New Patterns of Renaissance Thought: Secularism and Humanism

The Renaissance, influenced by classical ideas of Greece and Rome, began in Italy and spread its ideas across Western Europe in the 15C. The main themes of the Renaissance, secularism and humanism, had significant impacts on Western Civilization.

Secularism comes from the word secular, meaning “of this world”. Before the Renaissance, medieval Christian civilization had been largely concerned with faith and salvation in the afterlife. The new economic and political opportunities opening up for Western Europe in the Late Middle Ages encouraged more people to take an interest in this world. During the Renaissance people started to see life on Earth as worth living for its own sake, not just as an ordeal to endure before going to heaven. The art of the period in particular exhibited this secular spirit, showing detailed and accurate scenery, anatomy, and nature. Medieval artists generally ignored such realistic aspects in their paintings which focused only on the glory of God. This is not to say that Renaissance people had lost faith in God. Religion was still the most popular theme for paintings during the Renaissance, but people were finding other things worth living for.

Humanism relates to secularism in that it is the concept that places human beings, not God or faith, as the center of attention in life. Renaissance art, which portrayed the human body as a thing of beauty in its own right, not like some medieval "comic strip" character whose only reason to exist was for the glory of God. Along those lines, Renaissance philosophers and writers saw humans as intelligent creatures capable of reason (and questioning authority) rather than mindless pawns helplessly manipulated by God. Even the term for Renaissance philosophers, "humanists", shows how the focus of peoples' attention had shifted from Heaven and God to this world and human beings. It also described the group of scholars who drew upon the more secular Greek and Roman civilizations for inspiration.

Renaissance Literature and Learning

Education throughout the Middle Ages was very limited and what did exist was centered on the Church. Consequently, most books of the Middle Ages were of a religious nature. There were Greek and Roman texts stashed away in some monasteries, but few people paid much attention to them. All that changed during the Renaissance. Increased wealth from wider trading networks and the invention of the printing press created an audience that could afford an education and printed books. Most of these newly educated people were from the noble and upper middle classes. Therefore, they wanted a more practical and secular education and books to prepare them for the real world of business and politics.

In response to this, new schools were set up to give the sons of nobles and wealthy merchants an education with a broader and more secular curriculum than the Church provided: philosophy, literature, mathematics, history, and politics instead of just theology became areas of study. Naturally much of the basis for this new curriculum was Greek and Roman culture. Classical authors were used to teach students how to think, write, and speak. Greek and Roman history were used to teach lessons in politics. This classical curriculum provided the skills and knowledge seen as essential for an educated man back then, and served as the basis for school curriculums across the world into modern times.

Along the same lines, a more secular literature largely replaced the predominantly religious literature of the Middle Ages. History, (Greek and Roman history in particular) was more valued in order to learn lessons to apply for the future. Another emerging new area of study deeply rooted in history also emerged: politics. The “father” of practical politics was Italian nobleman Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). His book on governing techniques, The Prince, urges leaders to carry on with whatever ruthless means were at his disposal. Another book of a secular political nature was Castiglione's, The Courtier, which spelled out the ideal education and qualities of a leader needed.

Renaissance Art

Visual art is the one field most people associate with the Renaissance since it saw the most radical innovations and break with the Middle Ages. Medieval art was religious in tone and created only for the glory of God. As a result, medieval artists neglected life-like details making their art flat and lifeless. Faces and bodies were cartoon like, having no individual features or anything approaching anatomical detail. Other features such as background, perspective, proportion, and individuality were all virtually unknown in the art of the Middle Ages. Renaissance art contrasted sharply with medieval art in all these respects. More paintings illustrated secular themes and even the religious paintings paid a great deal of attention to glorifying the human form and individual human accomplishments.

Discuss: How did Renaissance education, literature and art represent the trends of Secularism and Humanism?
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