

HUMANISM AND THE CLAIMS OF GOD

"CAN there be an heroic humanism?"¹ It is to ask, in effect, whether Christian humanism is possible, a humanism not merely compatible with sanctity, but essentially directed to the achievement of sanctity as to the achievement of its own purpose. But the adjective is significant. Heroism implies a more than human effort, a strain therefore and tension; and the persistent presence of tension implies for the Christian humanist two outstanding dangers: forgetfulness of divine transcendence, forgetfulness of irremediable human sorrow.

The things that are seen have a directness of appeal to the heart that the greater glories miss for being hidden in the obscurities of faith. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard." "It remains, then," wrote Joannes a Sancto Thoma, "that the captive soul, bound in the bonds of faith to its clouded object, can be illumined only by the flame of love."² And there is no mysticism without tears. "I sought Him Whom my soul loveth, I sought Him and I found Him not." But the beauty that is not God is ever present, and pulls at the heart to such purpose as to become potential rival of divinity. So the discovery of God often entails a first reaction against the things which before had distracted attention from the search for Him. "'And not only pagan literature,' says Paulinus of Nola, 'but the whole sensible appearance of things (*omnes rerum temporalium species*) is the lotus flower; so men forget their own land, which is God, the country of us all.' 'The whole sensible appearance of things'—it is the mystic's dread, Buddhist or Christian, of the Great Illusion, and in a single sentence Paulinus has pierced to the secret antagonism, deeper than any occasional wantonness or cult of the gods, between the old poets and the new faith, has revealed unconsciously that which is at once the weakness and strength of Latin literature, its absorption in the actual."³ True,

1 Maritain: *Humanisme Intégral*, p. 11.

2 Comment. in *Sum. Theol.*, I-IIae, XVIII, 2, 14.

3 Helen Waddell: *Wandering Scholars*, p. xiv.

BLACKFRIARS

there is between Buddhist and Christian mysticism a fundamental difference. In the latter, as Miss Evelyn Underhill has shown, "we find inclusion rather than subtraction: a growing intuitive conviction that the One shall justify rather than exclude the many, that the life of spirit shall involve the whole man in all his activities and correspondences. The mounting soul carries the whole world with it; the cosmic cross-bearer is its true type. It does not abandon, it re-makes: declaring that the 'glory of the lighted mind,' once he has attained to it, will flood the totality of man's nature, lighting up the World of Becoming, and exhibiting not merely the unknowable character of the 'Origin of all that Is,' but the knowable and immediate presence of that Immanent Spirit in Whom 'we live and move and have our being.' As the heightening of mental life reveals to the intellect deeper and deeper levels of reality, so with that movement towards enhancement of the life of spirit which takes place along this path, the world assumes not the character of illusion but the character of sacrament; the spirit finds Spirit in the lilies of the field, no less than in the Unknowable Abyss. True, there is here too a certain world-renouncing element; for the spiritual life is of necessity a growth, and all growth represents a renunciation as well as an achievement. . . . But that which is here renounced is merely a low level of correspondences. . . . The sometimes sterile principle of 'world-denial' is here found united with the ever fruitful principle of 'world-renewal': and thus the essential quality of Life, its fecundity and spontaneity, is safeguarded, a 'perennial inner movement' is assured." "It is this attitude, this handling of the stuff of life, which is *new* in the spiritual history of the race: this which marks Christian mysticism as a thing totally different in kind from the mysticism of India or of the Neoplatonists." "The *whole man* raised to heroic levels, 'his head in Eternity, his feet in Time,' never losing grasp of the totality of the human, but never ceasing to breathe the atmosphere of the divine; this is the ideal held out to us."⁴

⁴ E. Underhill: *The Mystic Way*, pp. 31-2, 94-5.

HUMANISM AND THE CLAIMS OF GOD

Fear of the "lotus flower," then, is not the characteristic of Christian mysticism: but it is an element in it, for it emphasizes a danger which man must face if he is not to risk a denial of himself. "To propose to man no more than what is human, Aristotle remarked, is to betray man, to will his unhappiness, for by the principal part of himself, the spirit, he is called to something greater than a merely human life."⁶ Rather the dissatisfaction of Socrates than satisfied piggery; but it is the appeal of piggery which pursues us against our better minds.

That the denial of the Christian ideal of humanism is a menace to humanism is the verdict of history. Integrity is, to use Maritain's terms, theocentricity; humanism emptied itself when it became anthropocentric and abandoned God. "Three aspects or moments, inseparably linked together, can be distinguished in what might be called the dialectic of modern culture." There is a first moment, when "civilization gives lavishly its finest fruits, forgetful of the roots from which the sap rises, and is expected to establish by the power of reason alone a human order conceived according to the Christian pattern which preceding ages have handed down but which has become forced and is beginning to disintegrate . . . the moment of Christian naturalism. During the second moment it becomes clear that a culture separated from the supreme supernatural norms must necessarily take side against them; its duty is to free man from the superstition of revealed religions, and to open to his natural goodness a perspective of perfect security attained by the spirit of wealth accumulating the good things of earth . . . the moment of rationalist optimism. . . . There is thirdly the moment of materialist reversal of values, the revolutionary moment, when man definitely makes himself his last end, and unable to support any longer a mechanist world, fights a desperate battle to bring out of radical atheism a new humanity." The same process can be followed in regard to the idea of God. The first moment takes as its end "the domination of man over matter: God becomes the guarantor of this domination.

⁶ Maritain, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

. . . This is the God of Descartes." The second moment hopes to "create, thanks to physico-mathematical science, a material world in which man may find according to Descartes' promise a perfect felicity. God becomes an idea . . . Divine transcendence is rejected in favour of a philosophy of immanence. With Hegel, God becomes the ideal limit of the development of the world and of humanity." The third moment brings "the death of God, which Nietzsche will feel it his terrible mission to announce." "Striving to rule over Nature without remembering the fundamental laws of his own nature, man becomes more and more forced to subject himself, his mind, his life, not to human but to technical exigencies."⁶

Christian humanism will not adopt the easy way of avoiding this danger of annihilating God and itself by denying the things He has made and the self-perfection He has set before man as a goal. But it recognizes the infinite disparity between the two allegiances regarded, not (as in theory they must be) as identified, but (as in practice they often are) as divided. It recognizes that, while not incompatible but on the contrary complementary, the realities of heaven and earth are as far removed from one another as the infinite span of analogy can make them. It avoids the danger of belittling God, by laying final stress on His infinite transcendence.

" 'In England, you see,' Mr. Britling remarked . . . 'we have domesticated everything. We have even domesticated God.' " Canon Kirk, in a sermon on the text of Job, "Canst thou draw out Leviathan with an hook or his tongue with a cord that thou lettest down?" has written: "We attempt to evade the immensities of religion by domesticating, not merely Leviathan, but God Himself. Not till we have reversed the process shall we be in a position to substantiate the Christian claim that Christ 'makes all things new.' All serious movements in modern theology are emphasizing this fact. They bid us discard that unwholesome familiarity with God which has reduced Him to the level of a *famulus*—a

⁶ Maritain, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-42.

household mascot; and start instead by laying all our emphasis upon His utter greatness and distinction from all things human, and upon the light unapproachable in which He dwells. They bid us, without surrendering one atom of our love for the humanity of Christ, to dwell first upon the truth that He is Very God of Very God, Begotten of His Father before all worlds. And they are right. Only so shall we be in a position to understand the genius of the Christian religion . . . and instead of bringing down God to our own level we shall set ourselves, by the help of grace, to raise ourselves to His.’’⁷

Christian humanism will not share the suspicions of a Peter Damian or a Bernard of Clairvaux with regard to philosophy, still less accept the radical anti-rationalism of Luther. The devil, says Peter Damian, was the first grammarian. And look what use he made of the matter, teaching our first parents to decline God in the plural—Ye shall be as gods—and so making his first grammar lesson an instruction in polytheism.⁸ The saint’s remarks on other profane sciences are more highly coloured. At the other extreme is the rationalism which will allow of no limitations or dependence upon a higher guidance but seeks to “establish a human order by reason alone”; this also Christian humanism denounces, finding both a crown and a corrective to rational speculation in the supernatural revelation of God. “There are, as in philosophy, so in divinity, sturdy doubts, and boisterous objections, wherewith the unhappiness of our knowledge too nearly acquainteth us. More of these no man hath known than myself; which I confess I conquered, not in a martial posture, but on my knees.”⁹ St. Thomas too found refuge, when reason failed, in prayer; but to a different purpose. For where Sir Thomas Browne found strength to accept insoluble antinomy and to quell reason as an enemy of faith, he found on the contrary light to resolve antinomy and to illumine reason to the understanding of faith. But there is no question of comprehending the Incomprehensible.

⁷ Kirk: *The Fourth River*.

⁸ Gilson: *Christianisme et Philosophie*, p. 13.

⁹ *Religio Medici*, I, 19.

BLACKFRIARS

The Thomist theologian, like the mystic, is agnostic—an agnosticism *per excessum*, not *per defectum*.¹⁰ “*Infinitem excelsum Creatoris*—Maimonides himself has not proclaimed the transcendence of the Infinite with greater force and insistence than St. Thomas.”¹¹ Negation is “the corner-stone of his teaching about God.”¹² “We begin, he says, by excluding everything material from God; then we must set aside every perfection, even the most spiritual, which exists in creatures. There remains in the spirit nothing but the revelation of the Burning Bush; and we call God *Him Who Is*, understanding by that, with Damascene, an ocean of limitless substance. . . . But this ‘existence’ itself means for us something created, and we must strip our thought yet further. So we enter into the dark night, to unite ourselves, in wise ignorance, to Him Who inhabits the darkness.”¹³ We should do injustice to St. Thomas were we to leave the matter there; to neglect the richness of discovery which his other approaches to the light inaccessible open out to us and the flood of light which his doctrine of analogy has shed on the search of the reason for God. But his insistence on the fact that “at the end of our search we establish—not now as an initial postulate but as a final and definitive conclusion—that we know about God not what He is but rather what He is not,” is a salutary corrective. The possibility of a pride of reason which in effect takes divinity from God is paralleled by the possibility of a pride which excludes His claims as ultimate motive force and judge of our behaviour. We may build up an edifice of perfection according, as we conceive, to the divine pattern, only to find to our bewilderment and perhaps indignation that it comes crashing down upon us, that it was a house of cards. Perhaps, then we have to admit, our efforts were vitiated from the start by pride; perhaps the effort we were making towards self-perfection was but a masked way to self-destruction, since, under cloak of God’s service, we were in reality only serving ourselves.

¹⁰ Pénido: *Le Rôle de l'Analogie en Théologie Dogmatique*, p. 184.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

HUMANISM AND THE CLAIMS OF GOD

There is, at the end, but one prayer and one principle—the last words of the *Religio Medici*—“Thy will be done, though in my own undoing.” For Christian eudemonism knows that it is safest in God’s hand, secure, there alone, from the danger of self-deception:

“In darkness and in safety
By the secret ladder disguised
O happy lot!
In darkness and concealment
My house being now at rest.”

The dark night of the soul is the necessary and the happy, confident prologue to the light of union, agnostic, dumb, *per excessum*, because recognizing that all that can be said, all the vastness of theological speculation and all the findings of faith are lost in the greatness of what is unknown but is one day to be discovered.

That humanism is ready, on its own principles, to sell all it has at the call of Christ, knowing that therein will be its truest fulfilment, this throws light on the second danger which threatens a too superficial acceptance of its principles. We shall deny those principles and at the same time do hurt to Christianity if we allow ourselves to forget for a moment the dead weight of sorrow and pain in the world. The problem of evil has an answer of a sort in philosophical speculation. The Leibnitzian solution, that everything is somehow or another for the best in the best of all possible worlds, was demolished once and for all by the irony of Voltaire; nor can we espouse the equally unsatisfactory policy of saying that everything is for the best in the worst of all possible worlds, which would mean the passive acceptance of all the evil which confronts us. But we can see a purpose in the ascetical value of suffering, in the value of evil in opening our minds to the idea of good. Theology is necessary to carry further these partial and unsatisfactory solutions of the problem, for there is no adequate answer outside the Cross. This Christian answer was beautifully expressed in *Nova et Vetera*. “We need not, however, suppose that antecedent to the forevision of the Fall, an Incarnation had been decreed; but may believe that God, casting about, so to say,

in the infinite resources of His Divine intellect and power, for an order of things which should manifest His attributes, chose that in which His mercy and generosity would be displayed more fully. He chose, rather than the contrary, that world in which the race, engraced and elevated, would cast away its privileges; in which iniquity should abound that grace might superabound; in which His good gifts would be despised, squandered, abused, not merely by some, but by most; in which His richest schemes of mercy would be thwarted by man's perversity; in which He would gladly spend Himself and be spent, though the more He loved, the less He would be loved; in which, in a word, His labour should be largely in vain, His love largely unreturned. For plainly this is the showing forth of a far more prodigal and wonderful love, a love of the undeserving and unthankful. Had all men used His graces, what should we have known of His tender mercies, fulness of compassion, long suffering, and great goodness? We should have known Christ, but not Jesus; the King, but not the Saviour."¹⁴

That it was not the intention of God that man should acquiesce passively in the evil with which always and in every age he is confronted, is clear from the person of Our Lord Himself. The Cross and Passion are succeeded by and have their meaning in the Resurrection; He died in vain, St. Paul tells us, if He rose not from the dead; for His sufferings were not passive acquiescence in evil but its defeat, the Cross not ultimately a tragedy but a triumph. And if we are to "fill up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ" it is to the continuance of this battle with evil that we are called. Keats found at times "the creation of beauty . . . an impertinence in the face of anguish";¹⁵ there is, at a superficial reading, an emptiness and vanity and heartless unreality in the idea of humanism when we are faced with the pain and suffering with which the world is full. It would indeed be a superficial reading of the humanist theory so to regard it, for the fact that man is a political animal, with all the social duties which that fact implies, is central to the humanist

¹⁴ *Nova et Vetera*, LXXXIV.

¹⁵ Helen Waddell: *The Desert Fathers*, p. 20.

HUMANISM AND THE CLAIMS OF GOD

idea. Yet we know the depths to which in fact our culture has fallen in this respect. Tagore has warned the Japanese against "Christian civilization"; the Buddhists and Brahmins at the Religious Congress at Chicago said that "after an experience of two hundred years we see that your life is a complete contradiction to what you preach, that you are led not by the spirit of Love but by the spirit of self-seeking and brute force."¹⁶ The author of *Peace and the Clergy* remarks: "The proletariat feel their existence threatened by the sacrifices which capitalism and militarism impose upon them, and what embitters them more than anything is the idea they have that the Church is in league with these powers."¹⁷ We cannot then put down the failure of Christendom entirely to the fact that humanism has become degraded, has ceased to be Christian; the trouble is that we Christians have lost the very humanity of the Christian faith. Again, even when the social conscience is so far aroused as to make us bestir ourselves in the cause of the poor, there is the danger, which history has shown to be only too real, that humanism may turn into humanitarianism, and that the Christian duty of serving the poor as representatives of Christ may be replaced by a complacent and un-Christian condescension. "Look not for whales in the Euxine," said Sir Thomas Browne; and we should not perhaps look for radical reform of the social structure from a National Government. Yet we cannot acquiesce in a policy of tinkering with the surface of the wrongs of the poor which neglects entirely the fundamentals.

It remains that with the best will in the world we cannot expect to see the redress of every wrong, the conquest of every sort of physical and social evil in the world, achieved in a day or a year. When we have done all that can be done by us, when, above all, we have made it clear that the will at least is not wanting, that the masses are first considered even though our efforts are not crowned with much success, then we can and ought to turn to a last problem with which humanism must be concerned: the resolution of the anti-

¹⁶ Cf. Stratmann: *The Church and War*, p. 42.

¹⁷ P. 138.

mony between the infinite transcendence and the infinite compassion of God, for we can then hope without fear of dishonesty and escapism to show that the *lama sabachthani* of the oppressed is not without its divine reply.

“Christ had compassion on the multitude.” We are right to think of the Incarnation as God’s Way of making it possible for Himself to suffer with mankind, to bridge the gulf between His own transcendence and human misery. In the godhead there is no change, in the divine beatitude there is no sorrow; yet we can say with truth that God suffered and God had compassion, God died for man, since Christ is God and what was done by the humanity of Christ was done by God. These things, however (we might be tempted to argue), are past; they occurred two thousand years ago; and sorrow is best consoled by a present sympathy. Are we to say that God, having once shown His compassion and shared in the sufferings of mankind, is now retired into His eternal beatitude, in which there can be no admixture of sorrow, and so shows compassion, in the etymological sense at least, no more?

Happily, that very transcendence which makes God so remote affords proof that this is not the case. To God’s eternity there is no yesterday or to-morrow; we say that on this or that day the world came to be, Christ was born, Christ died, but these events are not dated in His divinity, the action of creation or incarnation from the side of God is eternal with Him, and the coming to be of the human facts involved denotes no change in His immutability. So we say that on this or that day Christ, in His human nature, began to sorrow or suffer, but what does this imply in the godhead?

“Let us consider what eternity is. For this declareth unto us both the divine nature and knowledge. Eternity therefore is a perfect possession altogether of an endless life, which is more manifest by the comparison of temporal things, for whatsoever liveth in time, that being present proceedeth from times past to times to come, and there is nothing placed in time which can embrace all the space of its life at once. But it hath not yet attained to-morrow and hath lost yester-

day. And you live no more in this day's life than in that movable and transitory moment. Wherefore whatsoever suffereth the condition of time, although, as Aristotle thought of the world, it never began nor were ever to end, and its life did endure with infinite time, yet it is not such that it ought to be called everlasting. For it doth not comprehend and embrace all the space of its life together, though that life be infinite, but it hath not the future time which is yet to come. That then which comprehendeth and possesseth the whole fulness of an endless life together, to which neither any part to come is absent, nor any of that which is past hath escaped, is worthy to be accounted everlasting. . . . Wherefore, if we will give things their right names, following Plato, let us say that God is everlasting and the world perpetual. Wherefore, since every judgment comprehendeth those things which are subject to it, according to its own nature, and God hath always an everlasting and present state, His knowledge also surpassing all motions of time, remaineth in the simplicity of His presence, and comprehending the infinite spaces of that which is past and to come, considereth all things in His simple knowledge as though they were now in doing. So that, if thou wilt weigh His foreknowledge with which He discerneth all things, thou wilt more rightly esteem it to be the knowledge of a never fading instant than a foreknowledge as of a thing to come.¹⁸

Boethius, waiting for death in Theodoric's dungeon, wrote of infinity with a depth and grandeur which no writer has surpassed; and scholastic thinkers, doing violence to language in their effort to imprison his thought in a phrase, defined the eternal in terms of a *nunc stans*, the standing moment; for we tend to imagine eternity as the infinite prolongation of a line of time, whereas in reality we should conceive it as a point. The man at this moment existing is not more present to God than is the child that he was or the dust that he is to be. Calvary is as present to Him now as it was two thousand years ago. And the will to compassion which brought it about is part of the eternal "never fading

¹⁸ Boethius: *Consolat. Philosoph.*, V, 6.

BLACKFRIARS

instant''; it is not past as it was never future, but is, so to say, part of God's immutable nature. Now there is comfort in the material sharing of pain; the boy finds his schoolroom punishments easier if he is not alone in them; but this sort of sharing is not what we mean by compassion. Rather, we mean the presence in another of the *will* to share in suffering, and it is precisely this will to compassion which is ever-present in God. The fact that Christ in His sufferings fought evil and overcame it means for us the duty of fighting with Him, strong in the belief that at the end the victory will be complete; but the promise of a far-off triumph is cold comfort to present affliction, and it is right that we should draw greater strength from the thought of the infinite condescension of the divine transcendence, the present will to share in the very worst that human life can bring.

To put these considerations before the oppressed while showing ourselves plainly acquiescent in the evils which oppress them would be an inhuman escapism, a treacherous denial of the Cross. And we may well hesitate to speak of the "creation of beauty in the face of anguish," and feel ourselves obliged to speak only of the creation of justice. Yet there is in the poor a grandeur of soul, a "heroic humanism" (for humanism, though it demands a certain material environment for its flowering, is primarily in the soul) for which beauty is the deserved setting; and when we can do no more in the way of human endeavour to bring this setting about in our world, it is right that we should emphasize the divine promise of a final adjustment, in which that grandeur will find its proper expression, the coming of a time when "God will wipe away the tears from the eyes of the saints, and there shall be neither mourning nor weeping nor any sorrow; for the former things"—the poverty and pain and labours of this present life—"shall have passed away."

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