

## **Question: What role did Christianity play in the Renaissance?**

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### **Answer 1) Christianity hindered the Renaissance.**

**Thesis:** Medieval Christianity held a firm grasp on the minds of people of Europe and limited creativity until Renaissance ideas began to break the church's hold.

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### **Answer 2) Christianity led the Renaissance.**

**Thesis:** Religion was not something that renaissance society shunned; rather, Christianity was a driving force behind the renaissance.

The Renaissance was a rebirth of creativity that broke the European worldview free from Medieval Christianity. The dark ages, or medieval period, was a more than 1,000-year period lacking in creativity and original thought because the Roman Catholic held the intellectual world of Europeans hostage. Education was dependent on Christian ideas. Clergymen trained the educated of Europe in canon law, theology and medicine; however, medicine was dependent on a reliance on God's will. Medieval Christianity held a firm grasp on the minds of people of Europe and limited creativity until Renaissance ideas began to break the church's hold.

Between the fall of Ancient Rome in 476 AD and the birth of the Renaissance around 1500, the Catholic Church hindered original thought. Medieval education was restricted to the monasteries. The monks worked to copy and illuminate many manuscripts in order to preserve them, but these were often religious works. The classical works of poets like Homer from Ancient Greece or Ovid from Rome were not a priority and therefore became lost to Western Europe. Petrarch, the 14<sup>th</sup> century father of humanism, commented that the world was in darkness because men, including him, had been deaf to the words of Homer for so long. As Christianity spread throughout the medieval world of Western Europe there was little desire to learn of the ancient ideas, culture, and achievements of the classical past because, to the Medieval Christian, the classical worldview was tainted by paganism. While the lack of education was more a result of the lack of political unity than of Christian leaders, the small amount of education that did occur in the early medieval period was done under the direction of the papacy. Even after the rediscovery of Aristotelian ideas in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and birth of the University, it was the monks and other clergymen who taught, studied, and wore the gowns of academia. University education during the late medieval period was limited to law, medicine, and theology. Even the method of university learning was built on certain principles that the Church controlled. Scholasticism was a way of attaining knowledge by synthesizing the writings of various church fathers. Even when the scholastics began to rediscover Aristotle and other classical thinkers, they attempted to combine their teachings with that of the saints, holy fathers, and church councils. Throughout the middle ages there were men in Christendom with keen minds; however, in the words of Petrarch, they were "surrounded by darkness and dense gloom." This darkness or stifling of education was a result

of the Roman Catholic Church's insistence on only studying those Christian ideas that were deemed worthy by the Church.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century a renewed interest in the culture of the classical civilizations began to creep into the worldview of Western Europeans and challenge the control of the Church. The study of the humanities like poetry, art, literature, rhetoric, and grammar was done on a minimal basis in the late medieval universities, but it began to be taken more seriously after Greek scholars from Constantinople came to western Europe beginning around 1453. The humanists, as they came to be called, began to challenge the traditional scholars at the university. But because the church had such a hold on the university system, the humanists were made up of various individuals throughout Europe, many who studied at a university, but due to their challenging ideas were on the fringes. The humanists attempted to incorporate what they saw as a sense of betterment and creativity, which they believed had been lost to Christendom, into their own worldview. Pico Della Mirandola, for example, described a great chain of being, but stated that man could use his intellect to rise to a position above that of the angels. Pico encouraged the use of intellect and embraced the use of other cultural worldviews along with Christianity. He cited Hermes Trimegistus and Abdulla the Muslim as starting points for his discussion on man's greatness. Pico even attempted to reconcile all human ideas with Christianity. Whereas medieval education heavily relied on strict adherence to Christian principles, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century many so-called pagan sources became a basis, or at least a starting point, for intellectual study and debate.

While the Christian leaders dominated the University structure of the late middle ages, it was merchants and artists that began to revive classical education. Cosimo de Medici, the Florentine banker, built an academy that resembled the ancient Greek academy of Plato. Florence became a center for artistic expression. Under patronage of Cosimo, Donatello sculpted the first freestanding bronze statue of a nude man since ancient Rome. Donatello's image of David at the defeat of the giant Philistine Goliath not only depicted David in the nude, but also alluded to a picture of Florence in the hat worn by David. Perhaps Donatello was depicting a new age of expression, a rebirth that could only occur outside of the iron grip of the Church. Cosimo de Medici also sponsored Filippo Brunelleschi, an architect of great genius. Several powerful families in Florence sponsored Brunelleschi, but it was under the

Medici that he completed the Dome on the Cathedral of Florence in 1436. The cathedral sat unfinished for nearly 100 years until, under the direction and patronage of Cosimo de Medici, Brunelleschi studied the secrets of Roman architecture and finished the dome. Florence produced some of the greatest artists the world has ever seen. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo Buonarroti all studied art and classical culture in Florence and began an artistic revolution that symbolized newfound creativity of an age that no longer was restrained by Christianity.

~~While Church officials did contribute to the new creativity of the Renaissance, it was those individuals who embraced the secular world more than the Christian world who had the most impact.~~ Some clergymen continued to hold creative minds hostile, but were bested by those churchmen who embraced a secular rebirth. The monk Savonarola attempted to continue to stifle the creativity of Florence by preaching against the Medici patronage, especially Lorenzo ‘il Magnifico,’ and after Lorenzo’s death, by organizing a burning of all vanities. Savonarola convinced the artist Botticelli to throw his own creative works into the great fire. But while Savonarola tried to crush the creative spirit of the renaissance, others, such as the Pope himself, embraced it. Pope Alexander VI had Savonarola burned at the stake as a heretic. However, Savonarola’s heresy was not in a misguided Biblical interpretation, but rather in his criticism of Alexander VI who, like the Medici, embraced the rebirth of classical culture. He sponsored elaborate parties that expressed human emotion rather than the restrictiveness of the medieval Church. One such party came to be called the “Ballet of Chestnuts” in 1501 where many of the most beautiful prostitutes danced for the guests before sexual appetites could no longer be restrained. Successors of Alexander include Julius II and Julius’s protégé, Leo X. Leo X, the son of Lorenzo ‘il Magnifico’ de Medici, threw such banquets and papal parties that he nearly bankrupted the Church’s accounts within one year of his papacy. Julius commissioned what was, perhaps, the greatest artistic expression of the period when he commissioned the great Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with beautiful frescos. Upon Julius’s death Leo X continued Michelangelo’s patronage and even pawned the papal jewels to pay for some of his artistic endeavors. While church fathers commissioned creative works of art in the classical style, it was those clergymen who embraced the secular world that drove the renaissance forward. The ambitions and appetites of those like Alexander

VI silenced those like Savonarola who held onto the old ways, and the descendants of Cosimo de Medici, after infiltrating the Vatican in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, continued to sponsor the creative legacy of the renaissance.

The renaissance was a rebirth of creativity that came from those outside of the Christian Church. The medieval Roman Catholic Church held the minds of Europe. Humanists began to emerge with a desire to study the classical cultures. They challenged the repressive ways of the medieval worldview by stressing the need for creativity. Wealthy merchants who embraced the classical worldview became patrons of artists willing to step outside of the restraints of medieval Christian art. Finally, these new thinkers influenced the papacy itself in order to create a new world that was welcoming of creativity and original thought and rid of those who would hold hostage the minds of the people. The renaissance was a rebirth of creativity that stemmed from a desire to break free from the stranglehold that medieval Christianity had on Europe.

The renaissance was a period in which the culture of ancient Rome and Greece mixed with the Medieval Christianity and created a distinct and original worldview. While the medieval worldview was based on an idea of God-driven destiny, renaissance Europeans believed in the betterment of the world through human accomplishments. However, to attribute the newly developed worldview to a desire to break from Christianity is not an accurate picture of the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Clergymen were leaders of the renaissance movement and artistic expressions were very often Christian in nature. The Church itself embraced many renaissance ideas. Some ideas were embraced with caution, but were explored none-the-less. Religion was not something that renaissance society shunned; rather, Christianity was a driving force behind the renaissance.

The rediscovery of classical sources, such as Aristotle, created an educational boom that was directed by the Church. In 999 Sylvester II became the Pope. He was known as the mathematical pope due to his desire to reintroduce Christendom to the math and science that had been lost since the fall of Rome. Sylvester II brought an abacus from the Muslim libraries of Spain and introduced Arabic numerals to replace the less-mathematically useful Roman Numerals. Gerard of Cremona, in 1185, traveled to Toledo, Spain and began to translate Arabic sources into Latin for use by the Christian world. With church father's introducing classical sources back into the Latin world in the 10<sup>th</sup> century through the 12<sup>th</sup> century renaissance, education was able to thrive. Out of the 12<sup>th</sup> century renaissance came universities that were controlled by the Church. Bologna was the first in 1085, followed by other universities in Paris, Oxford, and elsewhere in Europe. The education that was provided by the universities was based on law, often canon or church law, theology and medicine. While education was lacking after the fall of Rome, it was church fathers, and the desire to study and understand word of God that drove the educational explosion of the 12<sup>th</sup> century that led to the renaissance.

The desire to study classical culture, which was the basis of renaissance activity, was not a desire to rid society of Christian religion but rather to gain more of an understanding of God. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Muslims, Christian scholars sought refuge in Western Europe centered on the home of the Catholic Church in Rome. They brought with them Greek manuscripts of a cultural nature. Humanists began to study the

humanities (i.e. poetry, literature, grammar, history, and rhetoric) to understand the accomplishments of ancient cultures in an endeavor to understand God's most favored creation. Pico della Mirandola wrote on the dignity of man in what has been described by historians as the manifesto of the renaissance; he explored the place of man amongst God's creation. For Pico, man was worthy of praise because man was able to use his intellect to move along the "great chain of being," while all other creations, from angels to animals, were stuck in their particular place. Pico ambitiously sought to combine all human philosophy with Christianity, but he did not shun Christianity or attempt to break free of it.

Renaissance ideas were most clearly illustrated by the artists who combined the culture of ancients with Christian ideals. Donatello's groundbreaking bronze sculpture of a nude man, the first since ancient Rome, was the biblical character of David. Depictions of the crucifixion, the virgin mother, the last supper of Christ, and the fall of man from God's favor were recurring themes in renaissance artwork. While some artists experimented with purely classical themes, such as Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, or his poetically inspired fantasy *La Primavera*, their culture was still one built on Christianity. Botticelli himself was inspired by the sermons of Savonarola in Florence and not only cast some pagan inspired artwork into the "Bonfire of vanities" but also created artwork based on the religious ideas being preached. Michelangelo, perhaps the greats of the renaissance artists, illustrates just how deeply Christianity was intertwined with and drove the renaissance artistic movement.

Michelangelo's most ambitious work in marble was a 17-foot statue of David just before David's defeat of the giant enemy of Israel, Goliath. But Michelangelo's greatest work was the frescos that he painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. Began under the direction of Pope Julius II, the ceiling of the Chapel was covered with biblical stories, including the *Expulsion from the Garden*, and *The Drunkenness of Noah*, and at the center of the frescos was the *Creation of Adam*. While it was the Holy Father himself who was the patron of this work, this endeavor was not stifled by the church; Michelangelo painted the biblical figures in the classical style with an emphasis on the human body, and Michelangelo was adamant about his own creative freedom. While Michelangelo's final fresco for Pope Paul III was eventually altered to cover the "shameful parts," The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel

illustrated the Church's willingness to embrace the classical style and its promotion of the renaissance's most talented artists.

Christianity did not create a barrier to the renaissance, but rather, it was the driving force behind the renaissance movement. Education was reborn in the Church run universities after the Pope himself in 999 brought back mathematical texts to the Christian world. The 12<sup>th</sup> century study of Aristotle along with theology and cannon law gave way to the cultural study of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The renaissance worldview was a combination of classical culture with Christianity, but the two areas of influence were not equal. Christianity remained at the heart of the renaissance worldview. The artists expressed the societal desire to emulate the classical past but not the desire to return directly to it. The renaissance movement was not led by a desire to withdraw from Christian teachings, but rather, it was the prominent position of Christianity within society that sparked, sponsored, and spread the renaissance ideas.