

Speculate on the following: A. N. Whitehead makes a distinction between modern and classical civilizations on the basis of their relationship to the question of slavery and personal freedom. Do you see the Renaissance, with all its dependence on classical antiquity, as nonetheless furthering western man's struggle for personal freedom?

Question posed by Dr. Lawrence

Frederick Bartling

The thesis of this essay is, that the Renaissance furthered man's struggle for freedom, and I have used as the principal argument, the observation of A. N. Whitehead who maintained that the Renaissance was dependent upon classical civilization. Although Whitehead believed that modern and classical civilizations are to be distinguished on the basis of their respective relationship to the question of slavery and human freedom, I will argue that Western man's struggle for freedom was advanced by the Renaissance's great dependence upon classical antiquity.

Whitehead's book, Adventure in Ideas, stresses the importance of the history of ideas and their mutations in the life of humanity. The history of ideas, Whitehead maintains, is dominated by a dichotomy, what the Greeks called "compulsion" or violence - a set of consciously formulated ideals set at odds with the inherited verities and ancestral pieties undergirding a particular civilization. Whitehead wishes to demonstrate the adventure of a great idea, a new element in the history of ideas, that transversed through many mutations in the history of culture and led to modern Western civilization. The essential idea is the Greek belief in the greatness of the human soul and the slow evolution of the idea in the rise of Western civilization. It is "the story of the translation of the Greek metaphysical speculations into the sociological concept of human freedom." (31) The Greek idea was the catalyst that started the cultural ferment within European culture.

However, this great concept, Whitehead notes, enters "into reality with evil associates, and with disgusting alliances. But the greatness remains, nerving the race in its slow ascent." (26) The right of a human being as human had a checkered career and did not triumph until, in Whitehead's view, the nineteenth century. Classical civilization is remarkable, for two facts, first, that for a thousand years of classical civilization to be civilized was to be a slave owner, and secondly, when slavery ceased, the civilization

saved itself from slave insurrection by being "the first period which introduced moral principles, forming an effective criticism of the whole system." Athenian patricians humanized the institution, and later Latin Stoics insisted on the essential rights of slaves as humans. The institution itself remained intact and the social system, dependent upon slavery, protected itself through the principle of criticism of slavery and the continual fostering of man's essential humanity. "In this way the conception of the dignity of human nature was quietly emerging....a worthy moral force....It was the first light of the dawn of a new order of life." Whitehead had initial praise for the Middle Ages for it cultivated the worth of the individual, but when the church institutionalized and feudalism arose, the culture assumed untoward ideas. The great Classical ideal of the human soul and the essential dignity of man were again aligned with evil forces.

Whitehead, in his discussion, passes the Renaissance without reference, and takes up his argument again with the Enlightenment. He states: "The next resurgence of the notion of the essential greatness of the human soul is associated with the sceptical humanitarianism of the eighteenth century. We have arrived at the Age of Reason and the Rights of Man." We would argue that the Renaissance must be seen as that period which brought to light the full implications of classical antiquity and its "concept of human freedom....and the essential greatness of the human soul..." Without the humanist study of classical antiquity the final legacy of the classical view of man would not have been uncovered. Without this discovery the Enlightenment would seem impossible. A brief perusal of the nature of Renaissance civilization is in order. First, an initial historiographical survey of what the Renaissance was; secondly, what its values were; and, finally, how the humanist studies of the classics encouraged Renaissance beliefs in the nature of man and fostered "the Greek metaphysical speculations (on the) concept of human freedom."

The Renaissance was essentially patrician, elitist, and new middle.

class in orientation. In no sense were their beliefs widespread in the wider context of a decaying feudal and rural culture. The Renaissance man, however, emerged in the new towns and cities. Yet the Renaissance emphasis on personal freedom, its strictures against the church, its attack upon scholasticism and hierarchy, its fostering of a personal and practical piety were catalytic ideas that eventually filtered through European society and made the Enlightenment possible. Finally, in the nineteenth century with the rise of the common man, "the conception of the brotherhood of man and the importance of men (became) a vivid reality." They had produced the final effective force which hereafter, Whitehead argues, "made slavery impossible among progressive races.... But the intellectual origins of the movement is to be traced back for more than two thousand years to the speculations of the philosophic Greeks upon the functions of the human soul, and its status in a world of flux." (32) Without the Renaissance, I argue, furthering this idea among an emerging middle class, the outcome would seem impossible.

The modern concept of the Renaissance was formulated by Jacob Burckhardt's masterful synthesis published in 1860, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy. The concept of rebirth after centuries of medieval darkness originated, to a degree, in the Renaissance itself in material furnished by the humanists which lent itself to a scheme of periodization in history. The Italian humanists knew they were living in an age of cultural revival, but their awareness of what was new was limited to classical literature and the fine arts. Later generations, trained in the classics, adopted the threefold periodization of history common in Western history today. Burckhardt built upon that tradition in his original masterpiece. His work is disputable among historiographers, and the debate between proponents and critics of Burckhardt continues. Burckhardt's view, simply stated, insists that the Renaissance was the birth of modern culture.

Burckhardt's thesis is well-known. The classic is divided into six parts and treats fourteenth to sixteenth century Italy from various vantage points. The first part treats the struggle between popes and emperors, and sees the Renaissance in Italy as the emergence of the European state, free to follow its own inclinations. The state is a work of art characterized by political activity, and the emergence of a new type of individual who must depend on his own resources to serve his ends. "The Development of the Individual," the key to Burckhardt's synthesis, resulted from the foregoing political conditions. The third section deals with the "Revival of Antiquity," the 'rebirth' which sums up the whole period. The influence of the classics, Burckhardt felt, shaped in many ways the era, but was not isolated from the core of the Renaissance. It had to be coupled with the Volksgeist of the people. Both were inextricably intertwined to produce modernity. The humanist, the classical scholar, is observed in the society which was marked by individualism and secularity.

The rest of Burckhardt's treatment is an analysis of the manner in which the first three factors affected other facets of life. "The Discovery of the World of Man," the fourth section, deals with physical sciences, natural beauty, and the discovery of the human personality as delineated in the literature of the age. The individual is again emphasized. "Society and Festivals," the fifth section, places man in his social milieu, mingling as a burgher or a noble on equal terms in an urban culture based upon wealth, and not social position. Man achieves through personal worth. Social intercourse is free and itself becomes a work of art. In "Morality and Religion," the last section, Burckhardt becomes somewhat condemnatory and sees Italy in moral crisis without moral restraints. Partly it was the fault of the church and its reverence for pagan antiquity, but mostly he attributes it to individualism that made the Renaissance in Italy the beginning of the modern world.

Does Burckhardt's treatment stand the test of historiographic criticism?

The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation, by

Wallace K. Ferguson, is an attempt to work toward the solution of a new synthesis. Ferguson contends that Burckhardt's treatment of the Renaissance was too static and too limited in space and time, that it was essentially a movement of the upper classes, restricted primarily to Italy, and that individualism was overstated. Yet when Ferguson comes to his conclusion after some 400 pages, he reasons that Jacob Burckhardt was not far off base, but that the age should be seen as one of transition. He suggests a compromise solution, namely, "a systematic analysis both of the essential differences between medieval and modern civilization and what was peculiar to the transitional age itself. (391)" The periodic concept cannot, Ferguson states, be abandoned - something did happen in the Renaissance and each age must be approached with a point of view, since focal points of an age need not be universally the characteristic of an age. Every age is a continuum of the past, and with the future. The historian is bound, in final analysis, "to use his best judgment in deciding at what point the balance of more or less reaches a point of equilibrium. (397)" Hans Baron, in answering Ferguson and his objection that Burckhardt places the Renaissance too late because Italian merchantment, as individualists, were already at their zenith about 1300, states in rebuttal:

Burckhardt, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, when contemporary culture was keenly individualistic and had a strong aesthetic note, could discern in Renaissance Italy only the prototype and exemplar of these modern attitudes. The greatness of his work, indeed, derived from his power to establish the traits which he was first to note so permanently and with so lavish a mass of sources that Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien will remain the Renaissance as far as the Renaissance was an age of individualism.

G. P. V. Akregg affirms in "The Renaissance Reconsidered" that: "The Renaissance did not happen, yet there was the Renaissance. Not discreetly as an isolated phenomenon, but imperceptibly it came into being, just as one phase of the moon succeeds another, itself waning, to give way to a third."

It is common knowledge that the Renaissance ideals spread to the "Barbarians" across the Alps among the rising town burgher class and scholars in France, Germany, England, Holland, and culminated in Christian Humanism. It

remains our task, then, to see if, according to Whitehead's thesis, the Renaissance ideals, with all their dependance upon classical antiquity, furthered man's struggle for personal freedom by rediscovering, or uncovering for Western culture the Greek value of the human soul and the essential dignity of the individual man.

Lord Acton wrote many years ago, in 1906, that "next to the discovery of the New World the recovery of the ancient world is the second landmark that divides us from the Middle Ages and marks the transition to modern life." This statement is true in the sense that the humanists rediscovered the classical value placed upon man in his individual uniqueness. A fascinating, profound, but exceedingly difficult work was written relevant to this theme and is titled, The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries: From the Carolingian Age to the End of the Renaissance. We are indebted to it's author, R. R. Bolgar. Bolgar's thesis maintains that from the age of Charlemagne to the end of the Renaissance each age adopted certain elements of the classical heritage that were conducive to the slow rise of Western civilization. The Renaissance generation of humanists finally exhausted the teaching potential of that heritage when it rediscovered the essential classical value of the individual in his personal uniqueness. During the eighth century a Latin grammar curriculum was established to foster education and banish ignorance. The ninth century used Latin for the church and the art of writing; the quest for knowledge flourished. The tenth and eleventh centuries used the classics essentially for legal and medical information. Scholastics of the twelfth century basically neglected the classics with their theological endeavors. In the fifteenth century, development of classical studies occurred, when the rising Italian cities grafted Byzantine Greek and its cultural heritage to Western knowledge, and "uncovered the last secrets of the classical heritage." "The Renaissance," Bolgar continues, "revealed to an amazed world those elements in classical poetry, history, and speculation that bore on the personal life. Humanism became equated with

the free and full development of the individual" (382, underlining mine).

Bolgar sees two fundamental elements in the Renaissance contribution.

First, the aesthetic and the personal, and secondly, a preoccupation with form and the development of the personality. The humanists of the Renaissance altered their attention, from the traditional concern for logic and rhetoric, typical of scholasticism and earlier humanism to the more fruitful practice of imitation of the classics. The nature of thought patterns changed, and there was an attempt to rival each type of classical literary genre. The interplay of personal experience and literary form with artistic expression proved inexhaustible. Great attention to detail by imitating the classics gave solutions to personal problems that vexed the artist. The cultural interests of the humanist, "the second string in the Humanist bow," was the preoccupation of form and the development of personality. This led to a deepening of culture. "We have antiquity to thank," Bolgar concludes, "that our culture includes these many variations on the Humanist outlook which takes the individual as its final court of appeal and envisages him as a responsible being face to face with an independent and often recalcitrant environment!" (385, underscoring mine).

Since historical narrative is to be kept to a minimum, I have observed that the simplest, clearest presentation of humanist study in Italy is found in Wallace K. Ferguson's, The Renaissance (pp. 73-83). The humanists' use of the classics is traced from Petrarch (1304-1374) to the middle of the fifteenth century, when the possibilities of the classics were exhausted and the vernacular came into vogue. Ferguson stressed the new independent, secular approach that freed itself from medieval conventions. Laymen sought a broad and more human culture that accentuated forms of "literature that would combine aesthetic form with their own worldly and non feudal society." Human interest and unacademic philosophy concerned itself with man and his ethical problems and not metaphysical abstractions. They learned to discuss classics, history, politics, society, man, and nature from a worldly point of view. The lay

Humanist had arrived.

Humanism in the North was fully matured by 1530. As summarized by Ferguson (pp. 116-128), humanism in the north followed two lines of development, one secular, the other religious; yet neither felt a conflict between their interest in the secular aspects of the classics and their Christian piety. The Christian Humanists believed in a mystic, secular piety and ethics that eschewed decadent scholasticism. The key figure is, of course, Erasmus, who delighted through wit to seek the weak points in the institutions of the day, and whose "Philosophia Christi" was the embrace of a simple ethic of brotherly love - a personal ethic devoid of doctrinal subtlety.

Thus, not only Italian Humanism of the Italian Renaissance but the Christian Humanism of the northern Renaissance emphasized the personal in essential revolt against medievalism. The mainspring of this revolt is partially found (although certainly other forces were destroying medievalism) as Whitehead's major theme, namely, the idea which "is to be traced back for more than two thousand years to the speculations of the philosophic Greeks upon functions of the human soul, and its status in a world of flux" (31). It was the privilege of the Renaissance Humanist scholar to rediscover this great Greek idea in the classics. The Greek view was compatible with the values of the emerging middle class, each fructifying one another in a cause and effect relationship.

Renaissance man had a new appreciation of the person, and as a result, he understood himself and his sense of perspective to the past. He placed himself with respect to the age as a whole, a perspective medieval man lacked. Renaissance man was an optimist seeking improvement in the temporal conditions of man. The pessimism of the waning middle ages assuages and man came to see himself as occupying a special place in the universe, a shifting from God and eternity to the control of the social and temporal here and now. His optimism may be naive but his valuation upon man in his essential uniqueness and freedom must receive our approbation.

Did the Renaissance, then, further western man's struggle for personal freedom even though it depended much upon classical antiquity that was wedded to slavery? We answer with an unqualified yes, even though those values were held by special classes and not, as yet, society as a whole. The Renaissance was an age that rediscovered for western civilization the key Greek idea of the essential greatness of the human soul. By a slow evolutionary process as described by Whitehead, that idea filtered through western culture. The concept of the Brotherhood of Man made slavery as a viable institution in western civilization impossible. The Greeks were not modern but they enshrined an idea that led to modernity. It was the Renaissance that untapped this idea for the cultural enrichment of western culture. That is just another way of saying, as Whitehead observes, that the apprehension of a great idea in history is slowly advanced by an evolutionary process. The Renaissance was part of that process, or as Whitehead concludes: "When there is progress in the development of favorable order, we find conduct protected from relapse into brutalization by the increasing agency of ideas consciously entertained. In this way Plato is justified in saying, the creation of the world - that is to say, the world of civilized order - is the victory of persuasion over force" (32-33).