

## Foreword

I am, as always, eager to speak out on the subjects of humanism and the humanities. But I yield the floor first to someone who rather typically poses the problem that lies behind this book and the whole project of "Christian Humanism." Philosopher Frederick A. Olafson, near the end of an elaborate defense of the humanities, faces up to the problems of humanism and religion. His words will help illumine everything that follows:

The relationship between humanism and religious belief is one that has given difficulties for centuries and has caused a good deal of personal anguish to those humanists like St. Jerome and Petrarch who have aspired to be sincere Christians. There have been forms of religious belief that are radically incompatible with humanism because they proclaim the nothingness of man and transfer to their gods every possible form of agency or achievement with which man might otherwise be tempted to credit himself. Then, too, there are forms of religious belief in which natural forces have not yet reached the degree of personification that would permit human beings to understand themselves as persons through their relationship to their superhuman counterparts. But there are also religions that teach that there is something, however limited, that human beings as individuals and as societies can do and that thus concede a measure of significance and value to the achievements of human culture and even allow a modicum of human pride, as well as of shame, stemming from the contemplation of what has been done. (*The Dialectic of Action: A Philosophical Interpretation of History and the Humanities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, pp. 155-56.)

The relationship between Christianity and humanism still gives difficulty and “a good deal of personal anguish.” When I as a humanist pursue my goals, I am doing what I as a politician, a business person, a professional must always be doing. I must know that there is some tension between that vocation, which I live under God, and the pull of specific saving activity. Humanism, like politics, does not save souls or make sad hearts glad or bring in the kingdom of God. Yet the humanities—philosophy, literature, the study of religion, history, and the like—have their lure and are part of God’s creation. The Christian humanist says, “I must know that whatever I touch on the pages of human production is tainted by the fact that it will turn to dust. It belongs to an order of existence that is not only God’s creation, but is also tinged with the power of the demonic.” Yes, there is anguish.

Olafson moves on to a second point, however, one that can help remove false anguish today. Despite some conflict, it would be a mistake, he says, to write off all humanism as “atheistic or even anti-religious.” Today such writing off has been going on. Some well-intentioned, but frustrated and shortsighted persons have been used by less than well-intentioned exploiters of frustration. Together they have formed a kind of political crusade against all humanisms as being secular, atheistic or at least antireligious. This is short-sighted because it yields some of God’s ground to the enemy, and unfair because it groups together people who do not belong in the same camp. I might add that it is even theologically unsound, because God can work also in the secular sphere, through people who do not know him.

This book is part of an effort to reclaim space and a voice for Christian humanism. The cause is not helped by people who dismiss all humanisms as secular and then turn that into a code word for atheistic or antireligious. This book does not gripe about secular humanism; it does something about it.

Olafson is correct, further, when he says that there *are* belief systems that are radically incompatible with humanism. They misread, in the Christian case, the need to see human life as creaturely, with the need to see it as always and only corrupt and irredeemable, as if God has lost power to work through the creature. In our time much Christian antihumanism comes from forms of “Second Coming” theology, millennialisms that urge the worthlessness of the world because it will end. They give up on the world before God does, and act as if Jesus did not mean it when he sent people forth into that world. Whoever reads the chapters anthologized here will find that for many centuries Christian humanists, fully aware of the evil potential of

fallen humanity, make clear that they are members of the race that God chose to visit, the human race, hence humanism.

Humanism is rooted in the humanities, and humanists speak for a culture rooted in literacy, based in traces and texts. One of the theological traditions that produced this volume stems from a rereading of the Bible by Martin Luther. Luther knew what Olafson called the “anguish” of Christian humanism, as he worked with the benefits of classic literature in order to use what he learned for translating and understanding the Bible. He knew the limits of the human venture. But he came out as a Christian humanist:

I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless he has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists. . . . Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily. . . . Therefore I beg of you that at my request (if that has any weight) you will urge your young people to be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric. (Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacobs, eds. *Luther's Correspondence*. Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1918. Vol. 2, pp. 176-77.)

I would call that a rather emphatic charter for Christian humanism. In many respects, the riches in the present collection are to show how literature is a “John the Baptist” that prepares and points the way for Christ. They do not make the move of explicit witness, and are not written to convert people to Jesus. They are not proselytizing documents. I make that point because it is necessary to remind the pluralist culture that this Christian voice has a full claim, *as humanism*, to be heard in public classrooms. Christian humanism is not a churchly affair, but a cultural one.

To try to understand Western civilization while screening out the greatest, oldest, wisest, most convincing voices (alongside those of the Greco-Roman world, which have a privileged place) is an educational folly, a pedagogical scandal. Yet the attempt has often gone on, thanks to Christian abdication, thoughtlessness, organized obtuseness, and ganging up by humanists-in-general.

But whenever one sets out to make a case for Christian humanism in the public forum or the classroom, there is always a challenge from a culture that lives off texts: show us the texts! At that point one mumbles a bit about Petrarch and Erasmus and John Henry Newman, and the curriculum committee moves on. It has not time to go rummaging through libraries. There must be convenient materials. From now on there is little room for shuffling off, because materials are now at hand.

This anthology boldly sets claims to the ground Christian humanism once so willingly and forthrightly claimed. It brings together some highlights from the almost unlimited gallery of Christian humanist thinkers. They are stimulants to our own not yet exhausted imaginations. It could be that Christians in the humanistic culture and humanists who do not call themselves by the name of Christ alike will profit from the stimulus of people who enjoy being part of the race that God honored by choosing to dwell in it.

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