



Larsen, Rune Engelbreth, *Renæssancen og humanismens rødder*. Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2006

by Stein Wivestad

Rune Engelbreth Larsen has studied religion and the history of ideas at Aarhus University. In this book he wants to describe the breakthrough in the renaissance (and renaissances) of the idea of “humanism” or “a humanist view on human beings” (7, 29)¹. His postscript (which could have been the introduction?) reveals Larsen’s interest: He wants a concept of humanism for the third millennium, a “humanism, which sticks to its own historical origin” (337), a concept that is based in the historical new ideas that constitute the renaissance (340).

He starts, however, sketching the broad use of the word “humanism” during the last hundred years. The word is used in connection with persons and movements as different as Augustine, Kierkegaard (14), Human-Etisk Forbund in Norway (15), Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Jean Paul Sartre (16) and the EU Treaty for a Constitution of Europe from 2004. If “humanism” contains contradictory views, but is formally accepted by almost all, it seems “to have lost status as an independent, particular view.”² Larsen wants to avoid a situation where “anything goes”, and intends to go to the roots of the concept. *Humanismus* is first used in Germany in the beginning of the 19th century, denoting studies of language and literature within a specific culture. The broader concept of *studia humanitatis* and the concept of *humanitas* have their roots in the antique; and the word “humanist” (*umanista*) is formed in Italy by the end of the 15th century in connection with a renewed interest in *studia humanitatis*, the study of “grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy” (22-23, 322).

For me the concept of humanism is interesting in connection with an ongoing discussion about a planned new formulation of the aims of the Kindergarten, the Primary School and the Secondary School in Norway. The committee preparing this is finishing its work in June 2007. It discusses among other elements something about building the education on “basic ideas from Christian and humanist tradition”, or “transfer and renew the cultural inheritance with roots in Christianity, humanism, democracy and scientific way of thinking”, alternatively “with sources in” the same elements.

A “romantic” concept of renaissance (rebirth) was formed by Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt in the 19th century (34), referring to the Italian poet Petrarch, 1304-1374. Petrarch formed the concept of antiquity (i.e. the ancient ages?) as the period “before Christ” (i.e. the time before the domination of Christendom?). Compared with his own time (i.e. the new age) he understood the ages “between” antiquity and his own time (i.e. the middle ages) as a period of “darkness” (31). It is the idea of a “new time” in the 14th century that distinguishes the Italian renaissance



as *the* renaissance (82) lasting to the 16th century. However, renaissance is never an attempt to revive antiquity as such. It is rather an attempt to “open up for inspiration from greater parts of antiquity” (34). Many impulses came from antiquity much earlier than in the Italian renaissance. Greek language and culture found a “refugium” in Irish-Celtic monasteries in the 5th-7th centuries (53) and many impulses from antiquity were transferred through Arab sources (42) especially in the 12th century (35). Medieval times are often characterised by movements away from the cults of nature and fertility in pagan traditions. Strong movements in the Middle Ages presupposed a separation of God from nature (47, 60), and a contempt of the feminine. Some medieval actions and movements were definitely bad (81): religious intolerance and prosecution, and a heaping up of money and power which corrupted the Church. On the other side there are many examples of medieval movements which do not fit with the traditional dark picture: Francis of Assisi praises nature (54), Thomas Aquinas confirms the importance of human reason (57-58), Walther von der Vogelweide expresses equality between human beings of different religions (64), Dante expresses cosmopolitanism (66) and knights from different cultures meet at a round table to search for the Grail (67). A sharp division between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is not possible. There were several renaissances during medieval times and the medieval continues in some form during the Italian renaissance (81).

Larsen gives a broad picture of the Italian renaissance, starting in the 13th century with Dante, having its peak in the 15th century and ending in the 16th century (25). Though the poetry of Dante and Petrarch is guided by “Amor” (love), and give respect to Greek and Roman gods and heroes, they think and write within a Christian frame of reference. In a fictional dialogue with Augustine, Petrarch lets Augustine win formally, but not in practice (90). In the 14th and 15th century the city state of Florence became a centre for studies of the antique languages and cultural heritage. Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni (92-97) had the title of secretary of state in Florence. They were exponents of a great enthusiasm “searching for, copying, translating and spreading classical works from antique Greece and Rome” (92). This was economically funded by very rich people like Cosimo dei Medici (98), who also started a Platonic Academy in Caraggi led by Marsilio Ficino (100). Ficino translated the works of Plato and Plotinus, but was perhaps even more known for the translation of *Corpus Hermeticum*, a philosophical work building on magical wisdom traditions, identifying the Egyptian god Thoth with Hermes under the name Hermes Trismegistos (102). Including belief in magical revival of statutes of gods (105) and in astrology (106), this Hermetic tradition may be associated with the Emperor Julian (107) who in the 4th century tried to suppress the Christian religion and reinstate the old cults. Both Ficino and his younger rival Pico della Mirandola, 1463-1494, contend that love (Amor or Venus) is the central magical power in cosmos. It is through love there is communication between the gods and the mortal beings (108). A famous book from 1499 describes Poliphilos, a man who loves Polia or “many things”. He is lost in a wood, escapes a dragon, is sent by a Queen to three gates, enters the gate of *Mater Amoris* and marries Polia in a ceremony in the temple of Venus (115-116). My association to this work is the *Magic Flute*. A romantic duet in Mozart’s opera ends



with these words: “Mann und Weib und Weib und Mann, reichen an die Himmel an”. Through the union of the male and the female we may reach the perfection that we hope for. There seems to be a connection between Egyptian and Hellenistic magic, Italian renaissance, Freemasonry in Vienna and Romanticism!

The elite of the Italian renaissance went to Christian mass and confession, but the architecture of the churches imitated classical temples, and their palaces and gardens were completely heathen (120). It seems that both the development of natural science (135) and the great geographical discoveries (148) in this period are only loosely connected with the renaissance.

A long chapter represent philosophical views on “individualism and relativism” in the 15th and 16th century. Larsen gives interesting citations from works of philosophers like Cusanus, poets like Shakespeare and many other writers. Pico, Giordano Bruno and Campanella were strongly influenced by the Hermetic tradition. It seems that they believed that human beings could become like gods, with power to make a perfect world through the magic of love. The strong magical impulses in the renaissance were not accepted after the 16th century, and have been more or less forgotten by researchers until the end of the 20th century (176). Montaigne reacted against the hubris of the Hermetic tradition, but insisted on individual authenticity (215-16, 220). The human being ought to “be and realise *oneself*”³. Machiavelli described his experiences of leadership: how strong individuals ought to act immorally in order to achieve what is best for the society (177). Though Pico, Machiavelli and Montaigne have different views on the human being, they all expose the renaissance tendency in the history of ideas “that places the human in the centre of the universe” (218). The universe seems to unfold itself around the individual and in the power of each individual. The Danish prince Hamlet describes the situation in the “rotten” Denmark in this way: “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right ...” (274). The individualism is often combined with acceptance of different views. Pico formed a syncretistic vision, and welcomed representatives from all the different religions and philosophies to discuss his conclusions, including some conclusions of cabbalistic and magic origin (154-55). The inhabitants of Thomas More’s *Utopia* have different religious views, but they all pray to “Mithra” (183). And Johannes Reuchlin defended the civil rights of the Jews. Search for truth where Jews were involved had to accept their special cultural context (220-21).

The renaissance opened doors for astrology, magic, antique myths and art that had been shut in Europe since the time of Augustine. Though the cults of antiquity were not revived, the renaissance implied “a new synthesis” of pagan and Christian elements. “This synthesis appears in the visual arts, more than any other place” (231). Larsen’s book contains a small, well selected and commented collection of pictures. Donatello’s *Colleoni*, a big sculpture of a warrior on a horse was put up in Venice in 1493. Anything like it had not been seen since the time of the Roman emperors (232). And though many renaissance sculptures and paintings have Biblical motives, the form has antique nude models and expresses renaissance ideas: individual will and



feelings are made visible, the composition reveal the individual artist's "subjective, visual experience" and it calculates also the potential human observer's subjective experience (245), seeing everything through the individual's perspective. Self-portraits are painted for the first time around 1500 by Albrecht Dürer (243). The four walls in the private library of Julius II in the Vatican were painted by Raphael. Here the cross-cultural synthesis of the renaissance is visualised (265): On one wall the church fathers, theologians and popes discuss the altar sacrament. On the opposite wall Plato and Aristotle and many others (Raphael included) discuss philosophical questions. On the third wall stands Apollo, the nine muses and the antique poets. And on the opposite wall we find the cardinal virtues. Only one of the walls represents a motive from the Christian tradition!

Both the renaissance and the Lutheran reformation may be compared with "children" making uproar against their parents (287). Both stand in a Catholic tradition strongly influenced by the Augustinian synthesis based on the Christian and Non-Christian sources he knew around 400 after Christ. The renaissance "child" is "re-born" or vitalised through new direct studies of the Non-Christian sources, while the reformation "child" finds its form through new direct studies of the Christian sources. Both trust their own experiences and interpretations, but their sources are different and their uproars go in different directions. Luther's main principles, *sola scriptura*: giving the Bible higher authority than the tradition and the pope, and *sola fide*: putting the trustful relation to Christ before good works as the basis for salvation, removed the pope's power (283). After only a few decennia Roman Catholicism lost its spiritual leadership of Northern Europe (314). A Danish monk, Hans Tausen, studied in Wittenberg 1523-24. When he came back to Denmark and preached what he had learned, he had to leave his Johannite Order (289). But many wanted to hear him, and after some few years the town of Viborg was dominated by the reformation. The Lutheran ideas became popular, especially in the lower classes (290). At the same time, the king, Frederik I, reduced the power of the pope by leaving to the Danish archbishop and the king to confirm the choice of new bishops, and by giving decrees of religious freedom and tolerance. When the king died, his son Christian made full freedom for the Lutheran movement a condition for accepting the throne. After a short civil war, Christian III was victorious. He arrested all the bishops, confiscated their property, and shortly afterwards forced Norway and Iceland as well to accept the reformation (291). The persons who were selected to lead the reformation in Denmark were disciples of Luther's friend Melanchton. Larsen contends that Melanchton stood closer to the renaissance than Luther (292), and it seems that many of the renaissance impulses that reached Denmark came from Wittenberg (298).

The book contains many interesting stories and citations. Larsen has published several books, essays and articles, and he is a good story teller. It was interesting to learn about the great impact of the Hermetic tradition on the renaissance; in Denmark it also influenced Tycho Brahe (301). This underlines the difference between the renaissance movement and the natural science from the 17th century onwards. The new science believed in the Cartesian separation of subject and object



(225). And perhaps the modern “Humanist Manifestos” where “religion is subordinated to science” (15) owes more to Descartes and his followers than to the humanism of the renaissance.

Larsen remarks that Johannes Sløk’s presentation of the renaissance outwardly moves chronologically, while Sløk in “reality” starts with his critique of the contemporary culture (328). The question is if it is possible at all for a researcher to avoid a starting point in his or her own prejudices. Larsen wants to find the roots of “humanism” in the renaissance movement. He mentions briefly the historical origin of *humanitas* in the writings of Cicero (325), but he does not follow the origin of Cicero’s concept back in the Greek idea of *paideia*. I miss a discussion of the humanistic key concepts (“Humanistische Leitbegriffe”) in the beginning of the first part of *Wahrheit und Methode*. Larsen wants a concept of humanism where “the individually unique”⁴ is the programme for all human beings (331, 343). I suppose this needs more philosophical argumentation than Larsen has given. He contends that “The singular person in its individual difference from all others is the atom in Kierkegaard’s works”⁵. However, according to Kierkegaard, it is God’s gifts that constitutes the person: “no human being can give anything that is not given to himself” from above, and “To need God is the highest perfection of the human being”. Our understanding of the first person singular, the “I” or the subjectivity, has also been discussed by, for instance, Wittgenstein and Buber; and the historical roots to this understanding are deeper than the renaissance. We have to go back to Augustine and the Jewish-Christian tradition.

Larsen's book has only a few disturbing misprints: I suppose “sort” (134) should be “stort” and that “udbedre” (160) should be “udbrede”. The dialogue *De Sapientia* should not be translated “Om viden” (150), but “Om visdom”. Knowledge is not always combined with wisdom, as Cusanus remarks.

¹ All numbers in brackets refer to pages in Larsen's book.

² “at have mistet status som en selvstendig, særegen anskuelse.” (21)

³ “være og realisere sig selv” (278).

⁴ “det individuelt særegne”

⁵ “Den enkelte i sin individuelle forskellighed fra alle andre er atomet i Kierkegaards værker” (338).

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love and wisdom, adults who help each other to become better human beings and thereby also better examples for children. The main references for his concepts are Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Klaus Mollenhauer. See <http://fagsider.nla.no/sw/>
