

The History Guide

Lectures on Modern European Intellectual History

Renaissance Humanism

Humanism is the term generally applied to the predominant social philosophy and intellectual and literary currents of the period from 1400 to 1650. The return to favor of the pagan classics stimulated the philosophy of secularism, the appreciation of worldly pleasures, and above all intensified the assertion of personal independence and individual expression. Zeal for the classics was a result as well as a cause of the growing secular view of life. Expansion of trade, growth of prosperity and luxury, and widening social contacts generated interest in worldly pleasures, in spite of formal allegiance to ascetic Christian doctrine. Men thus affected -- the humanists -- welcomed classical writers who revealed similar social values and secular attitudes.

Historians are pretty much agreed on the general outlines of those mental attitudes and scholarly interests which are assembled under the rubric of humanism. The most fundamental point of agreement is that the humanist mentality stood at a point midway between medieval supernaturalism and the modern scientific and critical attitude. Medievalists see humanism as the terminal product of the Middle Ages. Modern historians are perhaps more apt to view humanism as the germinal period of modernism.

Perhaps the most we can assume is that the man of the Renaissance lived, as it were, between two worlds. The world of the medieval Christian matrix, in which the significance of every phenomenon was ultimately determined through uniform points of view, no longer existed for him. On the other hand, he had not yet found in a system of scientific concepts and social principles stability and security for his life. In other words, Renaissance man may indeed have found himself suspended between faith and reason.

As the grip of medieval supernaturalism began to diminish, secular and human interests became more prominent. The facts of individual experience in the here and now became more interesting than the shadowy afterlife. Reliance upon faith and God weakened. *Fortuna* (chance) gradually replaced *Providence* as the universal frame of reference. The present world became an end in itself instead of simply preparation of a world to come. Indeed, as the age of Renaissance humanism wore on, the distinction between this world (the City of Man) and the next (the City of God) tended to disappear.

Beauty was believed to afford at least some glimpse of a transcendental existence. This goes far to explain the humanist cult of beauty and makes plain that humanism was, above everything else, fundamentally an aesthetic movement. Human experience, man himself, tended to become the practical measure of all things. The ideal life was no longer a monastic escape from society, but a full participation in rich and varied human relationships.

The dominating element in the finest classical culture was aesthetic rather than supernatural or scientific. In the later Middle Ages urban intellectuals were well on the road to the recovery of an aesthetic and secular view of life even before the full tide of the classical revival was felt. It was only natural, then, that pagan literature, with its emotional and intellectual affinity to the new world view, should accelerate the existing drift toward secularism and stimulate the cult of humanity, the worship of beauty, and especially the aristocratic attitude.

Almost everywhere, humanism began as a rather pious, timid, and conservative drift away from medieval Christianity and ended in bold independence of medieval tradition. Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), one of the greatest humanists, occupied a position midway between extreme piety and frank secularism. Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) represented conservative Italian humanism. Robust secularism and intellectual independence reached its height in Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540). Rudolphus Agricola (1443-1485) may be regarded as the German Petrarch. In England, John Colet (c.1467-1519) and Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) were early or conservative humanists, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) represented later or agnostic and skeptical humanism. In France, pious classicists like Lefèvre d'Étaples (1453-1536) were succeeded by frank, urbane, and devout skeptics like Michel Montaigne (1533-1592) and bold anti-clerical satirists like François Rabelais (c.1495-1533).

Humanistic contributions to science consisted mainly in the recovery of Greek scientific literature which evinced a more accurate and acceptable body of facts and ideas than most medieval scientific works. However, we should not exaggerate the humanist contribution in this field. Everything of value, for instance, in Galen (c.130-201) had long been incorporated into medieval medicine. The scientific treatises of Aristotle, Euclid, and Ptolemy were translated into Latin and known to scholars before the Renaissance. Moreover, Islamic scholars had already introduced most Attic and Hellenistic science into western Europe, often with vast improvements on the original.

Humanism embodied the mystical and aesthetic temper of a pre-scientific age. It did not free the mind from subservience to ancient authority. If the humanists revered Aristotle less than the Schoolmen did, they worshipped Neoplatonism, the Cabala, and Cicero more. They shifted authorities rather than dismissed them. Even Aristotle, the greatest of Scholastic authorities, did not lack humanist admirers. The great libraries assembled by wealthy patrons of literature like Cosimo de' Medici, Pope Nicholas V, and the Duke of Urbino, devoted much space to the Church Fathers and the Scholastic philosophers. The humanists did, however, read their authorities for aesthetic pleasure as well as moral uplift.

The intellectuals of antiquity, in contrast to the Christians, were relatively unconcerned about the supernatural world and the eternal destiny of the soul. They were primarily interested in a happy, adequate, and efficient life here on earth. Hellenic philosophy was designed to teach man how to live successfully rather than how to die with the assurance of ultimate salvation. This pagan attitude had been lost for about one thousand years, when Europe followed the warning of Augustine against becoming too engrossed in earthly affairs, lest assurance of successful entry into the New Jerusalem be jeopardized. Humanism directly and indirectly revived the pagan scale of virtues.

When men like Petrarch and his fellow humanists read pagan literature, they were infected with the

secular outlook of the Greeks and Romans. Even rather pious humanists became enamored of what Augustine branded the City of Man. Petrarch, a devout Christian, worshipped the pagan eclecticism of Cicero. Erasmus suggested that such titles as St. Socrates and St. Cicero were not inappropriate or sacrilegious, and openly preferred the pagans to the Schoolmen. "Whatever is pious and conduces to good manners ought not to be called profane," he wrote.

The first place must indeed be given to the authority of the Scriptures; but, nevertheless, I sometimes find some things said or written by the ancients, nay, even by the heathens, nay, by the poets themselves, so chastely, so holily, and so divinely, that I cannot persuade myself but that, when they wrote them, they were divinely inspired, and perhaps the spirit of Christ diffuses itself farther than we imagine; and that there are more saints than we have in our catalogue. To confess freely among friends, I can't read Cicero on Old Age, on Friendship, his Offices, or his Tusculan Questions, without kissing the book, without veneration towards the divine soul. And, on the contrary, when I read some of our modern authors, treating of Politics, Economics, and Ethics, good God! how cold they are in comparison with these! Nay, how do they seem to be insensible of what they write themselves! So that I had rather lose Scotus and twenty more such as he (fancy twenty subtle doctors!) than one Cicero or Plutarch. Not that I am wholly against them either; but, because, by the reading of the one, I find myself become better, whereas I rise from the other, I know not how coldly affected to virtue, but most violently inclined to cavil and contention.

The leading intellectual trait of the era was the recovery, to a certain degree, of the secular and humane philosophy of Greece and Rome. Another humanist trend which cannot be ignored was the rebirth of individualism, which, developed by Greece and Rome to a remarkable degree, had been suppressed by the rise of a caste system in the later Roman Empire, by the Church and by feudalism in the Middle Ages. The Church asserted that rampant individualism was identical with arrogance, rebellion, and sin. Medieval Christianity restricted individual expression, fostered self-abnegation and self-annihilation, and demanded implicit faith and unquestioning obedience. Furthermore, the Church officially ignored man and nature.

In other ways medieval civilization suppressed the ego. In the feudal regime the isolated individual had little standing. He acquired status and protection mainly as a member of a definite group, whether lordly or servile. The manorial system revolved around the community rather than the individual. When the cities threw off the yoke of feudalism, they promised collective and corporate liberty rather than individual freedom. In commercial relations group life was paramount, both in the town guilds and the peasant villages on manorial estates. Everything was regulated by law and custom. The individual who attempted to challenge authority and tradition, in matters of thought or action, was either discouraged or crushed.

The period from the 14th century to the 17th worked in favor of the general emancipation of the individual. The city-states of northern Italy had come into contact with the diverse customs of the East, and gradually permitted expression in matters of taste and dress. The writings of Dante, and particularly the doctrines of Petrarch and humanists like Machiavelli, emphasized the virtues of intellectual freedom and individual expression. In the essays of Montaigne the individualistic view

of life received perhaps the most persuasive and eloquent statement in the history of literature and philosophy.

Individualism and the instinct of curiosity were vigorously cultivated. Honest doubt began to replace unreasoning faith. The skeptical viewpoint proposed by Abelard reached high development and wide acceptance among the humanists. Finally, the spirit of individualism to a certain degree incited the Protestant revolt, which, in theory at least, embodied a thorough application of the principle of individualism in religion.

It need not be supposed that the emancipation of the ego was wholly beneficial to the human race. Yet, that aspect of humanism which combated the sovereignty of tyrant, feudal lord, class, corporation, and tradition, has, for better or worse, had a tremendous influence upon the subsequent history of Europe. Indeed, it was during the humanist era that the freedom of individual expression and opposition to authority was first brought to the surface and became an integral part of the western intellectual tradition.

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