***Renaissance: A Revolution in Minds***

**The Middle Ages**

*When the past meant little, the*

*Present was to be endured, and*

*The future meant reward in heaven*

*Or punishment in hell - -*

In the Middle Ages, men seemed to have lost interest in the past. Scattered over Europe were reminders of the great days of the Roman Empire – scraps of walls, ruins of arenas, temples and triumphal arches. To the people of the Middle Ages, they brought no dreams of glory. The ruins were a terrible warning of the wickedness that God had punished. They proved that the life of man was short, that God was almighty, and that the ways of God were mysterious and unknown.

For the majority of men in the Middle Ages, the past mean little, the future was meant to reward in heaven or punishment in hell. And between the past and the future was the harsh present, in which they were peasants working the land. Ruling them were the feudal lords who made war, protected them from other lords, and grew fat on their labor. Ruling them, too, were the priests and monks who taught them their religion, emphasizing that their lives would pass as swiftly as the crops they harvested.

They live in a society held together and controlled by feudal law and the Catholic Church. Each man was born to his place, with his rights and duties laid down by law and custom. No one, not even the most bloodstained lord, questioned the value of religion for the sake of power or wealth. Altogether, especially for the peasants, life was simple and primitive, and marked by war, famine, and plagues. This society of lords, priests, and peasants was meant to last until the end of time, unchanging and unchangeable. And yet it did change…

**The Renaissance**

To go forward it was necessary to go back –

In the Renaissance men began to think less of death and more of life. They were less concerned with their future in heaven or hell, and more with their **present** on earth. And curiously, because they were concerned with the present, **they tried to learn from the past, from the ancient of Greeks and Romans.** “I go to awake the dead!” said one Renaissance man. Indeed, it was as if the dead were being awakened and forced to give up their secrets of art and architecture and philosophy. But, even more important, the living were awakening from the long sleep and dark dreams of the Middle Ages. So great was the awakening that it seemed as if all mankind was being reborn. This period became known as the Renaissance, taking its name from a French word meaning **rebirth**.

To go forward it was necessary to go back; to advance from the Middle Ages was necessary to return to antiquity and relearn the lessons which had enabled Rome to produce her great civilization. Medieval scholars had known about men like **Virgil, Ovid, Cicero, Aristotle, and Plato**; but not until the 14th century, and then only in Italy, was an attempt made to see the whole classical world as a culture in its own right. The study of this culture came to be called **humanism**. And humanists were concerned not only about discovering and editing Greek and Roman books, but with sorting out those elements in ancient through which could help men live better, more responsible lives. They turned Rome not only for instruction about law, politics, and art, but even moral guidance.

A rebirth of interest in this world.

Humanism means something different today, but in the Renaissance it stood for the view of life that while devotedly accepting the existence of God, shared by many of the intellectual attitudes of the ancient pagan world. It was interested in **esthetics**, saw the usefulness of knowledge of **history**, and was convinced that man’s chief duty was to enjoy **life** **soberly and serve his community actively**. Thus humanism restored to the scales balance which the Middle Ages had titled with a concern for eternity. It stressed earthly fulfillment rather than preparation for paradise. It had its spiritual side, but it reflected a society that was more interested in worldly matters – a society that was practical canny, self-conscious and ambitious.

Consequently, while many medieval scholars have been (monks), concerned with solitary meditations on spiritual matters, the Renaissance scholar was much more likely to be a public figure - - a teacher, a diplomat, a secretary of state…”Teachers turned their backs on medieval idea of poverty, celibacy, and seclusion, and instead praised family life and the wise use of riches. A monastery cell was no longer felt to be necessary for the development and the mind; learning was best pursued in some degree of material comfort.

**An emphasis upon the individual’s worth**

In the Middle Ages to praise man was to praise God, for man was a creation of God. But Renaissance writers praised man himself as a creator. They **played down the sinfulness** he was born with and **emphasized his ability to think and act for himself**, to produce works of art, to guide the destiny of others. They freed man from his pegged place in the medieval system…He was seen as the ruler of nature – the lord, although not the Lord, of creation…

This new vision of man sprang from a heightened awareness of self. Medieval man had been preoccupied with **searching their souls**, but Renaissance men were much more intrigued with exploring, and indeed parading, their own personalities… It was in the same spirit of self-interest that men began to call attention to themselves as unique and individual beings. For instance, composers began to sign their music. Around 1340 a self-confident Florentine banker had the gall to have his portrait painted on his tomb and in 1453 a Florentine commissioned a portrait bust of himself.

**Directions:** Fill in the chart of generalizations about beliefs in the Middle Ages vs. beliefs from the Renaissance

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| --- | --- |
| **Middle Ages**  | **Renaissance**  |
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