Welcome to the discussion board. We invite you to use this space to post reflections, comments, or questions in response to this month's web forum commentary, "Humanity Before God: Theological Humanism from a Christian Perspective," by William Schweiker. You may review the essay at http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/webforum.

Re: October 2003 Discussion

Author: Peter Di Pietro (---.proxy.aol.com)
Date: 10-03-03 07:09

Apositive Theology--God is not epistemologically accessible, and faith, alone, is not practically sufficient to managing the manifold vicissitudes of one's life, without free and deliberate (ethical and political) action on the part of the individual, regardless of any fundamental theological decision. Any relationship between oneself and Divine Being must be personal, private, and silent, to be entirely authentic and, thus, is never, at bottom, a matter for explicit public reference in practical matters. That is, one cannot validly issue reasons based upon theology, which are not purely idiosyncratic, to explain temporal actions or relationships. It is by wonder we begin to ask about the meaning of our worldly situation, in spite of its obvious empirical content, but we remove ourselves from this wonder once we begin to express it: Alone, it remains ineffable. This wonder is the admiration of the Holy. Respect for the Holy is the basis of all religion, and the foundation of any ethic.

This is not a statement of theism or gnosticism, or anti-legalism, agnosticism, or atheism, etc., as these attitudes are all positively constituted, and, thus dogmatically manifest, theological decisions. Apositive theology is, rather, a pure and simple apperception of The Holy (the immediate and profound wonder of Being, and admiration for the dignity of creation)--prior to any specific conceptual determinations of denomination (pantheism and humanism included)--without constituting it essentially. Any religious teaching that does not regard this fact as its absolute foundation, prior to any and all historical particulars, pragmatic tenants, or rules of worship, cannot properly serve the purpose to humanity that it most urgently intends as religion. All the worldly religions point us toward a single source in a loving perspective--the Creative Intelligence. It is when they point away from this unique source, in order to supplant it (to foster division and difference), that errors and strife between the various religions arise. All religious conflict (assumption of the source for ideological reasons) is really but a struggle for political (economic) identity or power. Religion, thusly posed, is never the actual matter.

Human disorders and evils thrive in the disconnect between possibility and reality, and they are invented.
Religious ethics can be truly productive in illuminating how the unintentional ones arise; invented, but not intended (for example, as from misunderstanding or insufficiency). The intended ones are malicious, obvious, and, therefore, less problematic.

Innocence can only be represented in imagination, as we are born, equiprimordially, with the inherent capacity for both good and evil. This is why guilt is a phenomenon, and why the soul can never find a state of rest in perfection on earth. Yet, this imagination is our specific power as human beings. Man is the imaginative animal? Only through innocence can we care about one another, but innocence and care are always only possibilities. This is why they are so uncertain; even as reverant love. There is always a lack; some doubt; a shortcoming.

Peace and war (the cancer of this limit) are corresponding social modes of dealing with our insubstantiality--we must choose the one over the other, so that we feel real, but the choice is actually for or against essentiality as authenticity; as the way in which we confront our finitude. This is why war and religion get so confused, as there needs to be an ultimate reason for living (and dying), as the mind incessantly and relentlessly seeks it, but, as the source is not a thing in the world, the world easily obscures this from conscious view.

Will religion make us whole, or is religion a worn out cloak? People must accept what is common first and foremost--the Creative Source--before we can rest with true intelligent knowledge (wisdom), rather than always turning that knowledge to strife against our own ultimate purpose.

Reply To This Message

Re: October 2003 Discussion

Author: Frank L. Pasquale (---.portland-16-17rs.or.dial-access.att.net)
Date: 10-16-03 06:04

I wish to thank Professor Schweiker for a valuable and thought-provoking essay on Christian humanism, and extend my thanks to the invited respondents for their thoughtful comments, as well. I particularly appreciate the sense of balance that pervades Professor Schweiker's approach, as in his conception of the simultaneity of the divine, the self, and the other (or the humanistic self as interdependent with the other), balance between the ethical and theological (or between worldly flourishing/happiness and other-worldly devotion), and balance of attention to human life and the "community of all life." It would seem to me that this is an important element in any reasonably "humanist" approach to life, existence, and human well-being.

I would, however, like to address another theme that is at the heart of Professor Schweiker's essay, the invited respondents' comments, and indeed any discussion of humanism, be it religious or non-religious. This is what I take to be one of the central questions prompted by humanism: whether (or to what degree) and how human beings can transcend their own personal and cultural interests sufficiently to ensure general human well-being, while still retaining those personal and cultural commitments or "identities" that do not threaten human well-being.

In this connection, I would also like to address a habit I have noticed on the part of many who present themselves as humanists, both religious and non-religious: that of speaking about pan-human or "transcultural"
ethical commitment while remaining overwhelmingly or exclusively within their own particular "humanist" cultures and ideologies. Both this theme and this habit reflect the same human challenge -- one that Reinhold Niebuhr placed squarely before us in his MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY: how to overcome, or at least minimize, the apparently inevitable egoism of human collectivity beyond the familial and the intimate.

I should, perhaps, preface my remarks with an admission that my view is from a non-religious humanist perspective. But I am not so steeped in this perspective that I am unaware or unappreciative of the role of religion (and religious humanism) in endeavoring to extend human ethical commitment far beyond self-interest, our intimate circles, our chosen collectives, our cultures, or our nation-states. Neither Professor Schweiker nor the invited respondents shrink from acknowledging that while religion-at-its-best has contributed to this endeavor, religion-at-its-worst has simply presented another class of egoistic cultures bent on the domination or destruction of others. And I am fully cognizant of the fact that the same is true of non-religious ideologies and cultures. The question, again, is: what does it take to overcome individual and cultural egoism and to act, as individuals and collectives, in ways that ensure our own and others' well-being?

From the Christian humanist perspective, as Professor Schweiker presents it, the answer lies in the "double love command" -- loving God and loving all one's neighbors as oneself. The power of this religio-moral strategy -- ethically binding extended collectives together through a common and compelling belief in God, or through a metaphoric connection of all human beings to one another through God -- cannot be denied. This said, Professor Schweiker and the invited respondents note that the first of these loves, if conceived too narrowly or too absolutely, repeatedly gives rise to "tribalism" that is neglectful or destructive of outsiders and other collectives.

From a non-religious humanist perspective, nothing is more important than our shared rational and ethical commitment to (interdependent) human well-being. The question, as Niebuhr stresses, is how such commitment can be extended in practice beyond the interests of our intimate and cultural groups. The special challenge to the non-religious is whether such a purely "rational" commitment is sufficiently compelling to motivate adequate other-directed concern and action. Regrettably, it would seem that it hasn't been nearly compelling enough thus far in human history. The character of cultures fostered by, for example, secular humanists, often falls far short of the ethical aims given in their principles. Indeed, many have succumbed to just another form of ideological and metaphysical tribalism, as many religious cultures have. Rather than viewing humanism as a focus of attention on what is good for all of us and our world, too many have taken "Humanism" to represent a definitive and rather dogmatic (anti-)metaphysical stance.

So where does this leave us in the contemporary humanist arena? I would suggest that we all need to practice more of what we preach, beginning with our respective "humanist" cultures. To paraphrase Shaw, religious and non-religious humanisms have been cultures separated by a common ethical aim and (partially) shared heritage. Within its derived tradition, as Professor Schweiker notes, Christian humanism culls its essence from Hellenistic philosophy by way of the Renaissance, Enlightenment critiques of egoistic Christianity, selected Church fathers, and the likes of Clement of Alexandria, Calvin, and Erasmus. Within its derived tradition, non-religious humanism culls its essence from Hellenistic philosophy by way of the Renaissance, Enlightenment critiques of religion in general, Unitarian and other manifesto-writers, and ethical "freethinkers" through the ages.

Among many Christian and other religious humanists, while there is expressed commitment to "dialogue" and "human commonality beyond our tribal differences," the focus is largely or exclusively on "ecumenism," cooperation among "persons of faith" and "faith traditions," "interreligious solidarity and justice," "Jews,
Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, members or sympathizers with any other religious community, or simply human beings trying to orient ourselves within the profound challenges that confront all of us," and so on. (I have noted the same tendency in Reverend Charles Kimball's WHEN RELIGION BECOMES EVIL, an analysis that answers Professor Martin's call for "unflinching study of the ways in which Christian ideas...have been twisted and deployed to the detriment of the human good.") This habit bespeaks both the achievement and the limits of much religious culture: tribalism at an expanded level of human collectivity. There are many who are seeking to do much more than merely "orient" themselves to our profound challenges, including Ethical Culturists, Humanistic Jews, secular humanists, "simply" humanists, and ethically committed human beings sans labels, explicit ideology, or religion. Isn't the superior strategy to embrace and cultivate the ethical endeavors of all who strive to be of "good will," whether religious or non-religious?

Similarly, among secular and other non-religious humanists, there is promising talk of acceptance of diversity, of common moral decencies, of "humanist ethics," and commitment to the welfare of humanity. But admittedly, among many there is also a dogmatic preoccupation with reason and rationality often to the exclusion (or destruction) of all else. Too, there is often an intellectually indefensible rejection of all forms of religious belief with the same broadly dismissive brush (as though all "religion" is tribal fundamentalism or uniformly threatening to human well-being). There is all-too-little voiced recognition in such circles of the existence of, or common ethical cause with, reasonable and rational persons who hold transcendental or supernatural beliefs.

Emphasis, priority, focus of attention, and balance count for a great deal in human affairs. We defeat ourselves when imbalanced focus on favored means to human well-being obscures or violates our espoused ethical aims. I would suggest that on the Christian side of humanism, a critical imbalance may lie in the prioritization of the "double love command." From a humanistic perspective, Matthew 22: 37-39 would better have read, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love the Lord your God..." (I have often wondered how Western history would have played out had this been the case throughout the Christian gospels.) On the non-religious or secular side of humanism, a critical imbalance lies in obsessively placing "reason" above our primary ethical commitments. When each places its preferred and particular means to the desired end before the end itself, we are once again prone to unethical tribalism. When we place our cultural commitments before essential ethical ones, destructive cultural egoism is again inevitable.

Returning to the central challenge of collective egoism posed by Niebuhr (and the hope of any viable humanism), the pathway to overcoming personal and collective egoism would seem to lie in always placing priority on "essential" ethical commitments (those demonstrably necessary to ensure our own and all others' well-being), and subordinating all other personal and collective commitments to them. Theoretically, at least, we must 1) work together toward better discerning which personal and collective behaviors are indeed ethically essential, and 2) better cultivate those personal disciplines that curb destructive individual and cultural egoism and ensure greater measures of human security, well-being, and fulfillment.

Christian humanism's focus on love and "doing unto others." stresses the ideal, pro-social, and emphatically-other side of the endeavor. Secular humanism's focus on the "logic" of interdependent self- and other-interest and on "not doing to others." stresses the value of reasonable individual freedom and well-being. Both would agree, I think, that among the greatest threats to human well-being are unrestrained egoism, irrational dogmatism, and cultural absolutism. Both are committed to the concept and protection of essential human rights. Both draw their wisdom from Western and Eastern ethical and philosophical traditions that place
emphasis on such notions as to metriion (moderation, balance, the middle way), gnothei se auton (self-
knowledge, both personal and cultural), and the value of a critical degree of skepticism, uncertainty, or humility
among human beings as finite creatures (before God and/or in nature).

The ethical priorities that religious and non-religious humanists share are of primary importance. But this does
not mean that all subordinate priorities and preferred means that differentiate them must be expunged. As
Professors Schweiker and Martin suggest, our (ethically acceptable) differences can serve an invaluable role in
dialogue. They provide checks and balances on the potential risks and excesses of the different means by
which we each seek to achieve shared ethical aims -- the religious through emphasis on the divine, and the
non-religious through emphasis on the rational.

The critical point is that "our common humanity is more important than our interesting differences, and makes
those interesting differences possible."* Our common ethical and human(ist) commitment is more important
than our individual and cultural differences, but it makes all our reasonable differences possible. And those
reasonable differences, in turn, may help us become less destructively egoistic in dialogue than we would be in
isolation.

I am heartened by Professor Schweiker's suggestion that "we are on the cusp of a new global moment"
involving "vibrant forms of religious humanism" and by his acknowledgement of the ideals and aims that
"contemporary humanists of all stripes" share. I wish to encourage much more inclusive dialogue among
humanists of all stripes in the hope (even in the face of nagging skepticism) that such ethical and inclusive
humanism might prove to be a more effective pathway to overcoming the Niebuhrian curse of inevitable
collective egoism. One can also hope that such an inclusive humanism would not represent mere cultural
imperialism or just another ratchet up to a slightly more expansive level of tribalism, but rather a truly
transcultural pathway to achieving shared human aims for a better quality of life, at least in this world.

* Believe it or not, Bill Clinton in a speech to the British Labour Party last year.
Some Initial Thoughts by Way of a Response

Author: William Schweiker (---.dsl.emhril.ameritech.net)
Date: 10-27-03 15:59

I want to begin with a word of gratitude to those who have responded thus far to my essay, “Humanity Before God: Theological Humanism from a Christian Perspective,” in this month’s Martin Marty Center Web Forum. It is a rare delight to be accorded such a deep and careful reading of one’s work. What is more, Professors Cahill, Klemm, and Martin, each of whom commands considerable intellectual attention, write out of different intellectual projects and commitments, and yet they have found points of substantive context with my work. This is profoundly gratifying and helps to confirm my hunch that we are on the verge of some new developments. In a similar way, those individuals who have responded so thoughtfully to the essay, I am thinking of Frank Pasquale, also engage the argument with the aim of furthering understanding. For all of these reasons I am profoundly grateful.

Of course, questions and points of disagreement remain. I would be remiss in my duties as an author for this Forum if I did not pass along my initial thoughts on these responses to the essay. So, what are some initial thoughts by way of a response? I can usefully do so under these heads: (1) the blessing and curse of particularity; (2) from whom shall we learn?; (3) reflexivity and global flows; and, (4) why this humanism and not another?

1. The Blessing and Curse of Particularity
Several of my respondents—Klemm, Martin, and also Pasquale—address the question of the “particularity” of religious and moral conviction. As David Klemm so rightly notes, part of the claim of any religious tradition on its believers is that it supplies what he calls “material theological knowledge.” I take him to mean that any religious community makes specific and determined claims about the world, human life, God or the sacred, and also redemption that by the nature of the case are in some measure exclusive. It would be odd, for instance, for a Buddhist or a Jew or a Christian to hold that (say) the Buddha was optional for enlightenment! And once that claim is made, then other religious outlooks necessarily seem excluded. Terence Martin in his response draws the logical conclusion and traces its history, namely, that too often and too readily high-sounding religious claims can and do feed hostility. And as Frank Pasquale notes, this can infest not only religious visions but also secular ones insofar as a commitment to ethical commitments become supplanted by others. In these ways the “particularity” of material theological knowledge, or (same thing said) profound existential and content-filled commitment, is a blessing, it provides meaning and orientation in life, and yet it is also a curse because it can fuel conflict and exclusion. In the face of this doubleness, the theological humanist, my respondents suggest, seems powerless.

Insofar as we are speaking here of profound human motivations, it is indeed true that any form of thought, any assessment and revision in our commitments, will often prove weak in the face of tenacious motivations. We should not be naive about that fact. But my suggestion was not that we get away from “material theological knowledge” for some kind of generalized ethical aim. My point was precisely that we need to foster conditions in which we can draw on and yet also reorient our most dearly held convictions. That is precisely why I speak of a Christian theological humanism or a Jewish theological humanism or a Buddhist or secular one. At root this requires a simple but difficult confession: while we might believe our “material theological knowledge” to hold
saving truth, our grasp of that truth is always subject to human fallibility and thus must be tempered by engagement and mutual understanding with others, equally believing and yet equally fallible. This might, of course, seem like a feeble resource with which to address a profound problem. But I see no alternative. Either we come to see our particularity as a resource and also as a demand for the thoughtful engagement of others in order to learn, or conflict will continue to reign. In my own opinion, the massive global problems everyone now faces require that we draw from our many and diverse resources a joint response; the demands of our day are making us see our particularity in new ways.

2. From Whom Shall We Learn?
The problem of “particularity” and also an admission of fallibility pose the question so nicely voiced by Professor Martin. In order to isolate, articulate, and curtail those points in our convictions most open to distortion, from whom should we learn? Martin’s suggestion, and it is surely right, is that religious people in the West need to engage the arguments of Enlightenment humanists who were so adept at isolating deception and violence among the religions. I completely agree. In fact, I find the current “Enlightenment bashing” among some religious thinkers, especially some Christian theologians, to be rather self-serving. It is time that religious thinkers engage the critics of religion around a shared concern for human well-being. Anything less than that engagement is actually special pleading; it is, once again, an example of the curse of particularity. Yet in a similar way I judge that the current situation is one in which we need to engage the resources of other religions on the question of human dignity and well-being. This is one of the great insights of Professor Cahill in her response. Comparative religious thinking around shared problems not only testifies to some appreciation of fallibility, but also can lead to the mutual, humane transformation of traditions. Surely the current world situation is one in which we are more and more coming to see our own traditions, communities, and convictions from the perspective of how they appear to others. This provides an opportunity for self-critique and transformation. In other words, a theological humanist will want to learn from anyone genuinely open to engaging in reflection aimed at what will in fact respect and enhance the integrity of life.

3. Reflexivity And Global Flows
Now, the point about our current situation can be usefully explored to provide some initial response to Lisa Cahill’s engaging account of my argument. She claims that I seem to say that “religious humanisms will be generated along parallel but separate lines” and that there is lacking any “grounds for his confidence or at least hope that this will occur.” Professor Cahill then insightfully turns to some work by Robert Schreiter and his ideas about a new kind of “universalism.” Actually, I am in complete agreement with Cahill, and that was part of the point above about coming to see our traditions in the light of other’s perceptions and experience and the possibility of comparative thinking. I may, of course, see global flows as more dangerous than Cahill or Schreiter, and I would also give them a more “humanistic” orientation within the theological because of their possible dangers, but the point is well taken. Come what may, the world is now forcing global interactions among peoples. And surely that is why we need something like theological humanism, so that we can, in the midst of these flows, adapt and revise our traditions towards what is most humane and also sustaining of life. This is not to suggest that we all become alike, that somehow “theological humanism” means the effacement of particularity. The point is to make distinctness a blessing and not a curse.

4. Why This Humanism and Not Another?
Finally, it must be noted that each of our authors writes from their own particular stance—philosophical, religious, non-religious—and there is the lurking question of why I retain a theological orientation rather than a purely secular or Enlightened outlook. Part of this is no doubt an expression of my own “particularity” as a Protestant Christian, of a sort. But it is also grounded in my reading of our situation, a reading too complex to
provide in detail here. Suffice it to say that I seek to hold together “theological” and “humanism” because I judge that a religious outlook -- and “theology” -- unconstrained by shared humane convictions has too easily devolved precisely into those problems Professor Martin and Frank Pasquale note. By the same token, too much modern “humanism” has given us a thin account of human aspirations and experiences of transcendence while too often backing policies to engineer humanity. As Klemm and Cahill know, there is something dangerous about defining human dignity solely in terms of political and social agendas. The seemingly paradoxical term “theological humanism” is meant to get at these twin dangers that constantly stalk religious and other moral convictions. It names a problem, or, better, an orientation towards a problem, found in all traditions. And it is that orientation, rather than the name, that is important.

5. A Last Word
All that remains is to thank once again the respondents to my essay. I hope the above remarks will in fact provoke more conversation. And should that be the case, I will be in the happy situation of once again engaging thoughtful people around matters of grave moment.

Re: Some Initial Thoughts by Way of a Response

Author: Frank L. Pasquale (---.portland-06-07rs.or.dial-access.att.net)
Date: 10-29-03 18:36

Professor Schweiker’s "thoughts by way of a response" prompt a few additional observations. The first is that the "blessing and curse of particularity" (e.g., in religion or humanism) is nothing other than the tragic aspect of human culture. Our "most dearly held convictions" produce destructive consequences (as often as our egoisms do) when these are held too absolutely and too blindly by too many. Recognizing this is not necessarily to suggest, as Professor Schweiker attributes to his respondents, that we – as humanists or simply as cultural creatures – are wholly "powerless" in this regard. As suggested in my initial comments, while I combat the naivete of which he speaks with a vigilant skepticism about the human enterprise, this is counterbalanced by a hope that we can acquire new disciplines (both personal and collective) that will enable us to surmount the challenges of our human and cultural nature.

"From whom [and what] do we learn" in order to identify and cultivate these disciplines, to enlarge our awareness, and to check the excesses toward which we and our cultures tend? Certainly from one another, from the best that has come before us, and from both our past successes and failures. My reading of history leads me to conclude that it has been neither those of "faith," nor those who have minimized it in favor of rational inquiry, who have alone produced our ethical "successes" or "progress." (By "successes" or "progress" I mean the development of ethical ideas and systems up to the task of guiding increasingly complex human collectives toward increased human well-being, e.g., the "theory" of human rights). Rather, there has been a continuing dialectic between the "use" of religious beliefs to anchor ethical wisdom and the attempt to rationally discern such wisdom from human experience (and so, to affirm, reject, or modify religiously or culturally anchored moral beliefs with respect to new human situations and collectives). This has been the case whether the subject has been enduring ethical principles, slavery, the emergence of human rights, eugenic sterilization, or courageous defiance of genocide...
Each approach (call them the "anchored" and the "reasoned") exhibits strengths and weaknesses, powers and limitations. For example, the one can and does fall heir to divine absolutism or theological scholasticism, and the other, to relativist prevarication or rationalistic hubris. It is precisely because of such differences that a dialogue between religious and non-religious ethics, between religious and "Enlightenment" humanism, must remain open and vital rather than closed and antagonistic. Blanket religion- or "Enlightenment-bashing" is not self-serving, but in the larger scheme, self-defeating. As Professor Schweiker emphasizes, all our "truths" are "subject to human fallibility" and so, must be "tempered by engagement and mutual understanding." We are all susceptible to self-absorption and arrogance, personally and culturally. By serving as ethical mirrors to one another, we improve the probability of avoiding ethical failure and achieving greater and more widely distributed human welfare. This requires reasonable diversity and accessibility. The hope is that, as Professor Schweiker notes, diversity of our cultural and ideological resources will produce a more ethically desirable "joint response." Or as I suggested previously, we will become more ethically "successful" in dialogue than in isolation.

This might, as Professor Schweiker suggests, "seem like a feeble resource." But as Niebuhr noted, in the face of the tragic tendencies of human collectivity, all our resources seem feeble. We are, however, as Niebuhr also noted, in the business of improving incrementally and of discerning probabilities – not becoming "perfect" in the absolute. Each of us as ethical beings and culture-members must increasingly ask: which of my passions and behaviors are best restrained for my own and others’ good and which are to be cultivated for the same reason?

"Why this [or that] humanism. . .?” Because one prefers it and focuses attention on evidence for its ethical efficacy. Because it is comfortable, challenging, existentially satisfying, "content-filled," and ethically promising. As I suggested in my earlier comments, the hope is that it is not necessary for us to surrender all our "particularities" or all our "material [theological OR cultural] knowledge" to a global "generalized ethical" monoculture or cultural universalism. The hope is that we can increasingly distinguish those "particularities" that violate our common ethical aim of general human well-being from those that do not, and increasingly discipline ourselves (both personally and culturally) to think and behave accordingly. This, at least, seems to me to be part of the "humanist" hope and thesis.

This addresses the dilemma of "natural religion," and of particular versus universal commitments, posed by Professor Klemm. Again, the hope is that one need not entirely give up a "sense of identity based on 'our' group" and wholly identify "with the universal and formal idea of humanity." The humanist goal would seem to lie in disciplining ourselves to surrender only those personal and group particularities that violate, or demonstrably tend toward violation, of human well-being. The hope is that it is "possible for one and the same person both to [retain a] specific, particular. . .identity" (though not necessarily ALL that this entails) while still embracing certain essential ETHICAL ideals. This does require that we surrender SOME things: destructive egoism, the arrogance of absolutism (religious or rationalistic), and xenophobic cultural self-absorption, among others.* Again, world mono-culture is not the goal, but ethical multi-culturalism – which, I understand, is a very "tall order" indeed. A profound measure of knowledge, discernment, education, self-awareness, discipline, and self-cultivation (personal and collective) is involved in such an aspiration.

I would suggest that one of the best contemporary exemplars of the foregoing – for both religious and non-religious human(s)ts – is His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In his ETHICS FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM, he notes that "whether or not a person is a religious believer does not matter much. Far more important is that they be a good human being" (sic; p. 19). Religious and cultural particularity is subordinated to selected ethical...
priorities, but all particularity is by no means surrendered. He is obviously and unapologetically Tibetan and Buddhist. He personally affirms his own preference for a religious path to an ethical life, as well as a belief that a religious or spiritual path seems to him most likely to produce desirable results (as does Professor Schweiker. I respect these cultural preferences and personal conclusions. But this does not change my own preference for a non-religious path – or my conviction that the merits of such a path warrant its pursuit, and that it has a critical role to play in the diverse mix of particular paths to shared ethical aims.)

The "spiritual [or ethical] values" which the Dalai Lama presents are, in part, rooted in Tibetan and Buddhist concepts and terms. Some of these particularities may culturally "exclude" (and some may simply elude) me – I wouldn’t make a very good Buddhist monk. But the material import of the ethical knowledge he presents is by no means exclusive; it is profoundly INclusive. It concerns the cultivation of disciplines that would seem to be essential for incremental improvement of the human condition: an "ethic of restraint" (of destructive emotions and behavior), "of virtue," "of compassion," and the cultivation of "discernment" (or rational, reasonable, and contextual ethical decision-making).

The point is that such ethical knowledge, discipline, and commitment deserve our primary attention, our emphasis, our priority. Following (and together with) ethical priorities such as these, all our rich, reasonable particularities – be they personal, theological/metaphysical, or cultural – are free to vary as they will. This is hardly a "thin account of human aspirations," but a profoundly challenging orientation. Call it "humanism," call it "essential ethicism," call it nothing in particular. There seems to be wisdom in it, and once again as Professor Schweiker notes, "it is [the] orientation, rather than the name, that is important."

Again, my thanks to Professor Schweiker and fellow respondents for a valuable essay and a stimulating discussion.

* It also involves some very difficult economic questions about the distribution of resources, but this moves far beyond the scope of the present discussion.
Response to Schweiker

Author: Lisa Sowle Cahill (---.bc.edu)
Date: 10-08-03 16:11

“Humanity Before God”: A Response

William Schweiker eloquently responds to the key challenge of globalization for Christian ethics: to realize Christian ideals of solidarity and justice in a world in which religious conflict and predatory globalization are exacerbating the divisions between rich and poor and the destruction of the natural environment. Three or four decades ago, the challenge to Christian ethics in North America was different. Contesting the cultural accommodations of liberal Protestantism, many Christian thinkers proposed or revived a communally solidaristic interpretation of discipleship ethics that centered on the distinctive narratives of the Christian community. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, isolation and insulation pose dangers to Christian fidelity at least as great as cultural co-optation. This is not the time for Christian retreat from the world political stage.

Schweiker proposes a generous, positive, ecumenical Christianity committed to the cooperative flourishing of all life on this planet and to the integrity of the planet itself as an ecosystem on which all life is dependent. He makes the case for a Christian humanism based on the “anthropological fact” that human beings belong to God, and that love of God and human existence in the image of God demand love of neighbor. Human differences are not ultimate. Christian humanists will responsibly further their own good and that of others by developing bonds in the community of life (9).

Furthermore, Schweiker has the courage to say that other religious traditions can and should develop humanistic stances of their own. Christians and other people of faith can be “fellow travelers in a quest for what is good and right” (8). Yet Schweiker seems to envision that religious humanisms will be generated along parallel but separate lines; he does not display the grounds for his confidence or at least hope that this will occur.

What I want to emphasize is that interest in a shared quest for a “humanistic” orientation already presupposes the mutual engagement of rich and distinctive religious traditions in efforts to combat recognized evils like environmental degradation, poverty, hunger, disease, and violations of women’s dignity. Schweiker’s opening paragraph and the prospectus for the D.R. Sharpe lectures both allude to conditions of violence and deprivation besetting the human race. Indeed, Schweiker suggests that concerted religious responses already amount to “a new global movement” (1). The path of development for religious humanism is necessarily dialogical, as every tradition grasps the stake it has in cooperating with others toward a more just and participatory global order.

In an article in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies (2000), Paul Knitter remarks that shared horror and consternation at suffering leads persons of different faiths to commit to “do something” together. Actual collaboration builds bonds and prepares for genuine communication about how distinctive faiths nourish ethical
practices. Finally, participants may reach a common experience of the transcendent in which they recognize the unifying dimensions within their different faiths.

Theologian Robert Schreiter (The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local) discerns a “new universalism” in theology and ethics that is emerging at the interface of the global and the local. He believes that religious movements and theologies of many sources and varieties have converged in a battle against ubiquitous and systemic problems that affect everyone. He sees in this convergence a “global theological flow,” universal in its concerns and effects, but still anchored in and differentiated by specific contexts and traditions. “Yet the discourses bear enough commonality to be understood in other settings, and the interaction among them creates not only mutual understanding, but also bonds of solidarity” (99).

Interreligious practices of solidarity and justice also help address the challenges of moral conversion and practical efficacy in the real and daunting political world. Practical cooperation not only leads to an expansion of the moral imagination and greater commitment to new ideals; it also begins to build up structures of social agency and change through which religious traditions can together make a difference.
I am delighted to have the chance to comment on Professor Schweiker's paper on Christian humanism. I wish, ever so briefly, to make just two points: the first underscoring the complexity and the seriousness of Schweiker's challenge; and the second re-enforcing Schweiker's reminder of the long-standing presence of humanism in Christianity, while noting the repeated (and, I think, tragic) resistance to humanism coming from within the Christian tradition.

First, Schweiker puts forward a challenge-driven project with a unified proposal directed to multiple interlocutors. What an ambitious, bold, and yet necessary undertaking. The challenge is to come to terms with the unsettling variety of problems facing human beings in our day, including environmental instability, human poverty and suffering, sectarian and tribal conflicts, and the "dulling and deadening forces of consumerism." Each of these problems raises questions about "human power" and human "dignity." Schweiker's proposal is that a properly revised "legacy of Christian humanism" is (for a Christian) the fullest possible response to the multiple problems of our age. This proposal is directed to non-Christians (who are challenged to tap the humanistic resources of their own traditions); to non-religious humanists (who are encouraged to take religious transcendence seriously); and to a variety of Christians (many of whose minds have been "captured" by anti-humanist sentiments). Among the latter include theologians who point to the horrors of twentieth-century "scientism, fascism, and totalitarianism" as evidence for the failure of humanism; but also major theologians and ethicists who in various ways subvert talk of human self-interest or well-being; as well as feminist and ecological theologians who tend to reject humanistic sentiments as either abstract or "anthropocentric." The strength of Schweiker's paper, I suggest, is that he invites and yet challenges each of these parties to squarely deal with the manifold threats facing human life today; and he does so in a way that insists that no one-sided view of human existence (for example, picturing a self "lost in God or the neighbor," imagining "some solitary 'I' in relation to itself," or conceiving human life shorn of any "trans-human good beyond the 'self'") and no one-issue line of thinking ("ecological theologians," for instance) is capable of satisfactorily addressing the underlying issues of human power and dignity involved in humanity's current struggles.

Second, (as a constructive response to his own challenge) Schweiker nicely illustrates the long and varied history of Christian humanism. What a marvelously suggestive historical sketch of the ways in which "the connection between the love of God and the life of the mind manifest in the labor of education and social transformation" have found advocates in the Christian fold; what a healthy reminder of the "humanistic ideals" resident in the classics of Christian thought. And yet, as Schweiker's essay also makes very clear, so much of the Christian tradition works against the humanistic line. There are too many today, he notes, who "glibly reject this proud heritage" as part of an anti-modern, anti-world program to promote the uniqueness of their church communities. But even some of the great thinkers of the Christian tradition slide headlong into anti-humanistic rhetoric. Take, for example, the words of Calvin quoted by Schweiker as potentially leading to a humanist stance (we are not our own, "we are God's"), words which (as Schweiker acknowledges) were "partly meant" and certainly taken by others as an expression of privileged election. Think, too, of how often the love
commands (which Schweiker makes central to his project) are interpreted to sectarian ends (only we Christians are neighbors); or how some classical theologians tend to bypass the "neighbor" as a mere means to the love of God; or how the self is utterly "lost in God" through the erotic rapture of medieval mystics; or how the "ideal of human flourishing and happiness" can be deemed a "deep betrayal of biblical faith" (tell that to a destitute person); or, finally, how neighbor love (in practice) can make one "blind to the concrete other," while fostering an "abstract" love of "everyone." Worst of all, consider how a religion of love like Christianity has—throughout its history—ignited "the fires of hatred and fanaticism," covering the earth with human blood. My point is this: the Christian world is a legitimate but tenuous place to set up a humanist shop. Schweiker is optimistic that "vibrant forms of 'religious humanism' are now appearing [among religious traditions like Christianity] in order to thwart the forces of hatred and to strive to further life;," and yet he is fully aware (as a good humanist) of the ambiguities of these very traditions. His constructive response is to trace and to defend the humanistic resources within the Christian tradition; and that work is vitally necessary if Christianity is to have anything meaningful to say about the manifold threats to life in today's world. But the defense of Christian humanism also requires close and unflinching study of the ways in which Christian ideas (even good ones) have been twisted and deployed to the detriment of the human good. Help with the latter task may be found in dialogue with non-religious humanists (a conversation already begun by Schweiker); but also by retrieving the classics of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, the humanistic sentiments of which were honed in critical struggle with the inhumane tendencies of the Christian religion.
Response to William Schweiker

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Date: 10-03-03 14:59

In my view, William Schweiker has done all of us a service with his passionate argument on behalf of a “theological humanism from a Christian perspective.” Whether we are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, members or sympathizers with any other religious community, or simply human beings trying to orient ourselves within the profound challenges that confront all of us, we need to take this argument seriously. Why? What is the bite of this proposal?

First, Professor Schweiker clearly spells out the urgent situation in which we must all live, think, act, and have our being. He speaks of widespread environmental endangerment, the demeaning of human dignity, and the ongoing threat of religious, ethnic, and cultural conflict among peoples. Professor Schweiker is right to suggest that we cannot simply do theological ethics in an abstract or historical form, as if these problems were not pressing us to the precipice of human viability. We must address these problems with all the resources we can muster, especially the resources of our own theological wits.

Second, Professor Schweiker articulates the ancient idea and rich history of Christian humanism as a potent movement within Christian thought and experience. At the core of this vital movement is an unbreakable connection between Christian love of God and the life of the mind in its universal dimension, as affirming basic humanistic ideals of individual freedom, mutual respect for persons, the importance of human community, and the intrinsic fallibility of human thinking with its demand for critical reflection of all claims for authority and truth. The purpose of reviving Christian humanism—and this is the bite of Schweiker’s proposal—is to use the resources of Christian humanism under new conditions of thinking to “conceive of human commonality beyond our tribal differences” that are so capable of fueling “the fires of hate and fanaticism.” Surely, this challenge to the religious communities to reclaim the humanistic strand of their traditions, within the basic faith-stance of those traditions, is of signal importance to serious people of all religious persuasions today. If we do not do it, who will? And it must be done.

Third, therefore, Professor Schweiker both answers the critics of his proposal for a renewed Christian humanism, and begins the task of rethinking Christian humanism with some guiding principles of reflection. The first of these principles is that true self-knowledge is intrinsically bound to love of God, such that one only occurs with the other and not as a secondary deduction or affect. The second principle is practical rather than theoretical: to become a self and to love God means to love one’s neighbor as oneself. These basic principles light the way for a renewed Christian humanism that can bring the light of God’s love into the common human world, where we can acknowledge our common human purposes and go to work as Christians (or Jews, or Muslims, or Buddhists, etc.) “to respect and enhance the integrity of all life.” What a noble agenda, what a serious challenge, to confront the urgent situation now pressing with eyes open wide, yet illuminated by the light of divine love as expressed in each of the religious traditions. I, for one, applaud the direction that this paper points us as concerned individuals. I have three questions to ask with regard to further clarification of this promising agenda.
First, is it sufficient to focus on the critics of Christian humanism by answering them in theoretical terms, or must we not also understand the deeply human and psychological reasons why people remain tied to particular religious communities in what is called “tribalism”? Professor Schweiker, like many of his Christian humanist predecessors, is asking fellow Christians to rise above their particular allegiances to a higher and more encompassing commitment to the human project in its most universal dimensions. In many ways, this call simply asks us to commit ourselves to what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls the process of Bildung (becoming a well-formed, whole, and cultured individual):

It is the universal nature of human Bildung to constitute itself as a universal intellectual being. Whoever abandons himself to his [sic, add “her”] particularity is ungebildet (“unformed”), e.g., if someone gives way to blind anger without measure or sense of proportion. Hegel shows that basically such a man [sic, add or “woman,” and so on through the quotation] is lacking in the power of abstraction. He cannot turn his gaze from himself towards something universal from which his own particular being is determined in measure and proportion.

Do Christians who remain attached to the particularity of their religious communions simply lack education and the power of abstraction? Or are there other, deep reasons for these attachments?

Consider the attractions to people of the positive, historical religions, specifically because of their particularity. The historical religions typically claim to possess some divinely-revealed, material theological knowledge that, if true, is of utmost importance to the project of humankind. Such purported knowledge includes insights concerning who or what God or the ultimate reality is, what kind of human life is justified in God’s eyes, and how humans may be redeemed from sin, evil, or ignorance into some kind of eternal life or salvation. According to Rousseau, positive or revealed religion is particular in the nature of the case: it is religion based on particular revelations of God that are entrusted only to particular people within particular traditions, teaching people particular ways in which God purportedly wants to be worshipped. Revealed religion is also intolerant and exclusive; each particular religion claims that it is the one true religion, and that all other religions are false. However, precisely through its exclusivism, positive religion offers people some very powerful satisfactions that come with particularity: a strong sense of identity in belonging to a special community of the faithful, a set of secure beliefs by which to live one’s life, and certainty of redemption from a fallen world. These things satisfy some very basic human desires, but the cost of these satisfactions is high—to wit, positive religions are highly susceptible to the kind of conflict provoked by “tribalism.”

This problem of exclusivism was, of course, addressed in the eighteenth century by humanist proponents of “natural religion.” Enlightenment thinkers criticized the historical religions from the standpoint of universal philosophical principles and the necessary conditions for a civil state. Partly to escape devastating religious strife, and partly to expose the self-contradictions in revealed religion, various forms of “natural religion” were posited. In dramatic contrast to the particularity of the revealed religions, the truths of natural religion are held to be in principle universally accessible to any rational being whatsoever. Natural religion promulgated tolerance on the basis of a set of elements common to all particular religions. Rational deductions of the existence of “God” as a universal highest principle of design and order in the universe, the existence of the soul as evident in immediate self-consciousness, and the finite freedom of the self over against the universe, constituted essential elements of different versions of natural religion.

By contrast to positive religions, natural religion purports to offer philosophical indifference to particularity, grounded in an interest in universal truth. One gives up the sense of identity based on “our” group and identifies...
with the universal and formal idea of humanity as such. One gives up claims to material knowledge of God and
God’s ways and instead engages in infinite criticism armed with abstract forms and principles. One gives up the
certainty of redemption in favor of the openness to the objectivity of not-knowing. The cost of this choice is
also high. In choosing universality over particularity, natural religion sacrifices the immediacy of believing in
images from sacred sources for the indifference of the scientific mind. Natural religion, however, has never
understood how it could compensate people for the sacrifice they make in order to rise to the universal. How
will Christian humanism reckon with this same problem?

Second, as I understand it, Professor Schweiker is not advocating a renunciation of positive Christianity for the
sake of universal humanism (a renewed natural religion). Quite clearly, he is rejecting the extreme form of both
alternatives. He is advocating a “Christian humanism,” which moves beyond the opposition between positive
religion and natural religion. Is there not more work to do with regard to understanding how it is possible for
one and the same person both to have the specific, particular “Christian” identity, with all that entails, and to
embrace universal humanistic ideals? Remember: many forms of positive Christianity claims to have material
teleological knowledge in its revelation of God through Jesus Christ. Professor Schweiker does not directly
address the issue of the centrality of Jesus for many Christians. He defines Christian humanism in a relatively
universal fashion: Christians declare, “We are God’s.” This formulation is fair enough, but it avoids the difficult
issue that in fact many Christians would prefer to say, “We belong to Jesus, who is the one way, truth, and
life.” Such Christians value the fact that through Jesus Christ, they do have material teleological knowledge—
even if this knowledge is that salvation comes through exclusive faith in Jesus Christ. How is it possible to
relate such Christians to the ideals of humanism, which are supported by arguments that eventuate in purely
formal teleological knowledge, such as: Humans possess finite freedom (their freedom is dependent on God)
and warrant respect, humans are social creatures who form communities, God (as “ground of being-itself,” or
the Absolute, or the ultimate reality) necessarily is. Such purely formal assertions do not tell us who we should
be as humans, what kind of communities should exist, or who God is and what God wants from us. The
fallibility of humankind is recognized in humanism, but it insists on the impossibility of material knowledge of the
kind so treasured by positive religion.

With regard to this problem of relating particularity to universality, Paul Tillich’s theology still remains
instructive. Tillich proposed that one could remain “Christian” in the strong sense of attachment to the symbol
of Jesus as the Christ by recognizing the Cross of Christ as the living religious symbol that symbolizes the
symbolic nature of all symbols. The Cross is a religious symbol that denies its own ultimacy, according to
Tillich, and anticipates its own disappearance. The universal truth of this symbol, and its openness to like
symbols of other traditions, lies precisely in the particular self-denying material of the symbol. Sunyata, the
emptiness of all dharmas, is itself empty, according to Mahayana Buddhism, thus revealing the same structure
relating particular and universal in another tradition. According to Tillich, followers of both Jesus and Buddha
can remain focused on the particular symbols of their tradition while opening to a common, universal truth
concerning the relativity of all symbols. Tillich’s method of correlation in Systematic Theology also addresses
the problem of relating particularity to universality. The meaning of specific Christian symbols, he claimed, can
be disclosed through the results of universal ontological analysis. However, Tillich’s theology is dated in many
respects. For one thing, his very definition of religion as “ultimate concern” seems to efface particularity in
historical religions and thus to lack respect for them. Can we move beyond Tillich in addressing this problem?

Third, what are the political implications of this proposal? The proposal unfolds within the assumed framework
of liberal democracy with a separation of church and state. Spinoza was an early proponent of liberal
democracy for the sake of civil peace, in hopes of avoiding both conflicts between groups that are
differentiated along religious-cultural lines and persecution of minorities within larger groups. What role can Christian (or any other form of religious) humanism play in diagnosing the health of our democracies while upholding the integrity of the particular religious communities?

These are some of the questions I would like to see a group of theologians address as we progress toward a form of theological humanism which is inclusive of many forms of religious thought.