



Catholic Mysticism and the Renaissance

Spiritual and Intellectual Movements from the 14th to 16th Centuries

1

Introduction

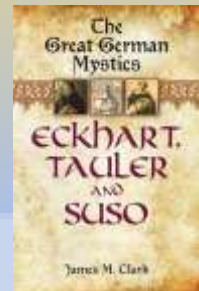
- In the 14th century, there was a flowering of mysticism as lay persons sought personal experiences with God.
 - Though they were loyal Catholics, the mystics undermined Roman Catholic authority.
- The most important intellectual movement of the time was the Renaissance. It represented the end of the Middle Ages as the Medieval norms were questioned and rejected.
 - This also undermined the Roman Catholic Church.
 - It set the stage for both the Scientific Revolution and the Protestant Reformation
 - The Renaissance was the forerunner of the Reformation, as the Reformers were deeply affected by aspects of the Renaissance.



2

Mysticism

- During the 14th century, there was a blossoming of mysticism in the Catholic Church.
- Greater numbers of people thirsted for a direct personal experience of God.
 - It started with three German Dominican preachers: Eckhart von Hochheim (1260-1327) and his two disciples Johann Tauler (1300-1361) and Heinrich Suso (1295-1360).
- Eckhart was known as Meister (Master) Eckhart. Together, the three formed a mystic impulse in the hearts of many Dominican nuns and Beguines (religious orders of lay persons).
- Eventually, their writings led to the rise of a wider group of German and Swiss mystics that called themselves the Friends of God.



3

Catherine of Siena

- One of the most prominent mystics was a woman, Catherine of Siena (1347-1380).
 - She was a Dominican tertiary from Siena in Northwestern Italy. A tertiary was a lay person that placed him/herself under the spiritual discipline of a monastic order without taking any monastic vows.
- Through her mysticism, she became a guide to a growing number of followers. She wrote *Divine Dialogue*, as well as 400 letters that offered spiritual counsel.
- Catherine participated in Church politics at highest levels, interacting with popes and other prominent Catholics.
 - She traveled across Italy and France trying to end the Babylonian Captivity and bring the papacy back from Avignon to Rome. She actually convinced the final pope elected during the captivity to relocate back to Rome. This was after she claimed to have a vision of the return of the papacy to Italy.
- Mysticism also spread to England where notable female mystics rose to prominence.



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Common Practices of Mysticism

- The 14th century mystics had common practices regardless of what country they were from.
 - They used the native language of their country rather than Latin. They aimed their ministries at lay persons as well as scholars and clergy.
 - They emphasized the centrality of preaching and teaching in the Church, and placed a high value on studying the New Testament. They also heavily encouraged holy living with a Christ-centered life.
 - Perhaps most importantly, they insisted that Christ was immediately available to the believer's soul, and therefore He was not locked up inside the priesthood and the sacraments.
- Mystics were often looked at suspiciously by church authorities. They feared it would lead people to look down upon the official doctrines and structures of the Catholic Church.
- Pope John XXII posthumously condemned Eckhart in 1329.
 - Eckhart's writings blurred the Creator/Creature distinction by teaching there was an uncreated eternal spark in each human soul.
 - Eckhart realized some of his language was problematic, and so he gave orthodox explanations for the parts of his teachings that seemed to defy orthodox doctrine. He, as most mystics, were loyal to the Catholic Church and did not seek to undermine its authority.
- Martin Luther was heavily influenced by the famous writings of the German mystics.

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Devotion Moderna

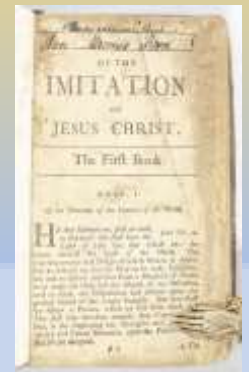
- Separate from the mystics there developed a movement known as *devotion moderna*, which means modern way of serving God.
- Gerard Groote (1340-1384) of Netherlands started it. He argued that the ideal religious life required the establishment of communities of Christian men and women as brotherhoods and sisterhoods.
 - They were to live, pray, and follow Christ together, but without becoming monks and nuns. They would work for a living and take no monastic vows.
 - These movements were popular and spread throughout both the Netherlands and Germany.
 - Often, the sisterhoods adopted some form of monastic vows, but the male communities usually stayed true to the original design of Groote.
- The Brothers of the Common Life were among the most famous. They taught boys in public schools and even established their own schools to teach people.



6

Imitation of Christ

- The modern way of serving God emphasized God's closeness to the individual believer as well as the need for believers to take up their cross and follow Christ.
- The most influential writing that was produced from this movement was *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471).
 - It has been read by more believers and translated into more languages than any Christian work other than the Bible itself.
 - It was strongly influenced by the spirituality of Augustine of Hippo and Bernard of Clairvaux.
 - It has always found wide acceptance among all Western Christians, including Protestants, even despite the strong medieval Catholic emphasis on the Mass.
- It challenges the reader to set the heart on eternal realities and to walk with Jesus in every aspect of daily life.



7

The Renaissance

- The Renaissance began in Italy in the second half of the 14th century, and eventually spread across the whole of Western Europe. It changed people's values and outlook on life.
 - It was a movement that adored ancient Greek and Roman culture and fought for its rebirth in their own time. In fact, the word Renaissance is the French word for rebirth.
 - There was a newfound commitment to learning Europe's pre-medieval culture, which this was made possible because the classics of ancient Greece and Rome were rediscovered, in part, due to the Crusades.
- It wasn't just a revival of literature, but classic forms of thought, expression, and action. It was achieved through studying the humanities – grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, philosophy.
 - Humane studies were contrasted with divine studies. In other words, there was theology and humanities. In fact, humanities came to be seen as the vehicle to perfect oneself.
 - The natural human needed to be refined to perfection by becoming a cultured person. Humane studies re-create us and make us authentically human.
- Special emphasis was placed on human beings as communicators. Humans should be effective in expressing thoughts and values in the forms of writing, speech, music, and visual art.
 - The medieval Latin of the church was despised as barbaric in comparison with the beauty of classical Latin.

8

The Renaissance Repudiates the Middle Ages

- Nineteenth century thinkers coined the term humanism to sum up the Renaissance concept of humanity.
 - It's not the same as present day humanism— which denies the existence of God and ultimately is an anti-Christian form of materialism.
 - Most of the humanists of the Renaissance were pro-Christian. Their commitment to human culture was part of a Christian view of the world.
 - They believed that God gives meaning and worth in the present life and in the life to come.
- However, they did see the medieval centuries as being a time of ignorance, superstition, and barbarism. They called it the dark ages.
- Central to the critique of medieval civilization was a readjustment of how to balance this world and the world to come.
 - The Bible teaches that God created the world very good, but due to Adam's sin, it is now cursed.
 - Yet humanity's final destination is beyond this brief life; it is found in eternal life in the world to come.
 - So how does one balance the duties of earth with the duties of heaven?



9

Middle Ages vs. Renaissance

- In the Middle Ages, the prevailing attitude of Catholicism was to have a contempt for the present life, fixing the mind on death, judgment, hell, and heaven.
 - The idea was that the only worthwhile use of the short life on earth was to prepare your souls for eternity.
 - The perfect human was the one that most closely conformed themselves to Christ, and this was defined as being a monk or a nun that renounced the present world, gave up family life, the owning of property, and subdued the body and its passions through asceticism and the spiritual disciplines.
- The Renaissance challenged this. It shifted spiritual concern back to the present life without denying the life to come. It insisted strongly that life on earth had a value, a dignity, and a beauty of its own.
 - The great Pagan works of Greece and Rome displayed no contempt for the world of human achievement. There was no call to monastic withdrawal.
 - Plato contemplated intently on visions of eternity, but he also attempted to design a perfect political community where the eternal ideals are lived out in concrete forms.

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Renaissance Humanists

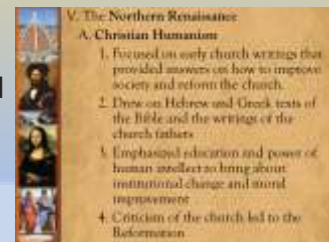
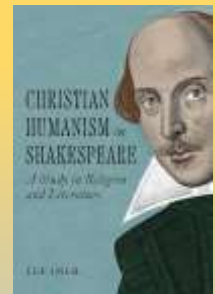
- Because of the Roman-Greco achievement in art, literature, architecture, and human achievement, the Renaissance humanists looked back on those civilizations as the golden age of human culture.
 - They were seen as the perfect expression of the human spirit and its greatest values. It needed a rebirth if humans were to reach their full potential.
- Naturally, this engendered a rejection of the monastic ideal of poverty, asceticism, and heavenly contemplation.
- Instead, Renaissance thinkers advocated an active and successful life in the world through regular secular pursuits.
 - The word secular comes from *saeculum*, which means this present age. Politics, city-life, statecraft, and even war was the main sphere of human action.
 - Individualism got its start as there was a fascination with personal self-expression and self-development.
- Biographies no longer would be limited to religious leaders, but would focus on the great men of this world.
- For regular Renaissance humanists, this was their main goal—a recommitment to the human claims of life on earth.
 - They sought this knowledge from the ancient Pagans alone.



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Christian Humanists

- A different group of humanists—Christian humanists—had a different vision.
- They did not limit themselves to Pagan sources, but all great works of Western Civilization, including the writings of brilliant Christians.
- They dived into scholarly study of the Greek New Testament and the Patristics.
- The apostolic and patristic period were seen as a spiritual golden age. They wanted this spiritual golden age reborn in the present—they saw it as the only hope for Western Europe.
- Thus, it was the quest for humanistic culture based on both Pagan and Christian sources.
- A famous expression during this time was *ad fontes*, which means back to the sources.



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Italian Renaissance

- There is a sense of poetic echoing in the fact that the Renaissance began in Italy. It was the heartland of the ancient Roman Empire.
- At this time, however, Italy was not a united empire, but five political communities: Milan, Venice, Florence, Naples, and the Papal States.
 - It would not be a united nation until the 19th Century. Italian humanism began in the great northern cities of Milan, Venice, and Florence.
 - The trade and commerce during the Crusades made these areas wealthy and politically independent. An urban money-based culture replaced the agrarian way of life.
- The first great Italian Renaissance figure was Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374).
 - Though from Florence, he grew up in Avignon during the Babylonian Captivity of the papacy.
 - For the first half of his life, he lived as a Catholic priest without any sense of divine calling. So he lived with a number of mistresses and sired illegitimate children.
- In 1350, he experienced a life-changing religious conversion where he loathed his former sexual sin and considered himself freed by Christ



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Petrarch

- Petrarch was an admirer of the Latin Pagan writers Cicero, Virgil, and Seneca. He modeled his writing style on them.
 - His own writing gained him international fame, especially his Italian love poems.
 - After he converted to Christ, his spiritual hero was Augustine of Hippo—he always had a copy of *Confessions* with him. Due to Augustine's influence on him, Petrarch accepted Plato as the supreme philosopher.
 - Undoubtedly, this put him in conflict with scholastic theology since it abandoned Plato for Aristotle.
- For this reason, Petrarch had a true hostility to scholasticism, and this would be typical of most humanists.
 - Also, most humanists thought scholastic theology was over-complicated, too philosophical, divorced from Scripture, overly speculative, and expressed in barbaric medieval Latin.
 - Schoolmen studied the Latin translation, the Vulgate. The humanists insisted that theologians study from the original languages of Greek and Hebrew.
- Perhaps one of the largest factors of disdain between certain Renaissance humanists and scholastics was after Aquinas, scholastic thinkers increasingly moved away from Augustinian theology. They drifted away from the doctrine of original sin and how human nature is in bondage to sin. They also increasingly rejected divine grace-based sovereignty in salvation.
 - E.g., William of Ockham's Neo-Pelagianism.

14

Petrarch as a Christian Humanist

- Since many Christian humanists admired Augustine, they tended to despise the later scholasticism.
- It must be noted, however, that not all Christian humanists were decidedly Augustinian.
 - Erasmus moved some distance from Augustine's doctrine of original sin and predestination. Therefore, some humanists were extremely anti-Augustinian.
- With Petrarch, we can see in a single individual humanism in its Christian form.
 - He had an attitude of contempt for the medieval period as the Dark Ages—he coined the term.
 - He believed in a golden age of civilization with Greece and Rome as well as a spiritual golden age with the apostolic and patristic periods.
 - He possessed a new fervor for Plato that walked back the scholastic commitment to Aristotle.
 - He admired the ancient Latin and the literary style of their great writers.
 - Finally, he believed that philosophy and theology should revolve around humanity and human life, especially the relationship between human beings and God.



15

Revitalization of Greek Learning

- Petrarch pushed a revival of interest in ancient Latin culture. The same would happen for Greek culture, first emerging in Florence.
- A number of Greek scholars relocated there due to the troubled state of Byzantium caused by Turkish aggression.
 - Manuel Chrysoloras (1355-1415), a native of Constantinople, lectured in Greek studies at Florence University.
 - Another Greek teacher in Florence was Gemistos Plethon (1355-1450). His specialty was Plato, and he influenced many humanists with his *Difference between Plato and Aristotle*, in which we argued that Plato's teaching was deeper and truer than Aristotle. Sadly, he was more of a Pagan Platonist than a Christian.
- Greek studies reached its height in 1462 with the founding of the Platonic Academy in Florence.
 - It was directed by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), a Catholic priest that blended Christianity with Neoplatonism.
 - He claimed Platonic philosophy was divinely inspired just as the Christian faith. He believed they taught the same fundamental spiritual truths.



16

Plato Academy's Finest Student: Mirandola

- Perhaps the most famous member of the Platonic Academy was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494).
 - He was a philosopher and student of Jewish mysticism. He later became a disciple of Savonarola.
- He wrote the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which is one of the most celebrated of all Renaissance writings.
 - He argued that God placed humans in the universe so that we could study, investigate, and understand the things of creation.
 - Humans exist on a level between animals and angels, and it is possible to fall to the lower level of beast or rise to the angelic level and become like gods.
- Like most Renaissance thinkers, he had a confidence in human reason and progress within a Christian framework of belief (God gave us these powers).
- Yet, he repudiated this confidence in human reason when he became a disciple of Savonarola in 1491.
 - He renounced the world, sold his possessions for the poor, became a street evangelist, and wrote commentaries on the Psalms and Lord's Prayer.



17

Scholarly Study of the Early Church

- Within the Italian Renaissance, interest in the early church also emerged.
- The greatest of all Italian scholars was Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457).
 - He was a native of Rome, ordained to the priesthood in 1431. He lectured, studied, wrote, and his patronage came from Pope Nicholas V and King Alphonso I of Naples.
 - He was an Augustinian that was zealous for studying the Greek text of the New Testament.
 - In his studies, he became very critical of some ancient Catholic traditions.
- His two greatest works were *Concerning the False Credit and Eminence of the Donation of Constantine* (1440) and his *Annotations on the New Testament*.
 - In the former, he exposed that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery used for 700 years to justify papal claims that the Vatican owns the Papal States and much of Western Europe.
 - It was clearly a forgery that went back to the time of Pepin the Short. Valla argued that the papacy should renounce political power and become solely a spiritual institution.
- In *Annotations*, he provided undeniable proof of the Vulgate's many errors by comparing it to the Greek text.
 - Valla did not publish this himself, but Erasmus published it long after his death in 1505.
 - Eventually, the papacy condemned all of Valla's writings, especially in the aftermath of the Reformation. Valla's works provided plenty of ammunition usable by the Reformers.

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Renaissance Popes and Visual Arts



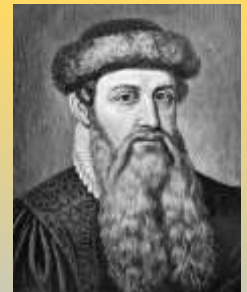
- Even though Florence was the chief center of the Italian Renaissance, it spread to other cities too.
- Even Rome will have Renaissance Popes that will dedicate a lot of money to humanist causes.
 - The first was Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) (Valla's patron)—he founded the Vatican library in 1453. It eventually became the greatest collection of books in the world.
 - Renaissance popes made Rome into the center of the Renaissance by commission so many works for music, painting, sculpture, and architecture.
- The Renaissance influenced the visual arts. In the Middle Ages, most artists focused on religious subjects. The Renaissance artists painted landscapes, scenes from everyday life, and individual portraits of people that were not saints or kings.
 - They made their painted people look like realistic people in natural settings. They did the same for biblical subjects too. Christ as well as other biblical people and scenes were painted in a way that looked like real people. This was the first time this happened.
 - Mary was portrayed as the first time as a human maiden and mother rather than the exalted queen of heaven.
 - Some of the famous painters and sculptors of Italy included Angelico, Donatello, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian.
 - Even though popes had a zeal for humanism, they lacked it for holiness, as demonstrated by ruthlessly wicked popes holding the office during this time.



19

Renaissance Throughout Europe

- The Renaissance spread to the rest of Western Europe. In the closing decades of the 15th century, it reached Germany, France, England, and Spain.
- The invention of print and movable type made it possible for ideas to spread much more rapidly.
- In 1450, Johann Gutenberg (1395-1468) of Mainz set up the first European printing press. The first book ever printed was the Bible.
 - By 1500, there were over 200 presses operating in Europe. This brought forth a cultural revolution that is impossible to exaggerate.
 - Scribes were no longer needed to copy books by hand. A publisher could make thousands of copies of a book easily and quickly.
 - This allowed for mass circulation, which decreased the price of books and made them more accessible. Ideas could spread with swiftness.
 - This will encourage widespread literacy. The Reformation will expand literacy greatly.



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Renaissance in Germany

- Germany: The Renaissance was more explicitly Christian in Germany than Italy.
 - A lot of Italian humanists, even as part of the Church, were more interested in Plato and Cicero than the New Testament.
 - The German humanists, in contrast, created a close blend of the Pagan and Christian elements of the Roman-Greco culture.
 - From the Pagans, they adopted literacy style, Platonism, and ideals of political citizenship.
 - From the Christian elements, they advocated for Christian spirituality based on the study of the New Testament, the Church Fathers, and serving God in the world rather than retreating from the world for a monastery.
- They were anti-scholastic since they saw it as a philosophical distortion that robbed people from the simplicity of Christ.
 - The German Renaissance also moved away from the scholastic tendency to interpret Scripture allegorically. This was a revival of the old Antiochene method.



21

German Renaissance

- By blending the Pagan and Christian elements of Roman society together, the German humanists offered a powerful vision for reforming society.
 - The idea was to use education from schools and universities to liberate people from superstition and help them develop into useful citizens for both God and society as they cultivate their earthly abilities as artists, politicians, teachers, merchants, craftsmen, and housewives.
- German humanists were most certainly German nationalists, believing that the Germanic people were the most noble-minded people on earth.
 - Their nationalist fervor was complimented by their hostility toward Italians and the papacy—bad blood going back to the medieval battles between Roman popes and German Emperors.
- Martin Luther will be able to use this German nationalism to great effect in his own battle with the Pope.
- Christian humanism made a deeper impact on Germany than any other nation.



22

German Humanists

- There were numerous German humanists that left a major impact.
 - Collectively, they were very nationalistic and willing to lash out at the papacy.
 - Some of them were openly supportive of Martin Luther when the Reformation began. Luther was not working in a vacuum, but the soil was prepared for him.
- One noteworthy German humanist was Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522). He will set off a huge battle between humanists and scholastics.
 - He was the first non-Jewish German academic to master the Hebrew language. He actually wrote *Rudiments of Hebrew* in 1506, the world's first textbook on Hebrew grammar and vocabulary.
 - He argued that the *ad fontes* must apply to the Old Testament too, and therefore he believed in friendly relations with Jews in order to help Christians understand the Old Testament better.
- Unfortunately, the Inquisition will go to battle with him over this. A Jewish convert to Catholicism, Johan Pfefferkorn (1469-1522) convinced the Holy Roman Emperor to order the confiscation of all Jewish books for destruction.



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German Humanists

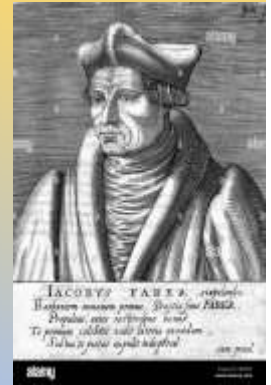
- Reuchlin opposed this. He said we need their literature to enhance our understanding of the Old Testament.
- Additionally, he claimed that friendly discussions would better persuade them to Christianity than persecution.
- For this, the Inquisition put him on trial for heresy in 1514.
- In the court of public opinion, he won because other German humanists produced satirical writings that made the Dominicans sound extremely stupid.
- Nevertheless, Rome condemned Reuchlin in 1520.
- Fortunately, by this point, Luther produced a much bigger storm. Reuchlin will not be executed.



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Renaissance in France

- Christian humanism also influenced some thinkers in France, most notably Jaques Lefevre d’Etaples (1460-1533)—aka Faber Stapulensis (Latin).
 - He combined Neoplatonism and Catholic mysticism with the Bible.
 - He translated the New Testament into French in 1523 and the Old Testament in 1528.
- He was a foe of scholasticism and even arrived at positions similar to the Reformers. This likely is accounted for by his use of the historical-grammatical approach to Bible interpretation.
 - He condemned transubstantiation and embraced an Augustinian view of salvation.
 - He was condemned by the church for Lutheranism, even though he never embraced the Reformation. He found safety in the court of Marguerite of Navarre since she supported reform.
- Other French humanists came to Lefevre’s support.
 - Some of these humanists became leaders in the Protestant Reformation in French-speaking Switzerland (e.g., William Ferel, 1489-1565).



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Renaissance in England

- William Grocyn (1446-1519) and Thomas Linacre (1460-1524) introduced humanism to Oxford University.
- The leading English humanist was John Colet (1467-1519), the son the Lord Mayor of London.
 - He traveled abroad for education and became a student at Florence’s Platonic Academy from 1493-1496.
 - Afterward, he lectured at Oxford on the letters of Paul. He was a fierce critic of scholasticism, especially Aquinas.
- He became dean of Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London in 1504, where he preached popular sermons from biblical texts.
 - Some of his audience were Lollards and they agreed with his teaching.
 - Colet criticized superstitious worship of relics and images.
 - Fortunately, King Henry VIII acted as his protector to keep him out of serious trouble.
- Colet built with his own money Saint Paul’s School in London as place to offer free education to young boys based on Christian humanist ideals of study.



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Renaissance in England

- Another famous English humanist was Sir Thomas More (1478-1535).
 - He was a Latin and Greek scholar, religious writer, and a successful politician.
- He wrote most of his religious works as a defense of the Catholic Church after the Reformation began.
- He also wrote the most famous English humanist book, *Utopia* in 1516.
 - He criticized the society of his day by comparing it with what he believed the perfect society would be like.
- Though he was a devout Catholic, *Utopia* argued for religious tolerance of all religions, and he promoted priests being free to marry.
 - He did not live by his own ideals as he was a fierce persecutor of Protestantism.



27

Renaissance in Spain

- The leading humanist was Francisco Ximenez de Cisneros (1436-1517).
 - He was a Franciscan friar that earned the favor of Queen Isabella.
 - In 1492, she made him her personal confessor, and in 1495 she promoted him to the archbishop of Toledo. He was now the national leader of the Spanish church.
- He promoted the humanist way and founded the University of Alcala in 1500.
- In 1502, he commissioned a team of scholars to create an authorized version of the text of the Old and New Testaments.
 - It was completed in 1517 and published in 1522. It was called the Complutensian Polyglot—it contained a revised Hebrew OT, a Greek NT, and the Latin Vulgate with language aids.
- Spanish humanism was unique from the others in that it was not hostile to scholasticism.
 - Ximenez promoted the works of Aquinas, leading to a group called the New Thomists. They leaned in on the parts of Aquinas that were Augustinian.



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