

Humanism and Secularization: From Petrarch to Valla (Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies)

By Riccardo Fubini

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The Renaissance movement known as humanism eventually spread from Italy through all of western Europe, transforming early modern culture in ways that are still being felt and debated. Central to these debates—and to this book—is the question of whether (and how) the humanist movement contributed to the secularization of Western cultural traditions at the end of the Middle Ages. A preeminent scholar of Italian humanism, Riccardo Fubini approaches this question in a new way—by redefining the problem of secularization more carefully to show how humanists can at once be secularizers and religious thinkers. The result is a provocative vision of the humanist movement.

Humanism and Secularization offers a nuanced account of humanists contesting medieval ideas about authority not in order to reject Christianity or even orthodoxy, but to claim for themselves the right to define what it meant to be a Christian. Fubini analyzes key texts by major humanists—such as Petrarch, Poggio, and Valla—from the first century of the movement. As he subtly works out these authors' views on religion and the Church from both biographical and textual information, Fubini reveals in detail the new historical consciousness that animated the humanists in their reading of classical and patristic texts. His book as a whole shows convincingly just how radical the humanism of the first half of the fifteenth century was and how sharply it challenged well-entrenched ideas and institutions. Appearing here in English for the first time, his work provides a model set of readings of humanist texts and a critical perspective on Italian humanism that will alter and enrich discussion and understanding of the nature of the humanist movement.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A splendid collection. Fubini’s studies offer a powerful and coherent account of Italian humanism from Petrarch to Valla. They make a strong case for the seriousness of humanism as an intellectual movement, rather than a simply literary or pedagogical one. They thus do us the important service of making our image of humanism at once more complex and more responsive to primary sources. . . . Fubini lays the basis for a whole new approach to humanist texts.”—Anthony Grafton, Princeton University

“Fubini is a major figure in the study of Italian humanism today. In this collection he addresses what has always been since Burckhardt a central issue in the interpretation of humanism, namely, to what extent and in what ways is the humanist movement responsible for secularizing Western cultural traditions at the end of the Middle Ages. His is an important voice urging us to see the full range and complexity of humanist attitudes to religion and helping us to situate the humanists more precisely vis a vis the Protestant Reformers and the Deists and philosophes of the Enlightenment.”—James Hankins, Harvard University

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