The Renaissance

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Of the many modern treatments of the interesting phenomena commonly called the Renaissance, none is more unfair than that of identifying it with the Catholic Church. It is true that during the period of its prominence the Church was the principal patron of literature and of art, and that, as a natural consequence, the books, the sculpture, and the paintings produced or brought to light by the great classical revival, obtained much attention in Rome and among scholarly ecclesiastics elsewhere. But it would be about as fair to make the Benedictine Order responsible for all the shortcomings of mediæval farming, on the ground that the monks were the greatest propagators of agriculture in the Middle Ages, as to attribute every ill effect of the Renaissance to popes, to prelates, or to priests. On the other hand, it would be no less unjust to assign the monkish taste for husbandry as the cause of all scandals in monasteries, than to lay the blame of the lapses of ecclesiastics upon classical studies.

In considering the condition of the Popes and of the Papal Court during the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, there are many important influences to be borne in mind besides literature and art. Among others, the exile of the Popes to Avignon, the reaction caused by their restoration to Rome, the frequent disputes and fightings which took place between the Popes and other Italian monarchs, the constant disturbances caused by great potentates, such as Charles V. and Francis I., who were sometimes patrons and at others persecutors of Popes, the alarming incursions of the Moslem power into Christian countries, the discoveries of Copernicus, the invention of paper and of printing, and the practical use of the long-known principle of the mariner's compass, which more than doubled the world so far as its surface was known to civilized man, rendered the times under notice exceedingly complicated and critical. There was another factor during the later period of the Renaissance, as important as any of these: namely, the so-called Reformation; but that catastrophe has not here been classed among them, because, rightly or wrongly, in the opinion of some historians, it ought to be considered, not among the influences rivalling that of the Renaissance, but to at least some extent as a result of the Renaissance itself. To this question we shall return by-and-by.

The latter half of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century constituted an epoch in which immorality was rampant in Italy; but we must go elsewhere than to the Renaissance, taking that word in its strictest sense, to seek its cause; and to exemplify this assertion, it may be sufficient to say that if a profound study of and admiration for the classics are conducive to immorality, there is no class of men who ought to be more immoral than Oxford dons; yet nobody could fairly pretend that the licentiousness of the dons of Oxford is one of the crying evils of the day. But, whatever its cause, immorality was almost beyond control in Italy at the period in question. In Fr. Antrobus's translation of *The History of the Popes*, by the Catholic historian, Dr. Ludwig Pastor, we read: "Undoubtedly of all the evils which darken Italian life in this period, the deadliest was the prevailing immorality. Illegitimate children were not accounted any disgrace, and hardly any

difference was made between them and those born in wedlock. When Pius II. came to Ferrara in 1459, he was received by seven princes, not one of whom was a legitimate son." When this vice was so terribly prevalent, it can scarcely be a matter for surprise that priests, whose boyhood had been spent in homes where licentiousness was predominant, should have been too vitiated by the pernicious atmosphere in which they were brought up, to attain a healthy condition of mind or body, unless by very special grace. So far as the Popes themselves are concerned, it may be well to remember that, of the whole 259, only five or six have been charged with immorality, even by the most hostile of Protestant writers, that if the sixteenth century produced an Alexander VI., it also gave the Church the excellent St. Pius V., while the family of Borgia brought forth the holy St. Francis as well as the ill-reputed Pope.

It has been too much the fashion to call ill-famed popes, priests, and laymen of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, "products of the Renaissance." By what right are the bad rather than the good fathered upon that phenomenon? Why should not St. Ignatius be said to be as much a product of the Renaissance as Benvenuto Cellini, St. Francis Borgia as Pope Alexander Borgia, or St. Philip Neri as Cosimo de' Medici? If it should be objected that the real children of the Renaissance were not ecclesiastics, but laymen of culture and learning, the reply is at hand that few, if any, men of that period were more distinguished for their literary attainments than the excellent Cardinal Ximenes, and that the brilliantly learned Cardinal Cajetan was considered the best theologian since the time of St. Thomas.

Of what was the so-called Renaissance the new birth? It is impossible to reply "Of learning," or "Of pagan literature," when we consider the enormous study devoted to the works of the pagan Aristotle by St. Thomas and the schoolmen, two centuries before its earliest dawn.

Speaking broadly, the revival in question was chiefly that of the study of Greek and Latin poems bearing upon the legend of the taking of Troy, and through those poems, directly or indirectly, of an interest in pagan mythology and Greek art. In saying this, the works of Cicero and of Cæsar, as well as those of other classical prose-writers, are not forgotten; but the general spirit of the Renaissance is more traceable to the Greek plays, to Homer's *Iliad*, and to the *Æneid* of Virgil, than to the historical or the philosophical classics. The origin of the rather sudden craze for everything classical and mythological is not very easy to trace; but it was certainly much aided and encouraged by the collection of Greek manuscripts made by Cosimo de' Medici, the so-called Father of his country, through his business agents and correspondents in many cities of Eastern Europe, during the first half of the fifteenth century. Some writers regard Petrarch as the Father of the Renaissance; but to others this assumption appears fanciful and far-fetched. So far as the Renaissance affected philosophy, it may be said to have been a revival of Platonism, and, with it, of independent philosophic inquiry based upon the comparative study of conflicting systems.

The late J. A. Symonds considered the Renaissance to have been an emancipation of the European intellect from ecclesiastical superstitions. Possibly an enemy of the Renaissance and all its works might prefer to call it the enslavement of the intellect of its times to the art and literature of the pagan past. *Per contra*, an admirer of the Renaissance, on reading Ruskin's opinion that it was a prostitution of Christianity to paganism, might reply that it rather enchained paganism as a slave of the Christian Church; and that, just as the Catholics of the days of Constantine had put Roman basilicas and heathen temples to Christian uses, so those of the Renaissance converted heathen art and, so far as beauty of style was concerned, heathen literature, to the same pious purposes.

In the great Battle of the Styles, fierce objection has been made to the so-called pagan character of much of the decorative work in Italian churches. The carved figures surmounting the altar-pieces and the monuments are, it is said, much more like sibyls and cupids than saints and angels. Yet it might be difficult to define the difference between the human appearance of a saint and that of a sibyl, while of the spiritual appearances of sibyls and saints we are in absolute ignorance; and it is obvious that no one can rightly call anything unlike an angel, unless he is already acquainted with the likeness of an angel, nor can anybody, without such an acquaintance, justly determine whether a cupid-like figure has less resemblance to a real angel than has his own preconceived idea of an angelic form. It may be added that, if a period had to be named in which the art of painting most successfully and most lavishly produced works exemplifying the truths, the traditions, and the history of Christianity and Christian times, it would be that of the Renaissance. And, more than this, it was not during that period, but in the period succeeding it, when the School of Bologna was at its zenith, that sacred pictures were most bespattered with doubtful-looking winged figures, to which pagans and Christians might dispute the right with a pretty equal show of reason. Far different, in this respect, are the works of Raphael and those of his immediate predecessors in Renaissance times.

It is indisputable that the excessive revival of a taste for Greek and Latin literature led to the formation of an unnatural and affected style in religious writings as well as in sermons, even if it led in them to nothing worse; but it has not been only during the times of the Renaissance that the manner of expressing theological verities has been influenced by secular fashions. In the seventeenth century, the absurd euphuistic mania affected clergy as well as courtiers, and a modern Jesuit has pointed out passages of pure euphuism in the writings of a celebrated Father of his Society, who lived nearly three hundred years ago. Again, in the eighteenth and in the early part of the nineteenth century, the style of the pulpit, as well as of devotional treatises, was at least as much influenced by an excessive taste for poetry and poetical expression, as it had been by an undue craving for classical quotations, or imitations, in the fifteenth and the sixteenth.

An exclusive study of the classics may have been injurious; and few indeed are the subjects of which one study, to the exclusion of all others, can be said to be altogether wholesome. This, however, does not alter the fact that, in the Middle Ages, most men, of what would now be called the upper classes, knew little beyond the arts of war or of hunting; and that, in the times of the Renaissance, such men learned something of the more refined pleasures of literature, if only in the form of the ancient classics. Much, however, as the literary education of the wealthy and of the well-to-do may have been neglected during the centuries preceding the Renaissance, it would be a mistake to suppose that the study of the classics was then a new thing. If what are sometimes called the Renaissance Popes of the sixteenth century were well versed in classical literature, so also had been Pope Gregory the Great, a thousand years earlier; if Greek was well-nigh forgotten in the schoolroom for hundreds of years, boys were made to study the Latin authors, Virgil, Horace, Sallust, and Statius, in the ninth century; and we read of their studying the same writers, with Ovid, Cicero and Quintilian, and even the Greek author Lucian added, in the thirteenth. (See the treatises of P. Daniel and Mgr. Landriot.) Cardinal Newman goes further, and says (Lecture on Christianity and Letters), that "the Classics, and the subjects of thought and the studies to which they give rise ... have ever, on the whole, been the instruments of education which the civilized *orbis terrarum* has adopted; just as the inspired works, and the articles of faith, and the catechism, have ever been the instrument of education in the case of Christianity."

It must not be inferred, from what has been already said, that in this essay a brief is being held in defence of the Renaissance. Far from it. No attempt is being made to conceal the evils resulting from the Renaissance, or, what are almost as much to the purpose, the evils prevalent during the period of the Renaissance. The revival of a taste for the finest literature of Greece and of Rome, the cultivation of a scientific perception and appreciation of the most splendid sculpture that the world has ever known, and the refining discipline of a trenchant study of the Latin and the Greek languages, were all excellent things in themselves. Unfortunately the atmosphere in which they existed, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was in many cases most debasing; nor was that the only period in which classical studies have been the means of doing harm, not through anything intrinsically wrong in themselves, but through the manner and method of their presentment. Cardinal Newman wrote — not of the Renaissance — "The drift and meaning of a branch of knowledge varies with the company in which it is introduced to the student. If his reading is confined simply to one subject, however such division of labour may favour the advancement of a particular pursuit, a point into which I do not here enter, certainly it has a tendency to contract his mind. If it is incorporated with others, it depends on those others as to the kind of influence which it exerts upon him. Thus the classics, which in England are the means of refining the taste, have in France subserved the spread of revolutionary and deistical doctrines."[^1] And when a study of the classics was accompanied by rampant immorality and intense worldliness, with a consequent decay of faith, the result of those classical studies, in too many instances, instead of refining the taste, was to increase the already prevailing licentiousness and to turn a mere conventional Catholicism into a sort of Neo-Paganism. It may be a question how far this accompaniment was a matter of cause and effect; for the newly discovered pagan ideal of life interfered with and modified the long-acknowledged Christian ideal; and, in the extension of their studies, men sought, and to some extent found, an intellectual sanction for a debased moral standard.

[^1]: Dublin Lecture on "The Bearing of other Branches of Knowledge on Theology." If any apology be needed for citing only one author, and that author several times, the reply must be that he has been so quoted because his remarks appear best suited to the purpose.

Cardinal Newman has just been quoted, when he was not dealing with the Renaissance; let him be heard again when speaking, if somewhat indirectly, of that incident and its times.[^2]

[^2]: *Idea of a University*, p. 234 seq.

"St. Philip lived in an age as traitorous to the interests of Catholicism as any that preceded it, or can follow it. He lived at a time when pride mounted high and the senses held rule; a time when kings and nobles never had more of state and homage, and never less of personal responsibility and peril; when mediæval winter was receding, and the summer sun of civilization was bringing into leaf and flower a thousand forms of luxurious enjoyment; when a new world of thought and beauty had opened upon the human mind, in the discovery of the treasures of classic literature and art. He saw the enchantress, and he perceived that the mischief was to be met, not with argument, not with science, not with protests and warnings, not by the recluse or the preacher, but by means of the great counter-fascination of purity and truth." Unlike other reformers, "he preferred to yield to the stream, and direct the current, which he could not stop, of science, literature, art, and fashion, and to sweeten and to sanctify what God made very good, and man had spoilt." Nor was St. Philip the only saint who tried to guide, rather than to arrest, the spirit of the Renaissance, for St. Charles Borromeo recommended the study of the works of Cicero, Virgil, Horace, and even Ovid!

It is probable that both the friends and the enemies of the Renaissance have made rather too much of it; that historians, in not a few instances, have attributed to its influence, character, conduct, and events which in reality were not directly caused by it, and that the Renaissance was more influenced by the times, than the times by the Renaissance. Like many other incidents in history, the Renaissance cannot truthfully be labelled as either distinctly good, or distinctly bad; and its very varying effects upon the world depended in a great measure upon the manner in which men and women either used or abused it.

As to abuse, in the secondary and declamatory sense of that term, few great incidents have come in for more of it than the Renaissance. Everything evil that happened within a margin of a century or more has been laid at the door of the unhappy Renaissance, and much later corruptions have been attributed to its effects. It is unquestionable that during the period of the Renaissance there was much that was bad; few have been the periods of which the same might not be said; but the Renaissance, and the period of the Renaissance, are two distinct and different things. If we state that the reign of a certain king was the worst period in the history of his nation, the listener may perhaps infer that the king had probably been a bad king, although this would not necessarily follow; but he would have no right to assume that all the evils of his reign had been attributable to his misrule. Or, to reverse the comparison, we may freely admit that the period of Protestantism has been that of the greatest advancement in material prosperity, science, and invention that the world has ever known, yet we may at the same time deny that the credit of that advancement is due to Protestantism. On the other hand, many things happened during the so-called Ages of Faith for which Faith was in no sense responsible, even when they were perpetrated in its very name.

Special periods of almost every kind, be their advantages what they may, have their own attendant dangers, and even what may be called their own besetting sins. Periods of plenty, periods of famine, periods of peace, and periods of war, have each their special perils, and even their special crimes. And, on the rare occasions when a great wave of religious fervour or awakening passes over a nation, how many and how hazardous are the contrary eddies which succeed or, it may be, accompany it! Not the least dangerous of particular eras, are those distinguished for a rapid advance in refinement and luxury; and such an era was pre-eminently that of the Renaissance. The danger, however, of its refinements and luxuries was not owing to their classical character. So far as the objects of refinement are concerned, Gothic architecture, modern poetry, the latest Royal Academy statuary, and the newest developments of electro-plate, might lead to as much enervation, selfishness, and sensualism, as the five classical orders of architecture so odious to Ruskin, the Greek and Latin classics, the best antique sculpture, and the jewelled *tazzas* of Benvenuto Cellini.

In the picturesque group of curiosities frequently displayed by Protestants for the confusion of Catholics, such as the case of Galileo, the fires of Smithfield, Pope Joan, Bloody Mary, and the Inquisition, the scandals of the Renaissance are given a place of high honour. "At any rate," say the champions of Protestantism, "you cannot get over those." Well, no veracious scandals can be got over; and many of the scandals connected with the Renaissance, or its times, undoubtedly were but too veracious. There is, however, something else which cannot be got over, and that is one's parentage. Whatever moderate students may think of the Renaissance, both extremes, and perhaps only the extremes, among its friends and its enemies, consider its chief result to have been a tendency to free investigation, comparison, and personal selection, untrammelled by the opinions previously inculcated on the part of parents, pedagogues, and priests; in short, the exercise of private judgment as opposed to submission to authority. Such was eminently, indeed pre-eminently,

the spirit of Protestantism, and it was during the period of the Renaissance that Protestantism came into being. Moreover, of the two, it is far more probable that the Renaissance was the parent of Protestantism than that it was the cause of the scandals, clerical as well as lay, of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries; therefore, Protestants who throw stones at Catholics, respecting the Renaissance, do so from the doorways of crystal palaces.

The Renaissance has fallen into considerable ill repute by means of the claims made upon it by free-thinkers. They would proudly father all the free thought, agnosticism, and infidelity of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries upon the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth. Now the case of free-thought, in its relation to the Renaissance, is very different from that of Protestantism. Protestantism existed during the period of the Renaissance pretty much in the forms in which it exists at the present day; but the free thought and the atheism of the two last centuries widely differ in character from the unbelief of the fifteenth and sixteenth; nor is the Renaissance in any large degree responsible for their birth or their development.

It is surprising, again, that the Renaissance should be claimed as the resurrection of a defunct affection for the classics, and as the inauguration of free speaking concerning the doings of ecclesiastics, in the face of the writings of Dante, who died a hundred years before the earliest date that can fairly be assigned to the Renaissance: writings in which he claimed Virgil as his master and assigned Popes — among them one who was afterwards canonized — as well as priests, monks and nuns, to the inner circles of the Inferno.

Perilous as is the undisciplined and vicious exercise of the intellect, its exercise, even its laborious exercise, with good intentions and under due control, is not only healthful, but also a medium for the attainment of the highest good. It was during the period of the Renaissance that this truth appears to have been fully recognized for the first time. In their system of Spiritual Exercises, the Jesuits invited the votaries of the newly fangled, or at least the recently revived, fashion for mental as contrasted with physical activity, to higher uses of the intellect than any suggested to their minds by the works of the ancient pagans. But the question of the extent to which it may reasonably be said that the early Jesuits were indebted to the Renaissance, is too delicate and complicated to be dealt with here.

Something has already been said about another delicate question, namely, the ever-raging Battle of the Styles; and it is only referred to again, here, to enable the writer to say that, while his own taste is in favour of Gothic, he admits the weakness, if weakness it be, of feeling considerable impatience, when he hears the architecture, the Church furniture, or the ecclesiastical vestments of Renaissance style — a style which has met with the approval of many Popes and the toleration of far more — described as unchristian, mundane and pagan, and as savouring of what some pretend to have been the worst and the most scandalous times to which, in the providence of God, He has ever allowed His Church to be subjected.