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## **SECULAR HUMANISM IN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY**

"Secular humanism" is a strange combination. Humanism indicates a focus of attention on man. It recalls the old Sophist principle that man is the measure of all things. Secular is opposed to the sacred, and secular humanism restricts man to this world by denying or at least bracketing a sacred dimension to human life. It is an attempt to explain human life within the range of its worldly factors without introducing anything from the outside, namely the spheres of magic, myth and the supernatural.

Secular humanism was introduced into Christian thinking by the Enlightenment which spelled Nature and Reason with capital letters. What could not be grasped with human reason could not be accepted even in religion. This was generally the position of Liberal Protestantism in the 18th century, and today this is discernible also in Catholic theology. The basis of this secularist and humanistic thinking is that human history has an autonomy of its own and any postulation of an outside agency of any kind would be artificial and unacceptable like bringing in an angel or a divine apparition to resolve a tangle of a plot in a novel or drama. What has to be examined is how far this secularism affects theology and the integrity even of human sciences like psychology, sociology and history.

### **Liberal Protestantism**

Secular humanism entered Protestant thinking as a critical examination of the gospels for their historical authenticity in the spirit of Martin Luther. About 1774 Johann Griesbach labelled the gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke synoptic for their common narrative pattern of materials, and the gospel of John became generally known as the Fourth Gospel. Hermann Samuel Reimarus in his book *on the Aims of Jesus and his Disciples* pictured Jesus as a failed Jewish revolutionary, whose body his disciples stole and made up the story of his resurrection. The two volume *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, written by David Friedrich Strauss concluded that none of the writers of the gospels were eye-witnesses and that these

were works of a later generation, presenting a garbled tradition. Wilhelm Wrede in his *The Secret of the Messiahship* showed that even Mark, the earliest gospel was more concerned with presenting a predetermined theological viewpoint than a straightforward historical narrative. Rudolf Bultmann introduced the method of "form criticism" to judge the historical validity of the gospels and concluded: "I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary"<sup>1</sup>

Nobody can deny the importance of the critical method in its various forms for arriving at the real meaning and intentions of the New Testament writings. Though the disciples of Bultmann have strongly argued that he went too far, still, the distinction between myth and history in the gospels and the effort to get at the gospels and the naked historical facts about Jesus still continues. Even the supercritic Adolf Harnack was against applying to Christianity the historical method which was common regarding the study of other religions, "because Christianity in its pure form is not a religion along with others, but the religion."<sup>2</sup> But John Locke in his *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered by the Scriptures*, had argued that only a thoroughgoing historical approach would disentangle the universal simplicity of the original faith from the distorted images that appear even in the later New Testament writings. If we examine the different books of the New Testament as they appear in chronological order, we can easily see which new ideas were added at what time.

But this Protestant secular humanism received a rude shock through the two World Wars, which shattered confidence in human nature, the continuity and consistency of human history and the power of human reason to act reasonably. This humanistic and secular approach was replaced by an existential approach to faith. This was specially evident in the Word Theology of Karl Barth which defined Christianity as obedient acceptance of the divine Revelation, the divine judgment, which human beings can in no way modify.

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1. Cf. Jan Wilson, *Jesus the Evidence* London: Weidfeld & Nicholson. 1984. pp. 35-39

2. Quoted by Kummel from a lecture of, *The New Testament*: p. 310

This existentialist trend continued in the theologies of Emile Brunner, Paul Tillich and others, till secular humanism made its reappearance in the Death of God Theology of Thomas Altizer, Paul Vahanian and others. These people argued that humans had come of age today and that religious faith should not be used as crutches for managing human affairs.

### **The Catholic Secular Humanism**

In the study of religion and particularly Scripture the Catholics had followed an extremely conservative approach obeying faithfully the teaching of the ecclesiastical Magisterium. But the epoch-making encyclical, the *Divino afflante Spiritu* of Pope Pius XII, and the opening of windows and doors of the musty Catholic Church by the courageous step of Pope John XXIII in convoking Vatican Council II, brought in a breath of freedom and a great deal of free thinking among theologians. The new tendency was to question everything assumed as sacred and unquestionable, in order to establish everything on grounds acceptable to all reasonable people. Hans Kung made history by questioning the meaning of the infallibility of the Pope. The traditional assumption that the Church as it is today was founded and determined in the last detail by Christ himself with St. Peter as the first Pope and the Apostles as local bishops, and the well defined matter and form of every sacrament was shattered. Over against this unscholarly conservatism of tradition there is today a widespread unscholarly liberalism in almost all branches of theology.

### **Secular Humanism and Interpretation of History**

Hans Kung's own *On Being a Christian* is a typical example of the new humanistic trend. He is proposing a Christology "from below" from the standpoint of modern humanism, and discussing the problem of God in the light of the challenge of world religions. The question is what is decisive and distinctive about the Christian programme as it was originally meant and what it can offer today. Kung offers no philosophical, ontological or anthropological structures as a starting point for religious questions. What he is examining is the appeal of the concrete Jesus in his message, behaviour and fate, as a possible and credible answer to those who want to know what Christianity really means for Westerners confronted with the

problem of meaning and direction. Tillich's method of correlation asked to what actual problems the message of Jesus was the answer, and Karl Barth preached a Bible-centred Christocentrism. Both these do not provide a satisfactory answer to the modern man. Kung's aim is apologetic, namely to show the superiority of Christianity over other religious systems available in the market. For this he proposes a fourfold typology of religions, establishment, revolution, emigration, and compromise. Judaism, tracing its origin to the structures created by Moses, is too narrow. Mohammed and Islam present the revolutionary model. Buddha with his world negation and ideal of *nirvana* belongs to the withdrawal or emigration type, while Confucianism presents a compromise pattern. Christianity cuts across all these types and presents the best choice. Kung is offering functional christology to demonstrate the uniqueness of Jesus. But the question is how Jesus is decisive or ultimately normative? Can anyone explain the significance of Jesus in his being and in his continuing presence in history without a doctrine of God and of the Holy Spirit?

*The Marginal Jew* by John P. Meier<sup>3</sup> is another example of the attempt to rethink the historical Jesus. Meier "prescinds from what Christian faith or later church teaching says about Jesus" (p. 1) and intends only to present a document that can "serve as common ground, a starting point for dialogue between Christians and Jews, between various Christian confessions, and between believers and nonbelievers, as well as an investigation to further research by both historians and theologians." (p.2). Though the title of the book calls Jesus "a marginal Jew," the term 'marginal' is used in a marginal sense. Jesus was not marginal to Judaism, but rather to the world situation of his times. In world history Jesus was just a 'blip' on the radar screen; he was in conflict with the establishment, the ruling saducees, and so was condemned and executed as a criminal; his teaching was offensive to many; he was a wandering teacher coming from a rural culture. He belonged not to the very poor, but rather to the lower middle class, and his reforms were rooted in the diverse and fluid world of Judaism of his times.

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3. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Meier makes a sharp distinction among the real, the historical and the earthly Jesus. It is impossible to arrive at the "real" Jesus since our information is too scanty. Though the four gospels present us with "the earthly Jesus," namely, Jesus during his life on earth, the term is too ambiguous for a theologian. The focus of the book is the historical Jesus, "the Jesus whom we can 're-cover' and examine by using the scientific tools of modern historical research." Meier is clearly against any attempt to reduce faith in Christ to a contentless cipher, a mythic symbol or a timeless archetype, or any attempt of pious Christians to swallow up the real humanity of Jesus into his divinity, and any move to "domesticate" Christ into a comfortable, respectable, bourgeois Christianity. According to him, the historical Jesus cannot be easily coopted for any programmes of political revolution. Compared with the prophets of the Old Testament Jesus is silent on many of the burning social and political issues of his day. He agrees with Kahler and Bultmann that "the Jesus of history is not and cannot be the object of Christian faith". The object of Christian faith is a living person, Jesus who lives now, risen and glorified for ever in the Father's presence.

Meier's treatment of the historical Jesus raises a few questions about the purpose and usefulness of the whole quest. He denies that the historical Jesus is of any use to the people of faith, "if one is asking solely about the direct object of Christian faith: Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and presently reigning in his Church," since the Lord "is accessible to all believers, including all those who never study history or theology for even a single day in their lives." (p. 198). The quest for the historical Jesus is useful only to the theologians of Western culture from the Enlightenment onward, in order to operate in and speak to that culture with credibility absorbing its historical approach. Does this not make faith just an intuitive vision of the divine person and not an authentically human response to God's self-disclosure through what He said and did in human history? Does it not make Incarnation itself a useless divine drama, already past, totally irrelevant to the people of today? Separation of theology from faith is another serious problem. If theology is the communitarian reflection on faith to make it intelligible, it cannot be separated from faith. To make it a cultural artifact relevant only for the culturally sophisticated is to deny

its central historical function of translating belief into behaviour, making faith relevant to daily existence. If the discovery of the historical Jesus has no relevance whatever for faith, how can it become a common ground for a religious dialogue among Christians, Jews and nonbelievers?

Perhaps the weakest link in this quest for historical Jesus is the concept of history itself. Is history simply going back through the available sources to the reliable data surrounding Jesus with a bare minimum of interpretation needed to collect them? The idea of 19th century historians that a historian had nothing to do but present all the facts and let them speak for themselves was characterized as preposterous by Carl Becker: "First, because it is impossible to present all the facts; and second, because even if you could present all the facts the miserable things wouldn't say anything, would just say nothing at all."<sup>4</sup> R.G. Collingwood ridicules this "scissors-and-paste history" as a naive view of history in terms of memory, testimony, and credibility."<sup>5</sup> History has to be both critical and constructive. "The historian starts out from statements he finds in his sources. The attempt to represent imaginatively their meaning, gives rise to questions that lead on to further statements in the sources. Eventually he will have stretched a web of imaginative construction linking together the fixed points supplied by the statements of the sources."<sup>6</sup>

Even if we had a video-tape of Christ's discourses and miracles, by itself it would not be history. We will have to discern in it the consistency, continuity and movement towards the future. History is not merely the record of events but the meaning of events showing us where they are leading us into the future. Christian faith is essentially historical. It is a faith in a Jesus Christ, not absent and far away on a throne in a place called heaven, anthropomorphically said to be on the right hand of a Father, who has neither right nor left, but right in our midst, in his church, in the Eucharist, in the Scripture we proclaim and in the strivings and sufferings of his people. He is Christ yesterday, today and for ever and carries with him the whole past and leads humanity towards its final fulfilment in the eschaton.

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4. Carl Becker, *Detachment and the Writing of History, Essays and Letters*. ed Phil Snyder. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press. 1958. p. 54

5. R.G. Collingwood. *The Idea of History*, p. 234

6. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. p. 205

### Secular Humanism in Sociology

A wider and more dynamic view of history is provided by John Dominic Crossan in his book *The Historical Jesus, the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*.<sup>7</sup> He is applying sociology and anthropology for a critical examination of Jesus and Christianity. He attempts to examine the literature of specific sayings and doings, stories, anecdotes, confessions concerning Jesus within concentric circles around it of the Hellenistic or Graeco-Roman history and a wider macrocosmic circle of the reciprocal interplay of cross-cultural, cross-temporal social anthropology. He disagrees with historians who say that it is difficult or impossible to arrive at the historical Jesus owing to historical problems and with theologians, who are against the search for the historical Jesus for theological objections. Jesus is actually one of the best documented figures in ancient history. Crossan makes ample use of the formal methodologies of the human sciences combining the complementary disciplines of social anthropology, Graeco-Roman history and the literary analysis of available historical documents.

His "overture" to the book has a twelve page reconstructed inventory of words and sayings that actually go back to the historical Jesus. Through them one can catch the style of Jesus who was a wandering Jewish peasant of the Mediterranean culture. "Antiquity' unlike modernity, did not have a middle class." It was a society based on patronage, not class stratification. (p. 59). Hence intermediaries in the form of bards, prophets and messiahs belonged to the social landscape. From India to Rome poverty and freedom were deemed signs of royalty in the wandering sage. Passive, militant, messianic and proselytic were the four cross-cultural and cross-temporal forms of resistance to overbearing cultural seductiveness, overpowering military superiority, over-whelming economic exploitation, and overweening social discrimination. Son of David and Lord Messiah, later attributed to Jesus, were titles which the pre-Christian Psalms of Solomon gave to the future deliverer from Roman domination (p. 107). Similarly the one like a Son of Man in Daniel 7, the Servant of the Lord in 2nd Isaiah and the Davidic Messiah are more than the personification or even the champion of

7. John Dominic Crossan. *The Historical Jesus, the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991

God's people but their mythical equivalent, their celestial archetype, ruling over a magnificently irenic and inclusive world, though in the *Book of the Similitudes* the Son of Man is "the Elect one who separates good from evil in a far more punitive and exclusive world." (p. 110)

Traditions regarding Jesus may be distinguished into several layers, the first of retention, recording the essential core of words and deeds of Jesus, the second of development applying the data to new situations, and the third of creation composing larger complexes that changed even the content of the original message. Through multiple attestations and other criteria one can arrive at the original stratum of Christianity, which placed greater emphasis on the Kingdom of God that is inaugurated, attested to by seventy seven statements in the first stratum, thirty of them outside the gospels, compared to the person of Jesus, who has only forty multiple testimony entries in the first stratum. This shows that the vision of the Kingdom was more deeply and broadly within the Christian tradition than Jesus himself. But it was a kingdom of nobodies, of children, of the poor over against the domination of the wealthy and the powerful. Miracles naturally belonged to the magico-mythical context of the Mediterranean culture. In a later stage of greater sophistication these are carefully interpreted or washed out of tradition entirely. The miracles involving the casting out of devils were particularly significant, as the silent protests against the inexorable, dominating power which was shown to be diabolical. The example of the Gerasene Demoniac (Mk 5:1-17), which Crossan ascribes to the second stratum is typical: "An individual is, of course, being cured, but the symbolism is also hard to miss or ignore. The demon is both one and many; is named Legion, that fact and sign of Roman power is consigned to swine and is cast into the sea. A brief performancial summary, in other words, of every Jewish revolutionary's dream." That the exorcist is asked to leave the place quite clearly shows the political implications of the action. (p. 314)

Crossan is trying to explain the story of Jesus as completely as possible through social science models about Mediterranean societies, peasant life, eating and healing, in order to discover the details concerning the historical Jesus. But he himself concedes that the social science "is shifting sand." In fact, this overdependence on sociological models leads him to what look like uncritical generalizations. He takes the



whole Mediterranean life as one monolith, and Judaism as completely dissolved in it: "There was, in the world and time of Jesus only one sort of Judaism, and that was Hellenistic Judaism, Judaism responding with all its antiquity and tradition to a Graeco-Roman culture undergirded by both armed power and imperial ambition." (p. 418). To reduce Jesus and his unique Judaic environment, which was saturated through and through with the religious sentiment, to the stereotype of pagan Mediterranean life is to deprive Christianity of all its cultural uniqueness. Only against the religious background of Palestinian Judaism can the words and deeds of Jesus be properly appreciated in continuity with the religion of the Old Testament. Secular humanism is guilty of leaving out those social elements which do not agree with its secular philosophy. Why did not Jesus and the Apostles fill the people with hatred towards Rome if throwing out the foreign rule was the only or even primary concern? Why did Jesus speak so much about loving the enemy? Why did he by preaching on conversion and repentance turn the natural hatred towards the foreign power back towards an awareness of one's own sinfulness? A purely secularist sociology is not true to its own scientific method of impartiality.

There is a trend today among some theologians to do ecclesiology with the same reductionist sociology. After all, ecclesiology is the articulation of the self-understanding of the Church. But this self-understanding of the Church is historically and culturally conditioned. According to the secular humanistic ecclesiologists, Christianity born in the family of Judaism, naturally understood itself as an offshoot of Judaism, and appropriated much of the Hebrew culture and traditions. The church understood itself as the new "people of God", the new and true Israel. But the disciples of Jesus who had a fond memory of the Master had only a vague understanding of his teachings. So when Christianity crossed the borders of the Hebrew world and met other peoples and cultures like the Greeks, the Romans, the Germanic tribes, it began to dissociate itself from Judaism and to understand itself in new ways and categories. Sometimes the new ways in understanding the Church also led to conflicts and tragic divisions in the Church and radically different ecclesiologies, such as Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, gradually emerged. For several centuries these different ecclesiologies never met each other, but lived in isolation and opposition that each of

these ecclesiologies became to some extent fragmented, exaggerated and distorted. It was only with the help of the imperial power of Constantine and his successors that the Church of Rome crushed other groups and gained world status. In spite of the fact that a good part of this general sociological picture of the Church may be true, what is ignored is that as the first Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians shows, there was a clear picture of the Church already within the first or second decade after Christ's resurrection, and it was shared by the big majority of the disciples. When conflicts arose owing to the entry of Gentiles into the Church and there were divergent opinions concerning continuation of circumcision and dietary and other regulations of Judaism the Apostles met in council and made clear decisions without allowing any split in the Church. As a community gathered by the Spirit around the Risen Christ it has a definite identity. The gradual evolution of the clergy and the juridical structure of the Church, though it was influenced by the Jewish sacerdotalism and other political and social factors, was generally recognized as approved by the Spirit. Letters of St. Clement of Rome and of St. Ignatius of Antioch show how the early Church was concerned about splits and conflicts that arose in the absence of the great Apostles, and how through many ecumenical councils the whole Church moved to establish standards of orthodoxy through creeds and liturgical formulations. Ignoring these various religious factors that were an integral part of the social set up of the history of the Church is an injustice to sociology itself.

### **Secular Humanism and Interreligious Dialogue**

Secular humanism has its greatest impact today in Christianity's approach to other world religions. Christianity's original message was that through the Incarnation the Son of God has definitively entered human history and that through his death and resurrection the course of history itself has radically changed under the direct guidance of the Lord of history. This is Gospel or "good news" for all human beings and not any special privilege of Christians alone. If the Incarnation is, as Christians believe, a historical fact, every human being has a right to know about it, and a refusal to proclaim the Gospel is a denial of that right. But in the view of the secular humanist this is too tall a claim for one religion alone to make over against so many other world religions, each one of which claims to have a message not only for its members but for

all human beings. So the question for the secular humanist is not whether there is any clash between these different claims nor whether these different claims are valid or not, but rather how to bring down all religions to an equal footing in our secular world.

In this secularist outlook, the approach to other religions is classified as exclusivistic, inclusivistic and pluralistic. Most religions are exclusivistic in character. Why should I belong to this religion unless I felt that it is the true and the best among all religions? But exclusivism is judged arrogant since it claims that one's religion alone is true and salvific, and that other religions are false or only partly true and salvific. Inclusivism says that other religions are already implied in one's own religious tradition. Here the humanist considers the diversity of religions a real scandal. According to him by creation itself all human beings are called to self-transcendence and to an intimate union with God. Jesus Christ is the example and model of that self-transcendence. so if the legitimacy of Christianity is made known, it would appear that other religions are already implied in it and that the so-called non-Christians are anonymous Christians. But this inclusivist attitude which claims that one's religion included all other religions, and that one had nothing to learn from others is perceived as rather condescending and hence offensive.

So the only alternative left in a humanistic approach to religions is pluralism. But there are different types of pluralism. One extreme is that all religions are equally salvific for those who believe in them. The first argument for this is the universal salvific will of God, that God has no partiality for any particular religion and that he is easily available to all who seek Him. But this does not exclude that God wills that each one should seek his salvation freely making use of all the means at one's disposal. The second argument is that every religion contains some truth and hence also a certain revelation of God. But the fact that every grain of sand and every drop of dew contains an element of divine goodness and a reflection of divine goodness, and that even the crooked actions of human beings, in as much as they show their intelligence and cleverness, contain a shadow of goodness and of the ultimate Good, does not mean that any knowledge even of God is by itself salvific. Even the devils have a certain knowledge of God which helps only to

make their punishment more intense. This parallel pluralism of religions does not take sufficiently into consideration the unity of the divine economy of salvation for all human beings, in view of the common history and one common destiny of the human race.

Some like Peter Winch argue that only the committed followers of a religious tradition who are initiated into its law observing mood can actually understand it. So each religion with its sacred books, rituals and beliefs is unintelligible to others. But this goes counter to the very basic capacity of intelligence to communicate ideas to others. It also denies the unity of human experience even regarding the transcendental meaning of being, reality and human life.

Another type of religious pluralism is proposed by Jainism which acknowledges the limitation of all religions. Its analogy for religions is the description of an elephant given by four blindmen who went to explore the animal. One of them who felt the side of the animal thought that the elephant was a wall; another who touched one of its legs opined that it was like a tree; a third who felt its tail came out with the idea that the elephant was a rope and the fourth who examined the animal's tusks gave the idea that it was a couple of spears. Buddhism first proposed this analogy to show that no religion had any correct idea of God. Jainism took up the same simile to show that all the four major religions of India were partially correct and partially wrong. So the best approach for all was to respect other religions and in collaboration with them form a universal religion. But when Jainism states that it is a better religion than others because it recognizes its limitation, while others do not, no other religion is willing to accept such limitation. A Hindu does not feel that he has to get his faith approved by the Muslim mullah next door, nor does the Buddhist think that his faith is imperfect unless it is complemented with the brahma-consciousness of a Hindu guru.

Perhaps the best solution to the conflicting claims of religions was given by Emperor Asoka who in his rock-edicts exhorted that followers of all religions should respect the beliefs of other religions as well, since thereby they would be doing honour to their own religions. For all religious people are trying to give expression to

their basic religious faith, and what others are emphasizing may be a dimension of their own faith, which they may have neglected.

But the more dangerous attempt of secular humanism to bring all religions to a common agreement is the proposal of a humanistic religion that appeals to the secular common denominator of all religions. This was the type of religion Thomas Jefferson proposed for the Americans to strike a certain harmony among people of all faiths, uniting them in the basic human concerns of all, leaving the particular differences of each religion for its members to cultivate on their own without disturbing others. He was speaking in a context in which all the citizens had their basic Christian faith, but were fighting against each other on account of their sectarian differences. The proposed reconciliation among religions meant that each religion understands its identity and commitment preferentially in terms of its relationship with other religions in a multi-religious context, that each religion while defining itself, should take into account sister religions as a theological and spiritual constituent of its own self-identity. Indian secularism has provided a socio-cultural milieu in which the different religions of our land could exist together in an organic way. India too is a religious country in which politics, economics, sociology and every other aspect of life are viewed in the light of a basic religious consciousness. So if the focus is on universal values like love, service, and forgiveness found in all faith experiences, faith would become relational, and there would be ongoing dialogue among religions but no dialectics or efforts to convert others to one's own religious view point. But why should dialogue which is the encounter of different persons with differing faith visions, be denied dialectics. When you present your faith to another and help him present his own faith in the best light there is scope for both self-criticism and other-criticism. Why should anyone be denied the freedom solely in the matter of religion to appeal to the reason of other human beings since the right to challenge the views of other people is the basic right of rational, free beings? According to Aristotle what constitutes a city is not that all citizens agree on everything, but that they can carry on a conversation about various issues without insisting on unanimous consent.

Secularization is a necessary process in the modern world, but secularism in the name of rational humanity is counter productive.

Secularization is the healthy attempt to make its own method and unique scientific approach to problems. For long centuries all the sciences were under the stewardship of religion, and even philosophy was called a handmaid of theology. That situation has changed today. History, politics, psychology and sociology are sciences on their own right like mathematics and physics. But secularism even in the name of humanity is a denial of human transcendence. Tying down man completely to the physical world and its experience is a denial of human nature itself. Hence humanistic secularism is a real contradiction in terms. This is particularly so in theology, which by its very nature states that human beings are called to a higher destiny in the experience of the Supreme Being.