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Christian Humanism  
Antidote to Fundamentalism and Secularism

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**DAVID NICHOLLS MEMORIAL LECTURE  
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**Christian Humanism  
Antidote to Fundamentalism and Secularism<sup>1</sup>**

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In 1991 a Parisian based political scientist, Gilles Kepel, published a book with the intriguing title *The Revenge of God*.<sup>2</sup> His subject was the resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the modern world. After two centuries in which religion had been on the retreat, centuries during which the 'death of God' had gradually but inexorably become an accepted reality for much of the modern world, suddenly, so it seemed, God had returned with a vengeance. Not only had modernity itself become a subject of widespread criticism, but the great twentieth century experiment in atheistic communism had collapsed in a heap of broken stones on the boundaries between eastern and western Europe. Religion, irrespective of its particular faith tradition, had bounced back from the sidelines to which it had been relegated by secularisation. Once again it had become a major political force that could not be ignored.

The types of religion that emerged with a vengeance in the late twentieth century were varied in character from new age to fundamentalism, but it was largely the latter that grabbed the headlines. Parallel to this was the decline of more liberal versions of the major faith traditions, notably as embodied in mainline Christian denominations. How different this was from the late nineteen-fifties and sixties when David Nicholls and I myself were theological students, a time of theological ferment, liturgical renewal and ecumenical commitment within the so-called mainline churches. In retrospect it is evident that conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism were gestating and gathering strength, just as Pentecostalism was growing at a remarkable rate. But all of this seemed peripheral to what we were experiencing, a throwback to the past rather than an engagement with the present and an anticipation of the future. The cultural mood, especially in Western Europe and North America was progressive if not radical, liberating if not revolutionary, secular if not secularist. And many theologians, especially those who had been engaged in the struggle against Nazism, and were now trying to come to terms with both the aftermath of the Holocaust and the reality of the Cold War, sought to engage the cultural changes with critical empathy.

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture is expanded in '*Being Human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist*' (London: SCM) forthcoming 2005

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

One of the theologians who spoke so clearly to us at the time was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who had been martyred by the Gestapo in 1945. From Bonhoeffer's prison letters we learnt the need to develop a 'religion-less' form of Christianity that would be appropriate for the new secular 'world come of age', a Christianity no longer tied to an antiquated metaphysic and worldview, or expressed in an otherworldly piety. I recall how, in the autumn of 1963, I was one many graduate students who eagerly crowded into the common room of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago to listen to the English bishop John Robinson speak about his recently published book *Honest to God*. The book had become a media event in Britain; but it was only one of several books at that time that developed the theme of 'secular Christianity' in response to Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann and others.

Fundamental to this vision of a 'secular Christianity' was an acceptance of the critique of religion associated with Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. Although these were archetypical despisers of religion, theologians recognised in their critique a secular version of the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible. For at the heart of that tradition too was a rejection of religion as idolatry, superstition, privatised piety, and a sanction for dehumanising and oppressive power. Secularisation itself, so we learnt, was in part the outworking of that prophetic tradition unleashed against established religion by the Protestant Reformers. This prophetic tradition, understood as political critique of unjust regimes and oppressive systems sanctioned by religion, became immensely important in both South Africa and Latin America as we struggled for liberation and justice.

The phrase 'secular Christianity', popular at the time, soon proved unhelpful to describe what Bonhoeffer and others were proposing. It had no appeal to those engaged at the grass-roots, for whom fundamentalism and Pentecostalism were far more attractive options, or to those who hungered for a spirituality in a world of technological dominance, scientism and secularism. But this did not mean that the vision of Christianity we associate with Bonhoeffer and others who shared his vision was invalid. While the 'revenge of God' seemed to be a return of traditional or fundamentalist religion, A.N. Wilson was more perceptive in concluding his book entitled *God's Funeral*.

Just as Nietzsche's generation were declaring the death of God and Thomas Hardy was witnessing his burial, religious thinkers as varied as Simone Weil, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nicholas Berdayev and Teilhard de Chardin were waiting in the wings.<sup>3</sup>

In the same breath, Wilson also refers to John Paul II, Martin Luther King jnr., and Trevor Huddleston who demonstrated the potency of the Christian faith in the public arena. There are many others who could be added to this list from many countries and Christian traditions and I am sure we can number David Nicholls amongst them as well. Probably none would have been happy with the

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<sup>3</sup> A.N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (London: Abacus, 2000), 465.

designation 'secular Christian', yet all were deeply engaged in the secular realm, often in company with secular humanists; at the same time, all of them were deeply committed Christians, profound in their spirituality, yet decidedly not fundamentalist.

Several terms have emerged to try and describe this vibrant ecumenical tradition, amongst them 'prophetic Christianity', 'radical Christianity', and 'radical Orthodoxy', all of them expressing important dimensions of the legacy. I wish to propose the term 'Christian humanist', an old and venerable term to describe a form of Christianity, irrespective of denomination or tradition, that regards human well being as a priority, and therefore rejects all forms of religion or secular culture that dehumanise people whether in the name of God, or in pursuit of an ideology of domination. Later I will say more about what I mean by Christian humanism, and why I believe it has value within our contemporary context, especially as we seek an antidote and alternative to both fundamentalist religion and secularism. But not all Christians see things this way. The vast majority of Christians today are undoubtedly more enamoured by those forms of Christianity that offer security and certainty amidst cultural crisis and change, and for many this means fundamentalism of one kind or another. But we make a big mistake if we allow Christian fundamentalism to highjack the name 'Christian', aided and abetted by the secular media. Or if we fall prey to the view that the resurgence of religion is and can only be, of this variety.

Some years ago, when I was writing a book on *Christianity and Democracy*, I discovered the first volume of David Nicholl's *Deity and Domination* on our university library shelves. It is an impressive theological work, and one that is germane to the theme of this lecture. Central to his argument was that the fact that

successive concepts and images of God have been related to political rhetoric' and 'have to some degree echoed, or at times heralded changes in the social structure and dynamics – in the economic, political and cultural life – of given communities.<sup>4</sup>

This is true for all of us, whether we happen to be Christian believers or not, and whether we happen to be Christian fundamentalists or Christian humanists. Our images of God are inevitably constructed, at least in part, by the cultural contexts in which we live, work and believe. But this does not mean that all images are of equal merit, or equally reflect the biblical tradition. There are, in fact, some forms of Christianity whose image of God, that is, whose theology, wittingly or not, promotes and gives legitimacy to domination, discrimination and dehumanisation. Chief amongst these, I suggest, is fundamentalism, a subject which I would now like to examine more carefully.

### **Christian Fundamentalism**

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<sup>4</sup> David Nicholls, *Deity and Domination Vol. 1: Images of God and the State in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2f.

Let me stress at the outset that I have no desire to attack fundamentalists as people or believers. Although I disagree strongly with their views, I do not wish to belittle them as human beings, nor suggest that my views make me a superior person or better Christian. In fact it would be a contradiction of what I mean by Christian humanism to denigrate others. But this does not mean that I should not challenge Christian fundamentalism as an ideology, especially given the dangers it presents to people, the church and society. Many fundamentalists would be horrified if they could see the connection between their treasured beliefs and the social and political consequences to which they have led.

Let me also say by way of introduction that fundamentalism is not a movement confined to one set of Christian denominations, but a closed mindset and worldview that finds expression in many religions and traditions, though it does predominate more in some than in others. Moreover, fundamentalism as a mindset is evident within the secular realm where there are, for example, an abundance of fundamentalist atheists. My intention, however, is not to examine or criticise the fundamentalisms of other religious traditions, faith communities, or secularists, but to focus specifically on a particular brand of Protestant fundamentalism. In doing so we do well to recall that the term fundamentalism was coined in the United States in the nineteen-twenties to describe those Christians who wanted to defend the 'fundamentals' of Protestant Christianity against liberal theologians and secular humanism.

The fundamentals in question were the authority of Scripture, the virgin birth, the divinity of Christ, the substitutionary doctrine of the atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the second coming. All of these certainly have their foundation in Scripture and the Christian creed, but fundamentalists interpreted them in a way that was increasingly tied to their particular mindset and worldview. This distinguishes them from other Christians including evangelicals who were originally aligned with fundamentalism. Today most evangelicals decry being identified as fundamentalists, though fundamentalists insist that they are the true evangelicals.

While Christian fundamentalism does not have the same extreme militant character that we now associate with forms of Islamic fundamentalism, it does, nonetheless, pose a threat to the well being of many people and of global society. This does not stem directly from the fundamentals that originally gave Protestant fundamentalism its name, and which are espoused by many Christians across the world. The reasons are much more complex. They have to do with a set of historical circumstances that have emerged since the Second World War, especially in the United States, a particular interpretation of the Bible called dispensationalism in which Israel is the focal point, an approach to Christian global mission that is triumphalist in character, and an involvement in politics that pursues a right-wing agenda. All of this, coupled with its support for and religious legitimation of the political, economic and military hegemony of the United States, has transformed Protestant fundamentalism into a closed religious ideology. As a result, Christian fundamentalism is now qualitatively

different, and ironically so, from its origins as a counter-cultural protest against liberalism and secularism. Moreover, it has spread widely around the world, and has taken root perhaps most notably in churches in Africa and Asia.

At the heart of the Protestant fundamentalist enterprise is an understanding of the authority of the Bible based on the belief that it is inerrant, infallible, and therefore beyond critical analysis. While this view is held beyond the confines of what is strictly Protestant fundamentalism, in the case of fundamentalism, with its particular cultural and political alignment, it inevitably leads to the advocacy of very conservative moral and political views. Thus, for example, fundamentalism is essentially patriarchal, opposed to abortion, and stridently against gay rights. Of course, it is not only fundamentalists who take such stances. The problem is that fundamentalism does so in a way that not only rejects alternative positions out of hand but regards those who support them as agents of the anti-Christ and unpatriotic. And it is precisely this fundamentalist blending of being Christian and being patriotic, supposedly based on a reading of the Bible that is beyond criticism and tied into a dispensationalist view of history, that makes Protestant fundamentalism so dangerous.

'Dispensationalism' is a term derived from the view that the Bible must be interpreted in relation to various historical epochs, or dispensations, each with its own character relating to world events from creation to the 'end times' or 'last days.' On the basis of texts from Daniel, Revelation and Mark chapter 13, dispensationalists impose an interpretative grid on the Bible that, they claim, enables them to predict the unfolding of world events. We are now living in the 'end times' during which the 'war on Satan' (now synonymous with the 'war on terror') will intensify prior to the final victory of Christ over all anti-Christian forces. This view, made popular through the mass circulation of books and magazines, and propagated on television, radio, and through movies, has become an essential part of the myth that currently shapes American support for Israel, and the war in Iraq.

There is, of course, a global battle against evil. The notion of the struggle against 'the principalities and powers of darkness', as St. Paul described the Christian 'warfare', goes back to the origins of Christianity and before. Christian witness inevitably involves such a struggle, but it is a struggle against injustice and oppression, a struggle for truth against falsehood, a struggle to overcome hatred in the name of the God who loves the world and seeks its redemption. But fundamentalists have a very different understanding of what this global battle is about, tying it to their dispensationalist conviction that the world is hastening towards the 'end times' and the Battle of Armageddon. To hasten that event through military action and crusades therefore seems commendable and is widely advocated. Moreover, in doing so, alliances are made with economic and anti-environmental lobbies that are hell-bent on promoting global policies to the disadvantage of the poor and the destruction of the earth.

Ironies abound in the fundamentalist perception that the world is a battleground between them and Satan, whether the fundamentalists are

Christian or Muslim. On the one hand, Muslim fundamentalists regard globalisation as the means whereby the West is seeking to spread its secularist views and Western military enterprises in a new Christian crusade to recapture Muslim lands. Christian fundamentalists, on the other hand, support Western military adventures because they believe that this will provide them with a new base for evangelism in the Middle East and hasten the 'end times'. And whereas some radical Muslim fundamentalists engage in acts of violence shouting 'God is great', Christian fundamentalists, like the crusaders of old, do battle against 'terror' crying 'Jesus is Lord.' In other words, Christian global mission from this perspective is to recapture the world for Christ in order to re-establish Christendom as a necessary prelude to his Second Coming and, conveniently, as a means to secure Western political and economic objectives.

Triumphalism, as we may call this dominating spirit is, alongside dispensationalism, the other disturbing characteristic of modern-day fundamentalism as a right-wing religious ideology because it introduces the notion of global domination. But it is not Christian. As George Lindbeck put it, the 'crusader's battle cry "*Christus est Dominus* (Christ is Lord)," ... is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of an infidel',<sup>5</sup> even though in other contexts it may be true. Of course, such triumphalism is not only a fault of fundamentalism; it can be found in many Christian traditions past and present, as well as in other religions. Most sections of what was called Christendom have been at fault in this respect, whether Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant. The litany of their failures makes appalling reading when you consider the legacy of inquisition and crusade, of holocaust and apartheid, all carried out in the name of Christ. The Lordship of Christ as the suffering servant who gives his life for the sake of the world must surely mean something different to the triumphalist spirit at work in fundamentalism today or wherever it surfaces within the Christian church.

In their war on Satan, fundamentalists whether Christian or not, regard secular humanism as one of the major ideologies of the enemy, and they regard liberal and liberationist versions of their respective faiths as sell-outs to and lackeys of secularism, evolutionism and scientism. Secular humanism is, for fundamentalists, a rival religion bent on governing the world and, in the process, destroying its moral and cultural values. So fundamentalism as a 'popular religion' gains much of its appeal by its ability to portray intellectuals and scholars, including evangelicals who are critical of the fundamentalist worldview, as Godless enemies of the common people and their values. And, as always in history, this mass appeal is something politicians wish to harness against its critics and opponents. Such alliances rightly fill us with alarm for the spectre they raise of a new wave of wars of religion, crusades and the like. This is not a happy prospect for a world in search of global justice and peace. Irrespective of the brand, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Hindu, such religion is simply bad religion.

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<sup>5</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: John Knox, 1984), 64.

## Secularism and Secular Humanism

Martin Luther's historic and traumatic move from being a monk, that is 'religious', to becoming a Reformer living fully in the world (i.e. 'secular') married to Kate, a former nun and admirable brewer of beer, was a major moment in the journey towards the secularisation of Europe. It provided a personal paradigm for what, as Catholic leaders and theologians rightly feared, would become a social avalanche and lead to the demise of Christendom. Technically, 'secularisation' meant that church property, monasteries, for example, now came under secular control, whether the state or some noble family. But, of course, the sources and outcomes of the process of secularisation were far more complex. Intellectually, the process is rooted in the eighteenth century European Enlightenment and the rise of modern science; politically it is a result of the French Revolution; and economically it developed alongside the Industrial Revolution. In sum, we refer to its outcome as modernity.

As an historical process, modernity has undoubtedly had many benefits, not least amongst these being democratic forms of government, scientific achievement and much more. But its outcomes have not all been positive. It has led to what we call secularism and scientism, two connected ideologies prevalent in the modern world. The first has replaced God with the self and its own interests; the second has replaced God with technology unchecked by moral constraint. Both are dehumanising, and as dangerous as religious fundamentalism for personal and social well-being. They are secular forms of fundamentalism.

Secularism is rampant in contemporary Western society. It is atheistic and nihilistic in character, driven by individual self-interest. It promotes a lifestyle that has lost any sense of moral value; an individualism that rides rough shod over the common good and the interests of others, and a cynicism that has no concern for future generations. It is reflected in the outrageous salaries paid to some business executives, to media and sports stars, in the ugly flaunting of wealth in a world of great poverty, in the disregard for the vulnerable and the worship of the powerful. Whereas religious fundamentalism seeks to impose a particular set of religious, moral absolutes and political convictions on others, secularism is a-moral, fostering greed and corruption whether in the private or public sphere. The self-centred hedonism of such secular 'fundamentalist atheism,' is as off-putting as the self-righteousness of many pseudo-pious people. So too is arrogant 'scientism', its partner in crimes against humanity.

The fact that scientific achievement has discredited certain religious worldviews and set us free to be responsible, does not mean that the world has, as a result, become a better place morally-speaking, or that modern scientific achievement has all been good. To believe otherwise, to believe that science is absolute, and that all its outcomes are beneficial for the world and for us as humans, is scientism. Scientism reflects a failure to recognise the limitations of science and draws conclusions from science that do not logically follow. By



contrast most great scientists recognise its limits, just as genuine secular humanists decry secularism. They know that science, like all intellectual endeavour, requires imagination and inspiration and, with that, a great deal of humility. The truth is that despite the enormous advances of science and technology, and the huge improvements these have made to the quality of life, they have often been misused to transgress boundaries and, in doing so, provided the tools of death and destruction. Science is a wonderful servant in our quest for full humanity, but it is a terrifying master.

In contrast to both secularism and scientism, secular humanism is agnostic not atheist, and wary of any absolutes whether religious, political or otherwise. Positing that 'human beings are the measure of all things', secular humanism as it emerged, not only denied Christian beliefs by taking the contrary position (reason, not faith; humanity, not God; goodness, not original sin), it also became the defender of values that were previously advocated by Christians of the Renaissance: reason, culture, humanity, tolerance and freedom. Indeed, secular humanism emerged as the rational the defender of humanity and the common good against religious dogmatism, ecclesiastical triumphalism, and popular superstition. Today secular humanists increasingly recognise the need to move beyond the polemics of the past and co-operate with all people of goodwill and moral concern, whether secular or religious. But above all, in contrast to secularists, secular humanists today are people who are concerned about the common good and who seek to promote values and virtues essential to democratic society, and human well-being across the planet.

Secular humanism is an attractive option for people who have become disillusioned with the church and disenchanted with the teachings of Christianity. I would rather be associated with the secular humanists I know than with many Christians who are judgmental of them in a self-righteous and arrogant way. But as one of my former Christian friends turned secular humanist once said to me: 'you are a believer and I am not.' It is this faith in the transcendent that makes the difference between a secular and a Christian humanist. But we should recognise that such faith and the doubt that keeps secular humanists agnostic are not polar opposites; they co-exist in all of us who are not fundamentalists, whether religious or secular. Honest faith is not blind, hence it is not possible without an ongoing struggle with doubt. So, too, there is but a thin dividing line between those who honestly struggle to believe, but can do no other (believers) and those who have seriously considered the claims of faith, but cannot believe (agnostics). There is sometimes more uniting such believers and non-believers, than there is uniting believers with some kinds of religious people, or secular humanists with self-centred secularists.

We share and recognise a common humanity that binds us together despite differences, and we are concerned about justice and the future of the world. I think, too, that we also try, though often fail, to live in depth rather than on the surface. The best secular humanists I know sense the need for something more transcendent than the mundane, something that gives more meaning to life than science can give, something we now generally call

`spirituality'. Maybe they have a sense that humanism is not sufficient on its own. Bad religion might be a crutch of the weak or an opiate of the people, but I do not think that this is true of genuine faith or spirituality. As Steve Biko, the founder of Black Consciousness in South Africa put it: `Material want is bad enough, but coupled with spiritual poverty, it kills.'<sup>6</sup> We cannot live `by bread alone', that is, unsupported by a grace that comes from beyond ourselves. Anything less denies our full humanity. Which brings us to Christian humanism as the antidote to fundamentalism and secularism and, let me add, as partner to secular humanism in the struggle for justice, human rights, and peace.

### **Christian Humanism**

Christian humanism seeks to provide an alternative worldview and spirituality that is Christian in character and commitment, *and therefore* humanist in concern. Its roots can be traced back to the Hebrew prophets with their understanding of human beings created in God's image and their concern for both human well-being and the well-being of society and the earth. The more specifically Christian version of such biblical humanism is rooted not just in the teaching and example of Jesus, but in the audacious claim that God became a human being in Jesus Christ, and in the second century when Christian thinkers began to work out the implications of this remarkable claim both in regard to what it means to be human and in relation to classical culture.

But it was only during the Renaissance with its striking emphasis on `the human' that a distinct Christian humanism began to emerge. Drawing on both classical antiquity and on Europe's Christian heritage, it affirmed the dignity, potential and freedom of humanity, the importance of reason, moral values and virtue, and the significance of language and texts for communicating truth. Critical of forms of Christianity that enslaved the human body, mind and spirit, the Christian humanism of the Renaissance sought to restore and affirm human dignity through a recovery of classical culture and a proper reading of Scripture.

There was one Renaissance humanist who stood out amongst the rest as the paradigmatic Christian humanist, Desiderimus Erasmus of Rotterdam. An ordained priest, committed Christian and cosmopolitan scholar of considerable stature, Erasmus was remarkably influential in many directions whether theological, political or more broadly in the humanities. He was not only a link between the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, but also between people of different nationalities and a variety of humanist interests, and he remains someone whose example may help us to establish better bridges between nations and peoples.

In advocating Christian humanism, however, I am not suggesting that we return to the Renaissance or Erasmus, an impossible task, but that we critically retrieve this venerable tradition that stretches back to the Hebrew scriptures and the origins of Christianity in a way that relates to the contemporary world and the

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 28. `I write what I like'.

problems that face us. Certainly I do not wish to convey an understanding of Christianity that is elitist, far removed from the experience of many people as well as from more 'popular' forms of Christianity. Rather I think of Christian humanism as a viable and true way of understanding Christian faith and life that can have as much significance for the 'ordinary' Christian irrespective of denomination or tradition as it might have for the more intellectual.

Furthermore, I am not suggesting a romantic or idealist notion of Christianity that exalts human nature as though it was wholly good anymore than I wish to defend the view that it is totally depraved or irredeemably sinful. Indeed, even people of great humanity, moral conscience and faith are prone to fault and failure. Nothing demonstrates this sad truth better than the way in which people of reason and conscience were impotent in withstanding the Nazi onslaught. Bonhoeffer speaks of their appalling failure 'to see the abyss of evil or the abyss of holiness.'<sup>7</sup> Yet we must not forget that it was from the ranks of humanists both secular and Christian that resistance to Hitler emerged. Hence Paul Tillich's observation that it was 'a consciousness of the Christian humanist values which underlie even the antireligious forms of this society' (i.e. Germany) that 'made it possible to resist the inhuman systems of the twentieth century.'<sup>8</sup> Christian humanism has to respond courageously and passionately to human suffering, the struggle for liberation from oppression, and to global poverty and injustice, to be truly Christian and truly humanist.

While for some, Christianity and humanism seem to be irreconcilable opposites, largely because we usually associated humanism with its secular variety, there are several reasons for choosing the designation Christian humanism. In briefly examining them we will gain a better appreciation of what it means.

First of all, the term Christian humanist helps to remind us that Christians are human beings first, in common with all others, and only Christian by choice. This has considerable significance in the light of historical experience. Constructed identities, amongst them being Christian or being a citizen of a particular country, are important, and some are more important than others. But when such identities become more important than our primary identity as human beings, then has gone wrong. The question, then, is whether being Christian enhances our capacity for recognising our common humanity and living accordingly, and whether or not it enhances or diminishes our own lives as human beings. Christian humanism affirms that it should contribute to human well-being, premised as it is on the conviction that all humans are joined together in a unity given in creation, and promised in redemption. And this means, that we are also all bound together with the whole of creation, and that the well-being of creation is inseparable from our own. The biggest threat to the world as we know it derives from a refusal by so many to honour this common humanity. A

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<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress), 78.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, *My Search for Absolutes* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1967), 23.

refusal demonstrated in every sphere of life from global economic policies to gender relationships, from international affairs to the way we respond to the disabled. Until we truly recognise our common humanity and live accordingly, and recognise that it binds us also to the earth and its well-being, there is little chance that we will achieve justice and peace, or truly understand what it means to be a Christian.

Secondly, following on from this, I can think of no other word than 'humanism' to describe the view that Christianity is about the well being of humanity. This does not make 'man the measure of all things' (something that most Renaissance humanists would have balked at), but rather reflects the ancient Christian saying that the 'glory of God is humanity restored.' This is the very opposite of what I see in bad religion, and especially in modern-day fundamentalism as a religious ideology. Christian humanism is the contradiction of dehumanising forms of religion. So the designation Christian humanist helps me to identify myself as Christian but not fundamentalist, ecumenical rather than narrowly denominational, and fully engaged with others, not least secular humanists, in making the world more humane, just and compassionate. People of other faith traditions, Jewish or Muslim for example, might also find some resonance with this position in terms of their own commitments.

Thirdly, in affirming humanity, Christian humanists affirm, along with humanists of every era, human potential, capacity, hope and especially rationality. Bad religion, whether Christian or some other, whether fundamentalist or not, inevitably keeps people in bondage, whether that is to superstition, a low sense of self-esteem, subservience to tyrants, or to a worldview and metaphysic that has long been undermined by scientific achievement. Christian humanism, recognising the power of evil and sin, also recognises the potential and capacity of human beings to solve problems and make the world a better place. Christian humanism likewise shuns pessimism in favour, not so much of optimism, but of hope. That is, the human capacity to transcend present reality and to live and work in expectation of change for the better. Without this, humanity surrenders its ability to make the world a better place and withdraws either into an unworldly piety or a selfish secularism that has no concern for future generations.

Fourthly, while Christian humanism affirms the rightful place of reason, acknowledging that while reason has limits and cannot supplant faith in the Christian scheme of things, Christian faith is not irrational. But Christian humanism is not a liberal reduction of Christian faith and commitment but a critical restatement of its core convictions and values in ways that are both critical of and yet constructively engaged with secular culture in serving the well-being of humanity. This implies the importance of reaffirming the importance of the Bible as the primary text for Christian faith, but a critical not a fundamentalist affirmation. In affirming the importance of the Bible for Christian faith, I am affirming the importance and authority not of a book but of a story that it contains – the gospel – because that gives meaning to life and keeps us human.

As I have already intimated, affirming Christian humanism today is not an attempt to bring back a venerable tradition associated with the European Renaissance, but rather a critical retrieval of that tradition in a form that is chastened by historical experience and relevant to the issues we now face. Elsewhere I have written about Bonhoeffer as someone who provides us with a paradigm for Christian humanism today, one that has been reshaped and honed through a recovery of the gospel in the costly struggle against the heresy of dehumanisation. As Frits de Lange has indicated, drawing also on the thought of the Jewish philosopher Levinas, Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism is a critical one, 'a humanism which discloses rather than legitmizes power, a humanism in which one person fails to inherit humanity when another does not, a "humanism of the other man".'<sup>9</sup> This 'humanism of the other' is central to the retrieval of Christian humanism not least because it embraces, as de Lange indicates, two important elements that we need to foreground. The first is its critical exposure of dehumanising power, and the second is its awareness that we all lose something of our humanity when others are dehumanised. A Christian humanism *for today* must therefore be a *critical humanism* expressed in solidarity both with those who struggle for justice, and with those who are the victims of injustice. It was this Christian humanism that emerged in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, so admirably represented by Desmond Tutu and the late Beyers Naudé. Representing two very different Christian traditions, the one Anglo-Catholic and the other Dutch Reformed, they exemplified a common humanity derived from their faith in God and their recognition of 'the other' as both God's demand and gift.

I conclude with reference to another who espoused Christian humanism and who, like Bonhoeffer, was Christian martyr at the hands of the Gestapo, the Jesuit priest Alfred Delp. Delp's Christian humanism, Thomas Merton tells us, was 'exactly the opposite of the Promethean pseudo-humanism of anti-Christian culture since the Renaissance.'<sup>10</sup> Critical of the ego-centric humanism of secularism, Delp wrote about the need for a 'God-conscious' humanism which affirmed human worth and dignity, affirmed 'divine and human potentialities within ourselves', but mastered the self-centredness of the individual which continually threatens to tear the world apart.<sup>11</sup> In short, he argued, we need a new religious movement within Christianity that takes, as its starting point 'the position of humankind and human beings' rather than religious people.<sup>12</sup> We have to 'stride out across new ground' Delp wrote, 'leaving the well-worn paths' lest history destroys us 'with a thunderclap of judgment.'<sup>13</sup> Modern people had become incapable of belief in God; the only way they can recover faith is through recovering their lost humanity. Both fundamentalism and secularism stand in the way of such a recovery because they have failed to discern that God's redemptive purpose is not the destruction of 'the other', but the restoration of

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<sup>9</sup> de Lange, "A Particular Europe, a Universal Faith," 93.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Delp, *Prison Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), xxxix.

<sup>11</sup> Delp, *Prison Writings*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> Delp, *Prison Writings*, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Delp, *Prison Writings*, 97.

humanity as a whole. That is the whole point of the Incarnation: God became fully human that we might all become truly human.