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The Theological Library and the Tradition of Christian Humanism

By JAROSLAV PELIKAN

Theology is a creation of the human spirit. It is, I am persuaded, vastly more than this. Indeed, if it is right theology, it is a creation of the Divine Spirit Himself. I am speaking as a university professor and scholar in the field of the humanities, to which theology as a creation of the human spirit belongs, and as one who believes that today the creativity of the human spirit needs all the help it can get. At this hour in the time of man, when not only the Christian faith but the very heritage of the liberal arts is under attack, we dedicate a new theological library to the glory of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the freedom of the human spirit under God. A theological library is a declaration of dependence upon the heritage of learning and upon the God of history. But it is also a declaration of independence from all the tyrannies — ecclesiastical and intellectual, anti-ecclesiastical and anti-intellectual — that would shackle the freedom of the Christian man to pursue his research untrammelled by anyone except the God in whose service is perfect freedom.

For a theological library is nothing less than a bastion in defense of the tradition of Christian humanism. Although the term "Christian humanism" may speak in an accent that has become strange to modern ears, it is the best term I know for the rich and varied legacy of Christian thought and art upon which our entire culture has been nourished and is being nourished still.

Historically, much of this tradition of Christian humanism belonged to an epoch in human history that is over, the age when the church and things Christian determined the tone and the style of the palace and the university. The statistics of global population show Christendom as a shrinking minority, and the facts of contemporary culture prove that its share of influence in the life of the mind and the spirit is shrinking too. Yet the theological library is neither a mausoleum nor a museum nor even a monument, for it does not celebrate a golden age in the past but marshals the resources of tradition for the challenges of an open future. The tradition of Christian humanism, as a living tradition, does not depend for its validity upon the dominance of institutional Christendom in the affairs of men and of nations. It does depend upon, and contribute to, an understanding of man that transcends the flat, two-dimensional world of appetite, sense, and measurement in which most men live. For those who are willing to see, it provides a vision of a world that is more than this world; and for those who believe, it provides the promise of the kingdom of God. Even those who do not believe must find in the tradition of Christian humanism a resource for deepening their understanding and appreciation of the world. It is, to be sure, for an Augustine or a Luther or a Newman that this library has been built, but a Goethe or a Mozart or a Berenson can find inspiration and learning here as well.

Anyone, then, whether a Christian believer or not, who fears the dehumanization of man and who believes that the mind of man was made for more than the here and now can find in the heritage of Christian books one of his main lines of defense. And defense is what the tradition of Christian humanism appears to need "against all its enemies, foreign and domestic," against those who attack it in the name of a limited view of God and against those who attack it in the name of a fragmentary view of man. By an ironic series of events in the history of recent Christianity the study of the tradition of Christian humanism has come under fire from certain Christians. Recognizing that some of the most serious damage to cherished Christian teachings and practices has been caused by the work of scholars, these defenders of the faith, well-meaning perhaps but actually subversive, have tried to build a Maginot Line against scholarship and to make a virtue of obscurantism. Thus they have in fact robbed themselves and their churches of the power for religious and theological renewal that can come only from the heritage of books and study. Fools for Christ's sake there have always been, and must be; but even these are nurtured at the bosom of alma mater, the tradition of Christian humanism. Christian theology is never an easy thing. Then why should this generation of theologians be forced to subsist on K rations and be deprived of the bountiful larder of tradition?

But the most pernicious campaign against Christian humanism does not come from the militant remnants of pietism in the churches, or even from the barbarism of the atheist, materialist, and Marxist. It comes rather from those, both inside and

outside the churches, who regard the legacy of humane learning as just so much ballast and who are impatient to get on with "the real business" of society and of the church. A theological seminary is, alas, always in danger of apostasy to rationalism and unbelief; for the adversary still goes about seeking whom he may devour. But he can devour through corrosion. A subtler and in my view a more clear and present danger is that a theological seminary in the United States will become a trade school, surrendering the substance of the faith not to overt apostasy but to a pious pragmatism that is more interested in gimmicks and techniques than in scholarship and doctrine and that is so bent upon success in the future that it will bury the past and thus lose the future. American Christianity of every denomination has a built-in resistance to the tradition of Christian humanism; for example, much of the development of the missionary enterprise and of evangelism in the American churches has been shaped by this resistance, with consequences that still distort the shape of the Christian message.

But this resistance within the churches is parallel to a cognate attitude in the total American community. Historians of the United States have spoken of this as a frontier mentality, opposition to ideology, or even innocence of doctrine. Within the American academy this attitude expresses itself in a preference for vocational training over liberal education and for the sciences over the humanities, but for engineering over both the sciences and the humanities. Thus we have managed in the last two decades of "applied science" to use up scientific research accumulated during a century or more, until now the scientific

community is desperately crying that funds and men be found, amid moonshots and cancer research, for vital fundamental research that may not "get anywhere" except to truth. When Albert Einstein published his paper on the general theory of relativity in 1916, its implications for the study of the use of high-energy particles could not be discerned; these were not visible until Hiroshima changed our world forever. But Einstein's studies of energy and the subsequent debates over quantum mechanics must be justified on their own grounds, as investigations into the nature of physical reality, whether or not they lead eventually to bigger bombs or cheaper electricity. But the American public, even parts of its literate minority, will still bracket Albert Einstein and Henry Ford together as "scientists," with Ford perhaps receiving a slight edge because his work led to practical results.

In a society where this heresy of results has become orthodox dogma, we have the temerity to dedicate a theological library which does indeed contain books about how to preach, how to administer a parish, perhaps even how to run a movie projector; but whose "meat and potatoes" collection consists of the great, the near-great, and the not-at-all-great of Christian history. In a culture where an antique is anything more than a century old, this library stands as a guide to the buried treasures in two millennia of Christian learning. And in an educational system where C. P. Snow's "two cultures" are often cajoled into an armistice of mutual impoverishment by the necessity of getting a job done, this theological library is a manifesto that our society is not complete unless it pays attention to the voice of its religious past and present,

that our culture cannot come to terms with itself unless it consults the heritage of philosophy and theology, and that our educational system is doomed to superficiality unless it looks beyond the length and breadth of technology into the depth dimension that only the legacy of great books and great ideas can furnish.

But that fair legacy has come on hard times in our day; everyone claims to care *about* it, but no one seems willing to care *for* it. The physical sciences must be on their guard lest government and industry corrupt them with grants for research and publication; investigation in the biological sciences, or at least medical research, has less money than it wants but more than it has ever had before; even the social sciences, lately arrived at academic respectability, can persuade foundations and government that the behavior of human beings or of rodents demands subsidized study. But the humanities are a Cinderella at the hearth. Among the large and wealthy institutions of our land only publishing and religion would seem to have an immediate stake in the support of humanistic learning. But except for endowments like this library, both of them seem so concerned about competing with the mass media by publishing "nonbooks" and by addressing the lowest common denominator of our culture that the humanities, to paraphrase a friend, rattle a tin cup with nothing in it but a Phi Beta Kappa key.

Still this library shines as a bright symbol of possible change, a portent of the coming-of-age of American humanistic scholarship. What E. M. Butler once called the tyranny of Greece over Germany has for the past century been the tyranny of Ger-

many over America. The research of our universities in history, language, literature, philosophy, and theology has been dominated by the presuppositions, the methods, and even the terminology of the Continent; my own discipline of historical theology has been practically a private preserve of German *Gelehrte*. But the development of our culture is apparently coming to the point, not of scholarly isolation from the international community of learning but of maturity and independent creativity. A field like literary criticism is a prime example of the maturity that American scholarship has been able to attain; and I would not be surprised if "close reading" became a technical term in German, like "common sense" and "outsider." Having been a professor in the university most closely identified with the Great Books and having become now a professor in another great university that is still dedicated to the humanistic tradition, I can hail, if not a renaissance, then at least a genuine spark of life.

If all this American research into history and literature is not to make itself ridiculous, it will need, among other things, the source materials that only the theological library can provide. How often has "A house divided against itself cannot stand" been attributed to Abraham Lincoln rather than to the Gospel According to St. Matthew? In the index to the 10th volume of the definitive German edition of the works of Luther, "If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit" is listed as a proverb. Scholars who specialize in the writings of John Milton are usually more at home in the politics of the Cromwellian Commonwealth than they are in the devotion and the theology of English Puritan-

ism. No one would dare to study the history of India without becoming acquainted with Hinduism; yet the history of the United States is often written in blithe ignorance of what the churches have taught and how they have worshiped. When an acquaintance of mine who was teaching philosophy in another Eastern university asked one of his classes for the source of Thomas Hobbes's notion of the covenant that lies at the foundation of the social order, the students came up with Plato or Aristotle or Stoicism or the feudal contract, but none of them suggested the Old Testament; and I am afraid that some of their other professors might not have known the difference.

These anecdotes, which could be multiplied ad infinitum, all serve to illustrate an ignorance more catastrophic than an occasional professional faux pas. They dramatize the tragic leaching out, during the past century, of a substance of Christian humanism that has belonged to our traditions of civility and to our very language since the peace of the church and the Christianization of the tribes. Even men who did not go to church or who did not believe what they heard when they did go still read Scripture and knew its history and language. Thomas Jefferson was a church member, but certainly not an orthodox Christian; he was, in fact, much further removed from the body of the Christian tradition than was Abraham Lincoln, who was not a church member. But both Jefferson and Lincoln were steeped in the lore of the Bible, which informed their thought and influenced their action. I am not speaking as a propagandist here, peddling the romantic notion of some Christian never-never land where everyone

believed and obeyed the Gospel; the church has always been a little flock. But I am speaking as an educator and man of letters, lamenting the Biblical and theological illiteracy of otherwise learned men, who have had to read Carl Jung to discover what Christians intend by Baptism and the Eucharist.

There may be some who will regard this theological library as a retaining wall against sophistication, but it is the precise opposite. A generation of pseudo-sophisticates have studied James Joyce but not Jesuit theology, Dostoevsky but not the Divine Liturgy of Chrysostom, Bach but not the Lutheran chorale, Martin Buber but not Moses Maimonides. To them this theological library issues an invitation to genuine sophistication. If most of the universities in the United States cannot amass the bibliographical wealth represented here—and very few of them either can or will—they will have to catalog their lacunae and turn for help to centers like this one. Indeed, there will probably be no center in the Christian world that will match the scholarly resources of the city of St. Louis for research into the tradition of Christian humanism, as the Fuerbringer Library and the Foundation for Reformation Research add their riches to the Pius

XII Memorial Library and the new library of Washington University. And from such centers as these, please God, a new humanism can arise, unabashedly traditional and yet fearlessly radical, Christian in its ground and orthodox in its deepest convictions, but humanistic in its devotion to learning and letters. If it is to arise, it will need what this library can supply; if it is to arise, it had better be soon!

The church does not exist to produce a Christian humanism. It exists to glorify God and to make disciples for Christ by the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. But history suggests that when the church is faithful to this, its primary task, seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, then a Christian humanism is one of the things that is added to it. Then the human spirit, shriveled and starved by the half-gods of its own making, can emerge from the cave into the sunlight of the Creator's good world and can unfold its blossoms to His glory. I am sure that I speak for all who cherish this vision of the essential humanity of man when I wish this Fuerbringer Library and my beloved alma mater, which it serves, a generous measure of devotion to its heritage and a full portion of blessing upon its mission.