RENAISSANCE HUMANISTS AND FREE WILL: EMBRACING THE RISKS OF FREEDOM

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In the western world one speaks of freedom with exhilaration and ease, as if it was the easiest of concepts, the clearest of truths. But freedom must go beyond songs and slogans. When what was macro and nebulous becomes micro and personal, the paradox of freedom shows itself. Freedom is in fact a double edged sword which cuts away the shackles that limit people, producing joy, pride, opportunity and self worth, but also uncertainty, pain, fear, competition, and even failure. Those who truly embrace freedom, love her and fear her at the same time, for while her virtues are desirable, she might demand more vigilance or sacrifice than one can individually muster or endure.

One way of viewing the Renaissance (an overly simplistic but useful way) is to see it as a period of rebellion against the tyranny of the middle ages. The tyrants were the first estate, the theologians and clergy who dominated the Church and education and by extension ethical and intellectual life, and the second estate, the nobility who dominated the political institutions in most of Europe. The Church and the nobility were virtually synonymous, the great majority of the upper clergy having been born of the noble class. The clergy did the thinking for the feudal world. They sanctified the

warring life of the nobles by giving a religious significance to chivalry and to the feudal structure of the three social estates which God was believed to have established.

The Renaissance humanists who sought freedom from the ideas and institutions of the middle ages were mostly lay scholars, men from the third estate. The pen was their sword, and the wisdom of the ancients the source of their vision, their "songs and slogans." At the heart of the humanist movement was the higher classical view of humanity. The humanists envisioned a new age wherein life could be fuller and more complete because one would have the opportunity to become what one willed to become. For this to occur there must be personal self confidence based on the ancient view of human potential as well as political and social freedom. What the humanists imagined was as exhilarating as "perestroika" and "glasnost;" a world where status was derived from having lived up to your full potential as a human being, the result of a learned, disciplined, ethical life lived out virtuously amongst the hassles, temptations and challenges of the urban setting. Because virtuous individuals would become (through classical education, self effort and the grace of God) the best they could be, society too would benefit. Perhaps, the Florentine humanists argued, society would become strong enough in citizen "virtues" to sustain a republican system of

government that could withstand the drift toward despotism that was so clear in Italy by the 15th century.

Fighting for the privilege of exercising freedom of the will was no easy task. It took courage to challenge the status quo common sense that had been held for over a millennium. Those who argued for freedom of the will and free opportunities for becoming one's best had to argue against such intellectual Goliaths as Augustine, whose views of creation and free will had triumphed over the views of others as early as the fifth century.[1]

Augustine had tremendous influence over medieval thought. One of the things he taught the West was to fear the freedom it had once treasured. Elaine Pagels writes, "What earlier Christian apologists celebrates as God's greatest gift to humankind--free will, liberty, autonomy, self-government," Augustine characterizes as "the root of sin, betraying nothing less than contempt for God."[2] Augustine's own experience and study convinced him that human beings who attempt to follow their own will inevitably fall into disaster. We must, he argued, forego personal autonomy and learn the virtue of obedience to the Creator.

For Augustine, the story of Adam was far more than a warning not to misuse our freedom. After Adam sinned, a change for the worse occurred which affected the whole human

race. Adam's sin not only brought upon humanity universal death but also, and equally inevitably, universal sin, a perpetual willful desire to rebel against God that is too strong to overcome except through grace and obedience.[3]

Augustine's dark view of human nature had political repercussions. Because of sin, secular and religious governments with power to coerce, punish and control are necessary. Humanity was, Augustine writes, never really meant to be free. For Augustine, "our true good is free slavery," that is slavery to God in the first place and in the second to his agents, the religious and secular authorities.[4]

At the time of Augustine, there were opposing voices raised which held to the higher classical view of human freedom.[5] Nonetheless these voices grew faint. It was the Augustinian view, which not so incidentally supported the need for the authority of the emperor and the Church, that became dominant in the middle ages. Obedience became one of the three monastic virtues along with poverty and celibacy. These vows, taken once, eliminated many choices and temptations for years to come. As the Roman Empire fell apart, the otherworldly monk superseded the citizen ideal of the classical period becoming <u>the</u> model for Christian living. Monks alone were known as the "religious." Of course others too might be saved through divine grace and the sacramental Church, but even lay

people, whose divinely ordained function was to provide earthly subsistence, were urged to take little interest in this world lest they endanger the soul's salvation.

To challenge these views would require a great deal of audacity, because to proclaim that the exercise of freedom of the will could lead to good, and that our freedom should be more celebrated than feared involved a reversal of the medieval view of humankind. The classical revival challenged not only a powerful idea, but also the religious and secular authorities to whom Augustine had argued people owed obedience, for their goodness sake.

At the same time that the Augustinian view of humanity became incongruent with the view of the ancients whom the humanists admired, the social and political structures of feudal society became incongruent with the dynamic social and economic life of the Italian towns and urban centers. The humanists gave conceptual justification for challenging the constraints of the fixed social hierarchy, the privileges of the ruling elite, and the clerical intellectual system. What matters, they argued, is not so much what you know, or who your ancestors were, but what you do and how you live. For the humanists, acting was clearly superior to knowing, thus the will was clearly superior to the intellect. To be truly free people needed a social and political system that allows

them to exercise choice. But do they have what it takes to embrace freedom and all her consequences? Are individuals good enough, strong enough, moral enough to accept the challenge successfully? Renaissance humanists of the quattrocento raised these questions.

Answers came in part from the scholastics of the 13th and 14th centuries, for it was Thomas Aquinas and William Ockham who made the human will the object of scrutiny and debate. Unfortunately, historians tend to separate the scholastics from the humanists too hastily, failing to recognize how many ideas the philosopher/theologians contributed to Renaissance thought.[6] With regard to a new view of humanity and free will, one can see three concepts that emerged out of the scholastic movement. First, the affirmation of natural man as basically good and thus capable of virtue on at least some level. Aquinas' "double-ordering" of things freed secular man from the bonds of directing all thought and action toward the religious, all of oneself toward God and nothing else, as Augustine had admonished. We are "called by nature", says the Aristotelian Aquinas, to live in groups so that we may "not only live, but live the good life."[7] Ockham's ideas, adopted by Erasmus, included the notion that people could at least initiate salvation by doing their moral best. Secondly, both Aquinas and Ockham directly or indirectly turned attention

toward the natural world. They argued that ultimate knowledge of God is not found within the soul and that knowledge of things divine will always be partial for people who are part of the natural, not the supernatural realm. Since individuals are limited in what they can know about God using reason and deduction, perhaps the proper object of the reasoning human mind is the natural sphere of which people are a part. According to Petrarch, only fools "try to grasp the heavens with their hands."[8] It is better to be what one is than to try to become what one cannot be. If individuals cannot know God, or become godlike, they should strive instead for virtue and become the best of what they already are: human beings living in the natural world. These ideas played a part in the Renaissance view of humanity which emphasized the study of human nature, the practice of free will, and the formation of proper relationships to others and to God. But these are general concepts. Living these ideas becomes specific, personal, even frightening, especially when you are one of the early ones to break with tradition.

In Petrarch one sees a rebel who expresses the courage and ambivalence of a front runner. Are human beings really capable of leading a virtuous life in the world or should they retreat to the order and authority of the cloister to save themselves from themselves and the evil world of temptation

and sin? Is our free will as much a blessing as a curse? Is the world of human affairs worth the risk of involvement, attention and concern? Does worldly involvement for the sake of improvement please God, or do we risk our salvation? Such questions plagued Petrarch and the early Italian humanists. The risks involved in embracing the freedom they sought were very real to them. What they gave to the West was a renewed belief in the individual who has the free will to "have whatever he chooses, and to be whatever he wills," for individuals have no fixed function.[9]

Petrarch inherited from the medieval tradition the idea that the religious life of renunciation is safer and superior to life in the world, yet he personally rejected the cloister, much as a Pole or East German would reject a governmental system that offers security with little opportunity. Petrarch came to view life as involving more than an either/or choice between salvation and damnation, the City of God or the City of Man. When he practiced scholarly withdrawal for personal and secular reasons, he went to Vaucluse to retreat from the frantic rounds of daily living in order to rediscover his inner self, to write and reflect and prepare for fruitful worldly activity, much like a U.S. President would take a trip to Camp David.[10]

In the *Secretum* dialogue Augustine, representing the medieval monastic tradition, warns Petrarch that it is "not possible to have one foot on earth and one in heaven," and that with his manner of life he is "foolishly risking eternity."[11] In short, he should single-mindedly devote himself to God and resist the discord and dangers of worldly affairs. Petrarch's reply:

> Mortal myself, it is but mortal blessing I desire. . . It is in the true order of things that mortal men should first care for mortal things. . . Even while we speak, a crowd of important affairs, though only of the world, is waiting my attention. I now return to attend to these. . .when they are discharged, I may come back to these [eternal matters].[12]

This is a far cry from the *contemptus mundi* of the earlier middle ages. Having argued against Augustine and the medieval tradition Petrarch concludes:

> If you hold an opposite view, let each one follow his own feeling, for . . . truth is a large field and every man should have freedom to judge for himself. . . One must not be obstinately bond to old opinions.[13]

In his work the *Ascent of Mont Ventoux*, Petrarch metaphorically compares his brother, Gherardo, a Carthusian monk, to himself.[14] Both climbed to the top of the mountain, Gherardo taking the shorter, steeper, faster, slope and Petrarch the slower rambling climb. When he reached the top, his brother was already there, refreshed and meditating.

Petrarch opened St. Augustine's *Confessions* and read a passage that bids people to turn from earthly beauty to contemplation of the soul and death "least death find one in the 'valley of sin.'"[15]

The descent is an significant as the ascent in this work, for Petrarch once again ignores the medieval saint's admonition and returns to the valley below, leaving Gherardo on the summit. For Petrarch, the earth, society and government are offshoots of God's creation. They must be looked after and improved, corrected and kept free from the hands of evil men. Political involvement is necessary and good men are needed. Their activity pleases God more that the lives of those who "sit with folded hands on the shore and criticize the navigator."[16] Petrarch saw the "superior" way, but willfully rejected it. He knew and admired many monks, and often lived near or visited monasteries, enjoying the company of the religious--and their libraries. He was medieval enough to doubt his decision, but too modern to believe that life lived by a rule is the only safe way. In his *vita solitaria* he writes that it is indeed not reasonable to induce all men to lead one kind of life:[17]

> There is nothing more vital than independence of judgment: As I claim it for myself I would not deny it to others. I grant you that every man's purpose is honorable and sacred. . . All men with the grace of God may lead a good life; the infinite clemency spurs none...[18]

Many Italian humanists adopted Petrarch's idea, arguing that we must choose for ourselves what we will do with our lives, God having given people that freedom and not made all the same.

Civic humanists like Coluccio Salutati went beyond proclaiming the right of each to choose. He criticized people who chose to withdraw from the active life as cowardly. Had not they renounced their freedom out of fear that they would be unable to live it out virtuously?

Salutati argued that the tradition of the cloistered life as superior to the life of activity should be reexamined in the light of Christ Himself, for Christ was a lover of mankind who wept over Lazarus and over Jerusalem, his *patriae*.[19] The true Christian also has a love for the world and is called to active service. In Matthew XXV, Christ specifically stated what was required of Christians, and He gave people the grace to act in accordance with these requirements. About Salutati, Revilo Oliver writes, "Salutati did not become a monk because he believed it to be the duty of men of superior intelligence to remain in the world and participate in government." Oliver believes Salutati, the Chancellor of Florence, "regarded himself as intellectually and even morally superior to those who did become monks."[20] Those who chose the active life participated in God's providential plans for *transformation mundi*.

Like the Ockhamists, Salutati did not think mortal man could directly know God in this life. He could, however, cooperate with God by doing; "the act of the will ... is nobler than the act of the intellect, which can be called contemplation or vision."[21] By arguing that the will, not the mind, is the ultimate organ of our religious fulfillment, Salutati placed the active life over the contemplative life. Without denying that God might call some people to the cloister, he nevertheless argued that withdrawal could be regarded as selfish retreat; "... Holy seclusion is of advantage only to oneself... But holiness in the affairs of the world edifies many ... and furnishes an example to many and brings many along with it to the gates of heaven."[22] Contrasting his own life to that of the contemplative, he writes, "I am always busy with activity ... I act in such a way as to help the whole of human society by my example and with my works."[23] To a monastic friend, he writes, "You, as is the nature of holy rusticity, benefit only yourself."[24]

For Salutati, one simply cannot be virtuous without being free to make choices. One cannot be certain of pleasing God by choosing to withdraw from the duty of service in order to save one's soul. Petrarch and Salutati, rejected the *vita contemplativa* because it neither allowed for the full expression and pleasure of being human nor provided the

opportunity to exercise free will and attain virtue. They were rebels who sometimes vacillated in the face of tradition, but break with it they did.

Unlike the Florentine humanists who often chose to ignore or avoid theological questions, Lorenzo Valla boldly confronted religious, philosophical and scholastic leaders including Aristotle. To him, they were all wrong in associating virtue with contemplation, asceticism and intellection. Primacy, in both God and man, belongs to the will, not the intellect, for it is the will that directs all actions; knowledge is neutral.[25]

Valla wanted to extract from Christianity all alien (pagan) philosophical additions. He believed the Greek emphasis on the mind and contemplation was in contradiction to the Christian emphasis on the will. Like Ockham, he thought that God was ultimately mysterious and knowledge of divine things more unknown that known.[26] He considered any universal standard for human conduct (such as the monastic ethic) unnecessarily restrictive, shallow and rooted more in Greek philosophy and asceticism than in Christian tradition. Why would there be one way of life as most appropriate for creatures endowed with free will? There is no hierarchy of Christian virtue, he argued, with clerical and monastic virtue on a higher rung than others, only single acts by particular

individuals in specific circumstances.[27]

In his *De professione religiosorum*, Valla's attack on the monastic life is bold, passionate and scholarly. The term "religious" should not be used only by those who take vows but by all Christians, he argues. Would the martyrs who chose death be called non-religious?[28] A religious person is one who is obedient to the example of Christ and the apostles, not one who takes unnecessary vows. What is full cannot be fuller. Thus the unnecessary can be sliced away.[29] Wealth can be managed with discipline. Sexuality can bring family and pleasure, and pleasure is a gift of God.[30] People are not called to denial, but to disciplined, virtuous living.

In the following passage, Valla celebrates freedom of the will and argues that individuals <u>can</u> choose both virtue and worldliness. God may even give the greater reward to those who face the dangers of choice over and over again.

> You obey: I assume the care of others. You live poor and continent; I lead a life equal to yours. You have bound yourself for keeping this, I have not thought that servitude necessary. You do rightly by necessity, I by choice; you out of fear of God, I out of love. . . . If you had not feared that otherwise you could not please God, certainly you never would have bound yourself. . . . You demand that you be placed above other. . . . But ... consider in my case the danger of sinning more easily. . . . This makes the same act of virtue greater in me than in you.[31]

Valla's enthusiasm for the active life and for the opportunity to exercise free will rests on his confidence in eloquent oratory which he believed had the power to free people of evil opinions and to inspire them to live lives of piety. He praises monks who serve the world by preaching, thus guiding people toward virtue. Interestingly, Valla's attack on the idea that regular clergy are superior to ordinary Christians stemmed from his devotion to Paul, who also served to inspire Augustine's distrust of the will. Paul wrote against the Hebrews who claimed special sanctity for their strict adherence to Jewish law, arguing that in God there is neither Greek nor barbarian, master nor slave, male nor female (Galatians III, 28). Valla also admired Paul as a rhetorician. The true Christian humanist, Valla argued, should imitate Paul and employ his rhetorical skills to benefit Christianity by directing the human will.[32]

Erasmus accepted Valla's challenge. Like Valla he scorned the claim of monastics for superiority, believed in the power of eloquence to persuade the human will toward virtue, and extolled the simplicity of the philosophy of Christ to the laity whom he believed capable of exercising choice, and, with God's help, of living virtuously. When the Protestant reformer Martin Luther denied the role of free will in salvation, Erasmus fought back. Like the Italian humanists,

Erasmus believed that each person is free and that virtue requires choice and effort. Humanitas must be won.[33] This involves the privilege and work of freedom, and the risks as well.