

Blessed Are the Merciful: The Church's Mission in an Age of Humanism

James G. Bushur

Introduction

After more than a decade as Director of Deaconess Formation at Concordia Theological Seminary, I have learned a simple truth. The church's mission of mercy is driven by two factors: the love proceeding from God and the need proceeding from one's neighbor. The church's mission is nothing other than the integration of these two factors. Yet, these two factors are not static principles or mere rational concepts; they are living powers—theological forces—that are ever at work, giving shape to the church's life. These two factors are like the two hands of a sculptor pressing into the moistened clay. These factors are the two powers by which the Spirit conforms the church to the body of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

These two factors—God's love and the neighbor's need—give shape to the church's liturgical life and her mission in the world. First, the church's life is shaped by her participation in the movement of love that originates within the Holy Trinity. "God is love," writes Saint John, the beloved apostle, "and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16).¹ For John, God's love is a supernatural power generated out of the Father, perfectly embodied in his Son, Jesus Christ, and ever sanctifying the church through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Yet, already here in John's claim there are the seeds of controversy. John does not say "God is anger," "God is sorrow," or "God is fear"; nor does he call the church to abide in God's sorrow or to be instruments of God's anger. Sorrow, anger, and fear are secondary passions; they arise as reactions to sin, death, and evil. Love is different. The Father's love for the Son subsists eternally in the Holy Spirit; and it is nothing other than this love that defines the church's mission. Saint Paul agrees with Saint John. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (Rom 13:8). For the apostle, love is the "bond of perfection" (Col 3:14) and the most excellent virtue even among those that "abide" (1 Cor 13:13).

Yet, the love subsisting in the Holy Trinity is not merely a transcendent ideal that remains inaccessible to humanity. Rather, the Father gives to humanity a place

¹ All Bible translations are my own.

James G. Bushur is the Carl and Erna Weinrich Professor of New Testament and Early Church Studies at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. He can be contacted at james.bushur@ctsfw.edu.

within his eternal love for the Son. The mystery of the human being begins when God creates him in the image of the Son through the inbreathing of the Spirit. Thus, from the beginning, God is, as the ancients liked to say, the *philanthropos*—the lover of mankind.² This divine *philanthropia* means that God is open to humanity; God's love has eyes, ears, and sensory perception through which he allows the needs of mankind a place within his own life. The hearing of Abel's blood crying from the earth moves God to act for the sake of righteousness (Gen 4:10). The perception of Israel's cries in bondage moves God to act for her salvation (Exod 2:23–25). Receiving Jesus' intercession, the Father is moved to receive sinners in his mercy (Matt 27:46; Luke 23:34; Heb 12:24).

These two powers—the love proceeding from the Father and the need arising from the neighbor—are both essential to the life of the church; both must be attended if the church is to be the church in our contemporary age. While pastors are concerned primarily with the proclamation of the love that proceeds from God, deaconesses are trained to aid the church's vision and hearing to be ever open and attentive to the needs of mankind. In relation to these two powers, the intercessory character of the church's liturgical and sacramental life needs to be recovered. In the church's cry for mercy—*kyrie eleison*—human suffering is sanctified. In the church's liturgy, human need is received in God's presence and becomes a salutary power calling for God's love to manifest itself through the body of Christ in the fellowship of the Spirit.³ Thus, the church's intercession before God already contains within itself the divine calling for the church to embody God's mercy and love for those in need. In this way, *leitourgia* (the church's participation in God's love) and *diaconia* (the church's participation in human need) are intended to be united, integrated, and inseparable. The church gathers around the altar, not only to receive the love

² Invoking God's *philanthropy* is common in ancient liturgies. See the Liturgy of Saint Basil as well as the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. In the fourth century, God's *philanthropy* became a theological foundation for trinitarian readings of Scripture. Athanasius defines God's *philanthropy* as the gracious gift of divine sonship, which he emphasizes against his Arian opponents. See *Discourses against the Arians* 2.59, where Athanasius writes, “But this is God's kindness to man [φιανθρωπία], that of whom He is Maker [ποιητής], of them according to grace He afterwards becomes Father also; becomes, that is, when men, His creatures, receive into their hearts, as the Apostle says, ‘the Spirit of His Son, crying, Abba, Father.’” In *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1890–1899), 4:380 (hereafter cited as *NPNF*) (= *Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 161 vols. in 166 [Paris: Migne, 1857–1866], 26:273 [hereafter cited as *PG*]).

³ A noteworthy example of the church's intercessory character is seen in early Christian Eucharistic Prayers. Following the Words of Institution, the church expanded the eucharistic “remembrance” (*anamnesis*) of Jesus to include petitions of remembrance for all the faithful, the needy, and the “least of Christ's brethren” (Matt 25:40). See especially *The Liturgy of St. James*, in R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cumming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), 88–99.

that proceeds from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, but also to bring the needs of the neighbor into God's presence. Through the church's intercession, human suffering receives a hearing so that it can inspire compassion and move the church to respond in divine mercy.

Human Need in an Age of Demiurgic Humanism

"When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt 9:36). God's eternal love takes the form of mercy when he sees humanity. In this seeing, Jesus opens his inner being to human suffering. His eyes are the doorways through which Jesus gives human need a place within his own heart. His perception of human suffering moves Jesus to compassion, inspires his sympathy, and leads to his mercy. This internalizing of human suffering is perfected in Jesus' crucified body. The Son of God becomes man, not merely to provide a solution to human suffering but also to know it, to bear it, to be present together with us in it. Jesus is the suffering servant who, in the first place, comes not to heal but "to bear human infirmities" (Isa 53:4).⁴ This truth means that the church's discernment of human need must involve a theological dimension. While medical, sociological, and psychological analyses are vital, the true character of human suffering can be discerned only theologically. If the church is to attend to human need, then she must consider it through the eyes of Jesus Christ. How does God see the human being in front of me? What is the true character of my neighbors' need in the eyes of Christ? The discernment of human suffering is a deeply theological question; yet, it remains a neglected aspect of most theological curricula.

⁴ See Athanasius, *Discourses against the Arians* 3.31–32. In this passage, Athanasius emphasizes the importance of the verb "carried" or "bore" in Isaiah 53:4. He writes,

And the Word bore [ἐβάρσταξεν] the infirmities of the flesh, as his own, for his was the flesh [αὐτοῦ ἦν ἡ σὰρξ]; and the flesh ministered [ὑπουργεῖ] to the works of the Godhead, because the Godhead was in it, for the body was God's. And well has the prophet said "carried [ἐβάρσταξε];" and has not said, "He remedied our infirmities [ἐθεράπευσεν]," lest, as being external [ἐκτός] to the body, and only healing [ἰασάμενος] it, as he has always done, he should leave men subject still to death; but he carries our infirmities, and he himself bears our sins, that it might be shown that he has become man for us, and that the body which in him bore these, was his own body; and, while he received no hurt himself by "bearing our sins in his body on the tree," as Peter speaks, we men were redeemed from our own affections [τῶν ἰδίων παθῶν ἐλυτρούμεθα], and were filled with the righteousness of the Word [τοῦ Λόγου δικαιοσύνης ἐπληρούμεθα]. (NPNF², 4:410–411 [= PG, 26:389])

“Post-Christian” Societies and the Rise of Humanism

So, how does God see the need of humanity in our present age? Certainly, the crowds around us remain harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Yet, what is the form of their harassment and the character of their helplessness? It is often asserted that Western cultures are transitioning into “post-Christian” societies. “Post-Christian” is an adjective describing the social, political, and cultural decline of Christianity. “Post-Christian” means that Christianity is losing the power to rule. It is losing the public authority to legislate, govern, and punish. It is losing the power to define and shape social arrangements and institutions. It is losing popular respect as a source of moral goodness. It is no longer publicly revered as a reliable depository of truth.

The description of Western societies as “post-Christian” is certainly true but testifies to a rather one-sided perspective. The “post-Christian” language describes this cultural transition only as it relates to Christianity. The term “post-Christian” expresses a Christian lament for what has been lost. However, Christianity’s decline has not been a voluntary one but is due to the rise of something else. So, what is it that is on the rise? What is it that shapes and forms modern presuppositions? Is it a philosophy, a political movement, an economic interest, a cultural phenomenon, or a religious conviction? These questions have led to a number of books diagnosing the Western transition to a “post-Christian” society.⁵ Typically, these books offer insightful analyses from a variety of perspectives. However, there are few that offer a theological analysis of the “post-Christian” transition.

A quite thorough and thoughtful theological analysis is found in a book by Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian*.⁶ In his work, Ashley draws attention to the growth and expansion of humanism. Humanism has its roots within medieval Western Christianity. Generally speaking, classical humanism consisted in a cultural movement committed to the dignity of the human being and his potential for excellence.⁷ In medieval Europe, the common man was compelled to

⁵ For an introduction to this literature, see Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). Trueman’s analysis draws from Charles Taylor, Philip Rieff, and Alasdair MacIntyre. For Trueman, these three authors offer helpful philosophical, psychological, and ethical concepts that form the foundation for his own cultural diagnosis. While Trueman’s work is insightful, it lacks the theological perspective necessary to expound the root of human identity.

⁶ Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (St. Louis: St. John Paul Center, 1985).

⁷ For a summary of classical humanism, see Lewis Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 139–170. Spitz roots the rise of Renaissance humanism in the preference for “classical studies in the school curriculum” (139). This interest in curriculum grows out of the conviction that “classical languages . . . are living instruments that were used to give expression to man’s highest culture” (141).

accept a rather passive disposition. He was simply to accept his place within the vast hierarchy of the cosmos somewhere between angels and worms. In the Renaissance, classical humanism has its roots in the call for man to shed his passivity and discover his power to act, to improve his circumstances, to produce beauty and wealth, and to reform the world around him.⁸ The Renaissance man need no longer be content with the world order as presented to him. Armed with reason, wealth, and expertise, man can change the world around him and contribute to its order.

From Classical Humanism to Secular Humanism

According to Ashley, humanism breaks from Christianity due to the corruption and intolerance of church hierarchies and the horrific violence between Catholic and Protestant nations.⁹ “These ferocious, fanatical wars of Christian against Christian,” Ashley writes, “made the claims of Christianity as a religion of faith and love appear incredible and called forth the new religion of Humanism.”¹⁰ Diverging from Christianity, humanism’s commitment to the dignity of the human being takes a new form. Classical humanism transitions into secular humanism, which stresses the freedom and autonomy of the human being from Christian bureaucracies.¹¹ “I think, therefore I am.” Descartes’ famous declaration rejoices in the emancipation of truth from corrupt authorities and in its universal accessibility to the autonomous human mind. Yet, secular humanism’s faith in human autonomy arises not merely from the negative factor of Christian intolerance and violence but also from the positive factor of science and its technological success. Through scientific discovery, the power of the human being to control the world around him was no longer a

⁸ See Spitz, *Renaissance*, 1:159–164. Spitz recognizes the impact of humanism on civic life. Spitz references Giannozzo Manetti, who was asked by King Alfonso of Naples concerning the duty of man. Manetti responded, “To understand and to act” (163).

⁹ See Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 58–59. Ashley rejects three common explanations for humanism’s separation from Christianity. First is the argument that “the rise of modern science . . . made it impossible for intellectuals . . . to believe the Christian world-view.” Second is that “the renaissance of Greek learning . . . shifted the focus . . . from clerical interests . . . to the interests of the laity.” Third is the idea that a “rising educated middle class” began “to rebel against the narrowness of scholastic theology and its authoritative enforcement by the Church.” Ashley points out that none of these factors—the development of science, increased interest in human affairs, or the rise of skepticism—were inherently anti-Christian. Thus, none of these factors adequately explains the anti-Christian orientation that humanism gradually adopted.

¹⁰ Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 60. For example, the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) developed into a general European conflict, pitted Protestants against Catholics, and devastated Germany.

¹¹ See Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 60–61. Ashley writes, “Thus to many thoughtful people of the seventeenth century, and particularly to those interested in economic and scientific progress, Christianity seemed hopelessly confused, warring against itself, and precariously maintaining a semblance of unity only through a superstitious, paranoid suppression of thought imposed by an obsolescent, bloated bureaucratic tyranny of altar-and-throne in the name of a tyrant God.”

philosophical theory; it was a proven fact demonstrated by technological innovation and the production of unparalleled wealth.

Secular humanism's rejection of Christianity can be seen in *Humanist Manifesto II*, published in 1973. Ashley describes this work as "a very fair statement of views much more widely held which have their own inner logic."¹² This statement outlines the humanist vision for the future of the human race. It begins by distinguishing itself from Christianity and all other theistic religions:

We believe, however, that traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species. Any account of nature should pass the tests of scientific evidence; in our judgment, the dogmas and myths of traditional religions do not do so. Even at this late date in human history, certain elementary facts based upon the critical use of scientific reason have to be restated. We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race. As nontheists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity. Nature may indeed be broader and deeper than we now know; any new discoveries, however, will but enlarge our knowledge of the natural.¹³

The transition from classical humanism to secular humanism consists in the rejection of the "supernatural." As for the ancient Greeks, the cosmos becomes a closed system. This view of the cosmos leads to the conviction that humanity can be defined only within the confines of the natural world. In addition, the fulfillment of the human race must, likewise, be found within the horizons of the natural world. The manifesto continues,

Promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful. They distract humans from present concerns, from self-actualization, and from rectifying social injustices. Modern science discredits such historic concepts as the "ghost in the machine" and the "separable soul." Rather, science affirms that the human species is an emergence from natural evolutionary forces. As far as we know, the total personality is a function of the biological organism transacting in a social and cultural context. There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body. We continue to exist in our progeny and in the way that our lives have influenced others in our culture.¹⁴

¹² Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 54.

¹³ *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973), American Humanist Association, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/>.

¹⁴ *Humanist Manifesto II*.

The rejection of any life after death leads to a definition of the individual human person as merely one creature among many in the natural order. The human being's distinction from the animals is reduced to mere function; human value is found in volition and performance. Thus, the secular humanist vision seeks to enhance and expand individual autonomy and social responsibility. "The preciousness and dignity of the individual person is a central humanist value. Individuals should be encouraged to realize their own creative talents and desires. We reject all religious, ideological, or moral codes that denigrate the individual, suppress freedom, dull intellect, dehumanize personality. We believe in maximum individual autonomy consonant with social responsibility."¹⁵ The equation of human freedom with autonomy identifies the individual with his power to will and his capacity to act. To be happy and fulfilled, the individual must not merely understand his desires and intentions but also have the freedom and capacity to express and fulfill them through his actions in the world. Thus, the manifesto concludes, "We urge that parochial loyalties and inflexible moral and religious ideologies be transcended. We urge recognition of the common humanity of all people. We further urge the use of reason and compassion to produce the kind of world we want—a world in which peace, prosperity, freedom, and happiness are widely shared. Let us not abandon that vision in despair or cowardice. We are responsible for what we are or will be. Let us work together for a humane world by means commensurate with humane ends."¹⁶ For secular humanism, the ideal human being is an activist whose value is commensurate with his capacity to effect, change, and control the world around him.¹⁷

From Secular Humanism to Demiurgic Humanism

Humanism begins within medieval Christianity as a movement seeking to enhance the dignity of the human being and to expand his capacity for excellence. The corruption and violence within Christendom and the success of the sciences leads humanism to separate itself from Christianity and to take a new independent form. Classical humanism becomes secular humanism, which is defined by the rejection of any reality beyond the natural world and the conviction of humanity's autonomy. "We are responsible for what we are or will be," as *Humanist Manifesto II* puts it.

¹⁵ *Humanist Manifesto II*.

¹⁶ *Humanist Manifesto II*.

¹⁷ Ashley argues that humanism has redefined the political spectrum. "The differences between left and right . . . is no longer between Humanists or Marxists and Christians, but between Humanists and Marxists, or (as in the United States) between Humanists who stress 'social welfare' and Humanists who stress 'free enterprise.'" Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 57–58. Ashley refers to Thomas P. O'Neill, *The Rise and Decline of Liberalism* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1953).

For Ashley, however, this movement from classical to secular humanism is not the end of the story. There is a new stage that needs to be recognized and considered. "Now in this century (20th century)," Ashley writes, "we have at last taken a giant step, greater than our step onto the moon. We have begun to remake not only our environment, but our very body-selves."¹⁸ Throughout the age of Newtonian science, the human mode of existence remained defined by biological necessity and the need to cooperate with natural laws. Science was committed to the discovery of natural laws and to increasing humanity's efficient cooperation with them for the good of all. With Einstein, the scientific vision of reality changes in a fundamental way. For Newton, the energy of creation that moved the world and shaped matter was, as he called it, "action at a distance." The origin of this creating energy remained transcendent in God and far removed from human control. However, for Einstein, the energy that shapes life is neither inaccessible to man nor an "action at a distance." Matter itself is a form of energy. The energy of creation is present and accessible within matter itself. Einstein's relativity and quantum theories "eliminated the last vestiges of the metaphysical aspects of Newtonianism." Ashley continues, "The general and special theories of relativity give us a cosmos which can be expressed purely mathematically."¹⁹ The properties and secrets of this creating energy can be known and, in theory, controlled.²⁰

The profound effects of Einstein's revolution are just beginning to unfold. Humanity is no longer seeking the power to cooperate with nature but the power to create. This creative power is not, of course, the power to create *ex nihilo*; but it is the power to orient the energy of creation for one's own ends. The ancients identified such power with the Demiurge, a lower, secondary god who cannot create something from nothing but can reshape and reform the world according to his own purpose. Humanity's quest for this demiurgic power is becoming evident in our ability to map the human genome and to synthesize new chemical substances that do not occur in nature. Science is making this demiurgic power available to the human being. Thus, secular humanism is transitioning into a demiurgic humanism, in

¹⁸ Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 6.

¹⁹ Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 65.

²⁰ Ashley describes the meaning of Einstein's theories for the human body. He writes,

Thus our familiar human bodies turn out to be realities inaccessible to our imaginative understanding in terms of our sensible experience of these bodies. To say "I am my body" really means that I am a field through which waves are passing in a period of time. Moreover the "field," the "waves," and the "time" turn out to be no more than mathematical relations justified by ingenious experiments which can be interpreted by several theories. The significance of these mathematical theories about my body is not that they have any experiential meaning for me, but that they promise a better control over my body. (Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 66)

which man is not merely autonomous but now also seeks the power to remake himself and the world around him.

Can humans remake themselves?²¹ This question is the central, most fundamental challenge of our age; and the religion of humanism is answering it with an enthusiastic “yes.” Here the scientific enterprise must be distinguished from the religion of humanism. There is nothing in scientific discovery that is inherently incompatible with Christianity. It is humanism that is using scientific discovery to serve its own religious purposes. The religious purposes of demiurgic humanism are oriented toward a new end. While secular humanism promoted human autonomy, demiurgic humanism seeks the power to create and achieve human fulfillment in this world. Secular humanism may be summed up in the aphorism “I think, therefore I am.” Yet, demiurgic humanism seeks to give thinking the power of creating. Thus, demiurgic humanism is a natural religion that is promoting a new vision of the human being. This demiurgic anthropology can be summed up in the following characteristics.

1. **Human Identity Is Self-Originating:** The root and origin of one’s identity is found within the individual self. Through psychological analysis, the individual can reach self-awareness by discovering the passions and desires that move at the depth of his being. These passions are like a psychological DNA that defines one’s unique personhood and determines his particular path toward fulfillment. Rooted within the self, one’s identity is no longer an immutable given. Through scientific innovation, an individual’s identity can be understood, controlled, and changed according to one’s volitional capacity.
2. **Human Identity Is Self-Directing:** While the origin of identity lies in the irrepressible passions of the psyche, the role of the individual’s will is to choose the path that brings these passions to fulfillment. The power of volition is positioned between the inner psyche and the outer body as the mechanism by which one’s identity comes to expression in the world. Thus, human volition seeks not only the freedom and autonomy to pursue personal fulfillments but also the technological power and increased capacity to control and direct one’s identity toward new, even unimagined, possibilities.
3. **Human Identity Is Self-Fulfilling:** Self-awareness leads to the need for self-actualization. The identification of the self with inner desires and passions leads to the pursuit of fulfillment in the created world. This fulfillment is found not only in material possessions but also and especially in passionate

²¹ Ashley raises a similar question at the very beginning of his work: “Can we create ourselves?” Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 3. Since the verb “create” entails the idea of generating something from nothing, it is perhaps better to recast the question in terms of the freedom to gain control over creation and “remake” it for our own benefit.

experiences in which one's inner impulses can be fulfilled in new and previously unimagined ways. The promise of limitless possible fulfillments in the natural world requires not only freedom to pursue them but also the technological capacity to create them and bring them to realization.

The Expansion of Human Need in Western Societies

As demiurgic humanism expands in "post-Christian" Western societies, human need is also expanding and taking specific forms. The pursuit of demiurgic power is fueling corporate technocracies. Unable to participate in this technocratic progress, many are being victimized, estranged, and disaffected. The human needs associated with demiurgic humanism may be characterized in correlation with its view of the human person. First, the location of identity in one's inner passions and desires is producing unprecedented confusion, instability, narcissism, and loneliness. Rooting one's identity in the self is like balancing a needle on its point. Such a narrow base is inherently unstable and far too fragile to endure.

Second, the emphasis on individual volition is leading to the new virtues of our contemporary age—ambition and aggression. Instead of a true freedom of the will, the individual is experiencing an internal fatalism in which the will is bound to one's passions. Authenticity means that one *must* act according to his passions. One "must be true to himself," so it is said. If one is to be happy, he *must* pursue the fulfillment of his desires.

Third, the need to find fulfillment in the created world is producing an epidemic of depression. Most lack the power, money, and resources to achieve personal fulfillment. Even among the elite, personal desire for wealth and power is proving insatiable. The desire for a million dollars only leads to the desire for a billion dollars. The relentless pursuit of a limitless fulfillment in the created realm is leading to unprecedented levels of depression and despair.

Finally, the great casualty of this humanist vision is love of one's neighbor and mercy to the one in need. In demiurgic humanism, the neighbor is seen as a mere commodity to be used for one's own benefit and pleasure. Western cultures are being restructured around social arrangements in which individuals consent to the mutual abuse of one another for the sake of pleasure, wealth, and power. Human value is found in one's functional performance for the sake of his employer, his community, his friends, or his family. Consensual social arrangements are dissolved when one party no longer performs in a way that benefits the other. The demiurgic man is not given to patient contemplation but to a desperate activism; only through his performance can one pursue, create, and achieve his own fulfillment.

Responding to Human Need in God's *Philanthropia*

"Yet, a Samaritan . . . came to where he was; and beholding him, he was moved to compassion" (Luke 10:33). The Son of God's advent in the flesh means that he allows human suffering to shape his own life. Yet, Jesus' response to the needs of his neighbor is not uniform or monolithic. For the victim at the side of the road, the Samaritan's compassion performs basic human care. In relation to Zacchaeus, Jesus offers companionship. Approaching Mary Magdalene, Jesus turns her sorrow into joy.

So, how should the church give form to God's love in a context of demiurgic humanism? To meet the challenges confronting Christianity, the church should begin by recognizing her position in "post-Christian" societies. The church is declining into a position of weakness. Christianity is losing cultural power and so cannot triumph through popular consensus. The church is losing political power and so cannot gain victory through political messaging or successful elections. The church is losing intellectually persuasive power and so cannot control the intellectual presuppositions of the debate. Thus, the church's response cannot be reduced to apologetic argument or doctrinal catechesis. So, the question confronts us: How does the church fulfill her mission from a position of weakness?

Divine Mercy: The Power Perfected in Weakness

Christianity's decline as a political and cultural power in Western societies is self-evident and can be demonstrated by objective data. Yet, for Christians, the transition to a "post-Christian" society is more than objective fact; Christians are experiencing this transition as a deeply subjective crisis of personal and corporate identity. In "post-Christian" societies, Christians are experiencing all the passions associated with real loss. The public loss of authority, influence, and control is leading to the communal loss of security, confidence, and self-worth.

The Christian community's grief due to the loss of power in this world encourages two different inclinations. First, there is the temptation to react in despair, to withdraw from the world, and to isolate in smaller, protected, and purist communities. This despair sees the world as the enemy of God, an enemy to be feared, disdained, and avoided. Second, there is the temptation to react in anger, to aggressively seek to regain worldly power, and to reassert Christian authority and justice. This anger also sees the world as the enemy of God, one to be attacked, conquered, and ruled. Yet, both reactions tend toward self-serving perspectives; so concerned with what is lost, Christians are tempted to assume either defensive or aggressive postures. Yet, both tendencies inhibit the church's attentiveness and sensitivity to the needs of her neighbors and the divine mission of mercy.

Christ has built the church, not to serve the passions of fear, sorrow, or anger, but to embody his love. “A new commandment I give unto you,” Jesus says, “that you love one another” (John 13:34). The “post-Christian” transition may be a salutary one for the church if it leads her to reconsider the true nature of her mission. The loss of power in this world may be difficult for Christians to accept and manage. Yet, the questions must be asked: Is it the mission of the church to rule this world? Is it to withdraw from the world? Did Christ build the church to be an earthly political power or to isolate into purist communities? Has God called the church to be driven by anger, zealous to rule the world, or to be governed by fear that surrenders in despair?

Both tendencies threaten to distort the church and her mission in the world. The church cannot withdraw from the world, neglect the needs of the neighbor, or ignore human suffering. Conversely, the church is not called to rule the world or to seek an earthly, millennial reign. Rather, the church’s mission to the world is unique; her life is generated for a different purpose than those of earthly nations. And so, she bears a different power. In his final words at the Last Supper, Jesus distinguishes the nature of the church’s fellowship from the kingdoms of the world. “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship . . . but not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the one who serves. For which is greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:25–27). Our Lord’s great desire is “mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt 9:13, 12:7); and the church is built to embody this desire. Yes, the church must engage the world; yet, she is called not to rule but to serve. Instead of an instrument of divine wrath, she is built to embody divine mercy: “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36).

The powers and principalities of this world operate by the power to kill; and with the power to kill, they hold the classical powers of justice—legislative justice, distributive justice, and punitive justice. Yet, as Martin Luther came to see, the church lives by a different kind of justice, a justice that is peculiar to God. The church serves that divine justice by which God makes sinners righteous.²² The

²² See Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist, 2013), 11–12. Kasper argues that the “traditional metaphysical starting point of the doctrine of God brings with it an additional problem for talking about divine mercy.” Justice as an attribute of God could be understood only as it was “in ancient philosophy, namely, as giving each his or her due (*suum cuique*).” For Kasper, legal justice (*iustitia legalis*), distributive justice (*iustitia distributiva*), and retributive justice (*iustitia vindicativa*) “raise the question of how divine mercy is to be brought into harmony with retributive justice. If God is merciful and does not punish the sinner, how can that be compatible with divine justice?” The medieval answers to this question tended to understand justice “as a higher point of view, to which one subordinates mercy.” Kasper sees Martin Luther as an example of one who wrestled with this question and came to articulate

church embodies the power by which the Father vindicates his Son and all who share in his divine sonship. This kind of justice is simply a form of the Father's love for the Son. Rather than fear, sorrow, or anger, the church must seek to remain grounded in the love of the Holy Trinity. Yes, the society surrounding the church may be the enemy of God, but Christ calls us "to love our enemies," "bless those who curse us," "pray for those who persecute us" (Luke 6:27–28). This divine love may take the form of weakness in the world, because it does not wield the power to kill. However, it is the only power perfected in weakness, because it consists in the power to raise the dead, to generate the children of God, to integrate many into one body, and to bring the renewal of all things.

Human Identity and the Mystery of the Holy Trinity

As described above, demiurgic humanism rejects any supernatural reality. Human identity has its ontological source and fulfillment within the natural world. However, this ontological limitation is concealed under the promise of limitless creative power. Demiurgic humanism preaches an optimistic gospel. Through control of creating energy, the human being can increase his capacity to remake himself and to fashion new, even limitless, possibilities for personal fulfillment. Our contemporary age promotes a human identity that is optimistic, progressive, and intrinsically unstable. This demiurgic anthropology is proving to be a difficult challenge for culturally conservative intellectuals. A strategy that emphasizes presuppositional truths, original created orders, and immutable natural laws will likely have a limited effect. Our contemporary context is no longer inclined to passively accept reality as it is. Created things are being changed, even manipulated genetically, for the benefit of society.

There is an alternative to this presuppositional apologetic strategy. Instead of a merely natural anthropology, the church needs to recover a theological anthropology grounded in the incarnation and the narrative of the gospel. According to Holy Scripture, the human being is not merely one creature among many confined within the natural realm; rather, he receives life from that breath that proceeds from the very face of God. "Let us make man in our image and after our likeness" (Gen 1:26). Humanity has its origin within the trinitarian council.²³ The fish are formed for the

"that, according to the Bible, God's justice is not God's punitive justice, but rather God's justifying justice, which includes his mercy."

²³ The interpretation of the plural pronoun in Gen 1:26 with reference to the Trinity was common in early Christian writings. See, for instance, Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 4.20.1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts et al., 10 vols. (Buffalo/New York: Christian Literature/Scribner's Sons, 1885–1903), 1:487–488 (hereafter cited as *ANF*). Irenaeus writes,

seas, birds for the sky, and beasts for the field, but humanity is formed for the fellowship of the Holy Trinity.²⁴ According to Saint Paul, the mystery of humanity's creation in the divine image is unveiled when the Father conforms his saints "to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:29). Christ Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15). "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transfigured into his image from glory unto glory even as it comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18).

From the beginning, human identity entails a divine dimension that cannot be confined within the natural world or explicated by the natural sciences. Rather, the human being is a divine mystery that is finally revealed in Jesus Christ—his birth from the Virgin, his death on the cross, his resurrection, ascension, and glorious return. As Saint John says, "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). For Holy Scripture, human identity is progressive in the truest sense. The fullness of human identity is revealed in the end; it is constituted in the resurrection of Christ, the "perfect man" (Eph 4:13). The first Adam became the ground of fallen humanity, but true humanity as God intended it is revealed in "the last Adam," Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:45). The incarnation demonstrates that humanity is designed to share in divine Sonship.²⁵ The mystery of the human being is that the Father has created him to have a place within his eternal love for the Son. The church's anthropology begins with her confession of the Holy Trinity. The church proclaims a truly progressive and truly optimistic gospel. The church shares in that love, by which God can always make man more in the future

It was not angels, therefore who made us, nor who formed us, neither had angels power to make an image of God, nor anyone else, except the Word of the Lord . . . For with him [the Father] were always present the Word and Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom, freely and spontaneously, He made all things, to whom also he speaks, saying, "Let us make man after our image and likeness;" He taking from himself the substance of the creatures, and the pattern of things made, and the type of all the adornments in the world.

²⁴ Gen 1 emphasizes geographical settings as the source from which the animals are created and in which they are designed to live. "Let the earth sprout vegetation" (Gen 1:11); "Let the water swarm with swarms of living creatures" (Gen 1:20a); "Let the birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens" (Gen 1:20b); "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds" (Gen 1:24). However, humanity's design is not limited to any geographical setting but arises from the communion of the Holy Trinity. Thus, he is given lordship over all the geographical spheres of creation—the earth, the seas, and the sky (Gen 1:26).

²⁵ See Eph 1:3–10. Saint Paul understands Christ as the unveiling of "the mystery of his [the Father's] will" (Eph 1:9). This "mystery" of the divine will is identified in Eph 1:5 with God's love that "destined us for sonship through Jesus Christ." For Paul, the mystery of divine Sonship has always been present, even before the foundation of the world, but has been made known and bestowed only through Jesus Christ and his Spirit.

than what he is in the present.²⁶ The church shares God's philanthropic vision that sees every human being as one created to bear the Holy Spirit, to be conformed to the image of the Son, and to call God "Abba, Father."

This trinitarian approach to the human being needs to be recovered if we are to engage our contemporary context. The trinitarian vision of humanity exposes the fundamental weakness of demiurgic humanism—namely, its stunted and restricted anthropology. While our culture promises the power to create new and limitless possibilities for human experience and fulfillment, these possibilities remain bound to a world in bondage to cruelty, corruption, and death. No matter how long he lives, how well he performs, how powerful he becomes, or how diverse his experiences, the human being will never find true fulfillment within the confines of the natural world. With each new experience, human desire grows only more insatiable. After living as rich and abundant a life as possible, King Solomon can conclude only that "life under the sun" is a "vanity of vanities" (Eccl 1:2). For Scripture, human identity cannot be reduced or limited to experiences, functions, performances, or any conditions of the natural world. Human identity is theological; it proceeds from the breath of God's own face and will find fulfillment in only one place—in communion with the Holy Trinity.

The church is built to embody the fellowship of love that unites the Father, Son, and Spirit as one God. "God is love," writes Saint John, "and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16). For John, the Father's love for the Son entails within itself a *philanthropia*, a love for the "brother" (1 John 4:20–21). This divine love is the power that generates children of God in the waters of Holy Baptism; it is the power that makes sinners righteous through the proclamation of the word; it is the power that integrates many members into the one fellowship of Christ's body at the eucharistic table. This divine love moves the church to love her neighbor. To love the neighbor is to ascribe to him a God-given dignity. It is to regard each human being as one created for communion with the Holy Trinity. It is to believe, teach, confess, and live the optimistic truth that, for the one standing

²⁶ An optimistic view of humanity was at the heart of early Christianity's rejection of Gnosticism. For the Gnostics, the human body had no eschaton beyond death. Thus, Irenaeus argues for the eschatological glory of humanity in communion with God. He grounds his dynamic and optimistic view of the human being in God's primordial call for humanity to "increase" (Gen 1:28). Irenaeus writes,

And in this respect God differs from man that God indeed makes, but man is made; and truly, he who makes is always the same; but that which is made must receive both beginning, and middle, and addition, and increase. . . . [B]ut man receives advancement and increase toward God. For neither does God at any time cease to confer benefits upon, or to enrich man; nor does man ever cease from receiving the benefits, and being enriched by God. For the receptacle of his goodness and the instrument of his glorification, is the man who is grateful to him that made him. (*Adversus haereses* 4.11.2, in ANF, 1:474)

in front of me, there is a path that leads to communion with God no matter the circumstances.

Human Freedom and the Mystery of Christ Crucified

Perhaps the most attractive characteristic of demiurgic humanism is its emphasis on human freedom. Freedom is identified with the radical autonomy of the individual and his power to create his own fulfillment. The individual does not exist to serve an authoritative order; rather, he has the right, even the duty, to assert his own personal identity, to interpret the world according to his own opinion, and to order his environment according to his own passionate impulses. The rise of individual autonomy has received support in a number of ways. It has gained energy as a reaction to Christian political power and its cultural legalism. (Here, we might consider libertarian reactions to movements such as prohibition or increasingly restrictive limitations on abortion.) It has been justified by the secular academy that defines the human person sociologically and psychologically in terms of the power to give order and meaning to one's own world. It has been promoted by a popular culture that encourages the actualization of the individual's autonomy. Finally, it has been fueled by the proliferation of technologies that enable consumers to overcome their limitations and to fulfill even the most irrational fantasies.

In response to demiurgic humanism, the church needs to recover a theological anthropology that engages the issue of true human freedom. First, the church must challenge the identification of human freedom with individual autonomy and demiurgic power. The ancient world was marked by a fatalism in which cosmic forces dictated the individual's destiny from the outside. Our contemporary age is also marked by a fatalism; yet, it is a fatalism that manifests itself from within the individual's psyche. Attempts to seek freedom from external authorities are leading to a slavery to one's own inner impulses. Demiurgic humanism treats the passionate desires that move at the depth of the human nature like a psychological DNA that defines one's authentic identity. Immoral lifestyles may be promoted as expressions of personal freedom from external oppressive authorities; yet, they also represent the inner bondage of the individual to certain impulses that move below the will at the depth of one's being. These passions are experienced as an inner necessity; one must actualize these impulses in order to live a fulfilled, healthy, and happy life.

Thus, the church must challenge the idealistic notions of individual autonomy with the real experience of bondage to the passions. It is a common practice for Christians to define sin as a transgression of God's law that results in our guilt before his judgment seat. This perspective is vulnerable to the charge of our contemporary context that sin is merely a legal status imposed on man by an external authority.

Demiurgic humanism is well equipped to challenge such a perspective. Our context needs the church to recover sin as a cosmic oppressor that victimizes the human being.²⁷ Rather than merely a legal violation of God's transcendent will, sin is also an inner, enslaving power that binds one to the dust of the earth. We experience this bondage in the visceral desires and passions that rage at the depth of our being. Hunger and thirst, the most basic of desires, move at a level below the will and reveal our intrinsic bondage to death. It is this revelation of man's intrinsic slavery that needs to be recovered if the church wishes to challenge the individual autonomy preached by our contemporary culture. This inner bondage is exasperated by the devil, whose temptations seek to exploit man's passionate nature.²⁸ Satan not only awakens passions but also especially tempts us to seek their satisfaction in false fulfillments. Thus, the church must not only reveal the intrinsic slavery of man but also expose the false fulfillments promoted by the world.

A focus on the passionate dimension of the human being sets the stage for the church to proclaim the gospel of true human freedom manifested in Christ. By his incarnation, the Son of God embraces full and complete solidarity with our passionate nature (Heb 2:14–18). He knows and, therefore, can sympathize with the desires and impulses that move at the depth of our humanity. He experiences the fullness of the devil's temptations that seduce humanity toward false fulfillments. In the temptation account, the devil seeks to exploit Jesus' hunger, his desire for authority and prosperity, and his desire to preserve his own life. These temptations reach their fullness as Jesus journeys to Golgotha. Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane shows that he fully experiences the human fear of death. Later, on the cross, the taunts of bystanders seek to inspire his rage and a visceral desire for revenge. However, Jesus directs all these passions toward their only true fulfillment in his Father. "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). In response to the devil's first temptation, Jesus does more than quote the Law; he endures the consequences of his obedience by refusing the path of self-fulfillment

²⁷ See, for instance, Rom 5:12–21, where Paul personifies sin and death as ruling powers that have "increased" and "reigned." See also Gal 4:3, which describes humanity as "slaves of the elemental spirits of the universe." See also 2 Cor 4:4 and John 12:31, where the devil is described as "the god of this age" or "the ruler of this world." This cosmic perspective of evil continued in early Christian writings. Irenaeus understands the devil as the "ringleader of the apostasy" or initiator of the fall. See *Adversus haereses* 4.40.1 and, especially, 3.23.3, in *ANF*, 1:521, 456. Tertullian also sees the devil as the paternal source of sin. See Tertullian, *On Patience* 5, in *ANF*, 3:709–711.

²⁸ See Jas 1:13–15, which describes temptation, sin, and death in terms of conception, birth, and growth to maturity. It is in the passions that the devil's temptation generates evil; his temptation gives birth to sin, which, "when it is full-grown brings forth death." See also Gal 5:16–26, which speaks of the conflict between "the desires of the flesh" and "the desires of the Spirit."

and suffering an extended hunger in his own body.²⁹ The first step in the way of Christ is self-denial. “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus says, “let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24).

Throughout his life, Jesus demonstrates a paradoxical freedom. He is free both to do what he does not desire and to refrain from what he does desire. “Not as I desire, but as you desire” (Matt 26:39). For Jesus, the true fulfillment of his desires is not found in the world but only in the glory of his Father. Such a conviction gives Jesus the freedom to live an unfulfilled life in this world. Jesus is free to reject the false fulfillments offered by the devil—bread, mammon, the Davidic kingdom, or the authority of all the earth. “Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and come follow me” (Matt 19:21). Jesus’ call to the rich man is a call to freedom—a freedom in which the fulfillment of one’s human identity is found in God, not in the things of this world. The fullness of human freedom is manifested in the glory of Jesus’ resurrection. In his resurrection on the third day, Jesus’ humanity is no longer confined within the boundaries of this fallen world but receives its place in the Father’s own eternal glory.

The resurrection of Christ is the source of true human freedom—the freedom to deny oneself, the freedom to live an unfulfilled life in this world, the freedom to love one’s neighbor and lay down one’s life for him. The freedom of Christ’s resurrection should give form to the church’s life. To be sure, Christ’s humanity is our freedom from sin, death, and the devil; but even more, his humanity is the fulfillment of our passionate nature, as we too are given a place in the eternal love of the Holy Trinity. In Christ, we bear the freedom that belongs to the children of God. “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). In the church, this divine freedom takes the form of mercy as we offer our lives as a living sacrifice and attend to the needs of our neighbor.

Conclusion

The challenge of our age is the question of human identity and especially the question of human fulfillment. Can the human being remake himself? Can he gain the power to create his own fulfillment in this world? Demiurgic humanism answers with an enthusiastic “yes” and promotes the promise of limitless possibilities for the future of humanity. This humanist vision offers a very idealistic and progressive view of the human being. There is no limit to what we can become. However, hidden

²⁹ See Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 5.21.2, in *ANF*, 1:549–550. Irenaeus sees the temptation of Jesus as a deeply passionate encounter. For Irenaeus, the primary intent of the devil is to tempt Jesus to repudiate the desires of his flesh. Yet, Jesus “acknowledges” his human nature and even embraces its weakness. “The corruption of man,” Irenaeus asserts, “was done away with by the Lord’s want of food in this world.” True human freedom is embodied in Jesus’ self-denial.

under this optimism about humanity lies an anthropology that is confined within the impassable boundaries of the natural world. No matter how many times the individual remakes himself, he will remain enslaved to the powers of sin, death, and corruption that rule this world.

In response, the church must recover the fullness of humanity's theological identity. Created in the divine image, humanity is God's chosen medium for the revelation of his glory. "The glory of God is the living man," writes Saint Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, "and the life of man is the vision of God."³⁰ The mystery of human identity is present from the beginning but only fully revealed in Jesus Christ, who brings humanity into the glory of his Father. The fullness of human identity is revealed only in the end. Man's passionate desires will never find fulfillment within the natural world as an end in itself. Man was made for communion with the Holy Trinity. Thus, the psalmist sings, "O God, you are my God. . . . My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So, I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you" (Ps 63:1–3). Human fulfillment can be found only "in the sanctuary"—that is, in the fellowship of Christ's body and blood.

Thus, the true need of our humanist context will not be served merely by new cultural movements, new political parties, new legislative agendas, new schools with new apologetic arguments, or even a new Christian nation. While such things may aid our struggle against the evil powers at work in this fallen world, they remain insufficient for the fulfillment of the church's mission. Christianity is losing the power to govern this world. So, how does Christianity fulfill its mission from a position of weakness? This question needs to be given a central place in our formation of future pastors, deaconesses, and other church workers. Christianity may be losing the power to rule, but what remains to us is the power that is perfected in weakness, the power of divine love. Rather than Christian rule, Christian cultural revivals, or even Christian schools, the world needs the church. The world needs for the church to be what Christ built her to be—a community that is unlike any mere earthly institution, a community that embodies the *philanthropia* of the Holy Trinity, a community that loves mankind as Christ has loved us and laid down his life for us.

To Christ be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.

³⁰ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 4.20.7, in ANF, 1:490.