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Collateral Readings in Humanism

OTTO F. STAHLKE

THE HUMANITIES have been a pleasant avocation and even a vocation with this reviewer. Man's recorded thoughts and actions as well as his artistic care for his habitat are cause enough for a lifetime of interest; it is an interest which the learned and the less learned can share, be it even the friend who believed that it was good to buy a Sunday paper for the purpose of maintaining his reading skill: "It can get away from you."

The great humanists of the Renaissance occupied themselves with the record of the Greeks of which the Romans were a pale reflection. Their humanism glorified man in his accomplishments without dismissing God wholly from the picture; it was a later humanism that carried the idea of "man the measure" to its ultimate conclusion. The concept has become a complicated and confusing one which defies definition but encourages description beyond all bounds. Humanism is the consciousness of man's proud rise to civilization and the magnificent development of his unlimited potential; it is the arrogant self-assertion which passes judgment on all gods and men; it is the sophisticated insight, and cynical, that all ultimate answers are forever elusive; it is the human rise above a beastly cynicism which graces man and elevates him above the dog-eat-dog world. Humanism is a pursuit of knowledge which wants to enlighten, to explore, to express the most basic thoughts in human experience.

Stringfellow Barr offers an excellent introduction to humanistic reading in a volume imposingly called *The Will of Zeus*.¹ It is the Greek story from Helen of Troy to Alexander the Great which is the basis of humanism. Barr has no ax to grind. He tells the thrilling story found in the Hellenic literature, full of conflict and agony while revealing at the same time a noble simplicity and silent grandeur. The modern interpreters' battle over the Apollonian or Dionysian character of Greek art and literature does not concern Barr. As an introduction to the *literae humaniores*, *The Will of Zeus* is unexcelled; the liberal arts have hardly had a more convincing advocate.

In *The Hemlock and the Cross*² Geddes MacGregor writes on humanism *ex professo*, professing a conservative humanism which wants no truck with the "hominism" of many contemporary writers (p. 53). By "hominism" MacGregor mean the scientific analysis of man's sickly normal behavior as practiced in psychology, anthropology, sociology and the other new humanities (in President Wilson's phrase). Where humanism sees man as heroic and almost divine, "hominism" makes him the victim of degrading forces and utterly abject.

MacGregor traces the history of humanism from ancient times in a comprehensive fashion, bearing gifts in the form of some delightful anecdotes. He detracts from his book when he finds it necessary to pour out his venom upon Christianity. Confucius fares better than Christ. In a book by the title *The Hemlock and the Cross* one should expect that humanism should be discussed under the theme "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" The book is an excellent source for a study of the relation through history between the study of Christian theology and the classical authors. The definition of humanism experiences an expansion: Confucius is in; eventually Christ is accepted also, but the Cross has yielded much of its uniqueness. The union of the hemlock and the cross is the goal of the author.

Karl Jaspers appears to be more positive in his approach to Christianity than MacGregor, at least a greater humanistic maturity is evident in the superior calmness with which he can introduce the Christian story into his humanism. Jaspers writes on *The Great Philosophers*.³ It would seem an innovation that Jesus, Buddha, and Confucius are included among the philosophers; is comparative religion now a phase of philosophy? Or does Jaspers aim at a humanistic synthesis which would include the religious founders?

Karl Jaspers, the great Heidelberg teacher of philosophy, arranges his studies in a unique manner. There are four paradigmatic individuals: Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus. These four, says Jaspers, are paradigmatic for all later thinkers in the sense that Plato's celestial ideas are paradigmatic for their earthly realizations. The four great teachers are comparable in that virtually no historical facts are known concerning any of them, according to Jaspers. But the lack of historicity is of no significance; they have shaped the world. Jaspers does not state why he has presented just four such ideals; one is reminded of the four gospels. Are these the four gospels of humanism? Mohammed is not included because he is too definitely historical.

When Jaspers continues with the presentation of the philosophers Plato, Augustine, and Kant, he shows what an excellent teacher he is. If he is found less authoritative in theology and in his presentation of Augustine, this should hardly be thought deprecatory. Augustinianism is treated very sympathetically, almost more Protestant than Catholic—and with some justification. With Kant, Jaspers leads the reader in a climb of the intellectual mountaintop of modern times.

Many less renowned writers and lesser craftsmen are at work incorporating Christianity into humanism. A. K. Esterer, *Towards a Unified Faith*,⁴ offers the concept which "forms a bridge over the traditional deep gulf between science and religion" (xiii), if only Christianity will hold still for the removal of its uniqueness. William Henry Sheldon in *Rational Religion: The Philosophy of Christian Love*⁵ admonishes Christianity with its own ethic:

Our Christian churches haven't discovered all truth as yet; But they can, with the help of reason which is God's gift to His children, discover new truths more and more. It is indeed their duty to do that. The gospel of love demands it (p. 6).

The paragraph quoted is concluded with the words, "And as we shall see, we would even go further and harmonize all the great religions" (p. 7).

David Rhys Williams was one of the original signers of the Humanist Manifesto, published in 1933, but since has achieved a faith that goes beyond humanism. *Faith Beyond Humanism*⁶ is demonstrated in a collect:

Once more we have come to that season of the year which the traditions of many lands and many ceremonies have set aside for communion with 'the better angels of our nature.' Let us join the millions before us—Egyptian, Grecian, Roman, Norseman, Christian and Jew—who, with varying custom and ceremony, have observed this period of the winter solstice as an occasion for joyous celebration. Let us, like them, use this propitious time to re-light the candles of our course and give voice to our holiest hopes and aspirations (p. 203).

Humanists are most ready to accept the Christianity of today into their bosoms in an ecumenism that includes all the living religions. The many theologians whose criticism discredits the Holy Scriptures as an authoritative source of revelation have assisted the humanist by making of Christianity a Christianity (with apologies to the French). In *Living Religions*,⁷ John B. Noss makes it clear that God has not left Himself without witness in areas not reached by the Judeo-Christian revelation, as Paul and Barnabas said at Lystra. According to this general revelation, Noss adds, God did not leave so many of His children in darkness for He is a God of love (p. 4, Foreword). While this could still be understood properly, it is clear that in Noss too much is ascribed to general revelation and the uniqueness of Christianity is sacrificed.

The Lutheran theologian will recognize that he cannot permit the foundations of Christianity to be undermined with the result that his theology is merely another humanism. Such terms as "Biblical humanism" have indeed their proper use, but they have easily lost the essence of the Christian confession in many writers. The humanist is incapable of preserving the true human values; for if the Biblical genesis of man is set aside in favor of an Asiatic or African genesis, and man is looked upon as bearing many instincts and behavior patterns of his animal origin,⁸ then the humanist must take up the discussion of an "animal humanism" which should be even more objectionable than MacGregor's "hominism." On every count the origin of man by special creation and the des-

tiny of the believer to share a heavenly kingdom with his Redeemer and all saints and angels is far more beneficial and satisfying to contemplate.

NOTES

1. Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1961. xvi and 496 pp. Cloth. \$10.00.
2. Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1963. 255 pp. Cloth. \$5.50. Among hominist writers MacGregor includes "probably Freud, Marx, Dewey, Russell, Max Otto, Erich Fromm, J. Bernowski, and Ashley Montagn."
3. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962. Translated by Ralph Mauheim. xx and 396 pp. Cloth. \$8.50.
4. New York: Philosophical Library, 1963. 102 pages. Cloth. \$3.75.
5. New York: Philosophical Library, 1962. 138 pages. Cloth. \$4.75.
6. New York: Philosophical Library, 1963. xiv and 223 pages. Cloth. \$5.00.
7. Philadelphia, Boston: United Church Press, 1957, 1962. 111 pages. Paper. \$1.45.
8. Robert Ardrey, *African Genesis*. New York: Atheneum, fourth printing, February, 1963, copyright, 1961. 380 pages. Cloth. \$6.95.