

Critical examination of the main features renaissance humanism

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In the history of the world, many remarkable periods have been referred to most often due to perhaps great events that have led to a turn-around in the thoughts and general lives of the people. One of such periods is the renaissance humanism.

The renaissance humanism is a term used to designate a period in history that is so spectacular and significant owing to its evolutionary of features. Renaissance here serves as an adjective to the word humanism; not any other type of humanism but the humanism of the renaissance period. This period falls from 14th to 16th century AD. The Church is and shall always be a society within a society. The relatedness between the church and the state or civil society has ever brought a kind of exchange in operations and thoughts.

Thus, one of the causes of the renaissance humanism is not far from what happened and was happening in the church as at that time. Consequently, the effect of the renaissance period could be said to have been felt by the church in many ways and more especially as it went as far as forming a foundation for the " reformation" championed by such a personality like Martin Luther. However, we shall explain in details what each of these terms mean, why they are called so, the key players or those that championed such an important period in history, the important features of renaissance humanism and its evaluation and conclusion.

In the course of this discourse, the approach shall be critical.

What Is Renaissance?

In the literary sense, it means “ Rebirth”. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (7th edition) defined it as “ the period in Europe during the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries when people became in the ideas andcultureof ancient Greece and Rome and used these influences in their art, literature etc.”.

The Encyclopedia Britannica explaining the Renaissance says it is; “ literally “ rebirth,” the period in European civilization immediately following the Middle Ages, conventionally held to have been characterized by a surge of interest in classical learning and values. The Renaissance also witnessed the discovery and exploration of new continents, the substitution of the Copernican for the Ptolemaic system of astronomy, the decline of the feudal system and the growth of commerce, and the invention or application of such potentially powerful innovations as paper, printing, the mariner's compass, and gunpowder.

To the scholars and thinkers of the day, however, it was primarily a time of the revival of classical learning and wisdom after a long period of cultural decline and stagnation”. This period appears to have a sharp break from religious and medieval values. Great historians like Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt say that it is the “ rediscovery of the world and man” and if this is so, it is more on the areas of literature and art. It is also within this renaissance period that the industrial revolution and the French revolutiontook place.

So, the intellectual ventures of this period never hung on the air nor did it end in an utopia idealism but it manifested in many facets of the government of many countries in Europe. The Catholic Church was not also left out in this trend or historical situation as we shall see later.

What Is Humanism?

Humanism as the name suggests imply a movement that has a significant focus on man. It is an intellectual movement. In the medieval ages, the scholastics and many religious thinkers influenced the people and the world ideas but during the humanistic period, the thoughts came from secular men or men of letters.

Great minds like Dante della Mirandola, Collucio Saluti and Lorenza Valla were the earliest champions. Its earliest manifestation could be traced to Italy before it spread to many parts of Europe. All these happened before the reformation and counter-reformation. In fact, humanism was one of the factors that gave rise to the reformation. In specific sense, the period of humanism was characterized by many things; the human nature was the center and focus as the name rightly implies. It was full of syncretism as it tried to fuse philosophical and theological truths together.

Humanism was really out to revive the human spirit and wisdom that appeared to be lost. Instead of the medieval emphasis on penance as the noblest human activity, the emphasis brought by humanism was on how man could be creative and have mastery over nature.

The Significant Events in the Renaissance Humanism

The renaissance humanism started around 14th to the 15th century AD. But it was preceded by an era known as the “ proto-renaissance” in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. It was the era of arts championed by great artists like St. Francis with his radicalism.

Art works and ornamental edifices prevalent in this era came from the Church. The popes made great marks in building classic churches as we could see in the Vatican city where we have the largest church in the world; the St. Peter’s Basilica. Thus, the world of arts in Europe could not be discussed without making reference to the popes. However, there was an upsurge of nude art works or nudity in their sculptures. This influence came from the Greek and pagan values but was never restricted in religious arts as such irrespective of their offensive meanings.

This was because the Greek pagans had great reverence for the naked body. We could then say that what prepared the ground for the renaissance humanism was mainly from the church and the fruits of the renaissance period which led to the reformation fell back to the church also. Therefore, we could say that the renaissance humanism started when the literary world and the world of arts was so charged. At the same time the church was leading but her great strides were infiltrated or became mixed with pagan/ Greek values that were seemingly unacceptable.

Thus, the European world saw the reason to question the church’s consistency in the religious matters and the absolute attribute of things to God or religion.

The Champions of Renaissance Humanism

The earliest humanists were Dante Della Mirandola, Lorenzo Valla and Coluccio Salutati. But after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, many scholars went to Italy to research and go acquainted with many books together with the knowledge of the Greek traditional arts. In the northern Europe we find people like Desiderius Erasmus who came up with the praise of the folly (1509).

This depicts the moral essence of humanism. He preferred heartfelt goodness to formalistic piety. We could also recall that the founder of the renaissance painting was Masaccio (1401-1428). Boccaccio (1313-1375) wrote the first sexual literature since the Late Latin writers. Nicholas Machiavelli (1469-1527) really mocked honesty and integrity in politics in his writings as it is farfetched. However, renaissance Humanism was not totally paganistic as perceived by many people as we see its religious relevance. We have the Christian humanists who began many schools.

Around the 15th centuries, more than twenty fine new universities were established. St. Francis, who abandoned the traditional theological practices, went about in identifying with the poor and raising the beauty of nature inspired the works of many artists of his time as the paintings that reflect the beauty of nature became prevalent. Biblical studies boomed higher as Hebrew was now being studied. Cardinal Ximenes de Cisneros (1436-1517) published a multilingual Bible too and when Johann Gutenberg invented printing, copies of these literary works and arts were made available to more people.

We shall not also hesitate to note that some scholars and thinkers fought against the structural and dogmatic stand of the Catholic Church. An example is John Wycliffe (1329-1384). He denied the real presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist and the necessity of the priesthood. Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) after making much converts through his powerful preaching destroyed it with his fanatic activities.

Renaissance Humanism and the Reformation

The reformation took place around the 16th century AD.

Encyclopedia Britannica says; “ It was a religious revolution that took place in the western world”. The champions are Martin Luther (1483-1546) as the chief and John Calvin (1509-1564). Martin Luther was a German priest (An Augustinian Friar) and highly intelligent scholar. He was so worried with the situation in the moral and spiritual situation of the church as the church mixed up so much with the imperial powers. She introduced the indulgence for the building of the Vatican City. Thus, the indulgence was being sold for material things.

The immoral lives of the clergy and the political practices that went on in the church left the scrupulous mind of Luther more bothered. Thus, Luther resorted to writing the ninety five these. This document was against the papacy, the infallibility of the Church. He also upheld grace, faith and the belief in the scriptures as the sure means of obtaining salvation. This was in sure contrast to the church’s teachings about penance. John Calvin with his Calvinism gave the Protestants a doctrinal basis.

He believed in the doctrine of predestination, thus, for him God cannot really forgive someone. One can only perceive that he has the grace by faith but may not really have it. The Renaissance humanism gave a plain background for the Reformation. We could say that the reformation is the climax of the humanism. What was left uneroticized directly was what Martin Luther boldly spoke against but though in an extreme manner. There have been arguments on whether the reformation could have taken place if Luther had not done what he did.

But, one could observe that the ground was already ripe and charged for a serious reformation in the church as at the time of Martin Luther.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Renaissance humanism gave a good intellectual background for the reformation. The different unbecoming cases and situations that were coming from the church started making the people to loose confidence in the Divine origin of the church. Hence, the possibilities that lie in the human powers were sought during the renaissance humanism but in the reformation, it was sought in the religious angle but against the church directly.

References

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