

In Defense of Christian Humanism

AN ESSAY SUBMITTED TO

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Introduction

The question of how church and culture should relate has always been a thorny one. Its roots reach all the way back into the Old Testament, where God promised that his chosen people would be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 22:18), yet commanded them to obey his law that they might be a “consecrated people” (Deuteronomy 26:19). The story of the Israelites – really, the story of the whole Bible – is the story of the tension between being a part of the world, yet remaining distinct from it.

Throughout Christian history various attempts have been made to define a philosophy of life that correctly balances the “two books” of God’s revelation: nature and Scripture. Because human beings are made in the image of God, human nature and human culture are sources of truth about God. But because Scripture is God’s full and authoritative revelation, what nature tells us about God must always be interpreted in the light of Scripture.¹ The task of the Christian philosopher, theologian, or pastor, then, is to speak God’s truth in the language and images of his particular culture and environment.

The current paper will argue the following thesis: adherents of a biblically faithful, Reformed Christianity must recover the viewpoint of *Christian humanism* in order to engage a skeptical 21st century culture with the gospel. It must be admitted at the outset that this is a challenging thesis to defend. Christian humanism has generally been shunned by evangelicals as too man-centered.² It has been embraced and redefined by liberals in a way that subverts the authority of Scripture. But Christian humanism, rightly defined and explained, can bring together

¹ Cf. Calvin: “[T]his skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible... Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds... clearly shows us the true God.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.5.1 and I.6.1.

² “Of course the word humanism itself is a stumbling block... Despite its wholesome associations with the Renaissance scholarship of five centuries ago, with the humanities, with human nature, and with the character and quality of being human, this controversial word suffers from having been tarred with the brush of being an anti-God philosophy.” R. William Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), xi.

the witness of history, the theology of the Reformation, and the best God-centered contributions in literature and the arts to make a compelling case for the Christian worldview in the 21st century.

Defining Christian Humanism

Approaching a definition of Christian humanism proves to be a moving target. “Christian humanism has been a fluid rather than a fixed element in Western culture,” say the editors of one collection of writings.³ A self-avowed Christian humanist website agrees: “There have been throughout the centuries several applications of the phrase *Christian Humanism*, and these labels have sometimes been applied to groups and viewpoints which are mutually exclusive.”⁴ The definition of Christian humanism seems to be largely influenced by one’s philosophical presuppositions. Those who start from a more progressive viewpoint speak as if Christian humanism is simply a synonym for theological liberalism.⁵ But more orthodox thinkers draw their understanding of Christian humanism from the gospel itself: “Christian humanism is firmly rooted in divine revelation, especially that self-revelation of God which we have received in the Bible... God, our creator and sovereign Lord... has, because of what Jesus Christ has done, forgiven our rebellion and reconciled us to God... [This] is the very foundation of a Christian humanistic view of life.”⁶

For the purposes of the current study, the most rigorous definition of Christian humanism will be adopted. We will understand the word *Christian* to reflect historic orthodox Christianity

³ Joseph Shaw and others, eds., *Readings in Christian Humanism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 17.

⁴ ChristianHumanism.Org. Accessed 31 May 2005 <<http://www.christianhumanism.org/whatis.shtml>>

⁵ “Mainline or liberal Protestants need a better term to describe themselves... Is there an alternative to the vague *liberal* and anachronistic *mainline*? We have a suggestion: Christian humanism.” From “Term Limit: Rethinking ‘Mainline Liberal.’” *Christian Century* [online], 31 May 2005. Accessed 1 June 2005, <http://www.christiancentury.org/edesk_article.html?articleid=285>

⁶ Harris Kaasa, untitled essay, 1983; quoted in Franklin and Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism*, xiv-xvi.

as taught in the Bible and summarized in the Apostles' Creed. And we will understand *humanism* by its dictionary definition: "A system of thought that centers on humans and their values, capacities, and worth; concern with the interests, needs, and welfare of humans."⁷ A Christian humanism that can give the church a voice in the 21st-century culture must be *both* humanist and Christian in the true sense of each word. Much of what is labeled as Christian humanism in the literature should more properly be called *religious humanism*, because it is not Christian in the historic, biblical sense. But such is the problem with language: *Christian* has become a cultural term, not simply a biblical one.

It is precisely this fluidity of definition that gives room for Reformed Christians to rediscover and appropriate Christian humanism in service of the gospel. The task for those who stand in the Reformation heritage is twofold. First, we must reclaim the term "Christian humanism" from those who have loosed it from its biblical and historical moorings. Second, we must demonstrate that Christian humanism is true humanism. We must show that vigorous biblical Christianity offers "a larger, richer humanism than nontheistic perspectives are able to offer."⁸

An Incarnational Starting Point

John Frame has said that "everything in creation bears some analogy to God."⁹ If this is true, anything can be a starting point for conversation about the God of the Bible. But Christian theology has long favored a transcendent starting point, stressing concepts like the glory of God

⁷ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), s.v. "humanism." Later in the citation is a more philosophically technical definition of Humanism as "a cultural and intellectual movement of the Renaissance that emphasized secular concerns as a result of the rediscovery and study of the literature, art, and civilization of ancient Greece and Rome." The current essay speaks of humanism in the broader sense, which includes and informs the more specific movement known as Renaissance Humanism.

⁸ Shaw and others, *Readings in Christian Humanism*, 24.

⁹ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 230.

or the Deity of Christ. Christian humanists, in contrast, start with worldly things as a way of reasoning to the divine. “[A]ppropriation... is the typical and fundamental gesture of Christian humanism: to respond to the world by taking it over, by embracing it, by showing that no beauty, intelligence, or goodness is alien to Christianity or incompatible with it.”¹⁰ This human starting point causes Christian humanists to hold the Incarnation as the central doctrine of Christian theology. “At the heart of Christian humanism stands the Incarnation of the divine Word in the living, historical actuality of Jesus.”¹¹ “These are the hallmarks of Christian humanism: Christ has joined us in our humanity, and shown us both ourselves and the God at the heart of reality at the same time. The Incarnation demands a consideration of the human person in every aspect of human existence.”¹²

The fact of the Incarnation means that human beings themselves are a clue to God’s existence. In a culture skeptical of authority and Scripture, Christians must reassert the fundamental truth of *Imago Dei*: humans are made in the image of God. There is great dignity and worth in the human person. Human nature can provide for us a point of contact from which to reason about God’s nature and existence.¹³ Moreover, the dignity of human persons arises from the uniqueness of their status in creation and from the fact that Jesus chose to inhabit a human body. “Christian humanism offers a framework for affirming the uniqueness of human nature, whereas most secular humanisms... are at a loss to explain why human beings are different from other creatures.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Virgil Nemoianu, “Teaching Christian Humanism,” *First Things* 63 (May 1996): 16-22.

<<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9605/opinion/nemoianu.html>>

¹¹ Franklin and Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism*, 62.

¹² Michael Spencer, “Christian Humanism: Beginnings” *The Internet Monk* [online], 18 April 2005. Accessed 1 June 2005, <<http://www.internetmonk.com/archives/2005/04/019896.html>>

¹³ Renaissance humanist John Donne wrote: “Now, as for the sight of God here, our theatre was the world, our medium and glass was the creature, and our light was reason...” Quoted in Herschel C. Baker, *The Wars of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 28.

¹⁴ Shaw and others, *Readings in Christian Humanism*, 34.

Why A Rediscovery of Christian Humanism is Essential for the 21st-Century Church

Christian Humanism connects us to the history of both church and culture. The more conservative elements of Christianity have been wary of humanism because of its association with secularism. But Scholars R. William Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw argue that secular humanism is a relatively recent development in the history of ideas. Humanism has its origin in early Christian and Greek philosophy, which both “understood human beings as having a preeminent place in the universe distinct from and above the nonhuman natural world.”¹⁵ Christian humanism flourished for centuries under the influences of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and John Calvin. The secular version did not arise until after the Renaissance, when naturalistic thinkers enthroned human reason – not revelation – as the most reliable source of knowledge. Consequently, Christian humanism is not some recent attempt to “Christianize” a secular philosophy. It is secular humanism that is the aberration.¹⁶

In light of these historical realities, a recovery of Christian humanism places the Christian worldview in its rightful place as the fountainhead of humanistic thinking. Furthermore, it connects us to the rich, intertwined history of church and culture – for indeed, the two cannot be understood in isolation from one another.

Christian humanism is properly nothing but a reclaiming of the basic inheritance of our history and the natural connection of culture with the religious vistas of the human being. The current separation is the artificial relation, not the other way around... [T]here are fundamental commonalities between humanistic culture and Christianity that bring them

¹⁵ Franklin and Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism*, 15. Chapter 2 of this work, titled “Christian and Secular Humanism,” argues convincingly for the temporal primacy of Christian humanism over the secular version.

¹⁶ Cf. the observation of Walter Artus: “There is no serious reason to think that the theocentric humanism of much of Christian thought today is just a 20th century development... since the earliest days when Christian thought began to develop... Christian thinkers have well-nigh unanimously insisted on the lofty worth, dignity, and destiny of each and every human person.” In Richard P. Francis and Jane E. Francis, eds, *Christian Humanism: International Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 7-8.

together objectively, irrespective of the wishes and plans of writers, artists, and intellectuals.¹⁷

Christian humanism allows Christians to make meaningful contributions to culture.

Christianity in America has largely separated the sacred realm from the secular. Instead of producing culturally meaningful art and literature and film rooted in a robust theistic humanism, Christians have settled for the creation of their own subculture which is remarkably divorced from the nitty-gritty world of human experience. Gregory Wolfe, founder of the Center for Religious Humanism, assesses the subculture this way:

[The] creation of a Christian subculture was a disastrous move for American Christianity... it has taken the worst of worldly pop culture and simply tried to graft a Christian message onto it, rather than try to do what I think Christians should do, and that is forge a new synthesis, a new imaginative vision... It is precisely this categorization, and the compartmentalization of consciousness that Christianity in America is so guilty of, that I believe needs to be addressed somehow.¹⁸

An ignorance of Christian humanism is to blame for this compartmentalization.

Convictions about the dignity and worth of the human person, human creativity, and the importance of natural revelation have been eclipsed by a stunted evangelicalism: unless our art “shares the gospel,” it is not truly Christian. But history proves such a premise wrong. Substantive and lasting contributions to art and literature in the name of Christ require an integrated view of existence that can only be described as Christian humanism.

David Eggenchwiler proposes that novelist Flannery O’Connor wrote from such a worldview: “[T]o view the pattern of Christian existence as a whole, one must resist the modern tendency to divide and isolate areas of knowledge... [O’Connor] assume[s] that the essential

¹⁷ Virgil Nemoianu, “Teaching Christian Humanism,”
<<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9605/opinion/nemoianu.html>>

¹⁸ Whitehead, Jayson, and Joshua Seth Anderson. “A Christian Humanist: An Interview with Gregory Wolfe,” *OLDSPEAK*, an online publication of the Rutherford Institute (No date). Accessed 2 June 2005
<<http://www.rutherford.org/oldspeak/blog/articles/interview/wolfe.html>>

unity of existence requires a wholeness of intellectual or artistic vision.”¹⁹ G.K. Chesterton spoke of his calling as “rallying the really human things,” and he ridiculed the inability of secularism to do so. “When [man] drops one doctrine after another in a refined scepticism, when he says that he has outgrown definitions, when he says that he disbelieves in finality, when, in his own imagination, he sits as God, holding to no form of creed and contemplating all, then he is by that very process sinking slowly backwards into the vagueness of the vagrant animals and the unconsciousness of grass.”²⁰ It is the Christian worldview, rooted in the Incarnation and the *Imago Dei*, which allows us to speak meaningfully of what it means to be human. The great Christian artists and writers and thinkers of the Christian humanist tradition did not seek to *avoid* the influences of worldly culture. Instead, they gained a voice in the culture by making meaningful contributions to its art and poetry and literature. Human culture became for them a vehicle for speaking of God. We must recover the genius of their perspective.

Christian humanism speaks to the issues of the day. Christians might say that the decline of Christendom and the increasing secularization of Western culture are the most disturbing trends of the day. An atheist, of course, would disagree. This debate flavors our public discourse: Christians in America argue that we are losing our biblical heritage, while atheists argue that we never needed it to begin with. The tensions are so great on either side that any hope of common ground seems to be quickly fading. Must the church be content to argue that everyone should agree with us? Or is there another way?

Christian humanism provides a *via media* to navigate this dilemma. If the church can (appropriately) lead with the *humanist* foot instead of the *Christian* one, we can find much

¹⁹ Eggenschwiler, David, *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O’Connor* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1972), 14-15.

²⁰ Quoted in Vigen Guroian, “G.K. Chesterton: Rallying the Really Human Things,” *Intercollegiate Review* 38 (Fall 2002), 26-35.

common ground with those who do not share our theological convictions. Christians and secular humanists alike have argued that the greatest challenge of our time is not secularization, but dehumanization. Writing in a strongly anti-theistic book²¹ edited by humanist leader Paul Kurtz, Floyd Matson has this to say:

Not only Humanism and humaneness, but humanity itself, is in clear and present danger of extinction – on one side from the technology of violence... on the other side from the technology of industry... Indeed, the physical threat to life and existence appears to many so compelling as to override all concerns and considerations other than that of survival itself.²²

The editors of an anthology of Christian humanist writings agree with Matson: “If one thinks of humanism quite simply and non-controversially as respect for human life and well-being, one can only conclude that it has been under severe attack throughout most of the course of this century.”²³ They go on to illustrate some of the dehumanizing forces in culture: totalitarianism, a growing acceptance of violence, declining study of humanities in the university, the growth of poverty and illiteracy, and the prominence of atheistic naturalism in philosophy. And they note that rather than helping the problem, conservative religious forces in America have only done more damage:

There could be significant gains for society if the leaders of the religious right were to analyze the weaknesses of secular humanism and instruct their followers in the meaning of Christian humanism, but that is not the case... The religious right is not interested in distinguishing between varying kinds of humanism; in its thinking, the very concept of humanism is unacceptable because humanism by definition and necessarily must be atheistic as well as secular.²⁴

²¹ The charge of anti-theism is warranted in light of this quote: “Using the powerful critical tools of science and logical analysis, modern man now recognizes that the universe has no special meaning or purpose and that man is not a special product of creation... Living on a minor planet on the edge of a small galaxy in a vast universe, man has come to see that he cannot look outside himself for salvation.” From the Preface titled “The Meaning of Humanism” in Paul Kurtz, ed., *The Humanist Alternative: Some Definitions of Humanism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1973), 5.

²² Floyd Matson, “Toward a New Humanism,” in Paul Kurtz, ed., *The Humanist Alternative*, 94.

²³ Shaw and others, *Readings in Christian Humanism*, 35.

²⁴ Shaw and others, *Readings in Christian Humanism*, 38-39.

Rather than railing against humanism and trying to regain the cultural high ground we once enjoyed, the church can regain a voice in the culture by affirming the worth and dignity of humanity over against the dehumanizing influences in the world. To do so would be to adopt the posture of Christian humanism.

Christian Humanism can be taught in the public education system. Christians have responded to the increased atheistic bias of public education in America in two primary ways: conflict or withdrawal. We have either hired lawyers to wage the legal battle for religious values in education, or we have pulled our children out of public schools and started private schools that teach from a Christian worldview. Certainly there is value in both asserting our legal rights and in retaining the cultural heritage of Christian education. But too often, both are viewed as all-or-nothing strategies. In reality, these must be pursued in combination with a third strategy: teaching Christian humanism.

Because it is a legitimate aspect of the humanities, Christian humanism can be taught in the secular academy. Without overt evangelistic intentions, professors can note the Christian convictions that lie behind the humanism of such cultural greats as Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Erasmus, Calvin, Galileo, Pascal, Milton, Dorothy Sayers, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.²⁵ History itself is our ally in this endeavor, for as we have already demonstrated, “Christian humanism was once the mainstream of Western thought. Other types of humanism arrived later on the cultural scene.”²⁶ Catholic University professor Virgil Nemoianu asserts:

Indignation is an insufficient alternative to the brutal secularization of the college curriculum. But some conservative commentators... seem positively anticultural – as though willing to admit that the ideologies of the secularists are what constitute the humanities. The opposite is, of course, the actual case: the humanities were born of – and,

²⁵ These are just a few of the authors contained in the anthology *Readings in Christian Humanism*, cited above.

²⁶ Franklin and Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism*, 4.

by right, still belong to – a Christian religious tradition... This is why we urgently need college courses today on Christian humanism.²⁷

Christians who are called to leadership in the academy should study the insights of the great Christian humanists as a way of bringing Christian themes into their teaching.

A Delicate Balance

It has been the goal of this paper to make a case for Christian humanism as a key tool in the church's engagement of culture. In spite of the many benefits of Christian humanism, it brings with it the potential danger of imbalance. Scripture is clear that God is the primary being in the universe, and that He is jealous for His own glory (Isaiah 48:11). A human starting point and deep concern for human needs can easily turn into an exaltation of humanity over God. This is an especially poignant concern in light of the intellectual history of the Renaissance, which began from a solid theistic foundation and ended with man as the measure of all things.

However, a passion for God's glory and a deep concern for humanity are not opposed to one another. As John Piper has said, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." Jesus is the perfect example of a God-centered humanist. He always did the things which pleased the Father (John 8:29), yet he was "moved with compassion" when confronted with human needs (Mark 1:41). Our inability to reconcile the two may be evidence of our sin and selfishness, but it is certainly not the fault of Christian humanism.

In addition, it must be urged that faithfulness to Scripture is the only thing which can keep Christian humanism balanced and orthodox. The words of Gregory Wolfe are again instructive here:

The model for Christian humanism is the incarnation, in which a totally perfect balance between the divinity of Christ and the humanity of Jesus is achieved... [I]f you

²⁷ Virgil Nemoianu, "Teaching Christian Humanism."

emphasize the divine axis, the vertical axis over the horizontal, you get what I call the "conservative problem," which is a legalistic kind of law and order mentality and an awareness of sinfulness and awareness of divine sovereignty and justice dominating over more empathetic, human issues. But if you emphasize that horizontal axis and fall into the "liberal problem," you lose that moral, ethical backbone that conservatism tends to have as one of its strongest points. My argument is that, for most of us, maintaining that balance is like walking on a tightrope, and walking on a tightrope is hard to do.²⁸

Conclusion

The Christian church, by and large, is becoming marginalized within an increasingly hostile, worldly, and polarized culture. The current paper has argued that the church must recover a robust Christian humanism in order to effectively engage this culture for the glory of God. By reclaiming the language of Christian humanism, by emphasizing worldly issues as valid starting points for reasoning about God, and by highlighting the Incarnation as the central point of Christian theology, we can begin to demonstrate that Christian humanism is true humanism. As we do so, we will reconnect with our vast cultural history, make meaningful contributions to culture, engage with the issues of our time, and gain a hearing in the secular academy. But time is fleeting. The Christian church in America must act decisively to raise up leaders who, like G.K. Chesterton, will once again “rally the really human things” in the service of the gospel.

²⁸ Whitehead, Jayson, and Joshua Seth Anderson, “A Christian Humanist: An Interview with Gregory Wolfe.”

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