THE NEW HUMANISM

By PETER HEBBLETHWAITE

RATHER THAN LABOUR towards a definition of humanism, it will be handier to accept a distinguished humanist's self-definition. Dr Cyril Bibby confesses that there are difficulties about making an exclusive claim to this title, since it has been pre-empted by the Renaissance. Erasmus thought he was a humanist, but he would not have been allowed to join the British Humanist Association. Nevertheless, 'humanist' is the least unsatisfactory term, as Dr Bibby explains:

> 'Atheist' sounds too dogmatically certain, too aggressive, too exclusively concerned with theological (or, rather, atheological) belief.
> 'Agnostic' is open to the objection that it is too negative, that it denies something but does not obviously affirm anything.
> 'Secularist' seems to relate too much to anti-clericalism, which, while having positive implications for some aspects of social policy, is largely irrelevant in many others.
> 'Free-thinker' appears too dated in a decade which is fairly permissive towards behaviour and almost completely so towards opinion.
> 'Rationalist' has an excessively cerebral tone, almost ignoring those many aspects of life in which factors other than reason are significant.
> In contrast with all of these, and yet absorbing the essence of each, 'humanist' is more positive, directing attention to the belief that humanity must rely on itself, to the hope that it will do so successfully and to the determination that every effort shall be made in that direction.[1]

One could gloss this passage endlessly. The rejection of older nomenclature seems to be partly for reasons of public relations. The appearance of a triad (faith-hope-determination) at the end is startling (was St Paul a structuralist?). But most intriguing of all is

[1] *The Humanist Outlook*, ed. A. J. Ayer (London, 1968), pp 14–15. The work is representative and the blurb claims that it is 'an authoritative over-view of contemporary Humanism'.

the assertion that 'humanism' absorbs the essence of 'atheism', 'agnosticism', 'secularism', 'free-thinking' and 'rationalism'. In that case it would be their quintessence, and there would be *nothing new* in contemporary humanism, other than its tone of voice and diplomatic sense. And I would have no article to write. Alas!

The Council speaks of a 'new humanism'. That neither proves its existence nor throws light on its nature. Yet I think the Council was more subtle here than Dr Bibby and that its lead should be followed. To grasp the point, one needs to look at the victorian debate on belief and unbelief and note the differences with today's debate. The discussion went along a well-worn groove and it is possible, looking back, to set down its main lines.

The 'humanist' (called by one of Bibby's other names) saw believers (or 'theists') as people who insist that the 'meaning' of the world lies somewhere 'outside' it. He claimed that the dignity of man demanded that he should be freed from the tyranny and illusion of this 'other world'. 'Man is the supreme being for man' said Marx. Man's dignity depends on his autonomy. Any notion of dependence was seen as degrading. Man should be concerned with man. The gods or God are a pernicious alienation which turn men's minds away from urgent tasks and make fallacious promises about the hereafter, where all will be well. Priests, a power-hungry lot, maintain this illusion because it is in their interests to do so (Nietzsche). The humanist, when accused of undermining morality, replied that in fact he was advocating a superior morality since it did not depend on supernatural sanctions whether of reward or punishment (so widespread was the influence of Kant). He might indeed counter-attack with statistics about how many christians peopled the prisons. A bright future was promised, as man (so went the peroration), liberated from magic spells and incomprehensible authority, marched confidently forward. Such sentiments echoed round victorian meeting-halls and can still be heard at Hyde Park Corner of a sunday afternoon.

The christian reply to this fustian was made with varying degrees of philosophical sophistication, honesty and knowledge of the other side. It asserted the crucial importance of a transcendent God as grounding the value of man. Abandon God, abandon an absolute foundation for morality, and you will soon find yourself in a morally chaotic world in which men are abused and trampled upon. The christian reply pointed out that there were more things in heaven and earth than humanist philosophy dreamed of, and that the

human hunger for God could not be replaced by any *Ersatz* or surrogate. The alleged conflict between science and religion was countered by noting how many great scientists had been believers ('Open your dictionary! You will find Ampère, Pasteur, Volta, giving their names to amps, pasteurisation and volts'). No human society, it was claimed, could survive for long unless based on some higher principle. And so on.

The debate moved along parallel lines which could never meet (except perhaps in infinity). It sounds wearisome enough now, but was earnestly engaged upon by bearded men. The best record of it, or rather of the intellectual battles which underlay it, remains Henri de Lubac's *Le Drame de l'Humanisme Athée*. And that victorian debate still colours the contemporary situation, because there are always survivors fighting a desperate rearguard action in the wrong ditch. We will leave them happily there.

Before proceeding, a word on the conciliar text. The concluding sentence of Section 55 of *Gaudium et Spes* says:

> Thus we are witnesses of the birth of a *new humanism*, one in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility toward his brothers and toward history.

Four remarks on this passage. First, humanism is correctly seen as the answer to the question: What is man? What is he for? What is his destiny (or vocation)? Secondly, there is no rejection of the 'new humanism' defined by a sense of responsibility to one's fellow men and to history. The Council Fathers say they are 'witnesses' of this development which they are not describing in order to condemn: rather they are attempting to 'discern the signs of the times', that is, to detect in the trends of modern society and the sensibility of contemporary man the action of the holy Spirit. Thirdly, the context of the discussion is the meaning of *culture*, that is, man's humanization of nature and society; this passage might perhaps have been included in the treatment given to atheism in nos 20–22, but it is not. This placing is of great importance. It means that the Council does not think that the new humanism, thus defined, is necessarily atheistic. Finally, the definition offered is plainly not incompatible with christianity; indeed, it is *entaild* by christianity[1] without however being anything like a full state-

[1] That to be responsible towards one's fellow men and towards history follows from christianity is made quite clear in *Gaudium et Spes*. In more than one place it specifically rejects the charge of alienation. Cf Hebblethwaite, P., *The Council Fathers and Atheism* (New York, 1967).

ment of it. It is on such considerations and on overlapping assertions that the possibility of dialogue with humanists can be based.[1] Prompted by the attitudes of this text, we can now attempt to define more clearly what is new in contemporary humanism. The victorian backcloth will let it stand out more clearly. There are three features to be noted.

1. *The humanist is a man of faith*

This would have seemed a strange assertion to nineteenth century unbelievers. They tended to suppose that their position was simply the scientific attitude applied to human behaviour. In this they were mistaken, but that did not deter them. They had to cope with the paradox of, on the one hand, evolution providing a picture of a highly competitive and violent struggle for existence in which the fittest only survived and the weakest went to the wall, with, on the other hand, a faith in the rationality and innate goodness of man. In practice, nineteenth century science combined with eighteenth century rationalist optimism and for the most part the contradiction went unnoticed.

Contemporary humanists generally concede that *faith* plays a part in their system. They do not claim to possess a scientifically water-tight view of the universe. The scientific view alone does not enable one to commit oneself to the struggle on behalf of man. For that 'something more' is required, and that 'something more' is usually called faith. We saw that Dr Bibby spoke of 'belief'. Others speak explicitly of 'faith'. Here is Roger Garaudy, a communist:

> Faith in our task does not imply for us Marxists any reference to the presence and call of a God. Earlier successes of thought and action in the process of humanizing nature and humanizing history give us, we think, sufficient strength to pursue the human epic begun more than a million years ago. We freely concede that we live out that certainty in risk, for no one and nothing guarantees us victory in advance. But no one and nothing permits us to assert that such a guarantee exists either.[2]

Garaudy is here distinguishing the faith which sustains him from christian faith. The interesting thing is not that he should sheer

[1] Cf *The Directory of the Secretariat for Non-Believers.*

[2] *From Anathema to Dialogue* (London, 1967), p 97. The french word is *foi*, which is distinguished from *croyance*, much as *faith* is from *belief* in english.

off from the christian position – that is inevitable; the interesting thing is that he should bother to make the comparison at all. And if one looks at the matter anthropologically (or in socio-cultural terms) and asks what is the *function* of faith for Garaudy, what does it do for him, then one finds something at least comparable in structure to christian faith.

The psychological components of Garaudy's faith are threefold: (a) it provides a motivation to press on ('strength to pursue the human epic'), (b) it is based on some evidence ('earlier successes . . . give us sufficient strength'), (c) yet it goes 'beyond that evidence' ('we live out that certainty in risk'). This is a far cry from the claim to consistent scientific materialism with which communism has been associated and which is still taught in manuals of philosophy in the Soviet Union.

However, humanists would stoutly maintain they carry what they consider the minimum ballast of faith and have thrown overboard the accretions of superstition. One can be said to be 'in the water' whether the water comes up to one's neck or one's ankles. I will return to this position later.

2. *The humanist is less tortured and more tolerant*

Much humanist writing is worried about how negative their position appears. 'There is a great need', writes Dr H. J. Eysenck, to discuss 'alternative proposals for harnessing the emotional vigour of humanists in a more positive endeavour than mere opposition to organized religion'.[1] The contemporary humanist is less aggressive towards christianity than his victorian forerunner, if only because he believes the main battles to be already decisively won. He can regard the survival of christianity as a curiosity or a cultural hangover which need not detain him greatly since he has other, though vaguer, enterprises to pursue. He believes that he has enough evidence from the on-going process of secularization to feel that the tide is running with him.

Now this is a very different attitude from that of the great victorians. Most of them were ex-christians who seemed to be haunted by the God they had rejected. Their obsession with the case for atheism could look like an obsession with God. As Ebeling said: 'Atheists bore me – they are always talking about God'. The classical victorian unbeliever was a lapsed christian, who was all

[1] 'Humanism and the Future', in *The Humanist Outlook*, p 277.

the more distressed in that he had once, perhaps when young, had high hopes. The remark of the Emmaus pilgrims – 'we had hoped' – became their slogan. They were tortured men who talked about *Angst.*

The contemporary atheist is not usually so *Angst*-ridden. Because he is less tortured, he can seem to be more complacent and afford to be sometimes more tolerant, indeed, ought to be more tolerant, since the basic humanist premise is that our society is 'pluralist', that is a society in which no one world-view can dominate and prevail.

3. *The humanist is of the establishment*

The typical nineteenth century humanist was an heroic, lonely figure, shunned by society, but battling on bravely against obscurantism and superstition. He was the exception, the odd man out, the *esprit fort,* and sometimes he had the satisfaction of suffering for his philosophical views. Charles Bradlaugh was a typical case. The literary prototype is Ibsen's *Master Builder* who shocked stuffy provincial norwegian society with his bold claim: 'Hence-forward I will build only houses for men, not for God'. This declaration would not make a very great dramatic impact on the stage today. It was once revolutionary.

The contemporary humanist is neither an heroic rebel nor a spirited non-conformist. He sits on royal commissions and his advice is respected. One can say that he simply thematizes those values and assumptions which are fairly widespread in contemporary society. He does not propound anything very courageous, or even interesting, but simply articulates in a more abstract form views which are widely held. Elizabeth Anscombe was once asked whether Oxford philosophy corrupted the young. She replied that it did not and could not since it simply reflected values current in english society. The point here is not whether the values and assumptions of contemporary society are sound or unsound – that would have to be discussed in detail: it is rather that these assumptions are communicated through the mass media and pass uncriticized. This no doubt accounts for the banality which affects so much humanist writing from utilitarianism onwards. Bentham's 'felicific calculus' is not calculated to make the heart beat faster.

I will now comment on these three new features.

Ad primum: If humanism admits to being a 'faith', then its 'structure of discourse' will be comparable to that of christianity. 'Religious

language' will not be a special and esoteric type of language to be relegated to some remote realm of poetry or mysticism, but in continuity with the 'faith-language' of the humanists. The situation is not unlike that described in Professor Wisdom's garden parable. Two men woke up one morning in a country cottage where they had never been before. They look out of the window. One says: 'Look at that line of trees, look at that bank of flowers, look at that lawn. A gardener must have been at work to produce that'. But the other man says: 'I don't think you need a gardener at all to explain this garden. After all, the trees are not quite in line, the bank of flowers is full of weeds, and the lawn is untended'. The evidence appears ambivalent. This is not tantamount to saying that both are right, since, unless we are prepared to abandon the principle of non-contradiction, one must be wrong and the other right.

The humanist's acknowledgement that faith plays a part in his position is important for another reason. Action calls, discussion cannot be endless, choices have to be made. *Nous sommes embarqués* as Pascal says, and there is not much time. Basic options can run ahead of our philosophical positions and can entail more than we immediately realize. Dedication to 'the cause of man' involves in practice faith in more than man, as youth leader, prison psychiatrist or UNO official all discover. The christian response here is not to say that in christianity such dedication is easy (for it is not), but that it can be grounded, that it makes sense, and that it corresponds to what was, all along, man's vocation.

Ad secundum: One welcomes the abandonment of nineteenth century battle cries and slogans. The less aggressive attitude to christianity is a sign of greater emotional maturity. But the feeling the humanist has of being on the winning side ('everything's going my way') may prove illusory. The process of 'secularization', which he takes as evidence of growing success, may turn out to be neutral as far as christianity is concerned. It has been argued by Gogarten and Harvey Cox, for example, that secularization is a result of the christian world-view, since the doctrine of God as creator liberated mankind from animism and magic which peopled the woods, groves and streams with spirits. It de-divinized the world. It declared great Pan dead. It led to an understanding of the autonomy of secondary causes within their own order, and so led to the growth of modern science. Far from undermining christianity, the process of secularization can purify it by banishing the domesticated idols that

tend to substitute themselves for the living God. Just as science is not the same as scientism, so secularization is not the same as secularism. The humanist sometimes hastily supposes that the process of secularization necessarily entails the ideology of secularism. One can dispute this link.

Ad tertium: If humanism is the thematization of current values and assumptions – and I realize this is not a very nice thing to say about it – it is at a distinct disadvantage compared with christianity. Though humanists tend to suppose that christianity is a reactionary and conservative political force, this analysis may belong to the past rather than the future. Thologians have rediscovered the virtue of hope, and this development has drawn attention to the fact that the christian, while generally accepting his own society, can never be complacent about it. It will never be perfect. It can and must always be criticized and changed in the direction of greater justice and more fraternity. In this sense christianity is permanently revolutionary, and these ideas are even now having practical consequences in South America. The humanist, on the other hand, is in danger of becoming a man of the establishment. He is not the man the police are interested in.

Christian faith as human self-understanding

Meanwhile, quite apart from this response to humanism, as yet tentative and unfirm, things have not stood still on the christian side. Under the stress of humanist thinking, christian theologians have had to ask themselves what really matters in their faith, what part accidental cultural accretions have played and what is an appropriate language in which to address contemporary man. For convenience one can mention three points which may seem to be no more than the liquidation on the christian side of nineteenth century arguments and rhetoric, but since the nineteenth century is always with us (and is often the object of humanist attack) it will not be a vain exercise to summarize them. They also provide a programme for dialogue.

The crucial point is the rejection of the autonomy/heteronomy distinction, the immanence/transcendence option. The main stream of christian theology has been concerned with refusing these dilemmas. God is not discovered 'outside', but by pursuing the logic of man (Blondel, Maréchal). Anthropology – the study of man – itself opens out into theology (Rahner). The theologians who hold these views do not expect humanists to agree with them, but they have

a right to expect humanists to accept their starting point and see how far they can go along with them. In a more popular form, this argument has been expressed by many recent authors who have striven to show that in order to be a christian, one does not have to turn aside from human experience, but rather to penetrate it more deeply, understand it more fully, see it whole. As Ladislaus Boros put it rather grandly: 'In the thornbush of the human endeavour to become a real man, the flame of the absolute burns'.[1] More soberly, the thesis of Anthony Levi's book, *Religion in Practice*,[2] is that human fulfilment requires this openness to God. Rosemary Haughton has often returned to this theme. This is not so much a matter of the christian stealing the humanist's clothes – they would not truly fit him; it is rather a way of answering the question of relevance by showing that christianity is a matter of strictly human self-understanding. One should not hastily set limits to man, or encapsulate him in the given situation.

The second development concerns christology. Christ can be seen as 'the one from above' who breaks into the course of human history and gives it a new direction, towards the Father, in the power of the mutual Spirit. But there is also a christology from below in which Christ is envisaged as summing up and concretizing all the aspirations of mankind. He is peace, reconciliation, freedom, joy. The vocation disclosed in Christ is thus the direction in which man was already tending, though he was unaware of the fact. All humanity is a partial and participated self-expression of God. 'To become ourselves is to manifest God. Now *in fact*, and this is the vital point, God's world is created capable of producing and receiving his *complete* self-expression which is Christ. Christ is at once the summit of human achievement and the ultimate creative initiative and revelation of God . . . It was precisely this point that the scriptural and patristic tradition was indicating when it saw Christ as God's agent in creation. If it is only in the light of Christ that the world can be understood, then Christ was the principle and pattern in God's mind in its creation'.[3]

Another theological tool is the distinction which is now commonly drawn, not without protests, between *faith* and *religion*. The distinction begins with Karl Barth. In his *Commentary on Romans* (1919), he applied to 'religion' what Paul had said of the 'law'. The 'law' which

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[1] *Meeting God in Man* (London, 1969), p viii. [2] Oxford, 1966.
[3] *Who is Christ? Faith in Question – 4, The Month* (April, 1969), p 209.

was meant to be a pedagogue leading to Christ had in fact become an obstacle for Paul. It was an obstacle because it represented the human attempt to justify oneself in the sight of God. Similarly for Barth, 'religion' can come to mean those practices or noble thoughts or pious aspirations in which we might place our confidence. As such, 'religion' is judged, found wanting and displaced by faith which Barth splendidly defines as 'the freedom of God with which men are seized'.[1] In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth later showed more tenderness towards 'religion' and conceded that it had a dialectical part to play in the disposing towards faith. But it is only 'fulfilled by being evacuated'. The later history of the distinction in Bonhoeffer cannot be discussed here. But it has proved important in the growing field of religious sociology. Faith cannot be measured, though 'religious practices' can be tabulated, analyzed and dissected. Faith does not yield up its secrets in the way that religion, as a sociological observable phenomenon, can be made to. Paul Ricoeur went so far as to say that 'religion is the alienation of faith'. The relevance of the distinction is that the christian can join with the humanist in many of his criticisms of 'religion', while insisting that they do not touch the realm of faith. And Cardinal Daniélou can be relied upon to point out the danger of over-stressing the distinction (which is simply the disembodiment of faith).

The twentieth century christian thinker with the greatest respect for humanism, and the keenest sense of the grace by which it can undoubtedly be carried, was Teilhard de Chardin. He knew its ambivalence and its weakness: the non-integration of failure. He once used a parable to express the possibilities for the future. Mankind was once locked in the hold of a ship. Down there in the hold it was dark, so much so that they did not even know they were on a ship. They passed the time well enough: quarrelled, fell in love or out of love, drank and were despondent or cheerful. Then, one day, someone broke through onto the deck. The whole situation was transformed. There was something for everyone to do: sails to be rigged, tiller to be manned. The ship was moving forward. Away in the distance, on the horizon, an island could be discerned. Like all the best parables, that one requires no explanation.

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[1] *The Epistle to the Romans*, transl. Edward C. Hoskyns, (London, 1968), p 240.