

Humanities 3: Renaissance, Reformation and Early Modern Europe

Overview

According to Revelle College, Humanities 3 covers “the revival of classical culture and values and the reaction against medieval ideas concerning the place of human beings in the world; the Protestant Reformation and its intellectual and political consequences; and the philosophical background to the Scientific Revolution.” This is accurate as a description of the terrain to be covered, but it doesn’t say much about the content of the course. The four questions laid out below give a fuller sense of the issues I will be raising as we work our way through the readings. Note that all four deal with fundamental features of our understanding of ourselves. These issues are still very much alive for us: we understand ourselves and our relation to the 15th-17th centuries in terms of these questions. One point to keep in mind while considering these issues is that in the period we’ll be studying religion was a central fact of life. It was an integral part of the fabric of society and the basis of most people’s understanding of themselves and their place in the world. It is sometimes said that there were no genuine atheists in Europe before the 18th century. Whether or not this is true, the growth of secular culture, and secular thought, is part of the story of modernity. In Hum 3, we are on the cusp of the modern period, so that development is just beginning to take shape. Our readings will be taken from the works of ten main authors: the Florentine diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), the Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1576), the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536), the German reformer Martin Luther (1483-1564), the French essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), and four Englishmen: the playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the philosophers Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and the poet John Milton (1608-1674).

Major Themes And Issues

1. *What are we?* What is the place of human beings in the universe? The earliest myths raise human beings up out of nature and link them to the supernatural or divine. According to the Bible, we are made in the image of God and have received from God the Law, which commands us how to live. The ancient Greeks located a divine spark within human beings and described how we might become more godlike. But these suggestions raise as many questions as they answer. What is divine about us? How can we cultivate that part of us, so that we might enjoy a better life? Does it involve the soul *and* the body, reason *and* the passions? Is the proper conception of the divine that of Greek philosophy or the Bible? Can these be reconciled? Assuming they can, what makes for a properly Christian life? These are questions people struggled with throughout the Renaissance and Reformation. By the end of the 17th century a new possibility begins to emerge: that human beings do not have a special place in the cosmos but are part of a unified natural order, governed by universal laws. Now a new confrontation emerges between the traditional, Biblical understanding of humans and their fate and the understanding offered by natural science, which leaves human beings in command of nature but in danger of being cut off from the divine.

2. *Who are we?* The original “we” was that of the family and the tribe. Gradually this was extended to the “nation” (an ethnically related people) and the city-state. In both ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity, the idea develops of a single human community, embracing all peoples, regardless of ancestry or race. This leaves us with the question: do our deepest allegiances as human beings lie with our local community or with humanity as a whole? Throughout history, the former has almost always held the upper hand. Florentines prided themselves on reviving the ideal of the Athenian *polis*, or city-state. Until the Reformation, Catholicism could claim to be universal: the “one, true church” (assuming this meant *Christian* church and one ignored the schism between the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches). Yet

even among its followers Christianity drew a distinction between those who stood to receive salvation and those who did not (“many are called but few are chosen”). Moreover, from the outset, Christianity had to reconcile its existence with that of the Jews, the original “chosen” people, to whom God first appeared. Was there a place for the Jewish people in Christian Europe? Could their refusal to accept Christ as the messiah be tolerated? Many Christians of the period thought not, a judgment that had fateful consequences. The same issue faced the Europeans who journeyed to the New World. Along with plundering it for its wealth, they saw it as their mission to convert native peoples to Christianity. Are human beings one or many? If we think of ourselves as united by certain universal characteristics (e.g. reason, free will), can this be reconciled with the idea that we also may be fundamentally different from each other, in our customs, values and beliefs?

3. *What do we know?* What do we *really* know about God, nature, and ourselves as human beings—both collectively and individually? By the beginning of the 16th c. a number of factors were beginning to shake people’s confidence in their most deeply held beliefs: (1) voyages across the seas changed people’s view of the shape of the earth and the variety of its inhabitants. (2) Martin Luther initiated a fundamental challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church as an intermediary between God and human beings. By insisting people read and interpret the Bible for themselves, Luther opened the floodgates to new and conflicting claims about God and the path to salvation. (3) This crisis of certainty was turned inward by Montaigne. As the traditional order of society began to break down, the question, “who am I?”—the unique individual posing this question—acquired a new force. (4) Finally, the revised understanding of the earth’s geography was extended by Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo to the universe as a whole. A picture of nature as bodies in motion, governed by unchanging mathematical laws, replaced the traditional Aristotelian picture that had held sway for almost two millennia. Now, though, it had to be asked, what makes us certain that this new account is more truthful than that of Aristotle and Ptolemy? And (see 1. above) what special place, if any, is there in it for human beings? In addition, Montaigne and Shakespeare both pose the question of the *value* of knowledge for life. Does too much knowledge, or too strong a desire to know, undermine action and the attainment of happiness?

4. *What can we say?* Our understanding of the world, and our ability to communicate our thoughts about it, depends on language. In some traditions, language is at the very basis of reality, as God literally spoke the world into existence (“In the beginning was the Word”). How deeply is our ability to *know* tied to our ability to speak meaningfully? Does language impose limits on what we can know of the world? Are words as likely to deceive us as to instruct us? Is our inability to understand each other (whether or not we are speaking the same language) evidence of our fallen nature? A heightened sensitivity to the importance of language is observed throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. (1) The revival of ancient (especially Greek) literature places a premium on the ability to interpret strange and difficult texts. At the same time, the contrast is felt between the complex ways in which language functions in these texts and the “trivialities” to which Latin had been reduced within the university curriculum (the humanist movement). (2) The invention of the modern printing press makes books available on a mass scale at affordable prices. This stimulates the distribution of newly discovered texts, as well the progress of literacy, as a result of which for the first time common people can read the Bible for themselves. (3) If language is the medium through which we know the world, it can also impede our ability to know. Shakespeare in his plays explores the ways in which a skilled user of language can spin a web of words that says little or nothing, or conceals the true intentions of the speaker. Words give us the ability to lie and promise falsely, as much as they allow us to tell the truth (see Sonnet 138). (4) Relatedly, Bacon sees in language a kind of counterfeit currency: words are tokens that pass easily from hand to hand, though they carry no real value. People utter words, but do their words having *meaning*? Bacon also sees in language an impediment to the progress of science. Only when mathematics replaces language as the most fundamental way of representing reality, does modern science begin.