

Perspective on Art and Religion
By the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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This week I went to a restaurant that serves “breakfast at any time.” So I ordered French toast during the Renaissance.¹ Well, actually, that’s a lie. But in truth, the brief perspective on art and religion that I want to share with you relates to the Renaissance.

Eleven years ago, I was traveling in Italy with my mother and my sister. The title of this little book grabbed me: *God and Money* by Richard Fremantle. It is about Florence and art during the Renaissance. I have been carting this book around for 11 years, and I am delighted to share a few of its insights with you. *God and Money* is about intended consequences and unintended consequences. Our lives, as well, are about intended consequences and unintended consequences of our behavior.

The Renaissance took place in Florence between about 1400 and 1550. “The two forces which combined to bring forth the Renaissance in Florence were the Church and Trade. The older religious [force] was conservative and protective of its ancient form. The new commercial force was outwardly materialistic, but really dependent upon the free spirits and the aspirations of individuals, looking toward the future. Throughout the later Middle Ages the Church and Trade both adapted, each becoming part of the other, until suddenly a third thing appeared which was neither, and at the same time both – the Renaissance.”²

Florence’s commerce was based on wool. Merchants would buy wool throughout Europe and ship it to Florence, where it would be turned into elegant cloth and shipped all over the known world, sold at great profit. The large profits from Florence’s commercial activities were lent out all over Europe at high interest rates. “But money-lending for interest, called usury, was actually forbidden by the Church. So conflict developed between the Church . . . and the increasingly wealthy business community.”³

¹ This joke is attributed to Steven Astor.

² *God and Money: Florence and the Medici in the Renaissance*, Richard Fremantle, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1992, p. 11, Pocket Library of Studies in Art XXVII, page 19.

³ Page 25.

“Although it was sinful for businessmen to charge high interest rates, the Church let it be known that adequate and beautiful gifts, offered to God through his Church *might* assuage men’s guilt The size and quality of the gift might possibly be relevant to the amount of eventual forgiveness after death By the ploy of condemning interest the Church absorbed into itself much of the wealth of the business world, changing forever the form of that wealth from money into art Not surprisingly, it was by way of this Church-directed arrangement that art began to replace God as Western Society’s object of veneration.”

Richard Fremantle writes, “For all of society the artist slowly became the accepted magician, a high priest, more important than popes or kings, more important than the richest trader, able to justify and transform the growing materialism of man. Only [the artist] was able to turn materialistic profit into art, uniting both vital parts of [human] character, the materialistic and the spiritual.”

“This, of course, suited the businessman perfectly. Without the spiritual input of the artist, all his money and materialism was worthless, dispersed as he decayed. Money in fact represented the flesh, while the artist and art represented God. It was only the artist who, especially through the portrait, could slowly help man convince himself that he and not Christ, was God.”⁴

That is what I mean by unintended consequences. The Church wanted to strengthen reverence for God and obedience to the Church. By indirectly financing the creation of magnificent art, the Church ended up undercutting its own goals. When they had a choice, artists generally could not bring themselves to extol actual living, breathing members of the clergy. Instead, artists looked backward for inspiration to the real or imagined heydays of Greece and Rome. Artists were midwives of humanism, midwives of the Renaissance. From our vantage point in history, we see that these artist midwives were also hospice workers at the bedside of a dying Medieval deity.

⁴ Page 26.

May we note the moral of the story: Our actions have unintended consequences, as well as intended consequences. May we grow in maturity so that we notice *all* consequences of our behavior. May we be open to change and open to being changed. May it be so!