

# The Renaissance

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – An overview of the period of the Renaissance and the rise of humanism
2. aim – To cause us to see the influence of Renaissance thinking before the Reformation

### b. outline

1. The Course of Scholasticism
2. The Nature of the Renaissance
3. The State of the Church

### c. overview

1. the “medieval” period (**now**) comes to an end as we approach the 16<sup>th</sup> C.
  - a. the 15<sup>th</sup> C. church in the W (centered at Rome) *is* the only Christian church *in the W*
  - b. the 15<sup>th</sup> C. is the W church at her most *desperate*:
    1. the course of theology becoming one of *intellectual* and *religious* fervor
    2. the rise of *humanism* infecting the church with a man-centered approach to life
    3. the revival of *antiquity* changing the focus of art and literature away from the spiritual
    4. the papacy at the *zenith* of its corruption, dragging the church into apostasy
  - c. **IOW**: the perfect storm of circumstances and individuals that would give rise to a movement to *reform* the church – a situation so *dire* that it literally “squeezed” men into the position of *needing* to address the realities of the Christian church in their day
2. so, we need to understand the thinking of the times (as it invades the church) in order to understand *why* the Reformation is able to break out *and take hold* ...

## I. The Course of Scholasticism

### Content

#### a. the course of scholasticism with Aquinas

1. scholasticism = a system of theology and philosophy based on Aristotelian logic and the early church fathers, having a strong emphasis on tradition and dogma
  - a. **i.e.** a new time of *rational thinking* paired with *religious faith* – is there *logic* to the Christian religion?
  - b. although more of an *asset* to the Golden Age, the rise of new theological activity would *aid* in ushering in the Renaissance and the Reformation (**i.e.** the collapse of the Golden Age)
2. scholasticism continued down its *logical* path (**pun**): logic and reason can be the *entire means* of understanding God and the world around us (**i.e.** the movement to inculcate logic into Christianity moves to the place where logic and reason *push aside* biblical revelation and faith)
  - a. first, it focused on ever subtler questions to pose, and even finer distinctions to answer them
    1. **e.g.** can God make a rock so big that even he cannot lift it?
    2. since the questions were so *esoteric* (**i.e.** understood by only a few), the answers required a highly nuanced (and virtually unintelligible) technical vocabulary
  - b. second, it produced a rift between philosophy (reason) and theology
    1. **e.g.** is God *only* knowable through revelation, or can man reason him “into” existence
    2. literally, a push *away* from the idea of Christianity being based on that which is *revealed* to that which can be known *only through reason* (**e.g.** the Jesus seminar and the Gospels)
  - c. third, it helped to *finalize* what had been a serious error in the church for centuries: that salvation is a *goal to be attained* by human action
    1. **e.g.** the nature of the Eucharist in the Mass being *salvific*, a pious work that “earns” favor
    2. since human reason and logic are able to address *every human need*, it is *logical* that our standing before God would be based on our actions in this world (**i.e.** since we will be judged for our actions) – **IOW**: the natural *fallen* tendency to think *we can* address our limitations
3. the scholastics, in their *detailed thinking*, elevated the cause of reason over faith, philosophy over theology, and produced an environment ripe with *intellectualism* over simple faith
  - a. **e.g.** John Duns Scotus (the Subtle Doctor) – his writings were so subtle that they can only be understood by those who have spent many years studying them

- b. however, Scotus' writings *do* demonstrate something: that this form of "theology" was far too intellectual to be sustained, and there were specific "push backs" against it
  - 1. **e.g.** he himself did so – denying that reason *alone* could prove the idea of God's existence
- c. **IOW:** *after* Aquinas and his contemporaries, something happened to this way of thinking that would become the *basis* of a "divergence" out of the Reformation:
  - 1. some would react against it with a full-blown "simplistic" faith, with little intellectual bearing other than accepting what was taught by the church (**i.e.** the modern Catholic)
  - 2. others would react against it with a more *biblical rationality*, going back to the Bible and arguing *from it* in a rational fashion *rather than* starting from creation and working back towards God
    - a. **e.g.** Luther's understanding of justification from **Romans 1:16f**; Calvin's *Institutes*; etc.
- d. the following are some examples of "push back" against this *extreme* intellectualism ...

## b. the reaction against scholasticism after Aquinas

1. William of Occam (Ockham; 1280-1349)
  - a. known for his "razor" = one should not pose the existence of anything *not necessary* to respond to a question or explain an event (or, the simplest explanation is usually the correct one)
  - b. **ITC:** God exists, not because a whole series of rational arguments for his existence need to be made (**i.e.** Aquinas' Five Ways), but because it is the *simplest* explanation for the evidence all around (**e.g.** the *order* in the universe suggests a creator; evolution *adds* complexity)
    1. the existence of God is accepted *by faith*, and (by extension) the fact that he is *omnipotent*
    2. therefore, because God is *omnipotent*, he is not limited by human reason
      - a. it is God who determines what is evil and what is good, not human beings
      - b. it is God who acts according to his own sovereign will, not the will of human beings
      - c. it is God who *chose* to act through the Incarnation of his own Son to save humans – although God *could have* (reasonable and logically) simply "cancelled" the sins of humanity, he *chose* purposely (according to his decree) to enter into the created order and die for sin
  - c. **IOW:** the human mind cannot fathom the mysteries of God – because of the *omnipotence* of God, all of our efforts to understand him must either:
    1. cease – meaning that human beings must simply accept the existence of God *blindly* (**i.e.** the path that many in the W church decided to follow)
    2. be conformed to what is revealed in Scripture – that human beings must acknowledge the *revealed* nature of what is known about God *and stay within that stream* (**i.e.** the path of many in the Reformation to bring about a more *systematic* view of theology)
2. the question of authority (**i.e. the fundamental question**)
  - a. if human beings *cannot* understand the fullness of God rationally, *who* can provide *authoritative* explanations of him (and of the requirements upon humans in the face of God's *omnipotence*)
  - b. **e.g.** Occam believed that popes and councils could err, and only the Bible was infallible
  - c. so, the movement during the Conciliar period (**see before**) was to put trust *in universal councils*
    1. if popes were fallible, then *councils of men* could provide the answers
    2. **e.g.** John Huss was commanded to recant before the authority of the Council of Constance – if he was able to argue *against* the council, its authority would be diminished
    3. **i.e.** since the power of *reason* is so incapable of producing true authority, then the *council* must be considered the final authority
  - d. **IOW:** the issue of authority would become *one of the central tenets* of the Reformation – who/what is the final authority of all matters of faith and practice? answer: *sola Scriptura*
    1. **i.e.** reason, logic, a pope, a council, etc. are *incapable* of bringing authority to faith – thus, the church was set for men to step up and make the case for Scripture as authoritative

## II. The Nature of the Renaissance

### Content

#### a. the nature of the Renaissance

1. renaissance = rebirth; a cultural movement (and historical period) marking the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity through the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> C.
  - a. it traces its origins to Florence in Italy, but its impact was felt throughout Europe
  - b. fundamentally, the Renaissance was a movement to "rebirth" the ancient Roman idea of the *humanitas* (**see below**) and the "rediscovery" of Greek philosophy
    1. **i.e.** the "middle ages" in between, the term describing that period as a "negative intermission"
    2. **i.e.** the "middle ages" was (to them) a period of decadence when compared to the ancient Roman empire, and (therefore) promoted a rebirth of that ancient civilization

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- c. however (in fairness), much of the thinking of the time was simply a *continuation* of what was already happening in the late medieval age
- 2. humanism = the belief system that humans are at the center of the universe, that *they* are the measure of all things; **i.e.** Protagoras (c. 490BC): “man is the measure of all things”
  - a. it is *formally* a study of the humanities (**i.e.** the liberal arts; the study of subjects like literature, philosophy, mathematics, social and physical sciences as distinct from *professional* studies, including *theology*)
  - b. but, humanism mostly became the *inordinate* and *specialized* study of “being human”
    - 1. **e.g.** “secular” humanism is the belief that human beings *are capable* of morality and self-fulfillment without belief in God; a focus on humanity “at the center” without reference to a Creator or *objective* standard outside of what human beings can
- 3. the Renaissance and humanism are linked *intrinsically*: the focus was on the *unique* nature of man, and it led to a massive cultural movement, sweeping through the arts, literature, sciences, etc.
  - a. **e.g.** Johan Gutenberg’s invention of the movable-type printing press in 1439
    - 1. he originally intended his invention to allow him to mass produce manuscripts of books, already “in print” for large sums of money; he did not originally publicize his machine
    - 2. but, the printing press became a means for humanists to duplicate the writings of antiquity
    - 3. eventually (~80 years later) that machine would be used to communicate to the masses and become a significant tool of the Reformation
      - a. the Gutenberg Bible (an edition of the Latin Vulgate) was published in 1450
  - b. one of the most significant parts of this movement was the beginnings of *textual criticism* – the science of studying ancient texts to discover their original content and purpose
- 4. combined, the Renaissance as a movement undergirded by humanism created a new vision of reality
  - a. art turned from primarily *theological* subjects to human “splendor” (**e.g.** Michelangelo’s vision of Adam in the Sistine Chapel paints a very different view of the man from the medieval ideal; he is receiving the power of God to rule over creation, rather than the frail man of the middle ages)
  - b. science turned from God’s creation to the ability of humans to make their “imprint” upon the world
    - 1. **e.g.** Leonardo da Vinci – his painting and sculpting alongside his scientific interests was to establish himself as the “universal man”; the view of humanity having unlimited capabilities

## II. The State of the Church

### Content

#### a. the effects of the Renaissance on the church

- 1. the effect on the church herself was simple: Renaissance thinking (in humanism) pushed back *hard* against the authority of the church to define reality
  - a. many of the popes of the age *embraced* Renaissance art, and spent their pontificates building and decorating Rome, pushing “Christianity” to being something of *beauty* and *honor*
  - b. but, some of the popes of the age tried to *fight against* the cultural forces, for it eschewed their power, but most were carried away by the spirit of the age, in their love of pomp, despotic power, and sensual pleasure
- 2. it is into this world that Martin Luther appears ...
  - a. the entire culture of W Europe is moving away from Christianity (or so it seems), and the papacy has reached the zenith of her corruption, making Christianity nothing more than a set of religious practices without thought within a world focused more on *human beings* than on God