

Christian Humanism: More and Erasmus

What was humanism? How did the Italian Renaissance influence northern Europe?

How did humanism develop in northern Europe?

What was the contribution of Erasmus?

What was the importance of humanism for the Reformation?

Some introductory cautions: 1) modern meaning of 'humanist' usually someone who does not believe in God ('secular humanist') not relevant here

2) 'humanism' an anachronistic term, coined in Germany in 19th century

3) No humanist 'movement', in sense of organised society of people, or coherent programme of action: humanists had a range of philosophical, political and religious ideas, and sometimes argued furiously!

So what was humanism? Contemporaries used word *umanista* to refer to student or teacher of the *studia humanitatis* (grammar, rhetoric, poetry, moral philosophy, and history) – alternative to the traditional, 'scholastic' curriculum which emphasised formal logic.

Inspiration of classical antiquity: professors and students of the *studia humanitatis* modelled their writings on those of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

The heart of humanism: shared literary and cultural aims.

1) *bonae litterae* (good letters): concern with good writing and eloquence, needed for a text to bring forth a genuine moral or ethical response.

2) *ad fontes* (back to the sources): ancient texts corrupted due to copying errors and layers of commentary during Middle Ages; need to remove layer of 'corruption' and establish 'pure' texts, including of major figures of early Christianity (Church Fathers) and also of Bible itself. Conviction that purer editions would lead to moral reform, a new vitality and dynamism in religious life.

Italian Renaissance and Northern Renaissance: origins of humanism in Italian cities like Florence, Rome, and Venice, from later 14th century. Diffusion to northern Europe through

1) Visits of Italian humanists.

2) North Europeans going to Italy to study or serve as diplomats.

3) Letters: humanism an international 'republic of letters'; not just private correspondence, but intended to be widely circulated and read.

4) Books and printing: Italy, esp. Venice, centre of European printing industry Press of Aldus Manutius specialized in humanist editions of classical texts, often reprinted by presses in northern Europe.

Patterns of development in northern Europe:

1) The Empire. From late fifteenth century humanist poets and orators appearing at German universities and moving between them. German cities contained important humanistic circles.

2) England: far end of the world for many Italian humanists! But by end 15th century, significant contacts established: Most influential English humanist = lawyer Thomas More (1478-1535), friend of Grocyn, Linacre, Colet, and Erasmus. In 1516 published *Utopia*, the greatest achievement of English humanism – advocates reform through playful satire and complex layers of fiction.

3) France: medieval France maintained tradition of classic learning, and during Avignon papacy works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio well known.

Humanist Superstar: Erasmus of Rotterdam: by far most influential Christian humanist, and creator of ambiguous legacy. Advocate of the ‘Philosophia Christi’ (philosophy of Christ): a simple, ethical Christianity, unencumbered by unnecessary rituals and ‘superstition’ – ideals put forward in his *Enchiridion militis Christiani* (*Handbook of the Christian Soldier*) of 1503. Relentless mocker of scholastic ‘subtlety’, eg in his *Moriae Encomium* (Praise of Folly), 1511. But, Erasmus not an outsider or a rebel – receives patronage from popes, and aristocracy and royalty across Europe. Heart of Erasmus’s vision for reform is renewed engagement with original Christian source-text, New Testament (*ad fontes!*). Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (1407-57) compared Greek manuscripts against Vulgate and found hundreds of minor slips and errors. 1505 Erasmus publishes Valla’s notes, and in 1516 his own Latin and Greek version, the *Novum Instrumentum*. Enthusiastically welcomed by humanist supporters, but some conservatives thought to criticise Vulgate was to attack authority of the Church. Radical notes and translation choices – eg for Greek *metanoiēte* proposed *resipiscite* (repent) rather than Vulgate’s *paenitentiam agite* (do penance) – undermining sacrament of confession?

Humanism and the Reformation: Erasmus complains people are saying ‘I laid the egg and Luther hatched it’. Humanism conventionally seen as one of the ‘causes’ or ‘preconditions’ of the Reformation: encourages climate of criticism of received wisdom and traditional authority; Christian humanism often hostile to popular religion of shrines, relics, miracles, saints’ cults; shared emphasis on authority of the bible, and impatience with scholastic ‘obscurantism’. When Luther protested against indulgences in 1517, many humanists rushed to support him. Some early Protestant reformers were strongly humanist, especially Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland. In his fight against traditional theology, Luther used the Bible and the Church Fathers in their new humanist editions.

But... relationship not straightforward. Erasmus has initial sympathy with Luther, but never breaks with the Roman Church. Publicly falls out with Luther in 1525 over question of the freedom of the will (Luther’s stress on total depravity of mankind distinctly unhumanist!) Some leading humanists (eg Thomas More and John Fisher in England) ferocious opponents of Protestantism. Reformation *splits* Christian humanism: strong humanist currents in both the Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation. Most early sixteenth century Christian humanists wanted to revitalise the existing religious and devotional life of the Church with a new ethos or spirit. Protestant reformers saw basic problem not as a lack of ‘eloquence’ and good letters, or even an excess of ‘superstition’, or a lack of familiarity with the Bible – but that the basic theological teaching of the Church was fundamentally wrong! Their *ad fontes* meant tearing up centuries of Christian teaching, and starting again from the beginning...