# Chapter 5: Changing Cultural Traditions

## Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Which elements of Greek and Roman culture were revived in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries?

Several elements of the classical past were revived. (1) Texts and ideas: scholars such as Petrarch urged a close reading of the actual words of ancient Greek and Roman authors, and works of Plato and Aristotle were read again, many through Arab translations. Humanist teachers taught grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy, subjects not tied to religion. The word humanitas, used by Cicero for culture, gave 'humanities'. (2) Law: it was studied in the context of Roman culture. (3) Art: fragments of ancient sculpture were dug up and admired, and sculptors like Donatello (1416) made lifelike statues in that tradition. (4) Architecture: excavated Roman ruins inspired a 'new' style that was really a revival of the imperial Roman style, now called classical. (5) History: people began contrasting their 'modern' world with the 'ancient' one.

Q2 Compare details of Italian architecture of this period with Islamic architecture.

Italian architecture of the period: after Roman ruins were excavated, architects revived the imperial Roman, 'classical' style, copying many features of Roman buildings. Popes, merchants and aristocrats employed architects familiar with it, and painters and sculptors decorated the buildings with paintings, sculptures and reliefs. Notable examples are Brunelleschi's dome (the Duomo) of Florence and Michelangelo's dome of St Peter's in Rome. Architects like Michelangelo were often also painters and sculptors.
Islamic architecture: it too used domes and arches, but is known for minarets, courtyards and decoration based on geometric patterns, calligraphy and plant motifs rather than human figures.
Comparison: both built grand domed structures. Italian buildings drew on Roman models and were enriched with figure sculpture and painting; Islamic buildings relied on abstract and written ornament.

Q3 Why were Italian towns the first to experience the ideas of humanism?

Several developments favoured Italy. After the fall of the western Roman Empire Italy had no unified government and the Pope was not a strong political figure, so Italy was fragmented; yet this helped its culture revive. Trade between the Byzantine Empire and Islamic lands, and the Mongol-opened Silk Route trade with China, revived the Italian ports, and the towns became independent city-states, not parts of an empire. In places like Venice and Genoa the clergy were not politically dominant and there were no powerful feudal lords; rich merchants and bankers helped govern, so citizenship and civic pride grew. Commerce created demand for lawyers and notaries, so universities such as Padua and Bologna, centres of legal study, shifted to studying Roman culture. Ruins of Rome also lay in Italy, and rich patrons supported scholars and artists. Together these made Italian towns the first home of humanism.

Q4 Compare the Venetian idea of good government with those in contemporary France.

Venice: Contarini describes a commonwealth governed by a council which all gentlemen above 25 could join. The common people were kept out, since popular rule was thought to bring troubles and tumults. Rule was to go by nobility of lineage rather than wealth, but not by the highest nobility alone, as that would be rule by a few; every citizen not ignobly born, noble by birth or ennobled by virtue, shared in government. Rich merchants and bankers took part, the clergy were not dominant, and pride in citizenship was strong even under military despots.
France (the chapter gives little detail, so this is partly general background): the country was a monarchy within feudal society of the 'three orders', with the king, nobles and Church holding power, and with no wide citizen participation. The chapter notes that French Protestants, persecuted by Catholic rulers, began claiming the right of a people to remove an oppressive ruler.
So Venice was an oligarchic republic based on citizenship, France a monarchy based on feudal orders.

Q5 What were the features of humanist thought?

Humanism, as developed in Italian towns and later in northern Europe, had these features. (1) Faith in the individual: man could make his own decisions and develop his skills, and human nature was seen as many-sided, which went against feudal society's three separate orders. (2) Learning not bound to religion: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy were taught, with skills developed through discussion and debate. (3) Respect for the classical past: humanists studied ancient authors closely and saw the intervening 'Middle Ages' as a dark age, using 'modern' for the period from the fifteenth century. (4) Reduced control of religion: wealth, power and glory were valued (Barbaro defended wealth; Valla criticised the ban on pleasure), though people were not irreligious. (5) Interest in manners and good conduct. (6) Realism in art and an interest in science. (7) In the north, Christian humanists like More and Erasmus criticised Church greed. Machiavelli saw self-interest as the chief motive of human action. Women were largely excluded from this ideal.

Q6 Write a careful account of how the world appeared different to seventeenth-century Europeans.

By the seventeenth century Europeans saw the world very differently from their medieval ancestors.

In religion, the Reformation begun by Luther in 1517 broke the unity of the Catholic Church. Printed Bibles in local languages let people read scripture themselves, and religion came to be seen as an individual choice. Protestant churches arose in Germany and Switzerland, England's ruler became head of the Church, and the Catholic Church reformed itself, for instance through the Jesuits founded by Loyola in 1540.

In science, Copernicus placed the sun at the centre, Kepler showed planets move in ellipses, Galileo confirmed a dynamic world, and Newton's gravitation brought this Scientific Revolution to its climax. Knowledge came to rest on observation and experiment, nature began to replace God as the source of creation in sceptics' minds, and scientific societies like the Royal Society (1662) spread the new culture.

Geographical knowledge and new navigation techniques overturned the view that the Mediterranean was the centre of the world.

In society, public and private spheres began to separate, individuals were known in their own right, printing spread ideas, and regions developed identities based on language.