

9. RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION: CONTEMPORARIES BUT NOT ALLIES

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I do hope that you are going to have the deepest sympathy for my contribution, because it really represents an attempt at the impossible. To force a whale into a sardine tin is no mean feat. And here one is expected to force not less than five whales (Renaissance, Humanism, Stoicism, Platonism and Calvin as representative of the Reformation) into the same tin. The titanic effort assumes even more heroic proportions when one considers that I have exactly fifteen minutes at my disposal in which to commit this academic crime.

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I am convinced that Calvin as a reformer (the theme of our congress) can only be fully understood and really appreciated if the background against which he grew up, developed, thought and wrote is also carefully studied.

This sixteenth century décor against which his life and work has to be considered is an extremely complex and many-sided one. There is an unbelievably wide range of factors which we have to keep in mind in the field of the church and religion, in the field of society and politics, and in the field of philosophy and theology.

There is a great deal of variation within each of the trends that we are going to deal with. Apart from that there is a strong degree of reciprocation among the various trends: Renaissance, Humanism and Stoicism can only be dissected neatly afterwards in theory.

In what follows I am merely going to attempt to isolate the deepest religious driving force behind the Renaissance and the Reformation.

The sixteenth century: a spiritual watershed

The turmoil in a number of areas was already noticeable in the late

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Middle Ages. The sixteenth century became an uneasy period of "Sturm und Drang" with many far-reaching events: repeated epidemics of the plague, agrarian and economic crises and large-scale urbanization with the resultant social upheaval.

A new mercantile middle class was established, and the farmers rebelled against injustices ...

This was also, however, a period of unprecedented broadening of horizons. Apart from the compass and gunpowder, ancient manuscripts and books of great age were discovered and studied. Through the voyages of discovery the world map was extended; the use of paper and of mobile printing, the development of schools and of universities, new ideas (such as those of Copernicus) all heralded the birth of a new world.

And the spiritual leaders were aware of this dawning. Over against the "dark Middle Ages" they began to see their own epoch as a golden epoch, a new epoch of light and enlightenment.

In the dawning of the new era in Western cultural history various intellectual trends came into being, each with the pretension of having *the* light, each secure in the belief that he and he only could offer new certainty and security to European man.

Whoever attunes his seismograph sensitively would see clearly that the ways diverged here. The sixteenth century represents the beginning of the end of the important role that Christendom played in the West for more than a millenium ($\pm 500 - \pm 1500$). At this time the secularization of the West started. A new paganism was born. At first it was a little unsteady, and sleepy-eyed, but it would soon conquer the West by storm.

In spite of the mutual dissatisfaction with the Scholastic past the ways slowly but clearly diverged. The Renaissance broke with the mentality of synthesis or compromise because it could not tolerate the Christian and Biblical element contained in Medieval thought. For the Reformation the synthesis between Christendom and ancient pagan thought became unacceptable for exactly the opposite reason, viz. because the Word of God did not come to full justice in it.

As to the question to which source one should turn for light in the new epoch there is no unanimity. The Renaissance looked for new

light in a totally different direction than the Reformation.

The Renaissance

We can already discern the difference in Early or so-called Christian Humanism and the thinkers of the pre-Reformation. Both sought to kindle their own flame at the cinders of the patristic age. The motives, however, differed. The precursors of the Reformation returned to Patristic thought, because they were fascinated by the *Scriptural* aspects of it, while early humanist thought was more interested in the question as to how the early Christian thinkers could simultaneously also be *Romans!*

This early form of Humanism was mainly a pedagogical movement, which sought a moral injection (to effect rebirth of church and religion) in the past.

Later Humanism still sought to redream the beautiful ideals of the past. These thinkers, however, delved even further back into the past. The period to which they returned to kindle their light was not so much that of the *Patres* as the Greek and Roman thinkers of Antiquity.

Here we have a still clearer leftish trend. The question now is not so much (as with the Early Humanists) how it is possible to be simultaneously Christian and Roman, but why it is not possible (as in Antiquity) to be purely Roman (that is pagan) in thought. The emancipation from church and religious bonds strengthened. Autonomous, assured, dignified and noble man emerged ever more clearly in spite of the Christian mentality of many individual humanists like, for instance, Erasmus.

Humanism was characterized by a scientific, literary and educational ideal based on a study of Antiquity. (It was confined more to intellectuals in comparison with the Reformation which was a more popular movement.) Humanism was the result of the process of fermentation instigated by the Renaissance in the field of the sciences. It did not, however, consist merely of the grouping of a number of disciplines. A new vision of life was presupposed in it. In his view of life the Humanist dreamt not only of a number of disciplines but also of the end result of schooling therein: a new world in which the new, autonomous man would be dominant.

All too soon the Humanists began to realize, however, that while a glorious past could be recreated in dreams, dreaming within the confines of one's study alone was not adequate to build a new culture. Repristination, after all, did not seem to hold the true answer. The clock of history could not be reset at will. Too much stress on the authority of the writers of Antiquity, for example, checked originality: noble man could not be inhibited thus!

Renaissance man (in this brief survey I do not distinguish sharply between Humanism and the Renaissance) thus took a further step: Man could be reborn of his own power. He did not need the midwife of Christianity any more than that of pagan Antiquity. Man could pull himself up by his own bootstraps and be the source of his own light.

One of the antique trends which beautifully complemented the new spirit of Renaissance man was Stoicism, represented in Antiquity by figures such as Cicero and Seneca. This was a school of thought in which man and his imperturbable moral duties stood in the centre. Renaissance intellectuals liked the doctrine of "back to nature" (in the place of the Scriptural one of grace). The Stoa, however, did not find the laws for moral life (*logoi spermatikoi* of the *Logos*) only in nature. These laws or measuring rods they considered to be implanted in the reasoning faculty of man. Man was thus basically his own lawgiver and autonomous. Rationalism, seminally already present in the Early Stoicism, was eagerly embraced by Renaissance man and would soon assume a leading role in the Western world.

As a result of the initial trend to return to the past, a number of schools of thought dating from Antiquity (such as neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Pythagoreism, Epicurism and Scepticism) had revivals in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. We cannot go into all these. We have to direct our attention now to a totally different group of men which found their light for a new culture and society elsewhere.

The Reformation

The reformers also had an aversion from scholastic Medieval synthetic thinking. They broke with it, however, for the exact opposite reason than the Renaissance did, viz. to enable the Word of God to be freed again. Their thought can be regarded as being clearly anti-synthetic, spiritually directed to the right.

The reformers learnt a great deal from Antiquity. Like the precursors of the Reformation they also returned in many respects to the Church Fathers. The motive, however, lay in the fact that the *Patres* could be regarded as representing a purer period in the history of Christendom. Thus Augustine was for Calvin in the first place a guide back to the Word of God.

The Reformation clearly sought its source of light elsewhere. It did not look at pagan Antiquity; it did not look at the enlightened, noble, educated man come of age and reborn through his own devising, following the light of his own intellect. Whether one sought authority from the Pope or from enlightened man was in the eyes of the Reformers equally wrong.

Light for them emanated not from the earth but from Above. The Reformation sought not merely historical change on the horizontal level, but religious change on the vertical level of the relationship of man to God and his Law; not conversion to the past or reaction against the past or conversion from one's own power, but conversion to God and to his Word. Absolute authority belonged to God alone. The Word is the only source of light.

Calvin puts to the test the spirit of the times

It would be wrong — as many are so prone to do — to regard Calvin, out of a sense of piety, as a sort of sixteenth century Melchisedek: a man without beginning or background. He grew up within a certain period and was in many respects a child of his time. From his youth onwards he came into daily contact with all the spiritual trends of his environment. One could even say that his own thinking developed out of a continuing dialogue that he conducted with the various trends of thought current in his lifetime.

It would be wrong to try to explain Calvin's thought merely from extra-Biblical influences. It would be equally wrong, however, to claim that he underwent no influence other than the Bible.

A few remarks regarding Calvin and Humanism, Stoicism, and Platonism should serve to illustrate this.

Humanism

According to experts, Calvin was influenced especially by that type of

Humanism in which Philology, as a result of the literary renaissance, played an important role. This group, in their return to the sources, developed a specific historical philological method which prescribed an attitude of reverence towards the texts of Antiquity. The historical awareness and the effort to be objective towards the sources and to let them speak for themselves was a novelty.

Calvin had a lot to thank Humanism for in this respect. He assumed a similar attitude to the Scriptures. It was an enormous forward step that in his exegesis of the Scriptures he broke with the centuries-old allegorical exegesis, because this had been an important method for reading all sorts of foreign ideas into the Bible and thus effecting a synthesis between Scripture and pagan concepts.

Stoicism

The fact that Calvin's very first writing was a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, would seem to indicate just how intimately he was aware of this school of thought. Some would suggest that Calvin's thought was in fact none other than "baptized Stoicism". The other extreme is represented by those who would plead that there is no evidence whatsoever of Stoic influence on Calvin.

One could, of course, use the concept "influence" in different ways. Personally I think influence of the Stoa can be detected on Calvin's idea of *lex naturalis* and, concurrently, his idea of *semen religionis* and *conscientia* (conscience).

Platonism

In research in this field one again has to do with two extreme viewpoints. Where some sin *per defectum* (by omission) by maintaining that Calvin had put aside completely the Platonising tendency (of Augustine, for example), others sin as it were *per excessum* (by commission) by totally over-estimating the influence of Platonism on Calvin.

My own tentative research in this field have convinced me that Calvin's thought underwent influence from Plato (and the neo-Platonists?) not only in the formal sense of word usage but also as regards content. His view of man (especially the way he sees the relationship between body and soul) is perhaps the clearest evidence of this.

I would not, however, go so far as to call Calvin a Platonist. That would presuppose a relationship of master and scholar which in this case definitely did not exist. What Calvin found useful in Plato he used — without becoming a disciple intent on confirming his master's ideas and careful that not one facet of it be changed.

It is a pity that limited time does not permit me to put a few quotations from Calvin's works on the table to illustrate what has thus far being stated only in very general terms about possible influences of Humanism, Stoicism and Platonism. I do hope it will be possible during discussion of this paper.

Recapitulation

The Renaissance, with all the philosophical schools it revived in the sixteenth century, was at heart a religious movement to the left, away from the Word of God and the God of the Word. Calvin's religious bias was to the right. He was imbued by a different spirit.

Renaissance in essence was a rediscovery of Antiquity, a revival of original *paganism*. The essence of Reformation was the rediscovery of the Word of God, of genuine *Christianity*.

For that reason one has to be very careful not to come to the conclusion that Calvin was influenced by a specific philosophical school merely on the basis of similar word usage and parallel intellectual patterns. A more detailed analysis is necessary in which the relevant systems (e.g. the entire anthropology) can be fully and carefully compared.

One often gets the impression that Calvin did not take the philosophical material of his times too seriously. He normally dealt with it in a remarkably nonchalant manner. He used philosophical ideas as an illustration of the truth rather than as a guide to the truth. His thought was not carried by these ideas, but these ideas did contribute to the clarification and explication of what he was trying to say. Many times he mentions a certain viewpoint merely to bring out the contrast with his own ideas more clearly.

Calvin's use of Humanism, Stoicism and Platonism can be said to be eclectic rather than systematic. As far as I know, one finds no attempt in his work of a sustained systematic argumentation to deal with a specific philosophy fully and to argue in its favour.

All of this, however, does not take away the fact that Calvin did, as regards some of his ideas (such as his concept of natural law and his anthropology) immersed himself deeply in the philosophies of his time. Whoever reads what Calvin wrote in an unbiased fashion in the light of preceding history would have to acknowledge this.

Calvin's independence, however, is the most striking feature, guaranteed by the fact that the Source of his thought was the Word of God. Perhaps one should not evaluate Calvin negatively by the extent to which he submitted to extra-Biblical influences, but rather positively by inquiring to the extent to which he made a contribution to our renewed better understanding of the Word of God.

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Although it has not happened within the prescribed time limit, the crime has been committed and the whale is safely ensconced in the tin.

You see, Calvinism does not prevent one from sinning. The only thing is that it takes the enjoyment from the act of sin!

P.S. For an elaboration in more detail (with bibliographical references) of the material discussed see Chapter 8 ("The intellectual decor of the Reformation with special reference to Calvin") of my book *Anatomy of Reformation*. Potchefstroom, Potchefstroom University for CHE, 1981 (page 164-214).