

# Renaissance assignment



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Renaissance and Reformation An Essay on Their Affinities and Connections

This essay was commissioned by the organizers of the Fourth International Luther Congress, held in SST. Louis in 1971. I tried to demonstrate in it not only the affinities of the Reformation with the Renaissance but also the European-wide character of the impulses underlying the Reformation.

I naively assumed that none of this would be controversial, and I was quite unprepared for the hostility it provoked among some legates to the congress, chiefly from Northern Europe, who represented what I came to perceive as the Lutheran Establishment. This group was concerned to insist on the total originality of Luther and the uniquely German Origins of the Reformation. The paper would, I think, be more generally accepted today . It was first published in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era: Papers for the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research*, De.

H. A. Barman, *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, Volvo. 8 (Elided: E. J. Brills, 1974), up. 127-149. It is reprinted here y permission of the publisher . Since the peculiar mixture of responsibility and presumption in the title of my paper will scarcely have escaped the notice of this distinguished audience, I feel some need to explain at the outset that it represents an assignment on the part of those who planned our meeting.

The significance of the problems to which it points is suggested by the great historians who have grappled with it in the past, albeit (a fact that should constitute something of a warning) with somewhat contrary results, among

them Michelle, Dilated, and Throttles. [1] Its racial importance lies in the need of most of us to place our more limited conclusions in some broader historical framework; we must therefore reconsider, from -? 226 -? time to time, the relationship between Renaissance and Reformation.

In spite of this, the subject has recently received little systematic attention, and many of us are still likely to rely, when we approach it, on unexamined and obsolete stereotypes. Obviously I cannot hope to remedy this state of affairs in a brief paper. Yet the progress of Renaissance studies in recent decades invites a reassessment of this lassie problem, and I offer these remarks as an essay intended to stimulate further discussion. What has chiefly inhibited larger generalization has been the extension and refinement of our knowledge, and with it a growth both in specialization and in humility.

Thus we are increasingly reluctant to make broad pronouncements about either the Renaissance or the Reformation, much less about both at once. For as scholars we are divided not only between Renaissance and Reformation, or between Italy and Northern Europe; even within these categories most of us are specialists Venice, in one phase or another of Renaissance humanism, in Machiavelli or Erasmus, in later scholasticism or the history of piety, in Luther or Calvin or the sects.

Under these conditions few students of the Renaissance have cared to look as far as the Reformation; and although Reformation scholars have been somewhat bolder, they have rarely pursued the question of Renaissance antecedents farther than northern humanism. Humanism is, indeed, the one subject that has recently encouraged forays into the problem of this paper;

but although Breed, Duffer, Spits, Libeling, and especially Charles Trinkets, among others, have made valuable intrusions to discussion,[2] the problem is still with us, primarily, I think, because we have not fully made up our minds about the meaning of Renaissance humanism.

A result of this difficulty has been a tendency to focus special attention on Erasmus as a touchstone for the Renaissance, a role for which-? for reasons that will emerge later in this paper-? I think he is not altogether suited. It is, however, one measure of the complexity of our subject that we cannot approach the question of the relationship between Renaissance and Reformation without somehow first coming to arms with the implications of humanism. I should like to do so, however, obliquely rather than directly.

It seems to me that although humanism, which assumed a variety of forms as it passed through successive stages and was influenced by differing local conditions, was not identical with the more profound tendencies of Renaissance culture, it was nevertheless often likely to give them notable expression, and for reasons that were not accidental but directly related to the rhetorical tradition; whatever their -? 227 -? differences in other respects, most recent interpretations of Renaissance humanism have at least identified it with a revival of rhetoric. 3] What has been less generally recognized is the deeper significance of this revival. The major reason is, I think, that in our time the term rhetoric has become largely pejorative; we are inclined to couple it with the adjective mere. But for the Renaissance there was nothing shallow about rhetoric. Based on a set of profound assumptions about the nature, competence, and destiny of man, rhetoric gave expression to the deepest tendencies of Renaissance culture,

tendencies by no means confined to men clearly identifiable as humanists, or always fully expressed by men who have generally been considered humanists.

I shall try in this paper to describe these tendencies, which seem to me to have exerted intolerable pressures on central elements in the medieval understanding of Christianity. And I will suggest that similar tendencies underlay the thought of the great Protestant Reformers. Thus the significance of Protestantism in the development of European culture lies in the fact that it accepted the religious consequences of these Renaissance tendencies and was prepared to apply them to the understanding of the Gospel.

From this standpoint the Reformation was the helically fulfillment of the Renaissance. Fundamental to the cultural movements of the Renaissance was a gradual accumulation of social and political changes: an economy increasingly dependent on commerce rather than agriculture; a political structure composed of assertive increasingly restive under clerical direction and increasingly aggressive in pressing their own claims to dignity and self-determination.

A commercial economy and the more and more openly uncoordinated conduct of politics supplied the social base for a new vision of man's place in the world, and of the world itself. Social experience dotted in the land had perhaps encouraged a sense of broad, natural regularities ultimately responsive to cosmic forces and inhibiting to a sense of the significance of change; but the life of a merchant community and the ambitious operations

of independent rulers made all experience contingent on the interaction between unpredictable forces and the practical ingenuity and energies of men.

Under these conditions the possibility of cosmic order seemed remote, but in any case of little relevance to human affairs; and the obvious rule of change in the empirical world encouraged efforts at its comprehension and eventually stimulated the awareness of history, that peculiarly Hebraic and Christian- as opposed to Hellenic or Hellenic- contribution to the Western consciousness.

Meanwhile new political realities and the claims of laymen undermined the hierarchical conceptions that had defined the internal structure of the old unified order of the cosmos, within which the affairs of this world had been assigned their proper place. [4] It will also be useful to observe at this point that these developments were by no means confined to Italy; I will touch briefly at a later point on the implications of this fact for the Renaissance problem.

It is not altogether wrong to emphasize the positive consequences of these developments which, by freeing human activity from any connection with ultimate patterns of order, liberated an exuberance that found expression in the various dimensions of Renaissance creativity. Bureaucrat's insight that the autonomy of politics converted the prince into an artist of sorts may require modification; yet the new situation made all human arrangements potentially creative in a sense hardly possible so long as the basic principles of every activity were deduced from universal principles.

The notion of the state as a work of art points to the general process of colonization and reminds us that the culture of the Renaissance extended far beyond its brilliant art and literature, and was perhaps even more significant in its implications than in its accomplishments. It had, however, another and darker side. It rested on the destruction of the sense of a definable relationship between man and ultimate realities. It severed his connection with absolute principles of order, not so much by denying their existence as by rejecting their accessibility to the human understanding.

It deprived him of a traditional conception of himself as a being with distinct and organized faculties attuned to the similarly organized structure of an unchanging, and in this sense dependable, universe. Above all, therefore, it left him both alone in a mysterious world of unpredictable and often hostile forces, and at the same time personally responsible in the most radical sense for his own ultimate destiny. For he was now left without reliable principles and—? because the directive claims of the church also depended heavily on the old conceptions—? reliable agencies of guidance.

These darker aspects of Renaissance culture eventually drew them a bit more closely. Renaissance thought has sometimes been represented as a reassertion of ancient rationalism against the supernaturalism of the Middle Ages. The formulation is, of course, both inaccurate and misleading. In the thirteenth century some intellectual leaders had been notably hospitable to Greek philosophy, and had tried to coordinate it with revelation.

But —? 229 —? it was precisely the possibility of such coordination that Renaissance culture—? insofar as it differed from what had preceded it—?

characteristically denied; in this sense Renaissance thought was less rationalistic (if not necessarily less rational) than that of the Middle Ages. In fact it was inclined to distinguish between realms, between ultimate truths altogether inaccessible to man's intellect, and the knowledge man needed to get along in this world, which turned out to be sufficient for his purposes.

Thus the Renaissance attack on scholasticism had a larger implication as well as a specific target; it implied, and occasionally led to, the rejection of all systematic philosophy. From Patriarch, through Salutation and Villa, to Machiavelli, Pompano, ND the Venetians of the later Renaissance, the leaders of Renaissance thought rejected any effort to ground human reflection or action on metaphysics: and at the same time they insisted on the autonomy of the various dimensions of human concern and the relativity of truth to the practical requirements of the human condition.

In this sense, although truth was robbed of some grandeur, it was also made more human; and if Aristotle was less and less respected as a vehicle of eternal wisdom, he could be all the more admired as a man. [5] Under such conditions philosophy could evidently contribute nothing to theology; indeed, its parietal effects were likely to be adverse since it encouraged malice and pride. Related to the attack on metaphysical speculation was an attack on hierarchy, which rested ultimately on metaphysically based conceptions of the internal structure of all reality.

The repudiation of hierarchy was most profoundly expressed in Nicholas of Cuss's conception of the infinite, which made every entity equally distant from-? and thus equally near to-? God;[6] a similar impulse perhaps lurks



behind Villa's rejection of Pseudo-Dionysus. [7] But partly because the formulations of Censur smacked too much of metaphysics, partly because the problem of hierarchy was peculiarly related to social change, the attack on hierarchy was likely to receive more overtly social expression.

It took a general form in the effort to substitute a dynamic conception of nobility through virtue for the static nobility of birth,[8] a specific form in the impulse (often expressed in legislation and the practical policies of states)[9] to consider the clergy in no way superior to other men but, on the contrary, as equal in the obligations of citizenship (if generally less competent in practical affairs), at least as alienable to sin, and in as desperate a need for salvation as other men, whom it was their obligation to serve rather than to command.

This suggested at least that social order was unrelated to cosmic order, but it also raised the possibility that order per se was of a kind quite different from what had been supposed. For the age of the Renaissance was by no means oblivious to the need for order, which indeed historical disasters had converted into the most urgent of problems. But its very urgency intensified the necessity of regarding order as a practical rather than a metaphysical issue. Bitter experience seemed to demonstrate that order had to be brought down to earth, where it could be defined in limited and manageable ways.

And, as the occasional intrusions of the clergy into politics appeared periodically to demonstrate, the attempt to apply ultimate principles to concrete problems was likely only to interfere with their practical solution. This was a central point not only for Machiavelli and his political successors; it

also molded the numerous constitutional experiments of the Renaissance, with their repudiation of hierarchically defined lines of authority in favor of order through a balance of interests and their appeal to immediate local needs and the right of local self-determination.

The best arrangements, in these terms, were not those that most accurately reflected some absolute pattern but those that best served the specific and limited human purposes for which they were instituted. But although a sense of the limitation of the human intellect was basic to the thought of the Renaissance, this negation had a positive corollary in a new conception of the human personality which also seemed to correspond better to the experience supplied by a new social environment.

Men whose lives consisted in the broad range of experiences, ontogenesis, and human relationships that characterized existence in the bustling and complicated modern world could no longer find plausible an abstract conception of man as a hierarchy of faculties properly subject to reason; instead the personality presented itself as a complex and ambiguous unity in which the will, primarily responsive to the passions, occupied a position at the center.

One result of this conception was to undermine the contemplative ideal; if man's reason was weak but his will strong, he could only realize himself in this world through action, indeed he was meant for a life of action. Another was to reduce suspicion of the body; in the absence of the old psychological hierarchy, the body could no longer be held merely base and contemptible. Action required its use, and the new integrity of the personality reduced the

possibility of attributing the human propensity to evil primarily to the physical or sensual aspect of man's nature.

Human passions now also acquired a positive value, as the source of action.

[10] This new anthropology, articulated by Patriarch, Salutation, and Villa, required a reconsideration of the problem of immortality and led eventually to the ardent discussions of the soul in which Pompano figured. It also pointed to the political and historical conceptions of Machiavelli and According, who emphasized the primacy of will and passion, as well as to the psychological interests of a host of Renaissance writers. 11] -? 231 -? In addition man was defined as a social being; if he lost one kind of participation in a larger reality, namely his abstract position as a member of the human species in the cosmic hierarchy of being, he, obtained another with, perhaps, more tangible satisfactions: his membership as a concrete individual in the particular human immunity in which he lived, now an essential rather than an accidental condition of his existence. Thus the values of human community now achieved full recognition. There men; man's active nature was understood to achieve full expression only in a life of social responsibility, and indeed his happiness was seen as dependent on human community. Furthermore, since effective participation in society required some wealth, the conception struck another blow at medieval asceticism. On the other hand the demands of life in society also stimulated a vision of human existence ere different from that implicit in the contemplative ideal.

For life in society was patently marked by a conflict of opposing interests that could rarely (if men were honest) be identified with absolute good or

evil; and to incessant struggle with other men was added, in social existence, the temptations that inevitably beset anyone who chooses to engage with rather than to withdraw from the world. The life appropriate to men in this world was thus not repose (however desperately one might long for it) [12] but a constant and morally ambiguous warfare, with the outcome ever in doubt. By the same token earthly life had also to be seen as dynamic, as subject to change in all its aspects.

Human communities could be seen to rise, flourish, and decay; and the philological investigations of Renaissance humanists supplemented common experience by revealing the general outlines of ancient civilization and thus demonstrating how much had changed during the intervening centuries. [13] They also wrote histories that communicated not only this perspective on the past, with its implication that human culture is not an absolute but relative to its times, but in addition other aspects of the Renaissance vision of life: the active and social nature of man, the values of community, the incapability of conflict and change.

This vision found its fullest expression in the rhetorical culture of the Renaissance. Humanist oratory was based on the conception of man as a social being motivated by a will whose energies stemmed from the passions. This conception led in turn to a distinctive concern with communication as the essential bond of life in society, as well as to a new human ideal of the well-rounded, eloquent, and thus socially effective man of affairs. The purpose of communication, in this view, could not be the transmission of an absolute wisdom, which the human mind was incompetent to reach, but the attainment of concrete and practical ends. 7? 232 -? Such communication

had above all to be persuasive; it had to affect the will by swaying the passions, rather than merely to convince the mind; in short it needed to penetrate to the center of the personality in order to achieve results in visible acts. And the significance of the need for persuasion should also be remarked. It implied a life in society that could not be controlled by authority and coercion through a hierarchical chain of command but depended instead on the inward assent of individuals. It was therefore no accident that the rhetorical culture of Italian humanism achieved its fullest development in republics.

In addition the needs of broad communication pointed eventually to the development and use of vernacular languages, a more important concern of Renaissance humanism than has sometimes been recognized. [14] It should be immediately apparent that this set of attitudes imposed great strains on traditional Catholicism. [15] It undermined the effort to base earthly existence on hanging world of ordinary experience to the invisible and immutable realm of the spirit. Both the comforts in this relationship and its implications for the guidance and control of lower things by higher were seriously threatened.

From a Renaissance perspective the arguments by which it was supported seemed at best frivolous, at worst a specious rationalization of claims to power in this world on behalf of a group of men whose attention should be directed exclusively to the next. And behind such suspicions we may also discern the perception of man as primarily a creature of will and passion. In this light intellectual claims were likely to be construed as masks for motives

that could not bear inspection; dogma itself might be no more than an instrument of tyranny.

In addition, since a contemplative repose now seemed inappropriate to the actual nature of man, as well as a breach of responsibility for the welfare of others, the ideal form of the Christian life required redefinition. Finally, the problem of salvation was transformed. Alone in an ultimately unintelligible universe, and with the more fundamental conception of sin and the problems of its intro opened up by the new anthropology, man could no longer count on the mediation either of reason or of other men in closer contact with the divine than himself.

His salvation depended on an immediate and personal relation with God. Here it is necessary to pause for a more searching look at one of the key terms of our title: Renaissance . The conceptions I have so far reviewed -? 233 -? have been based largely on developments in Italy, and this would suggest a vision of the Renaissance, or of Renaissance culture, as initially and perhaps primarily an Italian affair.

But this audience is well aware that the tendencies I have described were also present in a variety of movements outside Italy, if in somewhat different forms. It is obvious, for example, that later medieval piety exhibited similar impulses; and that, in spite of the antipathy of humanists to scholastic speculation (though here we need to be more precise about what was actually under attack), the later schoolmate played a major if largely independent part in bringing underlying assumptions to the surface and in attempting to accommodate theology to them. 16] Perhaps, therefore, the

time has come to expand, as well as to make more pacific, our conception of what was central to the age of the Renaissance, and also to abandon the traditional contrast between Italy and the North, which seems to me to have been in some measure the result of a failure to get beneath surface differences.

If I have concentrated on Italian thought in this sketch, I have done so partly to bring out the fundamental unity of European spiritual development, partly because the affinities between Protestantism and later Scholasticism have been more regularly a concern of Reformation scholarship than the parallels with the Renaissance in Italy. What is nevertheless increasingly clear is that the process of redefining Christianity to bring it into correspondence with the new assumptions about man and the world was gradual, and that it was taking place simultaneously throughout Europe.

Largely because of the recent profound book of Charles Trinkets, it is unnecessary to review in detail the process by which the pressures for religious change implicit in the assumptions of Renaissance culture operated among the humanists of Italy. They are Villa. In a general sense they may be attributed to the special loneliness and despair of men who could no longer regard religious truth as a body of knowledge of the same order as other knowledge that was communicable through similar kinds of intelligible discourse.

Nor could the institutional fiddles encouraged by ecclesiastical authority as an alternative to rational theology provide a satisfactory solution to the problem. Not only did the idea of implicit faith clash with the growing sense

of individual spiritual dignity among pious laymen; in addition, discredited by its impotence, its worldliness, the presumed irrelevance of its abstract theology, and a sacramental and disciplinary externalities increasingly inadequate to assuage the peculiarly intense guilt of the age, the church could no longer be regarded as a dependable guarantor of truth.

Thus, driven by a profound yearning for immediate contact with the eternal, [17] the humanists of the early Italian Renaissance moved perceptibly toward a simple religion of grace based on the Scriptures and apprehended by the individual through faith. Patriarch typically began with insights into his own inner conflicts and the discovery that these could only be resolved by throwing himself on God's mercy in a oath that was at once the highest form of knowledge and at the same time different in kind from all other knowledge; confusion on this point seemed to him the most dangerous error.

Salutation, concerned as a sterner moralist to protect human freedom and responsibility within a religion of grace, wrestled with the problem of predestination. And with Villa Justification by faith received an even fuller exploration, the role of priest and sacrament in the economy of salvation was correspondingly reduced, and that of Scripture, the Word whose authenticity could be established by philology and which spoke directly to the individual, was enlarged. 18] Corresponding to the distinction between philosophy and faith was the demand for a sharper distinction between the church and the world; the separation of realms in one area seemed to lead naturally to separation in others. In its demands for a spiritual church, the new historicism of the Renaissance collaborated with the insistence of the Italian states on freedom from clerical interference and with their grievances



against Rome as a political force. [19] The study of the historical church valued the spiritual costs of the confusion of realms. [20] At the very least, as men of the Renaissance with some political experience were in a position to know, the effective use of power in the world was always morally ambiguous; [21] and meanwhile the growing participation of popes and prelates in secular politics had been accompanied by an increasing neglect of the spiritual mission of the church. Thus, if reform required a return to the past, the reason was above all that the early church had been true to its spiritual characters. [22] Only a spiritual church, devoted to that which does not change, could stand above history and thus resist decay.

Villa's attack on the Donation of Constantine was not an isolated document; [23] it reflects a concern with the church, its earthly role and its spiritual mission, that runs through much of Renaissance historiography, from Muscat at the beginning of the fourteenth century to Machiavelli, Accoring, and Far Paolo Carpi. [24] The Patriarch recognized, was incapable of converting man at the crucial center of his being. "It is one thing to know," he declared, "another to love; one thing to understand, another to will.

What was required was a transformation not merely of the intellect but of the whole personality, so that Christian conversion would find appropriate expression in a life of love and active responsibility for the welfare of others. And, as in the world, the essential means for such a transformation was not rational appeal to the intellect but rhetorical appeal to those deeper levels in man that alone could move the will. Thus Patriarch argued for the superiority over rational philosophers of moral teachers who could sow the love of virtue in the very hearts of men. [5] For Villa rhetoric

was thus the only branch of secular learning (except for philology) applicable to theology. [26] The implications of this position for the importance and character of preaching seem clear. A new conception of man was also reflected in a changed conception of God, in accordance, perhaps, not only with Renaissance emphasis on man's creation in God's likeness and image but also with Calling's recognition of the reciprocal relationship between man's understanding of himself and his knowledge of God. [27] Like man, God could no longer be perceived as a contemplative being, as Aristotle unmoved mover, operating in the universe not directly but through a hierarchy of intermediate powers. [28] Laymen active in the world required a God who was also active, who exercised a direct and vigilant control over all things, like that to which they aspired for themselves. God too had therefore to be perceived as primarily will, intellectually beyond man's grasp yet revealing something of himself-? all, at any rate, that man needed to know-? in his actions, above all as recorded in Holy Scripture.

And from Patriarch's sense of the free, mysterious, and incalculable tauter of God,[29] Salutation went on to defend the anthropomorphic representations of God in the Bible as a form of communication appropriate to men's capacities. [30] Villa was, as one might expect, even clearer that the God of philosophy could not be the God of faith. [31] In spite of all this, it is nevertheless undeniable that the culture of the Italian Renaissance did not culminate in Protestantism, although even on this point our old sense of the immunity of Italy to the impulses of the Reformation is no longer altogether tenable. [32] Yet it remains true that the religious Hough of Renaissance Italy remained no more than an incoherent bundle of fundamental insights, and it

was unable to rid itself of fundamental contradictions; again, however, the contrast with Northern Europe seems hardly absolute. Above all it failed to complete its conviction of man's intellectual limitations, which pushed him only part of the way into the realm of grace, with full conviction of his moral impotence.

Even here its vision of man suggests a deepening in the understanding of sin and the human obstacles to salvation; and there is abundant evidence of a pessimistic estimate of the human condition in Tj? 236 -? Patriarch, Salutation, Pogo, Villa, and later, in a different form, in Machiavelli and frequently served chiefly to nourish the moralist that so deeply permeated later medieval piety,[33] contributing both to the notion of Christianity as the pursuit of moral perfection and of the church as essentially a system of government; [34] Renaissance humanism remained, in Lather's sense, Appealing.

The consequence was, however, that Renaissance culture in Italy, like Scholastic theology in the north, helped to intensify, from both directions at once, the unbearable tension between the moral obligations and the moral capacities of the Christian that could at last find relief only in either a repudiation of Renaissance attitudes or the theology of the Reformation. But it could not resolve the problem itself, and we must ask why this was so. Part of the explanation is connected with the fact that some among the figures we have cited were lacking in theological interests, while the rest were amateurs whose major activity lay elsewhere.

The result was an inability to develop the full implications of their assumptions, which was supplemented by prejudice against intellectual labor too closely resembling the Scholasticism they despised. In addition, closely attached to particular societies in which, traditionally, no distinction was made between Christianity and citizenship, they were unable to achieve a full sense of the radical disjunction between salvation and civilization that might have placed the Christian man fully in the sphere of grace.

Thus they celebrated instead the positive implications of the spark of divinity in man. [35] Of greater importance were the changing social and political conditions of the later fifteenth century which, at least in Italy, tended to undermine the assumptions underlying Renaissance culture, and thus to remove the sociological pressures for religious change.

Foreign invasion and prolonged war produced general insecurity and a growing sense of helplessness, so that freedom presented itself rather as a threat than an opportunity; and the extension of despotism even to Florence reduced the dignity of civic life and encouraged an increasingly aristocratic and stratified social order. Meanwhile the recovery of the papacy from the long eclipse of the conciliar period brought a usurious reassertion of the old cosmic intellectuality, of hierarchical principles, and of claims to clerical superiority in the world. [36] The result was a movement of general, if not total, retreat from the ideals of the earlier Renaissance. The Neoplatonism of later Quattrocento Florence may be taken as an illustration. Although this movement retained and even developed further some of the tendencies I have identified as central to Renaissance culture, what seems to me most significant in Florentine Platonism is not what it had in common

with the humanism of the earlier Renaissance but the ways in which it offered. 37] Thus it was spiritually akin to the thirteenth century in its concern to reunite philosophy and theology; for Fiction philosophy was not merely the handmaid of theology but her sister. [38] It also reasserted, if in a modified form, the conception of hierarchy; Fiction provided contemporaries with a Latin translation of Pseudo- Dionysus. [39] And with these conceptions inevitably went also a return to an understanding of man as a duality in which sovereign intellect should rule the contemptible flesh and salvation was held to consist in the separation of the spiritual