

## HUMANISM IN BRIEF

These days, it seems, more and more of our performing guilds and vendors are involved in a wider spectrum of “Renaissance” events: Henrican and Marian, as well as Elizabethan; Celtic and Continental, as well as English. One thing that all these sixteenth century venues had in common was the primary intellectual engine of the Renaissance - Humanism. All the well-traveled merchants, clerics, and courtiers many of us portray were aware, to one degree or another, of the tectonic-like shift in education, culture, and philosophy that was slowly and steadily making itself felt throughout all Europe. The medieval, God-centered, “rational” order was being challenged by students and teachers of ancient Greek and Latin classics who championed the importance (if not the primacy) of human passions and emotions in the quest of perceiving and living the “moral life.” After all, who doesn’t want to be able to teach their children how to be a “good person”, to be well thought of in this life, and safe and secure in the next?

Scholasticism and Aquinas Supposedly, when Abe Lincoln was asked his opinion on sin, he replied, “I’m agin’ it.” And so, too, it is sometimes easier to define a historical concept by first getting a handle on the earlier concepts with which it sought to contend, and eventually replace.

The dominant educational, philosophical, and theological system of the late Middle Ages was Scholasticism, and its personification was the Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas. The “Dumb Ox” (no, really: his buddies at university called him that; at 300+ pounds, he was so clumsy they wouldn’t let him in the kitchen) explained the moral life this way: God possesses, knows and, in fact, is all ultimate truth; God has expressed this truth through creation, establishing the moral order of all things (the natural law); God created humans with an intellect capable of knowing this truth and so control the human passions which would distract or disable us from leading the moral life we were created to live. The truth, and the means of knowing it are, of course, the preserve of the Church and its tradition. Note, creativity and passion are things to be controlled in order for God’s plan for us to proceed.

Renaissance Humanism In fifteenth century Italy, many who felt that creativity and passion were as necessary as rational thought in the pursuit of the moral life took the ancient Roman statesman Cicero as their model. He had believed that *studias humanitates*, the study of human nature and activity as explored in (Greek) classical literature, produced and sustained the ideal of virtue, as embodied in the Roman Republic. Those who advocated a serious study of the classics in their original languages called themselves “umanisti”, in the student slang of the Italian university.

But what, exactly, did the original humanists advocate? I am indebted to Prof. Ronald Modras for the following list of Renaissance humanism’s defining characteristics (He teaches for the Jesuits, so naturally, I assume he’s brilliant.):

1. Classicism. The foremost mark of the humanist was the obsession to collect and disseminate Greek and Latin manuscripts. Italian humanists traveled to the East, even before the fall of Constantinople (1453), to collect Greek classics for themselves and for their patrons. These classics were seen as the source of human knowledge, and the humanists went to work translating them into Latin for wider dissemination to an educated Europe; some even translated Hebrew and Arabic classics.

2. Educating the Whole Person. The humanists believed that this good classical literature produced the good person, one highly developed in all virtuous disciplines: a person who not only informed his mind, but set his heart on fire with love for what is best and hatred for what is worst. This led to the ideal of the *uomou universale* (the “Renaissance Man”), passionately pursuing excellence in all aspects of human learning and personal development available in the culture of the time, seeking to turn theory into practice and private morals into public virtue.

3. An Active Life of Civic Virtue. The highest goal of the humanist education was to produce someone accomplished in the rhetorical skills of memory, eloquence, the art of persuasion, and the ability to craft the message to the target audience. The ideal of the orator who could shape public opinion stood in contrast to the medieval monastic perspective that a life devoted to insight derived from contemplation was superior to one devoted to action. But the Renaissance humanist saw these as complementary: seeking and securing happiness in the hereafter did not prevent the individual from being an active, virtuous member of society, practicing Cicero’s “art of living happily and well.”

4. Individualism within Community. The Renaissance was a time of transition, holding in tension polar opposites: a more modern individualism and a more medieval sense of communal identity and responsibility. While the urban culture continued to strengthen bonds of family, class, and occupation, a new sense of the worth of the thinking, feeling individual was finding expression. In an age of discovery, humanists explored the human condition even as knowledge of the world around us was expanding exponentially.

5. Human Dignity and Freedom. In contrast to a medieval perception of humanity as *massa damnata*, the humanists were unfailing in their belief that humankind held the central, even exalted place in the “great chain of Being.” Human freedom uniquely endows us with the privilege of shaping our own destinies, of moral decisions leading to a virtuous or depraved life.

6. The Unity and Universality of Truth. Following the eclectic Cicero’s example, the revival of a wide range of classical authors in the pursuit of truth wherever it could be found put an end to Aristotle’s monopoly over intellectual life, held since the time of Aquinas. But the humanists continued to face the problem of reconciling pre-Christian ideas with the faith derived from the Gospel. But if Aquinas was correct, that God is the author of all truth, this unity confirms that truth lies wherever you can find it throughout history. Although human error may at times obscure truth, it cannot contradict this fundamental unity.

Secular Humanism and Machiavelli Although the (mis)use of this term is altogether too frequent these days in politico-religious (or is it religio-political?) discussions, its use here will be limited to humanism which concerned itself primarily with political affairs. Many of these thinkers discounted the Church, not because it was evil, but because it was simply no longer relevant to any discussion about public virtue. Our personification of this area of thought is Nicolo Machiavelli, especially as he applies it to civic leadership in The Prince.

Using the individuality, and thus the freedom and creativity, of the human person, along with the natural passion and emotion felt by each of us, Nicolo concludes that human will controls the destiny of society; it is through society that passions are best reigned in from dangerous excesses, and thus society can permit, and prescribe, the moral life for its citizens.

Christian Humanism and Erasmus Broadly, this term describes that school of thought which used the ancient classics and the earliest church writings to critique the belief and practice of the Church of their day.

First among these was Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1527); as the Dutch-born illegitimate son of a priest and a physician's daughter, he put himself forward as proof that education and status was available to anybody, regardless of origins. After studies at Paris and Oxford, he was the widely-traveled and universally-known "rock star" among humanists.

In his writings, Erasmus developed his "Philosophy of Christ": the Bible is at the center of Christian faith, and the (classically trained) laity are sufficiently intelligent and independent to understand the Scriptures through their own reading. The love of Christ is the core of Christianity, and many contemporary devotions (indulgences, relic worship) were ridiculous distortions of the Gospel. He condemned popes and licentious monks alike for their riches and abuses of power, wondering out loud if the Rome of his day was that of Julius Caesar or St. Peter. "What would St. Jerome say if he could see the Blessed Virgin's milk exhibited for money," he wrote, or "the portions of the true cross, enough, if collected, to freight a large ship?" In commenting on Matthew's Gospel: "Truly the yoke of Christ would be sweet and his burden light, if petty human institutions added nothing to what he himself imposed." The most famous exposition of this philosophy was In Praise of Folly (1511) the Latin being a pun on his best friend's name, Sir Thomas More.

Despite the "truthiness" of the old adage, "Erasmus laid the egg which Luther hatched," Erasmus could never accept Luther's negative view of human nature or Calvin's denial of human freedom. "I would rather see things left as they are," he wrote to a cardinal in 1520, "than to see a revolution that may lead to one knows not what..."

#### Suggested Reading/Listening

Gilles, Anthony E., The People of Anguish, pages 21-27; 1987, St. Anthony Messenger Press.

Gregory, Brad S., Ph.D., The History of Christianity in the Reformation Era, Part I,

"Lecture 6: Christian Humanism"; 2001, The Teaching Company Limited Partnership.

Modras, Ronald E., Ignatian Humanism, Chapter 2; 2004, Loyola Press.

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