music of the era, people become important and were often portrayed in a vivid, lifelike manner. The backgrounds of paintings become more important, with nature taking a prominent place. Some have suggested that this went too far, emphasizing the sufficiency of people to solve their own problems and find meaning in life apart from God. Francis Schaeffer^{iv} claims that Michelangelo's sculptures, for example, indicate that people are autonomous and can become perfect through their own efforts.

This would suggest that the Renaissance could be broadly characterized as humanistic, due to its emphasis upon the importance of people. Yet it would be unfair to characterize the era as secularist, since God was not entirely excluded from the picture. The people of the

Renaissance were more skeptical and inquiring than they were anti-religious.

The Copernican Revolution

About A.D. 150, Ptolemy concocted a theory that stated the earth was in the center of the universe and that the sun and stars revolved around the earth. This made good practical sense from casual observation, and his theory was quickly accepted by “scientists” and church leaders. As time went by, however, several stars (actually planets) did not conform to Ptolemy’s theory, so the theory was modified to account for them. The modifications also failed to work, so the theory was further modified until it was unbelievably complex. Still it did not completely account for the movement of these celestial bodies.

During the Renaissance, Copernicus looked at the data and suggested an entirely new theory, that the earth was only one of several planets, that the sun was in the middle of the planets, and that the sun was only one of many stars. His simpler theory should have taken the day, but accepted theories (especially if they are complicated) often die hard. The church insisted that Ptolemy’s theory was a part of religious orthodoxy, one’s basic beliefs, and that was that.

Many scientists today look back on the rejection of Copernicus as an example of religious intolerance. But the story could be told an entirely different way and still be accurate. You see, Reverend Father Copernicus went against the scientific establishment of his day in suggesting a theory they considered outlandish. The church and science had adopted a heathen theory (Ptolemy was no believer) that lacked biblical support, yet the good preacher was still laughed out of the laboratory.

To be as fair as possible, we must admit Copernicus’ ideas weren’t entirely original. He had studied little-known Greek writers who believed that the sun was in the middle of our solar

system (they also believed vast continents existed on the other side of the world).

Copernicus' great book was published just before his death,^v and one hundred years later Galileo was still persecuted for proclaiming that he had viewed (through his newly invented telescope) what Copernicus had guessed about. Still later Newton wrote the laws that explained how it all could be. Yet Copernicus' book continued to be banned until 1885!

The moral is that scholars can have a complicated theory and still be in error; simpler theories may be more accurate. Today we have many explanations for the problems and difficulties around us, but sometimes they may be better explained as the result of forgetting God and not using good, common sense.

Anatomy of Vesalius

Another scientist of the renaissance was Vesalius, who was an expert in dissection. He found hundreds of mistakes in the accepted book on anatomy, written by Galen in the second century.^{vi} Apparently Galen had used animals to develop his human anatomy book, while Vesalius used human cadavers. Vesalius' new book on anatomy was denounced by leading teachers, with one "scientist" proclaiming that he would rather stick with Galen and be wrong than change and be right!

Vesalius was proclaimed a heretic because he could not find certain bones required by the orthodox religion of his day. None of his cadavers had a missing rib, which Adam had supposedly passed on to all of his male descendants, and the "resurrection bone" could not be located, a legendary bone which was supposed to start the restoration of the body at the resurrection. He also failed to locate the soul in the bodies he examined. Discouraged, he destroyed his notes and wasted the rest of his life, but his early book on anatomy was as

revolutionary as the work of Copernicus.

While the differences between the Renaissance and Reformation have often been underscored by historians, here we see one important commonality. Both groups had a powerful distrust of tradition and both were intent upon finding out the truth of a matter, regardless of what the established dogmas of science and religion might proclaim.

The Economics of Renaissance Italy

There was no renaissance of sound economic principles. Wild, excessive government spending was the norm, while the guilds of the time exercised massive control.^{vii} The stongly centralized government of the day showed its manipulative influence everywhere.

The results? The Italians had severe problems with internal unrest, and war with their neighbors.^{viii} High taxation was the norm, as were economic problems in general. One guild would overthrow another, pointing out the injustices of the predecessors but rarely doing anything to correct the situation after gaining power. The situation was not unlike many of the coups that take place in our world today--a poor leader is overthrown only to be replaced by an equally bad or even worse ruler.

Yet the guilds accomplished little for the average worker, a definite trend of unions throughout history. Increases in salary are often offset by the inflation, and one can even make a case for general progress occuring only when opinions are ??^{ix} Leftist fans of the Renaissance do not seem to notice these results, then or now.

Voyages of Discovery

The Renaissance influenced not only Italy but much of southern Europe. During the crusades Europeans developed a taste for spices and other goods from the East, and thus an all-

water route to Asia was sought by explorers. In 1492 one such explorer, Columbus, discovered the West Indies, located between North and South America. When he and his men returned to Spain, they brought back Indians, a little gold, and (apparently) syphilis.^x The disease quickly spread throughout Europe (apparently our “new morality” is not very new).

Since Spain and Portugal made most of these early voyages, they held a monopoly of trade with the New World. The result was almost continual fighting, between themselves and with other countries who resented the monopoly. Perhaps there is an important economic lesson here--restrictions to trade are almost always unhealthy, and often produce bitterness and envy. Black markets often develop, and with them general disrespect for the law. Trade controls, through taxes or restrictions, are often the precursor to war as well as other international problems.

Machiavelli's Prince

Ferdinand and Isabella, who financed Columbus' journeys, were a new kind of royalty. During the Middle Ages, feudal forms of government placed the king at the top of the social hierarchy, followed by several levels of lords, knights, and finally peasants.^{xi} With the new king and queen, the middle levels all but evaporated, as power was centralized in the king, queen and a few local leaders.^{xii} It was the beginning of the end for feudalism.

The trend was followed by the French and English, with predictable results: higher taxes, nationalism, and (of course) larger armies. Machiavelli, who wrote *The Prince* in 1513, described what characteristically resulted when the leadership suddenly became more powerful.^{xiii} Enter Lord Acton's formula again.

While scholars disagree as to whether Machiavelli was defending such things, or just

describing what happened,^{xiv} he essentially stated that it was quite proper for the leader to lie, cheat, steal, murder or do any other immoral act if he did it for “the cause.” Among his later disciples were Louis XIV, Napoleon, Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. Apparently Machiavelli is still in fashion,^{xv} judging from reports of persecution of Christians and Jews in the Soviet Union and in other countries. Some Americans are not even surprised when their leaders do not tell the truth or when corruption is unearthed (have we begun to accept Machiavelli’s ideas?).

Perhaps we Americans have adopted a modified Machiavelli--the majority can do whatever it wants. The development of opinion polls would seem to indicate this; politicians use them to make many decisions. The Bible, in contrast, says certain things are always wrong, regardless of public opinion. We have told ourselves that the serpent in the garden was right, “Ye shall be as gods.”

Of course Machiavelli was not selling new ideas; Jezebel had no qualms about murdering the owner of the property that Ahab had coveted. Machiavelli’s concepts tend to surface whenever God’s law is set aside. Our world may be going through the same changes as the monarchies of the 1400’s and 1500’s--more power to kings (we are in an age of dictators and powerful presidents), higher taxes, increased nationalism, bigger armies, and Machiavelli.

The Renaissance: Pro and Con

In evaluating the humanism of the Renaissance, we must not overlook the genius of Leonardo da Vinci and others who were brilliant achievers. Francie Schaeffer says of Leonardo that “He was the embodiment of the true Renaissance man: he could do almost everything and do it well.”^{xvi} He was an engineer, a mathematician, a chemist, a botanist. He also found time for

architecture and painting!

The inventions, the art, and the rebirth of classical learning were all positive accomplishments of the renaissance era, yet the negative economics and, at best, lukewarm religion offset our enthusiasm for this time period. Perhaps we see here a reaction to the extremes of the Middle Ages, a reaction which went too far in the opposite direction. History is often the result of the fad and fancy of the time.

Humanism in the sense of being human-centered is compatible with the Bible as long as that centeredness includes God as predominant. Christians are to be concerned both with God and one's fellow man. Those of the Renaissance, on the other hand, concentrated upon the human to the extent that God was secondary, only in the periphery of the picture. Later in history people made the even greater error of excluding God completely, which is sometimes referred to as "secular humanism."^{xvii}

While the latter is easily avoided by contemporary Christians, the overemphasis upon the human while letting God take a place on the sidelines (as occurred during the Renaissance) is a threat yet today. For example, it is all too easy for the Christian to separate everyday life from religion and God. A religion that does not vitally infuse the everyday experience is a religion hardly worth having.

Another example is the compartmentalizing of faith and learning which can often occur in our evangelical colleges (e.g. teaching science of psychology without comparing concepts and assumptions with what the Bible says). While scholarship can inform our faith, we must never forget to let our faith give meaning, purpose and direction for our learning. If all truth is God's Truth, both faith and scholarship should reflect its Source.

Chapter Six

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- i. Knight, *Twenty Centuries of Education*, p. 92.
 - ii. Winston Churchill, *The Birth of Britain*, pp. 193-194.
 - iii. Karl Dannenfeldt, ed., *The Renaissance* (the introduction).
 - iv. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*.
 - v. Grove Wilson, *Great Men of Science*, p. 91.
 - vi. Robinson, *Story of Medicine*, pp. 251-160.
 - vii. Willis, op cit, pp. 403-405.
 - viii. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*.
 - ix. Paul Nemo, *Rembrandt Drawings*, p. 49.
 - x. John Motley, *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, vol. II, pp. 156-157.
 - xi. Ibid, vol. I, pp. iv-v.
 - xii. John Fiske, "How to Lose a War," *The Freeman*, Dec. 1964, pp. 17-19.
 - xiii. Willis, op cit, pp. 435-436.
 - xiv. Julius Klein, *The Mesta*, pp. 325-330.
 - xv. Willis, op cit, pp. 463-467.
 - xvi. Schaeffer, op. cit.
 - xvii. B. Carradine, pp. 58-65.