Renaissance
The Beginning of Religious Reform

De Lamar Jensen

Renaissance is a term used in many ways, each with its own justification and purpose. In the broadest sense it is a period of history covering roughly the two centuries from about 1350 to 1550, a time displaying a remarkable spirit of self-discovery and fulfillment, a recognition of human worth, and a dynamic outpouring of intellectual, artistic, and literary activity. In some ways it featured a cultural break with the ideas of the Middle Ages, yet in others it was a continuation or culmination of them. This should not be surprising since all history contains both continuity and change, congruity and contrast. Above all, we should recognize it as a dynamic age, a time when new ideas, institutions, and beliefs were becoming popular while many old patterns of thought and activity continued in force. The word *renaissance* means "rebirth," applied particularly to the revival of classical thought, literature, art, and style, but as commonly used it implies much more than that. It also refers to the rapid social and economic changes, new ideas and applications of political and international organization, and the overseas discoveries and expansion of Europe that were taking place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

For this essay I intend to focus more on the devotional, ideological, and moral aspects of the period, in what can be called the religious Renaissance, with features that most likely primed and led to the Reformation of the sixteenth century and revealed new insights into human-divine relations. It strikes me that some of these insights were not only new but perhaps even revelatory, precursory to a later day when divine communication would again be known. We can see at times similarities between the intuitive penetration and perceptivity of some of these Renaissance personalities and the divine disclosures of modern prophets.

Italian Humanism

The transition from medieval to Renaissance life and thought was never precise nor strictly in accord with a pattern. It was a time of devastation and recovery, of upheaval and reconciliation. The underlying feature of early humanism was an explicit acceptance of the worth of human existence, that life has intrinsic value and meaning, and that the promotion of most worldly pursuits was both justifiable and meritorious. Thus the early Renaissance humanists challenged and opposed the medieval depreciation of mortal life.

But it was more than just an attitude about human existence and purpose that separated Renaissance humanists from medieval scholastics. The humanists believed in and promoted a specific program of study and thought. They called it the *studia humanitatis*, what we would today call the liberal arts. To the early humanists this meant a commitment to such scholarly disciplines as history, poetry, grammar and rhetoric—including both literary criticism and philology—and of course moral philosophy, for the humanists were basically committed to religion and to the Christian church. It also meant looking back to classical Greece and Rome for models and guides to understanding the best expression of ideas and values. Thus they made vigorous efforts to revive the cultural ideals of antiquity and reconcile these with their own preferences. Unlike their medieval predecessors, who were attracted more to metaphysics, logic, and theology, the Renaissance humanists preferred an educational program that emphasized literature and history in order to improve both writing, speaking, and thinking. Pier Paolo Vergerio (1370–1444) expressed this ideal of liberal arts education when he wrote:

> We call those studies *liberal* which are worthy of a free man; those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom; that education which calls forth, trains, and develops those highest gifts of body and mind which ennoble men and which are rightly judged to rank next in dignity to virtue only. For to a vulgar temper, gain and pleasure are the one aim of existence, to a lofty nature, moral worth and fame.[1]

Fifteenth-century writers emphasized accurate scholarship and the development of character as the ultimate goals of education. Humanist education also prepared students for a life of civic activity. Many humanists were themselves teachers, including the gifted Vittorino da Feltre (1378–1446), who taught wherever he met teachable students. Vittorino introduced classical humanist ideals into his teaching in Mantua, which soon became the foremost grammar school of Italy. Combining the best of medieval mental discipline with ancient studies, and the characteristic harmonizing of humanistic learning with the education of body, spirit, and character, he was able to assemble a favorable learning combination with traditional Christian values. The impact of humanist education was felt wherever the intention was to produce good citizens as well as learned minds.

But I am getting ahead of my story. The first representative of the humanist tradition was Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch, 1304–74), who started the revival of classical learning. As for himself, Petrarch disclaimed the praise heaped on him by his contemporaries, claiming that he was but a man "who is roaming around through the lofty beech trees all alone, humming to himself some silly little tune, and—the very peak of presumption and assurance—dipping his shaky pen into his inkstand while sitting under a bitter laurel tree."[2]

Petrarch was the first of the great Italian writers to abandon the methods and goals of medieval scholasticism in favor of Latin classics, for these not only made him more aware of the values of life, he said, but were also sources of morality and virtue. Petrarch saw the problem implicit among the dialecticians and metaphysi-

cians, whose enthusiasm for natural philosophy drew them away from sympathy or training in classical literature. Among other things, Petrarch believed this neglect of communication and style resulted in a lack of concern about immediate human life. "What is the use . . . of knowing the nature of quadrupeds, fowls, fishes, and serpents," he asked, "and not knowing or even neglecting the nature of man, the purpose for which we were born . . . ?"[3] For Petrarch genuine moral philosophy was the most important goal of human thought because it led not only to truth but more importantly to goodness.

Yet there were contradictions in Petrarch's mind. He had a hard time accepting the dreary days that surrounded him; days that made this one of the most depressing ages in history, a time of widespread war, disruption, and institutional crisis. The Black Death of 1348–50 wiped out more than one third of the population of Europe, and was only one of the catastrophes that plagued this turbulent fourteenth century. Plague was accompanied by war, taxes, brigandage, bad government, insurrection, and schism in the church. Some of the conflict between Petrarch's ideals and his life are revealed in his "Ascent of Mont Ventoux," a lengthy letter to his friend Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, professor of theology at Paris. After a vigorous climb with his brother to the top of Mount Ventoux, in southeastern France, Petrarch reflected on his successful ascent, but at the same time he confessed, "I wept over my imperfection and was grieved by the fickleness of all that men do." Then, shaking himself from his languor, he began looking around to see what he had come to see.

> Like a man aroused from sleep, I turned back and looked toward the west. The boundary wall between France and Spain, the ridge of the Pyrenees, is not visible from there, though there is no obstacle of which I knew, and nothing but the weakness of the mortal eye is the cause. However, one could see most distinctly the mountains of the province of Lyons to the right and, to the left, the sea near Marseilles as well as the waves that break against Aigues Mortes. . . .
>
> I admired every detail, now relishing earthly enjoyment, now lifting up my mind to hither spheres after the example of my body, and I thought it fit to look into the volume of Augustine's *Confessions*. . . . I opened it with the intention of reading whatever might occur to me first. . . . Where I fixed my eyes first, it was written: "And men go to admire the high mountains, the vast floods of the sea, the huge streams of the rivers, the circumference of the oceans, and the revolutions of the stars—and desert themselves."[4]

Another translation continues:

> I was ashamed, and asking my brother, who was anxious to hear more, not to bother me, I closed the book, angry with myself for continuing to admire the things of this world when I should have learned a long time ago . . . that nothing is admirable but the soul. . . . Then, having seen enough of the mountain I turned an inward eye upon myself, and from that moment on not a syllable passed my lips until we reached the bottom.[5]

Petrarch's continuing struggle between his commitment to Christianity and his quest for personal achievement, and the conflict between his spiritual vision and the pleasures of cultivated literary fame are revealed in his imaginary dialogue with St. Augustine.

> S. Augustine: . . . But let us take for granted (what is quite impossible) that the duration of life will be long and assured: still, do you not find it is the height of madness to squander the last years and the last parts of your existence on pleasing only the eyes of others and tickling other men's ears . . . ?
>
> Petrarch: . . . I do not think my way of looking at it is so unreasonable as you imagine. My principle is that, as concerning the glory which

we may hope for here below, it is right for us to seek while we are here below. . . .

S. Augustine: O man, little in yourself, and of little wisdom! Do you, then, dream that you shall enjoy every pleasure in heaven and earth, and everything will turn out fortunate and prosperous for you always and everywhere? . . .

Though Divine Mercy may deliver a man from his folly, yet it will not excuse it. . . .

Petrarch: But I have yet a last request to make, which is that you will give me your definite judgment on this point. Is it your wish that I should put all my studies on one side and renounce every ambition, or would you advise some middle course?

S. Augustine: I will never advise you to live without ambition; but I would always urge you to put virtue before glory. . . . Follow after virtue, and let glory take care of itself. . . .

Petrarch: What must I do, then? Abandon my unfinished works? Or would it be better to hasten them on, and, if God gives me grace, put the finishing touches on them? . . .

S. Augustine: Which foot you mean to hobble on, I do not know. You seem inclined to leave yourself derelict, rather than your books. . . . [He then discourses on the short length of life and reminds Petrarch that] "A wise man's life is all one preparation for death."

This saying will teach you to think little of what concerns earthly things, and set before your eyes a better path of life on which to enter. . . .

Petrarch: Ah! would that you had told me all this before I had surrendered myself over to these studies! . . .

S. Augustine: You may count your prayer already granted, if you will only to yourself be true: for how shall anyone be constant to him who is inconstant to himself?

Petrarch: I will be true to myself, so far as in me lies. I will pull myself together and collect my scattered wits, and make a great endeavor to possess my soul in patience. But even while we speak, a crowd of important affairs, though only of the world, is waiting my attention.[6]

Petrarch's self-evaluation is suggested in the final paragraph in "On His Own Ignorance, and That of Many Others," where he pleads that he be appreciated not as a man of letters, but as a good man, deserving the name of a friend and a benevolent and loving soul. Would that we all might deserve such an accolade.

Most influential in the spread of humanism throughout Italy was Coluccio Salutati (1330–1406), a celebrated Florentine scholar, lawyer, and public official who served as chancellor of the Florentine *Signoria* for the last thirty years of his life. His chancery letters were written in fluid yet dignified Latin, and he contributed much to the Renaissance cultivation of eloquence. He was also a great collector of Latin manuscripts and brought the leading Greek scholar of the Eastern Empire, Manuel Chrysoloras, to teach at Florence. Beginning with Salutati, the Italian humanists paid increasing attention to features such as human dignity, freedom of the will, and the immortality of the soul. Theologians were still debating the question of predestination versus man's ability to control or at least influence his salvation. The layman Salutati also grappled with this issue. He reasoned in favor of both God's providential power and man's freedom. God comprehends man's fate, he argued, but does not force him to comply with it. Salutati rejected stellar determination, which was popular at that time, because it left no place for human choice nor divine will. God, he argued, always leaves man some degree of choice.

In similar manner, Lorenzo Valla (1407–57) argued in his *De libero arbitrio* (On Free Will) in favor of the necessity and importance of man's will, declaring that since God created human nature then that nature had to be good. But Valla was very different from Petrarch in both his approach to life and his view of the hereafter. He was self-confident and bold, whereas Petrarch

was restrained and cautious. Perhaps this may be due in part to the times in which they lived—Petrarch in the disastrous fourteenth century and Valla in the renewed fifteenth. Whatever the cause, Valla was driven to recover the historical truths of the ancient world and distinguish them from medieval errors. This can be illustrated in many of his works but in none more clearly than in his "Oration on the False Donation of Constantine." The so-called Donation was a medieval document purported to be the deed from Emperor Constantine giving the pope secular power as head of the Roman Church. Valla was not the first to question the Donation's authenticity, but he was the first to see it as a major forgery, a foolish attempt to strengthen the papal hold on the church.

Valla also took issue with the ancient Stoics. He did not disagree with their view that only virtue was capable of bringing happiness, but he believed more fully with the Epicureans that what brought true and continuing happiness was pleasure—not the fleeting pleasures of hedonism, but the joy of a life of justice and morality. This appealed most to Valla because it did not assume that man could find happiness by himself, but rather through the intervention of Christ. Christianity taught not only that virtue was its own reward but that it should be followed because it leads to the higher pleasure of a truly heavenly life. Valla explained in the preface to his *On the True Good* that he intended to discredit not only the medieval logicians and natural philosophers but ancient philosophy as well because it esteemed to discover appropriate standards of behavior in human speculation. For Valla there were two legitimate sources of moral determination: Christianity and common sense. His Christianity was a layman's religion, not the sacerdotal notions of the clergy, which he frequently criticized. His other standard of thought and behavior was practicality. Thus his ethical standards were based on common sense, the discipline that he thought came closest to real Christian belief. Accepting the limitations of human life, Valla believed that those limitations could be transcended by the intervention of God, not by the speculations of philosophy.[7]

At about the same time, Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459), a learned scholar in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, promoted the idea that man possessed free will and dignity despite his fallen state. In his *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man*, Manetti tried to show that the gifts of God, such as dignity and superior senses, were creations of divine origin and culminated in the immortality of the soul. The great Leon Battista Alberti echoed his conviction that man is master of his own fate and that through the exercise of will, effort, and self-discipline, he could largely shape his own destiny.

Another important contributor to the idea of human worth was the precocious Marcilio Ficino (1433–99), a remarkably cognizant person in a time of outstanding thinkers. From his earliest works, Ficino demonstrated the range and depth of his active mind with interests in music and music theory, poetry, and Greek. While still in his youth, he became intimately acquainted with Plato and began a lifetime of editing, translating, commentating on, and teaching Plato. The greatest stimulant to his study came with the establishment of the Platonic Academy in Florence with a circle of interested people led by Ficino. The main objective of the group was to achieve a synthesis of religion and philosophy. It not only served to help reconcile religion with individual truth, goodness, and beauty, but also promoted and gave direction to the general outburst of artistic activity in the Renaissance. Ficino wrote, "Our century, like a golden age restored to light the liberal arts that were nearly extinct. . . . It united wisdom with eloquence. . . . And in Florence it restored the Platonic doctrine from darkness to light."[8] He also wrote an important synthesis on Platonic theology, entitled *Theologia platonica*, which emphasized Platonic love, the dignity of man, and freedom of the will, all of

which are means of attaining "universal truth and goodness" and binding people together in bonds of common humanity.

> Man is really the vicar of God, since he inhabits and cultivates all elements and is present on earth without being absent from the ether. He uses not only the elements, but also all the animals which belong to the elements. . . . Finally, he is the god of all materials, for he handles, changes, and shapes all of them. He who governs the *body* in so many and so important ways, . . . he is no doubt immortal. [But more than that] the soul desires, endeavours, and begins to become God, and makes progress every day. Every movement directed towards a definite end first begins, then proceeds, then gradually increases and makes progress, and is finally perfected . . . through the same power through which it was begun . . . Hence our soul will sometime be able to become in a sense all things and even to become a god.[9]

The most emphatic statement on man's dignity and destiny came from the pen of young Giovanni Pico, count of Mirandola (1463–94). At the age of twenty-four, Pico went to Rome, where he compiled a summary of nine hundred theses on theological matters that he had drawn from all ages and places and offered to debate them with anyone. The papacy was not so impressed with Pico's scholarship, finding several of his theses to be heretical. He fled to France for safety but was arrested there and imprisoned in Vincennes castle, outside of Paris. Through influential friends he escaped and returned to Florence, where he became interested in the message of the zealous Dominican monk Savonarola. In the meantime, Pico had written an introduction to his nine hundred theses, which he called *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. The true distinction of man, he wrote, was that he had no fixed properties like other creatures, but due to his free will, has the power to share in and even exceed the properties of others. Man is the only being whose life is determined by his own choice to become whatever he desires. All other beings are limited within the bounds prescribed by God, but man has no limits, other than those prescribed by himself.

> O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most marvelous felicity of man! To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills. Beasts as soon as they are born bring (so says Lucius) with them from their mother's womb all they will ever possess. Spiritual beings, either from the beginning or soon thereafter, become what they are to be for ever and ever. On man when he came into life the Father conferred the seeds of all kinds and the germs of every way of life. Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish [or passionate]. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being. If intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God.[10]

The continuing contribution of the humanists to religious thought was the emancipation of human personality and the recognition of human worth, even though the established church continued to pursue a course contradictory to the moral philosophy of the Italian humanists. The humanists were Catholics too, but they thought differently than clerics and did not talk about the same things most of the time. With some exceptions the church was more involved with ecclesiastical and jurisdictional matters than with morality. But as we shall see, even within the church there were people longing for institutional, doctrinal, and moral changes.

Mysticism and the Modern Devotion

Elsewhere in Europe there were various movements within the church struggling for more fulfilling experiences and more realistic beliefs about human-divine relations. Among the more effective of these were the Christian mys-

tics, a tradition extending back to the early years of the church. The essence of mysticism was the longing of individual souls for some kind of identity or direct union with God. The emotional strength of Christian mysticism was obtained from a passionate love of God and a desire to be united with Him. It took many forms in different manifestations throughout Europe, most notably in the fourteenth-century Rhineland, where inspirational men like Meister Eckhart of Cologne, Johann Tauler of Strassburg, the ascetic Heinrich Suso of the Lake Constance region, and particularly Jan Ruysbroeck of Brussels, taught and practiced unity in their religious communication.

Another innovative figure who turned the emphasis of the movement away from the asceticism and austerity of earlier mystics to a broader interest in moral virtue, service, and education, was the Dutch patrician Gerard Groote (1340–84). Groote was born at Deventer, where his father was a prominent official in the local government, but died, along with his wife, of the dreaded plague in 1350. Gerard found stability in the home of an uncle, who provided for his youthful needs: primary school at St. Lebwin and later more advanced studies at Aachen, Cologne, and finally at the University of Paris, where he received the master of arts degree in 1358 when he was only eighteen. After that he studied law in Paris and traveled for several years before finally returning to Deventer. Groote's carefree life was seriously altered when he had several life-changing experiences that convinced him of the need to replace his vices and sins with repentance and virtue. For five years he struggled to cleanse his soul, spending the last two at the Carthusian monastery of Monnikhuizen.

In 1379 Groote left the cherished brothers and began a career of preaching, not only throughout the IJssel Valley of his boyhood but beyond to the cities of Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, Utrecht, Gouda, and Delft. Due to his zeal and friendly personality, he had great success wherever he preached. He was concerned about the people he taught, especially those without leaders. He advised them to follow their consciences, to love and obey God's commandments, and to emulate Christ's life. He pleaded with them also to abandon their vices and replace them with virtue and kindness because, he told them, "we human beings, having been endowed with a spark of divinity, are not totally depraved."[11] Many people were moved by Groote's words as they cast off their encumbering burdens and followed his appeal. It was the beginning of the important religious movement known as the *Devotio Moderna* (Modern, or New, Devotion).

Groote felt the need to stay in touch with God. Such contact could be sought through simple obedience and conformity to God's commandments and laws. Conformity is strengthened by serving one's neighbor and by constantly renewing contact by reading good books, by personal meditation, and through prayer. The key factor in uniting man with God is love. "Try to love," he taught, "for in loving you shall find the kingdom of heaven. If once you have found this kingdom, you will enjoy righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. Without these three gifts all outward show of piety, such as fasting, and mortification of the flesh, will be of no avail." How then can this love be expressed? Not by remaining sequestered in one's cell, separate from the outside world, but by expressing love for all God's creations, "for he who really loves God, loves all of God's creatures."[12] Groote urged his followers to return sympathy for jealousy, charity for spite, and love for rancor. "Close your eyes to your neighbor's defects," he would counsel, "and try to discover his good qualities, which are always worth considering; nay more than that, they are the only side of his character it is well for you to dwell upon. For our soul's health can only be sustained by thoughts of love."[13]

Groote was critical of the form and effects of medieval scholasticism. "Why should we in-

dulge in those endless disputes such as are held at the universities, and that about subjects of no moral value whatsoever?" When referring occasionally to some philosopher, he would single out those passages that had practical value, or speak of those people who had tried to solve some meaningful moral problems. In similar manner he opposed indolence in every form, urging anyone who is able to work to gain their livelihood by honest labor and not resign to begging. "This I say," he explained, "because labor is necessary for the well-being of mankind."[14]

The essence of Groote's teachings was Christianity, pure and simple. Follow the footsteps of Christ, he urged, fulfill His teachings, and bear His cross. Groote tried to follow his own advice, to return good for evil and to treat suffering with sympathy. He labored for almost five years teaching against deceitfulness, dishonesty, and dishonor. He did not attack the monastic system, only those monks who treated it like a personal prebend; he did not oppose the church, only those priests and bishops who violated its precepts and dishonored its name. He treasured being a Christian, and the movement he started was a virtual Christian Renaissance.

As a reformer, Gerard Groote was deeply concerned about the church of his day. He was embarrassed by the decline in standards at every level and was offended by the lack of moral leadership in the upper levels of church government. But he was a reformer, not a revolutionary. He supplemented his criticisms with constructive ideas. He did not attack the doctrines of the church, only its morals. "Everything I have preached is in complete accordance with the teachings of the Church," he maintained, "wherever I have been wrong I shall gladly retract. I submit myself to the authority of the Church."[15] What he wanted most was to preserve the spirit and authority of the church by reproving the wicked words and deeds that were manifested by many of its members and leaders.

Despite his simple life, devoid of many accouterments, he was a happy person, satisfied with what the Lord provided and content with his lot. He enjoyed reading the scriptures; in fact, he loved books of every kind. Though he lived before the invention of printing, he had an impressive number of books in his personal library, and he employed up to five copyists at a time copying manuscripts for him. He also borrowed books from his friends, who tried eagerly to appease his great thirst. But he read not just for his own satisfaction. He encouraged others to read and to learn from one another. Committed to education, he did his greatest service in providing schooling and experience for the scores of young people who followed him. He began helping boys and girls in and around Deventer who had little money and few friends. He arranged for them to stay with friendly matrons—many lodged at his own home—and he provided food and clothing for those who needed it. To achieve maximum results from his community effort, he searched for capable teachers to train his young charges in all of the most appropriate studies. The result was his founding of the Brotherhood of the Common Life in 1374.

The Brethren of the Common Life

Groote first opened his own home for the use of several poor women who wished to benefit from his guidance, and drew up a constitution for their governance. He did not want to found a new monastic order but simply to provide the facility where devoted sisters might worship together in peace. As the means became available, they learned useful subjects from trained teachers, all the while working manually to meet their own costs. Among Groote's dedicated followers were twelve men who remained close to him and who committed to living together in a common life, combining their earnings and uniting their efforts. One of these was Florentius Radewijns, who was vicar of St. Lebwin's Church when he joined Groote. Another intimate friend, already a

teacher at Zwolle and then rector of the city school, was Jan Cele, who became one of Groote's closest associates in his devotional and educational enterprises. Groote's followers were pious folk who expressed their piety through devotion and service. "It is our duty," he wrote, "to make ourselves worthy habitations where Christ will be pleased to dwell."[16]

Gradually various laymen began to gather around Gerard and Florentius in Deventer. They lived together and explored questions of religious devotion, copied religious texts, and taught the simple truths of the gospel as they understood them.

> The life of these associations was based on certain principles: we know what they did, if not why or how. They wished to conform to the essential ideals of poverty, chastity and obedience, but took no vows and were free to leave at any time; they lived frugally and wore simple clothes, but not a monastic style habit; they took food together in silence; they read, meditated, prayed and regularly exchanged together on questions of the inner life; they supported themselves by copying texts, and manual work, eschewing the begging adopted by lay groups suspected of heresy; they fed and clothed the poor. They had combined to help each other towards the common goal: to live in a better way, according to Christ's instructions.[17]

Later authorities have called Gerard the Great "the apostle of his country, saintly, devoted, and learned, humble, and meekly obedient to all lawful authority—the true reformer, the model for all missionaries, the architect of one of the grandest schemes ever devised for calling back erring man to the fold of Christ."[18]

After the death of Groote in 1384, the Brotherhood became more closely organized under the guidance of Florentius Radewijns. Membership increased, promising students were brought in, and they expanded their curriculum and efforts under the guidance of Jan Cele. They were committed to education and understanding and always maintained a profound respect for the lives of the early Christians. Living in the world but not of it was the meaning of their lives, as it had been of the early members. From their beginnings in Deventer and Zwolle, the Brethren soon expanded to Hoorn, Amersfoort, and Delft and later to Groningen, Gouda, Nijmegen, and Utrecht. They also spread to the neighboring German regions of Westphalia and beyond.

Some of the similarities between features of the Brethren of the Common Life and many of the Italian humanists are worth noting. Both looked to the ancient past for their textual and ideological roots: the Brethren focusing on early monastic and mystical texts, the humanists on classical literary texts. Both devoted much time and energy to reviving and maintaining the earlier texts by copying and later by the printing press. The Brethren sought old scriptural codices to be able to produce an authoritative Bible, just as the humanists scoured the libraries and archives of Europe for precious nuggets of truth. Both placed great emphasis on useful learning, on the value and practicality of their knowledge. Their criticism of the medieval scholastics was due to the impracticality of their philosophy. "Therefore," wrote Petrarch, "they are far wrong who consume their time in learning to know virtue instead of acquiring it, and . . . those whose time is spent in learning to know God instead of loving Him."[19] Radewijns similarly observed, "Much study is of little profit unless it be directed to the amending of one's life and to the ordering oneself diligently in right conduct."[20]

Radewijns led the Brethren from 1384 until 1398. No one was kinder or more supportive of the poor, the sick, and the unfortunate than he. Furthermore, he was a talented preacher and taught in a simple, straightforward manner in the language of his listeners. The third leader of the Brethren was Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, a devoted member of the *Devotio Moderna* who had the additional burden of resisting the growing

jealousy and persecution of many clerics and monks who resented the growing popularity of the Brethren of the Common Life. Zerbolt focused his defense in a treatise called *On the Common Life*, in which he effectively countered the objections raised against the brotherhood.[21]

After Zerbolt's death, the focus of the Brethren moved northward to Diepenveen, Windesheim, and Zwolle, where Jan Cele succeeded in attracting many boys from beyond the IJssel Valley and establishing a thriving secondary school system based not on the dead formalism of the scholastic curriculum but on the New Testament and other biblical works. The life of Christ was the heart of the school's studies. Cele's principal goal was to teach his pupils to imitate Christ. They were taught to pray in both Latin and Dutch, and every lesson began and ended with prayer. He also invited the adult inhabitants of Zwolle to attend his classes to obtain better understanding of what they should know and do.

But Cele did not stop with the Bible. He taught his students to examine everything available and learn to select the most useful. Although he retained some exercises from scholasticism, his emphasis was always on "the sacred writings, good manners, a saintly and Christian life, and the fear and love of God." In order to care for each student's needs, he divided his school into eight classes, or grades, an innovation with long-lasting results. He also provided for specialists to teach in the two upper grades. As a result, Cele's students usually made more rapid progress than others when they attended the universities.[22] Also worth noting is Cele's philosophy of maintaining discipline. He reasoned that learning was not enhanced by the severity of punishment. Believing that the greatest factor in maintaining order was the teacher's personality, not the fear of punishment, he took a personal interest in each of his students, first exhausting all the capabilities of sympathy and love before resorting to any other corrective measures.

Of the many unique personalities associated with the Brethren of the Common Life, none was more appreciated than Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), born at Kempen, northwest of Düsseldorf, and living most of his life in the Low Countries. For a time he was a pupil of the Brethren at Deventer before he became a novice of the Canons Regular of Windesheim at Mount St. Agnes, where his older brother was prior. Besides neatly copying manuscripts, including the entire Bible, and writing many works of devotion, collections of sermons, and chronicles, as well as outstanding spiritual counsels, he is also credited with the principal authorship of the *Imitatione Christi* (Imitation of Christ), a classic of devotional literature.

More than any other work, the *Imitation of Christ* opens the way to understanding the spirit of the *Devotio Moderna* and the piety and devotion of the Brethren of the Common life. It has been translated into more than fifty languages and has had a positive effect on generations of pious Christians. Thomas drew from a number of sources for the meat of the *Imitation*: from the New and Old Testaments, from the various writings composed and read in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna*, and from St. Bernard of Clairvaux and other earlier mystical writers. The *Imitation* was meant to strengthen readers who seek a stronger inner faith and who want to renew their spiritual lives by striving for divine association. The following excerpts illustrate the spirit and message of the book.

> Surely high words do not make a man holy or just; but a virtuous life maketh him dear to God.
>
> I had rather feel compunction than understand the definition thereof.
>
> Surely, an humble husbandman that serveth God is better than a proud philosopher that neglecting himself laboreth to understand the course of the heavens.

> If I understood all things in the world, and were not in charity, what would that help me in the sight of God, who will judge me according to my deeds?
>
> Truly, at the day of judgment we shall not be examined [on] what we have read, but what we have done; not how well we have spoken, but how religiously we have lived.[23]

Thomas à Kempis gave meaning and importance to the *Devotio Moderna* and made its principles applicable in many walks of life. Countless people in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were introduced to devotional life through reading the *Imitation of Christ*.

The Christian Humanists

Because non-Italian humanists were more interested and involved in religious matters than were their Italian counterparts, and more willing to take an active role in an effort to reform the church than were the Brethren of the Common Life, they came to be known as Christian humanists. They were, of course, interested in literacy and educational improvement, as were the Italian humanists, but they were more interested in questions of faith and conduct and in cleansing and reforming the church. They believed in an orderly reformation, using the Sermon on the Mount as a guide, hoping that a return to the scriptures would result in a renewal of Christian morals and correct the ineffectiveness of scholastic thought.

There were many humanists in France, partly because the French Renaissance was most like the Italian and because close linguistic, cultural, and political ties created a more intimate association of literary talents. Soon after the turn of the sixteenth century, France, under the patronage of Francis I, became an active center of intellectual and cultural Renaissance. Many serious French classical scholars turned the intellectual climate there into a continuation and adaptation of the Italian Renaissance. Yet there was a difference. French scholars, like Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples (1450–1536) and Guillaume Budé (1467–1540), not only advanced classical linguistic and educational standards, but also applied what they learned to devotional and scriptural interests. Lefèvre's serious biblical scholarship began in 1505 when he started publishing many volumes of religious commentaries, textual criticism, and biblical translation. At Meaux, outside of Paris, Lefèvre congregated with many intellectual and spiritual followers to form a growing multitude of Christian humanists who hoped to reconcile Christian dogma with humanistic learning and thus effect a spiritual and moral reformation within the church.

Meanwhile in Spain, similar cells of humanistic and religious reconciliations were forming under the guidance of scholars such as Antonio Nebrija—a disciple of Lorenzo Valla—and Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540). Living much of his life in the Low Countries and England, Vives advocated reform of education, law, and the church. But he was careful to attack only corruption and abuse in the church, not doctrines. The primary aim of all these institutions, he believed, should be morality and goodness. True wisdom, he concluded in *Introduction to Wisdom*, "consists in judging things correctly, so that we may estimate a thing at its true worth."[24]

Although not a humanist himself, the greatest promoter of humanism in Spain was Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros (1437–1517), confessor to Queen Isabel, archbishop of Toledo, and grand chancellor of Castile. He was a conscientious and energetic reformer, having no more tolerance for clerical abuse than he did for heresy. He was also a scholar in his own right and a benefactor of humanistic learning in Spain. In 1509 he founded the University of Alcalá, near Madrid, and soon thereafter completed the monumental six-volume Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic translation of the Bible.

Humanism in Germany differed most from its counterparts in France and Spain in that it exerted a less positive reforming pressure on the Church and a more embittered hostility toward Rome. As a result, it bred more serious religious discontent and social disorder there than in any other part of Europe. Nevertheless, a genuine Christian humanism did develop in Germany. Its earliest proponent was Rudolf Agricola (1444–85), born near Groningen in the northeastern Low Countries and educated early by the Brethren of the Common Life. He went on to study at the University of Erfurt, Louvain, and Cologne before immersing himself in every kind of humanistic education at Pavia, Ferrara, and Modena. He was particularly impressed by Petrarch and fancied himself the Petrarch of northern humanism. He devoted the last six years of his life to promoting a cultural and religious renaissance in Germany. His influence was strong, affecting many followers who carried on his ideals for the next generation.

The most illustrious of the German humanists was Johann Reuchlin (1455–1522), who, like his model, Pico della Mirandola, was interested in all areas of human knowledge and mastered many of them. His greatest passion was Hebrew and the mysterious features of the Jewish Cabala. But his serious Hebrew scholarship was not an end in itself but a means to cleanse the church of its follies and redirect its emphasis toward a simpler and more meaningful spirituality.

That was the goal of the English humanists as well. John Colet (1466–1519), the leading English scholar-theologian of the Renaissance, was at the forefront of adapting the approach of humanism to religious reform. He sought to apply the Bible as a guide to daily life and thus make religion a more integral part of personal behavior. In a memorable sermon at the opening of the Convocation of the Clergy, Colet used Paul's Epistle to the Romans to enjoin his listeners to transform the church by changing themselves. He exhorted them to abandon the secular and worldly way of living they had fallen accustomed to. Citing the Apostle Paul, he admonished the clergy to follow the example of the Savior in humility, sobriety, and charity. "Return to the God of love and peace," he pleaded; "return to Christ, in whom is the true peace of the Spirit which passeth all understanding; . . . 'Be ye reformed in the newness of your minds, that ye may know those things which are of God; and the peace of God shall be with you.'"[25] Colet's intentions were sincere and his reasoning sound, but his words had slight effect on the clergy as a whole.

Another even more famous English humanist was Thomas More (1478–1535), a lifelong friend and admirer of Colet. He was a layman, trained lawyer, and active man of affairs, eventually attaining the office of Lord Chancellor, the highest political authority in the kingdom. Despite his active public life, More never lost interest in the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual aspects of the time. He promoted Greek scholarship in collaboration with William Lily and was a sincere follower of Pico. Contemporaries proclaimed More's Latin poetry to be among the best of the time. The highlight of More's career was the famous *Utopia*, which describes the idealistic life and institutions of the inhabitants of the imaginary island of Utopia. In this masterpiece, the ingredients of a well-read humanist are combined with the brotherhood and simplicity of a devoted Christian and the boldness and clarity of a man-of-affairs, to produce a provocative and meaningful treatise that has affected social thought ever since.

Erasmus of Rotterdam

The leading voice in the chorus of Christian reformers at the beginning of the sixteenth century was Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), the greatest literary figure of his time, as well as a brilliant scholar, prolific and witty Latinist, and devoted Christian. At an early age he went to school at Gouda, then entered the famous school

of the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer, and later at 'sHertogenbosch. In 1492 he entered the monastery of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine before he was sent off to the University of Paris to study theology. He was later released from his vows. Lord Mountjoy invited him to visit England, where he began a lifetime acquaintance with John Colet and Thomas More. Colet especially impressed Erasmus with the reformative value of the scriptures, and More encouraged him in the religious truth of right living. Returning to the continent, he traveled in France and the Low Countries, promoting educational reforms, then to Italy, where he received a doctorate from the University of Torino and began a long association with the scholar-printer Aldus Manutius of Venice. By then Erasmus was the most celebrated educator and scholar in Europe, admired not only for his erudition, wit, and elegant Latin style, but also for his commitment to Christ and his determination to use the techniques of scholarship for the needs of Christian enlightenment and church reform.

Beginning in 1500 Erasmus published the *Adages*, a delightfully annotated collection of classical proverbs; the *Colloquies*, short and scintillating dialogues drawn from everyday life; and the *Enchiridion*, a penetrating handbook of Christian virtues and practice. He also contributed editions of Cicero's and Jerome's letters, a critical edition of Valla's *Annotations of the New Testament*, and many other works. On his third trip to England, Erasmus penned a charming little satire on the mores and foibles of life, particularly harsh on the monks, entitled (with a clever play on More's name) *Moriae Encomium* (The Praise of Folly).

> Among professional men [Folly declares], the lawyers claim first place. No others are so satisfied with themselves. . . . By stirring together six hundred statutes at once, . . . and by piling gloss on gloss and opinion on opinion, they create the impression that their work is extremely difficult. . . .
>
> After the lawyers come the philosophers, who are reverenced for their beards and the fur on their gowns. They announce that they alone are wise, and that the rest of men are only passing shadows. . . . The fact that they can never explain why they constantly disagree with each other is sufficient proof that they do not know the truth about anything.
>
> Perhaps it would be wise to pass over the theologians in silence. That short-tempered and supercilious crew is as unpleasant to deal with as Lake Camarina. . . . They may attack me with an army of six hundred syllogisms; and if I do not recant, they will proclaim me a heretic. . . . Their opinion of themselves is so great that they behave as if they were already in heaven; . . .
>
> Next to the theologians in happiness [foolishness] are those who commonly call themselves "the religious" and "monks." Both are complete misnomers, since most of them stay as far away from religion as possible, and no people are seen more often in public. . . . They cannot read, and so they consider it the height of piety to have no contact with literature.[26]

The most important output of Erasmus's devotional writing was the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (Handbook of the Christian Soldier), a manual to oppose the empty ceremonials of the church and replace it with a more personal and inward Christianity based on the teachings of the Savior. "The *Enchiridion* presented Erasmus' version of an inward religion, a Christianity based upon the ethical implications of 'the philosophy of Christ' and thus most likely to produce a world in which reason and the will of God prevailed. It underlined his conviction that any belief without practical content was meaningless." Critics of the church could also relish Erasmus's "gibes at scholastic theologians, his suggestion that the monastic life was not necessarily a second baptism, or even Christian, his insistence that men might better imitate the lives of the saints than burn candles to them."[27]

For Erasmus's Christian soldier, war against evil did not mean killing other human beings, regardless of their beliefs, but waging unending war against one's own sins and vices. The two principal weapons available for this war are prayer and knowledge. Prayer lifts our hearts heavenward and makes intercession, Erasmus affirmed, while knowledge suggests what ought to be prayed for. Speaking in a metaphor not unlike that of Pico, he reminded his readers that "in regard to soul, however, we have that capacity for the divine which enables us to surpass even the nature of angels and be made one with God." Then he elaborated twenty-two rules for approaching Christ by overcoming our spiritual ignorance, controlling our flesh, and strengthening our moral determination to live a pure and spiritual life."[28]

Erasmus spoke out strongly for living true Christlike lives rather than simply observing the symbols of such lives: "What does it matter that your body has been washed, as long as your mind stays filthy? . . . What point is there in your being showered with holy water if you do not wipe away the inward pollution from your heart? You venerate the saints and delight in touching their relics, but you despise the best one they left behind, the example of a holy life."[29]

Some of Erasmus's most forthright summons to study the scriptures and follow the teachings and "Philosophy of Christ," are found in *The Paraclesis*, the preface to his Greek and Latin editions of the New Testament.

> What we desire is that nothing may stand forth with greater certainty than the truth itself, whose expression is the more powerful, the simpler it is. . . . Yet how is it that even those of us who profess to be Christian fail to embrace with the proper spirit this philosophy alone? . . . Certainly He alone was a teacher who came forth from heaven, He alone could teach certain doctrine, since it is eternal wisdom, He alone, the sole author of human salvation, taught what pertains to salvation, He alone fully vouches for whatsoever He taught, He alone is able to grant whatsoever He has promised. . . . Why do not all of us ponder within ourselves that this must be a new and wonderful kind of philosophy since, in order to transmit it to mortals, He who was God became man, He who was immortal became mortal, He who was in the heart of the Father descended to earth? . . . Why, then out of pious curiosity do we not investigate, examine, explore each tenet? . . . The journey is simple, and it is ready for anyone. Only bring a pious and open mind, possessed above all with a pure and simple faith.[30]

Erasmus saw his own mission as one of cleansing the church through applying humanistic scholarship to the sources of the Christian tradition. For him, truth and piety were products of simple, honest thoughts and acts, not of sacraments and rituals, although he was quick to concede that relics, observances, and ceremonies helped lead the weak to faith and spiritual understanding. The essence of his confessional writings was a call to discover the biblical Christ and follow the spirit of His message: "Wish for good, pray for good, act for good to all men."[31] In this way Erasmus hoped to reconcile both personal and general conflicts by moderation and balance. Erasmus's impact on the church as a whole was less than he had hoped, although we do not know what influence he may have had on many people who learned of his message through second-hand verbal reports. Yet steps toward reformation of the church did not die out. During the first decade of the sixteenth century, criticism of dogma and practices increased, along with recommendations for fundamental change.

NOTES

1. William Harrison Woodward, *From Vittorino da Feltre and Other Humanist Educators* (London, 1897), 102, reprinted in Werner L. Gundersheimer, ed., *The*

Italian Renaissance (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 31.

2. Petrarch to Francisco Bruni, papal secretary in Avignon, October 25, 1362, in *Opera* (Basel, 1554), 824, reprinted in Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall Jr., eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 34.

3. Gerald E. Seigel, "Renaissance Humanism: Petrarch and Valla," in Robert Schwoebel, ed., *Renaissance Men and Ideas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 10–11.

4. Petrarch, "The Ascent of Mont Ventoux," trans. Hans Nachod, in Cassirer, Kristeller, and Randall, *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, 43–44.

5. Petrarch, in Julia C. Bondanella and Mark Musa, eds., *The Italian Renaissance Reader* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 19.

6. Petrarch, "The Secret, or the Soul's Conflict with Passion," trans. William H. Draper, (London, 1911), 175–92, reprinted in Donald Weinstein, ed., *The Renaissance and the Reformation* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 63–72.

7. Seigel, "Renaissance Humanism: Petrarch and Valla," 14–19.

8. See De Lamar Jensen, *Renaissance Europe: Age of Recovery and Reconciliation*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1992), 132.

9. Marcilio Ficino, "The Soul of Man," from *Platonic Theology*, trans. J. J. Burroughs, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 5, no. 2 (1944), in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: Viking Press, 1985), 387–92.

10. Pico, "Oration on the Dignity of Man," in Cassirer, Kristeller, and Randall, *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, 225.

11. Albert Hyma, *The Brethren of the Common Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 1950), 21.

12. Thomas à Kempis, *Vita Gerardi Magni*, in Hyma, *Brethren of the Common Life*, 29–30.

13. Kempis, *Vita Gerardi*, in Hyma, *Brethren of the Common Life*, 30.

14. Gerard Groote, *Epistolae*, ed. W. Mulder, quoted in Hyma, *Brethren of the Common Life*, 31.

15. Groote, *Protestatio de veridica Evangelii praedicatione*, ed. Thomas à Kempis, *Opera* (Antwerp, 1615), 914–15, in Hyma, *Brethren of the Common Life*, 34.

16. Migne, Jacques Paul, *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1844), quoted in Ross Fuller, *The Brotherhood of the Common Life and Its Influence* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 81–82.

17. *The Imitation of Christ*, ed. B. I. Knott (London, 1963), 15–16, in Fuller, *Brotherhood of the Common Life*, 88.

18. Francis Richard Cruise, *Thomas à Kempis* (London: Kegan Paul, 1887), 53.

19. Petrarch, "On His Own Ignorance and that of Many Others," in Cassirer, Kristeller, and Randall, *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, 93.

20. Florentius Radewijns, in Fuller, *Brotherhood of the Common Life*, 93.

21. See Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance: A History of the "Devotio Moderna"* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1924), and *Brethren of the Common Life*, 70–80.

22. Hyma, *Brethren of the Common Life*, 92–93.

23. In Wallace K. Ferguson, *Europe in Transition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 350–51.

24. Cited in Jensen, *Renaissance Europe*, 372; see also 365–88.

25. "Colet's Convocation Sermon," in John C. Olin, ed., *The Catholic Reformation: Savonarola to Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 39.

26. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. Leonard F. Dean (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1946), 94–96, 101.

27. Raymond Himelick, *The Enchiridion of Erasmus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), 15.

28. Himelick, *Enchiridion*, 40, 47, 63.

29. Himelick, *Enchiridion*, 110–11.

30. "The Paraclesis," in John C. Olin, ed., *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987), 98–100.

31. Jensen, *Renaissance Europe*, 387.