

'Christ and Letters'

THE RELIGION OF THE EARLY HUMANISTS

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To start with, a tempting text for the anti-humanist; only let him take care how he reads it. In 1485-6 a Flemish Carmelite wrote to the Venetian scholar Ermolao Barbaro to compliment him on his work and ask some personal questions: is Barbaro married? Or is he a priest or a religious? Answer: I am neither this nor that nor the other: *paganus et spontis meae sum. Duos agnosco dominos, Christum et litteras; cetero sum liberrimus*¹ . . . Obviously, the context saves us from misreading that *paganus*; Barbaro is using classical Latin and the word here means simply 'layman'. And yet an unsympathetic reader might cavil still. That acknowledgement of *two* lords, Christ and . . . 'letters'! Did not our Lord tell us we cannot serve two masters? Certainly; all the same it might be unfair to jump to conclusions: better, for the moment, to keep Barbaro's phrase in mind as a kind of motto of the humanist mentality we shall be considering, epitomizing both the integration it aspired to and also, no doubt, the risks that it ran.

The *literary* sense of 'humanist' – as referring to 'one devoted to or versed in the literary culture called the humanities; a classical scholar, especially a latinist' (O.E.D.) – is almost obsolete in modern English, except in history books, where Humanism designates the revival of classical studies in the later Middle Ages and the currents of thought and feeling that it occasioned. A discreet definition on these lines is offered by the American scholar E. H. Wilkins: 'the scholarly strand in the Renaissance'; which in turn raises of course the question of what we mean by the Renaissance. As an historical term it obviously contrasts with 'Middle Ages'; there was, it is implied, a rebirth bringing those Ages to an end; and they, as 'middle', intervened between a time when something was alive and a second time when it came back to life; and so were a more or less dead or dormant epoch, an interval of darkness between two luminous eras. But the term Renaissance was coined in the nineteenth century and it can no longer mean the same for us as it

¹'I am a layman and my own master. I acknowledge two lords, Christ and letters; for the rest I'm entirely free'.

did for Michelet or Burckhardt; we know far more about the Middle Ages than they did and also more about the men who led the way out of those Ages, the humanists. For it must be allowed at the outset that these men *were* innovators; and, what is more, that they knew it. If the term Renaissance is of fairly recent coining, the idea, in some sense, was clearly present to the mind of Petrarch. But in what sense?

It was a dawning awareness of a difference between his culture, both in its literary instruments and its spiritual interests, and the culture of the preceding generations. Writing to Boccaccio in his old age Petrarch looks back over the change that had begun to take place in his lifetime and notes his own part in it: *ad haec nostra studia, multis neglecta seculis, multorum me ingenia per Italiam excitasse et fortasse longius Italia.*² Combining this text with others it would not be difficult to show that Petrarch, dimly perhaps but certainly, saw himself as standing culturally in a different world from that of Dante or Aquinas. And this was a very remarkable fact, for it implied a grasp of historical perspective such as no previous medieval writer had achieved; a sense of time and change which, passing from Petrarch to his friends and followers, became a distinctive mark of the humanist outlook, first in fifteenth century Italy and then throughout Europe generally. This is not, of course, to deny the limitations and errors latent in humanist history. But that is another story. What matters here is that Petrarch had discovered the Middle Ages. And at the same time, of course, he had discovered that earlier time which he found so much more congenial: Antiquity. But where did Antiquity end for him? With the demise of paganism? Did he think the Dark Ages began with Christianity? Indeed he did not. The culture he looked back to with longing included, or rather found its fulfilment in, the Catholic Church of the Fathers; the writers he admired and fed upon included Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome. Petrarch's Antiquity, his golden age, was, roughly, the millenium stretching between, say, Plato or Pythagoras and Gregory the Great, with its centre in the Incarnation of the Word – the centre which divided, but did not separate, the pagan world from the Christian. That millenium with its sages and saints, its poets and moralists, became Petrarch's inspiration and the norm by which he judged, not always justly, his own age. And the vision of it was his bequest to the humanists who followed him. All of them shared it, at least verbally and allowing for differences of emphasis, down to Erasmus and beyond: the vision of a world prepared,

²'I think I have roused the minds of many, in Italy and perhaps outside Italy, to an interest in these studies of ours which have been neglected for centuries'.

politically by the Roman empire and spiritually by the classical philosophers and poets, for the descent of God's Word; and then living on this divine-human heritage for a few happy centuries before slipping into a barbarous ignorance and oblivion which was now in its turn happily coming to an end.

Such, essentially, was the humanists' view of history; the condition both of their classicism and of their anti-medievalism. With a greater or lesser awareness of the problems it involved their classicism was basically Petrarch's: a Christian evaluation of Graeco-Roman culture as God's preparation of mankind for the Gospel, parallel in some way to the preparation recorded in the Old Testament. This system of two 'parallel' sacred histories is already manifest in Dante; but without Petrarch's sense of historical perspective and even (paradoxical as this may seem) with far less than the latter's sensitivity to the difference between Christianity and paganism. For Petrarch knew the classical world far better than Dante or any other western scholar since the fall of the Empire; and knowing it so well and valuing it so highly he was correspondingly sensitive to the problem the humanist must face who would also be a Christian. This problem he expressed chiefly in terms of an effort to reconcile his two main literary loyalties, to Cicero and to St Augustine. I shall return to this point later. Enough for the moment to state the two characteristic, and *prima facie* perhaps contrasting, features of late medieval humanism, as I see it; that it was a Christian movement, as essentially presupposing faith in the Incarnation; and that it was also, and no less, anti-medieval. And this view of the movement (so to call it) leads straight to the main question I want to raise in this essay, though I shall hardly do more than raise it: in what sense, if any, did humanism prepare for the Reformation?

But first let us glance back at that other view of our subject already attended to: the nineteenth century view of humanism, itself stemming largely from the rationalism of the eighteenth century. Now this rationalism in turn was indebted to fifteenth and sixteenth century humanism not only for its classical culture but also, more relevantly here, for its anti-medievalism. But while the old humanism, in attacking medieval culture, generally distinguished it, implicitly, from Christianity as such, by the eighteenth century that distinction had become blurred and faint, so that in Voltaire and his followers contempt for the Middle Ages goes more or less explicitly with contempt for Christianity too. The classicism of Voltaire is more pagan than that of Petrarch, Valla or Erasmus, and in him their anti-medievalism has

hardened and coarsened into an anti-Christian attitude. And something of this attitude, though not its coarseness, is to be found in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on Humanism (1959 ed.), where this term is defined as 'the attitude of mind which attaches primary importance to man and to his faculties, temporal aspirations and well-being'; and the writer, after adding that this point of view was particularly characteristic of the Renaissance, goes on to argue the familiar thesis that it was against the medieval 'belittling of man's natural condition' that the humanists reacted; against which, inspired by their pagan authors, they 'asserted the intrinsic value of man's life before death and the greatness of his potentialities'.

Now there is a grain of truth in this, but the emphasis seems to me so misplaced as to make me wonder how many humanist texts the writer had actually read and whether, rather than from those texts, he did not start from a pre-conceived idea of humanism, the idea that opposes man and man's aspirations to any divinity outside himself, and our present life to a future one. And this no doubt is what humanism is coming to mean, more or less, in modern English: man for man's sake. But that is not how the historical humanists, from Petrarch to Erasmus, thought of man and his purpose in life. The drift of scholarship over the past twenty or thirty years has been right away from the old facile association of humanism and paganism. And again, with regard to the humanist critique of medieval culture, it is very much easier now than it used to be – now that the effects of thirteenth century Aristotelianism have been tracked down fairly thoroughly, beyond the synthesis of St Thomas, into the profoundly unsettled century that followed him – to understand the religious temper of so much of the humanist anti-Scholasticism. This temper is particularly evident in Petrarch, but it certainly did not die with him. And Petrarch attacked contemporary Aristotelianism for a number of reasons, but chiefly because he thought it dangerous to piety; and no doubt his own philosophical principles were cloudy, but who would now deny that his anxiety was partly justified? What is harder to discern is the bearing of this and other aspects of humanist anti-medievalism on Catholicism as such. To what extent had the Church become identified with that medieval culture against which, or against impressive aspects of which, the humanists were reacting? How far did their criticisms touch the Church herself, at least by implication?

This I have called the main question; and I shall not presume to answer it, but only suggest (with no claim to originality) a line of

thought along which, it seems to me, one might proceed towards an answer. So I will first explain a little more clearly why I stress the religious and Christian aspect of humanism; then touch on its anti-medieval aspects; and finally suggest a conclusion or two concerning possible links between humanism and the Protestant spirit.

The religion of the humanists is best understood, perhaps, as a fresh effort on the part of a line of writers and scholars, mostly Italians, between the mid-fourteenth century and the end of the fifteenth to rethink and restate the Church's traditional attitude towards pagan classical culture; an attitude of qualified approval inherited from the Fathers, particularly St Augustine. Its classic formulation is in the *De doctrina christiana* where Augustine says that Christians can help themselves to anything of value in classical culture, which is a good deal: 'the elements of a liberal culture suitable for the service of truth, and some very useful moral teaching'.³ More eloquently St Ambrose had said the same thing in a phrase that was to mean much to St Thomas, the prince of the scholastics, and to Erasmus their tireless critic: *omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, a Spiritu Sancto est*.⁴ It might be thought that with such texts in hand humanism had gained its definitive *droit de cité* in Christendom and that no further disputes need have arisen on the subject. But by the mid-fourteenth century new factors had arisen or were arising which combined to create a new situation. We may distinguish a political factor and a literary one. The political factor – the less important one since its effect on the humanist issue was relatively short-lived – related to the way men thought about the Roman Empire: was it a triumph of virtue governed and guided by Providence or a large-scale effect of pride and lust for power? The central Catholic tradition, from the *De civitate Dei* to St Thomas's *De regimine principum*, had conceded not only, following St Paul, that the authority of the Caesars was in some sense divine, but even that the Roman conquests had been in some sense a triumph of human virtue. But to a certain extent the thirteenth century conflicts between Empire and Papacy had disturbed this tradition. On the Guelf side the fret of controversy bred an attitude of hostility towards secular Rome which could find, of course, some support in St Augustine and in tradition but was sharpened and embittered by the political situation as the century drew to its close. When in 1313 King Robert of Naples denounced the Roman Empire as 'robbery with violence' he only echoed what many supporters of the

³*De doctr. christ.* II, 60.

⁴'Every truth, whoever utters it, is from the Holy Spirit'.

Papacy were saying, as we know from Dante's passionate protests in the *Monarchia*. And Dante went to the other extreme, going so far in 'consecrating' Roman history as to provide easy game for the sarcasms of his Dominican critic Guido Vernani. Dante's political *romanità* was indeed an extreme case; none of the later humanists would go so far. For one thing the political situation had entirely changed by the end of the fourteenth century, and the Imperial idea was virtually extinct; so that when, a few decades later, Lorenzo Valla exalts Rome as an eternal force for good it is not the Empire but its language that he glorifies; and then – surprisingly in so unclerical a writer – goes on to turn his praise of Latin, the sacred language, into praise of the Papacy for having preserved it through the barbarous ages that followed the fall of the Empire.

The new literary factor, the revival of classical studies in the later Middle Ages, was a cause of conflict chiefly because it meant that the reigning scholastic culture now had a new and vigorous rival. The culture of Petrarch and his school was Ciceronian, a cultivation of the *studia humanitatis*, which meant in effect a turning in on man himself as the centre of interest, especially on man as a moral agent (the ideal of *virtus*) and as uniquely capable of speech (the ideal of *eloquentia*). The result was a wholly different temper and outlook from that bred by the Aristotelian renaissance of the thirteenth century. We can now see that this renaissance was in its way a genuine classical revival; it really did bring hellenism, in the form of Greek science and philosophy, into the Christian mind. But the humanists did not so regard it. They found its typical products unscholarly, pedantic, grossly obscure and inelegant, and finally spiritually mischievous. Of course they were unjust; but it would be equally unjust, I think, to write off their spiritual objections to scholastic culture as merely marginal to an attack whose true motives were only philological or aesthetic. No doubt these motives were sometimes uppermost. One might cite many passages in which the main charge against a medieval author or translator is either his ignorance or bad Latin or both. Typical is Leonardo Bruni's contempt for a standard medieval version of Aristotle as a barbarous hybrid mixture 'half Greek and half Latin'; or Valla's derisive dismissal of Isidore (whom Dante had placed in the heaven of the Sun with Aquinas and Bonaventure!) as *indoctorum arrogantissimus, qui cum nihil sciat omnia praecipit*.⁵ And yet the more one reads these men the more difficult it becomes to separate

⁵*Elegantiarum libri*, II (Preface): 'The most presumptuous of ignoramuses; knowing nothing he presumed to teach all things'.

their cult of learning (of a particular kind) and fine language from a moral and spiritual ideal which one can only not call Christian if one either taxes them with an extraordinarily well sustained insincerity (for the name of Christ is continually on their lips) or else judges them by the standard of a Christianity so anti-human as to verge on heresy.

One expression of that ideal – and one with an ancestry going back to Plato – is the humanist defence of poetry and the study of poetry. It appears chiefly in Petrarch and Boccaccio and their younger friend and disciple Coluccio Salutati. They are meeting the charge that poetry is dangerous to faith or morals or is simply useless. Petrarch's reply, reduced to essentials, is a statement of fact and a statement of principle. The fact, he says, is that the Fathers, our masters in Christianity, honoured poetry and made large use of it (isn't much of the Bible poetry), whereas you will look in vain for *poeticum aliquid* in the writings of heretics (Averroes? Ockham?) 'either because of their ignorance or because poetry has no affinity with their errors'.⁶ Not very conclusive, perhaps; but the remark gains more weight if we realize that the chief 'errors' Petrarch has in mind are almost certainly atheism and the denial of the soul's immortality; and that he regarded the poetic gift as a kind of inborn impression on the soul of the creative Word whence it derives, a sign of our being made to God's image.

So far as the humanist had any common theology and spirituality, this was Augustinian. It shows itself, characteristically, in a recurrent polemic against 'pure', i.e. secularized philosophy or science. Again and again – in Petrarch, in Salutati, in Pope Pius II, in Valla and Ficino and Erasmus – this theme returns; but its unsurpassed expression is Petrarch's tremendous and richly humorous assault on the impious Aristotelians, 'On my own Ignorance and that of Many Others'. Provoked by the sneers of some young Venetian intellectuals, that he was 'a good man but uneducated', Petrarch wrote the greatest of his prose works and one of the classics of Christian humanism. 'O Jesus', he exclaims, 'true God and source of our minds and of all true learning . . . grant me this at least, I pray, if nothing else, that I become a good man; which I can never be except I love you from my heart and duly worship you. For this was I born and not for learning . . .'. The whole argument turns on the Augustinian distinction between *scientia*, which is mere knowledge, and *sapientia*, which is knowledge of the right term of desire, known as such and therefore loved as well. There is no point in knowledge except to become good, and goodness consists in loving God in Christ;

⁶*Invective contra medium*, III.

and the way to this lies through self-knowledge. So that in the last resort there are only two things worth knowing, God and the self. It is the old Augustinian principle, but thoroughly reconciled, for Petrarch, with Cicero's ideal of the wisdom entirely focused on *hominis cultus*, the perfecting of man.⁷ For man entirely needs God and to know man is to acknowledge this need. If the Catholic humanists had no other claim but this on our respect it would be worth upholding – that in the face of a culture excessively atomized by the *ratio ratiocinans* they made, as a group, an impressive attempt to re-unite what they found divided, knowledge and virtue and poetry, into a whole and single religious wisdom.

But they did this as critics of their world, the medieval world, and while I have perhaps said enough to convey some notion of their anti-scholasticism, I have said nothing of, and can now do no more than allude to, the other chief aspect of their anti-medievalism, their general hostility to the religious orders and in particular to the friars. And this, of course, is a trend that links them, *prima facie* at least, with the sixteenth century Reformers. Not that it has not many antecedents in the free-spoken Middle Ages; just as (to mention another matter on which more should be said in this connexion) Valla's attack on the Donation of Constantine finds its obvious if less scholarly antecedent in the anti-papal invectives of Dante. And so Boccaccio's mockery of friars and nuns continues an existing bourgeois *motif* and is itself continued, without important additions perhaps, by Poggio and others in the next century; and so on down to the *Laus Stultitiae* of Erasmus. It was, in part, the self-assertion of one caste against another, and of rebels against an establishment; in part, sheer impudence; in part, genuine moral criticism. You will not find it in all the humanists; not, certainly, in the pious Petrarch who had close and cherished connexions with the Carthusians and the Augustinians; and not much in the later Quattrocento Florentines. Still, it was a fairly frequent humanist theme; and in one work, Valla's *De professione religiosorum*, it took a really dangerous form. For Valla was not content to ridicule monks and friars or criticize them by the standard of their own professed ideal. He attacked the ideal itself, arguing that there is no merit in religious vows since they add nothing except a fear-motive (the fear of breaking them) to the ordinary, common and sufficient Christian love-motive. 'Religious' are no more religious than other Christians; indeed they are less, as presuming to add a human complication to the 'way of Christ' in *qua nulla*

⁷*De finibus* III, xiv, 36.

professio nobis injungitur.⁸ No wonder Luther admired Valla more than any other Italian humanist. Of all their line he was the least respectful of tradition and seems the nearest in spirit to Protestantism. In him their common anti-scholasticism comes nearest to being a genuine criticism of traditional theological language; and their common tendency to *simplify* Catholicism, to reduce it all to 'I and Christ', comes nearest, perhaps, to a break with the Church.

⁸From Valla's defence of the *De profess. rel.*, in a letter to Pope Eugene IV, ed. J. Vahlen, p. 191: 'the way of Christ . . . where no religious profession is imposed on us'.

Catholic Historians and the Reformation—II¹

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The dangers which threaten the Catholic historian writing on controversial topics were all too plain in the works of Hilaire Belloc. Great as Belloc was as a writer, outstanding as he was in his capacity to recreate the past, he was nevertheless primarily a controversialist with a number of bees in his bonnet, and tragically, in many ways, he was a man in a hurry who had to turn out many books in order to support his children, who were, he said, crying out for pearls and caviar. All this helps to explain why Belloc, who was capable of being on occasions so brilliant an historian, wrote a remarkable amount of bad history. Moreover, partly because he had been denied the opportunity of pursuing his work without the perpetual nagging of financial worries, he turned on the university which had failed to give him the chance of exercising his undoubted talents, and built up a picture of official academic historians, stupid, prejudiced, deceiving their readers by a spurious critical apparatus and footnotes which on investigation did not support the text. The

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