

RENAISSANCE AND RELIGION: THE BIBLE IN A TIME OF RADICAL CHANGE

P.G.R. de Villiers¹

ABSTRACT

This article investigates how perspectives on religion in Renaissance thought affected their interpretation of the Bible. After a first section on the relevance of seminal characteristics and the social context of the Renaissance to this topic, three approaches to religion by Renaissance authors are outlined. In each of the discussions of these approaches, remarks about the implications of these views for the role and interpretation of the Bible are offered.

The Renaissance is regarded as a truly new phase in the history of humanity after the Middle Ages (1300-1600). To some extent it represented a deliberate renewal of society, driven by the express self-consciousness of its participants that they were participating in and working towards a new epoch in the history of humanity. The incident in which the young Lorenzo de Medici appeared at a Florentine public gathering in 1469 carrying an emblem inscribed with the motto, *Le tens reuient*, in golden letters under an image of the sun and the rainbow, is a quaint illustration of this (Buck [1969]:1). The Italian poet, Pulci, reported the event and motto² as indicating the return of an ideal time of ages past, but in such a way that it expressed a deep consciousness of the inauguration of a new age. This consciousness is also evident when, for example, Renaissance authors like Valla, Kopp and Leonice-non regarded themselves as pioneers in translating the medical and philosophic texts of Galen into Latin, claiming to introduce to their society unknown and new thoughts. As Ebels-Hoving & Ebels (1988:134) note, they represent the emerging type of the humanist physicians who were convinced that they were providing the world with something new.³

1 Prof. Pieter G. R. de Villiers, Research Fellow, Department of New Testament, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 9300.

2 In Italian as "Tornare il tempo e'l secol rinnovarsi."

3 Of course Galen had been already famous in other locations at that stage, being, together with Hippocrates, one of the most influential figures in the Byzantium and the Arabic world. For an insight of the many classical authors that were available only in manuscript form, cf. Halkin (1994:6). Weise [1969]: 280ff.) warns against forcing Renaissance thinkers in one mould. One should not too easily spell out phases and chronological developments.

For a long time the interpretation of the Renaissance was determined by historiographers and theologians whose hidden agendas obfuscated its true nature and its important contribution to the history of Western civilisation (cf. Camporini [1969]). These historiographers either imposed anachronistic thoughts on the Renaissance (like Nietzsche) or denigrated its importance in order to highlight the significance of the Reformation (unfortunately at the cost of both these two seminal movements). The result is that the contribution of the Renaissance to religious change and to the interpretation of the Bible in the modern world, is neglected. This neglect needs to be addressed.⁴ In doing so it will become clear to what extent the work of Renaissance authors overlapped with, supported or stimulated the Reformation.

The Renaissance succeeded to initiate a phase in the history of humanity that is recognised by posterity in the first instance as being radically different from medieval times. Though the Enlightenment that developed afterwards, was also once again different and new, the Renaissance paved the way for and influenced it deeply. The Renaissance also had an abiding effect on the history of Western civilisation generally. Contemporary theological activities and Biblical scholarship can be fully understood only when interpreted as part of the greater picture of post-medieval society of which the Renaissance is an integral part and the decisive starting point. This is aptly observed by Houellebecq (2001:4), who, in his recent controversial novel, makes some seminal points about societal changes after medieval times (in the context of a reference to mutations of history of humanity). Global “metaphysical” mutations happen when the majority subscribe to radical transformation of values.

Once a metaphysical mutation has arisen, it tends to move inexorably toward its logical conclusion. Heedlessly, it sweeps away economic and political systems, ethical considerations and social structures. No human agency can halt its progress — nothing, but another metaphysical mutation.

4 This article is the first of two in which the contribution of the Renaissance to Biblical scholarship is discussed. The second article will focus specifically on the interpretation of the Bible by Renaissance authors. Due to restricted space, many of the complicated issues of definitions, periods within the Renaissance, geographical differences between Renaissance authors, relationships with politics, the arts and so on, cannot be discussed or only briefly touched on. The study of the Renaissance period is a wide and sophisticated field of research. Although an attempt is made to give due cognisance to the Renaissance as a movement in its own right, it is discussed here in so far as it impacts on Biblical scholarship.

As an example he refers to medieval Christianity that was swept away by modern science. It was

a complete, comprehensive system which explained man and the universe; it was the basis for the government of peoples, the inspiration for knowledge and art, the arbiter of war as of peace and the power behind the production and distribution of wealth; none of these was sufficient to prevent its downfall.

There is little doubt that the scientific ideal of the Renaissance to which Houellebecq also refers, set in motion a process that would change Western societies incisively. It is a comprehensive process with many closely related aspects that developed over many centuries. This process explains why views on religion and the Bible in Renaissance times need to be understood in the light of later developments, whilst the later understanding is illuminated in a special way through a study of the Renaissance. The post-medieval society since the Renaissance up to the twentieth century thus forms a coherent whole that needs to be understood in terms of its constitutive parts. This is why this essay aims to provide an analysis of the Renaissance approaches to the Bible. The interpretation of religion in Renaissance thought is particularly relevant because it had such enduring influence, affecting modern Biblical and theological discourse up to the present day. An investigation therefore will help to map the identity of contemporary Biblical scholars who have as object of research a book that dominated Renaissance thought to such a large degree.

These remarks illustrate how important it will be to investigate the relationship of Renaissance authors with religion in more detail.⁵ The topic of religion returns to the agenda of Renaissance thinkers time and again. They reflected deeply about its nature, its effects on society and the individual, its sources and their status.

It is also useful, finally, to reflect on the relationship with religion because it also helps to understand the true nature of the Renaissance. In writing

5 The reason why the Renaissance was neglected in much of later historical studies is to be sought in the polemics of authors who rejected its uniqueness and defended the Reformation as the real initiator of a modern era. Cantimori ([1969]:42; 45-51) describes as examples the 1743 work of Brucker (*Historia critica philosophia*) who regarded the Renaissance as merely repetitive of ancient philosophy and especially the influential position of Hegel who described the Renaissance as mere repetition of ancient philosophy combined with a boundless individualism and naturalistic subjectivism.

about religion, Renaissance authors were defining essential new aspects of their work. Their thoughts on religion reveal more of their self-consciousness.

1. REJECTING A CORRUPT RELIGION

Essential for understanding the Renaissance is their strong rejection of society as corrupt. In promoting the new, it was distancing itself from established structures that were regarded as degenerate. This corruption was inextricably if not almost primarily linked with the dominant religious structures of that time. The degeneration of Christianity in Europe is a major theme in Renaissance thought, best known through Erasmus' *Encomium Moriae*, published in 1511. In his *Enarratio in Psalmum XXVIII* in which he discusses the Turkish threat, Erasmus outlines how recalcitrant and corrupt Christianity has become. In his discussion of societal ills like wars, robberies, internal conflicts, factions, party-strife, epidemics, famine, diseases like syphilis and irreconcilable divisions between Christians, the moral condition of Christianity is singled out as a greater threat than the Turks.⁶ Erasmus' criticism focuses on the secular spirit in the church, the political games of clergy, their greediness, the superficial devotions, the vulgar preaching and the abandonment of the church's missionary ideals.

Religion was, therefore, one of the most important concerns of Renaissance authors, even if it was primarily only in polemical terms.

2. RENEWAL OF RELIGION

The renewal brought about by the Renaissance had at least two sides to it. It was a new movement in so far as new objects of research and new sources of reflection were appropriated. Having rediscovered antiquity as a valuable source of an ideal value system, it designed a program of learning that would develop certain constructive values taken from these sources. This happened from the very beginning of the Renaissance era. Buck (1969:3ff.) discusses some early Italian authors whose work reflects the study of ancient sources and their values. The list is impressive. It included, amongst others, such names as that of Dante, Petrarca and Giotto.

It is obvious that such a quest for ancient sources would affect the religious institutions of that time in terms of their sources of authority, like the Vulgate and scholastic theologians. The church was confronted with many other, previously unknown or inaccessible texts with which the traditional

⁶ Cf. Weiler (1988:34). The list of charges against traditional religion is very long. Cf. e.g. the examples mentioned in Halkin (1994:107).

sources now had to compete. It was not only a matter of the Latin Vulgate being superseded by the Hebrew and Greek originals. The ancient sources generated discourses that questioned and often stood in radical opposition to existing canons of tradition. Instead of Gratian, Lombard, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, the giants of scholastic theology, for example, the works of the Church Fathers and philosophers like Plato became required reading (Halkin 1994:21).⁷ Religion and the church could not remain unaltered once such works were used as sources of information and became objects of careful study.

The art of the early Italian Renaissance figures like Dante, Petrarca and Giotto, like many thereafter, simultaneously illustrates the other side of Renaissance renewal. The Renaissance, other than was alleged in later skew historiography, established a totally new discourse. It avoided being merely repetitive of earlier times.⁸ Their art is indicative of the Renaissance's aim to integrate ancient values in a new context in order to produce something decisively different from preceding times.⁹ The Renaissance was a movement that in its very essence focussed on progress through knowledge, based on the assumption that science improved the quality of life. It prided itself in listing simple, material things and events as examples that the new age has been advancing to higher levels. The discovery of, for example, printing, ammunition, compasses and even the new world were used to illustrate the superiority of their times over antiquity.

This progress and process of renewal inevitably had to affect the understanding of religion. It was not enough to criticise traditional religion. If society were to move forward, religion would be one of the prime targets of the process or renewal.

7 Erasmus described a situation in which the works of the Church Fathers were regarded as obsolete and out of date. They were completely neglected (Halkin 1994:268).

8 Cantimori ([1969]:41) provides extensive illustrations. Seminal is his observation that ancient sources were not regarded as gentile, preceding the Christian era, but as having been asleep during times of darkness. They are reborn in the new age that is dawning in the Renaissance. His essay generally provides ample proof of how skew historiography was in portraying the Renaissance as a repetitive, unimaginative movement.

9 Cf. also Green (1964:33).

3. RENEWAL THROUGH PROGRESS

The *studia humanitatis*¹⁰ as program of learning, as a science, aimed at inculcating a kind of knowledge that would bring about practical moral growth in an individual.¹¹ From an early stage in the Renaissance period much was written about education and its moral nature. Weise ([1969]:293), quoting Piccolomini's description of education (*omnes bene vivendi norma literarum studio continentur*) as introductory motif to his discussion on this issue, refers to several very illuminating examples that indicate how the Renaissance from its beginnings strove towards a fulfilling, dignified and improved existence as its educational ideal rather than the development and empowerment of human competence.¹² The drive towards progress was motivated by the ancient sources. They played a vital role in motivating the individual to become humane and moral through learning.

This implied that education changed individuals into human beings who could contribute positively to society and civilisation. The Renaissance was therefore not about exclusively individualist progress. The creative work of the Renaissance reflects the ideal of establishing a society that would change that which preceded it. In this respect the Renaissance transcended being a mere individualism. Garin ([1969]:246-7), for example, mentions Bruni together with other well-known Florentine historiographers like Machiavelli and Guicciardini who, from their practical political experiences discovered certain principles that empowered them to handle political events in their own times. Their education of ancient sources helped them distil insights that could be helpful for their political engagement in the present.¹³ This explains why an influential figure like the Dutch author Grotius, regarded the place and function of the sciences

exclusively from the point of view of their application to and use for the practice of individual and social life (Posthumus Meyjes 1988:34-35).

10 The term was first used by Cicero (*studia humanitatis et litterarum*). Cf. Weise ([1969]:291) for a discussion.

11 Even the practicalities of the *studia humanitatis* are worked out carefully and — practically! Erasmus writes a long letter to Christian Northoff about such matters as the choice of a teacher, how to learn from a teacher (like from a father, attentively), the necessity of recreation, the planning of a day with detail about times of study, eating and sleeping (Halkin 1994:22-23).

12 Once again the accusation of arrogant individualism and godless arrogance was made in the historiography of heavily biased interpreters of the Renaissance.

13 This also contributed to the origins of modern historical studies.

In other words, religious renewal in Renaissance times could not take place on the fringes of society or affect only the isolated individual. It targeted religion on all levels and certainly also on the institutional level as well. In a time that the church had extraordinary influence, generally as well as specifically in terms of the interpretation of the Bible, Renaissance authors targeted it consciously and strongly with its criticism, generally without rejecting the legitimacy of the institution.¹⁴ What happened effectively was that already in the Renaissance the criticism of the church as institution and the education of the individual set the dynamics in place for the growing force of deconfessionalisation that came so fully to the fore later on in the Enlightenment. The interaction between the individual and the societal or institutional in Renaissance thought stimulated a process in which the authority of the church was diminished, deconfessionalising society, whilst the active role of the individual or the laity in the process of creating meaning was increased.

Although some may argue that the seeds of secularisation were sown in this way, it must be remembered that the educational ideal in its moral focus generally speaking prevented an absolutising of human competence. Especially where the classics remained influential, the anthropological conception of Renaissance authors that was at work in their educational ideals did not necessarily stand in contradiction with religious beliefs.

4. THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE RENAISSANCE

The unique features of the Renaissance's perspective on religion and their dissemination over many countries are better understood by noting its social context. The beginnings of the Renaissance are to be sought in Italy (cf. Green 1964:29ff.). Italy provided the ideal conditions for such a new movement. It was a location with a rich historical tradition where the classics lay, so to speak, ready to be rediscovered. In 1416, for example, Bracciolini, an assiduous collector of manuscripts, discovered the famous *Institutio Oratorio* of Quintilian in a monastery. Later on this work was to supply Renaissance authors with leading educational ideas (Green 1964:36). Such discoveries, also of many religious manuscripts, in many monasteries and libraries in

14 The essay of Cantimori [1969] illustrates how Renaissance authors of different ecclesiastical persuasions (Protestant or Catholic) reiterated and defended the church as institution. Naturally there were others who had no interest in the church at all.

Italy, as well as their subsequent editing and publishing by Italian scholars, characterised Renaissance activities and stimulated Renaissance thought.

Italy was a place where significant scientific work was being conducted, as Galileo proves.¹⁵ Positive cultural and prosperous economic conditions stimulated an intellectual activity that was quite different from what was done in previous times and that was ideal for further work on the classical manuscripts. Intellectual activity was stimulated by the arrival of Greek scholars who fled Constantinople because of the Turkish threat.¹⁶ During this time Italian and Byzantine politicians and intellectuals, united because of the Turkish threat, often worked together. Italians studied in Constantinople, later on bringing back to Italy important Greek manuscripts to protect them from the Turkish threat. Strong support by wealthy patrons like the famous De Medici family in Florence enabled intellectuals and artists to pursue their scientific and creative work on the manuscripts. This engagement stimulated the literature, arts, music and other forms of creative engagement in a decisive manner. Among these activities the study of the original manuscripts of the Bible would prove to be most remarkable.

Italy was also the seat of the powerful Roman Catholic Church. The reputation of corrupt popes and clergy was widely known. It is therefore to be expected that the dynamics set loose by the *studia humanitatis* with its strong backlash against corrupt forms of religion, would create strong tensions in the country where its seat of power was located.

The origins, but also the spread of Renaissance ideas from Italy to other parts of the world, cannot be understood without reference to the communication process in that time. The interchange between Italy and Byzantine Constantinople proves this. But there were other forms of exchange. Except for the travels in countries, the meetings and correspondence between repre-

15 Many other examples of scientific discoveries can be mentioned. Porter (2000: 112) e.g. writes:

Heliocentric astronomy decentred the earth, reducing it to a tiny, minor planet nowhere in particular in that dauntingly infinite universe newly glimpsed through the telescope, whose immense spaces frightened not only Pascal. And this 'new astronomy' was complemented by a new 'mechanical philosophy', which stripped Nature of its purposive vitality, reducing it to a machine made up of material particles governed by universal laws, whose motions could be given mathematical expression. If daunting and dangerous, science was also full of promise.

16 Cf. Buck (1969:12). On the history of the Turkish invasion and the response of Erasmus to it, cf. Weiler (1988).

sentative figures and the printing of books greatly advanced the spreading and interchange of knowledge. Ideas were made available more easily and on a larger scale than ever before.¹⁷ The printing of the Bible in Renaissance times would stimulate radical reforms in interpreting it and in evaluating religious traditions based on it. Social conditions made it possible for ideas to be disseminated quickly. Information about events in Italy soon spread to other parts of the Western world, taking Renaissance ideas with it.

5. RENAISSANCE VIEWS ON RELIGION AND THE BIBLE

The Renaissance, as was observed earlier on, protested against a degenerate religion. The protest was driven by human values found in ancient sources. The Bible was also an important source, but ultimately only one of many others from which moral values were taken. This affected the place and role of the Bible in society, in religion and in hermeneutics. The way in which Renaissance authors approached religion is therefore of great importance to understand how they read the Bible.

Before the relationship between the Renaissance and religion is investigated in more detail, a general observation must be made. Although the Renaissance is characterised by its common criticism of traditional forms of Christianity, including the church as institution, this did not always imply a simple rejection of religion or of Christianity. Generally speaking, the relationship of Renaissance authors with religion was more varied and complex than that. Religion was rejected by some, retained in a purified form by others or replaced by a religious system that could be more properly described as a form of philosophy.

5.1 Reaction against traditional religion

Despite differences on many issues, Renaissance thinkers were practically unanimous in their rejection of traditional religion and theology.¹⁸ Major points of critique were the scholastic nature of traditional religion, the spe-

17 Weiler (1988:31) notes how news of the Turkish threat was spread through Europe through journals, books and pamphlets in Latin and the vernacular languages.

18 Porter (2000:49). Garin ([1969]:247-8) notes how the Italian Renaissance authors like Guicciardini, Machiavelli and Bruni rejected traditional religion, though they all had different understandings of, for example, what history was.

culative language and contents of scholasticism and the petty, quarrelsome logic of scholastic debates.¹⁹

With the rejection of scholasticism, the Renaissance expressed a basic conviction that the spirit of true religion had been lost. Religion had lost its healing and restorative power, giving way to an oppressive intellectualism. It is ironical that a movement that focused on erudition and knowledge could reject the traditional attempts at reconstructing knowledge. Several aspects of this rejection need closer attention.

5.1.1 Scholastic theology and language

Medieval theology is known for its rigid, sometimes outright ridiculous scholastic debates. To what level the scholastic theology could sink, is illustrated by an example given by Green (1964:21), who refers to the ridiculous discussion about the possible fate of the fish in the Lake of Geneva were they excommunicated by the bishop. In *Praise of folly*, Erasmus mentioned debates about the creation and design of the world, about the channels through which the stain of sin filtered down to posterity and about how long Christ was formed in the womb of the Virgin, commenting:

These subtle refinements of subtleties are made still more subtle by all the different lines of scholastic argument, so that you'd extricate yourself faster from a labyrinth than from the tortuous obscurities of realists, nominalists, Thomists, Albertists, Ockhamists, and Scotists — and I've not mentioned all the sects, only the main ones (cf. Halkin 1994:79).

Interestingly enough, and in line with Renaissance sensitivity for language, criticism also focused on the use of scholastic Latin. The method of manipulating the Latin texts of the Vulgate was singled out as an important source of concern (cf. further below). The Italian author Vasari (1511-1574), for example, stressed the negative consequences of scholastic style and language, explicitly pleading for the return to ancient style (Vanderjagt 2000:214).

Several arguments were raised against speculative language and theology. Some of these were obvious. Scholastic language, it was argued, offered infinite possibilities to introduce *ridiculous teachings*. It was further pointed out how *divisive* speculative theology could work, producing many groups that were constantly fighting each other. Ximénez in Spain sponsored the

19 Halkin (1994:21) describes Erasmus' disdain of scholasticism because of "its arid rationalism, its rigid systematisation, its authoritarian moralism, its sterile logic and its pretentious verbiage."

famous Polyglot Bible partially as a protest against such religious fragmentation and as an attempt to unite the many different religions and cultural groups in Spain (Bentley 1983:74).

Speculative language, teachings and practices also had negative *religious* consequences. It degraded piety, engulfing it in vanity and pretentiousness. During the rule of the De Medici family in Florence, Savonarola rejected such vain forms of Christianity, arguing that it replaced authentic, simple asceticism (Vanderjagt 2000:218). Erasmus noted that monks, with their inauthentic and externalised ritualism, were universally loathed because of their vain piety, braying “like donkeys in church, repeating by rote the psalms they haven’t understood,” thinking “they are charming the ears of their heavenly audience with infinite delight” (Halkin 1994:80).

Significant are the negative *anthropological* consequences that were pointed out. In essence the religious practices born from speculative theologies were perceived as degrading human beings because they promoted externalism and formalism. Institution and priests that took upon them the role of intermediaries and the observances of rituals and sacraments were seen as promoting externalism and formalism. This degraded the believer to a passive and receptive role. The dignity of a person was wrongly seen as deriving from the obedience to external authority and from the observation of rituals, thereby obfuscating moral choices and responsibility.²⁰

This criticism reflects a key feature of Renaissance thought according to which education focused on the development of human competence. Studying antiquity, discovering authentic morality, opting for a moral lifestyle, are key issues that point to the individual as an active agent. The *studia humanitatis* enabled a person to creatively and actively develop a moral lifestyle in practice. The potential and competence of the individual was in the centre of this anthropological concept.

The criticism of scholasticism therefore reflects the high premium placed by Renaissance authors on the value of believers as human beings with inherent dignity. This is underlined by the criticism of inquisition practices. Renaissance authors were not merely concerned about ludicrous doctrine and its harmful consequences. Much more was at stake. It was a matter of the value of human life itself. Erasmus reports in his *Praise of folly* 27 a theological debate during which the question was asked why heretics are burned at the stake rather than refuted in argument:

20 Cf. Vanderjagt (2000:220):

(H)et is niet voldoende dat de mens als mens wordt geboren of dat hij door het doopsel zijn in het paradijs verlorenen waardigheid herkrijgt.

A grim old man, whose arrogance made it clear he was a theologian, answered in some irritation that the apostle Paul had laid down this rule, saying, 'A man who is a heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject'.

The theologian then interprets the Latin verb for reject (*devita*) as meaning *de vita* (lit. from life), that is, a heretic should be removed from life. Erasmus notes that whilst some laughed, there were plenty of others who found the fabrication sound theology.²¹ Scholasticism, Erasmus writes by implications, ultimately destroyed human lives. This happens when an institution and its beliefs and practices function at the cost of human lives (cf. further below). In reaction to this, demands were raised for religion to respect the dignity of human beings and the value of human life.

5.1.2 Criticism of traditional religion and the interpretation of the Bible

The effects of the criticism of traditional religion *on the interpretation of the Bible* were manifold. The obvious consequences included the rejection of external forms of authority. The understanding of the Bible was no longer to be accepted on the basis of the directive interpretation of someone in a clerical or ecclesiastical position. A particular interpretation could not be enforced under the threat of punishment.

This consequence is closely linked with another quite interesting one. The ancient sources initially had authoritative status because of their moral edification. They became objects of study primarily because of their ethical nature. Within the framework of the critique of traditional religion, there was a subtle, but far-reaching shift in this position. A teaching came to be considered as authoritative because it was contained in the Hebrew or Greek Bible. Practices now began to be questioned when they lacked *grounding in Biblical sources*. It thus became not only a matter of rejecting external directions about the Bible or accepting an interpretation because of its moral nature, but in many cases it was a matter of legitimising an interpretation because it could be based on Biblical pronouncements. Increasingly the literal sense of the Bible gained in normative status. The Bible in its verbal form thus began to function as an exclusive norm against which to measure unacceptable ecclesiastical pronouncements and scholastic teachings. As a result the allegorical readings of medieval times disappeared from the scene. Valla's highly controversial rejection of the sacra-

21 Cf. the discussion in Halkin (1994:80).

ment of penance, for example, supported at a later stage by Erasmus,²² was based on the argument that the Latin word *poenitentia* is a wrong translation of the Greek original and cannot be used as basis for the sacrament of penance that reflects, as scholastic theologians argued, an intricate process of contrition, confession and satisfaction (Bentley 1983:64; 169; 186). The sacrament of penance therefore lacked Biblical authority because it could not be covered by literal Biblical pronouncements.

The appeal to the literal meaning of the text cannot be interpreted mechanically at all. Erasmus' discussion of the grim theologian that legitimises the killing of heretics on Biblical grounds reveals an essential characteristic of Renaissance thought. By attacking the theologian's scholastic understanding of Paul's instruction to reject heretics as licence to kill, Erasmus was doing much more than merely elevating the literal text of the Bible as norm. Erasmus' questioning of the nature of the authority of the church as persecutor of heretics opens the way for *enlightened thought* to replace instituted violence. Erasmus' phrasing of the question why heretics are burned at the stake rather than refuted in argument needs to be noted as opening the way for one of the most fundamental insights of the Renaissance. What happened here reflects what Mannheim noted as the decisive fact of Renaissance times, namely that the grip of the church on interpretation was broken and replaced by a free intelligentsia.²³

In an era characterised by scientific research and in which scientific knowledge became the highest ideal of intellectual activity, the individual had to be convinced of the rational, inherent quality of an interpretation of the Bible. Consequently rules of interpretation were drawn up to ensure the rationality of an interpretation. The Spanish scholar Nebrija (1441-1522) determined some "rules of criticism" for the interpretation of the Bible and tested them on difficult passages in Scripture (Bentley 1983:81-2).

How dramatic this rational reading and the intensification of Biblical authority are, is proven by the remarks of Erasmus in the debate on the burning of heretics. When Erasmus rejects scholastic thought at the heart of the inquisition in this text, he strikes at the heart of one of the most dangerous and violent institutions of his time. The popularity of Erasmus' works, especially his *Praise of folly*, can easily obscure how daring this was. How much he was sticking out his neck is clear, for example, when he is accused by his opponents of blasphemy and impiety in insulting

22 Erasmus held Valla in high esteem, regarding him as the restorer of literature (Halkin 1994:6).

23 Porter (2000:479).

popes, monks, mendicants, priests and doctors; scorning Church ceremonies, sacraments, and doctrines; and arguing against the veneration of relics, the making of pilgrimages, and the waging of war (Bentley 1983:209).

Interpreters using Biblical texts in this daring manner were developing a particular form of rational interpretation. In attacking the institution of the Inquisition, the critics were touching a sore spot of irrationality. One of the most fundamental characteristics of a rational reading is that it is never *violent*. It cannot be enforced. It can only convince. Implicitly then in this criticism, institutional violence began to be unmasked as the most serious threat to humanity and progress.²⁴

Erasmus, representing a basic thrust in Renaissance thought, thus rejects the atomising of a societal structure from a humane moral framework. He criticises the fact that an institution is made absolute at the cost of humanity in whose service it is supposed to be. This happens when it is allowed to lord over others and when it violently regulates the thoughts of others. Where it loses its persuading and moral character, arrogance abounds and degeneration sets in. That is why he spells out the arrogant character of traditional ecclesiastical activities so mercilessly in the above quoted description of the theologian. The theologian is portrayed as a grim, irritated, intimidating, shouting and thundering authoritarian figure sweeping all opposition out of the way. The function of this section is clear. A violent attitude of almost boundless hubris, dehumanising and immoral in its consequences is under attack. Scholastic theology, manipulative in its interpretation of the Bible, accordingly needs to be replaced by a rational, sober interpretation of the Bible, debating rather than determining issues.

On a still deeper level this implies that interpretation is linked to *humility* and *benevolence*. Halkin (1994:80) observed how the description of the grim theologian reminded him of Thomas À Kempis' call for humility when it comes to interpretation of the Bible. What he intuitively felt about this, was worked out carefully in the fascinating article of Weise about the *studia humanitatis* ([1969]:306ff.). Weise notes how many Renaissance authors, already from earliest times, link the notion of humanism with such seminal words like benevolence, suavity, friendliness, temperance, civility, discreteness, reverence and *gravitas*. All these words, taken from many different works of Renaissance authors, characterise the *studia humanitatis* deci-

²⁴ The list of Renaissance authors, who were socially ostracised and physically eliminated or threatened with elimination, is long. On the Inquisition as one of the perpetrators of violence, cf. the fair evaluation in Green (1964:191).

sively as a character formation, as education in “Güte, Wohlwollen, Freundlichkeit und mässiger Zurückhaltung” (Weise [1969]:313). Such benevolence and humility is not in the first instance an emotional condition or attitude, but it has to do with a spirit of investigation, tolerance and with a desire for truth.

Erasmus’ stinging satire focuses on scholastic debates according to which

it is a lesser crime to butcher a thousand men than to cobble a poor man’s shoe on a single occasion on the Lord’s day and better to let the whole world perish down to the last crumb and stitch, as they say, than to tell a single tiny insignificant lie (Halkin 1964:80).

In outlining an investigative attitude in the reading of the Bible and in requiring a responsible interpretation, Erasmus shifts important boundaries: the right of the individual to interpret, the limits of ecclesiastical authority, the necessity of rationality in debate are key issues. It is sometimes disheartening to read Erasmus and to reflect on how little of what he was asking so many centuries ago has been achieved even in the twenty-first century.

A comparison of Renaissance thought on this issue with the Enlightenment is helpful. Some Renaissance authors are close to the Enlightenment when they accept that the light within, stimulated by the reading of ancient sources, internalises Biblical teachings and brings people to live a moral life. At the same time the difference between the Renaissance and later times must not be underestimated. Human reason does not replace or determine the authority of the Bible as in so many instances in the time of the Enlightenment. The rational has not yet become the yardstick for what was acceptable in Biblical teaching. The Renaissance is mostly still at that stage where the Bible itself is the yardstick, but then read rationally.

Early on in the Enlightenment era, Bayle noted in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* how the Renaissance rejected medieval religion through its humanistic rationalism (cf. Buck [1969]:12). At the same time, though, the Renaissance introduced the era in which Christianity was progressively under threat because of unbelief. What the Renaissance began in lighting the fire of reason came to fruition in the Enlightenment (Buck 1969:13) and in the secularisation of later Western culture, once the restrictions laid on reason by them fell away. Weise ([1969]:295) provides illuminating material in this regard. He shows how Renaissance authors were strongly influenced by the moral character of reason in the classics.

In der Beherrschung und Dämpfung der Leidenschaften und der Ausdrucksbekundung, in der Betonung von Mass und Norm und in einer von der Vernunft bestimmten geistigen Haltung wird man

einen der hauptsächlichen Wesenszüge des Klassischen als Prinzip der künstlerischen Gestaltung wie der sich in ihr offenbarenden Lebensbestimmung erblicken dürfen.²⁵

A rational outlook had to do with benevolence and with improving the quality of life, as the work of Renaissance authors like Poggio, Barbaro, Gaurino and Alberti proves. This included a moral lifestyle, respect for ancient sources (including the Bible) and a moderation between the extremes of individualism and naturalism (Weise [1969]:297). This changed when reason became the supreme good in itself during the Enlightenment.

A final consequence of the attack on traditional religion must be pointed out. It has been mentioned in the previous section, but deserves some more attention. It relates to a basic religious matter. The reading of the Bible was, for example, in the case of Erasmus, driven by the desire to promote the right kind of piety. Erasmus, writes Halkin (1994:80), was close to Thomas À Kempis who observed that a humble peasant who serves God is certainly happier than a proud philosopher who, neglecting his salvation, observes the movement of the stars. This implies that the interpretation of the Bible needs to advance the service of God. Serving God is not a moralistic concept, although it certainly inspires a moral lifestyle. It is also not about religious practices that someone like Erasmus regarded as superstitious in nature because it was grounded in fear, the enemy of reason. Service of God, that is, piety, had to do with intense love. But intense love is not selfish or fearful. It is directed towards an object. Infinity, according to Erasmus in the *Praise of folly*, will be when the whole man will be outside himself, and happy for no reason except that he is so outside himself, enjoying God as the supreme good which draws everything to itself.

Thus the *Folly* concludes, satire transforming itself until it becomes raised to mystery. The folly of the Cross is the purest and highest of follies; it reckons neither prayers nor merits, neither sacrifices nor tests, it is enough to love! The Christianity exalted in this book is a mystical Christianity, far removed from the moralism to which some have wanted to reduce Erasmus' religion (Halkin 1994:85).

25 Noteworthy is the following remark:

Der Primat der Vernunft über die Leidenschaften, die der *ratio* zuerkannten Aufgabe einer Regelung der 'rebellantis motus animi' und der Bewahrung eines 'bene compositus animus' werden in diesem Sinne immer wieder, von Petrarca an und in Übereinstimmung mit der Weisheit der Alten, als eine Hauptforderung der Ethik in den Schriften und Briefen der Humanisten hervorgeheben (*ibid.*; Primary italics).

In the history of Biblical Studies as a discipline there is a divide between scholars who approach the Bible as a purely historical book and those that contend that such an approach is impossible, since it overlooks the spiritual nature of the Bible. They argue that the Bible can only be read as a book that promotes spirituality. Every other interpretation is doomed to fail or will decode only secondary aspects of Biblical texts. The way in which the Renaissance authors understood religion and the Bible in opposition to traditional scholastic theology provides helpful insights in this debate. Too often they are regarded as mere philologists who approached the Bible as historical books that should be read historically. It is clear from the above remarks that such an interpretation of the Renaissance is only partially correct.

An abiding influence of the Renaissance is to be found in its challenge to existing ecclesiastical structures and their ideological baggage. One should not see this as a destructive matter since it seems to have been undertaken mostly to reform the church, as was remarked earlier on.²⁶ It was only in some Renaissance groups and times, and later in the Enlightenment that a more radical view and a stronger break with the church developed. Scholastic philosophy also came under attack in the Enlightenment, like in the Renaissance. In England,

(t)hinkers like Locke abhorred *l'esprit de système* and swept aside the old scholastic cobwebs; the most ingenious way of becoming foolish was to be a system-monger, quipped Shaftesbury, who made ridicule the test of truth (Porter 2000:11).

But much more was to happen in the seventeenth century Enlightenment when the “cosy commonplaces” of the Bible and Greek philosophy were challenged by truly radical developments. Sciences like astronomy, cosmology, physics began offering empirical discoveries that fostered in a new spirit which went even further with its questioning of authorities, the Bible included (Porter 2000:52). Other than in the Renaissance, the authority of the church in *both* medieval and ancient times was rejected. This happened when

many of Europe's greatest minds ... concluded that, in the search for truth, neither implicit faith in the Bible nor automatic reliance on the Ancients would any longer suffice (Porter 2000:52).

With the age of Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza,²⁷ Bacon and Locke an Enlightenment agenda was developed that Porter describes as

²⁶ On this, cf. the discussion of Porter (2000:110-111).

²⁷ The significance of Spinoza for the Enlightenment and for the study of the Bible is being re-evaluated. Cf. further below.

the assault on bibliolatry; the iconoclastic rejection of tradition, speculation and *a priori* systems;²⁸ the grounding of inquiry in observation; and experiment and the conviction that science must serve mankind (2000:57).

The similarities and dissimilarities with the Renaissance are obvious.

5.2 Replacing one religion or theology with another

Certain Renaissance figures that consciously experienced and described their own times as new because of the focus on human pursuit of knowledge and endless new insights, moved beyond a mere rejection of traditional religion. Though they criticised traditional religion more extensively than others who remained Christians, they did not always break completely with religion.

These authors reconstructed a metaphysical discourse that functioned as a kind of religion. Seminal to the thoughts of Machiavelli and Bruni were their metaphysical observations that had a religious nature. Though stressing human competence and the ability to create new things, Machiavelli seemed to accept that human endeavour produces no lasting progress. The world, almost in a deterministic manner, exists in a state of continuous flux in which good and bad co-exist eternally (Garin [1969]:247). It therefore seems to be a product of stronger forces of a metaphysical nature.

More is to be learnt from someone like Bruni. On the one hand he seems to be quite radical in his views of religion. He rejected religion as worship of God and godly ordinances, also stressing the ability and task of humanity to create meaning through understanding and actions. The creation of meaning has a “human” character since it relates to and flows from the inner being of the individual. Human beings are competent to act according to nature and its order. At the same time, though, humans can also transcend nature and its laws. Through their experiences and freedom they create new natures, laws and ordinances.²⁹ God is transferred from a traditional external

28 Porter (2000:xxii) notes that to someone like Hume “enlightenment was primarily a matter of emancipation from religious bigotry within the political *status quo*.”

29 Cf. Garin ([1969]:250):

Nicht die Kontemplation des Göttlichen als Objekt, nicht die ehrfürchtige Schau der Gattungen, Naturen, Ordnungen des Universums, sondern das Weiterschaffen, ein Sich-der-Gesetze-Bedienen, um die Natur zu übertreffen und ihr neue Ordnungen zu geben durch freie Erneuerung, gestaltend, erschaffend.

heaven to become part of the inner being of humanity. The true God is where humanity lives and works in a free, responsible manner on earth.

But this is only one side of the picture. In some of his writings, Bruni seemed to retain more traditional ideas when he wrote in a metaphysical sense about contemplating the divine that embraces everything.³⁰ It represented, however, in fact a theology in which the traditional theistic conception of God was given up. In his essay on the notion of history in Renaissance philosophy of Bruni and Machiavelli, Garin ([1969]:247; 253) describes this as a metaphysical reconstruction of a natural religion. Such reconstruction denied any real progress and change, positing an eternal pattern behind historical events. Natural religion was removed from the level of rational experiences and historical change is effectively eliminated.³¹ It contradicted a fundamental conviction that knowledge can reach still higher levels because of the openness of humanity for endless possibilities (Garin [1969]:249). In this it deviated from a consistent humanistic position. It moots metaphysical contents and theology in which there is ultimately no place for the human being. It reduces a human being to observing what exists, rather than someone who creates and produces. Although these thinkers then retained some form of religion, they did so at the cost of their own point of departure as humanist scholars.

Weise ([1969]:290) describes this as the motif of the heroic that was so foreign to medieval thought. A human being is allocated an almost divine status and perfection. This is then qualified and restricted in its impact by the ideal of the heroic in antiquity. The ancient heroic ideal prevents this elevated perspective to become a boundless arrogance (as is sometimes said in superficial perspectives on the Renaissance). Even in the case of Alberti, who develops the ideal of living in harmony with nature and developing the personality fully, the moral focus is never lost.

30 Garin ([1969]:251-3).

31 Garin [1969]:247) quotes Machiavelli to illustrate this point:

Da die menschliche Dinge ständig in Bewegung sind, steigen sie oder fallen sie ... Und wenn ich darüber nachdenke, wie diese Dinge vor sich gehen, glaube ich, dass die Welt immer in dem gleichen Zustand gewesen ist und dass darin immer ebenso viel Gutes wie Böses war; dass aber dieses Böse und Gute von Provinz zu Provinz verschieden ist.

Cf. also Green (1964:33) who refers to the naturalism in the art of Giotto as an illustration of Machiavelli's conviction that history "never alters much in its texture".

To appreciate Bruni and to place him in proper perspective within the Renaissance, it is helpful to consider how differently Erasmus thought about nature. It is common knowledge that Erasmus was primarily interested in philological and moral issues. It is therefore not surprising that his interest in nature was, as Ebels-Hoving & Ebels (1988:132) wrote, focussed more on human nature than on nature as the material world and its laws.

The laws of nature, the *ultimate causae*, are to Erasmus matters of divine fact, to be admired, not to be scrutinized. This becomes clear when in one of his later works, the *colloquium Epicurus* (1533), Erasmus scorns the *opifici* who try to improve upon Nature, while praising the *homo pius* who simply rejoices in the happy conviction that all Creation is there for man's sake, to be used and enjoyed, not to be attacked by doubtful questions.

For the rest, it is known that Erasmus reacted in his writings against what he regarded as neo-paganist trends in some Italian Renaissance authors. (Cf. further below.)

It is therefore clear that there are strong tensions in the way some Renaissance scholars think about religion. Despite stressing the extraordinary competence and creativity of an individual, they retain some form of divine metaphysical order that stands in tension with that competence. They nevertheless set the tone for what would follow in the Enlightenment period, when such thoughts on natural religion would be developed more fully. In the meantime it is clear the Bible has very little role to play in such constructions.

5.3 Retaining a modified version of traditional religion

Some, if not most Renaissance thinkers were decidedly Christian, even if it was in an unconventional form.³² The Italian author, Valla, a harsh critic of scholasticism, for example challenged traditional asceticism in his publication that is effectively an exposition of Epicurean values. He nevertheless

32 Vanderjagt (2000:216) observes that the humanism of the Renaissance “onderscheidde... zich ook door zijn fundamentele christelijke signatuur van het moderne humanisme.” Israel (1998:15) argues that the early forms of the Enlightenment cannot be seen as essentially Christian. He does add, however, that it is also not anti-Christian:

Het was... een vreedsame, eclectische combinatie van de klassieke filosofie en de christelijke traditie, bedoeld om de tegenstellingen en strijdigheden zo niet op te lossen dan toch te verdoezelen en zo een geestelijke en ethische harmonie tot stand te brengen.

understood these values in a Christian way. His criticism of the piety of the monks for example also did not imply a rejection of piety and of Christianity. He merely underlined that lay people could exceed monks in piety (Bentley 1983:32).

Erasmus was also known as a Renaissance thinker who wished to remain Christian. How important this was to him becomes evident when he interprets the very notion of "Renaissance" in a religious way as promoting a life with a Christian attitude or as the restoration of a nature that is grounded in good (*instauratio bene conditiae naturae*; Buck 1969:7).³³ The liberation from external and traditional forms of religion thus was accompanied by the interiorisation of faith.

In his emphasis on the value of Christian piety, Erasmus, interestingly enough was not merely reacting against traditional religion like Valla, but explicitly against certain forms of Renaissance thinking to which he was exposed during a sojourn of three years in Italy (1506-9). To him the Italian preoccupation with classical antiquity caused the degeneration of Christianity into a neo-paganism. As a reaction against it, he desired to promote a deepening of the scholar's commitment to Christ in his own writings. Erasmus promoted a Christian piety in addition to or even as purpose of the *studia humanitatis*.³⁴

Bonae litterae in Erasmus' philosophy were merely beguiling, worthless, indeed dangerous, unless infused with a thirst for Christian truth, as defined by humanists such as himself, in non-speculative, moralistic terms (Israel 1998:45).

This is just a general picture, though, since someone like Petrarca was renowned for his Christian piety. He had problems with some metaphysical motivations of classical philosophical authors like Cicero, Seneca and others. The above discussion of the alternative forms of religion illustrates that it remains a problem to designate the Renaissance as essentially Christian.

33 This was his particular understanding. For other non-religious understandings, cf. Buck (1969:12).

34 The special nature of this piety is illustrated by its deep roots in a tradition of Dutch piety that evolved in the fifteenth century in the movement known as the *Devotia Moderna* and that foreshadowed the emphases of Renaissance thinkers like Erasmus on schooling and literacy. This movement is also close to Renaissance thought in stressing the inner development of the individual away from external and conventional religion (Israel 1998:41-2). Israel notes how seminal Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* was during those times in the northern parts of the Netherlands.

This position is repeatedly developed in his writings, of which the most famous is his *Enchiridion* (1503).³⁵

Erasmus' influence on religious issues was felt far beyond the borders of his home country, as Israel points out (1998:51). Despite his criticism of some forms of Renaissance thoughts on religion in Italy, many Italian humanists appreciated him as the true author of the Reformation. His religious influence is illustrated by his reputation in Rome as the instigator of Luther.³⁶

Though he contributed strongly to the breaking up of the institutionalised hegemony of the church in the interpretation of the Bible, his influence was not only negative.³⁷ He was one of the Renaissance scholars who, remaining Christian, determined the history of the interpretation of the Bible in a decisive manner. They read the Bible in terms of the *studia humanitatis*, collecting the texts, editing them and reading them philologically. Most of all they approached the Biblical texts, like the other ancient texts they studied, as historical work. How they did this and how it influenced the history of the interpretation of the Bible is a topic for further research.³⁸ In this context, the point is that their involvement in Christianity and the church affected the way in which they understood the Bible decisively.

35 Cf. also Bentley (1983:188-200).

36 Cf. the well-known quip of Stunica, *idest aut Erasmus luterizat aut Luterius erasmizat* (either Erasmus lutherizes or Luther erasmusizes) quoted by Bentley (1983:211). The relationship between the Renaissance and the Reformation is a topic of much discussion. For a detailed and interesting analysis, cf. Cantimori (1969).

37 Many other positive trends in Christianity were traced to him. His work on the *philosophia Christi* with its humanistic nature would later on influence Zwingli's emphasis on a new religious lifestyle as the real aim of the Reformation. His focus on the salvation of the individual deeply affected the dogmatic and sacramental role of ecclesiastical institutions. Cf. Vanderjagt (2000:220). On the links between Erasmus and Zwingli, cf. Weise ([1969]:311-2).

38 Cf. footnote 4 above.

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