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EDUCATION AND HUMANISM

IT is customary to identify the Humanistic period in the development of Western culture as the more or less chronologically isolated moment in which medieval times gave way before the advance of new attitudes and methods which define modern times. The basis for such a change is primarily explained in terms of the political, social, and economic changes which were taking place, but education has played a secondary role in the view-points expressed. Keeping in mind the definition of education as the process by which intellectual and spiritual standards of the culture are clarified and transmitted, it is my aim to demonstrate how the work of scholars, philosophers, thinkers, and the school itself, defined as primary concern the development of culture in this basic moment of our heritage.

The meaning of the term Humanism in its origin implies education. It meant to the Romans, whose education was so much indebted to Greek thought, cultivated intelligence, opposite to "barbaritas" and "feritas", the way of the wild ones. It would be natural to the Italians of the 14th and 15th centuries in their quest for knowledge of that past, to use the term imply-

ing the study of man in his immediate earthly life, defining the concept in terms of "a just perception of the dignity of man as a rational, volitional and sentient being born upon this earth with a right to use it and enjoy it".¹

Humanism started as a product of education. The term which has been properly used to describe the determination of the course which the Renaissance followed, is by itself a manifestation of the educative process involved. Humanism was the vital element in it.²

Outwardly, Humanism may be identified as a return on the part of scholarship to the classics. It might be narrowly identified as a return to the past. This would leave aside the consideration of the spirit which guided the movement and which gave it its vitality. We must recognize the fact that Italian culture was product of a continuing process since the classic age. Many elements persisted as an integral part of the feelings, appreciations, traditions, beliefs, etc., in the pattern of culture developed along ten centuries in all aspects of life. Education institutionally had been of utmost importance. It remained as one of the most stable factors along that long and turbulent period. The seat of the Medieval Church kept in its life the yearnings for the world that had been, and the Church itself had in its education that feeling beneath its other-worldly consciousness.

Theology and philosophy, the basic fields of knowledge and truth, as defined by the all-pervading institution, unavoidably kept in its reasonings the traits from its origin. If we add to this the fact that it was in Italy that secular education went on without interruption, with its pre-Christian spirit of inquiry outside the Church, it will not be surprising to see that the same education dominated by Christian ideas contained within itself the germ to produce this return to the study of the world in its immediate considerations with man as main actor. The greatest

¹ *The Renaissance*: Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 19, Article by Prof. Smith.
² *Op. cit.*

conflict in the medieval period was a conflict in ideas, realism versus nominalism. It was to that past to which scholars went to gather basis for the debate, where each school found reason for its stand. Plato and Aristotle were the thinkers who came to their help. When St. Thomas Aquinas recognized the world of faith alongside a world of reason and human endeavor, a door was opened for the acceptance of rationality and the coming in to the open of the ideal behind the concept of Humanism. Then, to conclude the picture of the roots of the movement, we might add that even in the informal education of medieval times, the world of the present was what helped to form the European character. Venus remained in the culture as a living deity.

Petrarch, Dante, Boccaccio, and Villani, the writers who initiate the study of antiquity, will produce their works in the forms of medieval times, but in them the love for antiquity is manifested. Their scholarship, especially Petrarch's, was the basis toward the development of schools which gave form to Humanism. The flourishing of academies will follow the Platonic Academy of Florence. The universities started in the previous centuries as centers for Christian theology will grow in this direction. It was at the University of Bologna that in 1396 Greek studies were organized under the direction of Crisoloras. The 15th century continued growing in this revival of learning under the education for youth developed in the schools founded by teachers imbued with this spirit. Despite the weaknesses from our point of view that characterized their implementation, we have to recognize that in their historical moment the ideas of these teachers were decisive educational factors in forming the character of humanistic culture. Among them, Pietro Paolo Vergerio (1349-1420) made Quintilian and his educative ideas a basis of curriculum definition. Vittorino da Feltre (1378-1446), has deserved being called the first modern teacher. Guarino da Verona completes the great trilogy of the classroom teachers who become initiators.³

Humanism continued its growth toward a new world view.

³ Boyd, William, *The History of Western Education*, Chapters V to VIII.

Although slow in its beginnings, by the sixteenth century humanistic thought will have gone forward in weakening the process of knowledge based on revelation and the strengthening of rationalism; but it will be a slow process. Till the end of the century the duality of faith and reason functions without conflict. Humanistic education will keep both forces working together. Churchmen will be some of the greatest exponents of the ideas. Nicholas of Cusa, the great German prelate, states:

Our knowledge of things is not acquired by completely disregarding their material conditions, without which no image of them could be formed; nor is it wholly subject to their possible variation; but the more we abstract from sensible conditions, the more certain and solid our knowledge is.⁴

Sir Thomas More, who preferred to die rather than betray his allegiance to the Catholic Church, will present in his *Utopia* a king who decrees "that it should be lawful for every man to favour and follow what religion he would, and that he might do the best he could to bring other to his opinion, so that he did it peaceably, gently, quietly, and soberly, without haste and contentious rebuking and inveighing against other."⁵

Erasmus, who became the greatest exponent of the movement at the beginning of the century, who will keep his position in the Church despite the expectations of the Protestants, will point at the humanistic spirit in the quest for truth even in matters of the Church:

"Now I hear the objection: What need is there for interpretation when Scripture is entirely clear? But if it is so clear, why have such eminent men groped so blindly and for so many centuries in such an important matter, as our adversaries claim? If there is no obscurity in the Scriptures, what need was there for prophecies in apostolic times? This, you may say, was a gift of the Holy Spirit. But I hardly know whether, like the gift of healing and the gift of tongues, this gift of prophecy has not

⁴ *The Age of Adventure: The Renaissance Philosophers*; arranged with introduction by Giorgio de Santillana.

⁵ *Op. cit.*

also ceased. If it has not ceased, it should be asked to whom it has passed. If to everyone all interpretation is uncertain.”⁶

It is in the 16th century when Humanism will basically look toward the future in its preoccupation with the present. The Reformation period in a high degree a product of the movement, despite the negation of the humanistic spirit because of the intolerance and fanaticism of its participants, will unwittingly lead to the acceptance of individual dignity and capacity to order this earthly life. Northern Europe will lead Humanism in its forward path. It has been recognized that the avant garde of Humanism in the Netherlands and German territory, were the Brethren of the Common Life, a religious order that introduced humanistic studies as basic to its curriculum. Their spirit of openmindedness in education prepared this area for the growth of ideas. Erasmus learned under their guidance. His ideas on education coupled to those of the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives, were to remain as the most progressive ideas in this field in terms of the child and the educative process. Vives sounds in his educative program like a recent exponent of education.

It is in the realm of scientific progress where humanistic thought brought about the most decisive changes. The profuse study of the classics with their varied points of view as to the physical world, will weaken the medieval standards of studies developed from Platonic idealism and from Aristotelian deductive thinking. The cravings for knowledge which humanistic thought nurtured will slowly and silently start overwhelming the concept of knowledge “a priori” and lead the way to the establishment of the inductive way of thinking and the development of the scientific method. With Copernicus a route was started which followed by Kepler, Paracelsus, Galileo, and Francis Bacon, among others, opened the horizon of scientific progress which still is under way. Bacon’s “*Novum Organum*” will state:

⁶ *Op. cit.*

One method of delivery alone remains to us, which is simply this: we must lead men to the particulars themselves, and their series and order; while men on their side must force themselves for awhile to lay their notions by and begin to familiarize themselves with facts.⁷

With the 17th century, despite the danger of using chronology as dividing lines in cultural matters, we come to the definite triumph of rationalism under the formulation provided by the great Descartes, and scientific definition as derived from Newton's propositions. Humanism, in its specific reference to the Renaissance, will have done its main service to modern times; and although strong in the world of ideas under other names, will be weakening under the specific interpretation of the term as used here. Disciples frequently are the destroyers of the ideas of their masters. It, then, is symbolic that in 1600, a great teacher, Giordano Bruno, was executed for his ideas; and in giving his life for his convictions on the principle of the free exercise of reason, sums up the humanistic ideal in its highest point. In death he gave life to the spirit of inquiry which should be a guiding post to education at all times. It was the educative process during the period under consideration that defined as a primary force the progress of Humanism; the specific forms of curriculums statically preserved thru centuries were a negation of the educative ideals that started those studies during the Renaissance period.

⁷ Man and the Universe: *The Philosophers of Science*; edited by Saxe Commins and Robert N. Linscott; complete transcription of Bacon's *Novum Organum*.