CHRISTIAN HUMANISM AGAINST FUNDAMENTALISM & SECULARISM

Capps Lecture 2
University of Virginia
November 2007

John W. de Gruchy
University of Cape Town

In my last lecture, I explored some of the dynamics that characterise the world in which we live and sought to locate the construction of Christian identity within that context. In this lecture I want to go further and explore the tension between the modern resurgence of religion, especially fundamentalism, and the secularism and secular humanism that have come to dominate in many countries in Western Europe that were formerly part of Christendom. In doing so I will attempt, in relation to both trajectories, seek to define further what I mean by Christian humanism as an alternative to both, and an essential tool for the reconstruction of Christian identity. But first, let me make a few further comments by way of setting the scene.

In 1991 a Parisian based political scientist, Gilles Kepel, published a book with the intriguing title *The Revenge of God.*[1] His subject was the resurgence of religion and especially Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the modern world. After two centuries in which religion had been on the retreat, at least in the Western world, centuries during which the "death of God" had gradually but inexorably become an accepted assumption for many people (the United States being a notable exception), belief in 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, and since then it has become a highly significant part of the global landscape. The recent role played by Buddhist monks and nuns in political protest in Burma is but the latest example of this worldwide phenomenon.

The return of religion has not gone unchallenged, nor is the return of religion on a path of inevitable success. Symbolic of this challenge has been the recent publication of Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* which is a strident call to abandon religion and embrace atheism. Religion, Dawkins argues, is one of the major sources of division, dehumanisation and violence in the contemporary world, and has always been so. And while his main target is religious fundamentalism, he also insists that more liberal forms of religion, while better, actually aid and abet religious fundamentalism by giving religion a more

[1] {Kepel 1994}

acceptable face. The reception that *The God Delusion* has received indicates that it has spoken to many people, not least students, who are disenchanted with the faith of their parents and religion more generally, or those who are simply angry about the way in which religious militancy and intolerance is intruding into public life. Symptomatic of this is the way in which a political commentator on BBC TV recently prefaced his remarks by saying that he was an atheist in much the same way as others might say they are gay.

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 increasingly grabbed the headlines. Parallel to this was the institutional 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 I was a theological student both in South Africa and Chicago. That was a time of theological ferment, liturgical renewal and ecumenical commitment within the so-called mainline churches.

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 more adequately address the 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 like Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth 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.

Bonhoeffer's proposals were tentative and sketchy and, as a result, have often been misinterpreted and misunderstood. And the notion of "secular Christianity" 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 rebirth of 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. Probably none would have been happy with the 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 to the Christian vision, 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 different from each other, yet all expressing important dimensions of the legacy. My proposal that we retrieve Christian humanist is an alternative, not least, as I will show, because it is a clear antidote to both Christian fundamentalism and a secularism that has lost concern for the common good. But I am fully aware that perhaps he vast majority of Christians today are undoubtedly more enamoured by those forms of Christianity that offer security and certainty amidst cultural crisis and global 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. So let us explore the ethos of Christian fundamentalism before turning our attention to the equally problematic rampant secularism that characterises much of our contemporary world.

Christian Fundamentalism

Let me stress at the outset that I have no desire to attack fundamentalists as people or believers – least of all in North Carolina or Virginia!. There was a time when I was one, and I remain indebted to those who played a positive role in my Christian development. So though I disagree strongly with their views, I do not wish to belittle them as human beings, suggest that my views make me a superior person or better Christian, or to disparage their faith and commitment. In fact it would be a contradiction of what I mean by Christian humanism to do so. But this does not mean that I should not challenge Christian fundamentalism as an ideology, especially given the dangers that I believe are inherent in its creed, the one religious and theological and the other social and political.

The term fundamentalism was coined in the United States in the nineteen-twenties to describe those Christians, led by some eminent scholars and theologians, 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. While all of these have their foundation in Scripture and the Christian

creed, they were – and still are -- interpreted in a way that was increasingly associated with an obscurantist and reactionary mindset and worldview.

There is little if any respect for difference, no acknowledgement of the validity of alternative readings of the Bible, or the value of the insights derived from other sources of knowledge and wisdom, including Christian tradition itself. Coupled with this is a particular, narrowly conceived, understanding of what it means to be a Christian. For that is the nature of fundamentalism whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Hindu: it is a closed mindset that holds absolutist convictions that exclude all who disagree as heretics of one kind or another. No one has expressed this more clearly than Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi in Britain, in his book, *The Dignity of Difference.* "Fundamentalism" he writes there, "like imperialism, is the attempt to impose a single way of life on a plural world. It is the Tower of Babel of our time."[2]

Christian fundamentalists have, of course, every right to their beliefs and their ethical stance. But the religious danger, as I perceive it and have experienced it, is that many Christian fundamentalists who experience life and thought beyond the boundaries of the fundamentalist camp, not only break with fundamentalism but also turn away from Christian faith. Having been deeply committed to Christ and ardent in their witness and worship, their faith crumbles when they encounter alternatives that are attractive and yet do not fit the fundamentalist mould. Then, like falling dominoes, each part of the fundamentalist package falls apart. No wonder Dawkins' *The God Delusion* finds a ready market. For many this is a great liberation, but it is also a great sadness that they could not discover other ways to be Christian with equal conviction and greater integrity and that, for many, they have lost touch with the spiritual resources that give meaning to life.

What, then, about the social and political dangers of Christian fundamentalism? Christian fundamentalism does not normally have the same extreme character that we now associate with Islamic militant fundamentalism, though certain forms of Christian fundamentalism do pose a similar threat to the well being 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 and especially the founding of the State of Israel, a dispensationalist interpretation of the Bible, 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 West, has transformed significant parts of Protestant fundamentalism into a strident political ideology.

---

[2] {Sacks 2003:201}

And, significantly, it has, in the United States, become a dominant force in mainstream cultural life and, from this base, spread widely around the world, and has taken root with a vengeance in churches in Africa and Asia. One reason for this is the way in which fundamentalists have been able to develop their communications capacity in all the media, and the extent to which they have engaged in missionary work. The rest of us cannot cry foul, we can only acknowledge that we have been outplayed and seek to do better.

There is a close connection between the religious and theological dangers of Christian fundamentalism on the one hand, and the social and political dangers on the other. At the heart of the fundamentalist enterprise is not only an understanding of the authority of the Bible based on the belief that it is infallible, and therefore beyond critical analysis, but also a dispensationalist hermeneutic or reading of both the Bible and the "signs of the times" that is also regarded as inerrant.

"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 drives Christian fundamentalism.

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 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. Christianity was certainly born amidst apocalyptic longing for the birth of a Messianic utopia, but whenever it has espoused such utopianism as a political agenda for the sake of the elect, it has turned its back on Jesus the Messiah who was crucified in part because he refused to fulfil such expectations.

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 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 cynics would say, 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 in the name of God. Our cause is God’s cause and therefore ends can justify means. 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. But 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 gains much of its popular 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. No wonder many people turn to secular humanism as a more noble and worthy philosophy of life.

Secular Humanism, Secularism and Scientism

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 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.

The positive fruits of modernity have been many, not least amongst these being democratic forms of government and scientific achievement, and secular humanism as espoused by many of the great moralists, scientists, philosophers and democratic is an attractive creed. But the outcomes of modernity have not all been positive as we well know, and may be considered under two headings: secularism and scientism, both of them aberrations of secular humanism and not to be confused with it. Secularism has replaced God with the self and its own interests rather than the interests of humanity; scientism 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. Driven by individual self-interest, promotes a life-style 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 and the environment.

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.

We must, as I have already stressed, distinguish secular humanism from both secularism and scientism. Of course, there are similarities. Like secularism, secular humanism is wary of any absolutes whether religious, political or otherwise, and in affirming that "human beings are the measure of all things", rejects Christian beliefs that seem to undermine human dignity and potential, taking the contrary position (reason, not faith; humanity, not God; goodness, not original sin). But unlike secularism, secular humanism since the Enlightenment became the defender of values that were previously advocated by Christian humanists: 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. And they increasingly recognise the need to recover a sense of transcendence and a spirituality appropriate for today.

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. We cannot live "by bread alone', that is, unsupported by a grace that comes from beyond ourselves. Anything less denies our full humanity.

One of my favourite authors is the nineteenth century English novelist George Eliot. Few novels in English can match her two greatest and last novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, for their literary brilliance and depth of insight. Recently I read Peter Hodgson's excellent account of the theology that is expressed in her fiction. Eliot began as an evangelical, turned towards a secular humanism, but gradually espoused a spirituality that embodied the deepest insights of Christian faith even though she was no longer a Christian in any confessional sense. In speaking of one of her characters, Romola, in the novel of that name, Hodgson writes: "In her, Renaissance humanism and religious faith clashed and fused, humanism losing its impulse towards hedonism and despair, and faith its impulse toward the miraculous and fanatic."[3] An apt description of George Eliot herself, and of many others who, in distancing themselves from fundamentalist religion have not lost faith or moral commitment. Elliot was not, writes Hodgson, "an advocate of severing a humanitarian ethic from religious faith, but the faith itself must be reimagined if it is to engender rather than hinder human flourishing."[4]

It is precisely this that motivates me and others in exploring Christian humanism as an antidote to fundamentalism, secularism and scientism, in the struggle for a world that is more compassion and just, more interested in human rights and flourishing than in self-interest whether individual or national, more concerned about the environment in which we live than in short term development, and more aware of the need for spiritual resources to do so. Christian humanism provides an alternative worldview and spirituality to fundamentalism and secular humanism that is Christian in character and commitment, *and therefore* humanist in concern.

Christian Humanism

The roots of Christian humanism 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 late second century when Christian

[3] {Hodgson 2001:87}
[4] {Hodgson 2001:90}

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 emphasis on "the human" that Christian humanism began to emerge as a recognisable and distinct approach to being Christian. 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 (and keep in mind that by no means all Renaissance humanists were Christian by conviction even if Christian by default) sought to restore and affirm human dignity through a recovery of classical culture and a proper reading of Scripture. In this way Christian humanists sought the transformation of a moribund Medieval scholastic culture and the renewal of the church. This, in turn, prepared the ground for the Protestant Reformation.

Not much was heard about Christian humanism by that name following the Reformation when religious intolerance and wars became the order of the day. But the phrase resurfaced in the twentieth century in a Europe exhausted by conflict and totalitarian regimes, notably in the writings of the French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain.[5] In fact, Catholics generally were more inclined to use the term than Protestants. Amongst them were three remarkable Jesuits of: the palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin, the martyr Alfred Delp, and the theologian Karl Rahner. For Teilhard, Christian humanism expressed his conviction that the advances of evolutionary science and cosmology needed to be integrated into Christian faith; for Delp, who died like Bonhoeffer at the hands of the Gestapo, it provided the starting point for a new movement within the church that took human beings rather than religion as its starting point;[6] and for Rahner it referred to the conviction that "Christianity proclaims a genuine and `radical humanism.'"[7] From a Protestant perspective, there is, much in Bonhoeffer's legacy to suggest that it is an appropriate term to describe his own position as it developed.[8] And today there is a growing retrieval of Christian humanism, notably in the writings of Bill Schweiker of the University of Chicago.[9]

Christian humanism has also been appropriated by some in post-colonial, post-apartheid southern African. Kenneth Kaunda, a former President of Zambia, described himself as such in a book published in 1966 entitled *A*

---

[5] Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism* (1938).

[6] Alfred Delp, *Prison Writings* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), 94.

[7] Karl Rahner, "Christian Humanism," in *Theological Investigations Volume IX* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, ?).

[8] See my unpublished paper "Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Christian Humanist", presented at the International Bonhoeffer Congress, Rome, 2004.

[9]

Humanist in Africa.[10] The humanism of which he spoke was not the secular humanism of the West; it was Christian, but not one based on a Christianity that contributed to the misery and enslavement of African people but to the renewal of the continent. But perhaps no one has encapsulated the term more, both in terms of his theology and his life, than Desmond Tutu. His theology of *Ubuntu* is precisely what a genuine Christian humanism is about, and his life of courageous struggle on behalf of human dignity and rights, irrespective of ethnicity, religion or gender, has been a beacon of compassion and sanity.[11]

In advocating Christian humanism, then, I am not suggesting that we return to the Renaissance, except by way of critically retrieving insights that remain of value. So what, then, would a contemporary restatement of Christian humanism look like?

First of all, the term Christian humanist reminds 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. But when such identities become more important than our primary identity as human beings, something has gone wrong. The all-important question 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.

The biggest threat to the world derives from a refusal by so many to honour this common humanity. A 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. For this reason, 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.

Secondly, Christian humanism stands in contrast and contradiction to all dehumanising forms of religion. 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.

---

[10] Kenneth D. Kaunda Kauda, *A Humanist in Africa: Letters to Collin M. Morris* (London: Longmans, 1966)

[11] See Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

Thirdly, 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 radical 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.

Christian humanism provides further guidelines for us in constructing our Christian identity as citizens of this world who are committed to following Jesus Christ; guidelines that enable us to avoid bad religion on the one hand, and the equally bad acids of secularism on the other. In briefly mentioning these, as I come toward the end of my lecture, I am aware that they may sound a little elitist. In a sense they are, but let me add two rejoinders. The first is, on examination, each of them can be embodied by any Christian irrespective of their background, education or status in society, though they would need to be reworked and stated in ways that may be more appropriate. The second is, my focus in this lecture has primarily been on those of us who have a somewhat privileged position in society, and certainly in the wider world. So let me suggest what Christian humanism means for us as we accept our common humanity in the name of Christ and seek to be his disciples in the world:

- Christian humanists have always insisted on the importance of education, not simply to obtain skills but to acquire wisdom.
- Christian humanists have always respected difference, yet they have been equally committed to seeking and standing for the truth.

- Christian humanists have always been committed to the wellbeing of their country, but they have been critical patriots, placing justice above national interests.
- Christian humanists have always encouraged human creativity and cherished beauty.
- Christian humanists have always been concerned to ensure that scientific and technological development serve the common good.

Why do I think these are necessary today in our global situation? The reasons should be obvious in a world imperilled by foolish decisions, blighted by xenophobia and political spin, overwhelmed by images of ugliness, and threatened by the very technologies that we have created for our benefit.

At a time when many secular people are aware of the pitfalls of modernity and turning elsewhere for meaning and hope, it may well be that the insights of a critically reworked Christian humanism provide both the language and the perspective for which they are searching. A humanism that affirms genuine transcendence and human well-being rather than one that promotes religiosity or fundamentalist ideas and values; a humanism that is both embodied in the world, and yet driven by a sense of the transcendent. Indeed, a radical humanism that affirms what is true, good, beautiful and human, and seeks the transformation of all that is bad, ugly and inhuman.[12] Certainly, people of other faith traditions, Jewish or Muslim for example, with whom I have spoken, respond positively to this position in terms of their own faith commitments. And they do so because it represents a timely counter and alternative to the rampant secularism and religious fundamentalisms that surround us and threaten to destroy human community.

[12] See Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1976), 602.