

Christian Humanism: from Renaissance to Reformation

Lucy Wooding

Lucy Wooding introduces a highly significant, but often much misunderstood, cultural force.

'Immortal God, what a world I see dawning! Why can I not grow young again?' This was written in 1517 by Desiderius Erasmus, the most famous of all Christian humanists. He was surveying the European culture he knew so well and was full of hope for the future. By tragic irony, even as he wrote these words, a small storm was brewing in the remote university town of Wittenberg, which would in time obstruct and obscure everything Erasmus valued most. Even more confusingly, both Erasmus and Luther could be described as Christian humanists, sharing the excitement about the Bible which so characterised the age, using their scholarship to uncover the beliefs and devotions of the early church, using their skills as teachers and writers to reform and inspire the world around them. Yet less than ten years later they were bitterly divided, with Erasmus lamenting the 'disaster' that Luther had brought upon them all.

So what was Christian Humanism? It hovers in the background of all our discussions of Renaissance and Reformation; it is applied to many great figures, from Erasmus and Luther to such ill-assorted individuals as Thomas More, Huldrych Zwingli, Reginald Pole or even Elizabeth I. It is immediately clear that the chief proponents of Christian humanism were often incapable of agreeing with one another, and sometimes became fiercely opposed. Can the label of 'Christian humanist' be of any value to the historian today?

The first thing we need to wrestle with is the problem of definitions. 'Christian humanism' was itself a form of a wider movement we call 'humanism', which might broadly be described as the intellectual aspect of the Renaissance, another historical movement which evades easy categorisation. At this point it is easy to feel discouraged, but it is important to persevere, because humanism was a movement of extraordinary richness, inventiveness, ideological commitment and literary beauty, worth studying for its own sake, but also for its important intellectual legacy. We might locate its heyday in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but its influence was to shape the literature, thought, art, architecture and music of every subsequent century until our own. Furthermore, humanists wrestled with problems of conflicting cultures, religious division, the encounter between Christianity and Islam, poverty, disease, war and political corruption. These are all issues with relevance to the modern world, and the works of the humanists still speak with startling immediacy and moral force to our own contemporary problems.

The Renaissance and the 'Golden Age' of Humanism

The Renaissance was, broadly speaking, a movement of cultural revival which sought to

rediscover and redeploy the languages, learning and artistic achievements of the classical world. It used to be claimed as the 'dawn of modernity', with humanism seen as a set of convictions concerning the dignity of man; the beginnings of that individualism which would one day find expression in the Enlightenment. These grand claims are now seen as deeply misleading. The Renaissance was not a new dawn after the darkness and ignorance of the 'Middle Ages', but a gradual development with a huge intellectual debt to the medieval past. We also now understand how distinct Renaissance ideas were from the ideas of the Enlightenment, or from modern attitudes. We have largely stopped trying to find our own ideas and attitudes in the past, and started looking at the work of the humanists in its own context; still an astonishing achievement, but coloured less by individualism and the beginnings of secularism than by the particular political, religious and cultural currents of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The idea of the Renaissance as an age of gold after an age of darkness was actually a tale spun by the humanists themselves, and makes the important point that this was a very self-conscious movement, which shaped its own reputation. In 1492 the Italian humanist Marsilio Ficino claimed glory for his native city of Florence, when he wrote that 'this century, like a golden age, has restored to light the liberal arts, which were almost extinct: grammar, poetry, rhetoric, painting, sculpture, architecture, music ... and all this in Florence'.

In 1575 the French humanist Loys le Roy wrote how 'we here in the West have in the last two hundred years recovered the excellence of good letters and brought back the study of the disciplines after they had long remained as if extinguished. The sustained industry of many learned men has led to such success that today this our age can be compared to the most learned times that ever were. For we now see the languages restored, and not only the deeds and writings of the ancients brought back to light, but also many fine things newly discovered.'

Some of the grander claims about humanism, therefore, were self-promotion, and need to be treated with care. Yet some historians, reacting against the old-fashioned view of the Renaissance as the dawn of modernity and humanism as the discovery of individualism, have gone too far in the other direction and become overly cautious about their definitions. For them 'humanism' is little more than a type of educational programme based upon classical Greek and Latin authors, and a 'humanist', strictly defined, a university teacher within such a programme, called at the time *studia humanitatis*. But this approach not only excludes such important figures as Erasmus, More and Montaigne, it fails to appreciate the excitement of the movement, its grandiose ambitions, and its often impressive achievements. For humanists not only sought to go back *ad fontes* – to the original founts of knowledge – they also sought to redesign their own world with the knowledge and inspiration derived from the classical past. Just as artists and architects began to copy the techniques and derive ideas from classical statues, temples and paintings, so humanists looked back to the political thought of Cicero, the histories of Livy, the moral philosophy of Seneca or Plutarch, the ethics of Aristotle and the stories of Homer.

Christian Humanism

If this was humanism, how should we understand 'Christian humanism'? It used to be thought that this was a clearly distinct offshoot of the main Renaissance movement, rooted in Northern Europe, detached from Italian preoccupations, less 'modern' because more religious, and in large part a prelude to Protestantism. This is unhelpful, not least because it suggests that Christian humanists were an oddly old-fashioned splinter group from the mainstream of Renaissance ideas. In fact, humanism nearly always had a Christian dimension, and it was

the pure republican types, or the mavericks like Machiavelli, who were the exception, not the rule. The Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives wrote about education: 'as for what books should be read ... there are some on which everyone is agreed, as the Gospels of the Lord, the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, the historical and moral books of the Old Testament, Cyprian, Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, Chrysostom, Hilary, Gregory, Boethius, Fulgentius, Tertullian, Plato, Cicero, Seneca and other such authors.' This is a characteristic example of how the Bible – also a classical text – and early church fathers were placed alongside Plato, Cicero, Boethius and the rest. Someone like Thomas More was at home in the world of classical antiquity, translating the Greek satirist Lucian or writing *Utopia*, which was modelled on Plato's *Republic*. Yet More was also famous for his piety, insisting that his children study the church fathers, discussing church reform with Erasmus, ultimately dying for his faith.

Christian humanism makes the point that we have misunderstood the Renaissance if we see it in terms of a pagan revival, a straightforward championing of the abilities of man. In any Renaissance art gallery, the motifs remain predominantly Christian, and most Renaissance thinkers continued to work within a Christian context. But Christian humanists were not afraid to pose a vigorous challenge to the religious assumptions of the time, particularly where they saw hypocrisy and corruption. Although as individuals they were shaped by their local circumstances, a key feature of the movement was its internationalism. This was maintained in various ways: through the travelling of scholars around Europe; through copious correspondence, which was intended for circulation to third parties and often published; through the use of the printing press, whose spread throughout Europe mirrored and facilitated the spread of humanist concerns. Most of all, the international aspect of Christian humanism was encouraged by the humanists' use of a single common language – they all spoke and wrote Latin fluently, which facilitated the kind of intellectual exchange which the modern world, hampered by language differences, still struggles to attain.

It is important here to issue a warning. Christian humanism was a highly diverse movement. It contained individuals as distinct as the German Cornelius Agrippa who studied the occult and the Kabbala; the Italian nobleman Pico della Mirandola who befriended Savonarola and some of whose religious ideas were condemned for heresy; the Spaniard Juan de Valdes who was the centre of an evangelical Catholic circle in Italy or the Englishman John Fisher who combined humanist learning with a renowned piety, died a Cardinal and in due course became a saint. Christian humanism could manifest itself at the most basic level as little more than a style of writing, full of classical, biblical and patristic allusions and quotations. Even a thorough humanist education could not be guaranteed to produce the same results: Mary I and Elizabeth I were both given the best humanist education of which English scholars were capable, and they were both exceptionally learned, but still had very different religious convictions. Yet Christian humanism was more than just a form of religious education; there were enough shared aims and ideals for us to see it as movement which comprised ideology, not just techniques for instruction. This ideology of Christian renewal was channelled in different ways, often with very different consequences, but it sprang from the same sources of inspiration.

Education

At the heart of Christian humanism was a fervent desire for education. In part this meant education for the humanists themselves, many of whom studied at a succession of universities all over Europe. But they also sought to educate society at large. Erasmus wrote to a friend that 'to be a schoolmaster is an office second in importance to a king. Do you think it a mean task to take your fellow-citizens in their earliest years, to instil into them from the beginning sound learning and Christ himself, and to return them to your country as so many

honourable upright men?' Yet if Christian humanists sought to reconfigure their world, they planned to do so from the top down. Erasmus might write dreamily of a time when the ploughman would 'sing texts of the Scripture at his plough, and ... the weaver ... hum them to the tune of his shuttle', but works like *The Education of a Christian Prince* targeted those at the apex of the social pyramid. Humanists sought the company – and the patronage – of Popes, archbishops and princes, nobility and gentry, and tried to encourage their patrons to implement programmes of reform based on the recommendations of their scholarly advisors. Meanwhile these influential individuals courted the humanists in their turn, anxious to be perceived as educated and enlightened Renaissance princes, or as nobles or churchmen of scholarly renown.

Christian humanism was thus to set a pattern for the education of the ruling classes which would long endure. The starting point was the study of ancient languages. Rabelais had Pantagruel's father exhort him to become 'a perfect master of languages. First of Greek, as Quintilian advises; secondly, of Latin; and then of Hebrew, on account of the Holy Scriptures; also of Chaldean and Arabic, for the same reason; and I would have you model your Greek style on Plato's and your Latin on that of Cicero.' This – pruned of the satire – was essentially the humanist model. Even women were included in this, although it was royal and aristocratic women, or the daughters of men like Thomas More, who most immediately benefited. That Elizabeth I was fluent in Latin and Greek, as well as French and Italian, was a testimony to the humanist programme of study she had followed.

Rediscovering the Bible

Above all else, the study of ancient languages enabled Christian humanists to read the Bible with new-found accuracy and enthusiasm. On one level, the biblical revival was a practical matter. To read the Old Testament required an understanding of Hebrew; to read the New Testament required Greek, which also enabled the reading of the Septuagint, the ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek from the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. New universities, or university colleges, were therefore established which emphasised the learning of these ancient languages, from the University of Alcalá founded 1499 to Corpus Christi College in Oxford, founded 1517, or the 'Collegium Trilingue' in Louvain, also founded 1517, where three lecturers were 'to read and expound publicly to all comers both Christian and other moral and approved authors, in the three languages, that is in Latin, Greek and Hebrew'.

Latin was still a living language, and the main form of communication among humanists, who latinised their own names to indicate their intellectual status. Greek was something new, and to study Greek, or patronise the study of Greek, was to mark yourself out as a cutting-edge thinker, dedicated to the pursuit of truth. It gave access not just to the Bible, but to the Greek fathers who had written in the centuries immediately after Christ. Erasmus translated the works of the Greek fathers St John Chrysostom, St Ireneus and St Basil among others. Most importantly of all, in 1516 he published a new translation of the New Testament in Greek and Latin. This *Novum Instrumentum* caused a storm of excitement, and in many cases, of protest from those who challenged his right to question the usual Latin text, commonly called the Vulgate. He was accused of trying to undermine the church. In his own defence, Erasmus pointed out that the text had been approved by his bishop, and accepted by Pope Leo X to whom it was dedicated. His was only one of several attempts to achieve a flawless edition of the Bible. The Complutensian or 'Polyglot' Bible, produced at the university of Alcalá, set texts in different languages side by side for purposes of comparison. In the Old Testament the Latin text of the Vulgate was given between the Hebrew and the Greek of the Septuagint, with an Aramaic text and its Latin translation added at the bottom of the page for the first five

books, or Pentateuch. The New Testament had Greek and Latin Vulgate texts placed side by side. This great work took from 1502 to 1517, the year in which Martin Luther began to cause a stir. It could be argued that everything Luther had to say about the importance of reading the Bible, and paying attention to the literal meaning of the text, had already been anticipated by the work of the Christian humanists.

Humanists were not merely interested in points of grammar and translation. Their study of Greek and Hebrew, their rediscovery of the Bible, were all undertaken for a reason, namely the revival of Christianity. It was a moral revolution that Christian humanists intended; a revolution to be achieved by learning. And although it began with the educated, it was a revolution which was to extend in time to all. Erasmus wrote 'I disagree very much with those who are unwilling that Holy Scripture, translated into the vulgar tongue, be read by the uneducated, as if Christ taught such intricate doctrines that they could scarcely be understood by very few theologians, or as if the strength of the Christian religion consisted in men's ignorance of it'.

The Road to Protestantism

Equipped with a knowledge of the ancient tongues, and thus with an understanding of the Bible and the early church fathers, humanists were poised to renew Christian society. The conclusions they drew could be radical, on the one hand exhorting the laity to lives of uncompromising religious commitment, on the other telling princes to embrace pacifism. Erasmus's *Handbook of the Christian Soldier* portrayed the Christian life as a spiritual struggle, aiming at a state of being where 'we shall be high-minded in Christ, of abundant charity, strong and constant in good or bad fortune, closing our eyes to petty things, striving towards higher things, full of enthusiasm, full of knowledge'. In order to achieve this, many forms of ignorance, superstition and corruption had to be put aside. Erasmus and his like vigorously attacked the wealth and indolence of many of the clergy, the moral laxity of many monks, the stupidity of popular religious traditions, the pomposity and obscurantism of theologians. *In Praise of Folly*, for example, attacked those ignorant clergy, who 'believe it's the highest form of piety to be so uneducated that they can't even read. Then when they bray like donkeys in church, repeating by rote the psalms they haven't understood, they imagine they are charming the ears of their heavenly audience with infinite delight'. Satire was the humanist weapon, gleefully and skilfully deployed. Popes, prelates, monks, nuns and the credulous laity were all mocked in turn.

Erasmus wrote to a friend that 'to be a schoolmaster is an office second in importance to a king

We tend to see Christian humanism as only a prelude to Protestantism, but in 1517 Erasmus was a scholar of international repute and Luther was an unknown friar in an obscure German town. We might do better to see humanism as the bigger movement, with far wider concerns, from which the theologians who would later be termed Protestants became a small breakaway group. Humanism, however, was a movement of intellectuals and scholars, who sought to change the world through the enlightened application of humanist ideals by intelligent and educated heads of state. Protestantism worked in much more crude and efficient ways, mobilising popular opinion, deploying cheap print and propaganda, whipping up antagonism and protest. Erasmus had at first given cautious encouragement to Luther, but warned him that 'one gets further by courtesy and moderation than by clamour. That was how Christ brought the world under his sway'. As the Lutheran movement gathered momentum, however, Erasmus began to deplore the violence involved. 'What was the point of a savage torrent of invective directed against men whom it was unwise to treat like that if he wished to

make them better, and impious if he did it to provoke them and set the whole world by the ears?’

The Reformation as it unfolded in Europe after 1517 used humanist ideas about the Bible, about the defeat of ignorance and superstition, about moral renewal and pious reform. It also relied heavily on the scholarly achievement of the humanists – their language skills, their editions of the Bible and the church fathers, their attacks upon popular ignorance, monastic corruption and scholastic obscurantism. But it was a world away from its aims of regeneration through education, cultural exchange and influence upon the elites. Erasmus in 1527 wrote to Martin Bucer, and gave an explanation of why he had not become a Protestant. ‘If I could have been convinced that this movement came from God I would have enlisted long ago’, he wrote. But he was alarmed at the human cost of the movement, particularly ‘the constant in-fighting between the leaders’, and said ‘if you were what you brag of being, they would have set an example of godly and patient conduct which would have made the Gospel widely acceptable’. And with ominous clear-sightedness, Erasmus wrote ‘I foresee a violent and bloody century should those who are angry get their strength back, as they surely will.’

Christian humanism and early Protestantism shared many characteristics. But it could be argued that it was the humanist vision which had the greater breadth, where Protestantism was to lose itself in precise definition of doctrine and the subsequent violent defence of those doctrines. Christian humanism could be put to many uses, many of them of only localised importance. It was deployed in Spain in the service of the wider aims of Ferdinand and Isabella; in Switzerland it served to underpin political dissatisfaction, facilitating the emergence of Swiss national identity, and the Swiss reformation; in England it was used to construct Henry VIII’s case for the Royal Supremacy, and a reformation which attacked abuse and superstition but equally rejected Protestantism. Yet Christian humanism never lost its international dimension, reinforced by the exchange of scholars and books as well as the exchange of ideas. It continued to uphold a vision of educated and civilised exchange, of the pursuit of learning, of biblical and patristic renewal, of new standards of lay piety, of the rejection of obscurantism and ignorance. These ideals remained a key part of early modern culture, the foundations of education, a formative influence in a range of different disciplines. Yet in the area where the humanists had most wanted to make a difference, conflict raged. The Bible became a familiar part of early modern vernacular culture, and a source of pious inspiration as they had wished; but it also became a battle-ground, its meaning fiercely contested between different religious groups. Still the older movement, although challenged, was never eclipsed. Despite the confessional divide which resulted from the Reformation, Christian humanism, as both an educational and an ideological force, refused to go away.

- **What** were the key features of the Renaissance?
- **Should** we see Christian humanism as a coherent ideological movement?
- **What** was the relationship between Christian humanism and Protestantism?

30288702

[History Review](#) [Lucy Wooding](#) [Archives](#) [Archives \(1980-2009\)](#) [HR SECTIONS](#)
[This Month](#) [Top menu](#) [WHAT](#) [WHEN](#) [WHERE](#) [Issue: 64](#) [Medieval \(4th-15thC\)](#)
[Renaissance](#) [2009](#) [Cultural](#) [Philosophy](#) [Religious](#)

Source URL: <http://historytoday.prod.acquia-sites.com/lucy-wooding/christian-humanism-renaissance->

