

THE CHURCH

AND

HUMANISM

*by*

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Many of the troubles afflicting us today, stem from persistent efforts to change the English language. This has gone farther than the attempt to eliminate distinctions of gender: it has altered our dictionaries and definitions of words, much as the French Revolutionaries sought to change that language in the 1790s.

This would not have surprised George Orwell, who warned of such an effort in his book, *1984*. We are, today, past 1984 in every sense. Newspeak is here. Old Speak is discouraged and those who use it are alternately mocked or boycotted. Publishing houses give authors lists of correct words, and so do newspaper style books. Students who use traditional terms in their essays receive failing grades and are sometimes dropped altogether. Debates on TV and radio and during election campaigns are heavily linked into proper words and expressions, and many subjects are now ruled beyond debate.

As an older writer, I have no intention of bowing to such pressures. On the other hand, I can't use any of the recent American dictionaries, because they are replete with distortions. I use Webster's Unabridged Second Edition, last issued in 1950, which is nearly unobtainable today.

In preparation for this talk I looked up the definition of the term *Humanism*. *First*, Human Nature or Disposition. *Second*, The study of the Humanities and polite learning, especially the learning or cultural impulse, imported by those who brought Greek and Roman classics into vogue during the Renaissance. *Third*, a mode or attitude of thought centering upon distinctly human interests or ideals, especially as contrasted with naturalistic or religious interests. *Fourth*, A contemporary cult or belief calling itself religious, but substituting faith in man for faith in God.

**“...they dazzled with all the lure of unpunished sin . . .”**

It would be nearly impossible to find a more succinct and accurate outline of the progress of what Webster's called “the cult” of Humanism. It began, as the last good dictionary of the United States says, in the Italian Renaissance – a cultural fashion, so to speak, that began at about the time of Dante's birth, and lasted to the death of Michelangelo. Of course, that's historical shorthand. Humanism, which began then, has not yet died – and in fact is flourishing today. Many aspects of Renaissance are still with us: the scholarly worship of ancient Greece and Rome, the rise of the State as despotic benefactor. New York City, for example, or London, are perfect examples of Renaissance cities, the elevated living standards and low morals. Like the Italy of past centuries, we have Humanists as educators, professionals and arbiters of our culture.

To describe Humanism is not enough: we must arm ourselves against it by understanding its methods, reasoning and tactics to such an extent that we can expose it as not only hollow but pernicious; as a disease exhumed from

the grave of the pagan past that brought Italy into seemingly permanent inferiority, which has debased our schools and corrupted the young, and will kill the Christian civilization unless it is scotched.

To arm ourselves with arguments against Humanism we should completely understand its appeal and its background, so that we can cite its results wherever it has gained a hold on a culture, beginning with its modern rebirth (for it is very ancient) in Italy.

“The Humanists,” wrote Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, “were a crowd of the most diverse sort . . . wearing one face today and another tomorrow; but they clearly felt themselves, and it was fully recognized by their time, that they formed a wholly new element in society.”<sup>1</sup>

He speculated that their immediate forerunners might have been the clerical vagrants of the 12th century – “the same unstable existence, the same freer and more than free views of life, and the germs at events of the same pagan tendencies in their poetry. But now, as competitors with the whole culture of the Middle Ages, which was essentially clerical and was fostered by the Church, there appeared a new civilization, founding itself on that which lay on the other side of the Middle Ages. Its active representatives became influential because they knew what the ancients wrote, because they tried to write as the ancients wrote, because they began to think, and soon to feel, as the ancients thought and felt.”

They were the men whose qualities varied from the ridiculous to the impressive, who brought Paganism back first to Italy, then to all Western Europe, whose admirers maintain the Humanist Cult among us, whose followers can be found in our universities, media, government and arts today.

***“It is impossible, therefore, to separate Humanism from a denial of God's laws.”***

The most important feature of Humanism, which must be understood at the outset, is that it is one of the vehicles used in the expansion of Governmental power. It provides a misleading gloss of learning to not only the decorative arts, but to human behavior, to history, to the theater, to education, to the professions, to religion and the State.

This may have developed slowly across the centuries in the ancient world, to transform the virile Greek civilization of Homer to the effete mobs of 5th century B.C., and to the intellectual and moral decline of the Romans from the great days of their Republic to their dreadful immorality under the Caesars. But the emergence of Humanism in Italy came with amazing speed.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*,: An Essay by Jacob Burckhardt, Phaidon Publishers, New York Graphic Society, 1955.

It was fueled at the start by the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman writings, which the Church has wisely kept sequestered in its isolated centers of learning during the Middle Ages. Their descriptions of unlimited power and immense wealth, of debaucheries, of the destructions of thousands and the abundance of slaves not only provided a contrast to the austerities and limitations imposed by Christianity during the Middle Ages: they dazzled with all the lures of unpunished sins.

The translators of these long semi-forbidden treasures came very quickly into remarkable eminence. Before they appeared, in 1300, everyone in Florence was said to be able to read, and even donkey drivers sang the verses of Dante. A popular encyclopedia was published, the people participated in public affairs, the city earned universal respect. After 1400, when the Humanists and their Latin appeared, “men looked to antiquity for the solution of every problem, and consequently allowed literature to turn into mere quotation.”

Dante was, of course, partly responsible for this. He was the first to bring antiquity into the forefront of Italian culture, and to treat the ancient and the Christian worlds as parallel. That he did so at a time when then Christian cycle of history was completely familiar added to his novelty and to the interest he aroused.

Other early Humanists achieved international fame. Petrarch, who looked at the ancient ruins of Rome and declared the Christian centuries to have been “The Dark Ages,” seemed to his contemporaries the reincarnation of an ancient scholar. He could write in all the styles of Latin poetry, as well as treatises on historical matters. This was the glittering surface. His underside was darkened by scatology, pornography and blackmail.

Boccaccio had an equally mixed vocation. Known all over Europe for two centuries for his Latin compilations of mythology, geography and biography, he answered arguments from the Church that these immersions into paganism were dangerous, by saying that there was no danger: true religion had triumphed long ago, paganism was dead; it was possible to study its corpse without danger. Meanwhile he wrote about revels amid the plague, adulteries and deceptions, bedrooms and betrayals.

It is impossible, therefore, to separate Humanism from a denial of God's laws. Prior to the revival of ancient literature, theater and politics, Italy – like the other areas of the Middle Ages were a number of independent city-states. These had inherited the liberties of the Middle Ages – liberties now forgotten and/or ignored by the general run of scholars.

It is also forgotten that these liberties, which laid the foundations of the Christian civilization and includes those often-discussed but seldom enjoyed today, came from the Church. “Feudalism had made land the measure and master of all things. With no other source of wealth than the soil, men depended on the landlord for a means to escape starvation, and his power became paramount over the idea of liberty and the power of the State. Every baron, said the French maxim, is sovereign over his own domain. The nations

of the West lay between the competing tyrannies of local magnates and of absolute monarchs, when a power was brought upon the scene which proved for a time superior alike to the vassal and his lord.”<sup>2</sup> That power was the Church.

That conflict lasted 400 years. If the Church had supported the kings it anointed, “all Europe would have sunk down under a Byzantine or a Muscovite despotism. [and] Although liberty was not the end for which they strove, it was the means by which the temporal and spiritual power called the nations to their aid. The towns of Italy and Germany won their franchises, France got her States-General and England her Parliament out of the alternate phases of the contest, and as long as it lasted it prevented the rise of divine right.”

“In the Middle Ages representative government, unknown to Greece and Rome, was nearly universal. “The methods of election were crude; but the

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principle that no tax was lawful that was not granted by the class that paid it – that is, that taxation was inseparable from representation – was recognized not as the privilege of certain classes, but as the right of all. Not a prince in the world, said Philip de Commines, can levy a penny

without the consent of the people. Slavery was almost everywhere extinct; and absolute power was deemed more intolerable and more criminal than slavery.

“The right of insurrection was not only admitted but defined as a duty sanctioned by religion. Even the principles of *habeas corpus* and the income tax were already known. The issue of the ancient state was an absolute state planted on slavery. The product of the Middle Ages was a system of states in which authority was restricted by the representatives of powerful classes, by privileged associations and by the acknowledgment of duties superior to those imposed by man.”<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the Middle Ages the feudal system had been so tightly organized that France, Spain and England fell easily into monarchies, but Italy remained a land of free city-States, until the rise of Frederick II and his infamous son-in-law, Ezzelino da Romano. Frederick fought the Church throughout his rule. He flouted its doctrines and used all his resources, after 1231, to create an absolute monarchy. Using Mohammedan patterns, he centralized the judicial and political administration of his realm, collected onerous taxes by force and eliminated all liberty. His subjects were forbidden

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<sup>2</sup>*Selected Writings of Lord Acton*, Vol. 1, “Essays in the History of Liberty”, Liberty Classics, Indianapolis 1985, pp. 32,33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

to marry outside his domain, freedom of study was restricted at the University of Naples for the first time in Western history (but not the last) and many industries were commandeered for his personal use.

Frederich's son-in-law, da Romano, deserves equal attention, because he was the first Italian despot to seize power without even a pretense at legality. For the first time a throne was seized by open murder. That example would be followed throughout the centuries of the Renaissance. Darkness, in other words, had descended upon Italy, and before it lightened it would envelop the Papacy, the Church and the people all Italian governments. Yet it was not Stygian; not unrelieved. The paradox of the Italian fate that was that it was accompanied by riches for the middle and the top, great expansions of science and exploration, a flood of new tools and techniques – and all the surface signs of success.

Tyrannies great and small arose in all the Italian city-States: in Florence and Genoa and Venice and Milan and others. Petrarch, the first and one of the most eloquent of the Humanists, rationalized the despot of Verona by describing him as the father of his subjects, their protector against all enemies, the maintainer of justice. Other Humanists followed, and they collectively created the great modern fiction of the ideal state, where the Prince was to take charge of everything. “Maintain and restore the churches and public buildings, keep up the municipal police, drain the marshes, look after the supply of wine and corn, to so distribute the taxes that the people can recognize their necessity; supply the sick and the helpless and give his protection and society to distinguished scholars, on whom his fame in after ages will depend.”<sup>4</sup>

Probably the worst service the Humanists provided, however, was to unearth the late Roman system of governance and jurisprudence.

Under the late Caesars the law became whatever the Prince declared. Torture was an accepted method of extracting ‘evidence.’ The Italians of Florence, Milan, Venice, Genoa and the other city-States lost their treasured freedoms: their votes, their right to resist taxation, to speak their minds, to be free. It was the Humanists was said this was good for them; that they were better off being ruled than being free, that money was worth their souls.

The Despots inhaled these arguments like perfume; it made their control not only smoother at a distance, but buttressed by scholarly learning at close hand. With all their crimes, they wanted to be admired not only in their lifetimes – but forever. With faith in Christianity plummeting, they turned toward the pagan idea of immortality: Fame. To be remembered became more important than immortality. After all, the holy shrines had been forgotten; painters had replaced saints, Condottieri [mercenaries, or contractors – ed.] replaced the nobility. Humanists provided the enamel, and rulers were described as superior in every way; wiser, bolder, more practical, more far-seeing, better. Their errors were muffled, their triumphs blared.

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<sup>4</sup> Burckhardt, *op., cit.*, pp 5,6.

By the fifteenth century all Italy outside the Vatican States was ruled by despots. Some slight idea of their morality can be gained by the fact that when Pius II was on his way to the Congress of Mantua in 1459, eight bastards of the house of Este rode to meet him at Ferrara, among them the reigning Duke Borso and the two illegitimate sons of his illegitimate brother and predecessor Leonello. The latter had a lawful wife, herself an illegitimate daughter of Alphonso I of Naples by an African woman. It was a time when the sons of the Pope founded dynasties.

There was what Burckhardt called “a natural alliance between the despot and the Humanist scholar, each relying on the other.” It was only natural in such circumstances that the Humanists began first as tutors to princely families, and then to head special Latin schools, which – for the first time – separated children from the Church schools where all were admitted – into two levels. In one, Latin, the language of scholarship, diplomacy and learning was taught; in the other, the Italian language of the people.

***“This is the period when novels first appeared, and it is interesting to note that when the theme was romance, it was usually in connection with adultery. . . .”***

This division entailed more than mere snobbery: it meant the creation of a different language for the learned than for everyone else. We see its influence among us today, whenever a profession has taken pains to create its own special language from which outsiders are barred, to the extent that the average citizen today is surrounded by a host of specialists who speak languages he cannot understand.

A natural consequence of the spread of Humanism in the Renaissance was that Humanists became secretaries for the despots and were usually in charge of correspondence. They became professors in the universities free of the strictures of the Church. This gave them influence enough to issue treatises and books on political matters. Machiavelli, one of their stars, wrote that the Prince was above morality. That absolutism has been cherished ever since by every ruling group.

It was about this time, however, that the Humanists fell from the favor of the upper classes – though they retained a hold on poets, historians, orators, and the common people. Their conceits had brought them into disfavor, but not only their conceits. Their careers were, as a rule, difficult to sustain. They were usually precocious as children, promoted by their parents into the unsettled life of wandering scholars, much like those of our university teachers who fail to achieve tenure.

The Humanists of the Renaissance, lacking the enormous and wasteful university system of the United States, had to rely upon the scattered courts

of the Italian city-states, the relatively small nobility class and the upper middle class and the vicissitudes of open competition with one another. "It was a life of excitements in which exhausting studies, tutorships, secretaryships, offices in princely households, mortal enmities and perils, luxury and beggary, boundless admiration and boundless contempt, followed confusedly upon one another, in which the most solid worth and learning were often pushed aside by superficial impudence."<sup>5</sup>

That brings to mind the fates of those Humanists among us today, in advertising and literature, journalism and the arts, edge professions like psychiatry and therapies of various kinds: the fates of all those millions who earn degrees that unfit them for trades and do not fit them for professions.

The Humanists in those days had the discomforts of losing a settled home, for earning a livelihood meant a series of moves. He grew tired of people and was made restless by the enemies he created, while his patrons frequently demanded someone new.

The historian is reminded of the Greek Sophists, who competed for pupils, but many of those were rich, and paid in gold. Eventually the people of Greece stoned them to death for killing their faith in the Gods and leaving their lives empty had it better than the Humanists after several centuries during which their learning ceased to be novel or exciting.

The Humanists also suffered from their excesses. Educated to believe that morality was unimportant or even unreal, they shared, whenever opportunities arose, in the aristocratic pleasures that they rationalized. This led to immense pride, and also to a total concentration upon themselves and their personal fates, at the expense of higher values.

None of this escaped observation and, in time, contempt. They accumulated a general reputation for vanity, a dissolute private life, immorality of all descriptions, heresy, atheism, insincerity and of being an evil governmental influence flattering the great and disdainful of the people.

All this could be said, of course, about the nobility and what was worse, about the Church. One can say that Humanism helped bring the Papacy down. The Popes with their mistresses and astrologers, their unbridled displays of wealth, their worldly pursuits and their wars, their ambitions for money, property and dominions, had themselves become followers of Humanism.

All this rolled up into a great national revulsion in the early 16th century. By then the morals of Italy had plummeted. Even Machiavelli noted it, and said, "We Italians are irreligious and corrupt above all others."

In the early 1500s the civilization of Italy had reached its peak, but its political ruin of Italy seemed imminent. A sense of foreboding spread throughout the land. It was the imagination of the "more highly developed

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Italian of this period,” thought Burckhardt, which “gives to his virtues and vices a peculiar color, and under its influence his unbridled egotism shows itself in its most terrible shape.” That’s a profound remark, because it is only faith in Christianity that can keep Man’s egotism in check.

“The force of the Italian imagination,” Burckhardt continued, “explains the fact that he was the first gambler on a large scale in modern times.” This mania spread through all Italy, from the 14th century onward. The great lottery-bank was called the Court of Rome. And a national lottery has been part of Italian life ever since.

More than one observer has commented also on the growth of vengeance as the single strongest element in Italian morality. Vendettas became part of the fabric of life. Claims of injured honor were accepted in the courts as valid reasons for murder, much as our courts accept the presumed outrage of minorities against their situation for their arsons and crimes. This rationale is a variation on the theme of vengeance.

This is the period when novels first appeared, and it is interesting to note that when the theme was romance, it was usually in connection with adultery. This slippage of morals ranged far. A murderer who kept a brave face on the day of his execution was openly admired and the dreadful facts of his murder were forgotten; today crowds appear to protect executions no matter how the victims suffered.

When social morality fades, when a sense of responsibility becomes dulled, public safety vanishes. After the death of the Duke of Milan in 1480 “all safety came to an end in provincial cities.”<sup>6</sup> In Parma the Governor, terrified by threats of murder, threw open the jails and let loose the most abandoned criminals. A wave of terrible crimes followed.

Churches were vandalized, and bands of brigands – a plague for which Italy eventually became famous – appeared throughout the land.

It was then that Luther visited Rome, and said it contained everything but an honest man. A short decade later, doom appeared in the form of an army of Spanish, German and even Italian mercenaries. They appeared before the walls of the Holy City; the center of Christendom, the richest city in Europe, found an opening and poured in to commit atrocities beyond number for weeks to follow.

It’s odd that the Sack of Rome is so seldom discussed, for it was one of the most significant events in Western history. It shattered Italy to such an extent that it has never since regained its footing as a major power. To this day it remains disunited. You meet a man from there today and ask where he’s from and he’ll say “Roma!” or “Genova!” – never Italy. It is a single nation only on paper; not in reality.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

Its spirit was broken in the Sack of Rome, and it has not yet recovered; it may never recover.

The punishment that befell Rome was Biblical in sweep and intensity, but even when it occurred men turned their eyes away from its significance. The Spanish ambassador, who saw and understood, told the fugitive Clement VII that he hoped that the Holy See would reform after this lesson. Clement, a dignified figure with a long beard, said, "I tell you that in this world the ideal does not correspond with the real, and he who acts from amiable motives is a fool."

He could not understand that he and his predecessors for several centuries had angered God with their impiety, their rebellion; their Humanism.

No doubt when Judgement arrives for modern times there will be equally obdurate, equally blind reaction. Even today the Humanists in American universities continue their Marxist studies, although the ruins of the people who suffered under that dwindling empire remains plain for all to see.

It was, of course, Luther and other Reformation leaders who saw. Young Calvin came to see: John Knox saw. The Reformation saved all northern Europe from the fate of Italy; it is our task to save what remains of Christendom from a repetition of the same debacle. For the Humanists we face today – and much of the Church – have returned to the troughs of the Renaissance.

As were the men of the Reformation, we are surrounded by new marvels of science, rulers who believe in absolute power, and Humanists whose praises of the State smother all debates, all contradiction. But like the men of the early 16th century we are aware of doom to come, and like them we will share in the new Reformation to come.

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