

Humanism and the Human Person

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Fittingly, given that our overall concern is with the role of the universities in shaping a new Humanism for Europe, the first occurrence of a version of the term ‘humanism’ (‘umanesimo’, ‘humanismo’, ‘humanisme’) is in the writings of the German philosopher and educationalist Friedrich Niethammer who speaks of ‘humanismus’ in the course of debating the proper form, content and purpose of education. That was in the first decade of the nineteenth century; but of course the source of the word and of the idea it represents lie in the world of classical antiquity. *Humanitas* is the term used by Cicero to render the Greek notion of *enkyklia paedeia*, which refers to a broad education in what would later come to be termed the liberal arts.

It was the aim of such an education to equip someone with the knowledge and mental training that would enable him (and then, and for centuries after, it would only have been a ‘him’) to interpret and understand human events and to play a role in human affairs by taking part in civic debate. If Niethammer was less concerned with the goals of public life and politics, he was of one mind with the ancients in thinking that education should be about exploring what is distinctive to human nature and about realising its highest powers, rather than for training human beings in purely instrumental skills. Liberal learning and cultivated sensibility was also the ideal of the renaissance thinkers to whom the term ‘Humanists’ was first applied in the mid-nineteenth century by the cultural historians George Voigt and Jacob Burckhardt.

Speaking more broadly, and less historically, humanism is a general style of thought that interprets significance and value from the point of view of human needs, interests, sensibilities and practices. That is not to say that humanism must confine itself to the human, or that it must think of human beings in individualistic terms. It is true that the present age is increasingly given to these approaches, but from the history with which I began and the broad characterisation I just gave of humanism it remains open whether it may also be religious and whether its account of the person, its philosophical anthropology, is ineliminably social.

Some participants in the thirteen symposia gathered under the general heading of 'The Human Person' discussed Christian anthropology, others the incarnation and the mystery of man. Some considered the family and its future, while yet others discussed the place of values in human psychology. Elsewhere groups examined and debated bioethical issues, and the concept and range of human rights. Along with explorations of the metaphysics of the human person, and examinations of past and present conceptions of intellectual culture and society, all of these enquiries constituted a broad and deep investigation of the meaning and content of humanism as it might be elaborated and defended today.

Elaborated, however, not in a purely speculative mode but in the manner of a commitment to a philosophy of the human. For most of us present that 'philosophy' incorporates, or is conjoined with a religious understanding of human nature as something possessed intrinsically of powers of reason, deliberation and free action; created for the purpose of coming to know, to love and to serve its creator; and capable of being united to God in a special way in consequence of the incarnation and atonement, and by means of grace. Evidently these remarks allude to a distinctive theology, and many who seek a new humanism to replace the reductive materialisms, deterministic naturalisms, and instrumentalised views of reason and value that have dominated in recent decades, are not religious believers. One may wonder, therefore, how there can be any serious intellectual co-

operation between Christian humanists and others seeking to get beyond contemporary materialist orthodoxies. Here there need not only be one answer; but allow me to make a brief recommendation.

Christian humanists of a philosophical sort have been inclined to emphasise as prior and most urgent the importance of developing a metaphysical theory of the person and an account of the foundation and structure of natural law. I am not at all against such projects per se; indeed they interest me greatly, but there is a danger that in trying to excavate to the deepest ground one never gets to the point of erecting a building, let alone of inhabiting it. And the seeming endlessness and difficulties of the excavation may encourage onlookers to conclude that the task cannot be done. Better then to create what may be less deeply founded structures, yet ones that are according to the same design as the unshakable edifice one would hope eventually to construct.

The point here is that while deep theory is being explored one may yet consider what its evaluative and practical implications would be and begin to implement them. Additionally, if we really believe that there is such a thing as human nature, that it includes intellectual and moral powers, and that it is in some way *imago dei*, an image of God (immagine di Dio, image de dieu), then we should have confidence that anyone of good faith who is open to the deliverances of lived experience, and it is not perversely resistant to the inbuilt teleology of creatures seeking their fulfilment, will incline to the same conclusions about the objectivity of truth and the reality of value.

What this introduces is the importance of finding a place for phenomenology in our methods of analysis and reasoning; ‘phenomenology’ not in any esoteric theory-dependent conception, but in the simple sense of description and interpretation of what presents itself to attentive experience. Here is the place to start in discussion with those seeking a new humanism yet who are hesitant or even resistant to Christian belief. There should be no

failure of match between on the one hand a true metaphysics of the person and true theory of the form and content of the natural law; and on the other a true phenomenological description of experienced values and meanings.

With that thought in mind let me turn briefly to the issues of European culture and the nature and role of university education. Here again I should like to caution against simplification and the premature desire for a unifying theory constructed at some great depth. The term 'Europe' bears different kinds of significance: geographical, historical, political and cultural. As we mark fifty years since the original Treaties of Rome, and reflect on the ongoing debates between members of the European Union about its nature and proper role, it is natural to think of Europe in economic and political terms. But no one reading this will need to be advised of the danger of neglecting the cultural meaning of European identity. What should be said, however, is that it would also be a mistake to suppose that there is a single unifying cultural identity to Europe, or indeed that there ever was such. Greek philosophy, Jewish monotheism, Roman Law and Christian incarnationism, are of enormous importance but apart from the fact that other elements have featured in the continent's development, how these four expressed themselves has varied across regions, nations and times. Again I would appeal to the value of reflecting on the diversity of real experience, instead of racing ahead to provide a unitary theoretical account of a distinctively European cultural identity.

Such reflection on real experiences is of value to individuals but it needs to be communicated and shared; and before individuals can be capable of it they need to be educated into various forms and modes of cultural description, interpretation and analysis. That is a central function of universities once routinely heralded as such and honoured in practice. But for reasons with which we are all familiar universities have acquired, and become increasingly to be dominated by, other functions. It is not wrong to ask how does

higher education contribute to the economy? Or how can more of the population be equipped for the world in which they will live? It is wrong, however, to think that the answers must dictate educational philosophy. The writer Oliver Goldsmith suggested that the issue of whether a certain policy is correct was resolved by the fact that given certain practicalities people would choose it. To this Dr Samuel Johnson responded ‘No, Sir, it does not solve the question. It does not follow that what a man would do is therefore right’. We are in a somewhat similar position. All over Europe higher education is responding to government and commercial pressures by choosing to orient its education towards employment, the economy and leisure, at the cost of sustained disciplined study in arts, humanities and sciences. But this does not solve the question.

Being beneficiaries of an educational tradition forged out of classical culture and Judaeo-Christian thought, we know what it is right to aim for in education, and we should have confidence in the power of a coherent and ennobling humanism to commend itself to others who are also seeking to escape cultural and economic materialism. Our task, therefore, should be to engage in discussion, with colleagues, with students and with the wider society, about the nature of intellectual and moral values, and in doing that, and in living and working in accord with those values, to draw others into the sphere of a new humanism that can serve both to secure the place of liberal education or *paideia* in the universities, and of humanistic dispositions in society more widely. If that seems a large and daunting task then the sooner we press on with it the better. And given the direction, encouragement and blessing of Pope Benedict in his address to the conference we should be mindful that the work of “bringing the light of the Gospel to contemporary culture” is also a responsibility for Christian university educators.