

## Chapter Twelve

### TRANSFORMATION

In oral cultures, if people think about the past at all, they tend to imagine it as much like the present. This is true even when they know of ways in which it wasn't. Europeans throughout most of the Middle Ages had had little sense of the past being different; but this was about to change. The introduction of clocks, an increase in the rate at which things changed, and new educational opportunities, prompted scholars to a thorough investigation of the past. In Italy, particularly, there had been any number of impressive remains lying about as reminders of the Roman Empire – a world so different from anything people knew in their own day. Only now, though, did these old stones begin to impact people's imaginations once again. The educated, who'd hardly been unaware of ancient Rome, now began to be fascinated by it, and wanted to know more.

The establishing of its first universities, some generations earlier, had started to transform Western Europe's intellectual climate. In part following on from this came another advance: the Renaissance – literally, the 'rebirth' of Western culture. At first it was a rediscovery of the past. Then appreciation and imitation of the old began to give way to the development of what was substantially new: new architecture, for instance, new kinds of literature, and new ways of organising city life. Although Rome was the initial focus of attention, a passion for ancient Greece emerged to rival this. As we've seen, key elements in the old order of things, like the virtual slavery many ordinary people endured under the feudal system, or unquestioning belief in the Church's spiritual power, had already been fatally undermined. Now the rediscovery of a brilliant – if clearly far from perfect – past began to suggest to people that things could be a lot better in future than they currently were. Peter Burke, in *The Renaissance Sense of the*

*Past*, writes about the revolution transforming Europe's perception of the world from around this time:

It is interesting that the Renaissance, the age when men began to think of the past as different from the present, was also the age of discovery of a wider world – of awareness that elsewhere is different; and the age of utopian literature – of awareness that the future can be different. Perhaps these three extensions of the imagination are connected. Galileo praised change in the physical universe at a time, the early seventeenth century, when historians were becoming more aware of change in the world of man.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Renaissance**

When – and even where – 'the Renaissance' is supposed to have begun is much debated. Of the various possibilities, the following is relatively uncontroversial: in the city-state of Florence in Italy, with the painters Cimabue (c.1240-c.1302) and Giotto (c.1266-1337), and the writer Dante (1265-1321). Following these came a series of equally extraordinary individuals – in Florence, and eventually right across Europe – who proceeded to fashion an entirely new civilisation for us. Early achievements were realism in painting and a convincing sense of perspective (making a two-dimensional surface convey the illusion of three dimensions) – but that was only the beginning. In the opinion of H.A.L. Fisher, 'During two hundred years (1340-1530) the cities of Italy produced an output of art, scholarship and literature such as the world had not seen since the glory of ancient Athens.'<sup>2</sup> The *Atlas of the Renaissance* gives one description of the way the artistic 'process' occurred, first in Florence, and then in Italy more generally:

The Roman ruins that still dominated the urban landscape bore ample testimony to classical civilisation. During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, a growing sense of the past prompted the study of remains and the collection of artefacts from antiquity. It was by taking inspiration from the Pantheon in Rome that Brunelleschi (1377-1446), in designing the dome for the cathedral in Florence, managed to vault a wider space

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<sup>1</sup> 1969; London; Edward Arnold; SBN 7131 5474 8 (or 7131 5465 6); p149.

<sup>2</sup> *A History of Europe*, p446.

than had ever been spanned before. Succeeding generations of architects, including Alberti (1404-72), Bramante (c.1444-1514) and Palladio<sup>3</sup> (1508-80), were inspired by the buildings of ancient Rome and imitated in their own work the classical system of proportions. Likewise, Ghiberti (1378-1455) was influenced by surviving Roman models when designing the bronze reliefs for the Baptistery Doors in Florence (1425, 1452); and the *Gattamelata* (1453) by Donatello (1386-1466), the first equestrian<sup>4</sup> statue to be cast since Roman times, clearly derived its inspiration from Roman funerary busts and from the statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. It is well to recall that the exactitude, realism and concern for proportion that are among the distinctive features of Renaissance art were at first more apparent in sculpture than in painting. Similarly, it was the architects Brunelleschi and Alberti who by their use of perspective first showed how to make a two-dimensional surface convey the illusion of three dimensions.<sup>5</sup>

Florence was for a long time pre-eminent in all this. But, as with Athens in classical Greece, there was more to Florence than art and architecture. Its considerable wealth it derived from banking, commerce, and the manufacture of cloth. So successful – and trusted – were Florentine financiers that the city's gold *florin* became Europe's standard, if unofficial, currency. These bankers to the Papacy had taken over where the Templars had been forced to leave off. Inevitably they wielded great influence. 'To be a banker on a great scale', says H.A.L. Fisher, 'is to be a diplomatist and a statesman. The banking business of Florence brought her into political relations with many governments in many lands.'<sup>6</sup> Florence may have had some 80,000 inhabitants by the mid-1300s (about the same as is estimated for Paris and Venice). But at the beginning of that century it was claimed that there were between 8,000 and 10,000 children learning to read and write in the city's schools, and that 1,000 were studying at institutions specialising in the teaching of mathematics to prepare pupils for banking and commerce. Like Athens, Florence had adopted a democratic

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<sup>3</sup> Whom we British would tend to associate with the mansions in our towns and at the heart of our country estates, designed by architects inspired by his work.

<sup>4</sup> I.e. man on horseback.

<sup>5</sup> C.F. Black and others; 1993; Amsterdam; Time-Life Books; ISBN 0 7054 0869 8; p21.

<sup>6</sup> p394.

constitution, of which it was very proud – but which disenfranchised the nobility<sup>7</sup> as effectively as it did the working class. Real power lay with the larger trade guilds and the merchant communities, and increasingly with powerful families. Politics in Florence was a dirty business. It's little wonder that the city produced Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), who in *The Prince* first explained the mechanics of politics as power for power's sake', as someone has put it; or, in another commentator's words, 'gained notoriety for promoting dictatorial government shorn of moral principles'. At the same time, 'Florence was one of the most liberal and free-thinking places in the world during the second half of the fifteenth century. It exemplified the emerging ideas of humanism and a form of democracy which encouraged novelty and innovation.'<sup>8</sup>

Of all Florentines, no one would ever outshine Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). Illegitimate<sup>9</sup>, and a practising homosexual<sup>10</sup> so good-looking he was considered beautiful, Leonardo painted in 1506 what is perhaps the most celebrated picture in the world, the *Mona Lisa* (or *La Gioconda*). It's been said of him that 'he possessed seemingly limitless talents to pursue his equally limitless curiosity'. Initially he accepted what the classical and medieval authors had said about science and technology. But when he found in his experiments how often he was proving them wrong, he grew suspicious of traditionally-accepted ideas. The greatest of the Renaissance anatomists – Leonardo didn't think you could paint the human figure properly without understanding its structure – he's believed to have dissected at least thirty bodies (an activity of his that aroused suspicion, particularly of necromancy<sup>11</sup>, and some hostility). He studied the structure of the

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<sup>7</sup> In other words, 'new money' wasn't going to be kept down or held back by 'old money' (the aristocratic landowners). This was one of the key achievements of the northern Italian city states.

<sup>8</sup> Michael White, *Leonardo: The First Scientist*, 2,000; London; Abacus (Little, Brown & Co); ISBN 0 349 11274 6; p57.

<sup>9</sup> Not a problem if one was from a prominent family or working class – but Leonardo's father was definitely middle-class.

<sup>10</sup> Officially illegal, but common in Florence, especially within the artistic community. At age 23, along with others, he was charged with sodomy. The point of bringing the charge, though, related to an inter-family feud of which he was no part. Eventually the matter was dropped. Even so, Leonardo, had been traumatised by the incident.

<sup>11</sup> I.e. making predictions by means of communicating with the dead.

eye, and came to understand the nature of the retina, the lens and peripheral vision. Whether or not he designed a telescope is disputed, but he certainly investigated optics and the nature and behaviour of light – including reflection, distortion by reflection, refraction (the splitting of light into its components, as in a rainbow), absorption, and magnification by lenses. He devised mechanical devices such as a helicopter, a submarine, and a machine-gun. He studied and wrote about acoustics, and designed musical instruments. He realised, as few others seemed to, that it was the cramped and insanitary conditions of the cities that made them vulnerable to the plague, in a way the countryside wasn't. Not a religious man, but ever hungry for knowledge, he wanted to go beyond what he could discover scientifically and speculate about a general theory of everything. Some accused him of bringing mystical and metaphysical ideas into his thinking – but why not? Science alone can't discover all there is to be known.

Although no one could actually outshine Leonardo, there was another Florentine who, while he didn't have such a wide range of gifts, could match his genius: Michelangelo Buonarroti (1474-1564), his younger rival and, sadly, great enemy (the feeling was mutual). Michelangelo, also homosexual, could never come to terms with his sexuality – indeed, being strongly religious, he agonised over it. Not at all good-looking, he suffered the further misfortune of having both a deformed body and a disordered personality (the latter making him very hard to get on with). While Leonardo enjoyed life's luxuries, tended to be a perfectionist, worked when he felt inspired to, and couldn't be relied on to complete commissions, Michelangelo lived a disciplined, almost monastic life, dedicating his work to God, and working up to twenty hours a day. And while Leonardo was by temperament a scientist, Michelangelo saw himself as a sculptor – one whose other talents were sufficiently regarded, however, for him to be commissioned to paint the Vatican's Sistine Chapel, and design the dome for St Peter's. The art world has tended to reckon Michelangelo's *David* his most important work. But surely his *Pietà* (Mary with the dead body of Jesus across her lap) in St Peter's must be the most sensitive, exquisite piece ever sculpted. There's another,

rough, unfinished, and almost unknown, *Pietà* he worked on, though – and then rejected – which is perhaps to the Christian believer even more moving. Unconventionally, it has a hooded man standing behind Mary. Joseph? It can't be – Joseph had died long before. A monk? Actually it's Nicodemus – Nicodemus representing the sculptor himself. "How can a man be born again when he is old?" is the silent question the work poses<sup>12</sup>. In early adulthood Michelangelo had been impressed by Florence's great Dominican preacher of hellfire and legalistic righteousness, Savonarola – seemingly without much effect at that point. Later in life, though, in his depression and misery, he was befriended by a godly aristocratic widow, Vittoria Colonna<sup>13</sup>, who led him to personal faith. And in old age he wrote a poem which serves as his testimony:

The course of my life has come,  
by fragile ship through stormy seas,  
to the common port, where we call  
to give account of all our evil and pious deeds.  
So the fond fantasy,  
which made Art my idol and my king,  
I now know to have been serious folly,  
and see what we all crave to our own harm.  
Those thoughts of love, once happy and free,  
what are they now if two deaths await me?  
I know the certainty of one; the prospect of the other oppresses me.  
Neither painting nor sculpture can satisfy me;  
my soul turns to that love of God's  
which, to enfold us, opens its arms on the cross.

The lives of these two men rather symbolise the transition from the Age of Faith – the Middle Ages – to the new, modern world. For one, Leonardo, the Christian faith means very little, even if he doesn't reject it as such. He can be as profound, when he wants, as practical – but it's the practical that motivates him. He'd

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<sup>12</sup> This particular *Pietà* is to be found at the top of the main flight of stairs up from the ground floor in the Cathedral (Duomo) Museum in Florence.

<sup>13</sup> Who belonged to a group of influential, intellectual believers working at that time for the reform of the Catholic Church in Italy.

understand the world of today, with its gadgets and gizmos (boys' toys). As for the other, Michelangelo, his instinct is for the God he doesn't yet know, but to whom he dedicates his work (and, by implication, his life). For him, meaning lies beyond what he can see and touch. And when Christ becomes real to him, he sees the one true passion of his life, his art, to have been his false god. Michelangelo would understand the spiritual search of today's generation – though he might urge us to be a bit more single-minded and self-sacrificing in our quest.

Some two hundred years earlier, a similar contrast could have been observed between the writers Dante (1265-1321), Petrarch (1304-74), and Boccaccio (1313-75). A philosophically-trained poet, Dante spent most of his life exiled from his native Florence because he belonged to the wrong political party. Eventually he became disillusioned with politics, and began to reflect more seriously on life. The result was the work for which he's best known, the *Divine Comedy*, written shortly before his death. In this lengthy poem, he describes his imaginary journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The Paradise section contains mystical passages of great power and beauty. Of the time he looked into God's face Dante says: "In that exalted moment, I lost my powers of description". Part of the poem's intention is vividly to bring to life the abstract thought of the theologian Thomas Aquinas. On the ground that he consigns all the classical writers to Hell (because unbaptised), Dante is sometimes thought of as belonging to the Middle Ages – but he really belongs to both ages; there was, inevitably, a great overlap.

Petrarch was born away from Florence, because his father had been exiled for the same reason as Dante. After a long, itinerant training as a scholar specialising in classical texts, he eventually settled in Vacluse, in what is now south-eastern France. A spiritually-inclined man, he became ordained (into minor orders), which generated an – unearned – income for him. But if he was spiritual, it was more in an artistic than a religious sense. He certainly wasn't converted. Being ordained (in the Catholic Church) didn't stop him fathering two children. To

his pioneering work in collecting and examining ancient texts he added the writing of both poetry and prose. Much of his poetry was about human emotion. His interests were wide, though, and he wrote about nature, travel, ancient history, and much else. He seems to have felt somewhat guilty about his sensuous, self-absorbed character, his love of fame, and his passion for pagan culture. Perhaps we can say of him that although he had an instinct for the Christian religion, his real loves and commitments were actually secular – even pagan – and individualistic ones. In many ways, Petrarch was a sign of what was coming: a world focussed on anything but God himself.

The third of this group, Boccaccio, was also a literary scholar. He wanted to see himself as a poet – and wrote a number of love poems. ‘But the author found his most effective voice in prose, writing a lengthy, raucously funny, bawdy collection of short tales reflecting both contemporary Italian life and legends from many lands, the *Decameron* (composed 1348-53). The story was set in the plague of 1348, when a group of wealthy young men and women sought shelter from its ravages. Deploring the breakdown of society, they recalled pleasanter moments by exchanging tales of deceived husbands, unhappy wives and consoling moments of love. The *Decameron* enjoyed widespread popularity throughout Europe, though some of the stories were so explicit that early English editions often left the more salacious passages untranslated.’<sup>14</sup> Here the worldview, values, and standards of the Middle Ages have been completely left behind: this is simply a non-Christian account of life. But at this point, Boccaccio seems to have had something of a conversion experience. He destroyed much of his earlier poetry. And, disowning the *Decameron*, ‘under Petrarch’s guidance, he turned to classical scholarship and his last years were spent searching for ancient texts in Naples and the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino.’<sup>15</sup> So, literary soft porn – much as we have it today – he left behind for the sober task of scholarship pursued with the intention of assisting the emergence of a new and

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<sup>14</sup> *Atlas of the Renaissance*, p41.

<sup>15</sup> p41. This is to be understood as having a very different motivation from that behind his earlier work.

better – even Christian – society. Perhaps Europe wasn't just about to desert the faith, after all.

'HUMANISM' Today's use of the term 'humanism' implies a rejection of religion – as in *The British Humanist Association*. It has a rather different usage when applied to the Renaissance. The word *humanista* then referred to someone who was studying the liberal arts (much like someone studying a 'Liberal Arts' or 'Humanities' degree at university today). The syllabus they followed was known as 'grammar' and 'rhetoric'. In practice this meant history, literature, poetry, and being taught to communicate clearly and effectively. Such a syllabus marked a major shift away from the old university curriculum which, though it trained students rigorously in logic, then burdened them with learning by rote vast amounts of uninspiring and outdated philosophical and theological ideas. Now the focus moved to seeking to understand human action, and to working out how human beings could improve themselves as people. In this enterprise a great deal of help was to be found in the literature of ancient Rome, in authors such as Livy and Cicero.

There was no particularly anti-religious agenda in all this, but the dangers to universally-held Christian belief were twofold: that humanists could seek to improve human beings without reference to the Church (and hence, in effect, to the Christian faith); and, secondly, that a non-Christian, and at its roots pagan, worldview would be given prominence within the education system.

In the Middle Ages it was overwhelmingly believed that man depended for goodness entirely upon God's grace, as taught and administered by the Church. Only by fixing heart and mind upon the contemplation of God's majesty, and by obeying the precepts of the Church, could man hope to rise above the level of a beast. The humanist, however, believed that man had the power of improvement within himself and that this talent could be released given the proper education and training. As Pico della Mirandola (1463-94) explained in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), man, placed at the centre of the universe, had the power 'to degenerate into the

lower forms of life, which are animal-like ... [or] to be reborn into the higher forms which are divine'.

Mirandola's account of man's place in the world and the capacity of his will was expressed, however, in profoundly Christian terms. He argued that it was God who had put man in the centre of the universe and who had entrusted him with the power to become as an angel or as a beast. Moulded in God's image, man possessed elements of divinity within himself that he could choose either to neglect or to nurture. Mirandola's ideas were hardly pagan; rather, they represented a fusing of classical ideas with the traditional doctrines of Christianity derived from St Augustine<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, by rejecting the paraphernalia of ceremonies and ritual cash-payments, which the Catholic clergy taught were necessary for salvation, both Mirandola and the study of humanities as a whole challenged the primacy and importance of the Church.<sup>17</sup>

It's important, in the light of what's said above, to bear in mind the following distinctions: (1) what the institutional Church actually teaches – as compared with what it ought ideally to teach (the 'true' version of Christianity); and (2) the rejection of the Church as an institution – and (what is in principle quite different) the rejection of the Christian faith itself. For the sake of clarity, these two pairs of contrasting ideas need to be borne in mind from this point on, until we reach the present day<sup>18</sup>. In the age we're examining, the authenticity of what the Church was teaching was beginning to be questioned, and the Church as an institution commanded increasingly less respect than it had in earlier times. But neither of these constituted a rejection of Christianity, as such.

Humanism can be credited with setting up the conditions which both created the movement we know as the Reformation, and allowed it to succeed.

A principal feature of Renaissance humanism was its concern for accurate versions of classical texts. So a large part of the humanists' work involved the careful editing of Latin and Greek works, often for the benefit of students. The cross-matching of

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<sup>16</sup> This isn't quite true – Augustine wouldn't have agreed with Mirandola about human freewill. And there is more 'classical' – i.e. neoplatonist – influence in Mirandola's work than the writer is suggesting here.

<sup>17</sup> *Atlas of the Renaissance*, p17.

<sup>18</sup> These distinctions often aren't clearly made in studies of the process of secularisation.

texts, which was facilitated by the development of printing, introduced new standards of historical research and literary criticism. The techniques employed by scholars were soon applied to nonclassical texts, however, and the discoveries those yielded also drew attention to the shortcomings of the Church. It was discovered, for example, that the papacy's claim to sovereignty over a large part of Italy rested on a document forged in the 8<sup>th</sup> century; and that the Vulgate, the 'authorised' Latin version of the New Testament, was itself full of errors of translation. There is, therefore, a clear link between Renaissance humanism and the Protestant Reformation, the movement of religious criticism and renewal that took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup>

Although we're not finished with them yet, we'll leave the Renaissance and Humanism, for the moment, to consider important things that were happening elsewhere, and that also served to destabilise the prevailing situation. But first we need to notice that the changes seen in Western Europe had been anticipated in the Byzantine Empire (the continuing Roman Empire in the East) some centuries earlier, at the turn of the millennium. The key figure here is the historian Michael Psellus (976-1078). Leaving behind the convention of simply recording people and events in chronicle form – the most primitive kind of history – Psellus painted word-portraits of those he wrote about. He described alterations in people's character and behaviour over the course of time, giving reasons. So the Emperor Basil II (whom he hadn't known) changed under the pressure of events from a pleasure-seeker into a stern, angry and suspicious man. On the other hand, the handsome but uneducated Michael IV, whom the ageing Empress Zoë took as her lover, became a serious-minded and conscientious ruler as soon as he ascended to the throne. And Psellus was a sufficiently astute observer of people to be able to comment on their psychological states. In his use of his critical faculties, he didn't quite stand alone. Christopher of Mitylene, from the same period, for example, wrote deriding the collecting of dubious religious relics. Such an approach to writing overturned the literary tradition of more than 500 years. But this kind of critical reflection wasn't generally adopted by Byzantine culture – as it would be in the West – and so never had the chance to show its value.

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<sup>19</sup> pp17,19

Byzantium was destined to degenerate and be destroyed, not to experience her own Renaissance and Reformation.

### **The Reformation before the Reformation**

Throughout the 1200s the papal throne had been occupied by lawyers who legislated rather than by leaders with vision and drive, who could prepare the Church for its future. By 1300 the papacy was much weaker than it had been 150 years earlier, and the political situation in Rome chaotic. So when a Holy Year (or Jubilee Year), called by the highly unsatisfactory Pope Boniface VIII for 1300 to mark the new century, attracted (some said) 2 million pilgrims to Rome, this was something of a surprise. There was clearly more to the Catholic Church than the condition of the papacy: 'the Holy Year of 1300 was a moment unlike any other,' says Donald Logan, 'a clear sign of a church come of age, its people comfortable, perhaps even triumphant, in the security of their beliefs and of the settled order of society.'<sup>20</sup> But the papacy, as it seemed to bounce back from difficult times, had evidently lost none of its assertiveness. In late 1302 Boniface published his 'bull' *Unam sanctam*. Logan again: 'it remains the best-known pronouncement of a medieval pope. Its principal emphasis is on the unity of the church, its opening words being, "There is one, holy, catholic and apostolic church". The pope is head on earth of this one church, and anyone who denies the pope's authority is not part of that one church. For that reason Boniface asserted that the two swords of power<sup>21</sup>, the spiritual and the temporal, were both given by God for the service of the one church. The spiritual with the goal of human salvation transcends in importance all things material. From this it follows that the spiritual power can and should judge the temporal when it departs from the ways of goodness. The bull's concluding sentence reads, "We declare, state, pronounce that it is necessary for salvation for all human beings to be subject to

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<sup>20</sup> *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, p258.

<sup>21</sup> He seems to have had in mind Luke 22:38.

the Roman Pontiff".<sup>22</sup> Not everyone in Europe was going to agree with such a sentiment.

In 1305, a French archbishop was elected Pope Clement V. Four years later, because of the power struggles in Rome, he decided on a new base for the papacy in Avignon – in what we now know as France, but which was not yet subject to the king of France. This didn't turn out to mean, however, that he'd be exempt from that monarch's bullying influence. (For instance, King Philip the Fair would force him to agree to the suppression of the Templars on trumped-up charges.<sup>23</sup>) The Italians were scandalised and, comparing this to Israel's exile, called it the Babylonian Captivity. Indeed, the stay there lasted almost seventy years, until 1376. But then, from 1378, two rival popes were elected and recognised by different parts of Europe. There were consequences to all this, practical as well as symbolic – and the symbolism may have been the more important. Being located in the city of Rome itself, because of Rome's role in Catholic propaganda, was vital to the papacy's cause. So also, to show where real power lay, was the need for it to control church life in a hierarchical manner. First one of these advantages, and then the other, was very publicly denied it.

The emergence of John Wyclif (1334-76), 'morningstar of the Reformation', is to be understood against this background. The kingdom of England, in which he lived, was reckoned one of the best-regulated parts of western Christendom. But Oxford University, where he taught philosophy, although committed to orthodox Catholic theology from the beginning, had in recent times become infected by scepticism. Seemingly from nowhere, Wyclif appeared, arguing for a range of reforms that would be demanded again in more promising circumstances during the 1500s.

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<sup>22</sup> p 262. 'Pontiff' stands for *Pontifex Maximus*, the spiritual title of Roman emperors – literally 'the greatest bridge-builder' between earth and heaven – which the papacy inherited.

<sup>23</sup> See ch.10, p23.

Wyclif was a philosopher in a tradition which saw invisible, eternal realities as more representative of reality than the experiences of the everyday world. He drew on this assumption to make a damning contrast between the material, powerful and wealthy Church over which bishops and the Pope presided, and the eternally existing Church beyond materiality<sup>24</sup>: this latter true Church was a mystical source of grace which the Bible revealed not simply to clergy but to all God's chosen faithful. Wyclif's supporters were harried out of Oxford University in a generation after the 1380s, but they inspired a wider following who created a Bible in English for everyone to understand, fired by Wyclif's insistence that all the Church's teaching and institutions should be tested rigorously against the record of God's purposes in Scripture. Sympathisers included some nobles and gentry who liked the sound of doctrines which might lead to the Church surrendering its huge landed wealth. Their enemies contemptuously called them Lollards, in other words mumblers who talked nonsense.<sup>25</sup>

It's worth noting here that Wyclif was opposing the Aristotle-influenced theology of Thomas Aquinas and those like him, and reappropriating Augustine of Hippo's Platonist-influenced one – as would Luther a century and a half later. Wyclif and his Lollard followers were suppressed for a variety of reasons: the political climate changed; the time wasn't yet ripe for the Reformation; and there was no printing press to popularise the message. (Had there been, things might have turned out rather differently.) But the message lived on primarily because of a link between the region of Bohemia (the capital of which was Prague) in central Europe and Oxford University. Students returning there passed on Wyclif's teaching to academic and church leader Jan Hus, who adopted its key ideas.

The Lollards used unlicensed preachers as well as the new English-language version of the Bible to spread their evangelical ideas. This, of course, threatened the established, Catholic form of Christianity. They also saw that there were social and political implications in what the Bible taught and, given the politically

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<sup>24</sup> I.e. beyond mere physical reality.

<sup>25</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490-1700*; 2003; London; Allen Lane; ISBN 0-7139-9370-7; p35.

unstable times<sup>26</sup>, acted on their new convictions about them somewhat unwisely – so serving to threaten still further a monarchy which sought to survive by strongly supporting the Catholic Church. Despite their inevitable downfall, the movement continued underground. By contrast, Hus became the leader of a strong movement for church reformation in Bohemia which attracted the long-term support of all sections of society from university to village. This the Church inevitably challenged. Hus was summoned to the general Council of the Church's bishops at Constance<sup>27</sup> in 1414 to explain his 'rebellion'. The Holy Roman Emperor guaranteed him safe conduct. But the Council, ignoring this, put him on trial for heresy and burned him at the stake. Even so, the 'rebellion' continued, and a Hussite Church, independent of Rome though less radical than Wyclif and the Lollards, came into existence – and survived because of the protection and support of landowners and the leaders of major towns and cities. This model of church reform would become important at the Reformation proper.

**COUNCILS OF THE CHURCH**     The election of rival popes – in what was an age discussing church reform – opened up the much-discussed possibility of convening councils of the whole Church (or, at least, the whole Church in the West), as had happened in the from the 300s onwards at Nicea, Chalcedon, and elsewhere. The papacy, of course, wanted to be the one decisive voice in the Church. But the Renaissance had been leading Europe's intellectuals – many of whom were church leaders – to look at the way things were done in the ancient (classical) world, 'at the beginning'. In that age there had been no one centre of power with decisive say-so in the Church. Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Rome and Constantinople all competed with one another for influence. Compared to these much later times, in which the papacy claimed absolute and universal authority, church life – not least at the level of its senior leadership – had been much more democratic.

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<sup>26</sup> When three parties, Lancaster, York, and Tudor, competed for the throne of England.

<sup>27</sup> The Swiss city of Konstanz.

The Council of Constance was called primarily to end the division between the two parts of the Western (i.e. Catholic) Church, which resulted from there being rival popes. This it achieved, when in 1417 the election of Martin V was recognised by all factions. But the Council produced a decree, *Sacrosancta*, with the most profound implications. *Sacrosancta* asserted that the Council held its authority 'directly from Christ; so everyone, of every rank or status, including the Pope himself, is bound to obey it in matters concerning the faith ... and the reformation of God's Church in its head and its members.' This Council also ordered that a general council was to be held every ten years from then on. But papal efforts to oppose such an undermining of what the popes saw as their own proper authority, and the fact that the Council of Basel (running for 18 years from 1431) ended in another schism<sup>28</sup> served to discredit the idea that such councils actually constituted a step forward. In 1460 Pope Pius II, who'd previously sympathised with the conciliar ideal, forbade appeals from a decision of the papacy to a general council. That, at least, was the politics. But this was an idea whose time had come. If such an option was effectively removed, at least in that form, the Reformation when it came would take the thinking behind it much further, and in a variety of different directions. In Diarmaid MacCulloch's words:

... the problem which conciliarism had originally raised – how to deal with a Pope who cannot lead the Church as God wishes – would not go away. In the end Martin Luther was forced to give the drastic answer that if the Pope turned out to be the Devil masquerading as the Saviour (Antichrist), then one must walk out of the Pope's false Church and recreate the true body of Christ ... The work of the greatest conciliarists was too fertile to ignore: it raised too many questions about how the faithful acted to fulfil the will of God.<sup>29</sup>

THE 'MODERN DEVOTION'      We have already noted the rise of the Augustinian canons and the Dominican and Franciscan orders of friars, all of which, while embracing the monastic ideal, applied it to the very different situation thrown up by the Late Middle Ages. Also the emergence of the

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<sup>28</sup> Division in the Church.

<sup>29</sup> *Reformation* p40.

Beguines – mainly female – who understood the religious life in a still more ‘secular’ way. Gerard Groote of Deventer (1340-84) took this trend yet a step further. In Utrecht (modern Holland) he established communities of lay people and clergy who, unlike monks, though they followed a common rule of life, took no vows and were free to leave when they wished. The aim of this ‘modern devotion’ (*devotio moderna*) was to study and meditate upon the Christian faith so as to be able to live it out more fully. These Brethren of the Common Life, as they were known, emphasised the importance of education and reading. The schools they established in cities across the Low Countries introduced their pupils to Roman, Greek, and early Christian texts. This was made possible by the large amount of time committed by the Brethren to copying out such material. From these texts moral and spiritual lessons were drawn.

The school at Deventer was the first one north of the Alps to provide instruction in Greek. Three of the greatest of the northern humanists – Nicholas of Cusa, Jacob Wimpfeling and Desiderius Erasmus – were taught by the Brethren at Deventer. ... The Brethren's repudiation of the conventional methods of medieval scholastic enquiry created a freer intellectual climate in northern Europe and helped prepare the way for the new learning. Through their involvement in education, the Brethren introduced many hundreds of northerners to the classics.<sup>30</sup>

Although it wasn't seen at the time, the centre of gravity in what was now recognisably Europe was moving northwards from the Mediterranean. With this migration, modern Western civilisation began forming. The key figure in bringing it to birth was the scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469-1536)<sup>31</sup>, mentioned above. The dust-cover of my copy of A.G. Dickens & Whitney R.D. Jones, *Erasmus The Reformer*<sup>32</sup>, says of him that he ‘was a literary polymath: the leading humanist of northern Europe, a laborious editor of the early Christian Fathers, a sensitive interpreter of the New Testament, a writer of entertaining dialogues, a connoisseur of proverbs, and an intelligent critic of state, Church

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<sup>30</sup> *Atlas of the Renaissance*, p137.

<sup>31</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, that is.

<sup>32</sup> 1994; London; Methuen; ISBN 0 413 33480 5.

and society.’ As well as teaching in Europe’s most influential universities, he travelled around the continent extensively, talking to ‘anyone and everyone who mattered’ about his ideas for church reform – and being listened to. To ensure maximum impact for the books he wrote, as well as the texts he edited (such as that of the Greek New Testament), he exploited the newly-developed technology of printing – the first person in Europe to see the potential of this medium. It’s been said that ‘Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched’. In the event, Erasmus wouldn’t at all like Luther’s treatment of his ‘egg’. What Erasmus had envisaged was reform. Luther, he reckoned, was fomenting revolution. The former’s worldview and preferences were quite simply very different from the latter’s. Erasmus was a pacifist and an optimist as regards human nature, who far preferred the highly Platonist theology of Origen of Alexandria to that of Augustine of Hippo – and may have been more profoundly influenced by the writings of John the Apostle than those of Paul of Tarsus. Luther, by contrast, was a pessimistic realist, inspired – as one might expect of an Augustinian monk – by the Neoplatonist-influenced Augustine and, beyond him, the Apostle Paul.

**GREEK INFLUENCE** The Greek philosopher Plato’s influence had been part of Europe’s intellectual life – and so of its church life – ever since the time of the Roman Empire. As we’ve seen, the arrival in Western Europe of previously unknown books of his pupil Aristotle impacted the new universities with revolutionary force; and then, in the Renaissance, rediscovery of classical Greece followed the rediscovery of the ancient Rome. As Boccaccio discovered, there were ancient manuscripts, Greek as well as Latin, to be found hidden away in monasteries. Added to all this, the 1453 fall of Constantinople, capital city of the Byzantine Empire, to the Ottoman Turks resulted in large numbers of Byzantine Greek scholars fleeing to Italian cities.

Byzantine scholars introduced their Italian counterparts to the works of Plato. The texts they brought with them were not pure ones, however, but commentaries composed in the main during the first centuries of the Christian era. These neo-

Platonic<sup>33</sup> commentaries presented Plato's philosophy as a complex allegory illustrating the hierarchical structure of the universe: God was the supreme principle of unity, the material world being linked to the heavens by an ascending series of intermediary realms. For the neo-Platonists, art, architecture, literature and music should seek to emulate the principles of perfection and harmony that governed the workings of God's creation.

By proclaiming an essential unity between the material and spiritual world, neo-Platonic philosophers were able to suggest that the scholar or 'adept' had the power to manipulate the heavens and to transform nature. The adept, by studying the movement of the stars and by reciting incantations and hymns, could also ascend through the hierarchy of the universe and achieve a condition of spiritual perfection. These ideas were most powerfully expressed in Greek texts dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries.<sup>34</sup>

By insisting that man had the power to transform nature, neo-Platonism contributed to the study of both alchemy<sup>35</sup> and astrology, and so indirectly prepared the way for the Scientific Revolution and the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Neo-Platonism also made the practice of magic fashionable and no longer the preserve of witches. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Renaissance scholar was as often a *magus* (magician) intent on the acquisition of magical powers as a man of letters<sup>36</sup> committed to the humbler pursuit of knowledge. Translations of occult texts of the cabbala during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries further encouraged the search for magical symbols and codes, and were largely responsible for the new interest in classical Hebrew works.

Neo-Platonism is frequently presented as an unfortunate diversion from the main path of the Renaissance. It is important to realise, however, that the importance placed in neo-Platonic philosophy upon the essential unity of the spiritual and material worlds greatly affected the art of the High Renaissance. The stress laid in the work of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516) and Raphael (1483-1520) on harmony and symmetry, and the geometric exactitude of their compositions, owed much to neo-Platonic ideas regarding the perfection of forms. ... For its part, the Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1508-12) by Michelangelo (1475-1564) is full of neo-Platonic imagery and has as its staring point a vision of man's empowerment, the *Creation of Adam*: 'And God created man in his own

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<sup>33</sup> The term 'neo-Platonic' seems to be used somewhat loosely here – and appears to mean any re-working of Plato's writings by later scholars (as opposed to the school of thought deriving from Plotinus, which is what the term has denoted in earlier chapters).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the end of chapter 7, on the family of heresies known as 'Gnosticism'.

<sup>35</sup> I.e. the semi-magical enterprise of trying to turn base metals into gold.

<sup>36</sup> I.e. a conventional scholar. (The term 'letters' we know today as 'literature' – but it didn't have that restricted meaning then.)

image ... and breathed into his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul.<sup>37</sup>

If you're thinking that there's a serious mixing of pagan Greek thought with a Catholic-Christian worldview here, you're right to do so. There never was, though, a time in the past when 'Christian' Europe ever possessed some purely-Christian worldview. There's always been a mixture – although at various periods the Christian element within the prevailing worldview (the way we understand the world) and 'spirit of the age' (what influences our imaginations and gut-instincts) has been dominant. Sometimes the tide has come in – as it were – from a Christian point of view, sometimes it's gone out. The challenge in any age is to have it running in our direction. Scholars like Erasmus showed what Christians can achieve in an age of confusing and threatening transition, if they can only identify the opportunities and seize them.

### **Europe threatened from the east and exploring to the west**

As we've already noticed, Holy Roman Emperor Otto I (western European and Catholic) overcame the Magyars (Hungarians) at the Lech Field in 955, whilst the Byzantine army (Orthodox, and at Europe's south-eastern boundary) was defeated by the Seljuk Turks at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. In fact the pressure on 'Europe's eastern border' was more-or-less constant, as it had been in Roman times. New people groups continued pressing westwards. In the mid-1200s Europe was threatened by a new and unexpected danger: the Mongols who, under their 'universal emperor' Genghis Khan, and having conquered the whole of central Asia, invaded southern Russia. 'They are inhuman and like animals,' wrote English monk-historian Matthew Paris, 'more monsters than men, thirsting for and drinking blood, tearing and eating the flesh of dogs and humans, dressed in cow-hides and iron-plate armour, short and stout, immensely strong, unbeatable, impossible to tire out ... They have one-edged swords and daggers,

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<sup>37</sup> *Atlas of the Renaissance*, pp19,20.

are wonderful archers, and spare neither the elderly, women or the sick. They know no other language but their own, and no one else knows theirs ...' In 1241 this nomadic people began a bold two-pronged offensive against western Europe. Both Poland, in the north, and Hungary, to the south, fell to the Mongols. All Europe was now theirs for the taking. It didn't help matters that just then the military capabilities of both Germany and Italy were committed to the struggle between the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX. But at this critical moment, the Mongols received news of the death of their (universal) Emperor Ogodai and returned to Mongolia to help elect a successor. Soon, it was assumed, they'd be back. In fact, although Batu, their general who'd defeated Hungary, did return, it was only to settle on the Volga as Khan of the Golden Horde<sup>38</sup>. This didn't mean the threat had passed, however. The one hope Europe could see of solving the potential invasion problem lay in the fact that the Mongols had earlier conquered Persia – and might want to advance on Baghdad and destroy the caliphate<sup>39</sup> based there. Perhaps the Mongols could be persuaded to make common cause against the Muslims? And if they converted to Christianity, maybe there could even be combined action between Europe and the Mongols to destroy Islam and then recover the Holy Places for the Church? The efforts made to win over the Mongols, though, produced meagre results.

At this time, the Italian port city-states of Venice (on the east coast) and Genoa (on the west) were Europe's most significant maritime powers.

The Great rival cities of Venice and Genoa had made themselves rich by transporting, feeding, and not infrequently swindling the Crusaders. Now that the Crusades were over, they were busy expanding their commercial empire beyond the limits of the Christian world. Venice had a commercial colony on the shores of the Sea of Azov<sup>40</sup>. Genoa had established something like a commercial empire all round the Black Sea. It has to be admitted with shame that the staple of trade was slaves; slaves from Russia were apparently regarded as highly desirable in Egypt, and not

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<sup>38</sup> Ruler over this particular Mongol sub-group.

<sup>39</sup> Islamic federal government.

<sup>40</sup> North of the Black Sea and Crimea, and south of Ukraine.

unknown in the West. In spite of protests of the Pope and the Great Khan, the traffic went on.<sup>41</sup>

The shape of the game was just about to change, though – not only for these two trading powers, but for the increasingly-powerful Islamic world too:

The successes of the Muslims had cut the world in two. Having taken to the sea, they had made the Mediterranean unsafe for Christian traffic, and in Indian waters they were the dominant power. This state of things continued until at the end of the fifteenth century Bartholomew Diaz rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and so turned the flank of the Muslim powers. By land most of the familiar trade routes were in their hands, though some of the northern routes through Central Asia were still open to Christians, and Byzantium was not wholly deprived of its trade relations with Cathay [China]. Western Europe as a whole, however, was almost completely cut off from Asia ...<sup>42</sup>

Diaz was a Portuguese, and the Portuguese would lead the way for Europe's global exploration and domination. In ship design there had been crucial advances, says J.M. Roberts, adding that:

Navigation too had come far since the days of the Vikings. They had been the first Europeans who knew how to sail an oceanic course, using the Pole Star and the sun, whose height above the horizon in northern latitudes at midday had been computed in tables by a tenth-century Irish astronomer. They crossed the Atlantic with this technique by running along a line of latitude, and their Scandinavian successors had been able to maintain sea communications with their Greenland and (possibly) North American settlements for centuries. Then there is evidence of two great innovations. In the thirteenth century the compass came to be commonly used in the Mediterranean (it already existed in China, but it is not certain that it was transmitted from Asia to the West or, if it was, how and when). In 1270 there also appears the first reference to a chart being used in a ship on a crusading venture. The next two centuries gave birth to modern geography and exploration. Spurred by the thought of commercial prizes, by missionary zeal and diplomatic possibilities,

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*; 1986; London; Penguin; ISBN 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4; p110.

<sup>42</sup> p81

some princes began to subsidise research. In the fifteenth century princes came to employ their own cartographers [mapmakers] and hydrographers [makers of sea charts]. Foremost among them was a brother of the king of Portugal, Prince Henry, 'the Navigator' as English-speaking scholars were later to call him (somewhat misleadingly, for he never navigated anything).

Land-locked by Spain, Portugal was virtually barred from east Mediterranean trade by the experience and ferocity of the Catalans and Italians who jealously guarded it. The Portuguese were almost bound to be propelled into the Atlantic, and had long experience of its fishing grounds. Their earliest explorations and settlement ventures had been towards the Atlantic islands, and in this the Spaniards were engaged, too. By 1339, the first voyage had been made to the Canaries. The Portuguese were already fairly familiar with oceanic waters when Prince Henry began to mount a series of voyages in another direction. From a mixture of motives he turned his countrymen southward. Gold and pepper, it was known, were to be found on the other side of the Sahara; perhaps the Portuguese could discover where. Perhaps, too, there was the possibility of finding an ally here to take the Turk in the flank<sup>43</sup>, the legendary Christian prince, Prester John. Certainly there were converts, glory and land to be won for the cross. Henry, for all that he did so much to launch Europe on the great expansion which transformed the globe and created one world, was a medieval man to the soles of his boots. He sought papal authority and approval for his expeditions. When he went crusading in North Africa, he took with him a fragment of the True Cross. Thus the beginnings of the age of discovery lay in government-subsidised research (as we might put it), but also in the world of chivalry and crusade. Henry is an outstanding example of a man who wrought more than he knew or could have intended.

The coast-hugging Portuguese pushed steadily south, some of the bolder among them also reaching out to the Madeiras, where they began to settle in the 1420s. In 1434 one of their captains passed Cape Bojador, an important psychological obstacle whose rounding was Henry's first great triumph; ten years later they reached Cape Verde and established themselves in the Azores. By then they had discovered that the *caravel*, a ship which used the latest rigging, could deal with the head winds and contrary currents of the return voyage by going right out into the Atlantic and sailing a long semi-circular course home. In 1445 they reached Senegal and soon after built the first Portuguese fort in Africa. Henry died in 1460, but by then his countrymen were ready to go on south. In 1473 they crossed the

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<sup>43</sup> I.e. to outmanoeuvre the Muslim powers. (Note that for centuries Catholics had been waging war in the Iberian Peninsula to expel the Islamic presence there – and this campaign was still not quite over, at least for Spain).

Equator and in 1487 reached the Cape of Good Hope. Ahead lay the Indian Ocean; Arabs had long traded across it and pilots were available. Beyond it lay even greater richer sources of spices. In 1498 Vasco da Gama picked up an Omani pilot on the east African coast and set off for Asia. In May he dropped anchor off Calicut, on the west coast of India. For the first time, Asia was in direct sea-communication with Europe.<sup>44</sup>

A little earlier a Genoese, known to history as Christopher Columbus, had offered his services to the King of Portugal, but to no avail. His conviction, derived from the teaching of 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD astronomer Ptolemy of Alexandria, was a revolutionary one: that by sailing west it would be possible to reach Asia. So he proceeded to put the same proposal before Queen Isabella of Castile (Spain). Only when the last Islamic stronghold in Spain – Granada – had fallen, in 1492, would she commission him to test his ideas. After 69 days' sailing his little fleet of three ships reached landfall in the Bahamas. Two weeks later they reached another island, which Columbus named Hispaniola – known to us as Cuba.

The race to discover the rest of the world was well and truly underway. Although in 1493-4, the Pope of the day, Alexander VI, had adjudicated between the rival claims regarding which parts of the world they might legitimately conquer – and had neatly divided the globe between them<sup>45</sup> – Portugal and Spain would soon find that others wanted to be involved in the action too: in particular, the Dutch, the French, and the English. Inevitably this heightened Europe's sense of making progress (away from backwardness), and increasingly rapid progress at that. But if there was progress in terms of physical achievements, it certainly wasn't matched by any moral progress on 'Christian' Europe's part. The ethical instincts of the Iberian pioneers of this new exploration were those of the 'crusaders against the infidel' they still were. Vast numbers of 'primitive' people worldwide, who happened to worship other gods, were going to pay a terrible price for this. Moreover the values of the classical world, woven as they were into Europe's

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<sup>44</sup> *A History of Europe*, pp198,9.

<sup>45</sup> Another example, sadly, of papal arrogance and ambition.

imagination, made it easy for the 'Christian' Portuguese to engage in the black slave trade from 1443 onwards – previously a Muslim monopoly<sup>46</sup> – and for other supposedly Christian European nations enthusiastically to follow them.

Can anything positive be said about Europe's global expansion? Perhaps. The exploration itself was consistent with the commission given the human race in Genesis 1 – even if it could never remotely be claimed that this was God's work being done in God's way. And, secondly, given the extent to which even murderous, exploitative conquest took the Christian faith to the nations, there's an extent to which we have to say: 'God meant it for good' (cf. Gen 45). This, of course, justifies nothing – although it may just illustrate the Lord's redemptive action in the midst of all sorts of inexcusable human behaviour.

### **A journey resumed in Europe's imagination**

The night sky has always captured the human imagination. Likewise, if in a very different way, the daytime sky. So it was no surprise that when the ancient Greeks began speculating about the universe, they soon developed theories about the heavens. Their ancestors had related the lives of the gods to the heavens. Then the speculation started moving in what we'd call a scientific direction as well. Inevitably all this impacted the wider culture.

The Greek playwright Aristophanes, a generation older than Plato, wrote outrageous, anarchic 'comedies' – where conventional rules and standards were jettisoned, and imagination given free rein. In his play *The Birds* (first performed 414 BC), two dishevelled old men on a journey make it clear they're wanting to escape their home city of Athens, which they've come to find oppressive (as has the rest of Greece). Staggering around, each with a bird chained to his wrist,

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<sup>46</sup> 'Modern historians examining contemporary comment produce reliable estimates that Islamic raiders enslaved around a million western Christian Europeans between 1530 and 1640; this dwarfs the contemporary slave traffic in the other direction, and is about equivalent to the number of west Africans taken by Christian Europeans across the Atlantic at the same time.' MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p57.

they're seeking a 'land that's free from trouble' – a new city (compare, in the Bible, Hebrews 11:10). Indeed they dream of a world which would be 'a place to curl up in, like a big soft blanket'. In the course of the chaotic dream which is the play's storyline, one of the two men, Peisetairos, encourages the birds to take back the power which he says they once held over the world. He tells them that the way to do this is to build a new city-state in the sky (to be called 'Cloudcuckooland'). This bird-city will be above the human world, though below the world of the gods. The point of building it, though, is to establish a platform from which the gods can be challenged. The two men have by now sprouted wings, so they can live in this city themselves. The sting in the tail is that Peisetairos, who's left Athens because it's so oppressive, now becomes the tyrant-oppressor of Cloudcuckooland (and rules the universe in place of Zeus, king of the gods). As one commentator observes: 'You can take Peisetairos out of Athens, but you can't take Athens out of Peisetiaros.' The play would be complete nonsense – if it weren't such a striking parable of recent history.

What impact Aristophanes' ideas had on Plato, if any, isn't clear – maybe none. Plato didn't approve of the theatre's corrupting influence on people. He must have understood, though, that what Aristophanes was offering was, ultimately, not just frivolous entertainment but a penetrating critique of the world they both knew. Anyway, Plato's conviction about the universe, that true reality is 'spiritual', and to be found in the heavens, whilst what we have down here is only a shadow of reality, was a rather more serious offering than the playwright's. In his *Republic*, Plato seems, on the face of it, to lay down the principles for an ideal city-state; for instance, that it should be ruled by philosophers, true lovers of wisdom, not politicians. If so, we have to ask about this ideal city-state 'republic': ideal for what? (Preparing people for the truly spiritual life?) Plato's answer here would probably not be ours. It seems that his purpose in the *Republic* has all too often been misunderstood, as later generations have read their own characteristic interests – present-day idealism, for instance – back into his work, and substituted them for his own. Whatever the case, in an age of political

instability which had affected him adversely, he came to be rather too impressed by the ways (fascist as we would see them) of the militaristic city-state of Sparta.

Jump forward in time to the publication by the English 'humanist' scholar and statesman Thomas More (1478-1535) of his book *Utopia*. It's clearly inspired by the *Republic*, in which More interpreted Plato to be arguing for what he considered the best city-state possible – not an ideal city, though, because 'that can be found nowhere on earth'<sup>47</sup>. His *Utopia*, by comparison, is a remote – but supposedly real – island in the New World, transformed by its mysterious conqueror Utopus from the primitive *Abraxa* it had been up until then. 'Utopia' means 'nowhere' (an echo here of Plato's book?), but possibly also 'good place'<sup>48</sup>. More, a committed Catholic<sup>49</sup>, imagines an enlightened society – 'the best state of the commonwealth' – in which private greed is curbed by the common ownership of all property (as in the *Republic*). Here everyone is educated on an equal basis, works hard for the general good, and there's plenty to supply everyone's needs. Religious tolerance is practiced, all have the vote, and domestic and community harmony prevail. More seems here to be offering a picture of what might conceivably be possible for a community of unredeemed individuals – in contrast to the unjust, unhappy struggle that was the lot of most Europeans at that time<sup>50</sup>. Even so, it's made clear that the Utopians have come to worship the unknown God in a way that can only command respect. Moreover, when the (Catholic) Christian faith is presented to them, they respond enthusiastically. The impact of the book can be judged by the place which the 'utopian' concept has occupied since then in the Western world's imagination. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels included More among the founding figures of

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<sup>47</sup> For More, the ideal form of life can be nothing less than committed Christian discipleship.

<sup>48</sup> The Greek can mean either – depending on what the U stands for.

<sup>49</sup> And a close associate of the scholar Erasmus.

<sup>50</sup> For the Renaissance humanists, there was always a tension between the Plato-inspired withdrawal from the distractions of ordinary life to seek after the only thing that mattered – the life of the heavenly world – and the search for a more enlightened political order, after the model of Plato's *Republic*, and the involvement in politics that implied. This was a tension in More's own experience – now a serious political figure, he had, as a young man, seriously considered the monastic life.

English communism. They hadn't read the book carefully enough, though. It ends with a disagreement between two friends, one of whom is supposed to be More himself, as to whether Utopian life is actually practicable – and 'More' (the author as a character in the book) is the sceptical one of the two. If he leaves the matter unresolved for his readers, it still remains there to provoke their imaginations. It's been suggested that More's purpose in writing the book was to correct what he understood to be Plato's vision in the *Republic* by means of Augustine of Hippo's (supposedly) biblical concept of the two incompatible cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, in *City of God*. This may be so. More, like Augustine, ended up believing that only a monastic kind of Christian community life – the kind he himself had elected, years earlier, not to pursue – could constitute any sort of ideal kind of existence in this world. But the inevitable impression he left for most of his readers was that he was pointing towards some near-ideal form of secular society – 'utopia' as we think of it.

To such dreams of alternative, better worlds we'll return in due course. They've served, on the one hand, as catalysts for much-needed social and political reform, and on the other, as dangerous rivals to the Christian faith.

### **The factors which set up the Reformation**

'Luther's stand against Rome aroused huge popular enthusiasm in the Empire and in German-speaking lands. A seemingly endless variety of individual acts of revolt against the old Church fed off his phenomenal volume of words rushing off the printing presses ...'<sup>51</sup> There had clearly been widespread desire for radical change in church life in the German world, which was just waiting for a Martin Luther to appear. Not all Europe felt this way, though, by any means. Eamon Duffy, in *The Stripping of the Altars*, shows how most people in pre-Reformation England happily involved themselves in the life of the Catholic Church, and that

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<sup>51</sup> MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p152.

there was no popular movement for the throwing off of medieval Catholicism.<sup>52</sup> That said, he makes clear that the more serious-minded in the church hierarchy were concerned by the lack of any deep commitment exhibited by most English Catholics. And the study is inevitably skewed towards the countryside, because that is where the bulk of the population still lived.

There seem to have been three basic areas of religious dissent in England, as would have been true in much of the rest of Europe: the intellectuals, townsfolk, and those whose lives involved travel. Western Europe was being changed by being educated. It was also changing by the shift towards a town life very different from the old feudal ways of the rural areas. And how 'travel was broadening the mind' we've already touched upon. We're talking about significant minorities here, in each of these groups, not majorities. And, associated with this dissent, there was significant – if patchy – economic growth. Many people were becoming much better off financially; and rising wealth levels were changing attitudes in the populations affected. In the German world, by contrast, famine, resulting from a succession of failed harvests, and war seem to have predisposed people to support Luther. Unrest in places like England, too, could be caused by dislocation of vulnerable groups in society – for example, because of the enclosure of formerly-common agricultural land – and the resulting hardship.

The Catholic Christianity of the pre-Reformation era was tied to a world that was fast disappearing – like a lot of Western Christianity today. Sooner or later the modern world (of that time) was going to make its impact. But the Catholic system itself was in trouble. The worldliness and corruption of the papacy was a scandal to many. Centuries before, when Rome had increased the distance between the clergy and the laity, this had resulted in a fundamental clergy-laity divide. The result, in a much later generation, was rising anti-clericalism: people, even in a place like England, wanted the Catholic system to change, even if most

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<sup>52</sup> 1992; New Haven and London; Yale University Press; ISBN 0-300-06076-9

were happy enough with Catholic religion. Reform was high on the agenda of the fifth Lateran Council in Rome (1512-17). Yet almost nothing of any substance was achieved in the five years it sat. Mere discussion of change had gone on far too long: the system simply didn't want to change itself in the way that was needed.

As for the monastic movement, which had done so much to Christianise Europe, much of it was now in a poor state. The lands and wealth of the older monastic orders had attracted the self-interested attention of the secular nobility, indeed were often under secular control. Consequently, even if these orders had wanted to reform themselves, they couldn't.

So often in the past the monasteries had supplied the impetus for renewal in the Church. They'd do so again this time. Martin Luther, a monk of one of the newer orders, the Augustinians, teaching at the new University of Wittenberg in Germany, would be the one who'd hear the call to lead a protest against medieval Catholicism. The Augustinians, of course, had committed themselves to involvement in urban life rather than to a spirituality of withdrawal to some kind of 'desert'. Monastic communities had for a thousand years built up the life of Catholic Europe, making it a thoroughly religious place. Now a monk was about to launch what would turn into a revolution powerful enough to break the Catholic hold over Western Europe, and hasten its secularisation<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> Of the various meanings of the term 'secularisation', I mean here primarily a shift away from that very religious way of experiencing and living life which characterised medieval Catholicism.