

Bertrand Russell

WISDOM OF THE WEST

II



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Bertrand Russell

WISDOM OF THE WEST

A Historical Survey of Western Philosophy in Its Social and
Political Setting

II

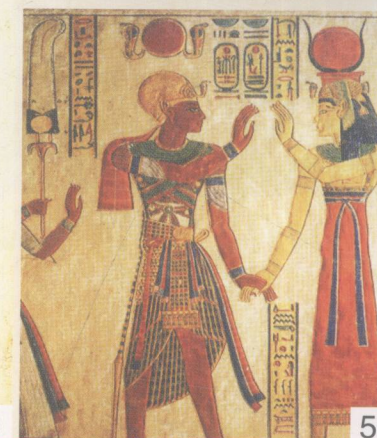
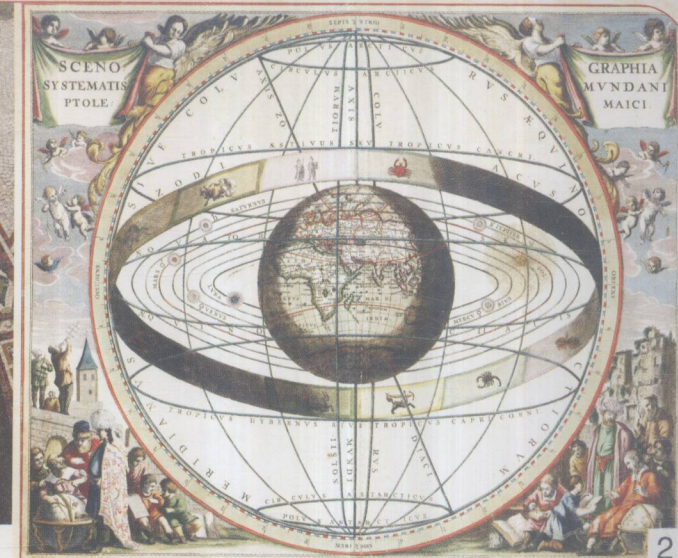
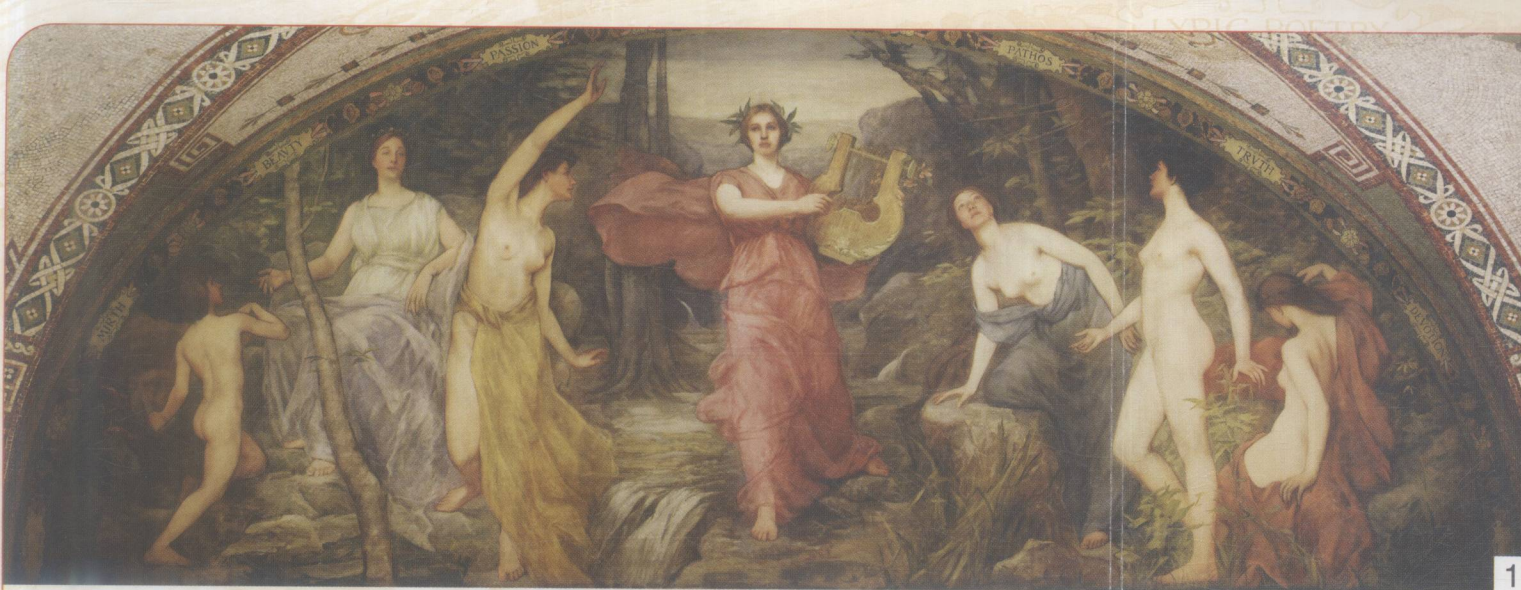
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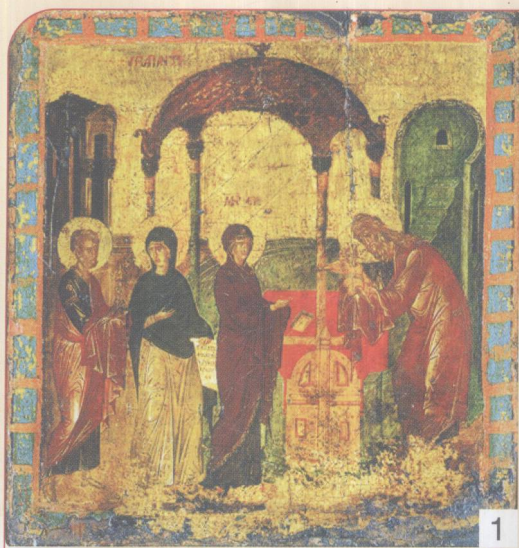
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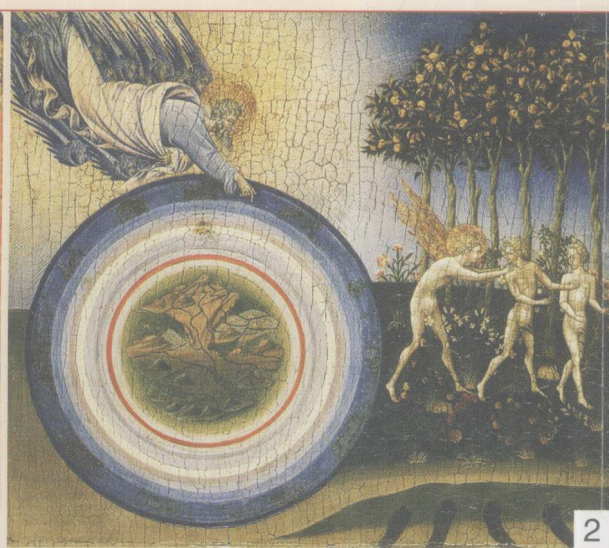
Amore Sacro e Amor Profano by Tiziano Vecelli.



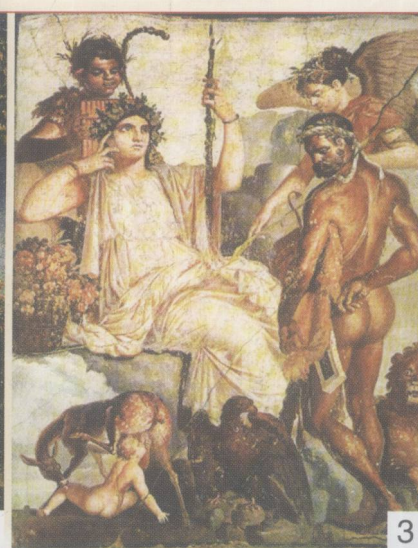
1. Henry Oliver Walker, *Lyric Poetry* (1896). Library of Congress Thomas Jefferson Building, Washington, D.C. 2. Johannes van Loon, *Scenographia systematis mundani Ptolemaici* (1660). 3. *Battle Scene*, from *Book of Maccabees I*, Saint Gall, Switzerland, second half of 9th–early 10th century. 4. Tomb painting of Nakht, the scribe of the granaries in the 18th Dynasty, over 34 centuries ago. 5. Rameses III confronting Isis, Valley of the Queens, Dynasty XX, 1190-1160 BC. 6. A 20th-century mural icon of one-legged Saint Takla Haymanot (ca.1214-1313)—ETHIOPIA'S RICH ARTISTIC LEGACY. A model of monastic devotion who spent such long hours standing on one leg in prayer that his leg broke off. He continued, standing on his remaining leg.



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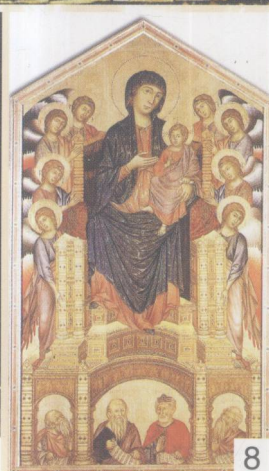
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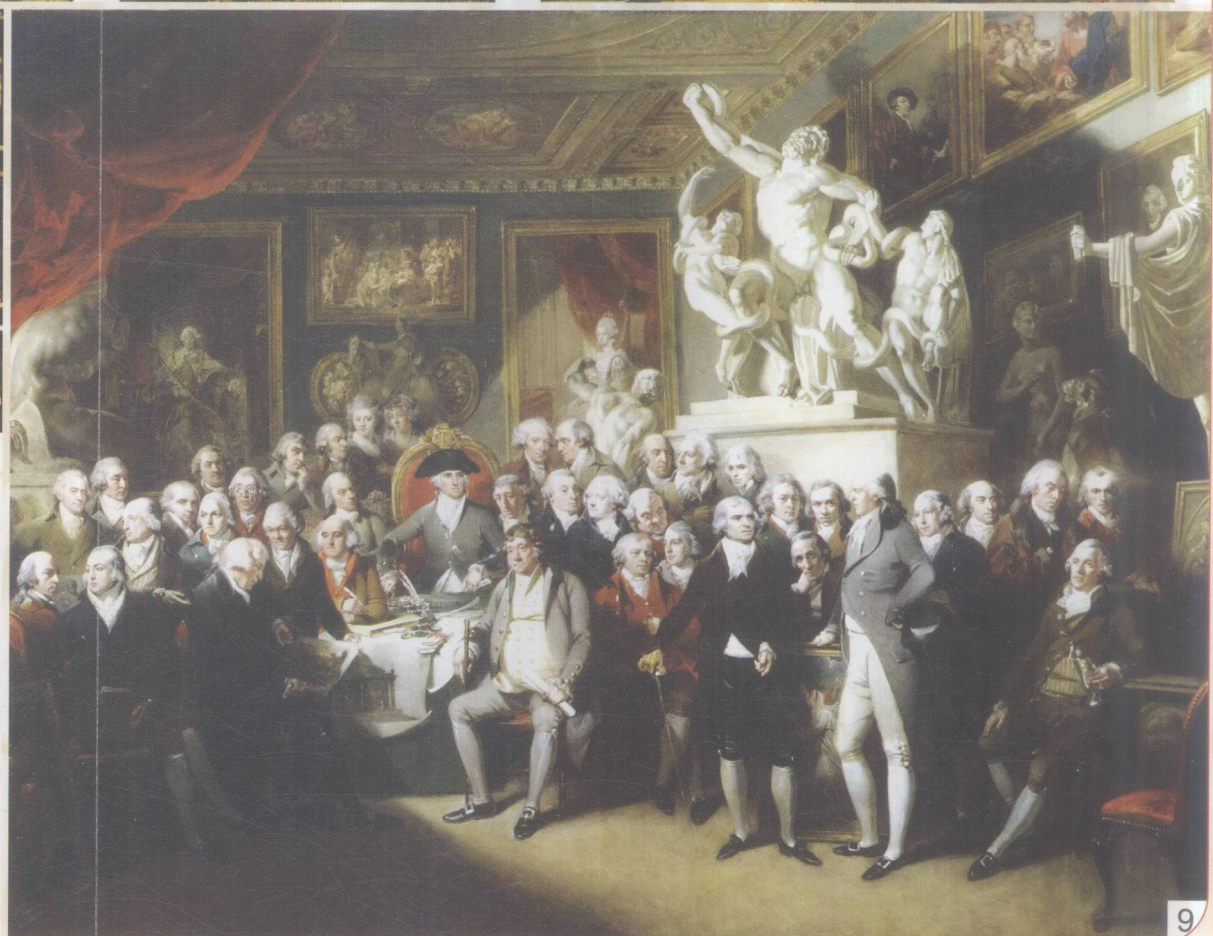
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1. Icon with the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, 1400–1500, Byzantine. 2. The Creation of the World and the Expulsion from Paradise, 1445, Giovanni di Paolo (Italian, Sienese, ca. 1400–1482), tempera on panel. 3. Hercules finds the baby Telephus, from Herculeaneum. 4. Sowing and Ploughing in the Fields. Dynasty 19, 13th century B. C.—Tomb of Sennedjem, Thebes. 5. Triumph of a King, the Standard of Ur. c.2700 B.C., Mesopotamia. Wooden panel inlaid with shell, lapis lazuli and red limestone. British Museum, London. 6. Plaque with Saint John the Evangelist, early 9th century; early Medieval, Carolingian; made in Aachen, ivory. 7. Detail, side A from a Sicilian red-figured calyx-krater (c.350 BCE–340 BCE). Ancient Greek comedy was one of three principal dramatic forms in the theatre of classical Greece (the others being tragedy and the satyr play). 8. The Madonna in Majesty (Maestà), 1285–86. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. 9. Retable en Albâtre, XV^e siècle, Grande-Bretagne. 10. The Royal Academicians in General Assembly, 1795.



La caccia di Diana by Domenico Zampieri.

~ Rise of Modern Philosophy ~

While during the 14th century the medieval outlook began to decline, there gradually emerged new forces which have forged the modern world of today. Socially, the feudal structure of medieval society becomes unstable through the rise of a powerful class of merchants who made common cause with sovereigns against unruly barons. Politically, the nobles lost some of their immunity when better weapons of offence made their customary strongholds untenable. If the crude sticks and pikes of peasants cannot breach castle walls, gunpowder will. Four great movements mark the period of transition which leads from the decline of the Middle Ages to the great forward surge of the 17th century.

There is first the Italian Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries. Whereas Dante was still steeped in medieval ways of thinking, he had provided in the vulgar tongue the instrument that made the written word accessible to the layman who had no Latin. With writers like Boccaccio and Petrarch there is a return

Venus rising from the waves, symbol of cultural revival, in popular art, too



to secular ideals. A rebirth of interest in the secular culture of the ancients is found throughout the arts and sciences, and marks a break with the clerical traditions of the Middle Ages. Whereas the medieval scene was dominated by preoccupations concerning God, the Renaissance thinkers were more interested in man. From this circumstance the new cultural movement derives the name of Humanism, the second of the great new influences. Whereas the Renaissance as a whole directly affected the general outlook on life, the humanist movement remained the province of thinkers and scholars. The Italian Renaissance was not accompanied by a durable rebirth of national unity. The country was broken up into small territories by city states and anarchy was rife. Italy fell to the Habsburg dynasties of Austria and Spain, and did not emerge as a sovereign nation until the middle of the 19th century. The Renaissance movement, however, exerted a strong influence and gradually moved north into Germany, France and the Low Countries. The great humanists of these regions emerged roughly a century after their Italian precursors.

Here, the humanist movement is contemporary with the Lutheran Reformation, the third of the major forces that changed the medieval world. That some kind of reform was due had indeed been recognised within the Church for some time. Humanist thinkers had criticised the malpractices that infested Church government, but the hold of ambitious and gold-hungry Popes was too strong. When the Reformation did break out it was severely opposed and condemned by Rome. What might otherwise have been accommodated as a new movement within the sphere of the Universal Church was thus forced into isolation, and developed into a number of National Protestant Churches. When at last the Catholic Church began to reform itself it was too late to heal the religious schism. Henceforth Western Christianity remains divided. The reformed religious owe to the humanist influence the conception of universal priesthood. Every man is in direct contact with God; Christ needs no vicars. The fourth important development arises directly from

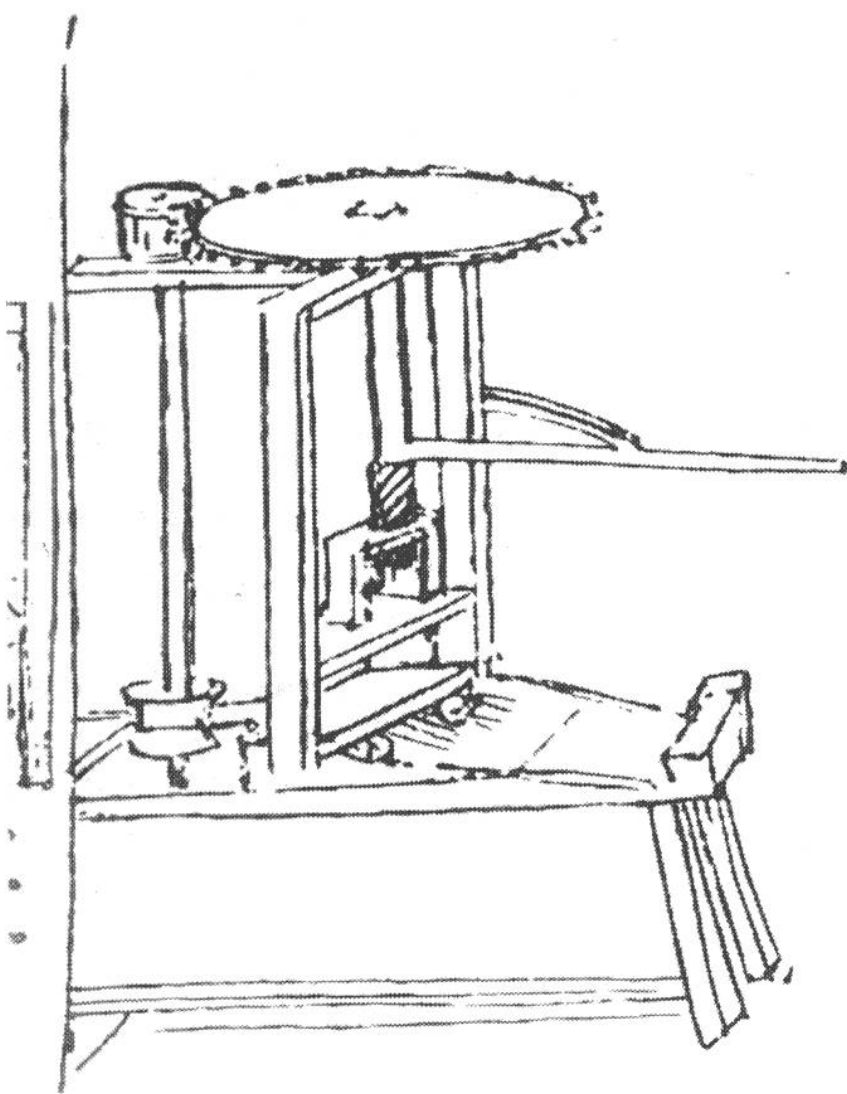


the revival of empirical studies initiated by the criticism of Ockham. During the next two centuries great advances are made in the scientific field. Of central importance was the rediscovery of the heliocentric system by Copernicus. The account of it appeared in print in 1543. From the 17th century onwards, the physical and mathematical sciences make rapid progress and by promoting great technical development secure the dominant position of the West. The scientific tradition, besides conferring material benefits, is in itself a great promoter of independent thought. Wherever Western civilization spreads, its political ideals eventually follow in the wake of its material expansion.

The outlook that is generated by the growth of scientific enquiry is

essentially once more the outlook of the Greeks. Doing science is to save appearances. The authority that these traditions acquire is utterly different from the dogmatism with which the Church in medieval times had sought to impose its dominion on men. It is true, of course, that a hierarchy which lives by a dogmatic system of beliefs may to a large extent speak with one voice on all manner of things when enquirers hold various opinions. By some it is assumed that monolithic unanimity is a sign of superiority, though why this should be so has never been explained. That it may give those who support it a feeling of strength is no doubt the case, but this does not make their position any the more plausible, just as a proposition does not become any truer for being pronounced with a louder voice. The only things enquiry has to respect are the universal canons of rational discourse, or, in Socratic language, the dialectic.

The spectacular success of science in its technological applications has, however, conjured up a danger of a different kind. For it has come to be thought by many that there is literally nothing man might not achieve if only his efforts are suitably directed and applied. The great advances of modern technology depend on the collaboration of many minds and hands, and to those whose task it is to initiate new schemes it must, indeed, appear that their own powers are without limit. That all these projects involve human effort and should serve human ends is apt to be forgotten. In this



A printing press, instrument for spreading literature

sphere our own world is fairly threatening to overstep the measures.

In the philosophic field, the emphasis on man gives an inward slant to speculation, and this leads to a point of view diametrically opposed to that which inspires the philosophies of power. Man now becomes a critic of his own faculties, nothing is allowed to stand unchallenged except certain immediate experiences. This subjective attitude leads to an extreme form of scepticism that in its own way is just as overwrought as the tendency to ignore the individual altogether. Some intermediate solution, evidently, must be found.

Meanwhile, the transition period we are discussing is marked by two especially important developments. First there is the invention of the printing press using movable types. This goes back to the 15th century, so far, at any rate, as the West is concerned. The Chinese had used this process already five hundred years earlier, but this was not known in Europe. With the advent of printing, the scope for circulating new ideas grew enormously. It was this that in the end helped undermine the old authorities. For as the Bible, rendered into vulgar tongues, became freely available in print, the Church could no longer plausibly maintain its guardianship over matters of faith. As for learning in general, the same causes hastened a return to secularism. Not only did printing provide a means for spreading new political doctrines that were critical of the old order, but also it enabled the humanist scholars to publish editions of the works of the ancients. This in turn promoted a wider study of the classical sources and tended to improve standards of education generally.

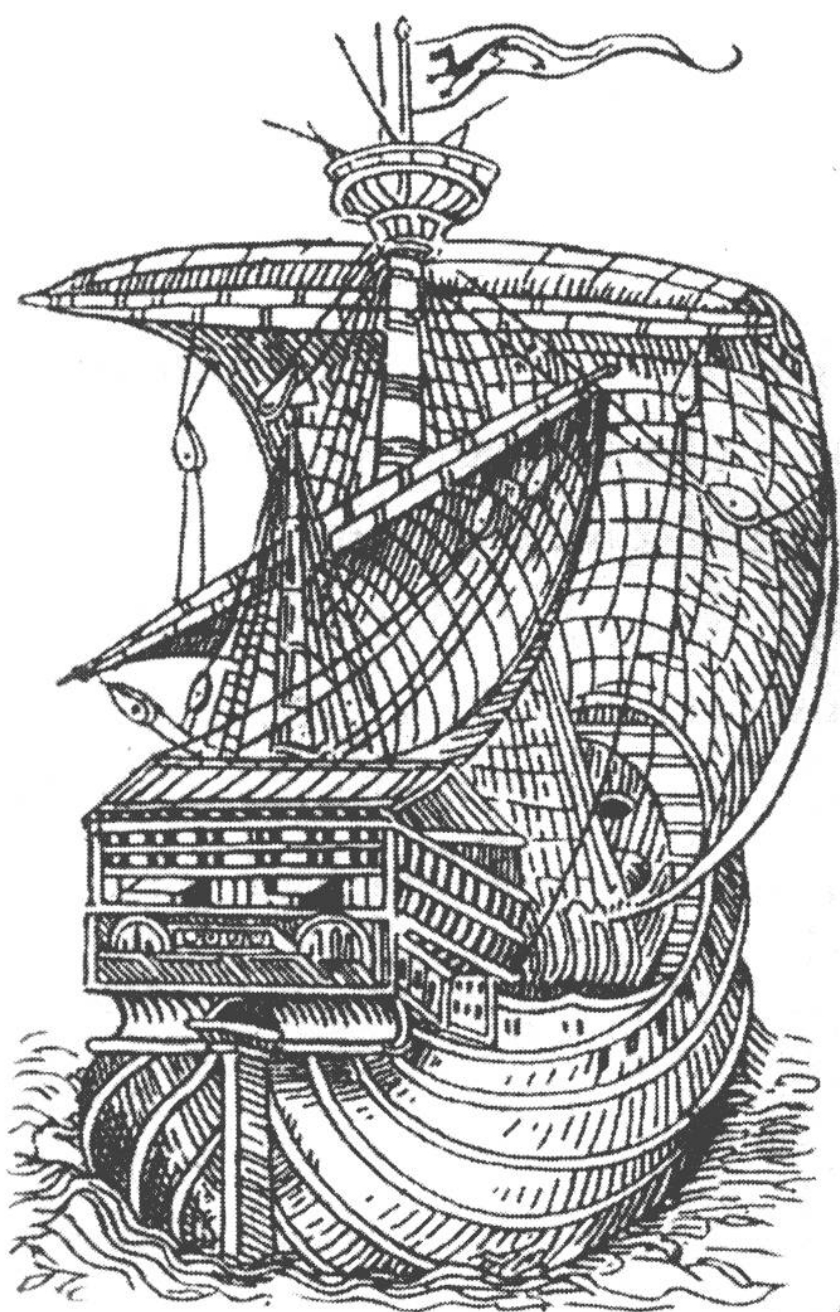
It is perhaps not superfluous to point out that the invention of printing is a doubtful blessing if it is not accompanied by the safeguarding of freedom of discussion. For falsehood is printed just as easily as truth, and just as easily spread. It avails a man precious little to be able to read if the material put in front of him must be accepted without question. Only where there is freedom of speech and criticism does the wide circulation of the printed word enhance enquiry. Without this freedom

it would be better if we were illiterate. In our own time this problem has become more acute because printing is no longer the only powerful medium for mass-communication. Since the invention of wireless telegraphy and television it has become even more important to exercise that eternal vigilance without which freedom in general begins to languish.

Along with the wider spread of information, men began to form a juster view of the earth they live on. This was accomplished through a series of voyages of discovery which gave new outlets to the drive and enterprise of the West. These adventurous exploits were made possible by technical improvements in shipbuilding and navigation, and also by a return to ancient astronomy. Until the 15th century ships did not venture far from the coastlines of the Atlantic, partly because there was no point

in doing so, but above all because it was unsafe to venture into regions where there were no landmarks to guide the seafarer. The use of the compass opened up the high seas, and henceforth explorers might cross the oceans in search of new lands and sea-lanes.

For medieval man, the world was a static, finite and well-ordered place. Everything within it had its appointed function, the stars to run in their courses and man to live in the station to which he was born. This complacent picture was rudely shattered by the Renaissance. Two



*Type of vessel used by Columbus.
His discovery of America in 1492
opened up new horizons*



opposing tendencies produce a new outlook. On the one hand, there is great confidence in the power and ingenuity of man, who now takes up the centre of the stage. But at the same time, man's position in the universe becomes less commanding, for the infinity of space begins to exercise the imagination of philosophers. These views are adumbrated in the writings of the German Cardinal Nicolas Cusanus (1401-1464), and in the following century become incorporated in the Copernican system. Similarly, there is a return to the old view of Pythagoras and Plato that the world is built on a mathematical pattern. All these speculations upset the existing order of things and undermined the old established authorities both in the clerical and secular sphere. The Church tried to contain the spread of heresy, but with little success. All the same it is well to remember that as recently as 1600 the Inquisition condemned Giordano Bruno to be burnt at the stake. As so often before, the ministers of the existing order, from fear of subversion, dealt out savage sentence on one who dared to be different. But this very verdict showed how weak was the position it was supposed to uphold. In the political field new conceptions of authority gradually developed and the powers of hereditary rulers came to be more and more restricted.

The break occasioned by the Reformation was not in all respects a fruitful development. It might be thought that with a plurality of religious men should at last have come to see that one and the same God may be worshipped in many different ways. This was a view that Cusanus had advocated already before the Reformation. But this rather obvious conclusion did not commend itself to the faithful.

The renaissance did not, of course, begin as a sudden awakening from a past during which the knowledge of the ancients lay dormant. Indeed, we have seen that throughout the Middle Ages there remained some vestiges of the older traditions. History is simply not broken up by such sharp lines of division. Nevertheless, distinctions of this kind are useful if handled with care. If, therefore, it is legitimate to speak of an Italian



Plato and Aristotle, as seen by the Italian renaissance painter Raphael

Renaissance, this means that there are certain obvious differences between the medieval past and the modern period. A clear contrast, for example, exists between the ecclesiastic literature of the scholastics and the secular literature in the vulgar tongue which begins to appear with the 14th century. This literary revival precedes the humanist rebirth of learning based on classical sources. The new literature used as its vehicle the language of the people, and thus came to have a wider appeal than the works of scholars who retained Latin as their medium.

In all fields of endeavour the limitations of the medieval outlook were now being thrown off. The sources of inspiration lay, to begin with, in the emerging secular interests of the period, and later in an idealised vision of the ancient past. The conception of antiquity that developed at that time was, of course, more or less distorted by the enthusiasm of a generation that had rediscovered a continuity with its own history. This somewhat romantic view of the ancients survived until the 19th century. We are certainly much better informed on these matters now than were the artists and writers of the



Renaissance.

In Italy, where the remnants of ancient civilization provided tangible symbols of past ages, the renaissance movement gained a wider foothold than did its later forms north of the Alps. Politically, the country was divided much in the manner of ancient Greece. In the north, there were numerous city-states, in the centre the papal dominions, and in the south the kingdom of Naples and Sicily. Of the northern cities, Milan, Venice and Florence were the most powerful. There was constant strife between states, as well as faction fights within each city. While individual intrigues and vendettas were conducted with supreme skill and cruelty, the country as a whole did not suffer grave damage. Nobles and cities would fight each other with the help of hirelings whose professional interest was to stay alive. This relaxed state of affairs was radically altered when Italy became the battleground of the French king and the Emperor. Italy was, however, too far divided to rally against invasion from abroad. The country thus remained disunited and largely under foreign dominion. In the repeated struggles between France and the Empire, it was the Habsburgs who emerged as victors. Naples and Sicily remained Spanish while the papal dominions enjoyed a tolerated independence. Milan, a Guelf stronghold, became a dependency of the Spanish Habsburgs in 1535. The Venetians occupy a somewhat special position, partly because they had never suffered defeat at the hands of the barbarians, and partly because of the Byzantine connection. They had acquired strength and wealth through the crusades, and, after defeating their rivals the Genoese, controlled trade throughout the Mediterranean. When Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, Venice began to decline, a process that was hastened by the discovery of the Cape route to India and the opening up of the New World.

The foremost bearer of the Renaissance movement was the city of Florence. No town except Athens has brought forth such a company of artists and thinkers. Dante, Michelangelo and Leonardo, to mention



Jerome, from a majolica dish of the Renaissance period

only a few, were all of them Florentines, and so, later, was Galileo. The internal troubles of Florence which had caused Dante's exile eventually led to the rule of the Medicis. From 1400 onwards, except for short interruptions, this family of merchant nobles ruled the city for over three centuries.

As for the papacy, the Renaissance had a twofold effect. On the one hand, the popes took an enlightened interest in the scholarly pursuits of the humanists and became great patrons of the arts. Papal claims to temporal power derived from the spurious Donation of Constantine, but Pope Nicholas V (1447-55) greatly admired Lorenzo Valla, who exposed the forgery and held other questionable opinions. The literary detective was made apostolic secretary in spite of his unorthodox views. On the other hand, this relaxation of standards of belief led to such secular preoccupations as to lose the papacy much of its spiritual influence. The private lives of men like Alexander VI (1492-1503) fell somewhat short of the piety that might be expected from God's representative on earth. Moreover, the temporal pursuits of 16th century popes drained off large sums of money from abroad. All this gave rise to grievances



that culminated in the reformation.

In philosophy, the Italian Renaissance did not, on the whole, produce great works. It was a period of rediscovery of sources rather than of great philosophic speculation. In particular, the study of Plato once more begins to challenge the Aristotelianism of the schools. Florence, under Cosimo dei' Medici, saw the rise of the Florentine Academy in the early 15th century. This institution favoured Plato as against the established universities. In general, the labours of humanist scholars paved the way for the great philosophic developments of the 17th century.

For all that the Renaissance emancipated men from the dogmatism of the Church, it did not save them from all kinds of ancient superstition. Astrology, which had constandy been discouraged by the Church, now gained widespread popularity, infecting not just the ignorant but the learned as well. As for witchcraft, this too was widely believed in, and hundreds of harmless eccentrics were burnt at the stake as witches. Witch-hunting is, of course, not unknown even in our own time, though it is no longer the custom to burn the quarry. Along with the rejection of medieval dogmatism went a loss of respect for established codes of conduct and behaviour. It is this, amongst other things, that prevented Italy from acquiring some form of national integrity in the face of foreign dangers from the North. The times were rife with treacherous intrigue and double dealing. The gentle art of disposing of rivals or enemies was developed to an unsurpassed level of craftsmanship. In such a climate of deceit and distrust no viable form of political collaboration could be born.

In the field of political philosophy, the Italian Renaissance produced one outstanding figure. Niccolò Machiavelli (1409-1527) was the son of a Florentine lawyer. His political career began in 1494, when the Medici were expelled from Florence. It is at this time that the city came under the influence of Savonarola, the Dominican reformer who stood out against the vice and corruption of his time. In his zealous efforts he