

UBC Lecture “The Creative Challenge of Christian Humanism”
Faculty and Graduate Students Association
Wednesday, February 27th, 4:00 PM Woodward Building

1. Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to share with you some thoughts about the importance of Christian humanism for the history and character of what we may loosely call “Western culture.” I say loosely, because we all know that there are many Western cultures, which makes Western culture about as useful a label as religion. Yet I will use this label nonetheless, for otherwise our talk about certain identifiable features across the variety of Western cultures would vanish in the deconstructive labyrinth of a thousand qualifications or at the very least an overly nuanced approach would exceed our allotted time and your patience. With this lecture on the creative challenge of Christian humanism, I have two objectives in mind. First, I would like to tell you *why* we should think about Christian humanism at all. During my studies at UBC, I profited from many good teachers. One teacher in particular left his mark, however, and that was Dr. Stephen Taubeneck from what was then the German department. Dr. Taubeneck would spend what I now realize was an extraordinarily generous amount of time a graduate student to discuss my essays, and, later, my dissertation chapters. Whenever I’d come to him all excited about my ideas, he would inevitably comment on my first drafts, with the words, “so what?” His annoyingly persistent demand to make what *I* thought important relevant for others

has stayed with me ever since, and so the first part of this lecture is the “so what part.” I first want to raise some issues in Western culture that demonstrate the need for thinking about Christian humanism. Then, in the second part, I will define Christian humanism and argue for its relevance within our current cultural landscape. One last preparatory remark concerning my use of “our” and “we.” Postmodern thinkers have rightly sensitized us to the potentially exclusionary nature of using personal pronouns. “We,” often either sets up an implicit boundary or tries to cover over differences. Yet we also have to keep in mind the positive use of “we” as affirming identity. Without identity there is no differentiation; in a social and cultural context, without identity there is really no dialogue. For these reasons, I think it is important to reflect on the “we” of Western cultures. Take our lecture hall here, for example. I am aware of speaking into a multi-cultural context with many international students from non-Western cultures. And yet, we in this room are all here in North-America, in Canada, in Vancouver, and thus within a cultural, conceptual and legal framework that bears the stamp of historically developed values whose roots reach back into the Christian humanism I wish to talk about. It is a historical given, in other words, that Western cultures are united by their common religious root, or what the famous British historian Arnold Toynbee called the West’s “ancestral Christianity.” The real question is how we are shaped by this ancestry and what we ought to do with it.¹

¹ Toynbee (1956, 263)

2. The Current Cultural Landscape

So why should we care about humanism in the first place, and why should we think about a religious conception of humanism, about Christian humanism? Let me offer you three reasons. The first and simplest reason is that the term “humanism” is crucial for understanding who we are, and where we are, “we” who inhabit the world of ideas, attitudes, and values that can be broadly summarized with the label “Western Culture.” The importance of the term humanism is signaled by its prominent place in what you may call the “index of Western intellectual history.” You will find hardly any intellectual movement of note that has not been labeled as ‘humanism’ in our Western cultural narrative: Greek and Roman humanism, Patristic humanism, Scholastic Humanism, Renaissance Humanism, the German educational ideals of (Friedrich Immanuel) Niethammer, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Alexander von Humboldt, and Wilhelm Dilthey, which define our idea of the university to this day, Marxism, Catholic integral humanism from Maurice Blondel to Cardinal Newman and to Jacques Maritain, atheistic-secular humanism, Existentialism as a humanism, Husserl’s Phenomenology, the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer as defense of humanistic education, Levinas’s ethical ‘humanism of the other,’ Islamic humanism, evolutionary humanism, and even postmodern anti-humanism and futuristic trans-humanism – all these movements can be gathered into our focus.

The second argument for taking up the narrative of humanism is that this focus naturally combines religious and secular interests on the question of what it

means to be human and how to live a good life. As soon as we utter the word “humanism,” we evoke a vast and profound legacy on the question of what it means to be human. This legacy encompasses ancient Greco-Roman thought, its Judeo-Christian adoption and transformation together with the further developments of these ideals through the Renaissance into modern times. Indeed, this Greco-Roman legacy would never have survived had it not been taken up and transformed by Christians. The church fathers first revitalized the classic heritage,² and their effort was renewed by medieval theologians and Renaissance humanists. As I will show you in a minute, Christian anthropology transformed the culture of antiquity and inspired our ideals of higher education. The resulting Christian humanism laid the groundwork for many modern ideas we now take for granted. Humanistic ideals of a common humanity, universal reason, freedom, personhood, human rights, human emancipation and progress, indeed the very notion of secularity (!) are literally unthinkable without their Christian humanistic roots.

In the words of the 19th century Historian Benedetto Croce, while we are the children of the whole of history, “in our moral life and thought we feel ourselves literally the children of Christianity.”³ Whether we like it or not, Christianity is an important foundation of Western culture; it is, in the words of T.S. Eliot, the West’s “Christian patrimony.” Eliot’s description of Western culture, directed at a European audience, applies to a large extent also to North America: “It is in Christianity that our arts have developed; it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have—until

² Reference here to Werner Jaeger

³ Croce, Benedetto. *My Philosophy, and Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Time*. London,; Allen & Unwin, 1949, 46.

recently—been rooted. It is against the background of Christianity that all our thoughts have significance.”⁴ Eliot said these words during his lectures on *Christianity and Culture* at Cambridge in 1939, and I am sure you recognize the significance of this date. Months away from the second World war, Eliot sensed a profound cultural crisis brought about by the forgetfulness of Europe’s Christian roots. We can see the same anxiety in the Gifford Lectures on Christianity and Culture, delivered in 1948-49 by the German theologian Emil Brunner. Like Eliot, Brunner tells his audience that Western culture was shaped decisively by Christianity: “Our democratic state forms, also our public and private charitable institutions, the colleges of English and American universities, a multitude of the most important concepts of our psychological, philosophical, juridical and cultural language are directly or indirectly products of the Christian tradition and of Christian thinking, feeling and purposing.”⁵

Unlike Eliot, Brunner wrote *after* Europe had witnessed perhaps one of the greatest recorded examples of man’s inhumanity to man. Brunner identifies the loss of the Christian concept of human dignity as the root cause of this disaster. He argues that “for more than a thousand years Western culture had been based on the Christian idea that man is created in the image of God. This central Biblical idea included both the eternal spiritual destiny of every individual and the destiny of

⁴ (Eliot 1968, 200)

⁵ Brunner (1948, 5) Brunner has no illusions “that there ever was a Christian Europe,” if we define the term “Christian” in the way the New Testament intends it. Yet, he argues, “it is just a manifestation of the superhuman power and reality of the Christian faith and of the New Testament message, that they are powerful factors within the cultural world, even where life has been only superficially touched by them, or where they are present in very diluted and impure manifestations” (ibid., 4-5).

mankind to form a free communion.”⁶ In other words, while we should never *equate* Christianity with democracy, or any form of culture for that matter, there is little doubt that the Christian religion, often despite the church’s own official positions, has been a powerful inspiration for humane societies. Brunner concludes that the Christian faith “is the only sure basis for, and an inexhaustible fountain of, a true humanism.”⁷

Eliot, Brunner and Groce recalled the Christian roots of Western culture before and after the war, because they blamed the atrocities of the Hitler Regime to a great extent on the loss of a Christian cultural framework. Brunner, along with many other intellectuals of his day argued that the powerful metaphysical concept of human dignity, brought into the world by Judaism and Christianity, had been gradually watered down until it was replaced by the naturalistic idea that human beings have no supernatural destiny but are merely highly developed animals.⁸ As a result, the most powerful party could determine anthropological value and declare one race truly human while experimenting on another as if they were merely animals. Writing in 1948, Brunner urges Europe to rebuild itself on a Christian anthropology (and table of values) to avoid similar disasters in the West’s future.

I am recalling this moment of cultural crisis in Europe, to offer you my third reason for the importance of thinking about Christian humanism. I believe that we are currently experiencing, even if in a slightly different way, a similar cultural

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Brunner, Emil. *Christianity and Civilization. First Part: Foundations*. Gifford Lectures, 1947-1948. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1948, 104.

⁸ “The totalitarian revolutions, with their practice of inhumanity, lawlessness and depersonalizing collectivism, were nothing but the executors of this so-called positivistic philosophy” (ibid., 3).

crisis, a similar uncertainty about the ultimate purpose of society and its institutions. In some ways, our current cultural crisis is more profound because it is more subtle. The West is not immediately threatened by a global war or any obvious deprivation. And yet even in the midst of affluence, indeed perhaps because of it, we have lost a sense of higher ends for our cultural activities. Our culture suffers from the separation of what we do from an ultimate reality that lends our activities purpose beyond eating and getting along. We have defined rationality in a way that excludes transcendent and religious sources. It would not be wrong to call this gap between our activities and their ultimate purpose the separation of reason from faith, as long as we keep in mind that we are not talking about only religious faith, but about the pathological narrowing of human reasoning to the exclusion of any higher moral order. And we should understand the novelty of this modern definition of reason.

From the ancient world up to the late medieval period and even well into the 19th century, many people had a strong sense that proper thinking and acting was based on a natural moral order of the cosmos. For example, this is how the Roman statesman and stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius summed up the natural order of the universe: “For there is one Universe out of all, one God through all, one substance and one law, one common Reason of all intelligent creatures and one truth.”⁹ Platonic philosophers challenged the materialist pantheism of this Stoic philosophy and introduced the idea that virtuous life meant the assimilation of the human soul to the world-soul, which was in turn the reflection of higher eternal

⁹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 45 (caps in original).

principles beyond the created order. Thus where the Stoics say “live according to nature,” Platonists encouraged their followers to assimilate to the divine image inherent in both the cosmos and themselves.¹⁰ Later Christian thinkers such as the apostle Paul and the church fathers could and did build on the pagan language of assimilation to the divine, even if they transformed it radically based on their belief in Christ as the true image of God.¹¹ My main point is that Christians and non-Christians articulated the purpose of human existence, of society, and of education on the basis of a participatory, essentially religious framework. Embedded in a meaningful cosmos, human consciousness participated in a larger natural rational and moral order that provided common reference points to the questions who we are, why we live and what we live for.

¹⁰ So, for example, in this remarkable passage from the *Timaeus*: “For the divine part within us the congenial motions are the intelections and revolutions of the Universe. These each one of us should follow, rectifying the revolutions within our head, which were distorted at our birth, by learning the harmonies and revolutions of the Universe, and thereby making the part that thinks like I (ἐξομοίωσαι) unto the object of this thought, in accordance with its original nature, and having achieved this assimilation (ομοιωσάντα) attain finally to that goal of life which is set before men by the gods as the most good both for the present and for the time to come» (*Timaeus* 90c-d; Qtd. in Van Kooten, 94)

¹¹ Emil Brunner, for example, argues that the anthropology of Christian humanism differs sharply from Greek anthropology by grounding the individual in the electing call of God, and thus in the divine-human personal encounter that posits community and individuality as very ground of being. See *Christianity and Civilization*, 100 (and preceding pages). Greece, Brunner argues, pioneered the individual, but on the basis of reason as the divine spark, which makes community secondary and also allowed for an aristocracy of reason that endorsed slavery. Brunner isolates three key differences between Hellenistic and Christian anthropology in the area of personality (Christian idea is not grounded in “the abstract, general element in all men, namely reason, but individual personality as such is the object of this appreciation because it is deemed worthy of being called by God.” The basis for personality is not reason but love: “The loving man, having received God’s love, is God’s image), of community (the Greek rational basis only allows for union, for a collection of the instantiations of impersonal reason, rather than the communion effected by the Christian faith as called by God in love of him and neighbor), and of body-spirit relations (here the Greek emphasis of reason as the higher, dispassionate element leads to a denigration of the body; the Christian adoption of this principle in Neo-Platonism, leads to ascetic Christianity in medieval times, criticized by Brunner (for all this see pages 95-96). I do not think that Brunner grasps a) the complexity of patristic thought on this issue, for the fathers did *have* to appreciate the body as part of God’s image (cf. Irenaeus) nor b) the continuity of Renaissance philosophy as patristic thought.

This correlation between mind and a transcendent moral order or natural law (Naturrecht), specifically in its later Christian configurations, gave direction and purpose to Western cultural institutions such as our universities, courts, and hospitals, but we have lost this connection. We have lost it because secularism threw out the baby of transcendence with the bathwater of religion. In this process, human reasoning and acceptable evidence for truth claims were narrowed to the same model of knowledge that proved so powerful in the natural sciences. But this method, as Heidegger for example, already pointed out in the 1930s, is purely empirical. Science is all “show and tell.” Science, as Heidegger famously put it, does not think, and when it tries, it usually produces bad metaphysics. Indeed what we got through the uncritical extension of the scientific method to all other areas of human knowing is “scientism.” Some of you may have listened to the physicist Ian Hutchinson’s talk here at UBC. In his book *Monopolizing Knowledge*, Hutchinson rightly restricts natural science to the kind of investigative knowledge that depends on, and draws its persuasiveness and nearly apodictic power from the empirical method of repeat-verifiability, or, as he put it, the reproducibility of results. And he rightly rejects precisely this extension of the scientific method into all areas of human knowing, because “in many fields of human knowledge the degree of reproducibility we require in science is absent.”¹² Consequently, scientism’s reductive rational grid devalues not only religion but also any other knowledge discipline that does not yield results in a petri dish. Thus not only religion ceases to be an important source of truth, but, along with it, aesthetics, art, literature, poetry –

¹² 45

in short, the humanities, are demoted to subjective opinion that has no place in the so-called real world.

Now secularism and scientism are closely related, because they rely on the same rejection of any truths that do not fit the narrow, reductive grid of reproducible results. Scientism and secularism, then, are akin to observing the world with a severely limited vision, with only one eye, and through a microscope (or a telescope), missing much, perhaps most of what makes up the full spectrum of human experience and knowledge.

The good news for all who care about the human spirit is that dogmatic secularism is collapsing. Our own Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has done much to unmask secularism as an ideology. By showing the ideological character of secularism, Taylor exposes the illusion that secularism is simply a value neutral way of assessing reality (Taylor 2007).¹³ In stark contrast to its supposedly disinterested rationality, secularism rests on the metaphysical claim that human progress necessitates the demise of religion. Taylor calls this the “subtraction narrative of secularism,” and he exposes the powerful narrative imagery of this myth. According to the secularist story, the mature human being leaves the irrational childhood of religious superstition and walks, erect and free, into the rising sun of an enlightened, humane rationality. On this view, all of Western history is merely the gradual subtraction of religion from the non-religious essence of human reason. Dogmatic secularists experience the diminishing of religion as liberation from a more primitive, irrational, state of human being which we have

¹³ *A Secular Age*. Taylor also summarizes his criticism of the Enlightenment *mythos* in a more recent dialogue with Habermas (See, Taylor 2011, 34-59, 53).

thankfully overcome to embrace human progress and prosperity.¹⁴ Once this story has been internalized, any return to religion will “naturally” appear as a regress toward the dark and infantile beginnings of humanity. The well-known sociologist José Casanova has shown that this dogmatic secularism lies behind many intellectuals’ irrational “fear of religion.” Secularism is thus a kind of faith, complete with a creed requiring the separation of reason and faith, a dualism that Taylor, along with postmodern philosophies, has demonstrated to be untenable (Taylor 2007, 314-319).

Those who inhabit this subtraction narrative have remained blind to the sociological fact that religion never really receded. In other words, the currently much-discussed “return of religion” or the notion of a post-secular society express the sentiments only of those who already inhabit the secularist narrative and thus expected religions’ continual diminishment. As the sociologist Hans Joas points out, the experience that religion had already been banished from rational thought but now has in some manner returned, did never really correspond to a larger social reality, neither globally nor in all of Europe (Joas 2004, 124). And yet, based on this internalized story, many educated Europeans instinctively link religion to intolerance and irrationality. They regard religious convictions as irreconcilable with rational thought and therefore as dangerous for the democratic state (Casanova 2009b).¹⁵ Non-Western cultures, however, are not historically conditioned in the same way, and the Western fear of religion is rather foreign to

¹⁴ “Sind wir immer noch säkular?” in *Der Westen und seine Religionen. Was kommt nach der Säkularisierung?* (Herder: Freiburg i.B., 2010, 52-65), p. 60.

¹⁵ Taylor believes, on the contrary, that religion plays an important part in democratic societies (Taylor 2009b).

them. Thus Pope Benedict is quite right to worry that the ideology of secularism with its separation of reason and faith provides a poor starting point for much needed inter-cultural dialogue, because the majority of the world's cultures cannot quite comprehend our separation of faith from reason (Benedict XVI 2007, 55). Benedict's analysis has recently been affirmed by a wonderful CBC broadcast in David Caylay's "Ideas" series entitled "The Myth of the Secular." In a number of interviews with sociologists, philosophers, political scientists and theologians "The Myth of the secular" broadcast confirms two things: first, secularism arose from the marriage of atheism to the scientific method, and to metaphysical naturalism. Secondly, we learn that the unmasking of secularism as a misguided ideology began when sociologists discovered in the 1970s and 80s that a secularist framework did not fit the empirical evidence of social phenomena they encountered.

The writings of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas illustrate this implosion of secularism. In the 70s, Habermas still preached that religion would be replaced by humanity's increasingly enlightened modes of public reasoning. About ten years ago, however, Habermas surprised his readers by admitting that secular reason cannot itself generate moral values but requires the inspiration of religion. Why this change? Well, Habermas was honest enough to see that secularism with its naturalistic worldview offered no resistance to the limitless ambitions of modern science and technology, especially in the area of genetic engineering. For example, Habermas routinely invokes the Christian idea of the "imago dei" to warn against the instrumentalization of human life.

At the same time, however, Habermas demonstrates the intellectual dilemma faced by many secular thinkers who don't want to be dogmatic secularists. Their intellectual formation in the subtraction narrative, and fear of religiously motivated violence prevent such otherwise progressive secular thinkers from admitting religious reasoning as a form of valid, public reasoning. Habermas exemplifies this ambivalence. On the one hand, he acknowledges society's dependence on religion as a moral resource. Yet on the other hand, he insists that legitimate public reasoning has to proceed without any metaphysics, relying ultimately only on the democratically achieved consensus of rational citizens in reasonable public debates. Any other arguments deriving from religious practice or belief are not admissible until they are translated into the idiom of public, post-metaphysical reasoning. It is again Charles Taylor, who has exposed the inherent contradiction of Habermas's position. Taylor has pointed out that Habermas's ideal of metaphysically neutral reasoning cannot itself generate the ethical assumptions on which it depends. Habermas presumes that we grant each other the dignity of moral and reasonable persons. Such ethical conceptions about human nature, however, are not at all self-evident; they are historically contingent and derive from Christian anthropology.

Habermas wants the moral intuitions of religion but not as an intrinsic part of public reason. Such a refusal to link human consciousness to a natural moral order keeps in place a faith reason dualism that hurts Christians and non-Christians alike. For example, Habermas is certainly right to insist on some form of common public discourse, but, in the absence of a broader sense of rationality that could include within itself religious experience, we will always have a purely

confrontational model of secular-religious dialogue. On the one side stand Christians, who have forgotten their respective natural law traditions, and thus regard the Bible as the exclusive basis for moral discourse; on the other side are the secularists who oppose religious voices in the name either of naked reason or some form of scientism masquerading as common sense. Until we address this missing common framework head on, unless we can bridge the perceived gap between reason and faith, discussions about the loss of cultural identity and the loss of purpose in Western institutions will remain fruitless.

Part of the problem in the debate about religion and culture is that many educated and well meaning people in the West have forgotten where their values come from. Ignorance concerning the Christian humanistic roots of Western culture by those committed to liberal democratic values often leads to the false opposition of humanism and Christianity. Consider this example: last year, the German chancellor Angela Merkel tried to address the practical and political quagmire of multiculturalism by asserting that Germany's social values were founded on a Christian vision of humanity to which both native citizens and immigrants should conform. Among many critical responses, a blog by a German legal expert was particularly revealing. He wrote, "No Madame chancellor, I align myself with the image of humanity embraced by humanism . . . I am obligated to the constitution's vision of our humanity (*Menschenbild*) and not to that of Christianity." Christianity, the critic claims, has only produced the Inquisition; the Enlightenment, however, produced the free and responsible individual together with an ideal for social progress. Many educated citizens of Western societies would agree with this

opposition of humanism and Christianity, and thus of freedom and progress on the one hand, and oppression by benighted religions on the other. And yet, the very ideas of universal human dignity and freedom were inspired by Christian humanism. This legal expert's false opposition of humanism and Christianity demonstrates that we too often forget that the values of secular humanism depend on their older Christian roots.

Let me give you a final illustration for the loss of purpose in Western culture. This is an example closer to home. Higher education, is perhaps one of the more important areas where this lack of purpose is especially evident. Very few academics are happy with the kind of mercenary pragmatism many university administrators are apparently quite eager to embrace. By now, the books lamenting the loss of liberal arts education are beyond count. But most of these critics are unable to come up with any convincing arguments *why* we should educate for wisdom and character formation, if no transcendent realities exist. As one of my favourite writers on the university, John Sommerville has pointed out, by becoming purely secular institutions, universities cut "their lifeline to ultimate sources of meaning." The upshot is that "relentless secularization reduces universities to trade schools, even though we like to imagine them as something more."¹⁶ As a result, we find ever better ways to teach us *how* to make money, but we can no longer convincingly teach *what* we should spend the money on. Sommerville, again, identifies naturalism as the main culprit. He argues that the conscious effort in secular universities to eliminate the religious dimension that gave birth to them,

¹⁶ *Religious Ideas for Secular Universities*, 48-49.

ends up devaluing the purpose of university studies to the point of extinction: “If the point of the secular university was to eliminate the religious dimension, it will eventually find that it has eliminated the human distinction as well, and be unable to make sense of any of its intellectual and professional disciplines.”¹⁷

3. The Challenge of Christian Humanism

In my view, the best way to address all of these issues is for Westerners to recover their own religious roots for what it means to be human, and the best summary way of speaking about these roots is to use the label Christian humanism. Thus in the remaining time, I want briefly to show you what I mean by that term, how it has shaped our past cultural periods, and then end with some general observations on why Christian humanism is relevant for us as today.

Christian humanism begins with the Christological interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27. For New Testament and patristic authors, what it means to be “made after the image and likeness of God” is determined by the Word become flesh. We know that the ancient Greco-Roman world also talked about the image of God. We also know that Christianity shares the concept of the *imago Dei* with Judaism and Islam.¹⁸ Nor should we forget, as the religions scholar Guy Stroumsa reminds us, that Christianity defeated the Greco-Roman cultural world with “Jewish Weapons.”

¹⁷ Sommerville, *Decline*, 38.

¹⁸ On Judaism, see “The Jewish Paradigm” in Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 53-78. He shows that Philo, most likely following Antiochus of Ascalon (died 69 BC), already placed Plato’s forms into the mind of God and identified them with the logos, the creative wisdom of God (ibid., 59). On Islam, see Küng, *Der Islam*, 118; Rahman, *Themes of the Qur’an*, 5 and 65ff.

¹⁹ These “weapons” were a sovereign, personal God not bound by need or necessity, and the embodied personhood afforded by the idea of man made in the image of God.²⁰ And yet, Christianity alone claims an actual incarnation of God in human flesh. As the church father Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 115-202) points out, only the incarnation actually *shows* concretely what humanity is to be:

For in times long past, it was *said* that man was created after the image of God, but it was not [actually] *shown*; for the Word was as yet invisible, after whose image man was created. . . . When, however, the Word of God became flesh, He . . . showed forth the image truly, since he became Himself what was his image. ²¹

Early Christians believed that in the incarnation, God himself became human in order to lift humanity up into the divine life. In this way, as Irenaeus put it, Christ “assimilat[ed] human being to the invisible Father through means of the visible Word.” Jesus Christ himself was the true human image of God and by participation in him one could attain true humanity.

Many early Christian theologians from Irenaeus all the way to Augustine have encapsulated the purpose of the incarnation in the adage that God became man so that man could become like God.²² In Augustine’s words, “the Son of God became

¹⁹ Strousma, Guy G. *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity*. Translated by Susan Emanuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 11.

²⁰ Ibid., 23. Strousma also shows that, save for a few platonising exceptions, the Christian definition of the person “includes the body as much as the intellect” (ibid.).

²¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 544 (5.16.2) (italics in the original).

²² Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, held not that reason is the divine spark but that “Christ had set in the human body a piece of heaven.” He “took flesh (amazing! To washed-out minds incredible!) and came, both God and man, two natures gathered into one; one hidden, the other open to mankind” (*On God and Man*, 72-73). Nazianzus also talks about a “double purification”, namely that of the spirit and that of the blood, for Christ’s blood poured out was, after all, “mine too” (ibid., 74.)

the Son of Man, so as to make the sons of men into sons of God.”²³ With this formula, early Christian theologians took up the intellectual vocabulary of their day to express the biblical idea that Christ has inaugurated a new humanity, and that to be truly human is to be patterned after Christ who is the true image of God.²⁴ For these early Christian writers, Christianity was essentially a humanism. It is difficult to convey in a few minutes the breath-taking scope of the patristic vision for the deification of humanity. We are confronted with a comprehensive program for elevating humanity to its divinely intended place of god-likeness. As Clement of Alexandria put it, “the greatest and most regal work of God is the salvation of humanity.” Salvation, however, pertains to the whole being, body, soul and intellect, and meant the renewal of human beings toward “all that pertains to love of truth, love of man, and love of excellence.”²⁵ For the church fathers, Christ had died so that true humanity could become possible. Patristic humanists answered the two questions of “who am I” and “what am I living for,” by pointing to the original purpose of human beings: to the comprehensive plan of God to lift his human creatures above irrational behaviour to their true rational and relational image in Christ. St. Basil the Great sums up the essence of patristic humanism, in this brief

²³ *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 372.

²⁴ 1 Cor. 47-49; 2 Cor. 5-17 (kaine ktisis – new creation); Eph. 2:15: For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man (kainon anthropon) in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end; Eph. 4:19 ff.: Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and put on the new human being (kainon anthropon) , created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Clement, *Instructor*, 235 (ch.12).

catechism. Question: "What is Christianity?" Answer: "Likeness to God as far as is possible for human nature."²⁶

My claim is that this teaching has revolutionized ancient conceptions of humanity and laid the foundation for many positive aspects of our culture. I can only claim this here, but if you want greater detail, you will have to take out a small loan and buy my book. Nevertheless, it remains true that even if some of these aspects have developed over a long time, the Christian idea of the incarnation, and the related notion of the Christian life as the journey toward true humanity has given us a unique definition of what it means to be human. For example, the Judeo-Christian idea of the *imago Dei* has allowed for an intrinsic human dignity apart from race, nationality, mental or physical abilities, and thus apart from our usefulness for society.²⁷ Along with this intrinsic human dignity, Christianity afforded us a unique idea of human freedom. The great German philosopher Hegel still knew of this important Christian humanist legacy when he wrote, "that the human being is free in his essence was known neither to Plato nor Aristotle. . . Christianity taught that Christ freed human beings, that they are equal before God, and liberated toward Christian freedom, independent of birth, status or education."²⁸

And Hegel may be German but he is still is right! Through a lengthy development based on the *imago Dei* and Trinitarian discussions in patristic and

²⁶ *On the Human Condition*, Discourse 1 (Popular Patristic Series. Ed. John Behr. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), p. 45. Compare this to Plato's statement as godlikeness as human destiny: *homoiosis theoi kata to dunaton* as the goal for philosophy qtd. in George H. Van Kooten, Geurt Hendrik van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context*. Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008, 126.

²⁷ On the importance of "intrinsic human dignity" see Margaret Somerville, "Defining Human Dignity." <http://www.family.org.au/care/articles/Somerville%20defining%20human%20dignity.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2012).

²⁸ *Einleitung zu Geschichte der Philosophie*, in *Saemtliche Werke*, hrsg. V. H. Glockner, Stuttgart 1927, Bd. 17, 79 ff. Qtd. in Kaufmann, *Kirchenkrise*, 57.

medieval theology, Christianity has granted us a view of personhood that balances the importance and depth of the individual person with the importance of human solidarity and society.²⁹

Two insights from patristic humanism remain important for us. First, by replacing the Greco-Roman logos with Christ, Christian humanists transformed the Greco-Roman “image of God.” Not merely the rational mind but the whole human being was to be valued and brought into communion with God. Gnosticism gave way to true humanism. Moreover, as created in the image of a God free from necessity, human beings came to be seen as endowed with a free will and no longer determined by fate, nature or by the state. We see here the birth of moral self-determination and the theological roots of political resistance.

Secondly, because the creator God had made all things through Christ, creation possessed an intelligible order perceptible to every rational mind. This is the origin of the careful synthesis of reason and faith that enabled the intellectual life of Christianity and its inherent respect for all sources of truth. Christians and non-Christians shared what Augustine had called the “saeculum,” a common world, running according to the laws of creation until Christ would return and renew all things. Thus the very idea of the secular is a Christian idea.

²⁹ *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, 335. See also Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization*, “Personality and Humanity,” pp. 91-105. It is not, of course, as if the ancient world had not known a common humanity or talked about human dignity. Yet when Christians adopted Platonic language of becoming godlike, the biblical content transformed the meaning of the older references. As Henri de Lubac has pointed out in his important book on the social aspects of Christianity,²⁹ the conception of a personal, Trinitarian God makes possible a true and free society of persons, a city build of living stones.

Scholastic and Renaissance Humanism

Now that we have sketched the theological roots of Christian humanism, we can take a brief look at how Christian anthropology has shaped the subsequent cultural periods of the middle ages and the Renaissance. In doing so, I suggest a basic continuity that may sound strange to some of you, because Christians and non-Christians alike have become habituated to the secularist subtraction narrative, so that we see the middle ages as the breakdown of a more unadulterated New Testament Christianity, and view the Renaissance as the beginning symptoms of a secular humanism that will put man on God's throne. Research in the humanities has long corrected such a distorted picture, and supports a much greater continuity between these periods.³⁰ I suggest therefore, that medieval and Renaissance humanisms are shaped by the same educational impetus of restoring human beings to the true image of God.

Now we know that medieval scholastics were consummate synthesizers and compilers of authoritative texts. Why did they do this? The ideal of scholastic humanism takes up the concept of the restoration of human being to the *imago Dei* from the church fathers by seeking to repair the fragmentation of knowledge occasioned by humanity's fall from divine grace. According to the medievalist R.W. Southern, Scholastics aimed at "restoring to fallen mankind, so far as was possible, that perfect system of knowledge which had been in the possession or within the

³⁰ I am principally drawing on the scholarly effort spearheaded by Paul Kristeller, Charles Trinkaus, and Albert Rabil, among many others, to show the continuity of Renaissance humanism with patristic and (despite many differences) even with scholastic nominalist theology. See for example Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*. The three volume collection of conference papers on the relation of the patristic, medieval, and renaissance periods edited by Albert Rabil also provides a solid overview of this trend: Rabil, *Renaissance Humanism*.

reach of mankind at the moment of Creation.”³¹ Within the boundaries of human finitude, scholastic humanists were confident about achieving enough knowledge for a proper view of God, nature, and human conduct to restore society to as close a resemblance of the original endowment of its first parents as was possible for fallen humankind.³² They did not believe that everything knowable would be known, but rather that “at least all reasonably obedient and well-disposed members of Christendom would have access to a body of knowledge sufficient for achieving order in this world and blessedness in the world to come.”³³

Once again, the incarnation was central to this scholastic humanism. The concept of the incarnation as God’s reconciliation with creation and his most intimate fellowship with humanity wove nature, humanity, reason, and religion into a meaningful tapestry of ennobling purpose that was central to medieval theology.³⁴ These religious developments “brought the universe within the reach of human understanding,” but also disclosed God as the “friend of mankind.”³⁵ In the words of Aquinas, “by willing to become man, God clearly displayed the immensity of his love for men, so that, henceforth, men might serve God, no longer out of fear of death . . . but out of the love of charity.”³⁶ No other humanism before Christian humanism had postulated the friendship of God or elevated human dignity to the role of “co-operators” with God.³⁷ As we can see, Medieval humanism thus draws its energy from the same motivation as patristic humanism: Assured of God’s love, the

³¹ Southern, *Scholastic Humanism*, 1:5.

³² *Ibid.*, 1:10.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:5-6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:29

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:30.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Shorter Summa*, 230.

³⁷ Gilson, *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, 144.

intelligibility of creation and the trustworthiness of human reason, the scholastics energetically pursued their ‘repair job’ of restoring the fullness of knowledge to humankind.

For a number of reasons, Scholastic humanism ultimately failed. The scholastic ambition of synthesising all available knowledge was self-defeating because scholastic compilations of authoritative texts and commentaries themselves contributed to the proliferation of knowledge and only showed that reality is too complex to be unified by human understanding. Moreover, the scholastic penchant for conducting science without conducting experiments was also a dead end. And so scholastic exegesis was soon replaced by Renaissance humanism, and scholastic science by empirical scientists. Nonetheless, we should not forget that scholastic humanists gave us the universities and their trust in reason laid the foundations for modern science.³⁸

When we now turn to our next cultural period, we need to ignore Renaissance humanist’s own exaggerated sense of breaking with the “dark ages” (an expression coined by the humanist Petrarch), and we also have to ignore the suspicious view held by many evangelicals and reformed world-view-enthusiasts that Renaissance humanism is secularism waiting to come out of the closet. Secular humanists themselves, of course, share this view with Christian critics, but celebrate rather than lament it. It really is too bad, that we have to demolish such a rare meeting place of Christians and secular humanists. And yet faithfulness to the

³⁸ Southern, 1:43. See also Henri de Lubac, who, in *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, shows that the congruence of nature and grace was prevalent in the middle ages until the sixteenth century. In contrast to modern philosophy, the idea of “pure nature,” was unknown to medieval theologians (12).

historical evidence demands that we interpret the Renaissance in continuity with patristic and medieval Christian humanism. It is true, of course, that Renaissance humanists emphasized the individual more than medieval theologians, and developed a stronger philological and historical consciousness than preceding Christian cultures. Yet on the whole, we have to view Renaissance humanism as a Christian movement in the tradition of the earlier Christian humanisms. Consider, for instance, that Renaissance humanists brought about a patristic revival, retrieving not only Aristotle and Plato, but also, and with great religious earnestness, patristic sources, such as Augustine (in the case of Petrarch) or Origen Jerome and Irenaeus (in the case of Erasmus). Consider also that the apparently blasphemous language of extolling the greatness and god-like stature of humanity will appear less radical when we understand it as a continuation of the patristic language of deification. When Pico della Mirandola (1463-94) goes on about the greatness of man and urges the subordination of our baser instincts to reason so that we may live up to our divine image, he is really not that far away from Augustine's similar educational program. Pico celebrates humanity's God-given dignity, not human autonomy.

Other passages show clearly Pico's basic adherence to the Christian narrative of redemption, according to which Christ restores our full humanity:

But just as all of us in the first Adam, who obeyed Satan more than God and whose sons we are according to the flesh, deformed from men degenerated into brutes, so in the newest Adam Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the will of the Father and defeated the spiritual iniquities with his blood, whose sons we are all according

to the spirit, reformed by grace, we are regenerated [by man] into adoption as sons of God.³⁹

Pico is not, as usually assumed, the Renaissance villain (to Christians) or hero (to secularists), who proclaimed the secularist sovereign self. The patristic scholar Henri de Lubac hits nearer the mark when he claims that Pico's Renaissance manifesto, *Discourse on the Dignity of Man*, is theologically not opposed to traditional Christianity.^{40/41}

The educational vision of Renaissance humanism thus rested squarely on Christology. Renaissance humanists knew well that the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus set Christianity apart from previous philosophies and religions. As Petrarch put it, "only Christianity truly joins heaven and earth."⁴² I am sure you all know that Renaissance humanists were infatuated by philology, literature, rhetoric and poetry. What few people realize, however, is that their love for the Word was consciously based on the incarnation of the Word.

The humanist Giovanni Pontano (1426–1503), for example, drew two important insights from Christology. First, the creative power of words. According to Christianity, being exists by the power of God's Word, and as made in His image, human beings participate in this appearing of being through the word. Secondly, Pontano believed that the incarnation demanded that just as the eternal Word could truly show itself in time, so human universal truths can be adequately depicted in

³⁹ Commentary on Genesis as qtd. in Trinkaus, *In Our Image*, 2:517.

⁴⁰ Lubac, *Theology in History*, 43.

⁴¹ Trinkaus, *In Our Image*, 1:xx-xxi. Like the church fathers and the medieval humanists, Renaissance thinkers regarded the ability and drive of man to cultivate and shape his world as "an emulation of divinity, since it was in this respect that man was created in the image and likeness of God."

⁴² Petrarch, *De otio religioso*, qtd. in Trinkaus, *In Our Image* 2:658.

language, but never exhaustively so. The incarnation, in short, teaches that truth is interpretive and, like God, cannot ever be nailed down to a final meaning.⁴³ But there is more: because human language shares in the divine Logos, Renaissance humanists believed that language possessed an infinite possibility of meaning. For them, Christian Word theology made language what Heidegger would call later “a clearing of being;” that is, language allows us to see things in new constellations and discover new meanings.

This of course, is the power of metaphor, our linguistic ability intuitively to grasp similarities between seemingly disparate things. The 18th century humanist Giambattista Vico (1688-1744), for example, taught his students that rhetoric and poetry train an analogical imagination, by which we can unite seeming contrasts into a new unity.⁴⁴ For Vico, without this ability, even scientists will never find new theories. Vico summarizes the importance of metaphor with this one liner: “Similarity (*similitudo*) is the mother of all invention.”⁴⁵ Vico then makes the same argument the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur made for our time: the obsession with merely descriptive language in science or analytic logic is inhumane. For without the power of metaphor, the human imagination cannot transcend given horizons and thus unlearns to hope for better things.

⁴³ Hans Georg Gadamer benutzt den gleichen Sachverhalt, um die Verbindung von *res* und *verbum* für seine hermeneutische Philosophie zu sichern (TM Seite finden).

⁴⁴ Vico, *Vom Wesen und Weg der geistigen Bildung*, 43

⁴⁵ Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, 98.

3. The Challenge of Christian Humanism

We do not have time to trace further the ideas of Christian humanism into the modern and postmodern periods. Instead, I want to conclude with some general remarks on why we need to recover the heritage of Christian humanism. What I have tried to say is not that the Christian religion plunked down ready made concepts we have to recover. Rather my argument is one about the religious inspiration and historical development of humane values: deeply indebted to the Jewish faith, the Christian religion has decisively and beneficially shaped the conceptual and moral horizons of Western cultures. This inspiration and its results have been both taken for granted and also ignored on account of an ideology called secularism. Yet no matter how loudly and stridently some of its adherents may still protest, the intellectual credibility of secularism and its attendant reductive materialism (or naturalism) and rationalism are quickly losing their credibility. This implosion of secularism now opens the way for reassessing the role of religions for social developments and intercultural dialogue. The old secularist approach had been to foster social harmony by repressing religion, or by watering it down. As Christopher Hitchens put it, “religion poisons everything.” Many still hold that religious belief, especially monotheistic belief, can only lead to the repression of the other. Hence, they argue, we need to water down religious belief, and – short of eradicating religion altogether—we must seek the lowest common denominator among religions to foster inter-cultural dialogue. We now recognize, however, that the supposedly secular neutral vantage point from which religions are thus assessed has its own metaphysics, its own faith commitments, and its own fundamentalists.

Even Habermas's half-way house of making use of religious insights while clinging to an essentially secularist conception of public reasoning will not do in the long run. In fact, Habermas's rather instrumental view of religion shows us clearly that religion and not secularism is a living inspiration for shaping culture. The time has now come to redraw our conceptual maps of social movements, issues and trends. Acknowledging once more religion as the true inspirational force behind cultural formation, we should now try to understand and *draw on the inspirational power of* the particular religious beliefs that have shaped our cultural values; Moslem scholars, as you probably know, are already doing this for their cultures.

For these reasons, I suggest that Christian humanism, whose features I have all too briefly sketched for you through three formative cultural periods, should be an important topic for understanding a set of religious beliefs about who we are as human beings that have shaped our culture and cultural identities. The challenge of Christian humanism, for the religiously committed, as well as for those who are not committed to an identifiable religion, will be creatively to appropriate the religious resources unique to the Western tradition in such a way that they support and further the modern democratic and rights based societies they helped engender. I believe that we can meet this challenge, because important modern insights into the nature of human beings and the nature of truth are not merely compatible with but actually flow out of Christianity. We have already talked about the formative role of Christianity for the emergence of human freedom and dignity. I now want to mention briefly two other aspects that flow from the Christian religion. The first is a *common humanity* and the second is *the interpretive nature of truth*.

If we don't water down Christianity, but actually focus on Christology and the incarnation, early Christian teachings in the New Testament and also in the church fathers unfold a vision for a new humanity, for a "new race" (as they called it) in which social and ethnic divisions are overcome. Needless to say, Christianity has not been very good at realizing this vision, but it exists and can be drawn out nonetheless. It is important that this vision is not merely extant in historical texts, but that it can and ought to be a living reality at the heart of the Christian's religious life. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, used this teaching to protest the so-called Aryan paragraph which effectively barred Jewish Christians from church membership. For Bonhoeffer this exclusion was not merely a bureaucratic or civil matter but a denial of the church's role as the new humanity for which ethnic divisions no longer existed. For Bonhoeffer, whose theology recovers the Christian humanism of the church fathers, the incarnation necessitates inclusion and philanthropy. Bonhoeffer makes this point emphatically on the last pages of his book *Discipleship*: "In Christ's incarnation all of humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever from now attacks the least of the people, attacks Christ, who took on human form and who himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance."⁴⁶ Christianity thus has this truly universal, humanitarian message: with the incarnation, God has firmly anchored and heightened human dignity for every human being.⁴⁷ For Bonhoeffer, this teaching

⁴⁶ DBWE 6, 285. In DBWE 6, 403. "Human nature" replaces humanity in *Discipleship*: "However it is the mystery of this name [Jesus Christ] that it denotes not merely an individual human being but at the same time comprises all of human nature within itself."

⁴⁷ "The incarnate one transforms his disciples into brothers and sisters of all human beings. The "philanthropy" (Titus 3:4) of God that became evident in the incarnation of Christ is the reason for

about the unity of humanity is intrinsically tied to church life. He believed that the church sacraments, baptism, the Eucharist, and preaching, were participation in this reality, so that at the most intimate worship experience, one had to think about the connection established through Christ between oneself and the rest of humanity. Solidarity began at the heart of the church. You may recall Bonhoeffer's famous line that "Only those who cry out for the Jews may also sing Gregorian chants."⁴⁸

The second important insight that flows from the Christian religion is the interpretive nature of truth. Again, this is true historically as well as existentially. The father of philosophical hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, confirms the historical and philosophical value of the incarnation for a hermeneutic understanding of truth: "Christology prepares the way for a new anthropology, which mediates in a new way between the mind of man in its finitude and the divine infinity. Here what we have called the hermeneutical experience finds its own, special ground."⁴⁹ Gadamer argues that the incarnation allows us to think the harmonious mixture of transcendent otherness and historical being, and thus provides the basis for a conception of truth that is both fully historical and linguistic, and yet not merely subjective. The incarnation, in other words, places at the heart of Western thought the idea of *mediation*. Truth, whether it be the truth of human

Christians to love every human being on earth as brother or sister." Also the church is thus the sin bearer for the secular community (DBWE 4, 285).

⁴⁸ Müller, G. L., & Schönherr Albrecht. (1996). Editors' Afterword to the German Edition D. W. Bloesch & J. H. Burtneiss, Trans.). In A. Schönherr & G. B. Kelly (Eds.), . *Vol. 5: Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (A. Schönherr & G. B. Kelly, Ed.). Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (125). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. Originally mentioned in Bethge *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 512. Bethge corrected his initial date for this statement from 1938 to the end of 1935.

⁴⁹ TM 428.

ideas or divine revelation is always mediated through language, concepts and tradition.

Again, it is important to realize that the incarnation places this insight at the very heart of religious experience. What is for Gadamer an existential truth philosophically, is for the Christian an existential religious reality. For brevity's sake, I turn to Bonhoeffer again to demonstrate this Christological basis for a hermeneutic epistemology. Bonhoeffer was very concerned about two Christian mistakes. The first was the Christian ghetto mentality to withdraw from the world to establish perfect Christian subcultures. This attempt to establish God's Kingdom on earth, he argued, merely repeated the worst of culture within itself. The second mistake was that of the German Christians who condoned Nazi politics because nationhood and race are creational orders ordained by God and thus to be preserved by religion. Both mistakes, Bonhoeffer argued, result from not acknowledging that all reality is mediated through the incarnate, crucified and resurrected Christ. Because of this mediation, any unmediated relationships to either nature or people are an illusion; the same is true for our knowledge of divine revelation. Knowledge of God, he said, must follow the pattern of mediation laid down by God himself in the incarnation. The holy, he wrote, is not the same as the profane, but because of the incarnation, the holy is only found in the profane, the revelational only in the rational.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *Ethics* 6, 49. The full passage runs: "Just as the reality of God has entered the reality of the world in Christ, what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is worldly, the 'supernatural' only in the natural, the holy only in the profane, the revelational only in the rational. The unity of the reality of God and the reality of the world established in Christ (repeats itself, or, more exactly) realizes itself again and again in human beings. Still, that which is Christian is not identical with the worldly, the natural with the supernatural, the revelational with the rational. Rather, the unity that exists

Bonhoeffer demonstrates that Christology provides the basis for a hermeneutic epistemology in which faith and reason work together. Because he believed that God had become a human being, transcendent truths exist in their mediation through historical tradition and rational reflection. He thus shows us that at the heart of Christianity, in Christology, lies the very antidote to fundamentalism and the seed for human solidarity.

I am sure other religions have similarly beneficial resources for hermeneutics and solidarity, but my competence does not really extend to other religions. It strikes me as extremely important, however, that all religions have to discover at their very heart social unity and the capacity for a hermeneutic conception of truth, that revelation is mediated through language, tradition and rational reflection, if they are to serve modern societies. I hope I could convey to you a sense that Christian humanism, based on the unique teaching of the incarnation, provides important resources for our common future after secularism; secularism's reductive view of reality has deprived us of the crucial realm of the human spirit from which we draw our hopes and motivations. The dignity of the person, and of common humanity, human rights and justice – these are spiritual values we must have not in formulas but in reality; religions are uniquely suited to provide this reality, but they must also form a consciousness of human solidarity. I want to leave

between them is given only in the Christ-reality, and that means only as accepted by faith in this ultimate reality. This unity is preserved by the fact that the worldly and the Christian, and that means only as accepted by faith in this ultimate reality. This unity is preserved by the fact that the worldly and the Christian mutually prohibit every static independence of the one over against, that they behave toward each other polemically, and precisely therein witness to their common reality, their unity in the Christ-reality."

you with a citation by Bonhoeffer that expresses the kind of attitude that makes Christian humanism a beneficial cultural resource.

After the plot to assassinate Hitler had failed, and Bonhoeffer knew his life was forfeit, he wrote this in a letter from prison to his closest friend: “ I discovered, and am still discovering to this day, that one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life . . . and this is what I call this-worldliness: living fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities—then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. And I think this is faith And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian. (Cf. Jer. 45!) How should one become arrogant over successes or shaken by one’s failures when one shares in God’s suffering in the life of this world?”⁵¹ That religions have been arrogant is attested by history. But the antidote to religious triumphalism is not secularism but the kind of religion Bonhoeffer outlines for us here.

Christianity, for Bonhoeffer, is all about becoming truly human. And this, it seems to me, ought to be the purpose of any other religious or non-religious attitude. Hence within a secular society, could not religious and non-religious rally around this final sentiment by Bonhoeffer?: “No one has the responsibility of turning the world into the kingdom of God, but only of taking the next step necessary to

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, D. (2010). *Vol. 8: Letters and Papers from Prison* (C. Gremmels, E. Bethge, R. Bethge, I. Tödt & J. W. de Gruchy, Ed.) (I. Best, L. E. Dahill, R. Krauss, N. Lukens, B. Rumscheidt, M. Rumscheidt & D. W. Stott, Trans.). Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (486). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

God's becoming human in Christ. . . . God became *human*. That is why responsible action has to weigh, judge, and evaluate the matter within the human domain."⁵²

Additional Material

Most of us will know that education was a main concern of Renaissance humanists.⁵³ What is less well established is that humanistic education did not merely aim at character formation in a general sense but at the shaping of Christian virtues. More specifically, humanist educators sought to inculcate a fully rounded, rational faith in their students. The humanist [Pier Paolo] Vergerio, for example, explains that "it is proper for a well-educated youth to respect and practice religion and to be steeped in religious belief from his earliest youth."⁵⁴ Yet such faith should

⁵² Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 224-5.

⁵³ Kristeller, "Humanism," 13-14.

⁵⁴ "The Character and Studies Befitting A Free-Born Youth" in Kallendorf, Craig. *Humanist Educational*

not be like “old wives” tales, but one that is well reasoned and ably articulated. For this purpose the student was to read a great deal of philosophy, theology and literature.⁵⁵ Not even a well-rounded mind, however, was the final goal of humanistic education, but the building of Christian moral character.⁵⁶ Like patristic authors, the humanist teachers appreciated classical learning for its metaphysical, even religious, bent, and they believed that classical writings contained much truth that Christians can build on. Renaissance humanists also agreed with the patristic teaching, however, that in Christ every moral human truth finds its fulfilment, wherefore the Christian should be spurred on to outdo the classical writer in moral virtue. As one humanist educator explained this greater burden for the Christian: if the Romans already knew about the importance of virtue and religion, “what must we do, who know the true God?”⁵⁷

The study of language and poetry finds its place within this Christian humanistic education as that which orients the soul toward the beautiful and wisdom. For wisdom is nothing else but understanding oneself and the world in light of God’s truth.⁵⁸ Noble sentiments require noble expression, and wisdom requires eloquence for its articulation. In the words of the English humanist, Roger Ascham, “as a good steak is required for nourishing the body, so good language is

Treatises. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002. 2-91, 25.

⁵⁵ Leonardo Bruni. “The Study of Literature To Lady Battista Malatesta of Montefeltro.” In: *Humanist Educational Treatises*. 92-126, 123. The combination of literature and knowledge makes the well rounded person, for “literary skill without knowledge is useless and sterile; and knowledge, however, extensive, fades into the shadows without the glorious lamp of literature.”

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 124-25.

⁵⁷ Aenas Silvius Piccolomini. “The Education of Boys.” In *Humanist Educational Treatises*. 126-259, 167.

⁵⁸ Leonardo Bruni d’Arezzo. “Concerning the Study of Literature.” In Woodward, William Harrison. *Vittorino Da Feltre and Other Humanist Educators*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press in association with the Renaissance Society of America, 1996. 119-134, 131.

necessary to express something well” [my paraphrase for [“for good and choice meats be no more requisite for healthy bodies than proper and apt words be for good matters.” For the humanists, clear and sensible expression of truth—in other words, eloquence—was “one of the fairest and rarest gifts that God doth give to man.”⁵⁹ Despite this ostensibly Christian platform for education and social reform, the humanists encountered plenty of fellow Christians who were rather suspicious of learning. One humanist warns his students that they “will be confronted by the opposition of the shallow Churchman,”⁶⁰ who will denounce classical learning as a waste of time. (Apparently these people have not died out). The immediate defence by humanists against such zealous ignorance in the disguise of religious piety is pointing to the church fathers’ interest in pagan poetry. After all, Jerome, Augustine, Cyprian, and Basil the Great “did not hesitate to draw illustrations from heathen poetry and sanctioned its study.”⁶¹ Besides, as humanists pointed out to their Christian critics, the Bible itself contains metaphors, poetry, and analogies; indeed, they said, is not theology “poetry about God”?⁶²

Possible alternative citation by Maritain at the end:

Maritain has so eloquently summarized what this claim entails, that I will try your patience with a lengthy citation by Maritain to press home the importance of Christianity for politics:

⁵⁹ “The Schoolmaster.” In Martindale, Joanna. *English Humanism: Wyatt to Cowley*. London; Dover N.H.: Croom Helm, 1985. 179-84, 184.

⁶⁰ Aeneas Sylvius. “De Liberiorum Educatione.” In: *Vittorino Da Feltre And Other Humanists*. 134-158, 149.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness* 2:690.

To keep faith in the forward march of humanity despite all the temptations to despair of man that are furnished by history, and particularly contemporary history; to have faith in the dignity of the person and of common humanity, in human rights and in justice—that is in essentially spiritual values; to have, not in formulas *but in reality*, the sense and respect for the dignity of the people, which is a spiritual dignity and is revealed to whoever knows how to love it; to sustain and revive the sense of equality without sinking into a leveling equalitarianism; to respect authority, knowing that its wielders are only men, like those they rule, and derive their trust from the consent of the will of the people whose vicars or representatives they are; to believe in the sanctity of law and in the efficacious virtue – efficacious at long range—of political justice in the face of the scandalous triumphs of falsehood and violence; to have faith in liberty and in fraternity, an heroic inspiration and heroic belief are needed which fortify and vivify reason, and which none other than Jesus of Nazareth brought forth into the world.”⁶³

⁶³ Benedict, *Christianity and Democracy*, 37.

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