Secular Humanism of Southern Europe

Humanism refers to an attitude and way of thinking which emerged in the Middle Ages, matured during the Renaissance (ca. 1400-1650), and greatly influenced the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

- Humanism stressed human achievement, the creativity of the human spirit, and the accomplishments of human aspirations. Humanism was a human-centered attitude as opposed to the God-centered attitude which characterized the Middle Ages.

  Petrarch (Italian lyric poet, 1304-1374) wrote: “Man admires the mountains, the sea and the stars, but he fails to admire himself.”

  Humanist education stressed moral edification. Humanism promoted the well-balanced human being: refined and self-controlled, graceful and virtuous, with a disciplined mind (a new ideal type of personality which replaced the notion of the ideal knight of the Middle Ages).

- Humanism stressed that personal and intellectual growth could be achieved through a liberal arts education in general, and through the study of classical Greek and Latin languages and literatures in particular.

  Humanism encouraged the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. Humanist scholars were secular scholars, i.e. not members of the clergy. They worked outside the universities, which still were bastions of scholasticism.

Classical Latin: Petrarch urged humanists to model their writing after the prose of Cicero (Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106-43 B.C., a Roman lawyer, statesman, gifted speaker & writer.) Cicero’s use of Latin was considered simple yet eloquent, and it became the standard of classical Latin, as opposed to medieval Latin (which was seen as a “corrupted” form of Latin.)

Textual Criticism (translations)

Humanists based their insight and understanding on empirical observation, e.g. facts, mistranslations of individual words, and not on the authority of dogma. Humanist scholars, many of whom were Byzantine scholars seeking refuge in Italy after the Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453, studied ancient Greek, Arabic and Hebrew texts and translated them into Latin. Translation was a dangerous business which threatened to undermine established authority and doctrine.

Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), for example, was interested in the accuracy of translated texts, especially of Jerome’s translation of the Bible. (Jerome’s Bible was the Latin Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament used in the Catholic Church.) He was interested in errors of translation, a thought which by itself attacks the idea that the Apostles actually had been the authors of the New Testament. Humanist criticism also led to the discovery that the Donation of Constantine (a document supposedly written by Constantine,
the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire which gave the Pope control over vast lands in Italy), was in fact a forgery. You can see why the Catholic Church condemned humanism.

**How did Humanism arrive north of the Alps? What form did it take?**

German students studied law and medicine in Italy. German princes took pride in becoming patrons of humanist scholars, e.g. Emperor Charles IV (1346-78) in Prague (the founder of the Charles Univ. of Prague). In 1440 the Imperial Chancellory moved from Prague to Vienna, i.e. closer to Italy. There was increased trade between Italy and Germany, and traveling papal ecclesiastical and diplomatic legates spread the word.

**Christian Humanism of Northern Europe**

Unlike in Italy, humanist thinking north of the Alps was guided by a desire to achieve a purer religiosity-- ideas which would lead to the spiritual reform of the Reformation. The particular form of Christianity which emerged in northern Europe (and which guided reformers such as Martin Luther) is known as *Christian Piety*.

As a reaction to the *bubonic plaque* that ravaged Europe in 1349-50 and killed 25 million, *memento mori* (“remember death”) still influenced how Christianity was expressed north of the Alps. The “Dance of Death” would be a popular theme in literature and art. Followers of Christian Piety sought a truer Bible, closer to the pure Christianity of the early years of Christianity, before the regulations and bureaucracy of monasticism. They wanted to lead a Christian life of discipline and balance, a life which they felt the highly regulated confines of the monasteries could no longer provide.

**Christian Humanists:**

**Erasmus of Rotterdam** (1466?-1536) studied Socrates, Plato & Cicero under the Brethren of Common Life. He studied Greek in order to discover a truer Christ. 1516 he had translated the New Testament in true humanist fashion by comparing the original Greek New Testament with the Latin Vulgate. 1509 he wrote *Praise of Folly* in which he criticized ignorant monks, powerful bishops, the veneration of saints and relics, and the practice of indulgences. In many ways, Erasmus was a forerunner of Luther, except that Erasmus did not support the Reformation.

**Johann Reuchlin** (1455-1522) was a German scholar of Hebrew who had to defend himself six years in ecclesiastical courts, arguing that his studies did not represent a danger to Christianity.

**Connections between Humanism and the Reformation**

The reformers in general would reject the notion that someone or some institution must play the role of a mediator between God and humans. They would reject the well established central authority of the Catholic Church, with hierarchy of popes, archbishops, bishops, and priests. They felt driven to interpret the Bible themselves and arrive at truth independently of religious doctrine.