

Humanity Before God: Theological Humanism from a Christian Perspective

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The massive moral and political challenges of our age center on the power and the dignity of human beings. In a time of profound environmental endangerment wrought by the fantastic spread of technology and market-driven consumption, all life on this planet is bound to the destiny of the human adventure. In a similar way, we live in a time of incredible human suffering and travail when the most minimal needs of many people are denied and the dignity of many more demeaned. Here too the future is at stake, namely, the future of the human species. Finally, the present age is characterized by increasing religious, ethnic, and cultural conflict among peoples. If there is little or no way to conceive of human commonality beyond our tribal differences, then the fires of hate and fanaticism will eventually consume us. In all these ways, it seems right to say that questions about human power and dignity are at the very center of contemporary, global challenges. In response to these challenges people must fashion communities and ways of life that respect and enhance the integrity of life.

These massive global challenges form the backdrop for the upcoming D.R. Sharpe and Hoover Lectures at the University of Chicago Divinity School, *Humanity Before God: Contemporary Faces of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Ethics*. Jewish, Islamic, and Christian thinkers will explore the distinctiveness and responsibility of human beings as envisioned within their own traditions. In order to announce some of the themes of this conference, the following essay written for the Martin Marty Center Religion and Culture Web Forum argues for a specific expression of Christian faith. In the light of present realities I believe Christians ought to revise and yet reclaim the legacy of Christian humanism. The purpose of this essay is to engage in that work of critique and retrieval within the fabric of my own tradition.¹ Yet I am also bold enough to suggest that thinkers in other traditions can and ought to reclaim the humanistic expressions of their own faiths. We are, I submit, on the cusp of a new global moment when vibrant forms of “religious humanism” are now appearing in order to thwart the forces of hatred and to strive to further life. This essay is one small contribution from within my own tradition to this exciting development. It will not be given at the upcoming conference, but indicates some of the concerns that have motivated the planning and presentation of this year’s Sharpe and Hoover Lectures.

1: The Idea and History of Christian Humanism

The idea and history of Christian humanism is complex, much debated, and rich in thinkers and communities. The origins of modern humanism are usually found in the Renaissance and the revival of interest in classical Greek and Roman writers as the backbone of education. But the legacy of humanism is long and varied, reaching into the distant past as well as to the rise of the modern world. Consider just a few thinkers in order to grasp the range and reach of this legacy in the Christian tradition.

Clement of Alexandria, often considered the most learned of the Church fathers, drew on a wide variety of sources and continued to wear the philosopher's cloak. St. Augustine was a rhetorician and has been acknowledged as the last great Hellenistic philosopher. He penned what became the virtual manual for medieval education, the *De Doctrina Christiana*. John Calvin, as is well known, was steeped in humanistic education, wrote his first treatise on a work by Seneca, and also spoke of the philosophy and school of Christ. Philipp Melanchton was steeped in humanistic learning and along with penning the *Augsburg Confession*, the first Protestant manifesto, also wrote on philosophy and education. Erasmus, the greatest of the sixteenth century Christian humanists, presented a vision of the free unfolding of human life within a decidedly Christomorphic philosophy. He did so through satire, like *In Praise of Folly*, but also in dialogues, commentaries, and biblical translation. John Wesley, an Oxford Don, worked to revive vibrant faith, established schools, and sought to "reform the nation." Friedrich Schleiermacher engaged the whole compass of intellectual labor even as he worked to help found the University of Berlin. In the twentieth century, Paul Tillich spoke of an ecstatic humanism. Of course, for a variety of reasons not all of these thinkers would claim for themselves the name "Christian humanist" in any technical sense of the word. Yet the connection between the love of God and the life of the mind manifest in the labor of education and social transformation might best define the project of Christian Humanism.

Oddly, in our time Christian theologians too often and too glibly reject this proud heritage. They rush to embrace whatever purports to accent Christian uniqueness against other peoples and traditions. These theologians rail against "the world" and celebrate "the church" as an outpost of peaceableness in alien lands. They challenge ideas about human rights, democracy, and social cooperation or ecumenism among religious communities. Anti-humanism has apparently captured the minds of many theologians. There are of course many reasons for these developments. Why did the "rights of man," so hard won in the early modern turmoil of social and economic change in the West, prove powerless to end slavery and wither before the forces of hatred and death in the twentieth century? How did aspirations for valid knowledge and political self-government give way to the forms of scientism, fascism, and totalitarianism that scarred the past century? How has the modern celebration of human power manifest in the spread of technology led in our day to a worldwide environmental crisis? In the light of these failures, it is hardly surprising that many join the criticism of the historical legacy of humanism. Yet in the face of killing fields, gas chambers, and rape camps, there has also been resistance to intolerable horror in the name of our fragile shared humanity. The poor, suffering, and the oppressed rightly cry out for recognition of their human dignity. These events have led many people to champion what the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas has called the "humanism of the other man."²²

In many ways, the global Christian community confronts a profound and even troubling question. Given the sad legacy of inhumanity in the last century, the worldwide environmental threat brought on by the expansion of the human kingdom, but also the cries for human dignity, is it possible to forge a viable and vibrant Christian humanism that protects and promotes human dignity not against but within the wider compass of life on this planet? Is it possible to find an expression of Christian faith that works with and not against other forms of faith and other moral outlooks?

In many ways this is *the basic* question confronting the Christian community in the global era. Anything like a complete answer to that question is of course well beyond the bounds of one essay! But in order to make headway in answering it, one needs some clarity about a set of convictions that define in a general way a humanistic outlook. And we will have to show how best to understand the distinctiveness of Christian humanism given that general outlook. With those ideals in mind, we can then turn to the most basic criticisms of Christian humanism and offer a response to them. I conclude these reflections by trying to advance an argument capable of meeting the challenges of the present time.

2: Humanistic Ideals

On several points all humanists agree: the importance of freedom or self-determination; human beings as fit objects of respect and esteem, the ends of action; the fundamentally social nature of human life and thus the importance of community; and, lastly, human fallibility and thereby the demand to test all claims to truth linked to a suspicion of authoritarianism. It is hardly surprising that humanists have advocated the ideals of liberty, human rights, democracy, general education, and the public scrutiny of opinions. Of course, how each of these ideals is understood is hotly debated. What is meant by freedom? Surely on that point Calvin and Wesley differ! Many contemporary thinkers also disagree about how to conceive of freedom. How best to define the boundaries of community and norms of justice? Here too theologians and Christian communities differ. What do we mean by an end of action, and who precisely is the fit end of human acts? Non-religious humanists insist that the well-being of other human beings is the *sole* end of right actions. A religious thinker, say, a Christian or Jew, will argue for a richer conception of human transcendence and so the divine good as the ultimate end of action. As one might expect, there is constant debate about how rightly to articulate these shared humanistic ideals. But granting this debate, it is safe to say that contemporary humanists of all stripes desire to respect and enhance human existence within and not against the wider realms of life.

On my understanding, what distinguishes Christian humanists from those who share these ideals and yet reject religious belief is a conviction about how best to conceive the distinctiveness of human beings.³ One can state this conviction by borrowing a phrase from John Calvin. In the midst of Book III of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin, in describing the Christian life of self-denial in all its joy and sorrow, hope and yet travail, raises his otherwise stark rhetoric to new and profound levels. Calvin writes a virtual hymn to the truth that in all things and in all ways we are not our own. The “hymn” progresses through a series of “stanzas” proclaiming that we are not our “own” at the level of reason or will, proposals for the end of action, and also possessions. And then he writes:

On the contrary, we are God’s; to him, therefore, let us live and die. We are God’s; therefore let his wisdom and will preside in our actions. We are God’s; towards him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every part of our lives be directed.⁴

We are God’s. On a Christian account, that is the most fundamental fact of human existence. Of course, this confession was partly meant by Calvin to draw a line between the church and those outside the body of Christ. He returns to the theme in discussing “predestination,” hardly a humanist topic! And it is also true that many of his followers took the real point to be a division of humanity into the elect and the damned. These positions sadly pit theocentric faith against a humanistic sensibility. But Calvin’s deeper insight, I submit, was that human life is not defined by what we possess, even our dreams of self-possession or eternal election! It is defined by a relation to the living God which can and ought to ignite a confident and ardent service with and for all mortal creatures.

The question then becomes, how is that relation to the divine to be defined and actually lived? Interestingly enough, it is precisely on these points, that is, a conception of human distinctiveness and also the moral vocation of human beings, that one finds the deepest contemporary criticisms of Christian humanism. With some sense of the ideals of humanism in hand and also the marker of what is distinctive about classical Christian humanism, let us turn to

these criticisms. It is only if we can answer them that it will be possible to outline a viable Christian humanism for our day.

3: Critics of Christian Humanism

Contemporary non-religious humanists as well as theologians and philosophers who advocate a “humanism of the other man” reject a specific conception of human existence and dignity that defines the central strand of classical Christian humanism. One issue is anthropological, that is, how to define and understand what it means to be a human being. Traditional Christian humanism, the detractor argues, entails a conception of the self that in principle excludes the claim of who and what is radically other than self. It focuses on the self and its cultivation or perfection. The humanist commitment to education is seen in this light as grounded in a vision of human life aimed at the fulfillment of self. And behind the idea of fulfillment is really a deeper commitment to personal flourishing and happiness, what Greek and Roman Hellenistic philosophers called *eudaimonia*.

One kind of criticism of the anthropological point comes from within the Christian community. If that is so about any form of humanism, what about the neighbor that the Christian is commanded to love? Is the living God nothing more than the end of human aspirations, the provider of our happiness? That hardly seems like the biblical vision of God. The God who speaks at Sinai or meets one in the Cross is a far cry from the joy of human natural desiring. The living God requires a radical care for the neighbor, even love of one’s enemy rather than the search for happiness. The great Methodist ethicist Paul Ramsey insisted that Christian love has very little to do with consequential reasoning aimed at flourishing. Christian love is a duty of care for the other precisely because this and this alone is what the Lord requires of us.⁵ In this respect, the very idea of Christian humanism is an oxymoron that inscribes a deep betrayal of biblical faith replacing it with the classical Hellenistic ideal of human flourishing and happiness. In the face of the twentieth century and the idolatries of state, race, and blood, Christians must insist on the radical freedom and sovereignty of God. What is needed, the critics argue, is vibrant concern for the other and a profound awareness of the otherness of God. Theocentrism seems to exclude the very possibility of humanistic sensibilities in the life of faith. One must thereby reject Christian humanism as a truthful expression of faith and life.

Another kind of critic stands outside the religious community but does not attack the anthropological point. This critic admits that Christians are in fact responsible for the other precisely in the name of *agape* and the demands of radical neighbor love even if this includes love of self. On this account, Christian faith is humanistic not in the sense of a classical vision of self-formation and fulfillment, but because it makes human well-being basic to a vision of faithful existence. After all, Jesus insisted that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. The difficulty for this detractor of Christian humanism lies elsewhere. It focuses on the moral dimension of Christian humanism more than the underlying anthropology. The Christian, the critic observes, is commanded to love everyone. Christian love is thereby non-discriminatory and necessarily abstract. One is commanded to love an abstract other (the “neighbor”) and do so through loving God. The “neighbor” is nothing more than a category for any human being stripped of all concrete particularity. Christian love, the detractor insists, is blind to the concrete other and in fact really loves the other as a means to loving God. Calvin’s point, after all, was that God is the *only* legitimate end and therefore all other ends, including human beings, are set against that ultimate, divine good. One is to love one’s neighbor, but what is meant by the “neighbor” seems shorn of all reference to gender or class or race or language or cultural heritage.

Stated otherwise, Christian love is otherworldly. It is really directed at God and not at other, concrete real persons. And given this, Christian faith cannot be a genuine form of humanism since it does not take human beings as the *only* fit end of action. Given the forms of tyranny and suffering in

our world, especially those forms rooted in seeing human beings in abstract form (sexism, racism, etc.), one must reject all generalized claims about neighbor love. And one must reject religious conviction altogether in the name of a viable contemporary form of humanism. This is the tactic of current neo-humanists.⁶ They insist on “lateral transcendence” rather than any relation to the sacred as a divine good and they do so in the name of concrete, real individuals.

We have now isolated two kinds of current criticism of classical Christian humanism, one theological and one that is not, that have arisen out of the painful experience of the last century. Christian theologians have responded to the criticisms in a variety of ways and to various ends. Karl Barth, for instance, leveled the first charge against “liberal” theology, claiming that in its concern for human religious experience it subsumes the divine into the self. He argued that one must begin with the revelation of the Word of God that is totally other than the human self. The only true man is Jesus Christ; the rest of us are phenomenal men. What is more, the Word of God confronts one as permission and command to live in a specific time and place. Given this fact, Barth responds to the second criticism by insisting that the divine command is concrete and particular. The entire point of the divine command is to insure the freedom of God and the priority of God’s will over generalizable moral maxims. In the end, Barth thereby advocated the “humanity of God” because he too was worried about otherworldiness.⁷

Other theologians respond differently. Some feminists, for instance, agree that Christian love is too often an abstraction from specific relations of care and therefore must be refashioned in the direction of relationality rather than the duty to love. But these theologians often appeal to women’s experience and thereby retain at least remnants of the basic anthropological claims attached by the first kind of detractor.⁸ Finally, there are ecological theologians who insist that the focus on human flourishing is wantonly anthropocentric. In an age of global environmental endangerment, the task before us is to break free from anthropocentric ideals and seek to respond rightly to all realms of life, even when this might demand the sacrifice of distinctly human goods.⁹ A “humanistic” outlook is driven by a faulty moral position centering on “human well-being” and this is backed by a specific anthropology. In this light, one must see human beings as part of the wider system of life on this planet and also expand the boundaries of the moral community.

So the criticisms go. How might a Christian humanist address these matters? As the next step in my argument I want to turn to that question. My answer to the theological and non-theological critic requires clarity about how best to formulate the anthropological point in light of the double love command as the summary of responsible existence. In doing so, I will be making some revisions in this grand legacy of thought while also, hopefully, retaining and advancing its spirit.

4: Rethinking Christian Humanism

The first point to make is that for the Christian humanist what has been called the anthropological and moral dimensions are inseparable. This is so even though many classical and modern Christian humanists were not as clear about the point as one might wish. In the classical formulation, true self-knowledge is bound to the love of God. But what does that mean? To love God is to know one’s self truly, or, conversely, to have a true apprehension of one’s self is to grasp the ultimate object of one’s desiring, one’s love. What is more, there is testimony to the relation between God and self in each and every human heart. This relation to the divine constitutes human existence as such.

The point was made by some of the classical Christian thinkers. Erasmus, for instance, claims, in his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (1503), that God simply is the life of the human soul. John Calvin opens *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the claim that true and sound wisdom consists of knowledge of God and knowledge of self. He even went on to claim that these two are bound together so closely that it is difficult to say which brings forth the other. Does knowledge of God

lead to right self-understanding? Is the inverse the case? Much earlier, St. Augustine, in the *Confessions*, articulated the principle that both Erasmus and Calvin explore, namely, that God is always nearer to us than we are to ourselves. God's closeness finds witness in the human heart. The core of our being is restless until it rests in God.

This claim about the relation of God and self continues into the modern world. John Wesley, who insisted on vital, living faith, proclaimed that "true religion, or a heart right towards God and man, implies happiness as well as holiness. . . [T]he Spirit of God bearing witness with the spirit of a Christian, that he is 'a child of God.'"¹⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, another "reformed" theologian and the great translator of Plato, claimed that the immediate self-consciousness is itself a testimony to one's relation to the divine. And in the twentieth century, Paul Tillich talked about "ultimate concern" and the experience of being grasped by the Word of God, an ecstatic relation in the depth of human beings.¹¹ As created and as redeemed, the presence of the divine life is manifest within consciousness, the spirit, self-knowledge, or the restless heart. Granting the fault and fallibility that riddles human life, God is not without witness in the rough and tumble of human existence.

However, it is also the case that these thinkers, and others as well, were not always clear about the causal *relation* between the human heart and the living God. For Christian humanists what it means to be a self, an actual living individual, cannot mean that somehow we first come to self-awareness and then in a subsequent act decide to love God! Knowledge of self does not lead to or cause the knowledge of God. The true knowledge of self and love of God arise simultaneously or they do not arise at all. One does not peer inside of oneself somehow to find God. This is not a version of religious narcissism or psychologically oriented natural theology. What is more, an unfaithful or distorted relation to the living God and others means that the self, despite its illusion to existence, is not really alive. Outside of a right love of God and others we do not and cannot truthfully know ourselves. There is, we might say, a kind of living death in which the self, while biologically alive, is nevertheless spiritually dead. Not surprisingly, one can diagnose various moods or states that manifest the right or distorted relations between self, God, and others, moods like a guilty conscience, holy sadness, as Schleiermacher calls it, the restless heart, human folly, or, conversely, real joy in a life of love. Christian humanists examine "moods" because they disclose the condition of our lives within the defining relations to others and the living God. However, the state of the "soul" and its signifying moods (guilt, joy, sadness, hope) does not cause a relation to the divine.

The depth of the human plight on this account is that we are not aware of ourselves precisely because we do not love God nor real, concrete others. Human beings too often exist in a haze, a profound sleep or spiritual death unmindful of their condition or the actual depths of their existence. As the Protestant reformers put it, we must be shocked into self-awareness through the convicting power of the "law" to expose our misdirected loves. One then looks to where God and human existence are disclosed in proper relation, one looks to the event of the Christ and the witness is scripture to that event.¹² This means, ironically enough, that selfhood or individuality is not a brute given. We do not "own" ourselves. Our true selfhood is received from God in grace and achieved through the cultivation of Christian character in love of others.

A good deal of misunderstanding is found on this point, even among theologians, about the non-causal relation between God, self, and others. For instance, when Schleiermacher argues that human consciousness always entails a "feeling" (*Gefühl*) of absolute dependence on a "whence," he means this in a very formal way. For any actual human being, their existence is and always will be shaped by the beliefs and practices of some community. Schleiermacher's point is simply, theologically considered, that human existence is never self-explanatory.¹³ We are not trapped within the confines of our wants, desires, and imaginings. Our "feeling" is not a causal form of knowing

God. Likewise, Erasmus, against Luther's more strident formulations, asked "What good is man if God acts on him as a potter acts on the clay?"¹⁴ Erasmus is not saying that we make ourselves! As children of Adam we are made of "clay." Yet our character is not only received, it is also something we must freely achieve. In other words, there is a double transcendence of the self: one always and already exists in relation to the other who is God, and, what is more, genuine life is a constant struggle of self-overcoming, an achievement, to have right relations with others. Casual language is then simply inadequate: we are not just "clay pots" in the hands of an otherworldly craftsman and the living God is not a product of human wants.

With respect to the anthropological criticism, the detractors are simply wide of the mark. To be a self, on this distinctly Christian humanist account, is to find oneself in others and always surpass self in the free struggle for the cultivation of character marked by love of others. This is hardly a veiled "Hellenistic outlook" centered on *eudaimonia*. In fact, what is meant by "happiness" has been radically changed through reference to the demands and possibility of "holiness," as Wesley put it. Holiness just is the life of love, the fulfillment of the moral law. And yet, it must be noted that precisely on this issue Christian humanists do differ from other versions of Christian faith. Knowledge of self and knowledge of God arise simultaneously and they do so in such a way as to affirm, rather than deny, distinct human capacities for action and free relations to others. Unlike some more strident forms of Christian faith, including Augustine and Calvin at certain points, that verge on necessitarianism in order to preserve God's sovereignty, the argument here protects and promotes the distinctiveness of human beings as moral agents. Stated differently, Christian humanists believe that theocentrism and humanist ideals must go together in an adequate account of faith and life.

This brings us to the second important insight or revision needed to meet current detractors. Not surprisingly, for this strand of tradition the connection between self-knowledge and love of God is a way to conceptualize the core of the Christian witness. Christian faith is, after all, a trust in and love of the living God who is manifest in Christ that ignites and emboldens service of all things in relation to God. What is more, Erasmus, Calvin, Augustine, Schleiermacher, and certainly Wesley, among others, grasped that the double love command, to love God and one's neighbor as oneself, expresses this connection between God and self-knowledge as a maxim for the conduct of life. That maxim, they claimed, finds testimony in each and every heart. In some way, every person has a grasp, no matter how tenuous or distorted, of the claim of others to respect and esteem as well as a longing for the divine. The task of the Christian community, as Wesley intimated, is to form and order personal and social existence so that people's actions and relations enact the ground and destiny of life in the living God. A life aimed at enacting that truth is in turn nothing other than the union of holiness and happiness, that is, the highest human good.

For the Christian humanist, what defines the dignity of human life is specified in terms of the double love command, to love God and to love the neighbor.¹⁵ But this means that the "self" is not some solitary "I" in relation to itself. There is no private community between self and God lodged in the deep interiority of the "I." The "self" is profoundly marked by otherness; God and neighbor inhere in the love that defines existence. Christian existence, in other words, does not rest or resolve itself in itself. What is more, the right intentionality of our lives appear to us under the form of the demand of love as itself the path of the highest good. Who I am, what I can become, is specified in a project of increasing love for God and for others. The Christian "self," again, is not a brute given. It is not an origin but rather a project or task whose end is the God of life and the life of the neighbor. That is why Christian humanists speak of cultivation, education, and even perfection. Genuine formation is to bear the image of Christ in one's life through love of God and others.

In this vision of life, the “self” is not an abstract principle of identity. It is a concrete person in community with others seeking to live out a life of love within the complexities and realities of existence. But the self is also not lost in God or the neighbor. There is no “mystical” absorption of self into the divine nor is there a moral effacement of the worth and dignity of the individual person in praise of the priority of the “other.” Rather, a person in her or his own dignity exists within a complex set of relations with the ability and task responsibly to orient life. That is, again, why Christian humanism insists on the importance of freedom.

The same thing must be said about the neighbor. Since the love of God and true self-knowledge arise together, the command to love neighbor as self cannot mean, despite what the detractors think, that a Christian loves others in the abstract *as a means* to the divine. Insofar as the self is in God through faith and in the neighbor in loving acts, the same is true in principle of all other people. That is, any other actual living person exists in a complex web of interrelations. Of course, how they live within that web can take almost infinite expression. Some live in hope and courage, others live in despair and anger, still other people struggle to be faithful parents and good citizens, and many struggle to live religiously within their own communities. The ways of life that people adopt are varied and complex and part of the richness and poverty of human reality. The Christian humanist finds this variety of ways of life profoundly ambiguous. The human world is marked by virtue and vice, goodness and profound evil. It is part of the comic but also tragic tapestry of existence. But an acknowledgment of the ambiguity of the human project does not entail an easy acceptance of all forms of life as equally good and true. No way, style, or path of life ought to be adopted that violates the double love command and thus effaces and distorts the life of others and the right intentionality of one’s own life. In fact, human sin consists in a closure of the self on itself in which relations to God and others are denied and the intentionality of life to its highest good thereby thwarted. The life of faith is to awaken from that condition of spiritual death and to live in love.

It would seem, then, that a theological response is possible to very prominent criticisms of the legacy of Christian humanism. Of course, I have not been able to outline in detail a robust revision of Christian humanism. My task is more modest. It is simply to make a case for the importance of such an agenda in Christian moral thinking. Yet even if this tentative case for a renewed Christian humanism is persuasive, other problems remain to be answered. What would a viable account of Christian humanism look like in an age of global dynamics and radical moral and religious diversity? These matters have not been addressed to date by thinkers standing in this legacy. I want to conclude this essay by turning to those matters and thereby round out my contribution to the renewal of Christian humanism.

5: The Present Challenge

In many respects, the arguments made above in defense of Christian humanism are a bit too easy for our age. In order to make the anthropological and moral argument for this vision of Christian life one must, in fact, accept what can no longer be presupposed; namely, that there is a wide, if often tacit, acceptance of biblical and other Western ideals and values. Even the criticisms of classical Christian humanism seem to presuppose that background. What I have called the “anthropological” criticism presupposes that it is good to be a self. The issue that divides thinkers is how best to conceive of the self. The moral criticism likewise arises out of a shared presupposition about the nature of moral responsibility and hence the demand to respect and enhance not only one’s own life but that of others. But the fact is that we increasingly live in a world in which the complex interactions of cultures and traditions manifest a lack of shared presuppositions. In some traditions and cultures the idea of a “self” is hardly a defining idea. It is seen as an imposition of “Western” modes of thought. Within the spreading global market, it is not at all clear that anything can trump

the drive of consumption and the satisfaction of personal preferences. Everything can be seen as a commodity for the satisfaction of individual needs and wants. Even the moral life, it is argued by some thinkers, is simply a means to the end of personal satisfaction. How ought one to respond to this new, changed situation?

Ironically, it is precisely in this situation that a renewed Christian humanism is sorely needed within the global Christian community. As we have seen, the core of this outlook is that human dignity is not a matter of self-possession. We are not our own, as Calvin put it. The drive for possession, the wanton lust for consumption and the clinging to whatever is believed to satisfy human longing, is in the final analysis destructive of the human spirit. This is not to say that everyone should take a vow of poverty! But it is to say that in a world of widespread want and also gluttony, the profoundest message of the Christian witness is that while we live by bread we do not and cannot live by bread alone. A human life driven by unrestrained want is not really living; it is a mark of death within life. This insight combats the dulling and deadening forces of consumerism and might just as well enable Christian thinkers to engage representatives of traditions and culture less beholden to “Western” conceptions of the self. For if the argument above was in any way compelling, then a properly Christian conception of the human dislodges the “I” from the center of reflection. It shows that genuine existence is in love. The distortion and destruction of life lies in its closure driven by the desire to engulf all life in the self, what was traditionally call “concupiscence.”

Once we grasp the Christian humanist conception of what it means to be a self, then two things follow. First, what it means to be a person is more complex and saturated with “otherness” than typical ancient and modern philosophical conceptions. Anti-humanists and the varied forms of neo-humanists simply have not grasped this point. The neo-humanist argument for “lateral transcendence” can too easily be implicated in the mad rush to fulfill all human desire. And, likewise, the modern anti-humanist attack is off target since what the Christian humanist means by the “self” is not a being defined simply by its “self-relation.” And we also see, second, that Christian humanist thinking is *diagnostic*. It aims less to explain “doctrines” and much more to analyze and articulate the structures of lived reality, thereby to provide orientation and guidance for life. Doctrine is in the service of faithful living. The diagnosis shows, in part, is that in order to preserve our humanity, one must have a trans-human good beyond the “self” in mind. Other forms of “religious” thought, like Buddhism, are also rigorously *diagnostic* in character while challenging a focus on the “self.” They seek to isolate, articulate, and answer a range of human problems thereby better to orient and direct human life. A Christian humanist is, accordingly, able to see adherents of other religious traditions who engage in diagnostic thinking as fellow travelers in a quest for what is good and right.

This brings us to another reason why a new Christian humanism is needed among Christians. I have just argued that one needs religious sources, say, a *Christian* or *Buddhist* humanism, to respond to the global spread of consumerism and with it the drive of technology to enfold all forms of life within the kingdom of human power. Yet in a world of increasing conflict and tribalism, one equally needs a robust Christian or religious *humanism*. Since we are not our “own,” that is, we are defined as human beings not just by the usual markers societies establish to divide the world into “us” and “them” but by a relation to the divine and the neighbor, then ethnic, political, gender, racial, and even religious differences cannot be ultimate. To be sure, those forms of identity are crucial and necessary in human life. As already argued, no one is an abstract “self” or an abstract “neighbor.” We always live concrete, situated, embodied lives bearing various markers of identity. Yet while that is obviously true, the force of any kind of humanism, and especially Christian humanism, is that there is a bond between finite and fallible creatures within the community of life. By insisting on this point one has the means to counter the viciousness and excessive tribalism of one’s own home tradition. And one also has the means to appeal to the good will of others to inhabit their community with just that capacious sensibility.

There are signs, thankfully, that thinkers in other traditions and cultures are beginning to reclaim the best and most humane insights of their communities. And the reason for this ought to be obvious to everyone. In an age in which each and every religion has fostered the most fanatical and violent forms of fundamentalism, the resources of the religions must be bent towards humane purposes or they will surely continue to feed global conflict. It is precisely because of one's belief in and dedication to a specific faith that one can and must argue for its humanistic expression. Religious thinkers should find common cause not in terms of seeking some unified theological vision that will somehow cut across all of the religions. Rather, what can and must be sought is an internal renewal, a reformation, of each and every tradition in terms of service they can render to life. For the Christian humanist this is simply living out the double love command mindful that we are not finally or ultimately our own.

6: The Cloak of Christian Humanism

This brings us to the final reason for wearing the "cloak" of Christian humanism. Without doubt, one of the pressing issues of the twenty-first century is and will be the worldwide environmental crisis. In this light it might seem odd to insist on *Christian humanism* rather than, say, an ecological holism in ethics. And yet surely it is the case that the crisis we face is a crisis of the relentless spread of the human kingdom. The age of globality is nothing else than a time of unbridled human power operative in and through trans-human systems, the global market, media, and other technologies. It is also a cultural phenomenon in which human beings make meaning through symbolic representations. The only way to orient these "agencies" toward what respects and enhances life is to insist that they are the working out of distinctly human choices and decisions. In this way, global agencies are made responsible even as people can be seen again as the makers, not the products, of those systems. That is to say, if we wish to avoid a runaway expansion of non-human agencies that too easily trammel rather than enrich life, we must *humanize* them and thereby set their actions and relations within a moral framework. But insofar as we do that, we must also labor for an expansion and education of *human* desires and hopes to include the awareness of the oft unheard cry of others forms of life. To do that requires, once again, a *trans-human* good, just the kind of good that invigorates the legacy of Christian humanism. The inner secret for meeting the ecological crisis might just be a renewed and robust understanding of the moral vocation of human beings to respect and enhance *the integrity of all life*.

In the end, it must be said that Christian humanism is more than a set of ideas or doctrines or moral ideals. It is a specific stance in life characterized by a deep and abiding trust in the living God, dedicated to respecting and enhancing the integrity of life, and moved by a love of life despite the folly, ignorance, and brokenness of human beings. The sensibilities of the Christian humanist are such that she or he wants to make life better, richer, and deeper through dedication to social transformation, education, and an unceasing willingness to learn. One believes that these are the true marks of the life of faith and certainly a life worth living. And one wants to work in concert with people of other cultures and traditions who also strive to further what is most humane and vibrant in their convictions.

NOTES

¹ I have made a case for theological humanism elsewhere. See William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, forthcoming 2004).

² See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre Nous: essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991). For an account of the “inhumane” that has sparked new reflection in ethics, see Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

³ In this essay I am addressing non-religious positions rather than thinkers in other religious traditions. That comparative work will have to await another essay.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.7.1.

⁵ See Paul Ramsey in his *Basic Christian Ethics*, forward by Stanley Hauerwas and D. Stephen Long. The Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

⁶ See Tzvetan Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, translated by Carol Cosman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976).

⁸ For example see Beverley Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, edited by Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985). Also see Cristina L. H. Traina, *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law: The End of Anathemas* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999) and Darlene Fozard Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁹ For the most trenchant position see James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 1984). For a radically anti-humanist position see Peter Singer, *Unsanctifying Human Life: Essays on Ethics*, edited by Helga Kuhse (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002).

¹⁰ John Wesley, “The Way to the Kingdom” in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, First Series (London: Epworth Press, 1944), p. 77.

¹¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 volumes in 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

¹² For the classic statement see Luther’s lectures on Galatians (1535) in *Luther’s Works* vols. 26-27 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1963).

¹³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

¹⁴ Erasmus, “Diatribes on the Freedom of the Will” in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, edited by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson. Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

¹⁵ On the importance of the love command see William Schweiker, “And a Second is Like It: Christian Faith and the Claim of the Other” in *Quarterly Review* 20:3 (Fall, 2000): 233-247 and also Paul Mendes-Flohr, “A Postmodern Humanism from the Sources of Judaism” in *Criterion* 41: 2 (Spring, 2002): 18-23.