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# Renaissance

*\* Keith D'Souza*

### Introduction

The term 'Renaissance,' sometimes 'Renascece,' is derived from a French / Latin word meaning 'rebirth'. It refers to an experience of the European world that began from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was characterised by a rebirth of learning, arts and culture. The people of this period felt that there was a sharp break between their own age and the 'Dark Ages' that had preceded them, and moreover, that there were similarities between their own civilisation and that of the Greeks and Romans who had flourished between 400 B.C.E and 300 C.E. Later historians have sometimes agreed and sometimes disagreed with this point of view. Jules Michelet in his book 'La Renaissance' held that the two most significant features of this epoch were 'the discovery of the world, and the discovery of man'.

The Renaissance began in Italy. It lasted from around 1300 to 1600. Historically, it followed the Mediaeval period and led into the Modern period which began with the Enlightenment. Politically, Mediaeval Europe was dominated by the Feudal Hierarchy. This meant that the peasants were subject to a landowner, who in turn would be subject to a higher lord and so on, all the way up to the King. In the field of learning, the Catholic Church was dominant, and all arts, sciences and philosophical learning were regarded as servants of Christian theology.

Hence, mediaeval architecture expressed itself in Cathedrals, while mediaeval art expressed itself in the form of religious paintings. Even the ancient authors were read principally from the point of view of mastering the Latin language so as to study Theology which was taught in Latin. Scholasticism was the term used to describe this attitude and methodology, which was declining by the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The Renaissance put an end to this subservience of the arts, sciences and philosophy. Beginning from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there was an increasing tendency to study these subjects for their own sake and not merely as servants of theology. This led to a flowering of the arts and sciences and paved the way for the 'Modern' period in philosophy. This new-found independence in thought was also manifested in the Protestant Reformation, which ended the Catholic Church's dominance in northern Europe. The feudal system was also collapsing during this period, partly due to the increasing number of urban dwellers and traders, who did not fit in with the land-based feudal hierarchy. Ultimately, all these changes amounted to a totally new vision of the human person through Renaissance Humanism.

The revival of arts and learning was financed by the commercial revival of Europe through the rise of great banking families in Italy (particularly in the city of Florence) during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, followed by the discovery of the sea routes to India and America towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Renaissance transformed Mediaeval Europe beyond recognition. It resulted in the development of an intellectual independence that no longer took arguments from authority for granted but instead strove to explore and discover new frontiers in philosophy, science and technology. Hence it took Europe to the threshold of the Age of Reason. The period of the

Renaissance was followed by that of the Enlightenment, during which the new attitudes, supported by new discoveries, gave birth to Modern Philosophy and Science which are characterised by their total independence from Theology.

### **Major Events and their Significance (1300 – 1600)**

- 1305-1378    After over 12 centuries, the Popes leave Rome to stay at Avignon in France. This is known as the 'Babylonian Captivity of the Church' and results in a loss of prestige for the Church leaders.
- 1341        Petrarch, the first great humanist, is crowned as 'Poet Laureate' in Rome.
- 1348        The Black Death in Europe: Bubonic plague drastically reduces the population. However, the plague is followed by an economic revival.
- 1378        The Pope returns to Rome but the French insist on having a Pope at Avignon as well, resulting in the Great Schism or split in the Church.
- 1397        The Medici Bank is founded in Florence. The Medicis, great patrons of art and culture, soon become practically the rulers of the city. Also in Florence, Greek literature is introduced as a subject at the University.
- 1400-1450    Donatello, artist and sculptor, flourishes in Florence.
- c. 1450        Johann Gutenberg invents the printing press (printing was earlier known to the Chinese) and uses it to print the Latin Bible.

- 1453 Constantinople falls to the Turks; many Greek scholars settle in Italy, bringing their manuscripts.
- 1479 The Italians (of Venice) are defeated by the Turks; hence the ancient trading route to India (via Egypt) is cut off. The Portuguese and Spanish begin exploring new routes.
- 1492 Christopher Columbus, in search of India, reaches America.
- 1495-1498 Leonardo da Vinci paints *The Last Supper*.
- 1498 Vasco da Gama discovers a sea route to India, arriving at Kerala. The Portuguese become the first European colonial power in India.
- 1503-1505 Leonardo da Vinci paints the *Mona Lisa* while Michelangelo completes his statue of *David*.
- 1508-1512 Michelangelo paints the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in St. Peter's Cathedral, Rome.
- 1517 onwards Rise of Martin Luther, who initiates the Protestant Reformation in Germany. He is followed by Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland and (in the 1530s) by John Calvin in France.
- 1519 onwards Expansion of the Spanish empire in Central and South America.
- 1543 Copernicus publishes his work on the Solar System, claiming that the Earth travels around the Sun.
- 1546-1563 The Catholic Church holds a Council at Trent in Italy and initiates a process of Counter-

Reformation. The measures taken include strict censorship of books (resulting in the “Index” of forbidden books), with consequences for philosophers and scientists in southern Europe.

- 1585 Introduction of the modern (Gregorian) calendar by Pope Gregory XIII.
- 1588 The Spanish Armada (Navy) is defeated by Queen Elizabeth I of England, paving the way for the rise of new colonial powers like the British, Dutch and French.

### **Aspects of Renaissance Culture and Philosophy**

#### **Humanism**

Today, humanism refers to an attitude of deep concern for the welfare of humanity. However, during the time of the Renaissance, a humanist was one who had mastered the five subjects known as humanities. The Italian universities were famous for these humanities which included grammar, rhetoric (the art of persuasive speech), poetry, history and moral philosophy. The humanists often studied these subjects for their own sake and not merely as an aid to theology. Hence, the attitude of the humanists was quite distinct from that of the Scholastics who followed the Mediaeval tradition. This led some of the humanists to look down upon the later Scholastics who were unable to move beyond Aristotle’s philosophy.

Renaissance Humanism began in Italy with the rediscovery of certain ancient manuscripts of classical Latin literature. Later, with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, a number of Greek scholars immigrated to Italy, bringing their precious manuscripts with them. Hence, the study of the Greek language and literature became

more widespread than before. The writings of Plato and other early philosophers were read in a new light. All this had a direct impact on society in the fields of letter writing, literature, art, architecture, philosophy, religion and the sciences. Further, a positive attitude emerged which led scholars to study these subjects for their own sake and not merely as a prelude to the study of Theology.

**The Arts and Architecture:** The architects of the Renaissance went back to the Classical Greek temples and Roman buildings for their models. Churches were increasingly built with domed roofs rather than vaults. The construction of St. Peter's Basilica, in Rome (1506-1667), can be said to be one of the highlights of this period. The dome of this church (designed by Michelangelo) was modelled on the ancient Roman Pantheon.

The secularisation of architecture also took place during this period. Henceforth, there were many rich noblemen and princes who could afford to build a palace for themselves, and elaborate buildings began spreading throughout Italy. A large number of country houses in France were built during this period.

Sculptors and painters also began to look to ancient models which were regarded as more natural and lifelike than mediaeval art. Rather than follow convention, the artists studied the human body and attained a better sense of proportion. A sense of perspective was also achieved by painting distant objects smaller than nearby ones. Italian painting generally remained religious in nature. Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were famous for their paintings.

The art of music also began to flourish during the Renaissance period. New instruments were invented, and harmony was increasingly used, though most music (as

an art form) was still composed either for the courts or for religious purposes. Music composed during this period remains an integral part of European culture today.

**Literature:** The Renaissance can be said to have begun with the rediscovery and translation of many ancient Roman and Greek texts. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which had earlier been known only through brief Latin summaries, could now be read in full, as could other ancient literature. This led to the revival of certain features of classical style, which were imitated by humanist authors and poets. The Popes shared this love for classical literature, and established the Vatican Library in 1447. The humanist scholars, who were skilled in languages, were often employed as secretaries to the Popes, princes and noblemen of the period. Initially, their letters were composed in Latin, but by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, vernacular languages were beginning to take over. Many humanists were also known for their poetry. Petrarch, an early humanist, was crowned as 'poet laureate' in Rome in the year 1341. The humanists began to contribute to the spread of new ideas through their works. A Greek edition of the Bible, produced by Erasmus in 1516, revealed that the Latin version in use had deviated in certain places from the Greek text which was now understood to be the original. This led to new religious movements. Similarly, the field of politics, which had been changing rapidly with the decay of feudalism, was analysed in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Rabelais' *Gargantua* and several other works. Cervantes' famous *Don Quixote* took a humorous look at the outdated feudal system. One of the greatest European playwrights ever, William Shakespeare, flourished during the later years of the Renaissance.

During the Middle Ages, manuscripts had to be copied by hand. The arrival of printing simplified the process of

making copies of books, and hence paved the way for the spread of literacy and learning. Paper had been invented by the Chinese and was introduced into Europe by the Arabs in Spain. In 1450, Johann Gutenberg, a German, designed and built a printing press and printed the famous Gutenberg Bible, in Latin. Ultimately, printing proved to be a great liberative force, spreading the light of learning to the common man through affordable mass-produced literature, public libraries, and soon newspapers.

**Religion:** The two major religious events of the Renaissance were the Babylonian Captivity of the Church and the Protestant Reformation. The Popes had generally been associated with Rome, but due to largely political compulsions, one of them decided to establish his permanent seat in Avignon, a town in southern France. When a later Pope decided to return to Rome, there was opposition and the result was that two Popes were elected, one at Avignon and one at Rome. This resulted in constant conflicts. The presence of two Popes divided the Christian world and lowered the status of the Church. This condition lasted until 1417. The Popes were heavily concerned with secular matters, and vast wealth began to accumulate in Rome. Exactly a hundred years later (in 1517), Martin Luther, a German monk, condemned what he described as the Catholic Church's immoral ways of collecting money through the sale of indulgences (cancellation of the punishment due to sin, in return for a donation). He also pointed out other areas of corruption that had crept into religious practices and structures. The need for change was felt strongly and many people from different strata of society sided with Martin Luther. His followers included a number of German princes, and with their help, he established a Church organisation that was independent of the Pope. Luther intended this to be a temporary measure until Rome itself could be



purified of its immorality. However, other reformers such as Zwingli and Calvin began to take still more radical measures such as destroying the statues in the Churches. It soon became impossible to heal the divisions within Christianity, which have therefore endured to this day. The new churches began to call themselves Protestant.

**Science:** During the Mediaeval period, arguments based on Aristotle's writings were still considered to be more important than actual observation of nature. The Renaissance, however, was an age of discovery. It opened people's minds to new ways of thinking, and thus helped to create the modern scientific mentality. One of the key discoveries of the Middle Ages was the fact that the Earth was in constant motion around the Sun. This idea, first proposed by Nicolaus Copernicus and later by Galileo, led to what is known as the 'Copernican Revolution.' After this discovery, humans were no longer able to consider themselves the centre of the Universe. This led to a dramatic change in the European worldview.

Such discoveries in astronomy, as well as important medical studies such as Vesalius' detailed description of the human body and William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood, led the thinkers of the Renaissance to reject all blind dependence on Aristotle's teachings. Aristotle had held that blood was formed in the liver. His views were now challenged. But more significant was the new scientific method of observation and experiment by which he was shown to be in the wrong. Towards the end of the Renaissance period, most European scholars were aware that if they wanted to progress, merely turning to the ancients was not enough; they needed to surpass the classical authors in their knowledge, and this knowledge could be attained through the scientific method. Thus, the Scientific Renaissance paved the way for the next age, the Age of Enlightenment.

### **Major Thinkers During the Renaissance**

**Petrarch (1304-1374)** has been described as the first great humanist and the first modern scholar. Noted as a poet, he was crowned as 'Poet Laureate' in Rome, in the year 1341. He travelled from city to city and composed literature in Italian and Latin. He rightly described himself as standing between two eras, and in many ways the attitudes of the Renaissance were first seen in his writings.

**Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64)** began originally by studying Church law and ended his career as a Cardinal of the Catholic Church. He was a man ahead of his times. He anticipated Copernicus by holding that the Earth was not the centre of the Universe. He made major contributions through his study of ancient manuscripts. He is famous for his philosophy which he explained in his book *On Learned Ignorance*. He criticised the philosophy of Aristotle which was the prevailing view at that time, and held that we can attain only an approximate knowledge of reality which he calls 'conjecture'. Although he did not belong to any particular school, he paved the way for the revival of Platonic ideas during the Renaissance.

**Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536)**, from Rotterdam in Holland, was the foremost humanist of the Renaissance. He did much to spread the values of the humanists. In 1516 he published his Greek text of the New Testament, which had wide-ranging implications for the field of religion. It showed that there were errors in the official Latin Bible that was being used. He also wrote *In Praise of Folly*, which satirically exposed the shortcomings of the upper classes and religious institutions of his time. Martin Luther was strongly influenced by the writings of Erasmus and thus the humanism of Erasmus prepared the way for the Reformation.

**Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)** [*pron: mak-ya-veli*] was an Italian statesman who served at the court of the Republic of Florence (in Italy) which was then dominated by the Medici family of bankers. After he left the court in 1512, he began publishing his views in the form of books, the most famous of which is *The Prince*. This contains an analysis of Italian politics and shows how a prince who is not bound by scruples will be successful not only in ruling his own city but also in conquering his neighbours. This has given rise to the English term 'Machiavellian' which refers to plans and schemes that involve deceit or other underhand means to gain power.

**Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543)**, justly famous for bringing about the 'Copernican Revolution,' was a Polish astronomer and scientist who realised that the patterns of the movement of the heavenly bodies would make more sense if the Sun, rather than the Earth, was regarded as the centre of the Universe. He published this view (known as the Heliocentric Theory) in his book *De Revolutionibus*, which was printed in the year of his death (1543). This was a daring theory because it seemed to contradict both the Bible and Greek Philosophy. Though his views took time to get established, this book marked a major milestone in the history of science.

**Thomas More (1477-1535)** was an eminent humanist and statesman. He studied law at Oxford University, where he met several humanists. Later, he served as Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII of England. However, when Henry VIII proclaimed that the King, rather than the Pope, was the head of the Church of England, Thomas More refused to sign the Act. He was sent to the Tower of London and beheaded. His *Utopia*, a novel about an imaginary republic, was a protest against the abuses of the day. It is an important work of political philosophy.

**Martin Luther (1483-1546)** was well known for his lead role in the reformation of the German church. He was a monk in the Augustinian Order and was a professor of theology. He was shocked by the wealth and the scandalous life of some of the clergy, especially in Rome. He began his struggle to reform Christianity by protesting against another monk named Johann Tetzel who was collecting money in return for 'indulgences.' These indulgences were designed to excuse a person from the penalties of his or her sins. Luther also called for a change in the Church structure. When several of the German princes supported him, a new Church (later known as the Lutheran Church) was established, based on the principle of the Bible alone as the source of doctrine, and faith alone as the means of salvation.

**John Calvin (1509-1564)** was a Frenchman who expounded the principles of Protestantism in a systematic manner in his book, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He stressed the importance of the Bible, and stopped all practices not mentioned in Scripture. He believed in predestination – the belief that human beings are predestined by God either for Heaven or Hell. The French Protestant communities, later to be known as the Huguenots, accepted his doctrines. When he had to leave France for Geneva (Switzerland), his followers managed to take over the city and rule it on Calvinist principles. The movement spread to Holland and Scotland as well.

**Giordano Bruno (1548-1600)** held views on religion, society and human life that were quite different from those of his contemporaries. He argued, for example, that reason was the only source of knowledge, that the Copernican model was correct and that the universe was infinite in size. He also taught that the universe was made up of two principles, namely matter and the soul,

both of which were aspects of the same substance. This idea, similar to Baruch Spinoza's [See: Enlightenment], led him to a form of monism. He was condemned as a heretic and executed in 1600.

**Francis Bacon (1561-1626)** was an English intellectual reformer. He held a number of Governmental posts during the reign of King James I of England. In his *Novum Organum*, he proposed a new system of knowledge based on the principle of induction, which should be used along with deduction in order to build human knowledge. Through induction (by which we observe a number of individual facts and are able to draw a general conclusion) we are able to learn not only through reasoning but also through our experience. The method of induction still serves as the basis of scientific research today.

**William Shakespeare (1564-1616)** is the best known English playwright of the Renaissance. His historical dramas, comedies and tragedies reveal a deep understanding of human nature and have been a tremendous force in the creation of modern English literature. Like other Renaissance writers, he too made use of classical themes in his works.

**Johann Kepler (1571-1630)** was a German astronomer and mathematician. Reflecting on the views of Pythagoras, he came to the conclusion that the Universe has a geometrical arrangement. He abandoned the ancient theory that the orbits of the planets were circular, and instead brought out the three laws of planetary motion which state that the orbit of the planet is elliptical in shape. He is known to have corresponded with Galileo.

### **Major Areas of Significance for Western Philosophy**

The following advances that took place during the Renaissance are significant for the development of Western philosophy:

- There was a move to return to the original texts or sources, rather than to read their accepted interpretations. This attitude of going to the origins of texts was echoed in the numerous 'Modern Philosophy' projects of discovering the origins of human experience rather than choosing any other commonly accepted starting point. Later Units will show that the Rationalists chose the mind and its powers as the starting point of experience and knowledge, while the Empiricists chose the senses and what they revealed as the starting point of experience and knowledge.
- This desire of going to the original texts resulted in a gradual turning away from the dominance of Scholastic and Aristotelean-influenced thinking, and an embracing of alternative worldviews, including a renewed interest in Platonism.
- The turning away from theological interests to more humanistic interests sowed the first seeds of the gradual secularisation of learning and the secularization of European consciousness in general. The seeds of this movement have taken root and grown steadily in Europe, so that what we see today in the contemporary European scenario is a culture which is predominantly characterised by secular and humanistic ideals rather than religious ones. This has direct consequences for contemporary European philosophical interests.

- The religious turmoil which Europe witnessed during this age (and during the Enlightenment) was one more reason which determined the later reluctance to allow religion to enter spheres of social and political influence. That is why, as compared to Medieval Philosophy, Modern and Contemporary philosophy are not as concerned about theological questions as they are about the human and the social horizon of meaning.
- The emphasis on creativity in artistic expression (in art, sculpture, architecture and music) replaced the desire to repeat the aesthetic forms of the medieval age. This also had an echo in philosophy, where creativity in thinking and in choosing new starting points for philosophical inquiry was encouraged rather than frowned upon.
- The invention of printing and the spread of literature enabled philosophical tracts to become more widespread and to be available throughout the continent. Printing made the process of education (including exposure to these philosophical works) comparatively more accessible and democratic, especially since works were translated into vernacular languages and widely disseminated for the first time.
- This period also witnessed the decline of a feudal social structure and a feudal mentality. Consequently, capitalism was born and grew rapidly, aided by the growth of Protestantism. All of these had serious consequences in terms of socio-political philosophy, especially in terms of the birth of Marxism, which was a response to capitalism. The modern phenomenon of globalization is a development of capitalism, which had its origins in this age.

- The Copernican Revolution set Europe on the path of scientific progress. Once again, theological interests and control gave way to more positive and scientific inclinations and inquiries. This resulted in the rapid advance of science and technology in the Age of Reason (17<sup>th</sup> century) and during the Enlightenment in general (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century), and in the birth of 'Positivism' and many human-centred philosophical projects in 'Contemporary Philosophy' (from 1800 onwards).

## Conclusion

The period of 'Modern Western Philosophy' cannot be fully understood without reference to the prevailing cultures of the time in Europe, namely, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. In this Unit we have portrayed the basic features of Renaissance culture. We began by providing a basic understanding and overview of the 'Renaissance,' by highlighting the most significant and defining moments during this period. We then focused on key aspects of the culture and philosophy of the times, and some prominent thinkers and personalities who contributed to the development of this culture. Finally, we reflected over the significance this culture had in terms of the development of the history of Western Philosophy.

Try and remember the following key points related to the Renaissance:

- 'Renaissance' means 'rebirth'. This period (from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) saw the rebirth of classical patterns in art, architecture and literature in Europe. It is sometimes called the 'Early Modern' period.
- This was also a period of cultural and social turmoil. The Feudal System declined and trade became more



important, leading to the beginnings of a capitalist economy.

- The Renaissance began in Italy with the revival of interest in Greek learning and Greek philosophy. All this was funded by rich banking families and several Popes who were patrons of art and architecture.
- The five subjects known as humanities (grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy) began to be studied for their own sake and not as a preparation for theology. Hence the Renaissance became an age of humanism, dominated by humanists such as Erasmus. The humanists also prepared the ground for the Reformation which affected the religious sphere.
- All this undermined the mediaeval schools of thought and led to independent thinking. An interest arose in observing nature directly, rather than merely quoting from the ancient authorities. This led to the birth of modern science through the discovery of the heliocentric theory (Copernicus) and the focus on the law of induction (Francis Bacon).
- During this period, sea routes to America and India were also discovered.
- The most important invention of this period was that of the art of printing. Printing led to the spread of learning across Europe and prepared the way for the Enlightenment.

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**Important reference websites:**

- 1) Renaissance-Related Resources: [www.learner.org/exhibits/renaissance/resources.html](http://www.learner.org/exhibits/renaissance/resources.html)

- 2) *Mediaeval Sourcebook: Renaissance* [www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook1x.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook1x.html)
- 3) *Italian Renaissance*: [history.hanover.edu/courses/italren.html](http://history.hanover.edu/courses/italren.html)
- 4) *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: [www.iep.utm.edu](http://www.iep.utm.edu)
- 5) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: [plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu)
- 6) *The Meta-Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: [www.ditext.com/encyc/frame.html](http://www.ditext.com/encyc/frame.html)