

## Lecture 13

# The Renaissance Proper, 1200–1600 AD

**B**y 1200 AD all of Europe, southern, middle, and northern, had gained a common written language, Latin. That link existed very specifically due to the Christian faith. That faith was the Roman formulation—the earthen vessel—in which the treasure of Biblical faith was precariously carried. The Roman earthen vessel would not forever dominate Europe but it did last long enough to give it a single language that endured as a vehicle of scholarship many centuries after the somewhat superficial unity it had at 1200 AD.

Many new and unprecedented events emerged which together defined the increasing momentum. We saw in the last lesson how the final years of the 800 to 1200 period were bursting with new vitality—the first appearance of universities, cathedrals, crusades and, above all, the new pattern, the Friars. Still other evidences of mounting vitality, such as the Albigenses, the Cathari, and the Waldensians, were brutally crushed.

At the same time, the most powerful Pope of all time, Innocent III, was able to excommunicate rulers and interdict whole countries in order to establish morality and justice as he saw it.

But moving into the 1200 to 1600 period, the Friars—the Franciscans and Dominicans—very soon became a truly major additional force, not politically, militarily or, at first, even ecclesiastically, but spiritually. Within a few years there were 60,000 followers of Francis. Their evangelists blanketed and greened Europe, and thus the Twelfth Century Renaissance flowed over into the next period. The emergence of the Friars could well have been the most important event as we enter the 1200–1600 period.

This was also the period in which the Black Plague took the lives of one third of the people in Europe. It is believed that 20,000 Franciscans (as well as many more others) died in Germany alone—because they intentionally, despite the known risk, tended the sick.

There was also the curious and amazing phenomenon of the Crusades. While they began in the previous period they caused much of their disturbance in the 1200–1600 period. On the one hand they certainly reflect the increasing momentum of both civilization and the official Christian faith in the West. Some were launched as a direct result of sweeping spiritual revival. On the other hand, they betrayed the still-savage background of the majority of the now-Christianized Goths and Vikings. The Crusades were a combination of prayerful dedicated believers and crude adventurers. All were led by former Vikings.

At this stage the Islamic tradition was by comparison much more “civilized” than the middle and northern European “Christians.” If a crusader went out of his mind, the common remedy would be to gouge a cross in his scalp and pour molten lead into it. By contrast, the Muslims possessed far more sophisticated understandings of physical and mental illness—as well as literature, science, philosophy and political science.

In the 14th century a leading Christian library north of the Alps might have 400 books while, an Islamic library down in Córdoba, Spain had 400,000 books.

Meanwhile, there was also the comparative magnificence of the Chinese civilization under the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan as reported by Marco Polo. Marco Polo’s father and uncle had been in his court earlier. At that time the Khan, whose mother was a Nestorian Christian, asked them to relay to the Pope his request for 100 missionaries who could teach science and theology. After delivering this amazing message to the Pope, the two brothers returned to Europe, now with the 15-year-old Marco. They had been able to recruit only two Dominicans, who turned back when things got scary.

However, the Polos did arrive. Marco Polo who was favored by Kublai Khan stayed in China 17 years

working closely with the emperor. He later wrote up his experiences back in Europe. He was most surprised by the Mongols' use of paper money, coal for heating—not just wood—and a postal system which was something like the pony express which functioned briefly in the American expansion to the West.

Just before 1300 AD a Dominican finally arrived in the court, but after the death of Kublai Khan. Despite the intense opposition of the Nestorians there, he did gain a following of some 6,000.

The general acceleration of things was vastly spurred on by one of the side effects of the Crusades—a greater acquaintance with the Greek and Roman classical world over which by this date the Muslims were the main custodians. This “rebirth” of the classics gave the general name “Renaissance” to a period that in fact was actually less of a renaissance than either of what scholars refer to as the Carolingian Renaissance or the Twelfth Century Renaissance. These two earlier renaissances (and we could add what I have dubbed The Classical Renaissance of the Fourth Century) more profoundly affected society than did THE Renaissance of the 15th Century which involved mainly artists and scholars.

The Wikipedia states,

Historians now point out that most of the negative social factors popularly associated with the “medieval” period—poverty, ignorance, warfare, religious and political persecution, and so forth—seem to have actually worsened during this age of Machiavelli, the Wars of Religion, the corrupt Borgia Popes, and the intensified witch-hunts of the 16th century. Many of the common people who lived during the “Renaissance” are known to have been concerned by the developments of the era rather than viewing it as the “golden age” imagined by certain 19th century authors. Perhaps the most important factor of the Renaissance is that those involved in the cultural movements in question—the artists, writers, and their patrons—believed they were living in a new era that was a clean break from the Middle Ages, even if much of the rest of the population seems to have viewed the period as an intensification of social maladies.

The most reasonable conclusion would seem to be to extend the usual meaning of The Renaissance to include the Reformation of the 16th century, with an emphasis on the Gutenberg printing revolution in the 1450s and the many children of that printing

revolution in the following century. Within 50 years a thousand printers emerged, and by Luther's day in the early 1500s three million printed documents had been produced, three quarters of them religious.

Thus, what started out as a renaissance involving only a few became a reformation more profoundly affecting the entire area of European society than any previous event.

Interestingly, the term “Reformation” is not entirely accurate. It implies a re-formation or an improvement of theological and moral patterns, when in fact it is much more helpfully understood as a final breakdown of an essentially temporary and superficial extension of Mediterranean culture and theology—an extension into the Germanic basin. It is basically an example of the breakaway of a mission-field church. It is one more case of the earthen vessel of the missionary culture finally yielding to the new earthen vessel of a new missionized cultural sphere. The Reformation was by no means primarily a theological squabble over the doctrine of the justification by faith. “A cultural reformulation” would be a better phrase.

For example, John Wycliffe, two centuries before the Reformation, is called the “morning star of the Reformation.” His vernacular English translation of the Bible is said to epitomize the thrust of the Reformation and to emphasize the “issue” of the suppression of the Bible and especially the Bible in the vernacular of the various language groups of Europe. In reality, for Wycliffe and later John Hus, it was not so much the case that the Bible could not be put in languages other than Latin but whether or not the Bible was more authoritative than the Pope.

Even that was not at bottom the real problem, but the fact that once you elevate the authority of the Bible, the basis is there to liberate outlying countries from the cultural and political domination of the Pope and his Latin church.

Luther gained great indignation against all things Roman simply because of a routine visit to Rome on behalf of his order. Even had that not happened the breakdown of the “uniformitarian” principle (on which the papacy stood) would have undoubtedly happened in any case. In that case we would merely have not heard of Luther. His trip to the “stinking city of Rome” and its multitudinous tourist traps for naive Christian visitors changed him from a Christian German to a German Christian. Next, money-raising by Rome,

promising contributors things after death further troubled him.

His posting (not dramatically “nailed”) on a bulletin board of items for a perfectly routine discussion (of his so-called “95 theses”) certainly highlighted the theological features of the Reformation. But those same things he also wrote about to the current Pope with no great difference of opinion. That Pope was one of the best. He favored the “Elector Frederick” (the “senator” from Luther’s region) as the best candidate to become the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Until that issue of the choice of a new Emperor was decided, the Pope, even if disagreeing with Luther, was not eager to offend Frederick by working against Luther. In 25 years it was settled but the friendly Pope was no longer in power.

Far from being an issue over the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, Luther’s was the 14th entire Bible rendered into German. In Italy, Spain, France, and Germany hundreds of small groups were studying the Bible and believing in justification by faith. Only when it became clear that the Bible in the vernacular could be used for divisive political purposes was it necessary for both Protestants and Catholics to restrict the reading of the Bible to scholars. Both camps burned Bibles in unofficial translations.

A proper reading of the Book of Acts could have allowed for a peaceful diversity of “Insider Movements” within the various cultures over which the Latin church had extended its reach. Why, for example, should Mediterranean respect for celibacy be extended into Germanic territory?

Had the Reformation been mainly a matter of doctrinal reformation, the Lutheran “revolt” would not have spread automatically to all of the territories beyond which the Roman empire had not thoroughly “romanized” the cultural substratum—as had been the case, for example, in France, Spain and Italy.

There would seem to be two exceptions to the rule that the Reformation succeeded where the Romans had not succeeded. In both Poland and Ireland, we see outlying groups who deliberately stayed “Roman” in order to distinguish themselves from peoples that had gone Protestant, and who were geographically between themselves and Rome.

Of course, the Roman domination of much of Europe for centuries created a tension leading to half-hearted loyalty to the Reformation—and considerable hesita-

tion and confusion. To this day villages in Germany side one way or another, or post the percentage breakdown of Catholic or Lutheran at the edge of the town as you drive in. However, for at least a century such differences led to innumerable armed conflicts such as endure in Northern Ireland, which goes back to the Celtic/Anglo-Saxon tension long before the Reformation.

This perspective I am giving you is missiological. It would seem to aid enormously in modern attempts to decipher the complexity of the complexion of global Christianity. The same word, Reformation, is often mentioned when a radical change of earthen vessels takes place both at home and in the so-called mission lands.

But it is uncommon to hear of the significant parallels between 1) the transmission of Biblical faith from Jewish to Greek and Latin worlds, 2) the transmission of Biblical faith from either Greek or Latin to several other worlds farther north, and 3) the transmission of Biblical faith from Western Christianity to forms of the faith that prefer not to adopt Western culture along with the treasure that always comes in earthen vessels.

There are other parallels. Islam can be seen as the transmission of Biblical faith from a Roman to a Semitic earthen vessel. Islam is, unfortunately, blighted by the simple fact, as we have seen already, that the form of faith from which Muslims drew their cues was itself a highly defective Christianity. One insightful scholar for this reason has said that Islam is victim of (flawed) Christianity. Furthermore, the Bible in its entirety was not available in Arabic.

Other parallels thus can be seen all over the mission world, that is, cases where the Bible becomes available and a considerable number of people prefer to interpret it for themselves instead of accepting the missionary’s culturally laden interpretation.

Even in American history we can perceive what H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Social Sources of Denominationalism* famously points out, that denominations are basically more often different cultural streams than they are theological disagreements.

The beginning of global missions is to be seen in the later years of this period, due to the ability to circumnavigate the globe. It is for Protestants a matter of acute embarrassment that the beginning of global missions is almost entirely a Catholic event. Ample coverage of this significant beginning is contained in the reading assignments for this lesson.

