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Does Michelangelo's Poetic Veil Shroud a Secret Luther?

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

The thesis poses a question derived from an unlikely nexus of two prominent figures of the Renaissance and the Reformation: the artist whose creative abilities ostensibly dominate the Vatican and religious art, juxtaposed with the rebel who splintered the dominance of Roman Catholicism. Michelangelo's program of artistic and religious reform in the second quarter of the sixteenth century strikes a chord similar to Martin Luther's theological perspectives set forth in the Reformation. Through the influence of the artist's friendship with the noblewoman, Vittoria Colonna, and subsequent involvement with an elite and cultured Italian reform group called the *Spirituali*, his later works of art and poetry reflect a deepening spirituality with unmistakable affinities to Protestant doctrine.

The thesis first discusses the revolutionary stream of religious thought by providing a brief background of the intellectual, social, political, and ecclesiastical currents conducive to religious reform in Germany and Italy. Second, it explores the pathway leading to Michelangelo's later spiritual and doctrinal formation and the manner in which it parallels Luther's in several crucial aspects. The point of divergence,

however, manifests itself through the parameters of personal experience in communicating their respective visions. Whereas Luther combined piety with spiritual autonomy and freedom, directing his efforts toward proclaiming a simple, democratic gospel the masses could comprehend, Michelangelo wedded piety with beauty and mystery, communicating through a nuanced language of art and poetry shrouded in allegory, myth, and allusion. Lastly, the paper comments upon possible reasons for Michelangelo's and the *Spirituali*'s failure of reform strategies in contrast to Luther's success. Michelangelo's ties to Luther are predicated upon an evaluation of certain of the artist's poems and *The Last Judgment* fresco as expounded in the thesis. However, the final determination of whether Michelangelo can be viewed as a "secret Luther" rests with the reader and his/her commitment to imagination, intellectual involvement, and a personal quest for truth. The thesis challenges the astute reader to assume the role of an authentic truth-seeker who must delve below the surface of superficiality to discern the message of the divine artist/poet who deems truth too precious to unveil to the mindless throng.

Chapter One: Introduction

Influenced by the writings of classical antiquity, the Renaissance cast artists in the role of gifted poets and seers, divinely inspired by God and rare among men. Boccaccio spoke of the poet veiling truth “in a fair and fitting garment of fiction” through the power of *fantasia* to invent new combinations of words and thoughts (*De geologia deorum*, 14,7 {*Opere in versi*, p 941}). Similarly, Michelangelo, through his power of imagination, employed fictive invention conjoined with the surmounting of technical difficulties to proclaim the truth universally, but exclude most from its understanding. Fully appreciating the form and function of art necessitated engaging the elite aristocrat’s intellect, educated in solving artistic problems and in applying judgment to exegesis. While one may affirm that one of the requisite functions of a poet concerned shrouding truth with a veil to protect it from too much familiarity and the irreverent gaze of the vulgar throng, could the serious truth-seeker make a quantum leap of interpretation and synthesize certain religious congruities that Michelangelo held with Martin Luther? By positioning and analyzing certain of Michelangelo’s art works and poetry within the context of reforming religious ideas of the sixteenth century, the thesis demonstrates many similarities between these two figures who are synonymous with the Renaissance and Reformation.

Both Michelangelo and Luther essentially validated an identical message: to reformulate the Church of Jesus Christ and liberate it from the layers of ecclesiastical

fiats that threatened to obscure the centrality of Christ to salvation. While Luther's 95 *Theses* (1517) overtly railed against the corrupt practices of the Roman church, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (1536-1541), set within the most sacred bastion of hierarchical Christendom, adopts a more covert stance as a subtle visual punctuation to the monk's reformatory call for purification. As the optimism of the High Renaissance gave way to pessimism, many correlated the brutal Sack of Rome in 1527 with God's judgment against an errant church that had deserted Christ, her first love, and degenerated into the status of a greedy harlot. Both monk and artist embraced the doctrine of justification by faith, apart from works, and acknowledged the need for internal church reform. Though this doctrine possibly shaped the inner core of both men's theological systems, the individual methodology for implementing reform could hardly have been more diverse.

Since the Vatican flaunted Michelangelo's artistic genius, while it excommunicated Luther, one might assume their theological tenets clashed. Instead, they shared the essential commonality of looking to the past to interpret the present. Luther studied Hebrew and Greek translations of the Bible to better understand the nature of early Christianity to effect religious reform, and Michelangelo applied the *ethoi* of ancient Greece and Rome to meld classical myths and Christianity toward a reform of religious art. Both embraced the doctrine of justification by faith, rejected a complex system of works to gain salvation, deplored the venal state of the Roman church, and worked for internal reform. Each experienced a personal deepening of religious experience and acknowledged Christ's grace as sufficient atonement for sin—salvation apart from works. Conversely, polemic differences exist in how each externalized his

personal vision for religious reform: Michelangelo expressed piety through elegance, mystery, and classical beauty, while Luther's piety straightforwardly addressed spiritual autonomy, granting the faithful permission to question religious authority. The artist advocated an elitist and esoteric religious coterie to which only the initiated could aspire, in contradistinction to the monk's striving for simplicity and clarity of speech, transcending class barriers, and democratizing the Gospel.

The manifold calls to reform the church –no novel enterprise of Luther, nonetheless, assumed irreconcilable proportions through the character and disposition of the individual or group, the venue in which the reform message was manifested, and the manner in which it was perceived by the religious and political establishments. The thesis will briefly explore why Luther's reform failed in the Catholic church, but eventually liberated the state and individual from the powers of the church. Set against this sixteenth century skirmish over ecclesiastical tradition versus individual Biblical interpretation along with the "culture of civic religion" (Nagel "Gifts" 324) opposed to the subjective interiority of the individual, the thesis highlights Michelangelo's sympathies with some of these revolutionary and reformative approaches to God's revealed truth, couched in his poetic veils of allusion, myth, and allegory.

Michelangelo's vision for religious and artistic reform generated within subjective religious experience and aristocratic ideals, also destined for failure, nevertheless, prefaced an eventual new art market, liberating the artist from contractual agreement to create art for art's sake. Alexander Nagel proclaims the *Last Judgment* as a means for communicating theological precepts through artistic transcendence was a failure, immediately causing intense debate (*Michelangelo*195). The Counter-Reformation's

Council of Trent hardened its position on justification by faith apart from works into heresy, and Michelangelo's *Spirituali* group dedicated to church reform and conciliatory efforts with the Protestants disbanded, but the Inquisition never questioned him. Since his poetry had not been published at the time, and his religious presentation drawings were in the possession of his friend and spiritual mentor, Vittoria Colonna, the more patent connotations with Protestantism were not in circulation. Still, if one views the *Last Judgment* through the lens of the *Spirituali*'s theological interpretations, especially as set forth in the *Beneficio di Cristo* document, many veiled allusions to some Protestant doctrines, later deemed heresy, suggest a secret Luther, but an anti-revolutionary one. While a young, upstart monk like Luther could be considered dispensable to the Catholic church, the celebrated and prestigious Michelangelo, referred to as *Il Divino*, and his prodigious talents, although not above censure, assumed an unparalleled position in the culture and preservation of Roman Catholicism as well as, or perhaps superior to, any pope.

Chapter Two: Conditions Favorable to Religious Reform

In assessing how and why the radical ideas of Luther caught on, their sundry modes of transmission, and to what extent these ideas affected Michelangelo, it behooves one to peremptorily scrutinize the interaction of religious and socio-political forces to create conditions conducive to religious reform. Aside from the more well-known theological issues associated with the Reformation, both religious and non-religious considerations in Germany and Italy played a crucial role in its success. Hans Hillerbrand theorizes that Luther's (or any other reformer's) theology could have been formulated one hundred years earlier, but it would not have met the same fate, due to the social, political, and intellectual climate in Germany (64). A loyal supporter of the church, Emperor Charles V would have forcefully put down Luther's intransigent theology, but he had to negotiate with contentious towns and princes and fend off French and Turkish threats. Not least of these considerations involved the protection afforded Luther by his benefactor, Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony.

Germany: Politics and Religion

In the fifteenth century, a changing German society resented the static power structures actualized by feudalism. Subsequently, when industry and commerce attracted people to cities, a rising middle class, called burghers, displaced the lesser nobility of

knights and insisted upon a more operative part in government. With the revival of Roman law, princes and cities began to usurp authority in religious matters from the bishops (Thompson 378-79). Secularization weakened church sovereignty as lawyers and businessmen replaced churchmen and nobles in government administration. Chafing at the church's jurisdiction and taxation to benefit Rome and Italy, while receiving few ecclesiastical appointments in return, the people judged these actions as belittling German stature and draining their resources. Growth in mining, industry, banking and trade engendered a more prosperous and secular society, whose confidence in their abilities begot a national pride. Empowered by the printing press and greater literacy, Italian humanism traveled over the Alps, prompting a more worldly mentality that questioned traditional beliefs, and when applied to religious critique, eroded the power of Rome even further. Finally, peasants desired a better life and more civil rights, and though uprisings remained few and local, resentments continually simmered and social tensions rose.

Italy: Politics, Religion and Art

Italy, less impacted by feudalism than Germany, benefited earlier from the growth of industry, foreign trade, and capitalism. Due to a breakdown of republican government, Italian despots ruled the towns, even within the Papal States, leading to hereditary lordship and a constant scrambling for territorial expansion. Farther south, the Kingdom of Naples, with less towns and a more feudalistic society, contributed little to the cultural attainment of the Renaissance, but evolved as the center of political intrigue between the French and Spanish, triggering the French invasion of 1494. The Renaissance Italian

courts, papal and secular, used culture in the form of art, literature, and politics to articulate and justify power, and Europe would soon adopt the courtly relations as a model for their cultural values.

Any discussion of religion, politics, or art must eventually lead to the pinnacle of Christianity, the popes. The popes had convinced European Christians they maintained control over the responsibility of meting out salvation. However, salvation became the province of a vast and sophisticated enterprise that set forth the terms in increasingly legalistic modes. The bureaucratic machinery succeeded in granting dispensations and indulgences in exchange for funds, and the papal church became a choice property to manipulate to their advantage and that of their families (Mayer 78).

By consolidating its power in Rome, the papacy concentrated on patronage of humanistic learning and the fine arts (Nauert 87). Intent upon papal splendor, they restored Rome, languishing from its state of squalor and gross neglect while the popes resided in Avignon. Repairing the infrastructure and improving water supply, they built and restored churches and hospitals, and beautified the city by constructing palaces, gardens, and fountains. The Renaissance popes, many of them connoisseurs and art patrons, showed greater predilection for administrative and political skills than theology. Though several of the Renaissance popes were pious, many rejected the medieval belief that the world was a vale of tears, and viewed the papacy as a God-given benefit to be used and enjoyed to the full.

Apart from the reigning popes, the second consideration resides with the function, relevancy, and perception of the church itself. The Renaissance church, as an instrument of the Papal States, owned one third of Italy, and she retained rich holdings in the rest

(Durant 17). The church viewed her principal duty as avouching moral and social order, education, and the arts, requiring copious funds and personnel to superintend such a complex organization. Often appointed by lay authority, bishops and cardinals were not selected for their piety, but on administrative or military ability, wealth, or political connections. Bribery flourished in ecclesiastical appointments, papal elections, and the secular courts. At lower levels, the monks proved notorious for their lazy and profligate lifestyles; scurrilous charges circulated regarding their drinking, gambling, and sexual exploits. The chief complaint against parish priests concerned ignorance; their many duties and inadequate pay allowed little time or money for study (Durant 20-21). Many Catholics outside Rome addressed the issue of reform, looking back to the church of antiquity as a model, demanding better educated clergy, more sermons, and a closer check on public morals.

In addition to voicing pandemic ethical complaints, other issues indicated religion's irrelevance to contemporary life. The aridity of scholastic sermons based on reason left the heart untouched, and people felt a void. Medieval philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) combined faith (God's revelation) with reason (Aristotle's logic), privileging logic over thought and feeling. In contrast, those who followed Augustine spirituality, both Catholic and Protestant, rejected scholastic rationalism, preferring a simple faith in the Scriptures and observing the teaching of the early church fathers. Influenced by northern Europe's lay movement and mysticism, they viewed faith as a gift which enables belief, an inward condition of the heart that replaced an external commitment to rules.

A religion that did not engage the heart epitomized merely a system of calculated externals and a form that lacked substance. Burkhardt theorizes that the upper and middle class Italians at the height of the Renaissance held contempt for the church and resented its hierarchy, but still complied with the outer ecclesiastical rituals and ceremonies that structured daily life (Burkhardt 342-43). The church taught that one earned salvation through performing good works and seeking grace through the intercession of saints and priests. The cult of saints, relics, and pilgrimages not only stimulated economy, but constituted an array of works designed to procure salvation. The most lucrative of these works benefiting the church entailed selling indulgences and hiring priests to say Masses for the dead in order to minimize the time spent in purgatory (Durant 24).

Charges of greed, moral corruption, and worldliness against the church intensified, as superstition and self-serving rituals involved in amassing pious works proved odious to the reformers. The Catholic position could be summed up thusly: humankind must accrue good works to add to the hope of salvation, and art patronage in service of God functioned as a suitable work destined for heavenly reward. In the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, especially in times of war and peril, people received spiritual solace through the representation of saints in paintings and statues, imbuing them with a superstitious belief in their transcendent powers (Noble 453-56).

Since art transmitted both spiritual and societal values, the commissioning of sacred and secular art works played a prominent role in Italian culture. For those individuals or guilds who desired not only eternal recompense, but fame, art patronage provided ample opportunity for aggrandizement. As religion became more about

subjective internalization and less about external forms and rituals, the system of art patronage with its endowments, commissions, contracts, and traditional iconography produced art that lacked spiritual potency. Michelangelo, as well as Luther, emphasized the grace of Christ as a free gift, unsolicited and undeserved. Extending this to aesthetics, Michelangelo felt the artist should be free to follow his conscience in expressing his personal religious feeling (Nagel “Gifts” 647).

Renaissance Humanism

Aside from the universal acknowledgement of the church’s corrupt state and the escalating furor of condemnation, other factors converged and gathered momentum to drive the religious revolution—the most paramount being humanism. Humanism as an intellectual movement comprised the dominant force of the Italian Renaissance, and from it “flowed the reform of religion itself, the birth of science, and all good things” (Olsen 97). Most recent scholars agree on Renaissance humanism as a product of the revival of rhetoric. When applied to understanding and proclaiming the Gospel, the Reformation became “the theological fulfillment of the Renaissance” (Bouwisma 226-27). Humanism, with its priority on education and the individual’s responsibility to pursue knowledge in the interests of self and society, inspired the arguments and debates that fueled the Reformation and Counter-Reformation (Greengrass 33).

Kristeller states that Renaissance humanism was not a philosophical system, but “a cultural and educational program which emphasized and developed an important but limited area of studies” (Kristeller 10). Nauert agrees somewhat, but adds that it

contained some “philosophical implications,” such as the belief that education produced a more moral person. A component of morality concerned societal obligation. With the overthrow of German control in the thirteenth century, some northern and central Italian cities formed republics. At times unstable and under the rule of a despot, city-republics still maintained some of their republican practices. Educated people felt compunction to participate in community affairs and saw similarities in Roman history that stimulated their own contemporary political thought and action. The Roman educational model held no interest for the medieval clergy and aristocracy, but its accent on rhetoric and oratory attracted those who wanted to prepare their sons to participate in public life implicit in the new awareness of social responsibility (Nauert 5, 12-13).

Impacted by paganism and the Roman model of citizenship, Renaissance humanism precipitated a revolutionary refocus: from fixation on God and the soul to a new conception of the world and humankind’s exploits within it (Olsen 97). The humanists did not reject God, but prioritized education as the chief means for advancing the good of self or society. The Renaissance was not irreligious, as might be supposed, judging by its focus upon humanity. However, medieval philosophy’s preference for reason advocated a mastery of absolute truth that exceeded human ability and proved irrelevant to daily living. On the other hand, the goal of life is not to know God who is beyond our ability to understand, but to love God. Disregarding absolutism, the humanists advocated moral choices based on probability and not certainty, seemingly more practical than scholastic training in speculation and science (Nauert 15-16).

An agent of social and religious change, Renaissance humanism produced skepticism in traditional systems of order and bolstered confidence in humankind’s

ability to solve problems. New political structures and a society of educated laity undermined the established hierarchy by rejecting the uncritical acceptance of church dogma and distrusting the absolutes of medieval metaphysics. Humankind's self-reliance and ingenuity displaced medieval faith in cosmic order. In some respects the liberation from imposed order stimulated Renaissance creativity and caused a secularization of society, but beyond the silver lining of opportunity, there existed a darker side. Bereft of an unchanging and orderly universe, humankind found itself at the mercy of unpredictable forces in a world no longer comprehensible. The principles that had shaped one's world-view and governed behavior through the church called for personal reevaluation or "re-form" of theology (Bouswma 228-29; Volz 184). That process of "re-form" would be the province of northern humanism.

Northern humanism, primarily concerned with ethics and theology, had its origins in Italian humanism. Humanist ideas wended their way over the Alps by the printing press, tradesmen, artists, ecclesiastics, and court personnel, but mainly by way of teachers who had studied in Italy and returned, or by itinerant humanists, often called "wandering poets" (Nauert 100-102). At the close of the fifteenth century, humanism could be found in all German universities, and those having a humanist education assumed their places in all areas of eminent leadership and prestige (Nauert 108). Christian humanists plumbed the sources of Greek and Hebrew Biblical writings to recover the golden age of Christianity, extending from the time of Christ and the apostles to the early church.

Luther, not technically a humanist, nevertheless familiarized himself with the writings of the Christian humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, while Michelangelo's humanism blended two slightly different varieties: Florentine and Roman. John

D'Amico makes an astute distinction between Florentine and Roman humanism. The Florentine adherents concerned themselves primarily with metaphysics and synthesizing all religions, whereas the Romans, sometimes referred to as curial humanists, studied ancient writings for authority to claim the cultural supremacy of classical Rome in order to bolster the image of their revitalized and Christianized empire. The humanists glossed over the differences between classical culture and Christianity in the interests of accommodating a variety of conflicting views that worked until the Reformation and the Sack of Rome (116-17). However, apart from the curial humanists, a small reforming group with members in Renaissance Rome followed a theological/mystical pathway and eschewed historicity in favor of a mystical interpretation of Biblical texts, especially the Apocalypse. The varied intellectual interpretations of this group arose through renewed study of scholasticism, medieval mysticism, and an interest in the esoteric nature of the ancient Hebrew Cabala. Consequently, its leaders usually came from the religious order subscribing to medieval trends (D'Amico 218-19). Viewing the passage of time as having a degenerative effect on the purity of the church, they urged a return to its earlier values. Interestingly enough, these Italian reformers advocated church reform rather halfheartedly, since real reform would have undercut the institutions that supported their positions.

Michelangelo, having begun in Florence and ended in Rome, partook of both brands of humanism. The Platonic Academy in Florence, set up under the despot, Lorenzo de Medici, basically ignored civic responsibility and emphasized the mystery religions. These bacchic mysteries intrigued Michelangelo, along with his stellar interest in Neo-Platonism--very much evidenced in his art and poetry. When Michelangelo

arrived in Rome, he became attached to the circle of Cardinal Riario and Jacopo Galli which merged an Augustinian mysticism with the formal cult of Cicero and Virgil (Wind *Pagan* 154). The fact that Michelangelo produced both a *Bacchus* and the *Pietà* of St. Peter's at relatively the same period attested to the fact that he and his patrons had no compunctions about fluctuating between pagan and religious themes. Recently rekindled and especially popular in Rome, Cicero's rhetorical acumen manifested the humanist ideal of language as the medium of culture and refinement (D' Amico 123). Pandering to refined taste, Michelangelo utilized many rhetorical strategies fundamental to the high style of writing in his painting of the Sistine Chapel, such as ornamentation and artifice designed to thrill and delight the savvy viewer. Due to his friendship with the noblewoman, Vittoria Colonna, he became active in the *Spirituali* or Italian reform group referred to above. The thesis will primarily consider his works after this meeting, exhibiting that his beliefs coalesced in many respects with the Lutherans.

Influence of Humanism on Luther and Michelangelo

Aside from the above noted religious and cultural overtones of Florentine and Roman humanism that molded Michelangelo's perspective, a brief discussion of the intellectual current of humanism is extremely pertinent to both Luther and Michelangelo. With its chief proponents of human dignity, education, and secularization, humanism actuated the world-view and self-perception of each.

The first aspect concerned self-consciousness and the dignity of man (Stephens 113). Both considered their feelings and thoughts worthy of exploring and expressing

through the mechanism of self-reflection that had been initiated earlier by Petrarch. Luther proclaimed that one could effectively entreat God through personal prayer, having no need of a mediator, and trusted his conscience to guide him in understanding the Bible and forming a true religion. The Renaissance had rejected outmoded structures of compulsory belief and urged freedom of thought. In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Pico della Mirandola invested mankind with the freedom to make of himself what he chose. Man had the power of mental choice to rise in spiritual meditation or sink to the manner of beasts in unbridled sensuality. In designating the lofty spiritual realm, Christian Neoplatonists believed that God personified ultimate beauty and its source. Michelangelo, steeped in these Neoplatonist ideas of contemplating God, avowed man as the crowning glory of God's creation and considered a beautiful person, made in the image of God, to be the most potent revelation of the Creator himself. The artist learns to create beauty by the example of the divine Creator, as the portion of a sonnet written ca.1511 would indicate.

He Who made all there is, made every part
at first, then put those loveliest of all
together, to show what beauty's at His call,
as here, in this triumph of celestial art. (Nims 12, Sonnet 9)

(Colui che 'l tutto fe', fece ogni parte/ e poi del tutto la piú bella scelse,/ per mostrar quivi le sue cose ecclese,/ com'ha fatto or colla sua divin'arte.) In order for Michelangelo to create a beautiful work of art, his mind, under divine inspiration, must form a concept and then realize it experientially by overcoming difficulties inherent in the particular artistic medium. Michael Allen wrote in *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino: A Study of His Phaedrus Commentary, Its Sources and Genesis* that for the Neoplatonists, "beauty was raised to the status of being the highest artistic and even moral and

intellectual abstraction” (Quoted by Snow-Smith 149). In Michelangelo’s earlier works, beauty is the agency by which one approaches the deity, but his later works turn from the immediate and sensuous physical realm to the quest of a more theoretical, spiritual beauty.

The second aspect postulated a return to the sources of an earlier age for inspiration and clarity and the role of education in improving life. Renaissance humanists, desirous to learn the culture of earlier civilizations, taught that education had a civilizing effect on humankind, making them more humane. Luther looked back to original Biblical translations of Hebrew and Greek to re-examine the teachings of Jesus, the lives of the apostles, and early church fathers and advocated education in Biblical doctrine to develop a personal relationship with God. However, Michelangelo’s education took on a Greco-Roman bent, as he studied the sculptures of antiquity and probed pagan mysteries in the Neoplatonic spirit of the great humanists, Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, to synthesize the classical and the Christian. An astute knowledge of both Christian and pagan themes was necessary to fully appreciate Michelangelo’s work. Also consonant with the reformers’ tendency to look to the past for a more purified worship, he held a life-long fascination with the most popular cult image of the late Middle Ages, a frontal view of the dead Christ, the Man of Sorrows. Its implementation shows his attempt to forge a connection with the earlier tradition of religious art by setting it in modern terms (Nagel *Michelangelo* 20). This is exemplified in the *Christ Crucified between Two Angels* (Figure 1) he made for Vittoria Colonna, a new kind of religious image that fit the Christocentric program of the reformers and stressed the primacy of Christ’s supreme sacrifice.

The third aspect involved removing the accretions of tradition through liberation and unclothing. Luther liberated the Gospel from ecclesiastical dogma and superstition to reveal the true image of Christ, the Word made flesh. Michelangelo shared Luther's belief that the accumulation of religious ritual and the preoccupation with externals had, like so many clothes, obscured the Christ of the Gospels. Extending the metaphor of clothes, Michelangelo attempted to emancipate art from the morass of contractual agreements to reveal the true image of Christ, emanating from the Divine as God's counterpart in the flesh. He was convinced that art patronage had swathed the image with layers of self-aggrandizing and superfluous piety.

The fourth and final aspect entailed secularization. Luther advocated a practical Christianity. No longer relegated exclusively to monasticism, God's calling embraced any secular vocation, no matter how mundane. All necessary work done in the service of God to benefit humankind pleased God as much as prayer and meditation. All the religious energy that had previously been expended on good works now redirected itself toward vocation. Michelangelo, in pursuit of his divine calling, ventured to free art from the strict prerogative of the church and economy of patronage and inadvertently opened the way for a free art market.

Chapter Three: Luther and Italian Reform

To more fully understand the doctrinal similarities Michelangelo held with Luther, a short historical summary follows sketching the outline of Luther's initial call to church reform, the formation of his ideology, and the far-reaching ramifications of both the establishment's response and that of the German people. Luther staunchly maintained the believer must rely on faith alone for justification, while others considered good works a necessity. Probably most theologians and believers took a position somewhere between these poles (Mayer 80). Before the Counter-Reformation's Council of Trent clarified Catholic dogma, the church tolerated a rather broad accumulation of free-thinking theological interpretations—one of which retained by the *Spirituali*. Quite possibly there would have been room for Luther, but the militant character and dispositions of both Luther and his more ardent detractors raised the controversy to such a high pitch of invectives and diatribes, the doors fairly slammed shut on the possibility for retreat and/or reconciliation. Though a number of theologians held similar views to Luther's, few Italians followed his revolutionary path. What Luther failed to grasp and Pope Leo X knew only too well were the political, economic and social consequences of his initiatives. If the pope were portrayed as an ineffectual player in the pursuit of man's salvation, the supremacy of the church would be diminished and open to displacement by the power-hungry kings and princes. If someone had explained to Luther the full import

of his assertions, would he have backed down and waited for the church to deal internally? Probably not; the dye had been cast (Mee 209).

The Luther Controversy

In Germany, Luther posted his 95 *Theses* for theological debate, but received no response. The *Theses* not only denounced simony, or the sale of ecclesiastical offices, but challenged the indulgence trade, alleging that it minimized the seriousness of sin (Latourette 708). At first Luther only disaffirmed indulgences and secondary theological issues, but during the months of theological debate in 1518 and 1519, his emphasis shifted to the role of the papacy and matters of religious authority (Hillerbrand 20-21). Disputing the necessity for priests to act as mediators between man and God, he asserted that Christ had fulfilled that role. Another point of contention involved the Eucharist; Luther felt congregants should partake of both bread and wine in Communion, instead of limiting the wine to the priests. The reformer perceived this sacrament as a commemorative symbol, instead of the actual blood and body of Christ as set forth in the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation.

Luther favored diminishing priestly role and increasing personal autonomy in worship. Insistent on the individual's right to interpret Scripture rather than submit to ecclesiastical tradition, he charged medieval Christianity had lost or perverted the biblical account of who man is and how man is saved. Luther and the Catholic church both trusted in the promise of salvation that was preached and commemorated by the sacraments; the point of departure resided in how they viewed the future. The Catholic

believer, comforted by the promises of Christ the Savior, nevertheless, proceeded from this place of mercy along a road that led to Judgment, ultimately facing Christ the Judge. Medieval theology resolved that conflict by penance, absolution, and good works, and by the 15th century indulgences could be bought to relieve doubts (Ozment 83). Luther placed the entire burden of salvation on Christ the Savior; the believer need not fear Christ the Judge.

Luther's *Theses* and radical tracts circulated by means of the printing press, and by 1518 the pope's advisors and priests had greatly advanced the role of Luther as prime heretic and antagonist against the church (Mee 209). Receiving a summons from Rome to appear there on charges of heresy, he immediately petitioned Frederick the Wise of Saxony to intervene. A major element of Luther's success can be traced to the support of Frederick, who insisted Luther be given a fair trial. His protection from 1517 to 1521 afforded Luther and his friends at Wittenberg the time and opportunity to develop and circulate their revolutionary ideas (Stephens 209).

From the beginning, Frederick refused Rome's request that Luther be sent there for trial, but suggested he should be tried in Germany. Summoned by Emperor Charles, Luther appeared at the Diet of Worms in 1521. When ordered to recant what he had written, Luther refused, saying, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen" (Mee 280). An individual had dared to defy the established church, and the consequences of such an action would reverberate throughout Europe. The Diet failed, and the Emperor commanded them to remove the heretic. He immediately issued an edict for Luther's arrest, but Frederick secretly arranged to have him kidnapped and hidden in the castle of Wartburg.

Luther never intended to leave the church, but the church eventually left him; Pope Leo X's bull of 1521 ex-communicated the recalcitrant monk (Marty 68). Leo X died that same year, concluding the Leonine Age, the golden age of the Renaissance, with all its excesses. Luther's singular defiance of tradition and authority contributed to the unleashing of powerful social forces that fostered a new concept of individuality. Michelangelo's commitment to portray his personal religious experience, albeit shrouded in the subtleties and nuances of *The Last Judgment* that provoked such a storm of controversy, attests to the same spirit of individuality and personal autonomy that Luther possessed to such a great degree. German Luther never comprehended nor esteemed the full flowering of the Italian Renaissance ideal personified in the early works of Michelangelo. Nevertheless, from our point of historical perspective,

. . . we lament the destructive result of his influence; and yet we rejoice still in the figure who stood up before the Diet of Worms and asserted the sovereign rights of the individual. And if we grieve to see how the world of Leo X was destroyed, we know, too, that this archetypal struggle between the establishment and a revolutionary, the establishment fostered, nourished, and helped to shape the destructive forces that brought it down. (Mee 294)

The rebellion to intellectual dogma framed in the Renaissance inspired the rebellion to the inflexible moral autocracy of the institutional church in the Reformation.

Italian Reform and the *Spirituali*

The call for religious reform in Italy was not a new phenomenon. Fra Girolamo Savonarola, fiery Dominican preacher attempted to institute a restored Republic with a theocratic base and ruled Florence from 1494-1498. Condemning the vanities of Florence and the degeneracy of its art and culture, he preached hypnotic and riveting

sermons, predicting God's vengeance in the form of a French invasion. When it came true in 1494, his credibility mounted. Championing a short-lived theocracy, however, Savonarola was excommunicated by the pope, strangled, and burned in the public square by 1498 (Burkhardt 356-61). After Savonarola's death, his followers established the Oratory of Divine Love in 1517 to carry on his hopes for internal church reform. Advocating frequent and devout celebration of Mass, they also revived old orders and established new ones, as "revivals in the Catholic church have often been preceded by revivals of Catholic monasticism" (Thompson 506). Several Oratorians became active in the Italian Reformation and the later Counter-Reformation, but they disbanded after the Sack of Rome in 1527, and many escaped to Venice where they met other churchmen (DeTolnay *Michelangelo* 103). One of these ecclesiastics, Reginald Pole, would assume leadership in the Italian Reform group, the *Spirituali*, and function as Vittoria Colonna's spiritual adviser. Savonarola's martyrdom fueled a pious interest in his writings in the sixteenth century, and Vittoria and Michelangelo subscribed to its popularity (Wind *Religious* 149). Vittoria borrowed a text from Savonarola's *Triumphus Crucis* for one of her poems (Jerrold 287-91), and Michelangelo studied his treatises, also. Condivi commented in his biography that the artist still carried the memory of the sounds of the preacher's words so many years later (68).

Another potent force advocating reform involved some Italian intellectuals who became more open to religious ideas fomenting in the north. This reform movement called Evangelism occupies a position that remains distinct from both the Protestants and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. Eva-Maria Jung defines it as "the last Catholic reform movement before the Council of Trent and the first ecumenical movement after

the schism of the Reformation” (512). Italian Evangelism took its cues from Erasmian criticism of the established church and its author’s intent to reform the Church from within through argument and persuasion. This Catholic reform movement, active from about 1510 to 1560s, consisted of reforming individuals or groups called *Spirituali*, because they criticized their fellow churchmen as being too worldly (Greengrass 328). Claiming greater effectiveness, the spiritual church prioritized inward disciplines of prayer and intense study of the Scriptures over outward forms and rituals.

The work that most clearly defined the *Spirituali* doctrine was the *Beneficio di Cristo*, printed in 1543 and popular until placed on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1549 (Nagel *Michelangelo* 171). The popularity of the *Beneficio* lay in its relevancy to address mounting concerns of the laity induced by the spiritual anxiety of the age. The manifesto honed in forcefully and concisely on the widely debated issue of how men were justified before God and could possess the assurance of such, but totally ignored the function of the church.

The *Beneficio*’s doctrine on justification closely approximated that of the northern reformers. How, then, did Italian Evangelism respond to these radical and divisive issues so prevalent in the writings of Luther and Calvin? Jung maintains that it is erroneous to speak either of the identification of Evangelism with Protestantism, or Evangelism as being opposed to Catholicism. She says the emphasis merely shifted. “The stress was no longer on good works but on divine grace; not on law, but on faith; not on the church, but on Christ” (522).

Evangelism’s three characteristics can be summed up thusly: It is “undogmatic,” “aristocratic”, and “transitory.” It did, however, share certain affinities with

Protestantism. Both grew out of the individual's longing for the assurance of justification and salvation in a bewildering and volatile religio-political milieu. Both assumed a pessimistic attitude toward human nature—a strong reaction against the humanistic optimism of earlier times—apprehensive about the nature and value of works to ensure God's blessing. Instead, they acknowledged their dependence on the grace of God and the extent of his mercy. Both relied more upon the study of Scripture than the teachings of the church and looked to personal inspiration from God, rendering the mediation of priests unnecessary. Both denigrated and called into question the accretion of relics, rituals, and miracle-working images, opting instead for a more Christ-centered form of worship. Both wished to spiritualize the church and cleanse it of a complicated system of contractual works designed to curry God's favor (Jung 520).

The danger ominously lurked in Evangelism's apparent nonchalance toward dogma whose sacred paradigms had formed the foundation and structure of the organized church for generations. Instead, they favored a spiritualized church built on tolerance, teetering precariously on the brink of an ethereal mysticism. Jung says after the Council of Trent, Evangelism shared both the fault and condemnation of *Beneficio*—not for what it said, but by what it omitted; not so much for its heresy, but its apathy toward the Roman church. Lacking strong leadership in this time of heightened religious uncertainty, the *Spirituali* failed to stand up under the suspicion and scrutiny of the Inquisition (Jung 523).

Strictly speaking, the essential difference between Evangelism and Protestantism can be epitomized in its singular absence of protest. The *Spirituali* wanted not so much to reform the church by force but to affect a reform of the individual through personal

faith. They highly respected the institution of the church, along with its hierarchical structure, and believed it could be successfully reformed through a return to the spirit and doctrines of the early church. Moreover, there was nothing revolutionary about Evangelism; they could be maligned for suspected heresy, but not rupture. Though the *Spirituali* subscribed to the pessimism of the Reformation, it did not lead to iconoclasm or asceticism, but “merged with a high aesthetic culture and developed into a spiritualized and moderate devotion,” combining “humanism with mysticism, the love of letters and the cultivation of good manners with austerity of morals” (Jung 524). In spite of sporadic attempts to reach the middle-classes through religious literature in the vernacular, the sophisticated elite gathered in salons and palaces, with no concern to impact the masses (Jung 523-24). It was to this group that Michelangelo became attracted through the influence of his friendship with Vittoria Colonna.

Chapter Four: Spiritual and Doctrinal Formation

If there ever was a theologian who lived his theology, it was Luther. And if there ever was an artist who could ignite the spark of the Divine in his art, it was Michelangelo. Both men exercised a commitment to discover truth and lead lives consonant with their system of religious beliefs, but the somewhat discursive road to enlightenment assumed the guise of a spiritual pilgrimage. Both Luther and Michelangelo laid claim early in life to Christianity, but each appears to have experienced a deepening of spirituality, resulting in a heightened awareness of sinfulness, renewal, and restoration. In analyzing Michelangelo's art and poetry after he met Vittoria Colonna, the thesis will show that he affirmed at least three pillars of Reformation theology erected by Luther: the doctrine of justification by faith, the priesthood of believers, and Christ's sacrifice for the sins of humankind as the core doctrine of Christianity. Though agreeing in principle, the manner in which each man manifested his beliefs through a methodology for implementing reform could not be more discrete. While Luther's formula for achieving piety combined spiritual autonomy and simplicity, Michelangelo looked back to classical antiquity to reform the religious imagery through beauty and mystery wedded to piety. Much like Jesus taught his parables to the multitude, but explained the meaning of them to his inner circle of disciples, the artist shrouded precious truth in the veiled language of allegory, myth, and allusion practiced by the poet.

Deepening Spirituality

As a young monk at the convent of Erfurt, Luther suffered an acute spiritual despair, occasioned by his strict asceticism. Through intensified rigors of self-denial and penance, he never appeased an angry and vengeful God. He wrote, “For I had no idea except that the ‘righteousness of God’ meant his severe judgment. Would he save me from his severe judgment? Nay, I would be eternally lost” (Quoted in Thompson 388).

Suffering torment from time to time with these attacks of doubt, Luther pored over the Bible inside a small room in the tower of the Augustinian convent he used for study while teaching at the University of Wittenberg. Avidly seeking to assuage an over-active conscience, it was in that very place he discovered the liberating doctrine of justification by faith, hallmark of the Reformation. Often referred to as his “tower experience,” Luther realized that Christ’s sacrificial death had paid in full the atonement for sin, and he could not add anything to it (Thompson 390).

Michelangelo, too, appears to have attained a milestone in religious enlightenment that altered his perspective on the means of attaining salvation. DeTolnay refers to the deepening of Michelangelo’s spirituality in this final period of his life as a “conversion.” Some historians object to DeTolnay’s use of the word “conversion,” since he was already a Christian (Dixon 121). In this fragment of a sonnet, ca. 1552-54, Michelangelo acknowledges God’s continuing support.

Day after day, ever since my early years,
Lord, you have been my helper and my guide;
therefore my soul is even now confident
of doubled support in my doubled sufferings. (Saslow 480, Sonnet 287)

(*Di giorno in giorno insin da' mie prim'anni,/ Signor, soccorso tu mi fusti e guida,/ onde l'anima mia ancor si fida/ di doppia aita ne' mie doppi affanni.*) In the context of the Christian life as a progressive journey, it follows that his life-long personal faith formed the artesian well-spring of the entirety of his works. However, it seems reasonable to agree with DeTolnay's assertion that this intensified religious sensibility can be traced to the spiritual climate of the time and his friendship with Vittoria Colonna (*Michelangelo* 100). It was through her participation in the *Spirituali* group that Michelangelo also became involved. As members of this cultured and elite coterie of intellectuals, Michaelangelo and Vittoria demonstrate *Spirituali* ideology in their art. Throughout the course of their friendship, Michelangelo felt himself transfigured and reborn under the beatific ministrations of the noble Marchesa. Though platonic, their union, based upon ardent religious enthusiasm and centering upon faith in Christ's gift of salvation, expressed itself through a reciprocal gift-giving of letters, poetry, and drawings. Perhaps their mutual attraction could be derived from the shared Renaissance background of "a liberal, humanist, and highly cultured Catholicism" (DeTolnay *Michelangelo* 113).

Vittoria's biographer, Maud Jerrold says most writers agree that Michelangelo probably met Vittoria in 1538 when she was forty-seven and he sixty-three, and their relationship lasted until her death in 1547 (121). Frederick Nims disputes the date of meeting in favor of 1536 in Rome, a few months after the artist began work on the *Last Judgment* (141). Michelangelo found in their relationship an element of reciprocity that formerly had eluded him. His earlier poetry divulges unrequited love toward women, a source of emotional pain. Vittoria, possibly his first female friend, radically transformed the life of one who seemed to have been so unlucky in love.

Engaging artistic metaphors, Michelangelo credits her with remaking his rough exterior into a more polished and acceptable form that strives to emulate her virtue. Humanists revived the notion found in ancient literature of the imaginative artist as divinely inspired. One of his sonnets to Vittoria, written between 1545-1550, speaks of the god-like mind's ability to envision a true version of face and form, begin with a crude model, and guide the workman's heart and hands to realize the vision in mortal time and space. The artist likens himself to the inchoate model.

I'm like that model, as crude as you'd come across,
exalted lady, till born again through you,
elate, pristine, as your cleansing auras reach me.

Where I lack, you add; where I'm rough, you file and gloss
in your kindly care for me. What amends are due
for my furors past, as your ways rebuke and teach me? (Nims 120, Sonnet 236)

(Simil di me model di poca istima/ mie parto fu, per cosa alta e prefetta/ da voi rinascere po', donna alta e degna./ Se 'l poco accresce, e 'l mie superchio lima/ vostra mercé, qual penitenzia aspetta/ mie fiero ardor, se mi gastiga e 'nsegna?) Self-centered and

painfully sensitive, Michelangelo willingly places himself into Vittoria's hands from which to dispatch her sensible and well-balanced judgment, making himself vulnerable to a woman in a way that has been absent in his life heretofore. The confident and haughty artist who has always controlled and executed the most stellar artistic judgment, now, with humble self-effacement, concurs to a helpless malleability before a creative force outside himself.

It is within this mutual friendship rooted in accessibility and trust that Luther's priesthood of all believers comes to fruition. Each believer exercised the role of priest to the other and to God, as freedom from the guilt of sin and fear of judgment overflowed in unmitigated love and concern for neighbor. Luther writes in his *A Treatise on Christian*

Liberty about love flowing from faith and joy in the Lord, “and from love, a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one’s neighbor willingly . . . and most willingly he spends himself and all that he has, whether he waste all on the thankless or whether he gain a reward” (Kerr 117).

With a pure love inspired by God, Michelangelo’s powerful emotions motivate him to adoringly address her in poems and letters as “*Divina Donna*.” Exceeding the conventions of sixteenth century love poetry, many of his verses to her, acting much like an introit, invoke an attitude of obligatory worship and abject humility that envelops her in an aura of reverent awe (DeTolnay “Michelangelo” 308) . Michelangelo exalted Vittoria as a paragon of female virtue and infused her presence with transcendence, capable of lifting his soul to heights of euphoria far above his normal vision of life, beseeching her to intervene and save him from loneliness. “O Lady, conducting up our souls through tears and fire to days of bliss, save me from that old me, self’s black abyss” (Nims 120, Sonnet 235). (*O donna che passate/ per acqua e foco l’alme a’ lieti giorni,/ deh, fate c’a me stesso piú non torni.*)

The poet yearns to break free from the proud, self-centered attitude that acts as a veil, incarcerating him in isolation and spiritual darkness. In a sonnet that borrows Petrarchan antithesis, he expresses a deep, religious longing:

I wish I wanted, Lord, what I don’t want:
between my heart and the fire hides a veil of ice
which moderates the fire, so that my deeds
don’t match my pen, makes my page a liar.

Rend that veil, you, O Lord, break down that wall
which with its hardness keeps delayed from us
the sun of your light, extinguished in this world. (Saslow 208, Sonnet 87)

*(Vorrei voler, Signor, quel ch'io non voglio:/ tra 'l foco e 'l cor dI ghiaccia un vel
s'asconde/ che 'l foco ammorza, onde non corrisponde/ la penna all'opere, e fa bugiardo
'l foglio. Squarcia 'l vel tu, Signor, rompi quel muro/ che con la suo durezza ne ritarda/
il sol della tuo luce, al mondo spenta!)* Realizing the inconsistency of his proclamation
and practice, this sonnet recalls the dilemma of St. Paul in Romans 7:15 (RSV): “I do not
understand my own action. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”
Luther allotted this sense of helplessness to meet the demands of God and the paradox of
Christian life as necessary prerequisites to receiving divine grace. While both Protestant
reformers and the *Spirituali* relied heavily upon Paul’s writings, it is worth noting their
unpopularity in Pope Leo’s court. Pietro Bembo, papal secretary to the pope, is reported
to have commented to another secretary, “Avoid the Epistles of St. Paul, lest his
barbarous style should spoil your taste” (Mee 120). Leo would have disdained the
paradoxical Christian struggle, espousing a more comforting serenity and reveling in an
opulent ambiance inspired by art.

Not only in poems that strike a prayerful note, the tensions of opposites and
incompatibilities blur the distinction between human and divine love, creating a new
space for interpretation in both art and poetry. Nagel mentions Michelangelo’s
propensity for applying Petrarchan *topos* to love lyrics, “and simultaneously to have
expanded its semantic scope to apply both to religious faith and to his work as an artist.
In Michelangelo’s understanding of the gift, the discourses of love, art, and divine grace
mingle inextricably” (Nagel “Gifts” 331).

The *Spirituali* group’s function of gift-giving may well have taken its cues from
Luther’s new vision for the community based on the priesthood of all believers. Luther

invested the community, as the invisible church, with the obligation of encouraging its members to participate in a spiritual exchange of constant giving and receiving (Holl 30-36). Endemic to the *Spirituali*'s emphasis upon the doctrine of salvation as a gift--free to all and unmerited by pious deeds--gift exchanges among its elite ranks provided a metaphor for divine grace. The idea of a gift assumed connotations with Christ's sacrifice and rejected the contractual agreements associated with Christian art through dedications and endorsements, a point of contention with religious reforms from Savonarola to Luther. Art as gift elevated it to a more spiritual and less worldly-minded endeavor. The creative freedom and joyous spontaneity inherent in designing and executing the work, combined with the willingness of the viewer to accept a gift, bespoke the greater spiritual act of recognizing and receiving the gift of divine grace (Nagel *Michelangelo* 170). Michelangelo addressed this sonnet to someone from whom he had received a gift--possibly Vasari, who reportedly sent a gift of candles:

my dear lord, even to give you all I am
would be nothing at all like what you deserve:
for repayment of a debt is not a gift. (Saslow 496, Sonnet 299)

(*Signor mie car, ben vi sare' niente/per merto a darvi tutto quel ch'i' sono:/ ch   'l debito pagar non    presente.*) The artist displays an attitude of humility and graciousness in accepting a gift that cannot be reciprocated.

Justification by Faith, Not Works

Viewed by the Roman church as radical and incendiary, Luther's theology can be summed up into four main concepts: justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers,

the ultimate authority of the Scriptures, and responsibility of each individual to interpret Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (LaTourette 715). The Protestant's hope for righteousness that assured salvation on Judgment Day lay in the crucified, resurrected Christ whom faith alone could grasp. Luther compared the moment of faith as the "happy exchange" of bride and bridegroom: "As Christ and the soul become one flesh (Eph. 5:31-32) it follows that everything [each has] is [thereafter] held in common, the good as well as the evil. The believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has [grace, life, and salvation] as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has [sin, death, and damnation] Christ claims as his own" (Ozment 84). German Protestant tradition held the polemic view in which the believer was righteous and sinful at the same time, righteous in his union with Christ and sinful through his participation in fallen humanity. Alongside this encouraging promise of hope existed a more somber and troubling side. The soul without the Bridegroom, impotent to fulfill God's law, must survive God's judgment in the next life. Luther's theology differed from the Roman church who discerned life as a spiritual journey making progress from sin to increasing righteousness through good works. Luther visualized the soul as holding a tension between opposites, hopeless to gain righteousness by earthly effort, but eternally secure in Christ's promise of salvation in the next life (Ozment 85). In like manner, Michelangelo employed paradox and antithesis in his art and poetry to accentuate certain aspects or themes in bold relief.

Whereas Luther's discovery of the liberating theology of justification arose early in life through contemplation and solitude, Michelangelo's doctrinal formation, or "re-formation," occurred at a more mature age through friendship and group participation in

the *Spirituali*. Lacking Luther's certainty of faith in the "happy exchange," Michelangelo's anguished conscience expressed itself through paradox and ambiguity in art and poetry.

The *Spirituali*'s handbook, *Beneficio de Cristo*, elucidates its doctrine of justification: "The justice of Christ is sufficient to make us children of grace, without any good works of ours; these cannot be good if we have not previously been made good and just by faith" (DeTolnay *Michelangelo* 104). Undeserved grace could not be earned through participation in religious rituals or the accumulation of devout deeds. In one poem Michelangelo seizes on the idea that good works are the result of salvation and an outworking of faith in Christ, not its cause. "Thou alone [Lord] are the seed of chaste and pious works" (DeTolnay "Michelangelo" 312, Frey, *Dicht.*, CLIV). (*Tu sol [Signore] se' seme d'opre caste e pie.*) In another sonnet that privileges faith or grace over good works, he writes: "I'm speaking to you, Lord, since all my efforts can't make a man blessed without your blood. . ." (Saslow 471, Sonnet 280). (*I' parlo a te, Signor, c'ogni mie pruova/fuor del tuo sangue non fa l'uom beato:*) When believers took stock of themselves and realized the complete hopelessness to affect salvation, an attitude of extreme pessimism prevailed, a strong characteristic of Protestantism. This negative aspect of human depravity permeates the poems of both Colonna and Michelangelo.

The friendship of the two focused upon their compatible religious beliefs and intensified through a private exchange of gifts. The Marchesa's spiritual counsel during the artist's work on *The Last Judgment* served as a boon to anchor his faith and provide stability and balance to his life. This commission vigorously engaged his mind in visualizing the eventual fate of degenerate humankind at the mercy of a just God and in

creatively communicating the drama surrounding the apocalyptic event. Consequently, he must have immersed himself mentally and spiritually in both the reality and the dire consequences of his own sinfulness and those of humankind in order to lend credence to the powerfully emotive faces and bodies of the fresco. The themes of sin, judgment, and propitiation prefigure his later poetry and the iconography of *The Last Judgment*.

Though the Catholic church and the reformers believed in justification by faith, they interpreted its meaning differently. Thompson succinctly defines the contrariety:

For the Protestants, justification meant a *once-for-all-event*; for the Catholics, an *enduring process*. For the Protestants, “justification” meant to *be reckoned just* in God’s sight on account of what Christ did, for the Catholics, “justification” meant to *become just* in God’s sight through the combined powers of God’s grace and human effort. (519)

The Protestant looked back to Christ’s Resurrection with assurance of salvation, while the Catholic directed his sight to future judgment in the hope of salvation.

“Christocentric” Faith

Along with justification by faith, apart from works, Michelangelo followed Luther’s lead in advocating a “Christocentric” faith. Both men deplored the ignorance and superstition attached to relics and images and the economy of religious art made possible by indulgences, vows, dedications, and patronage. These enterprises constituted a complex system of salvation by works, yet had little effect upon the heart. They felt the true message of the Gospel, that of Christ’s sacrificial death to redeem humankind, had been obscured. Benefiting from those who revived ancient languages and edited texts, Luther and others rescued the Bible from long neglect, using a philological and critical

approach. Luther understood the Bible to be the living Word of God; Christ incarnated in the Word made flesh and revealed in the written Word (Bainton 224). Luther preached against a works salvation, liberated the Bible from accumulated layers of church dogma, and advocated the return to a more pristine Christianity pivoted on Christ's sacrifice for the sins of humankind.

Michelangelo also subscribed to the reforming idea of a personal faith centered in the true message of Christ crucified. Alexander Nagel makes a good case for Michelangelo's "mutual" relationship between the claims of art and those of religious reform. He is of the opinion that art works during this period gave "interpretive scope" to reforming thought, particularly its "subjective emphasis, its preoccupation with the role of the believer's conscience in the movements of faith" ("Gifts" 324). Faith exerts its preponderate claim upon the heart that hears the Word of God regarding the sacrifice of Christ as a personal message to him or her. The Word, though acknowledging sin as the agent of condemnation, assures the believer of its penalty being fully satisfied by the Cross and guarantees eternal salvation.

This type of faith repudiates any form of subjection to intermediaries, superstitious practices associated with pilgrimages and relics, and works designed to placate God, the angry judge. The internal dimensions of faith could be classified as passive or active. Passive belief in the historicity of the Bible was looked on as perfunctory, but active faith evolved from the Holy Spirit's ministry of interpreting the Scriptures and applying them to the particular needs of the individual. This concept of faith, Nagel asserts, appealed to the rather exclusive group of *Spirituali* who met in "secluded places and used highly intimate and 'secret' means of communication, not

merely for fear of persecution, but because such practices suited their religious orientation” (Nagel “Gifts” 334).

So it logically follows that adherents to this group would eschew artistic works destined to serve an intercessory purpose in the hopes of appeasing God. Similarly, they would be less enthusiastic regarding iconography that reinforced Catholic dogma, but would adopt a simpler, more “Christocentric” art that complied with their interpretation of justification by faith, apart from works. Art predicating the immensity of Christ’s sacrifice translated more eloquently and fluently into the language of divine grace.

Michelangelo believed that Christian art, by its obsession with the external details of Christ’s life had weakened its spiritual significance. By mid-sixteenth century, in the interests of reform and the return to an earlier age, the tendency arose to look back to older images. Some of Michelangelo’s presentation drawings to Colonna evoke the most popular cult image of the late Middle Ages, Christ the Man of Sorrows, a frontal view of the dead Christ which served as a symbol of Christ’s Passion. By 1500, this image had lost popularity with artists who began setting the Christ figure within a Passion narrative. Michelangelo viewed chronicling Christ’s life as usurping the centrality of Christ’s sacrifice and ventured to rectify it by situating the figure in modern terms. He proposed to infuse Christian art, not so much with the iconic operandi of cult images, but with the inner ecstasy he had discerned in ancient sculpture. Michelangelo’s themes of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection evoke the effect of renewal and reform through the collapse of traditional order, and were stimulated by his interest in excavation and restoration of antiquities (Nagel *Michelangelo* 16-20, 87).

Achieving Piety: Simplicity vs. Mystery

Luther's formula for achieving piety entailed simplicity and individual spiritual autonomy. He preached the Word of God in the visible church with directness and clarity--his messages geared to the masses. Not only translating the Bible into the German vernacular, he wrote and circulated many printed tracts and compiled a Catechism to clarify important theological doctrine to young and old. From his analysis of the Gospel, Luther outlined a new concept of personality and of community based on personal freedom. Enlisting the examples of Christ and the apostles for a sense of community, he also argued for the individual's liberty to research and interpret Scripture as the basis for making moral choices. Humankind must shoulder responsibility for its actions and not push them off on a priest. Without church hierarchy, individuals no longer required a mediator to approach God

While Luther strove for clarity in preaching an egalitarian Gospel, Michelangelo, inspired by classical antiquity, endeavored to reform the religious visual imagery through mystery, elegance, and beauty wedded to piety. Commensurate with unearthing antiquities, hieroglyphics were thought by some to hold the key to revealing cosmic truth. In this view, art and architecture became a medium for interpreting and reordering a spiritual renewal in the early sixteenth century (Nagel *Michelangelo* 143-44). Alexander Nagel (*Michelangelo* 17) suggests that Michelangelo, opposed to the portrayal of blood, wounds, torture, and excessive mourning, chose instead to depict the mystery and miracle of Christ's triumph over death through the "cult of the enigmatic" (Wind *Pagan* 156).

The revival of classical antiquity stimulated an interest in ephemeral states of ecstasy produced by the mystery religions alongside a rejuvenation of Christian mysticism. The Roman circle of Cardinal Riario and Jacopo Galli, to which the young Michelangelo became attached, fused elements of bacchic and Christian mysticism with the refined language and rhetorical strategies advocated by Cicero. This group subscribed to Giles of Viterbo's (1469-1532) assertion that in times past, elegance was associated with irreligion, while piety stemmed from a rustic manner. After many years of literary decline, eloquence had been revived by the humanists, reversing the previous trend and consequently linking piety with sophisticated elegance (Wind *Pagan* 154). Giles, chosen preacher and protégé of Julius II (Dotson "Augustinian I" 252) held the post of prior general of the Augustinian order from 1507-1517, at which time Pope Leo X elevated him to cardinal. Luther's highest ecclesiastical superior, Giles probably met the monk during his trip to Rome in 1510 (O'Malley "Historical" 532).

Giles considered the farther the church historically evolved from the early church of the apostles, the greater its propensity to degeneration and moral turpitude. The standard Giles used for deciding about the truth of a doctrine was whether it agreed with the faith of the Roman church, convinced that even corruption in the church would not affect the purity of its essential dogma (O'Malley *Giles* 33). He, like Luther and Calvin, viewed Rome as the harlot of Babylon and proved very vocal in his criticism of ecclesiastical abuse and scandal, urging a return to the principles of the early church and preaching impending doom (O'Malley "Historical" 537-38). Michelangelo, too, shared in reproaching Rome for its depravity under the leadership of the militaristic pope, Julius II. Shortly after the completion of the Sistine Ceiling, Michelangelo penned this

invective: “Here they make helmets and swords from chalices and by the handful sell the blood of Christ;” (Saslow 78, Sonnet 10). (*Qua si fa elmi di calici e spade/ e ‘l sangue di Cristo si vend’a guimelle*). The sonnet goes on to say that Christ’s blood cries out for justice since “now in Rome his flesh is being sold,/ and every road to virtue here is closed.” (*poscia c’a Roma gli vendon la pelle, /e écci d’ogni ben chiuso le strade*.)

Giles’ influence on Michelangelo might be regarded as two-fold: his role as a forerunner of the *Spirituali*, centered in the town of Viterbo, and probable advisement on theological doctrines when Michelangelo painted the Sistine Ceiling (Shrimplin 135, 215). Well schooled in the mysticism of the esoteric ancient Hebrew Cabala, Giles believed the poets received special divine revelation and agreed with Dionysius the Pseudo-Aeropagite (anonymous theologian and philosopher living in latter 5th and early 6th centuries) that divine truth is concealed under a poetic veil (O’Malley *Giles* 56). The poet’s use of allegory undertakes the paramount faculty for articulating human nature, since it attempts to stimulate a vision within the hearer that seems to be what he/she has been searching for all along (Murrin 96). “The truth behind the painted veil is man himself” (Murrin 163).

The Florentine humanists under Pico della Mirandola, with whom Michelangelo had contact in the household of Lorenzo the Magnificent, revived the mystery religions of pagan antiquity in an attempt to synchronize all religions. These Neo-Platonists implemented allegory to appropriate the mythical characters of the ancients and invest them with “a universal wisdom that was held to be—beneath an often frivolous or lascivious surface narrative—harmonious with Christianity” (Saslow 30). The ancients presumed truth to be a precious commodity and not assessable to everyone, convinced

that wisdom could lose value by too much exposure to the easy familiarity of the vulgar (Murrin 19-20). The pagan poet ventured to express the ineffable reality of the gods by using myth and obscure speech, intent on protecting truth through veiling it in allegory (Murrin 46). However, some truths, even presented with clarity, will not be understood by most of the hearers because a veil exists in the minds of people (Murrin 10-11). What divides the few who understand from the many? The truth-seeker must in some sense become like truth in order to recognize it when he sees it (Murrin 43). Truth and beauty only divulge their oracles to those who earnestly and reverently seek them.

These ancient bacchic mysteries hypothesize bodies dominated by a power outside themselves, conceits that Michelangelo put in the service of Christianity to reveal the divine power inherent in Christ's resurrection (Nagel *Michelangelo* 17-18). Adverse to superficiality, he endeavored to elevate art to a spiritual plane by signifying motion and the forces behind bodily movement and gestures. Surpassing merely human emotions or will inspiring the action, he intimated a divine energy that infused the body and possessed it (Nagel *Michelangelo* 86). To achieve this effect, Michelangelo studied the antique sculptures of *Apollo Belvedere*, *Laocoon*, and *Belvedere Torso*, from which he improvised the *figura serpentinata*, a spiraling of the body in contorted poses. This 'divine fury' imparted a rapturous quality to the figures that mirrored a euphoric state of the soul (Snow-Smith 150). The bacchic frenzies of the god Dionysis transcended the limitations of the human mind and transported the initiate to ecstasies, temporarily out of the body while under the influence of the divine (*Michelangelo* 96-97).

The Sin Question

The puissance validated through the power and torsion of Michelangelo's bodies comprises a salient feature of his art. Nagel credits the charismatic agency with mysterious external forces, while John Dixon attributes it to an internal animus originating from a tension between bodily desires and the conflicting desires of the spirit. Disparaging those who say Michelangelo's nudes reflect the idealization of Greek and Roman sculpture, Dixon maintains these ancient sculptures exhibit poised equilibrium of body and spirit that are absent in Michelangelo's (86). Rather, his figures manifest an energy that results from inner conflict, the paradox of human life, and the embodiment of his own spiritual struggle.

During this period his poetry reflects a tormented psyche regarding the burden of sinfulness. One of the most potent influences of Luther and Calvin's doctrine manifests itself in Michelangelo's sense of sin and guilt. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, William James provides an interesting comparison in how differently the Italians and the Germans viewed sin. He says for some, evil is "only a maladjustment with *things*," reparable by making adjustments with the things, the self, or both. For others, evil consists of a deep corruption of the essential nature that resists attempts at realignment of self or circumstances and requires divine intervention. James writes:

On the whole, the Latin races have leaned more towards the former way of looking upon evil, as made up of ill and sins in the plural, removable in detail; while the Germanic races have tended rather to think of Sin in the singular, and with a capital S, as of something ineradicably ingrained in our natural subjectivity, and never to be removed by any superficial piecemeal operations. (151-52)

Bearing out this essential difference in religious attitude, Mee describes Leo X's primarily aesthetic religious experience. After Raphael completed his tapestries for the Sistine Chapel, Leo would sit under Michelangelo's ceiling with eyes closed, hand folded, listening and humming to the music of the best choirs of France, Greece, or Mantua who sang the offices. Mee asserts that the pope was just as religious a man as Luther, but his religion was "sensual" and lacked the disconcerting conception of "the sinner's guilt before God." Leo's pathway to experience God meandered tranquilly through a landscape of artistic beauty. "He could not tolerate hearing those interminable, meaningless sermons, much less, like Luther, give one, but he could happily sit in the midst of the visions of Raphael and Michelangelo, listening to the music of the angels and be transported to communion with God" (121-22).

Dixon tends to adhere more closely to the second definition of sin outlined above. He defines sin as not so much what we do, but what we are, a comparison with God that leaves us with a feeling of uncleanness and a vast separation from the purity of the divinity (84). Homosexuality transgressed the laws of both man and God in contemporary society. Whether Michelangelo was homosexual or not, he seemed to possess an uncanny ability to understand the basis of male and female sexual desire in order to portray it so powerfully. Michelangelo faced human sexuality without wincing, for Dixon says to ignore the eroticism of the human body is to denigrate it. In Christianity, desire is lust and whether he acted upon that lust or not, it was still an offense against his conscience (Dixon 11-13). Michelangelo felt acutely the shame of the human condition in being expelled from Eden, but from the "shame there came the

supreme beauty that was the earliest of his great achievements, culminating in the profound sense of the Glory of the Lord” (Dixon 15) in the Sistine Chapel.

Neoplatonism

Michelangelo believed the beauty of God’s creation reached its apex in his creation of mankind, and that contemplating physical beauty gave rise to spiritual elevation, a concept of Neoplatonism. Dixon comments that though Neoplatonism informed Michelangelo’s work, he was not a Neoplatonist, citing the tendency to escape from particulars to generalities in its philosophy. He proposes, to the contrary, that Michelangelo dealt primarily in the concrete and immediate, reveling in the earthiness of the stone and the beauty of the fleshly body. Neoplatonism did, however, provide him with a lexicon to express his homosexual and heterosexual desires that “could be transformed into the love of beauty,” guiding the soul upward to God (19-20). In a more pragmatic sense, Kristeller posits that Neoplatonic love suffered distortion and became a “hypocritical disguise for refined sexual passions, or an empty game fashionable in good society” (*Renaissance Thought II* 53).

Dixon’s opinion contradicts the earlier assertion by Panofsky that of all the contemporary artists who adopted fashionable Neoplatonist concepts, Michelangelo used it as a “metaphysical justification of his own self” (180). Panofsky cites the discomfiture Michelangelo conveyed in regard to his work and life, and the sense in which his art testifies to a tortured soul attempting to escape from the prison of the body (180-81). I interpret this intensity as the enigma of the imperfection of the earthly body in bondage to

sin and decay, but yearning to experience the Resurrection of Christ that promises a new and glorified body, no longer subject to the ravages of time and the limitations of space.

Michelangelo's work abounds with paradox and the tragedy of the human condition: "beauty and squalor" are part of the same thing. But tragedy is not the end, and "peace" is "won from pain" (Dixon 13-14). While earlier works celebrated the Creator's design of beautiful flesh—the Incarnation of God made man, his later works deal more with the sacrificial nature of the Atonement—Christ enduring shame and weakness on the cross and his eventual death. Here again paradox prevails. Death was not the last word, but prompted the hope for a glorified body in the Resurrection as the *Last Judgment* testifies. His flayed and lifeless skin substantiates a reorientation of the worship of physical beauty to the transcendence of eternal spiritual beauty, certain to resolve the tortured conflict of body and spirit.

Chapter Five: Communication, Reception, and Rejection of Reform

Luther proclaimed his message from the pulpit and written tracts, while Michelangelo, steeped in a religion of the senses, communicated reform through art and poetry. At the outset, Luther's aim merely referenced a call for an internal debate on church issues, but unforeseen events and circumstances propelled the actors from the wings of a strictly theological matter to the center stage of an ecclesiastical and political rupture that swept Europe with its historical drama and rocked the foundations of Christendom. As Luther's ideas gathered momentum and garnered broader appeal, his radical Protestant message burgeoned through publicity, socialization, preaching, and writing.

In quite the reverse manner, the efforts of Michelangelo's circle of *literati* produced little impact upon either the church or society. The rejection of the *Spirituali's* religious reforms arose partly from the in-grown nature of their exclusivity as a cultured group who met in secret places and spoke the obscure language of the initiated. Consonant with their *topoi* of veiling precious truth, Michelangelo's art in the Sistine Chapel reveled in pagan themes disguised as Christian, pandering to the intellectual who understood the esoteric exposition and opening himself to censure by those who did not. Perhaps the ineffective dynamic of Michelangelo's message of religious and artistic reform accompanied by dashed hopes for conciliation with the Protestants can be discerned in *The Last Judgment* where his portrait is revealed attached to a lifeless skin.

The *Spirituali*, with their intellectual and artistic *hubris*, might be analogized with the audacity of the mythological Marysas, who dared to engage in a musical contest with the divine lyre of the god Apollo and lost his hide as punishment.

Communication: Visual vs. Aural

Communication in Reformation language might translate as a controversy over word versus image—the Protestant religion of the ear and intellect juxtaposed with the Roman Catholic religion of the senses, especially as they applied to sacred visual art. Renaissance thought exalted sight and hearing over the other senses due to their ability to reveal the divine order of the world. Cicero emphasized that the aesthetic appreciation afforded by the senses of sight and hearing provides an experience that is “uniquely human” (Summers 356). The operative powers of vision held a mysterious power in Renaissance theory. Leonardo spoke of the eye as “the window of the soul” and “the chief means whereby the understanding can most fully and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of nature. . .” (da Vinci 200). Visual communication comprised an invaluable tool to instruct the faithful within the confines of the Catholic church. Since the time of Gregory the Great, sixth century pope, the objective of religious images in the Western church had been to teach the Bible to the illiterate.

Functioning as more than mere scriptural enlightenment, images served to inspire more ardent devotion and move the will, according to beliefs held by medieval worshippers. Art has long been purported to exert a potent agency to stir emotions through the conscious and deliberate act of seeing. Around 1500 people understood the

act of seeing, not as the result of light falling upon the optic nerve, but as a mutual activity between viewer and viewed in which a kind of energy flowed between the two, almost on a par with physical contact (Scribner 97). Artists' representations of the many saints incurred reverence and served as an aid to prayer and devotion. Alberti's treatise on painting says the painter possesses a 'divine force which . . . makes the dead seem almost alive', and should be able to 'capture the eye' of the viewer and 'move his soul' (Scribner 96 Quotes Leo Battista Alberti, *On Painting* trans. J. R. Spencer, {London, 1956} 63,75). Along with the emphasis upon externals, a preoccupation with the sensual spilled over into the sacred realm, evidenced by the worshippers' desire to see and revere the elevated Host, literally believed to be Christ (Christensen 15-18).

Visual art entailed but one means for communicating religious subtleties through an appeal to the emotions via the senses. In an effort to remain potent in a changing world, the Roman church enhanced and solidified its structures--both architectural and ecclesiastical-- eliciting visible symbols to reinforce its rigid hierarchy of forms. The church's employment of visibility as a testimony to its authority could be discerned through its ecclesiastical pomp and ritual enacted within the magnificent opulence of architecture and interiors. By entering its confines, one was transported to another world, blithely oblivious of the conscious planning and construction of its materiality needed to induce this magical transformation. The invisible world conformed to the structures of the visible and therefore made itself subservient to its objective form. Luther recognized the need for structure; what he objected to were systems of representation that privileged structure over transcendence and technique over ethics (Berger 452-53). It was this very

perception of Michelangelo's exalting his artistic technique that caused such a furor upon the unveiling of *The Last Judgment*.

An infamous charge has been leveled against the Reformation—that of discouraging art. As discussed above, art works of the Catholic church denoted more than mere symbolism, but were symbols of reality and objects of veneration. Protestantism sought to break entirely with this concept of external things and stress a religion conforming to purely spiritual and intellectual principles, diametrically opposed to the sensuous (Holl 147). Opinions varied as to how far one should go in removing images—the most extreme being held by the iconoclasts.

Protestant reformers prioritized the Word, or the Bible. Indicating the prerogatives of preaching and hearing as paramount in spreading the reforming message, Bard Thompson writes: “The Christian church is a *Mundhaus*, a ‘mouth-house.’ Where there is no preaching, there is no church” (391). Pulpits replaced altars in the newly designed churches. Religious services comprised reading the Bible, listening, and singing hymns in the vernacular. Luther himself wrote hymns, and their lyrics not only proved instructive but served as auditory praise to God. “Reformation culture was in short an *aural*, not a *visual* culture (Cunningham 89).

Reception of Protestant Message of Reform

The Protestant doctrines gained wide acceptance through publication, proclamation, and socialization. Early on Martin Luther perceived the advantages of literacy to democratize the Gospel. Latin lost its place as the only scholarly language, and he intuited that good communication depended on the use of vernacular, which he widely

employed, especially in translating the Bible. The utilization of clear and concise rhetoric applied to a broad spectrum of communicative venues could arouse the passions, move the will, and engender actions favorable to his cause. Only a few hundred people from Wittenberg attended his sermons at the parish chapel, but thousands across Europe read his pronouncements and gathered their own impressions. The printers snatched up everything he wrote, with his permission or without (Marty 34). Additionally, Luther's excommunication from the Roman church, the novelty of the vitriolic exchange between Pope Leo X and himself, and continued death threats to his person served to fuel his popularity. Books, pamphlets, and treatises circulated throughout Europe as a propagandistic means of theological persuasion on polemic positions held by both sides.

Within a few years, Luther had accumulated a following, mostly among intellectuals, the middle class, and clergy. Preachers, and even some Catholic priests, proclaimed Luther's words from the pulpit. People eagerly heard "a new evangel, new slogans, new doctrines, new principles" as ministers spread the new faith throughout Germany (Hillerbrand 25). The Reformers established churches with novel forms of worship and integrated them into the fabric of society.

Rejection of *Spirituali* Message of Reform

Interestingly, the lack of the three practices listed above as advancing the Protestant agenda is the primary cause of the *Spirituali*'s failure. They circumvented publicity as the closed group met in secret places and chose to communicate through a medium only explicable by the "in crowd." The reform group engaged in neither

proclamation nor socialization. In addition to ineffectual leadership, their esoteric message, directed toward the initiated, circulated mainly within their own ranks. Opposed to annexing members, they preferred limiting their group to the cultured and *intelligencia*.

Italian Evangelism rationalized itself as a relatively transient movement destined to reform the church during the times of religious upheaval and would no longer be necessary once this reform came to pass. The self-centered mysticism of the small groups characterized by “disappointed resignation” and a “shy attitude of self-defense” (Jung 526), most assuredly found no determinate niche in the new Counter-Reformation, which needed to aggressively mobilize its forces and go on the offensive to regain a measure of what it had lost to the Reformation. The *Spirituali* disbanded, and a more militant and fundamentalist group, the Jesuits, generated greater impetus to the Catholic reform.

Jung maintains that while the Counter-Reformation suppressed many humanistic elements of Evangelism such as religious tolerance, freedom of speech, personal devotion, study of the Scriptures, and inclusion of the laity in theological debates, it was not destroyed, as is generally thought. Interestingly, Jung posits that Evangelism lent its “positive forces” to the Counter-Reformation. It provided the “soul” for the Counter-Reformation’s practical program of reform that necessitated its bold departure from elite gatherings “onto the battlefields of the world” (526). Under the pontificate of Pius IV, the Council of Trent reached its conclusion in 1563, by whose dictums the Catholic church would reform her clergy, restore morality, and clarify her doctrines. The reform

in Italy, though long in coming, proved to be effective and spectacular (Durant 899).

The Last Judgment

Michelangelo and Martin Luther conducted and advanced their spiritual pursuit of truth through antithetical means, but reached the identical determination regarding human effort. I view the period of Michelangelo's life (prior to his friendship with Colonna) that utilized Neoplatonism's ladder of ascension to God through beauty of the flesh on a similar plane to Luther's struggle with works of penance and self-denial to appease an angry God. Whereas Michelangelo's discursive pathway bordered on hedonism and indulgence of the flesh (whether in reality or the imagination), Luther's route followed strict asceticism. Artist and monk, though pursuing binary opposites of hedonism/asceticism, individually became cognizant of the futility of their endeavors to effect salvation and spiritual renewal. In this fragment of a sonnet ca. 1552-54, Michelangelo recalls the enslavement of human passion in his earlier years:

My fire once used to burn even in cold ice,
but that burning fire is cold ice to me. Love,
now that the unbreakable knot has been untied,
and what was a joyful feast is now death to me.
The love that once opened to us all time and space
is, to the tired soul in its final distress,
a burdensome weight . . . (Saslow 472, Sonnet 281)

(Arder sole' nel freddo ghiaccio il foco;/ or m'è l'ardente foco un freddo ghiaccio,/ disciolto, Amor, quello insolubil laccio,/ e morte or m'è, che m'era festa e gioco./ Quel primo amor che ne dié tempo e loco,/ nella strema miseria é grave impaccio/ a l'alma stanca . . .) After the period of deepening spirituality, Michelangelo seems to re-form his optimistic religion of bodily beauty as a joyful feast into one of spiritual transcendence

that rather darkly assumes the Pauline conflict of body and spirit. St. Paul agonizes over this bitter internal rivalry in his letter to the Romans: “For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death” (Romans 7:22-24)? The rejoinder to his dilemma of liberation is forthcoming in the next verse: Jesus Christ. Michelangelo implores God as the only solution to the propensity for sin in his mortal body, written from mid-1547:

My dear Lord, I call and appeal to you alone
 against my tormenting passion, blind and futile:
 you alone can renew, within and without,
 my will, my judgment, and my meager strength.
 You, Love, gave my divine soul over to Time,
 and imprisoned it, with a harsh destiny,
 within this mortal carcass now frail and tired. (Saslow 463, Sonnet 274)

*(Signor mie caro, i' te sol chiamo e 'nvoco/ contr'a l'inutil mie cieco tormento:/ tu sol
 puo' rinnovarmi fuori e dentro/ le voglie e 'l senno e 'l valor lento e poco./ Tu desti al
 tempo, Amor, quest' alma diva/ e 'n questa spoglia ancor fragil e stanca/ l'incarcerasti,
 e con fiero destino.)* Romans 8:21-23 further enumerates that all creation waits with eager longing for the coming of Christ in order to set it free from bondage to decay and obtain bodily redemption for the Elect.

The artist objectifies this hypothesis in *The Last Judgment* in which Christ forms the central element of the painting and generates the power of corporeal Resurrection (Figure 2). In the lower right corner St. Bartholomew wields a knife in one hand, while holding the flayed skin of a figure who bears the facial features of the artist in the other. Michelangelo's fleshly portrait as an empty skin testifies to the inefficacy of the

Neoplatonic ladder of fleshly beauty as a means to experience God. Eliding with that conception is the Protestant belief that one faces Christ naked and defenseless, devoid of the mantle of good works, and salvation is a matter of choice made by faith in Christ's sacrifice as a free gift to all.

In contrast to medieval paintings of the Last Judgment forming stratified tiers with Christ seated, Michelangelo rendered the figure in dynamic motion, looking much like Christ coming forth from the grave at his Resurrection. Michelangelo was following Augustine's concept of the first and second resurrections. The first resurrection is when the individual makes the choice to follow Christ. The aspect of free will would have resonated with Michelangelo and other Renaissance thinkers. Augustine maintained that only those who choose Christ will join the Elect at the second resurrection. "Thus, *the judgment of each soul has been made before the final day*" (Hall 21).

As previously mentioned, Michelangelo appears to fall far short of an assurance of eternal security held by the Protestant believer. In contrast, his figures appear to be moved by mysterious powers outside themselves and possessed of great uncertainty, mirroring his own anxiety about his final destination. A portion of a late sonnet written after 1555 exhibits concern about a delay in Christ's coming as placing his soul in danger of hell.

Lord, when will come what is awaited by those
who believe in you? For every excess delay
shortens hope and puts the soul in mortal danger.
What good is your promise of great light to all,
If death attacks first, and fixes them forever
in the state he finds them in, with no escape? (Saslow 490, Sonnet 295)

(Deh, quando fie, Signor, quel che s'aspetta/ per chi ti crede? c'ogni troppo indugio/ tronca la speme e l'alma fa mortale./ Che val che tanto lume altrui prometta,/ s'anzi vien morte, e senza alcun refugio/ ferma per sempre in che stato altri assale?) This appears to contradict the idea that the judgment was an event already settled.

Since the unveiling of the fresco, much has been opined about whether the beardless, Apollo-like Christ is the Savior in a celebration of the Resurrection, or the Judge dispensing punishment to those whose works have not been of sufficient merit. If one interprets the figure as Christ the Judge on this final day of reckoning, Michelangelo, in the midst of his marvelous and unprecedented artistic work in the entire Sistine Chapel, parodies himself as empty of the creative power to attain salvation—merely a fleeting veil or a transient covering of skin who hopes for undeserved grace. Michelangelo believed as Luther, that Christianity's prime concern—far from a tabulation of human merits—instead, should focus upon what God had done for impotent humankind. In spite of the anguished countenances of the damned, the benign expression the artist has rendered on the face of Christ harmonizes with the Protestant exegesis of Christ the Savior, the exemplar of divine grace, instead of the Catholic construction of encountering Christ the angry Judge. Valerie Shrimplin disputes the idea of a pessimistic mood in *The Last Judgment* motivated by rupture of the Roman church due to the Reformation. Instead, she insists that at the time of its commission and execution (1533-41), hope still persisted for Protestant reconciliation. Looking at the fresco as filled with light and hope, she equates the optimism with Pope Clement VII's having moved past the humiliation of the Sack, secured a marriage treaty with France, and witnessed the removal of the Turkish threat to Italy, serving to bolster his position again (315).

Those acquainted with mythology could have drawn a parallel with the dual nature of Apollo and Christ. Apollo, the god of the sun, could bring growth or destruction (Barnes 59). Michelangelo and his theological advisors syncretized Christian and pagan philosophies in both the Ceiling and the end wall of the Chapel, in the manner of Neo-Platonist, Ficino's writings. Christ is positioned against a yellow background that recalls Plato's symbolism of the sun as a diety. Theological writings and the *Divina Commedia* of Dante also contributed toward the sun-diety connection in the Renaissance (Shrimplin 216). The circular movement of the figures organized around the Apollo sun-god of classical antiquity lends credence to the connection with the Copernican theory of heliocentricity. Though Copernicus' book was not published until 1540, Clement actually requested the theory be explained to him and some church dignitaries in the Vatican in 1533 (Shrimplin 266). Clement and Michelangelo apparently found no conflict with the theory and church doctrine. In the absence of the earth and mankind as the center of the universe, placing Christ as the axis served as some consolation (Shrimplin 274). The Catholic church eventually condemned Copernicus' hypothesis, but not at the time of *The Last Judgment*.

Many have remarked on the similarities of Michelangelo's art and poetry with the poetry of Dante, whose works he knew well and greatly esteemed. Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio agreed that the chief function of poetry was to hide the truth behind a pleasing veil of fiction. Boccaccio praised the veil of fiction in charming the ignorant, but stimulating the intelligent to search for the meaning, making it more precious to those who succeeded. The ability of the poet to obscure the meaning at first encounter signaled the mark of a skilled poet. The encyclopedic nature of the *Divine Comedy* with all its host

of historical and literary figures appealed to only the most educated reader. Dante shunned the readership of the ignorant, but employed a writing style that was difficult to understand. Those defending Dante felt the meaning hidden in metaphor and allegory required more effort to decipher and therefore proved more satisfying to the reader. The revived classical *topos* of ornamenting the high style of speech with figurative language could be elided with Michelangelo's veiled and hidden meanings beneath the figures of *The Last Judgment* (Barnes 96). Nonetheless, in Giovannin Andrea Gilio's *Degli errori de' pittori*, published in 1564, his chief complaint lodged in the difference between poetry and the truth of theology. He maintains that poetic paintings deal with mythology or allegory and are considered as fiction, but that sacred history must be understandable at a literal level of interpretation to present correct theological doctrine (Barnes 98).

As indicative of the poet's veiling of truth in the guise of myth to appeal to the learned, it is imperative to recall the myth of Apollo and Marysas. Having established the correlation of Christ with Apollo, it can be extended to Apollo's judgment on Marysas, that of releasing him to the executioner for flaying. Marysas, the wild and arrogant flute player, had the audacity to challenge Apollo's lyre, symbolic of order and harmony in a musical contest. Dante also makes use of the myth as he asks for inspiration from Apollo, winner of the contest, at the beginning of *Paradiso*.

Michelangelo identifies, not with Apollo, but with the presumptuous Marysas by his self-portrait on the empty hide, as though his art attempted to rival that of the creative powers of God and Dante (Barnes 105-07). Many Renaissance critics considered this trait of audacity as necessary for artists to execute their most important works. Herein lurked danger; if the artist did not use restraint, he could easily elevate his own glory above that

of Christ's, falling into the sin of pride (Summers 131). In the later works, one of his most well-known poems sent to Vasari in 1554 acknowledges that even his art fails to suffice as redemption, portions of which read:

So now I recognize how laden with error
was the affectionate fantasy
that made art an idol and sovereign to me,
like all things men want in spite of their best interests.

Neither painting nor sculpture will be able any longer
to calm my soul, now turned toward that divine love
that opened his arms on the cross to take us in. (Saslow 476, Sonnet 285)

*(Onde l'affettüosa fantasia/ che l'arte mi fece idol e monarca/ conosco or ben com'era
d'error carica/ e quel c'a mal suo grado ogn'uom desia./ Né pinger né scolpir fie più che
quieti/ l'anima, volta a quell'amor divino/ c'aperse, a prender noi, 'n croce le braccia.)*

The presentation drawing made for Colonna, Christ on the Cross, (Figure 1) is an example of the arms spread wide on the cross at the time of Christ's plaintive cry, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

The Aftermath

To go one step farther in analogizing the artist's depiction of his lifeless skin, one might speculate as to whether this validated an uncanny premonition of the furor this fresco would incite. Bernadine Barnes' book details many positive and negative responses to *The Last Judgment*, encompassing several years. She explores the subject of a culturally diverse audience, in addition to the new directives on religious art that resulted from the Council of Trent, as relevant issues to the heated debate. Due to the cheap replication of prints from artists who had copied *The Last Judgment*, the work

reached a much larger and more disparate audience than Michelangelo had envisioned. Occasioned by a wider market, written responses to the fresco included less cultured laity, artists, and modern commentators.

Many criticisms concerned the artist's high style of painting that combined complicated ornamentation with nudity. Ceremonies in the Sistine Chapel became more lavish and complex in the Renaissance. The higher style of both art and ritual was viewed as a vehicle to proclaim the authority and majesty of the church. Educated clergy or laity would have not only been familiar with classical mythology, but have made references to them in sermons given in Latin and modeled after Cicero (Barnes 46,58-59).

Ecclesiastics assigned a high rhetorical preaching style composed of ornamental language to subjects or people of great importance (Barnes 39). Consequently, the momentous theme of *The Last Judgment* would certainly command artistic ornamentation.

Michelangelo's style in this painting, based on elaborate movement and the ideal nude, may or may not be construed as ornate, depending upon the training of the viewer.

Whereas educated art connoisseurs might look upon foreshortening and idealized beauty as ornament, the common people would expect ornamentation to consist of sumptuous clothing or gold haloes. Similarly, while the mostly urbane audience of the Chapel maintained familiarity with classical nudes, the uneducated viewers responded to nudity as they would to naked humans in real life. The definition of decorum as it represented nudity only arose in the second half of the century, probably because so many people commented upon it related to *The Last Judgment*. Some expressed concern that the common people might misunderstand the work and result in a weakening of their faith. Stimulated by desire for church reform, these ultra-conservative critics deemed *The Last*

Judgment with its erudite subjects and unnerving nudity as the quintessence of all that was wrong in art (Barnes 87-88). When the fresco was painted, hope still existed for a reconciliation with the Protestants, and the *Spirituali*'s efforts directed toward internal reform resembled those of Luther. Nevertheless, after the Council of Trent concluded in 1563 the Catholic church reaffirmed the place of images in worship, but gave strict mandates for art to conform more closely to religious doctrine and present it unambiguously to the faithful.

Ironically, Michelangelo never lived to witness the loincloths painted over his nudes in *The Last Judgment*. Unlike Vittoria Colonna, whose fear at the prospect of the Inquisition resulted in her breaking with her past and joining the Counter-Reformation, Michelangelo remained true to his religious convictions and escaped the dreaded interrogation of the Office. Nagel comments, regarding Michelangelo's religious and artistic reform: "This delicate marriage of religious and aesthetic ideals proved as fragile and short-lived as the culture for which it was made." Art as a gift, "couched in an exquisite discourse of aristocratic courtesy" failed to reform religious paradigms but disposed itself toward the formation of secular art that would eventually find a market in the furnishing of private collections and art galleries (Nagel "Gifts" 350).

Conclusion

Two unfinished sculptures begun in his later years exemplify Michelangelo's gradual disillusion with the idol of physical idealism and a greater preoccupation with his own death and that of Christ. Most of his finished sculptures were executed in his youth;

but with age, he increasingly lacked the ability to completely form a piece that met the criterion of his stellar judgment. After contact with Colonna and the *Spirituali*, religious themes informed almost all Michelangelo's art works. The Florence *Pietà* (Figure 3), originally intended for Michelangelo's own tomb sculpture, functioned as a testament to his personal faith. Had it served the intended purpose of presiding over his remains, it would have operated as a memorial to mortality putting on immortality in the Resurrection of the just on Judgment Day. The artist's mortal flesh is subject to decay, but his art lives on. A portion of this sonnet written for Colonna gives voice to a yearning for immortality: "How can it be Lady, as one can see/ from long experience, that the live image/ sculpted in hard alpine stone lasts longer/ than its maker, whom the years return to ashes" (Saslow 404, Sonnet 239)? (*Com' esser, donna, può quel c'alcun vede/ per lunga sperienza, che più dura/ l'immagin viva in pietra alpestra e dura/ che 'l suo fattor, che gli anni in cener riede?*) By carving his features on the face of Nicodemus, the artist personalizes his worship of the Christ in whom his identity is so intricately bound up. Michelangelo's tender facial expression and elevated position seem to avow that Christ has given Himself as a gift—a sacred trust to the individual believer. And by extension, the Divine Creator has entrusted the artist as earthly creator to ordain and supervise his own work as his genius dictates. It is this unmitigated concentration upon both the finished work of the Crucified Christ in securing humankind's salvation and the role of the individual's subjective religious experience in receiving the free gift of grace that resonates so cogently with Luther's beliefs. Consequently, it would almost signal a breach of decorum to visualize a priest or ritual to mediate such an intimate exchange. Unfortunately, Michelangelo reportedly grew dissatisfied with the work, mutilated it, and

abandoned it to be partially finished by a sculptor of far less ability; yet it remains among his most famous works.

The *Rondanini Pietà* (Figure 4), the last unfinished sculpture Michelangelo worked on six days before his death in 1564 strikes one as autobiographical. Advancing age instilled an acute awareness of the transitory nature of human flesh, yet he continued “to probe the stone, seeking out its life and grace . . . one last time trying to make life with his hands” (Summers 459). The sculpture exhibits a poignant tribute to Michelangelo’s indomitable religious ardor that clung to the image of the Crucified Christ, in spite of, or more aptly, because of his diminishing physical faculties. The sculpture fairly melts down as wax too near the raw, consuming flame of Love. The Christ figure merges into his mother’s in a singular mass, prefiguring the sculptor’s own fusion with divinity, intuitively reaching toward the blessed union with his Lord that awaits the sound of the death knell. Peace is won from suffering, and death is merely the agent of renewal and resurrection. While beauty actuated his senses and fueled his creative passion, it was merely a ladder in the Neoplatonic sense to approach God, each rung of which offered a heady elixir of guilt and pleasure. His ultimate destination eclipsed all earthly beauty in spiritual transcendence, and Christ awaited him with the open arms he had so often lovingly incised on paper and etched indelibly in his imagination. Michelangelo’s genius lay in using art as a divining technique to discern universally symbolic principles, that when correctly applied, functioned to plumb the depths of meaning in humanity’s perplexing relationship to and with the Divine Creator. His legacy was personally unique, professionally astute, and profoundly transformational.

Was Michelangelo a “secret Luther”? Though he embraced many doctrines that Luther propounded and the Counter-Reformation eventually deemed heresy, as the thesis enumerates, my final conclusion is that Michelangelo lived, worked, and died with the pertinacious mettle of individuality and the pursuit of ultimate truth as he perceived and experienced it. With regard to an unabashed commitment to a personal quest for truth that refused to be thwarted, he and Luther were kindred souls. Is it audacity bordering on *hubris* to compare a theologian to an artist/poet? Perhaps after all is considered, the province of the reformed theologian is solidly bound up in the simplification of truth in the vernacular to spoon-feed the believer, newly weaned from Mother Church, while the poet/artist aspires to shroud it with a mysterious veil. Most especially in employing metaphor, myth, and allusion, Michelangelo’s art necessitates both personal and intellectual engagement. Notwithstanding, even in his preliminary sketches, scraps of poetry, and incomplete sculptures, the famed artist unintentionally challenges the imagination of the reader or viewer to finish the rhyme and complete the image by means of a personal epiphany accommodating his/her vision of truth. Assuming the poet’s guise, the ultimate truth of the answer to the question regarding a “secret Luther” may be operative and open to a broad spectrum of interpretation, making it the rare and much sought-after prize of the determined truth-seeker, exponentially rewarding in relation to the effort expended to ferret it out.

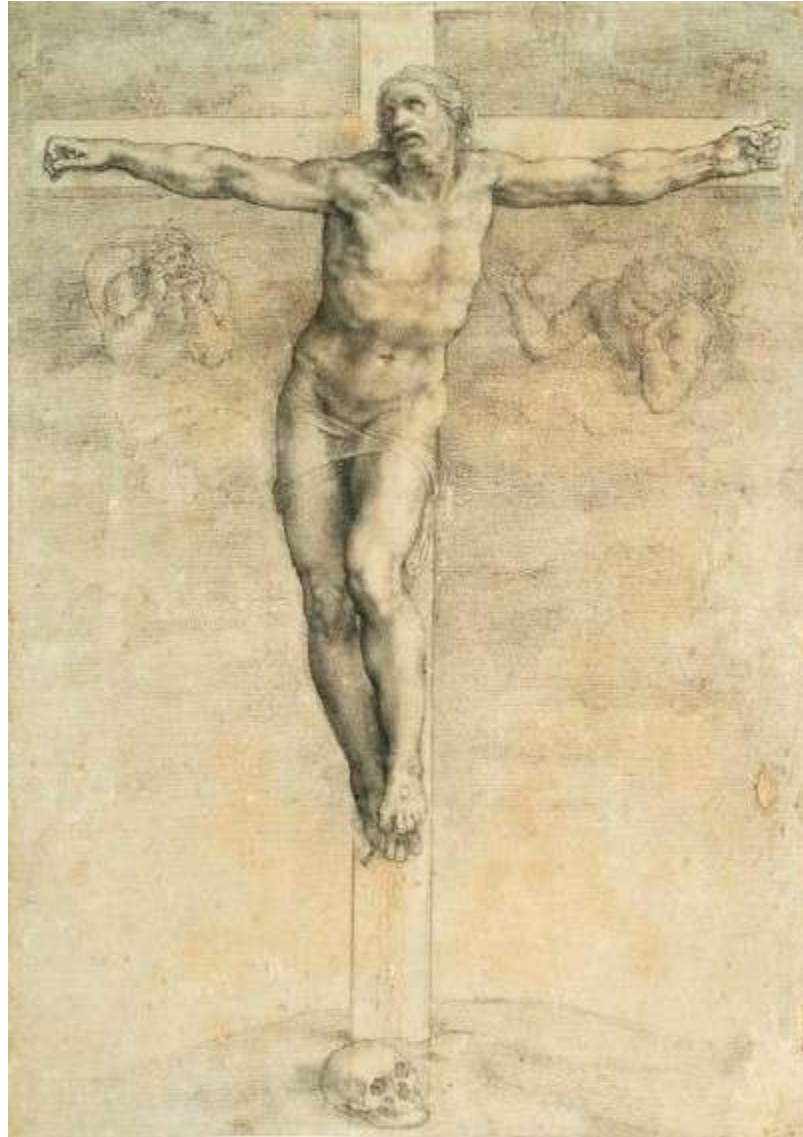


Figure 1. Michelangelo. *Christ Crucified between Two Angels*.
The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 2. Michelangelo. *The Last Judgment* (detail). 1534-1541. Fresco. Sistine Chapel, Vatican.



Figure 3 Michelangelo. *Pietà*. C. 1550. Marble. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy.



Figure 4. Michelangelo. *Pietà Rondanini*, unfinished. 1564. Marble. Castello Sforzesco, Milan, Italy.

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