

Humanism: The Road From Athens to Jerusalem

BY DONNALYNN HESS

Over the past 30 years numerous Christian leaders have legitimately decried particular evils spawned by secular humanism; few, however, have provided a thoughtful analysis of how this philosophic system has been interwoven into God's eternal plan. Viewing humanism in the context of sovereignty reveals that this recurring movement is not only a vivid record of fallen man's impotence but also a divine roadmap that can be used to lead men to the cross. It is, therefore, valuable to reflect upon the significance of the historic signposts God has given. Such reflection can awaken a profound awe of God's wisdom and compassion; it can also help believers discern (like Paul) how to guide "Athenians" from Mars Hill to Jerusalem. In the preface to *Humanist Manifestos I and II* (1973), Kurtz noted that "Humanism is a philosophical, religious, and moral point of view as old as human civilization itself" (p. 3). Although the thread of humanism does indeed run throughout the development of civilizations, there are specific reference points that are particularly helpful in discerning its impact on the western world. These reference points include the Greco-Roman period, the Renaissance, and the dawn of the modern age (20th century).

Classical Humanism: A Precursor to the Incarnation

The most important of the three epochs is the Greco-Roman period, for during this era the key tenets of humanism were formed. To fully understand the movement's origin we must begin not with Socrates but with Thales, the pre-Socratic philosopher born in Miletos around 640 B.C. Although the classical scholar Aristotle was the first to identify Thales as the father of western philosophy, contemporary philosophers have also acknowledged the impact of Thales's ideas on western philosophic thought. For example, Zacharias (1994) stated:

It was Thales's speculations and his love for ordered knowledge that gave birth to philosophy. He knew the world was made of an infinite variety of things—plants, animals, clouds, etc. What, he wondered, was the one basic element that pulled it all together, out of what had come such diversity? From then until now the quest for the philosopher has been to find unity in diversity. Many of us may not realize all the implications of this quest, but in simple ways it has made inroads into our language and culture. . . . For example, the very word university means to find unity in diversity (p. 147).

In light of modern scientific knowledge, Thales's key postulate—that water was that one substratum that unified all things—seems at best bizarre. As Zacharias implied, however, Thales's contribution was not in the details of his theory but in his articulation of philosophy's key problematic. It was this problematic or conceptual frame that

inspired Plato's metaphysical quest, the quest to find unity (in man, in nature, and in the commingling of the two) amidst a diverse universe. In addition to this conceptual frame, Thales's system of argumentation also proved significant. Prior to Thales, philosophers relied primarily on the intuitive to explore ontological questions and on the narrative form to express their conclusions. Thales was the first philosopher to shift the focus from the intuitive (a priori) to the experiential (a posteriori) and from narrative to non-narrative explanation. Staloff (1992) noted that Thales took the "questions of who and why and replaced them with mechanistic questions of what and how." In so doing, Thales laid the groundwork for the Greeks' philosophic inquiries.

Plato's compelling Socratic dialogues and Aristotle's elegantly crafted discourses brought humanism into the market place. Through their writings and educational endeavors (Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum), these classical scholars not only sought to answer Thales's unity question but also endeavored to apply their conclusions to the practical areas of philosophy—epistemology (how we "know," discerned through logical propositions and systematic analysis) and axiology (how we shape our values, discerned through ethics, politics, and aesthetics). For instance, in the *Phaedrus* (Jowett, trans. 1952a) Plato set forth his tripartite theory of the soul. Using the metaphor of a charioteer, he explained that those who allowed the rational (intellectual) aspect of their soul to drive the more "unruly steeds" of spirit (will) and appetite (desire) were those best able to maintain harmony within themselves and to rule others in the polis well. In his *Republic* Plato further explained his theory of the soul and explored his philosophy of the mind, his belief that only through rational intellect could man move beyond the material world (the ephemeral in which all things are illusory) to comprehend the absolute (the transcendental reality unifying the universe). As Recchiuti (1992) observed, "The *Republic* is about the entire human condition."

Although Plato's star pupil Aristotle acknowledged the existence of a transcendental absolute, he thought Plato's metaphysical theories were too convoluted and Plato's view of the natural world as illusion was absurd. For Aristotle, natural philosophy was the key to unlock the riddles of the universe. Through his causal nexus (his explanation of how things come to be) and his scale of being (his systematization of things that are) he sought to simplify Plato's schematic. By his doctrine of the golden mean he also endeavored to curb the "excesses" he perceived in Plato's practical applications. Succinctly summarizing Aristotle's viewpoint Dalton (1992) notes, "In his doctrine of the golden mean Aristotle argues that Plato has violated a basic truth: never in excess, never to the extreme." Aristotle firmly believed that Plato's ideas on the communal organization of the family, the elite rule of the state, and the eradication of private property were extreme.

The key point of this brief overview is to turn our attention to God's hand in the rise and fall of classical humanism. Through pre-Socratics like Thales, God allowed man's innate longing for unity to be reawakened and thrust into the public forum. He then used Plato and Aristotle to illustrate that human rationality, however logically consistent, could never fully unify man's soul nor explain all the conundrums of the universe. As the golden age of Greece declined and the practical genius of the Roman

Empire emerged, sovereignty further reified this truth. Although Rome's vast road system spread the Greek language and philosophic ideals throughout the known world, this dissemination did not usher in the "glorious future" envisioned by the classical scholars. The true nature of man ensured that Platonic and Aristotelian theories would fail. Before long the Roman arena superseded the Greek academy, and the pursuit of pleasure rather than the quest for a just life became the driving force of ancient culture. The world's most powerful and prosperous civilization seemed poised on the brink of barbarism. Then "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

To better understand the sublime implications of this historic moment, we must place Christ's incarnation in its philosophic—not just historic—context. For example, we must first recognize that the babe of Bethlehem was not simply a uniquely "begotten" personality; this Child was the I AM (the eternal unifying principle under girding all things). He was (and is) the triune God, and although the mystery of the trinity has been theologically extolled, its philosophic implications have not been as readily explored. C. S. Lewis (1948) provides a conceptual frame that can help us discern the philosophic significance:

A good many people say [as Aristotle said], "I believe in a God, but not in a personal God." They feel that the mysterious something which is behind all other things must be more than a person. Now the Christians quite agree. But the Christians are the only people who offer any idea of what a being that is beyond personality could be like.

You know that in space you can move in three ways—to left or right, backwards or forwards, up or down. Every direction is either one of these three or a compromise between them. They are called the three Dimensions. Now notice this. If you're using only one dimension, you could only draw a straight line. If you're using two, you could draw a figure; say a square. And a square is made up of four straight lines. Now a step further. If you have three dimensions, you can then build what we call a solid body: say, a cube—a thing like a dice or a lump of sugar. And a cube is made up of six squares.

Do you see the point? A world of one dimension would be a world of straight lines. In a two-dimensional world, you still get straight lines, but many lines make one figure. In a three-dimensional world, you still get figures but many figures make one solid body. In other words, as you advance to more real and more complicated levels, you don't leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels; you still have them, but combined in new ways—in ways you couldn't imagine on simpler levels.

Now the Christian account of God involves just the same principle. The human level is a simple rather empty level. In God's dimension you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being. Of course we cannot fully conceive a Being like that. But we can

get a sort of faint notion of it. And when we do, we are for the first time in our lives, getting some positive idea, however faint, of something super-personal—something more than a person (pp. 8-10).

We are also getting some faint idea of what Christ was actually asking in Gethsemane when He prayed, “that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us.” Chambers (2000) noted that through the fall “man not only died from God, but he fell into disunion with himself” (p. 577). All of the intellectual, emotional, and volitional conundrums encountered and explored by the wise men of the ancient world grew out of this disunion. Yet as a result of Christ’s incarnation (and His specific prayer) every soul would be given the opportunity not only to be restored within, but also to be reunited with the I AM. Placed in this context it becomes easy to see why the magi, who surely knew of the metaphysical questions raised by the Greeks, willingly left everything to follow that distant star.

One other poignant truth that emerges from the philosophic contemplation of the trinity is a greater understanding of Christ’s final cry, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The physical anguish of the cross, as horrendous as it was, was inconsequential compared to the Son’s agony when He was separated from the Father. Eternal, absolute unity for the first time was in some inexplicable way torn asunder for our sake. No wonder darkness fell, “the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened.” The very universe reeled under the shock of this event. How shallowly we view our Lord’s sacrifice.

Renaissance Humanism: A Precursor of the Reformation

By the end of the middle ages, the wonder of Christ’s resurrection had been obscured by man’s focus on religious traditions and his preoccupation with individual self-interest. The blatant hypocrisy of many within the church and the failure of its leadership to address life’s important philosophic questions further exacerbated the problem. Europe was ripe for a resurgence of secular learning, and with the dawn of the Renaissance classical humanism was “reborn.”

Although loose ties between East and West had been maintained since the Greco-Roman era, the Turkish threat during the 14th century served to tighten the bond between the two. In an effort to obtain Italian support against the Ottomans, the Byzantine Emperor sent Manuel Chrysoloras to Italy as a diplomat in 1397. This Greek scholar eventually settled in Florence where he began teaching Greek and translating the works of Plato and Homer. Chrysoloras sparked the desire for classical learning that spread throughout Italy and soon swept up into the northern European countries as well. The works of artists like Raphael and ecclesiastics like Erasmus illustrate not only the geographic span of the movement but also its unique connection with the medieval church. Aston (1996) noted that “the single most important task for Renaissance thinkers was to reconcile classical philosophy (which they revered) with Christianity (which they believed)” (p. 44). One of the most famous pictorial illustrations of this attempt at reconciliation is Raphael’s Stanza della Segnatura. The Stanza della

Segnatura is a series of frescos commissioned by Julius II to decorate the papal rooms. Although commissioned by a Christian Pontiff, this artistic panorama is startlingly classical in its syncretism.

The fresco in the series that most clearly reifies the era's admiration of secular antiquity is *The School of Athens*. According to Aston (1996) this particular painting "is a pictorial expression of all that the Renaissance stood for in the secular sphere" (p. 40). At the center of the work Raphael places the two most revered Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Through their gestures he also reminds us of their conflicting viewpoints. Plato, the idealist, points to the heavens, emphasizing his transcendental philosophy of the mind. Beside him Aristotle stands, hand outstretched, palm downward, symbolizing his emphasis on the material world. The book each scholar holds serves to further highlight each man's focus. (Plato holds his *Timaeus* and Aristotle his *Ethics*.) The surrounding characters Raphael includes are equally important. Beck (1993) in a detailed analysis of the work, identifies Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Epicurus in the lower left register. These three along with Heraclitus (pictured in the foreground writing on a block of stone) represent four of the five pre-Socratic schools of thought. Beck also identifies Ptolemy, Zoroaster, and Euclid in the lower right register—three astronomers who embody the ancient world's varied conceptualizations of the universe. Finally, Raphael creatively merges the past with the present "by representing several of these writers and thinkers of antiquity in the guise of men of his own day. Plato, for instance, is Leonardo da Vinci; Heraclitus is Michelangelo; Euclid, bending down with compasses in hand, is Bramante" (Aston, 1996).

The amazing amalgamation of classical, biblical, and allegorical knowledge embodied in the *Stanza della Segnatura* also alerts us to the changing roll of the artist during the Renaissance period. Prior to this time artists were trained and viewed as mere craftsmen. With the dawn of the Renaissance, however, the model of the Greek academy revived, and artists—like ancient philosophers—began to congregate to discuss and share ideas. These loosely organized gatherings soon developed into informal schools for sculptors and painters. One of the earliest art academies was formed by Leonardo da Vinci, the consummate Renaissance man. Leonardo's method of training was both intellectually and artistically rigorous. For example, those who joined themselves to his academy studied atmospheric perspective, figural proportion, human anatomy, astronomy, and engineering principles. Aston (1996) noted Leonardo's unique influence.

Leonardo was not a scholar and seems to have taken little interest in classical literature and culture. He was therefore not a typical humanist, but the reputation he earned in his own lifetime was immense, and he was instrumental in promoting the notion of the artist as an intellectual thinker as opposed to the manual craftsman (p. 313).

Da Vinci's school also became the prototype for subsequent art academies which added to his already rigorous curriculum classical studies in metaphysics, natural philosophy, rhetoric, and logic.

Classical literature and culture was grafted into the curricula of the universities and monasteries as well. The diverse literary accomplishments of the Dutch scholar Erasmus not only illustrate this educational integration but also show the profound impact it had upon the church. Erasmus was an Augustinian monk who, like the founder of his order, sought to reconcile Plato's metaphysical concepts with the doctrines of the Roman Church. Erasmus's insatiable desire for knowledge of Greek and Roman culture inspired his textual and linguistic study. The fruit of his labors was a wide range of improved (or first edition) translations of classical, patristic, and biblical texts. This unique scholar's linguistic genius coupled with his creative gift for satire made him both popular and influential. Through his satires Erasmus undermined the authority of Rome's ecclesiastical system while his biblical scholarship and translation work inspired a return to the authority of Scripture. As one anonymous epigram of the era aptly noted, "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched."

God used secular learning inspired by the Greeks to prepare the minds and hearts of men. In addition, He rekindled the practical "spirit of Rome" to develop a printing press that would completely alter the cultural landscape. "The invention of printing changed the whole intellectual world forever. Without it, classical learning would have been confined to a small coterie of scholars; the Reformation would have been a quarrel between theologians; popular literature would have been impossible; scientific studies would have languished unread" (Aston, 1996, p. 206).

Modern Humanism: A Backward Glance, A Forward Look

We come at last to the modern era, and again we find ourselves adrift in a dark age. MacLeish (1967) poignantly describes the mood.

There is, in truth, a terror in the world, and the arts have heard it as they always do. Under the hum of the miraculous machines and the ceaseless publications of the brilliant physicists a silence waits and listens and is heard.

It is a silence of apprehension. We do not trust our time, and the reason we do not trust our time is because it is we who have made the time, and we do not trust ourselves. We have played the hero's part, mastered the monsters, accomplished labors, become gods—and we do not trust ourselves as gods. We know what we are.

In the old days when the gods were someone else, the knowledge of what we are did not frighten us. There were Furies to pursue the Hitlers, and Athenas to restore the truth. But now that we are gods ourselves we bear the

knowledge for ourselves. Like that old Greek hero who learned when all the labors had been accomplished that it was he himself who had killed his son (p. 22).

How did we come again to such a place? We need only look back to another Greek hero to discern the origin of our darkness. Early in Book 1 of his *Politics* (Jowett, trans. 1952b) Aristotle wrote: “He who considers things in their first growth and origin, whether a state or anything else, will obtain the clearest view of them” (p. 445). With this simple statement the great scholar exposed humanism’s most egregious flaw. He also adumbrated his own demise, for had Aristotle observed men in their “first growth and origin” as carefully as he observed the natural world, he would have seen more clearly and perhaps would not have been forced to flee Athens at the end of his life. “With the death of Alexander in 323, Aristotle’s life at the Lyceum came to an abrupt end. The revolt of the Athenian party, following the news of Alexander’s death, was directed against Antipater [Alexander’s political appointee in Greece] and through him it involved Aristotle” (Hutchins, p. vi). Charged with impiety, Aristotle feared he would suffer Socrates’ fate and fled to Chalcis, declaring, “ ‘I will not let the Athenians offend twice against philosophy.’ Aristotle lived in Chalcis for only a few months. Writing to Antipater, he noted, ‘The more I am by myself, and alone, the fonder I have become of myths.’ He died in 322” (Hutchins, 1952 p. vi).

Although the tone of *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) mirrors the optimism of the Golden Age of Greece, the following introduction of *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973) reflects the somber mood of Aristotle’s final years: “It has been forty years since *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) appeared. Events since then make that earlier statement seem far too optimistic. Nazism has shown the depths of brutality of which humanity is capable” (p. 13). Like stunned children these humanist scholars stood agape that 20th century man had failed, ignoring the fact that the fifteen tenets affirmed in their first document (especially biological determinism) made Hitler’s ideas not only possible but inevitable. Ironically, rather than reflect upon what history had shown them, the original signers—joined by more than two hundred additional voices—cast aside their somber mood and again took up the siren’s song, declaring that “the next century can be and should be the humanistic century” (p. 14).

Conclusion

Due to the cultural climate at the dawn of the 21st century, however, the singers in the great humanistic choir seem to be thinning out. The conflict between Plato’s “man of pure reason” and Aristotle’s “man of science” has been rekindled (e.g., theory of intelligent design vs. Darwin’s theory of evolution). On almost every continent political turmoil is on the rise, revealing that despite our vast knowledge we have miserably failed to create unity in a world of diversity. Nor have our scientific advances enabled us to harness the chaos of the natural world (e.g., 2004 tsunami). The 20th century’s innovations in communication and transportation—as culturally explosive as those developed during the time of Rome and the Renaissance—have failed to eradicate ignorance or end poverty. And again in the market place the hedonism of the arena is superseding the quest for truth. Despite material wealth and political power, the West

seems yet again poised on the brink of barbarism. Let Christians rejoice, and looking beyond our own narrow experiences, small ambitions, and consuming self-interests pray that God will mercifully take us up into His great purpose. For if previous historic signposts are any indication, we stand on the threshold of another great era in the unfolding of God's eternal plan. In light of such reflection the following challenge from Chambers (2000a) seems especially apropos:

How many of us are letting Jesus Christ take us into His school of thinking? The saint who is thoughtful is like a man fasting in the midst of universal intoxication. Men of the world hate a thoughtful saint. They can ridicule a living saint who does not think, but a thinking saint—I mean of course, one who lives rightly as well—is the annoyance, because the thinking saint has formed the Mind of Christ and re-echoes it. Let us from this time forth determine to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (p. 132).

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Humanism - Humanism - Machiavelli's realism: Niccolò Machiavelli, whose work derived from sources as authentically humanistic as those of Ficino, proceeded along a wholly opposite course. A throwback to the chancellor-humanists Salutati, Bruni, and Poggio, he served Florence in a similar capacity and with equal fidelity, using his erudition and eloquence in a civic cause. Like Vittorino and other early humanists, he believed in the centrality of historical studies, and he performed a signally humanistic function by creating, in *La mandragola* (1518; *The Mandrake*), the first vernacular imitation... Niccolò Machiavelli, oil on canvas by Santi di Tito; in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Mondadori Portfolio/age fotostock. Like other humanists in the Renaissance, he looked to the future influenced by the past. As a humanist he framed Utopia as the philosophers example of what is good for mankind but as a realist he knew that it would take more than classical ethics, humanism and for that matter, religion to change his own society. It is no accident that Raphael Hythloday, an "angelic fool" is the narrator of Utopia and that the character More is the dubious recipient of his tales of Utopia.