



(Continued - Eastern Section)

HISTORY

THE "PROBLEM" OF THE RENAISSANCE

"*Mi pare rinascere* (I feel reborn)!" With these words Antonio Filarete greeted the architectural innovations introduced by Brunelleschi in the mid-fifteenth century. In the same vein Rabelais described the effect of the "new" literature of the time as the means by which "out of the thick Gothic night our eyes were opened to the glorious torch of the sun." These sentiments, inspired by an artistic impulse which found its source in the wellspring of antiquity, expressed the feelings of many fifteenth-century intellectuals who coined the term *renaissance* to assert the superiority of their own age over the "middle," or "dark," ages (also terms of their manufacture). In the hands of these self-proclaimed "new men," the term attained polemical heights and was used to characterize their period as one of spring and youth, awakening and innovation; the obverse side of this metaphor which gave its proponents the virtues of enlightenment and vigor was the depiction of the preceding era as a time of darkness and cultural squalor.

It seems to be a fact of human nature that if an idea is expressed long enough and loud enough, many people will come to accept it as a proven and immutable truth. And the process of acceptance is both hastened and made more secure when the pronouncements emanate from respectable scholars who appeal (often unconsciously) to deep-seated prejudices held by their public. Regarding the idea of a "renaissance" which followed upon an age of medieval darkness, all of these factors (and more) seem to have operated efficiently, and the idea of a medieval/Renaissance periodization approached its final form in the seventh volume (1855), of Jules Michelet's *History of France*. Examining the history of the sixteenth century in his own country, Michelet saw in medieval civilization the destruction of freedom and the debasement of the human spirit while in the renaissance came "the discovery of the world and the discovery of man" and the spontaneous rebirth of art and antiquity. Echoing the sentiments of earlier generations, Michelet's renaissance was a distinct epoch, sharply contrasting in spirit with the preceding age.

Five years later Michelet's analysis received its capstone with the publication of Jacob Burckhardt's monumental *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860). The greatness of this Swiss historian lay in his ability to synthesize several strands of previous thought and to draw upon much of the information then available. The central thesis of the work, which purported to lay bare the "unique inner spirit" and "essential

modernity" of Italy in the Quattrocento, was furthered by the fact that Burckhardt created a literary masterpiece which persuaded by the very beauty of its style and form. Thus, the contentions of the fifteenth-century "innovators" and the ensuing tradition of centuries attained completion; the existence of a rebirth in Western civilization was beyond doubt. Or was it?

Burckhardt himself left the door open to later criticism when he wrote:

To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a great civilization present a different picture In the wide ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many; and the same studies which have served for this work might easily, in other hands, not only receive a wholly different treatment and application, but lead to essentially different conclusions.

It was not long before this small crack in the dam of absolute certainty was widened by a veritable flood of doubt concerning the nature and extent--indeed the very existence--of a renaissance.

The carefully constructed edifice of renaissance historiography came under fire from later scholars who were armed both with more extensive information concerning the history of the centuries from 1100 to 1500 and with the relatively new methodologies of psychology, sociology, and economics. Some critics approached the no-man's land of debate like snipers; these proceeded by an examination of the historical contexts and personal motivations of the various proponents of the concept of renaissance. It was claimed, for example, that Burckhardt had been unable to reconcile himself with his own historical milieu and so had created an ideal, heroic age from the past in which he could exist intellectually and spiritually. To be sure, such an approach may yield information or insight of some intrinsic worth, but it draws a perilously thin line between useful critique and the "genetic fallacy" by which a theory may be discounted as false solely because of its origins.

Other critics have undertaken a more substantive approach by questioning the major premises and assumptions which underlie the concept of renaissance. Their work has produced a mass of literature concerning artistic style, qualitative economics, and social change which often baffles the non-specialist. To the observer standing outside the circle, the minute detail of debate most often appears as a "tempest in a teapot," the material from which academic careers are fashioned but hardly the stuff by which empires are won or lost. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that most critics--and they run the gamut from those who would make only minor modifications to those who advocate outright rejection--agree on one point: the way one interprets the period called the Renaissance depends largely on how one interprets the period which preceded it, and the choice of criteria for interpretation is a highly individual matter of taste.

At this juncture, our own experience stands us in good stead. In Unit VI we discovered that the period of the High Middle Ages was not an age of unmitigated darkness, that there were many roses among the thorns. In the course of our analysis it became clear that the sources of many later developments were to be found in the period 1100 to 1350; the word *static* hardly applies to the vast economic, social, and political developments which filled the age, and the people of the time did not consider themselves to be living in the "dark" ages of mankind. Given our understanding of the earlier period, the era after 1350 must appear less as a rebirth than as a continuation or culmination of developing trends that began as far back as the tenth century. And we find the source of error in earlier views to lie in the tendency of some disciples to accept too literally the vernal metaphors built into the word *renaissance* by the masters of the fifteenth century.

Having discounted the "death and rebirth" image furnished by earlier generations, we can use the term *renaissance* in a perfectly neutral sense to denote a particular span of time, roughly that from the Black Death of 1347 to the early seventeenth century. We can understand much of this period as the crisis time of medieval civilization; we can also see it as a period of creativity and new beginnings. Better still we should understand it as both: as a period of transition between one distinctive civilization and another. Seen in this aspect the Renaissance becomes the melting pot in which elements old and new became conjoined and formed a substance of a distinctively different character, early modern Europe. Our task in this unit thus becomes twofold--to examine the religious, political, and socio-economic developments emerging out of the medieval period, and to recognize the modifications brought about by activities and ways of thought which were essentially new to the Renaissance. More specifically, we shall be concerned with the fall of Church power, the rise of national states in France and England, and events in Italy.

THE DECLINE OF CLERICAL INFLUENCE

The papacy reached the high point of its power in the thirteenth century; we have traced the nature of papal power in previous units and may recall the image of King Henry IV kneeling in the snow at Canossa, begging forgiveness of Pope Gregory VII. For a time after this drama of 1077, papal dictates often served to depose or raise temporal princes at will, but events in time brought the wielders of sacred power into direct confrontation with the secular sword. And beginning in the 1300's the papacy suffered a series of blows which diminished the power and prestige of the Church as concern for the soul gave way to reasons of state.

During the pontificate of Boniface VIII (1294-1303), the rulers of England and France refused to bow down to the commands of the papacy. In quest of revenue to finance his war with England, Philip IV of France (1285-1314) sought to impose new taxes upon the clergy. This action received a severe command from Boniface that the secular realm not interfere

with Church members. Matters of money became matters of law in 1301 when Boniface asserted the traditional right of clergy to seek judgment in ecclesiastical courts. While the immediate issues differed, the basic issue was the same in 1301 as in 1296: who was to rule in Europe? The power struggle intensified when the pope issued a bull in 1302 (*Unam Sanctam*) which affirmed that there were indeed two swords in the world and *both* belonged to and were used by the papal will. Particularly revealing is the last sentence of the bull which carried the pope's position: "It is absolutely necessary to salvation that every human being be subject to the Roman Pontiff." Unlike 1077, Philip IV had no intention of "going to Canossa." Instead, he sent troops with orders to kidnap the pope and return him to Paris for trial. Only chance prevented things from proceeding as planned; the pope escaped capture but not damage to his prestige. The first round of the fight left the Church reeling, and Boniface died in 1303, some say of shock and humiliation.

His successor, Clement V, was a French archbishop who moved the papal residence to Avignon in France. Thus began the so-called "Babylonian Captivity" which lasted from 1305 to 1378. Clement gave in to Philip IV on every important point, even to the extent of declaring that Philip had shown "praiseworthy zeal" in accusing Boniface of wrong conduct. Understandably the English and German princes were defiant of a pope whom they rightly considered to be a French pawn. Edward III of England boldly reminded the pope that "the successor of the Apostles was commissioned to lead the Lord's sheep to pasture, not to fleece them." There is no doubt that papal prestige suffered within the Church as well, for the pope's misconduct caused scholars such as John Wycliffe to challenge the belief in the divinity of the papal office and the sacramental system.

When Gregory XI became pope in 1377, the papal residence was returned to Rome, and it seemed that the fortunes of the Church would improve. But Gregory died the following year, and an Italian pope, Urban VI, was elected by cardinals acting under pressure of the Roman mob. Some cardinals fled Rome and, finding support in France, elected Clement VII, a Frenchman who set up shop in Avignon. Now there were two popes, each with his own college of cardinals, each claiming absolute sovereignty, and each excommunicating the other. This "Great Schism," which began in 1378, lasted until 1417 and, needless to say, did not add to the Church's influence. The peoples of Europe were split--those of France, Scotland, Navarre, Castile, and Aragon supporting Clement; and those of England, Italy, Portugal, and Flanders supporting Urban. Faced with division upon division, people in Europe searched frantically for a way to preserve a semblance of stability. A conciliar movement that would unite churchmen and lay leaders seemed to be the answer, and in 1409 the Council of Pisa was convened. The members of the council sought to restore order by electing a new pope and deposing both incumbents. The latter, however, refused to step down, and the Church was faced with the spectacle of three popes!

In 1414 the Council of Constance was called. Here were represented respected leaders of Church and state, and a sense of growing "nationalism" was evidenced by the fact that representatives were divided into

four "nations"--an Italian, a French, an English, and a German. The first Council of Constance managed to pass a decree (*Frequens*) affirming that a general council, *with or without papal approval*, must be convoked every seven years to discuss matters of importance to the Church at large. (Potentially this decree could create yet another body which would vie for power with the pope.) The second meeting at Constance in 1417 resulted in the election of Martin V as pope and the return of authority to Rome. Thus, the council ended the schism, but in the long run the effects of the previous hundred years were irreversible; the Church had lost its leadership, and the days were past when it could command the kings of Western Europe.

The popes of the last half of the fifteenth century pursued policies far removed from religious leadership. Some became patrons of Renaissance artists and writers, some of whom openly repudiated Christianity. A few popes, such as Pius II, made feeble efforts at reform, but were swept away by the general tide of scandalous living--Paul II wore a papal tiara greater than a palace in value; Sixtus IV made his nephew a millionaire; Innocent VIII celebrated the marriages of his children in the Vatican; Alexander VI sired at least five children; and Cesare Borgia, Alexander's son, carved out a principate for himself using the Papal States as raw material.

Hardly less significant was the decay of the whole body of the clergy. Bishops were better known for their political activities and great wealth than for their interest in religious work. Decline in monasticism was pronounced; between 1300 and 1500 not a single monastic order of any importance was established, and even the Franciscan and Dominican Orders forgot their ideals of poverty and service and turned instead to the pursuit of wealth and power.

From this brief account it is clear that the decline of the Church came about as a result of both external and internal factors. Perhaps the Church had been too successful in some aspects of its secular life: some estimates put the Church in possession of one-third of the wealth in Germany and a similar proportion in France. In Italy one-third of the peninsula belonged to the Church as the Papal States, and the Church owned rich properties in the rest. Great wealth appears to have led to arrogance and degeneration within the structure built to God.

In addition to the spiritually degenerating effects of its own activity, the Church suffered from the critical attitudes toward the clergy and religious institutions fostered by the Renaissance. The resurgence of trade and urban life brought great change in the social fabric of Western Europe; secular activity began to replace sacred concerns. Most importantly, political and social change contributed to the development of nationalism and the growth of new powers in the persons of kings who proved most reluctant to obey any opposing force or institution. Unable to reform itself or to control secular rulers, the Church reaped a predictable harvest in the Reformation of the sixteenth century.