

RENAISSANCE and REFORMATION

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Introduction

This paper narrates an epic tale that begins in 1453 with the Fall of Constantinople, the end of the Hundred years War and the printing of the Gutenberg Bible. It can be taken to end with the death of Elizabeth I of England in 1603. During this period, both economic and political power shifted from the Mediterranean Sea to the upstart national monarchies north of the Alps – a truly epochal transfer of cultural dominance away from the Mediterranean Sea whose very name reflects its historic position at the center of the European world. To a remarkable extent, this epic is also the story of one Florentine family: the Medici. Its members and protégés dominated Renaissance Florence, occupied the papacy at the outbreak of the Reformation, ran the French regency during the early French wars of religion and, during the counter-reformation, provided a queen for King Henry IV of France. Later, the tutor they employed for their sons was a man named Galileo Galilei who had a spot of trouble with the Papal Inquisition. The list of Medici protégés include Brunelleschi, Filippo Lippi, Donatello, Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Pico della Mirandola, Vasari, Bronzino and Galileo. The musical *opera* originated largely as an entertainment devised for the Medici ducal court in 1598.

Giovanni de Medici was a Florentine wool merchant whose money lending business made him the wealthiest man in the city. Under his son, Cosimo, the Medici Bank became the greatest financial enterprise in Europe. The Medici were both shrewd and bold. Early in their rise, they sponsored the ecclesiastical career of a rogue named Baldassare Cossa. When this rogue became Pope John XXIII (or, more precisely, the Roman anti-pope during the Great Schism while another papal claimant reigned in Avignon), he rewarded the Medici by designating them as papal bankers. As collectors of papal revenue across Europe, they established a vast international banking network throughout the continent. Cosimo's success made the Medici the leading family of Florence. As upstarts, however, their need for social legitimacy was acute. They sought and acquired their social status through that extraordinary sponsorship of artistic endeavor that we know as the Florentine Renaissance.

In 1500, Europe was still the maze of local states that was a residue of its past. Already emerging in Northern Europe, however, were the relatively efficient bureaucratic national monarchies that would dominate political life until the French Revolution. Also emerging was a new cultural sensibility – robust, pietistic, and spiritually introspective. In time, the

contrast between its earnest outlook and that of the urbane, sensually self-indulgent Italians would culminate in the cultural clash of the Protestant Reformation.

The Renaissance

The Italian Renaissance: Florence

The sprawling tale of the Italian Renaissance can be imagined, a bit simplistically, as a tale of three cities: Florence, Rome and Venice. By 1453, many of the great artistic milestones had already been achieved. Brunelleschi had built the cathedral dome that still dominates the skyline of Florence and had revolutionized art by inventing the system of vanishing point perspective that was to be employed by Massaccio in painting and Donatello in sculpture. The famous [Gates of Paradise \(Plate A\)](#) doors for the Baptistery had recently been completed by Ghiberti. In fact, after 1453, the process that would lead to the eventual end of Italian dominance had already begun. Ironically, the greatest period of Italian creativity occurred as its political and economic prospects were actually in decline.

During the second half of the fifteenth century, several factors conspired to shift the balance of political and economic power northward from Italy to the Atlantic states. The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 meant that the Mediterranean Sea was no longer an Italian lake. Further, the small political units of Italy could hardly hope to compete with the emerging monarchical bureaucracies of Spain, France, England and the Hapsburg empire. In 1454, in response to the threat of invasion and political meddling from France and the Empire, Florence, Milan and Venice joined in mutual defense in the Treaty of Lodi. This pact brought the four decades of relative peace that allowed for the flowering of Florentine cultural life under Cosimo and Lorenzo de Medici. This was the age of Botticelli and of Josquin des Pres. As noted above, the Medici patronized both Leonardo and Michelangelo. Indeed, when Michelangelo was thirteen, he was virtually adopted by Lorenzo who gave him his own quarters in the Medici palace where he dined with Lorenzo's own sons and mingled with the glittering cultural circle of the Medici court. He always viewed Lorenzo as something of a father figure. The Medici domestic circle, embracing, as it did, some of the greatest artists and thinkers of the time, must have been a wonderful setting in which to nurture this exuberant artistic genius.

Indeed, if one were to form an impression of Renaissance Florence from a stroll through the Uffizi or the Louvre, one might be tempted to view it as an idyllic celebration of cultivated humanity. A more accurate image would be that of a collection of Mafia chieftains with extensive resources and superlative taste. The reality of the violence of Florentine family rivalry

makes Shakespeare's depiction in *Romeo and Juliet* seem like an elegant pageant. In Florence, the Medici and the Pazzi (another banking family and their closest social and political rival), played Montague and Capulet with ruthless abandon. For example, in 1478, Pope Sixtus IV wanted to solidify his control over central Italy. To further his plans, he conspired with the Pazzi family to assassinate both Lorenzo de Medici and his brother Giuliano. On Easter Sunday during High Mass at the cathedral – at that most sacred moment of the consecration and elevation of the host – Giuliano de' Medici was stabbed to death and Lorenzo was wounded. The enraged Florentines seized and killed the conspirators – hanging one of the conspirators who happened to be an archbishop. The pope responded by placing Florence under a papal interdict and persuaded Naples to attack the city. With no help coming from Florence's traditional allies in Bologna and Milan, only Lorenzo's brave and skillful personal diplomacy saved the day. He sailed to Naples, put himself in the hands of the Neapolitan king and, after a three month captivity, convinced the king that the pope was an unreliable ally. Lorenzo was then allowed to return to Florence in triumph.

The Florence of Cosimo and Lorenzo de Medici was the center of an emerging and revolutionary secular humanism – not to be confused, however, with what is called secular humanism in our own time. The Enlightenment was still centuries away. The humanism of the Medici court was a Christian secular humanism. It embraced the paganism of the ancients as exemplified in the early masterpieces of Botticelli like [Spring \(Plate B\)](#) and [The Birth of Venus, Plate C](#) with their frank and unapologetic celebration of sensuality and fertility, as well as the daring evocation of seductive homoeroticism in Donatello's [David \(Plate D\)](#). Nevertheless, all of its leading figures remained sincere and even fervent Christians. They were secularists, but not Deists. Nor were they medieval Christians. They embraced the “Good News” of the Gospel of Christ while refusing to view life in this world as despicable, and the human mind and body as objects of contempt. They in no way believed that earthly existence is a mere vale of tears; that one ought to renounce earthly pleasures if one hoped to achieve eternal salvation. On the contrary, they glorified the naked human body and all of the rest of God's creation – and asserted that the ancient pagan cultures had much to teach about living a moral life. I know of no better graphic exemplar of their commitment to the harmonious synthesis of pagan and Christian visions than Michelangelo's Doni Tondo of [The Holy Family \(Plate E\)](#). In the realm of philosophy, the attempt at a pagan and Christian synthesis reflected a perennial tension in Christian culture. Augustine, Aquinas and Abelard had all tried to baptize either Plato or Aristotle. In each case, such attempts evoked the conservative retort that Jerusalem had no need of Athens. Augustine had his Tertullian, Aquinas and Abelard had Bernard of Clairvaux and the Florentine humanists had

Girolamo Savonarola – and ultimately that radical rejection of the Renaissance synthesis that we know as Protestantism.

Toward the end of Lorenzo's life, Florentine humanism experienced what Gilbert Murray, in another context, described as "a failure of nerve." The assertive confidence required to support the revolutionary claims of Christian secularism had become harder to sustain in the face of growing Italian disunity. Florentines now began to give credence to the apocalyptic ravings of the man whom Lorenzo had appointed abbot of the monastery of San Marco and whom he summoned to his death bed only, it is claimed, to have Savonarola refuse to grant him absolution.

Two years after Lorenzo's death in 1492, Charles VIII of France invaded the Italian peninsula. Savonarola, who opposed both the Medici and the papacy on grounds that both were worldly and corrupt, had predicted and even welcomed the French invasion. With the Medici driven from power, Savonarola took virtual control of the Florentine republic. A remarkable wave of religious revivalism engulfed Florentine society. In time, Savonarola's followers came to include both Botticelli and Pico della Mirandola. Finally, the papal forces and Savonarola's enemies defeated him. The fanatical monk was hanged and burned in 1498 with the blessing of the Borgia pope, Alexander VI. A mood of vulnerability and insecurity spread through the Italian peninsula as the city states battled each other. The devoted Florentine, Machiavelli, was among those seeking to understand why the once proud independent city-states of Italy now seemed virtually helpless before the invasion of foreign powers. His view of politics reflects his experience of living in Florence during these tumultuous decades.

Following the overthrow of Savonarola, a rather unstable republic was set up in Florence. In 1512, Lorenzo's son, Giovanni de Medici led a papal army that overthrew the republic and re-established Medici rule. When Giovanni was elevated to the papacy as Leo X, the civic pride of the Florentines reconciled them to Medici domination of their city. They also welcomed the restoration of Medici culture that replaced the repressive austerity of Savonarola. At the same time, the fact that Giovanni, as head of the Medici family, was also head of the Church, meant that for decades to come, the history of Florence and of the Renaissance would be dominated by events in Rome under the pontificates of Leo X and his cousin Clement VII.

The Italian Renaissance: Rome

In classical times, Rome had been the dominant city in Western Europe. As

the capital of the greatest empire that Europe had ever known, the city boasted a population of one million people. By the end of the Middle Ages, it was a depopulated city of around twenty thousand souls and of classical ruins that were memorials to an earlier glory – while serving as stone quarries for contemporary buildings. The great system of Roman aqueducts had been so severely damaged that there was not enough fresh water to provide for a large population in a city surrounded by a malarial swamp. Politically, the city was dominated by feuding families whose thuggish retainers engaged in anarchic rivalry. The greatest prize – as a source of prestige and plunder – was control of the papacy and the wealth of the Church. It was to escape this violence and chaos that Pope Clement V in 1305 had moved the papacy from Rome to Avignon in what became known as the Babylonian Captivity of the Church. The Avignon papacy would lead to the scandal of the Great Schism when there were at various times two, or even three, rival claimants to the papacy – a crisis in Christendom that would not be resolved until 1417. When the Church was finally re-united under a single pope domiciled in Rome, it had to re-build a ruined and impoverished city. There are very few Gothic churches in Rome because the great period of Gothic architecture corresponds to the era of the Avignon papacy and the Great Schism. Rome would become a Renaissance and a Baroque city created by popes who were truly magnificent patrons of the arts – and deplorable ecclesiastics. Their aesthetic munificence produced the explosion of artistic genius that we know as the High Renaissance. Alas, it also provoked the Reformation and all of the senseless bloodshed of the wars of religion that only ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the greatest artists and architects would be brought in to re-build and beautify Rome under the direction and patronage of the papacy. The result is the magnificent tourist city that we know today. It was a costly and magnificent achievement – the transformation of an uninhabitable desolation into a vibrant, cosmopolitan and truly beautiful center of culture and learning. Of course, it was not a holy city. It was a city of men without women. This was true not merely because it was dominated by an officially celibate, but not necessarily chaste, clergy. Additionally, most of the many artisans and other transients who came to rebuild the city had left their families behind. Thus, a city of men without woman produced a demand for recreational sex that was met by a large prostitute population that the Church both tolerated and taxed.

While the papacy was restoring the civic pride and glory of Rome, lust for power, nepotism and lavish sensuality were destroying a papal moral authority that had only barely been salvaged by the healing of the Great Schism. Sixtus IV was responsible for the murder of Lorenzo de Medici's

brother in the Pazzi conspiracy. The Borgia pope, Alexander VI, worked tirelessly to secure appointments and advantageous marriages for his four illegitimate children by his mistress – a married woman whom he kept openly in a grand palace in Rome. In furthering his childrens' careers, he resorted to murdering his daughter's inconvenient husband in the papal apartments after his hired assassins had bungled the job on the steps of Saint Peter's. His son Cesare Borgia was a murderous psychopath who probably had his older brother killed so that he could succeed to command of the papal military forces. He once suspected the loyalty of one of his officers, but didn't know which officer to blame. He solved the problem by arranging for them all to be assassinated. (This was the man whom Machiavelli thought would be the solution to the political problems besetting Italy!) When Savonarola was preaching against the moral degradation of Pope Alexander, he certainly wasn't being unfair. Nor should he have been surprised that the outcome would be his own execution. Cesare Borgia and his father were not men to be trifled with.

Alexander was succeeded by Julius II, a fearsome military commander known as "the warrior pope." It is probably appropriate to be reminded that, at this time, the pope was both spiritual head of the Church as well as the secular ruler of that vast territory in central Italy known as the Papal States. He was also head of a family for whose material benefit he had sought the papacy in the first place. Julius was one of the greatest patrons of art in Western history. Under his patronage, Michelangelo painted the Sistine ceiling, Raphael painted rooms in the Vatican palace including the library that contains [The School of Athens \(Plate F\)](#), and Bramante began to build St. Peter's Basilica. Julius' successor, with a short reign in between, was Leo X, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Indeed, Leo was himself nothing if not magnificent in both his patronage of the arts and the lavishly sensual lifestyle of the papal court. Leo's expenditures would have bankrupted the Church had he not hit upon the expedient of selling indulgences on a grand scale. This ultimate corruption created an understandable crankiness in a certain German monk named Martin Luther who, in 1517, began the movement that would destroy the unity of Western Christendom. It was Leo who excommunicated Luther in 1521.

By the first decade of the sixteenth century, the Italian powers were little more than pawns in the great hegemonic struggle between the Hapsburgs led by Emperor Charles V (who controlled Germany, the Low Countries, Spain and the Spanish territories in the New World) and Valois France under Francis I who unsuccessfully attempted to build a countervailing alliance against Hapsburg hegemony. Francis allied with Tudor England at the time when Wolsey was attempting to arrange an annulment of Henry VIII's marriage to an aunt of Charles V and Francis even encouraged the

infidel Turks to attack the Hapsburgs territories. Under Suleiman the Magnificent, they did this so successfully as to threaten Vienna itself in 1525.

Both Francis and Charles had claims on Italy and at various times they both sent conquering armies to enforce their claims. At one point, Charles was either unable or unwilling to pay the forces he had sent to capture Milan. These hardened veterans responded by living off the land; and, when pickings around the Milanese countryside were exhausted, they began an unchecked march down the Italian peninsula, reaching the walls of Rome where Pope Clement VII could do nothing to prevent them from sacking the city in 1527. The pope and his entourage escaped to Castel Sant' Angelo. Meanwhile the city suffered an eruption of barbarism that Europe had not experienced in a thousand years. Many of the troops were German Lutherans and this added an ideological dimension to what was otherwise mere savagery. Tens of thousands were slaughtered; churches, homes and graves were looted. All woman, young and old were repeatedly raped before being murdered. Companies of German Protestants played dice for whole convents of nuns – for the pleasure of raping these virgins first. As people fled the city, peasants set up roadblocks to rob and kill the fleeing refugees.

After the frenzy of butchery exhausted itself, the invaders occupied the city for eight months. The unburied dead lay in the streets or were tossed into the Tiber. Since the Tiber was also a source of drinking water, disease joined hunger in further decimating the population. Finally, Pope Clement escaped from Castel Sant' Angelo and met with Charles V. The pope sanctioned all imperial claims on Italian territory and thus initiated a Hapsburg dominance on the Italian peninsula that would last until the nineteenth century. Needless to say, this moment, when the pope was a virtual prisoner of the emperor, was not an auspicious time for Henry VIII to attempt to persuade him to annul his marriage to the emperor's aunt, Catherine of Aragon. Unsurprisingly, the pope declined to do so. Henry broke with Rome and founded the Church of England in 1534.

The sack of Rome is often regarded as the end of the Renaissance – even though Michelangelo and Titian were to live on for several decades. It certainly was the death of Florentine humanism with its optimistic view of civilized man and his potentialities. Perhaps, this transition can be seen in a comparison of three masterpieces of Michelangelo: the Doni Tondo of [The Holy Family, \(Plate E\)](#), the [Sistine ceiling](#), and [The Last Judgment \(Plate G\)](#).

Florentine humanism flourished in a merchant and banking republic

dominated by Cosimo and Lorenzo De Medici. The [Doni Tondo](#) is the perfect exemplar of Christian humanism – harmoniously blending, as it does, pagan and Christian motifs in a modest size painting intended for a domestic setting. By contrast, when the center of the Renaissance moved to Rome, the Church replaced the wealthy layman as the primary patron for works of art. This promoted the grandiose lavishness that characterizes the High Renaissance – the generation in which Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo were creating their most monumental works. For instance, the [Sistine ceiling](#) is in every respect a prodigious piece of work. The area is approximately 54 by 134 feet, and Michelangelo covered it with 343 separate figures. Remarkably, he completed this masterpiece in just four years. It should be noted that at this apex of the Renaissance Humanism, Michelangelo placed the [creation of man \(Plate H\)](#) – not the incarnation, birth, crucifixion or resurrection of Christ – at the very center of the Sistine ceiling. Michelangelo lived on past the period of the High Renaissance into that of the Counter-Reformation. If the Doni Madonna can be seen as the culmination of the ideal of Florentine humanism and the Sistine ceiling as the quintessence of Roman High Renaissance magnificence and splendor; [The Last Judgment](#) surely incorporates that repressive return to a medieval religious view of fallen man that even a Savonarola could have embraced – so long as he didn't have to enjoy the glorious pagan nudes that offended Michelangelo's more prudish contemporaries.

The Italian Renaissance: Venice

Unlike most of the great urban centers of Western Europe, Venice did not originate as a Roman imperial city. It was founded in the fifth and sixth centuries by Romans who were fleeing from barbarians who had invaded the empire. These Romans had sought safety in the lagoons just as others had sought security in such inaccessible places in Ireland as Skellig Michael – a pinnacle of rock eighteen miles from the Irish coast, rising seven hundred feet out of the sea. The first Venetians were fishermen who eventually became merchants and created a maritime republic. Venice grew prosperous and came to dominate the maritime trade of the Adriatic and Mediterranean because of its close trading relationship with Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. During the Fourth Crusade, it joined with the crusaders in sacking Constantinople in 1204. This was a blow from which the Byzantine Empire never fully recovered. Henceforth, it would be ever more vulnerable to The Turks who finally overthrew it in 1453. In the long run, the fall of Constantinople would hastened the economic decline of Venice. However, in the meanwhile, Venice enjoyed a trading dominance in the Mediterranean that made it the wealthiest city in Western Europe. If one wanted to supply the Latin kingdoms set up by the crusaders, one had to deal with Venice. If one wanted to trade with the Levant, one needed to go through Venice.

Two events doomed Venetian prosperity and Italian dominance. The first was the Fall of Constantinople in 1453. The conquering Turks saw no reason to grant Venice the trading monopoly they had previously enjoyed. Indeed, the Turks steadily advanced in the Mediterranean and elsewhere so as to dominate the region and its trade routes. The other event was even more decisive. Around the same time that Columbus accidentally bumped into South America while attempting to discover an all water route to India, a Portuguese explorer named Bartholomew Diaz managed to sail down the whole western coast of Africa and round its southern tip, the Cape of Good Hope. Several years later, another Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama, rounded that cape and reached India in 1498.

There was a very good reason why explorers were seeking an all water route to the wealthy Levant, and da Gama's voyage was one of the major turning points in European history, leading to the inevitable decline of both Italy, in general, and Venice in particular. It was now possible to trade directly between the Atlantic coast, India and the Far East, by-passing the Mediterranean entirely. From this time forward, the Mediterranean and Italy became backwaters. The Atlantic powers of Portugal, Spain, France, the Netherlands and England would henceforth become the arbiters of European political and economic history.

Curiously, it is against this background of decline that the Renaissance came to Venice. Prior to the Fall of Constantinople, Venice was a maritime republic, culturally and politically detached from the affairs of Italy, and aligned with the Byzantine power of Constantinople and Ravenna. With the Turkish ascendancy, trade in the Mediterranean became risky (see Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*), and the Venetians became more culturally attached to the West. It was exposed to the International Gothic Style in the work of Gentile da Fabriano in the early fifteenth century and developed its own brand of Renaissance painting in the work of the Bellini family culminating in the masterpieces of Giovanni Bellini toward the end of the century and of Titian in the next century. What is distinctive in Venetian Renaissance painting is its reflection of the special visual quality of the atmosphere of the city – a lighting and color that literally reflects the shimmering light play of the lagoons. Where Florentine painting is marked by draftsmanship and linear perspective, Venetian artists excel in light, color effects and atmospheric perspective. The resulting sensuous sparkle is particularly Venetian and would be reflected in the music of Antonio Vivaldi in the eighteenth century.

By 1520, both Leonardo and Raphael were dead, leaving only Michelangelo in Rome and Titian in Venice to survive to 1564 and 1576

respectively. In fact, the 1520s represent a kind of crisis point in the history of European art. In addition to the depression of spirit and invalidation of Humanist optimism that occurred as a reaction to the sack of Rome in 1527, there was also a purely aesthetic problem for artists – a sense that all the problems set by the artistic revolution of the early renaissance had now been solved. Artists had learned to combine the grace of Duccio and Simone Martini with the realism of Giotto. Some new direction had to be discovered if art was not to stagnate. However a radical departure would not be propounded until the end of our period. Chiaroscuro, the use of bold contrasts of light and shade for dramatic effect, had originally been perfected by Leonardo. However, it was Carravaggio who exploited the operatic emotionalism of chiaroscuro to mark the new departure in painting that would dominate the seventeenth century – culminating most notably in the paintings of Rembrandt. In music, this would also be the period that opera – that most improbable of artistic genres – would emerge in European culture.

The Northern Renaissance

In 1432, six years after Masaccio startled Florence with [The Trinity \(Plate D\)](#), his masterpiece of linear perspective, the van Eyck brothers completed the [Ghent Altarpiece \(Plate J\)](#). Jan van Eyck perfected the oil painting technique that would come to dominate painting all over Europe. It is one example of the influence exerted on Italian art by their northern colleagues. The influence of Italy on the North can be symbolized by the fact that Leonardo died in France in the employ of King, Francis I. Further, Durer was influenced by his contact with southern artists – particularly the Venetians Mantegna and Bellini. Nevertheless, there were distinctive differences between the approaches that expressed views of life and of piety that would ultimately lead to the rupture of Christendom.

We can illustrate this by a consideration of one of the first works produced by Durer, the greatest of the German Renaissance artists, following his first trip to Italy. The work is one of a series of woodcuts on the apocalyptic visions of the Book of Revelations and is entitled [St. Michael's Fight against the Dragon \(Plate K\)](#). Here, Durer displays total mastery of Italian Renaissance technique. However, this is certainly not an Italian work. The choice of subject matter rather reflects the Germanic earnestness that Kenneth Clark noted in another work of Durer and observed "...what a nuisance it has been for the rest of the world." As Gombrich points out, "the terrifying visions of the horrors of doomsday ...had never before been visualized with such force and power. St. Michael...uses both hands in a mighty effort to thrust his huge spear into the dragon's throat, and this powerful gesture dominates the whole scene. Round him there are the hosts

of other warring angels fighting as swordsmen and archers against the fiendish monsters, whose fantastic appearance defies description... <but which seem to echo the gargoyles > of those Gothic artists who had created the porches of the great cathedrals.” (The Story of Art; p.345). Of course, as Kenneth Clark suggests, it is also possible to view Durer’s apocalyptic vision as prophetic of the senseless violence of the wars of religion that were to defile the next century of European history.

By contrast, Italians distained what they scornfully termed “Gothic” art – viewed by them, but by no means by the Northerners, as crude and barbaric, in contrast to the refined classicism of ancient Greece and Rome. Of course the glory days the Italians wished to celebrate were the days of their own glory as opposed to the centuries of Germanic dominance. The artistic revival of the North was more of a continuation and elaboration of the characteristic artistic achievements of the High Middle Ages. Specifically, the archetypal artistic genre in the South is fresco painting. The idealized human nude has a very prominent place in the subject matter of Italian art. By contrast, although there are occasional nudes in Northern painting, they tend to be both infrequent as well as un-idealized (naked rather than nude) as exemplified by the figures of Adam and Eve in the [Ghent Altarpiece. \(Plate J\)](#). Further, Northern art was grounded not in the monumental art of the fresco, but in the fine detail of the miniature manuscript illumination. This is well illustrated by the art of Jan van Eyck in either the Ghent Altarpiece or in the Frick Collection’s [Virgin and Child with Saints and Donor \(Plate L\)](#) where idealization is applied not to the human figure but to the imaginary landscape depicted in the background. As Gombrich observes, “It is a fair guess to say that any work which excels in the representation of the beautiful surface of things, of flowers, jewels or fabric, will be by a Northern artist, most probably an artist from the Netherlands; while a painting with bold outlines, clear perspective, and a sure mastery of the beautiful human body, will be Italian.” (The Story of Art; p.240).

The Reformation

No one can view the art of the Renaissance papacy without granting that it is truly magnificent. And yet, I find myself reminded of the response of Marshal Bosquet to the Charge of the Light Brigade: “C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas la guerre.” One can say something analogous about the products of papal patronage. They were magnificent, indeed, but they had little to do with religion – and less with the Gospel of Christ. It is thus hardly surprising that they provoked a reaction that had everything to do with Christ and Biblical Christianity – admittedly with a dose of political opportunism thrown into the mix. The corrupt and sensuous magnificence of Rome would be challenged by the oppressively austere spirituality of

Luther and Calvin.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the pope was the autocratic ruler of a large territory in central Europe known as the Papal States. This meant that Renaissance popes were CEOs of Europe's largest multinational business organization as well as secular rulers – major participants in the cynical game of Italian power politics – and, oh yes, spiritual leaders of Christendom. On the basis of the fraudulent Donation of Constantine, they even claimed a sort of universal authority as an inheritance of the Roman Empire. They made these grandiose claims at a time when their conduct had made the papacy an object of contempt and derision in civil society. They had just emerged from the periods of the Avignon papacy as well as the Great Schism during which competing popes had excommunicated one another. Now, in the papacies of the Borgia Alexander VI and the Medici Leo X, they raised Rome to its greatest artistic glory and luxury while presiding over a city that scandalized all of Christendom with its loose morals and clerical corruption.

Thus, the Reformation was a response to the High Renaissance in Rome. The Medici pope Leo X famously observed that “God has given us the papacy, so let us enjoy it.” Alas, he enjoyed it, in part, with German money raised by the sale of church offices and indulgences. Both the venality and the vengery of Rome had long been a smoldering scandal among the devout clergy and laity offending such loyal Catholics as More and Erasmus. The Church was ruled by connoisseurs and condottieri when it needed reformers. Dedicated Christians, both lay and clerical, were aware that the Church needed a thorough cleansing. Savonarola was only a fanatical example of a widespread cry for reform. Indeed, clerical turpitude was by no means limited to Rome. In the diocese of Trent, in the early sixteenth century, a fifth of all priests kept concubines. (Perhaps, the others had bad breath.)

It must be noted that the Renaissance was not a secular period outside of the Church hierarchy. There was a fervent religiosity among the laity. However, it was a spirituality that distained what it viewed, fairly or otherwise, as the intellectual vanities of scholastic quibbling. They sought a piety that was simpler, purer, more personally meaningful – a faith more humbly and accurately dependent on the divine text. Unlike the scholastics, they were not interested in what they viewed as the presumptuousness and inevitably disputatious goal of trying to know God in his fullness. Rather, they sought to ardently love Him in an intimate way and to devoutly live the Christian life “in imitation of Christ.” While they rejected scholastic rationalism, they were committed to Biblical and Patristic scholarship. Theirs was a learned piety that was often grounded in a humanist

education.

The sale of indulgences had been a widespread scandal in the Church for a very long time. The practice began during the Crusades as a way of raising money to build and support churches and hospitals. In 1457, the pope announced that indulgences could be applied to the souls of family members or friends suffering in Purgatory. By the fifteenth century, the sale of indulgences became intertwined with the sale of Church offices. Indulgences could be sold to finance such purchases. Indeed, prominent families looked to the Church to provide lucrative sinecures for their children.

However, in the early sixteenth century, a series of events was to cascade in a way that would destroy the unity of Christendom and produce the long series of religious wars that would disfigure the history of the next two centuries. In 1517, a Dominican friar named Johan Tetzel was trying to raise money for the ongoing construction of St. Peter's Basilica. He conducted a particularly aggressive campaign to market indulgences using the catchy line, "As soon a coin in coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." This more than usually offensive campaign prompted a biblical scholar by the name of Martin Luther to invite others to debate the theology of indulgences. He made this invitation in the customary manner by posting a set of ninety-five theses on the Cathedral door at Wittenberg. Other critics before him had attacked the sale of indulgence, but Luther attacked not only the practice of a particular grant of indulgence, but the very theological justification for any granting of indulgences whatever. The Church had taught that the accumulated capital created out of the treasury of merits bequeathed by Christ and the saints, could be dispensed by papal authority as a sort of trustee of the endowment of spiritual merit – a kind of spiritual sinking fund, as it were. Luther rejected this doctrine in its entirety. He was thus not just protesting an abuse, but striking at a vital claim of papal power. Not surprisingly, Luther was accused of heresy and ordered silent by Pope Leo X, whose enjoyment of the papacy he was upsetting. Luther insisted on his right as a professor of theology to defend his position and refused to be silenced. When a papal representative met with Luther and accused him of denying the authority of the Pope, Luther admitted that he did not believe the pope to be infallible. In the course of the ensuing debate, Luther asserted the doctrine of sola fide – justification by faith alone, and sola scriptura as well as the priesthood of all believers. Summoned before the Diet of Worms by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, Luther refused to recant: "I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me. Amen."

A noble sentiment eloquently expressed – containing, however, a fatal logical flaw. Luther denied the teaching authority of the Church in the face of the canonical text of the Bible (*sola scriptura*). However, the text upon which he was relying is canonical only because it, and not other texts rejected as apocrypha, were certified as canonical by the same Church authority that Luther denied. This is an early example of the “baby and the bathwater” problem that came to plague liberal Christianity: How do you moderately reform a theology without eviscerating it?

Luther himself, despite the above eloquence, was by no means an advocate of freedom of conscience and of unlimited theological dissent – nor were any of the other Protestant leaders. Luther, like all of the others, was substituting one dogmatic formulation for another. They were all anxiously certain that one’s eternal salvation depended on theological accuracy more than a loving heart and a virtuous life. When one thinks about it, this is an extraordinary view of the nature of God – one that sees Him as a theological academic so obsessed with cognitive accuracy that error would result not merely in a denial of academic tenure, but in eternal damnation – a most curious reading of the teachings of Christ and His gospel of love. Curious, but not surprising, I suppose, that theological academics would magnify their own importance by creating a God in their own image.

Luther’s doctrine of salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*) derived from his personal struggle for salvation as an earnestly devout Augustinian monk with a compulsive’s perfectionist and persecutory super-ego. He could never be good enough to feel that he merited salvation no matter how hard he tried. Further, since, in characteristic compulsive fashion, he projected his own judgmental perfectionist demands onto God, he was barred from the loving relationship with God that is the essence of the Christian message of salvation. Luther’s own description is eloquent and moving: “Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that He was placated...I did not love, yes I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously,...I was angry with God.” Finally, after much agonizing, he had the insight that one would desire for all compulsives – that salvation is not about merit, but about love. It can never be earned by good deeds. This is not because one’s good deeds are insufficient, but because they are irrelevant. One is saved by allowing oneself to be loved – by God, by oneself and by others – and good deeds then flow naturally from the transformation that God’s loving grace has wrought. This is a truly profound human and theological insight. However, it implies a dilemma that led Luther, and, even more grievously, Calvin, into the doctrine of pre-destination – a doctrine that even Calvin confessed to be horrible. If salvation cannot be earned and is a free gift of

God, one can opt for universal salvation on the basis that a loving deity would not wish anyone to suffer eternal damnation. Alternatively, one is forced into the insanely paradoxical and terrifying view that all of humanity is so vile as to deserve damnation, and God arbitrarily elects a small minority of spiritual lottery winners for salvation by a process that has nothing to do with their individual merits, but is merely a manifestation of His divinely capricious mercy. This thoroughly distasteful position was embraced by the reformers because they really couldn't even consider the really radical position that somehow a loving God would find a way to redeem even the most horrific of sinners (a position repugnant to a faith that might be founded on love, but thrives on the passive-aggressive gratification of revenge – “God will punish you for that, mark my words!”). Calvin was also determined to exalt the absolutely limitless power of God and to insist on God's revulsion at the disgusting vileness of even the best of mankind – a view that would later recur in the Jonathan Edwards sermon: Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.

The fact is that both Luther and Calvin rejected the humanist view of the nature of man to an even greater extent than did the Roman Church. There cannot be a greater contrast between the view of Jonathan Edwards and that of Pico della Mirandola – or indeed, the speech that Shakespeare would place in the mouth of Hamlet: “What a piece of work is man.”

It is astonishing how easy it is to persuade man that he is vile. It would seem that the widespread original sin of mankind is the tendency to believe in original sin – to experience natural desires as evil and one's nature as fundamentally flawed – and even hateful. We are so easily duped into accepting perfectionist demands on ourselves that we reflexively respond with nods of approval to such masochistic nonsense as the Kantian demand for an ethical neutrality between our own desires and the interests of others. We readily assented to John Kennedy's inaugural challenge: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask rather what you can do for your country.” But, in fact, the state is properly a contrivance for meeting human wants, and the proper question to ask is not “What can I do for my country?” but “What has my government done for me lately?” We all too readily posit unnaturally high moral standards. We then either fail to meet the standard or our success in meeting it is accompanied by a poisonous resentment – the cranky bitterness of the overly good. Our failure or resentment is then experienced as evidence of our depraved nature.

Of course, the most important challenge to the spiritual, economic and political authority of the Roman Church was Luther's positing of the priesthood of all believers which eliminated the *raison d'être* of the entire church hierarchy. In 1517, when Luther first issued his famous invitation to

theological debate, the dominant political power in Europe was the Hapsburg family with branches in Austria and Spain and control of the Netherlands. Two years later, the Hapsburg Charles V, just nineteen years old, became Holy Roman Emperor by out-bribing his rival from France, Francis I. Charles futilely attempted to simultaneously rule Spain and the Netherlands – as well as Germany, Austria and Italy in what was nostalgically called The Holy Roman Empire – a political conglomerate that Voltaire would later famously observe was neither holy, nor Roman nor an empire. This meant that Luther's Germany was effectively run as a confederation of principalities under the loose suzerainty of the emperor. Luther survived because of the protection of his powerful local ruler, the elector Frederick the Wise.

While Lutheranism spread in Germany, a young man named John Calvin went searching for his truth – and, most unfortunately, found it in the radical implications of the perception that “there is an unbridgeable chasm between man and his maker. Man is thoroughly corrupt, so base that it is unthinkable that he could lift a finger to participate in his own salvation. God is glorious and magnificent beyond man's highest capacity to comprehend; He is both omnipotent and omniscient, and has foreordained all things that will come to pass, merely by knowing that they will do so. Man is helpless in the face of God's will. He is predestined either to eternal glory or eternal damnation, and he can do nothing, even if he is the best of saints in his fellow's eyes, to alter the intention of God. To suggest that he could would be to imply that the Creator did not fore-know precisely and thus diminish His majesty. To Calvin there could be no greater sacrilege. This doctrine of predestination did not originate with Calvin, but no one ever expressed it more clearly and uncompromisingly. He did not flinch from the terrible consequences of God's omniscience.” (Biography on Answers.com)

This doctrine by the rationalistic and legalistic Calvin would ultimately spread from Calvin's Geneva to wield widespread influence among the rationalistic French and become the faith of the French Protestants (called Huguenots) during the French wars of Religion. However, initially French Protestants were Lutherans and were tolerated by Francis I until they actually penetrated the royal household. On the night of Oct. 17-18, 1534, placards attacking the Mass were put up all over France, even upon the door to the King's bedchamber. This provocation led to a brief persecution of suspected Lutherans. Otherwise, Francis, for political reasons, actually allied with the German Protestant princes against his rival, Charles V. But when Francis changed his foreign policy and tried in 1538 to reach an accord with Charles V, persecution of Protestantism in France began more earnestly.

Under Francis' successor, Henry II, it seemed like tiny sects were springing up everywhere to hear newly arrived preachers from Calvin's headquarters in Geneva. Henry persecuted Protestants far more severely than Francis had. They were condemned without trial or inquisition; mere hearsay was sufficient for burning a man at the stake. Suspicion, fear and false accusations spread across France.

Henry's death inaugurated a period of dynastic instability that led to the regency of Catherine de Medici. Initially, she sought a compromise with the Calvinists but her reasonable policy came to naught. In 1562, the Catholic extremists unleashed a religious terror – burning and jailing Protestants wherever they could find them. This sectarian violence culminated in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre on August 24, 1572. With Catherine's knowledge, the Catholic faction prepared to assassinate all the Protestants in France. In a matter of days as many as thirty thousand Calvinists were brutally murdered. The violence continued to rage until the Protestant Henry IV famously decided that Paris was worth a mass and converted to Catholicism. He ascended to the throne, declared a general amnesty and proclaimed the Edict of Nantes granting religious and political freedom to all subjects. The Huguenots were actually allowed to form a kingdom within the state. His sane and virtuous conduct did not go unpunished. In 1610, despite all of his efforts to persuade his countrymen to forget the past, he was himself assassinated. Civil and religious war again erupted, not to end until 1624 when Cardinal Richelieu took over the reins of government.

Lutheran resistance in German principalities had convinced Emperor Charles V that he would never be able to re-impose Roman Catholicism throughout his German empire. Accordingly, in 1555 he accepted the Religious Peace of Augsburg that decreed that in any German territory, the religion of the ruler would be the faith of his subjects – provided that the ruler and subjects were either Catholic or Lutheran. This was by no means a charter of religious toleration – merely a *modus vivendi* among ruling elites. Further, it did not include non-Lutheran protestant sects such as the Calvinists and Anabaptists.

On the continent, the excessive religious sensitivity of Martin Luther and the fanatical rationalism of John Calvin sparked a theological conflict that quickly acquired political overtones that would, in more than a century of religious warfare, overwhelm the theology in dispute. Meanwhile, in England, Henry VIII, a religious conservative, faced a political problem that would spark a theological dispute that would poison the politics of his realm for a century.

Henry believed (incorrectly, as it turned out) that he needed a male heir; and he felt other needs as well toward Mistress Anne Boleyn. Alas, Anne, unlike “the other Boleyn girl,” her more pliant sister, insisted on marriage as the price for love. Marriage was also required as a condition for the legitimacy of a male heir to the throne. There was, however, the inconvenience that Henry was already married – which would not have been a problem except that Henry’s wife, Catherine of Aragon, had a nephew who happened to be the Emperor Charles V. As Hapsburg ruler of Spain and the empire, Charles was the most powerful monarch in Europe. Further, his army was in Rome holding the pope as a virtual prisoner. Under such circumstances, it was unlikely in the extreme that His Holiness would look favorably on Henry’s petition for a marital annulment. When the petition was denied, Henry dissolved the connection of the English church with Rome, cut off the heads of those like Thomas More who couldn’t support the break with Rome, and preserved a generally conservative theology by burning both Catholics and Lutherans at the stake with a fine impartiality.

Henry would go through six wives in a desperate quest for a male heir. Actually, Catherine had already produced an heir, the future Queen Mary (of cocktail party fame as her prosecution of Protestants would earn her the moniker “Bloody Mary.”) Indeed, Anne Boleyn would produce another future monarch, Queen Elizabeth I.

Finally, Henry got the male heir he craved. In 1537, Henry’s third wife, Jane Seymour, died giving birth to the future Edward VI who ascended to the throne in 1547 when he was nine years old, reigned under a regency of strident Protestantism, but died of tuberculosis six years later. When Edward died that regime made a feeble attempt to install Lady Jane Gray as queen, but the very Catholic Mary Tudor brushed aside this opposition and Lady Jane was executed. Mary married Phillip II of Spain, returned England to obedience to Rome and persecuted Protestants. But when Mary herself died, after a reign of only five years, she was succeeded in 1558 by her Protestant sister Elizabeth.

Elizabeth sought a religious compromise in the service of political stability. Not seeking “windows into men’s souls,” she was content to tolerate non-conforming religious belief so long as her subjects acted in obedience to her in any dispute with Rome. If the Pope had been willing to compromise, a détente could have been arranged (a sort of theological “Don’t ask; don’t tell”) and there would have been no English Civil War, and no Cromwell. However, the Pope insisted on being provocative – excommunicating Elizabeth herself and

placing her realm under interdict, thus trying to force English Catholics to choose between excommunication and treason.

Even though it was the last thing Elizabeth had desired, she had no choice but to view any profession of Roman Catholicism as a treasonous conspiracy against the Crown – a conspiracy especially grave as it was backed by the power of the Spain of Phillip II, England's most formidable enemy – and the widower of Mary Tudor. Eventually, with the destruction of the Spanish armada, Elizabeth would defeat Spain and secure the safety of her realm and her crown. After a long and glorious reign, she finally died in 1603 at the age of sixty-nine.

After Elizabeth died, England reverted to the religious strife that she had tried to avoid, fought a sectarian civil war, experimented with republican government, embraced a military dictatorship before restoring an absolute monarchy. Finally, in 1688, she returned to a moderate limited monarchy and began on the road that would ultimately lead to political and economic hegemony. The British people can always be counted on to do the right thing – after they have exhausted all other options.

Counter-Reformation

It took a generation for the Church to respond to the shock of the Protestant Revolt. However, when it came, the response was as thorough as it was effective. Indeed, the Catholic Counter-Reformation is one of the outstanding examples of institutional recovery and re-vitalization in all of Western history. It did not restore the medieval unity of Christendom, but it did preserve and reinvigorate fundamental Catholic belief and practice. On the one hand, it was an extension and belated embrace of the Catholic reformist criticism of the Christian humanists. However, while it represented a drastic eradication of clerical corruption, it also embraced a dogmatic reassertion of traditional teaching and a rigid enhancement of papal authority over the beliefs and practices of the faithful.

The Society of Jesus was founded in 1540 by the Spaniard Ignatius of Loyola. It would spearhead the campaign of the Roman Church to stem the gains of the Protestant reformers. The Church also employed the Inquisition. In its papal form, the inquisition had been created in the thirteenth century to eradicate the Albigensian heresy. In its Spanish form, it was instituted in the fifteenth century as part of the effort of the monarchy to enforce religious conformity on its subjects. Both papal and Spanish inquisitions were medieval courts that used medieval methods of torture.

However, the keystone in the arch of the Catholic response to the

Protestant Revolt was Council of Trent. Convoked by Pope Paul III, at the insistence of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, it met from 1545 to 1563. The council rejected point after point of reformed doctrine. The papacy emerged much more centralized, better organized and administered. Gradually a series of more able popes helped restore the prestige of the papacy within the Church. The city of Rome itself would be resurrected after the sack of 1527, under Baroque architects like Bellini into the magnificent city that we know today, but without the automobile traffic that currently disfigures it.

Conclusion

The Renaissance began as a return to classicism. The core value of classicism is restraint – “Nothing in Excess!” By the time we reach the pontificate of the Medici Pope Leo X, Rome was nothing if not excessive – an excess that provoked the vigorous but restrained criticism of the classicists – Erasmus, Colet and More. These Christian Humanists were opposed by the revolutionary hotheads – Luther, Zwingli and Calvin eliciting the counter-revolutionary extremism of Charles V, Philip II, Loyola, and the Council of Trent. This was the end of the classicism of the Renaissance. The art of the late Michelangelo, and of Bernini in the next century, is no longer the art of classic restraint, but is an art bursting the bounds of that restraint in an evocation of power and ecstasy.

At the apex of Renaissance Humanism, Michelangelo would place the creation of man at the very center of the Sistine Ceiling. At the end of our period, Galileo would reduce man and his entire world to the status of an insignificant planet of a minor star. This created a permanent crisis for humanists who can at most claim that man is of central importance to himself and his kind – a significance not validated by the universe and its gods. Thus, he is forced to search for a possible source of value, dignity and meaning. After Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud and Marx; man seems no longer master of his fate, but blown about by forces that he can barely understand, much less control. This requires a new human narrative – one that is not grandiose like that of the Renaissance, but that is compassionate rather than self-lacerating. Man needs to acquire a humble, but sympathetically self-accepting and comfortable view of his place in his world. We have produced monsters and heroes, but most of us are neither. We are inescapably comic figures necessarily struggling to manage yearnings that can neither be honestly denied nor adequately satisfied – conscious of both our mortality and our insignificance. This is sadly comic, but, perhaps, in the spirit of Montaigne, it is the comedy of compassion rather than scorn. Finally, most of us are doing the best we can; and, sadly, that may not be good enough.

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