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## HUMANISM: A CHANGING COURSE

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“ . . . . Ut veritas pateat, veritas placeat, veritas moveat.”  
St. Augustine.



WE ARE living in a world which is again loose from its moorings. It casts about buffeted by shifting tempests, driven from reef to shoal. With a confusion of ideologies, false prophets call the people to conflicting goals. How did this confusion come about? How did our world, once in rein, lose the restraint of reason? How did the western world, once the leader in civilization and heading toward a certain goal, swerve from its path and in the course of centuries turn to increasingly debasing aims until at the present our very civilization seems doomed to perish in the chaos engendered by hate?

The thinkers lead the world and they were the first to be confused. The founders of philosophic systems rarely live to see the full effects of their work. The fruition of their ideas is a slow process in conception for more than one generation. There comes an intermedial impregnation and that is upon the educators. It is they who apply the principles enunciated by the philosophers and they who produce the results. Philosophy and education are closely allied. The philosophic world, itself within a whirlwind, has dispersed both the means and ends of education. “Complete living,” “capacity to enjoy the finer things in life,” “harmonious development of all the powers and capabilities,”—all these, proposed by philosophers and accepted by the educators, have resulted in the spectacle of secondary and collegiate curricular courses on home planning, cosmetology (the science of cosmetics), socialized history, cooking and what not.

Centuries ago, education began this march from unity. Now that march is hardly less than a rout. Let us trace the course to see what was the early single purpose, what caused its abandonment, the effects down to the present stage and, briefly, the remedies for a return to the saner purpose and methods.

In the common use of the term, humanism "is the effort to enrich human experience to the utmost capacity of man to the utmost limits of the environing conditions."<sup>1</sup> "It is the ideal of human completion, the enrichment of human personality through experience."<sup>2</sup> "Full actuality in man, then, demands the perfection of body, senses, mind. It demands too the perfection of heart and will, for as St. Thomas put it, knowledge is only perfect when it passes into love; it demands perfection of action."<sup>3</sup> Generally, the term is applied to that movement in learning within the Renaissance, but improperly, for humanism had its origin in the Athenian culture, was revived by the Schoolmen after a period of neglect, and was finally taken over by the new scholars of the Humanities at the decline of Scholasticism. Now it is the catchword of the American philosophers.

The Hellenic culture was humanist, built upon a philosophic foundation. It was the result of the combined thought of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates, who began the formation of the concept of man's dignity, placed the knowledge about man on the summit of learning. The supreme good for man was happiness, the peace of mind resulting from study and harmony of conduct with one's principles. This happiness, centered upon man, was found to be insufficient when Plato discussed the form of the good, "cause of all reality." The anthropocentric humanism of the Greeks had thus become, in a manner, theocentric. It was still perfectible and the task of perfecting it remained to Aristotle. "Human good," he said, "turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete."<sup>4</sup> This development of all the powers of man to correspond with the highest form of life, according to Aristotle the speculative, was the "golden mean." It was this "golden mean" which gave an appreciation of the true and the beautiful and elevated the Athenians beyond the baser goals of those cities and nations

<sup>1</sup> C. W. Reese *Humanist Sermons*. Pref. xiii as quoted by Gerald Vann, O.P. *On Being Human*, page 11. Sheed & Ward. 1934.

<sup>2</sup> Vann, *op. cit.* page 11.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Vann: *Morals Makyth Man*, page 26. Longmans Green & Co., Ltd. 1938.

<sup>4</sup> *Basic Works of Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. 1, Ch. 7, page 943. Edited by Richard McKeon, Random House. 1941. New York.

which looked only to militarism and caste. With the conquering of Greece, much of this culture, its ideals, its means and ends, suffered scorn and neglect by Rome. When Christianity inherited the land her energies were absorbed by the needs of proclaiming the Divine Message and of combating each succeeding heresy. This seeming lack of interest in science has caused modernists to regard the ages that intervened until the rebirth of learning as intellectually dark and obscure. "There is good *prima facie* evidence for ascribing this decline (in scientific knowledge) to the advent of Christianity and to the consequent turning away of men's minds from this world to the next and from the facts of nature to the truths of faith."<sup>5</sup>

During the ages in which the Church was centering her attention upon the spiritual, the ancient Greek traditions of science and culture were, in the main, the treasures of the Moslem. This must not be taken to imply that no attempt was made to preserve that culture, for many scholars forged links with the past. Bede and Boethius were among the most famous and Irish monks may have been influenced by some of their members who had travelled in Egypt and had returned with knowledge of Greek thought.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle was known to the schoolmen principally through the *De Interpretatione*, *Categoriae* and later through the *Analytica Priora*, *Topica* and *De Sophisticis Elenchis*. But the entire body of Greek science was possessed by the Arabs who had received it from the Syrians. Until about the twelfth century the Arabs were the great commentators on the works of the Greek philosophers. The culture of the Church, accenting the supernatural, and that of the Arabs, concentrating on the sciences, existed simultaneously but with little bond. Eventually the arid wastes between them were crossed by two streams over which the whole body of Greek thought and culture could pass to the Christian scholars.

The works of the Philosopher, excepting those previously mentioned, were ferried over these routes, one the gradual infiltration of the Arabic ideals into the schools of Spain by the Arabian and Jewish commentators and the other the spread of knowledge through the great courts of the northern merchant cities and the returning Crusaders. By this latter fashion, St. Thomas Aquinas may first have learned the Grecian philosophy. Of a great Neapolitan family, one supporting and encouraging this new stream of knowledge through

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Dawson: *Medieval Religion*, page 61. Sheed & Ward, London. 1934.

<sup>6</sup> For an interesting exposition of a theory concerning the early contact of Irish monks with Egypt read H. V. Morton's *Through Lands of the Bible*, page 141 et seq. Dodd, Mead & Co., New York. 1938.

their court, he got his early training from Peter of Ireland in the University of Naples.

Both routes, northern and southern, finally converged at Paris, then the intellectual center of the world. Here, in 1245, came St. Thomas and his master St. Albert. Interested in natural science as well as in philosophy and theology, St. Albert borrowed from the Arabic and Jewish commentaries on Aristotle and directed the studies of the young Thomas. However, the dangers inherent in following inaccurate translations from the Arabic, themselves translations of translations, and from Arabic commentaries had brought condemnation of the works of the Stagirite. In spite of this, both St. Thomas and St. Albert saw the wealth and merits of the Aristotelian system and St. Thomas secured a direct and accurate translation by William of Moerbeka. "Albert and Thomas . . . saw the truth that lay in the new-found Aristotle, they set out to establish his claims, Albert by explaining him to the Latin mind, Thomas more critically showing where he found him right and where wrong."<sup>7</sup>

The humanism of Aristotle, as has been said before, aimed at the development of all man's faculties and, being itself theocentric, was the foundation upon which St. Thomas could erect the imposing structure of complete and Christian theocentric humanism. "St. Thomas took humanist ideals, as he took the Aristotelian ethical system and infused into them a new life, a new vigor, an infinitely greater significance and compass, by setting them in the infinitely greater horizon of the supernatural."<sup>8</sup>

Thus philosophy was enthroned in its proper place and the system of learning was complete. The effects of that enthronement are felt even to this day for it was upon that very thing that modern civilization in the West is built. It is the very foundation upon which the later humanism was to erect its temple. "The restoration of contact with Greek thought . . . is a turning point in the history of world civilization, for it marks the passing of the age-long supremacy of the Oriental and eastern Mediterranean culture and the beginning of the intellectual leadership of the west."<sup>9</sup>

The only true humanism was then in sway. The glory of philosophy was a prelude of a majestic symphony whose climax was the theme to be found in theology. The whole system looked to the development of the highest faculties of man; it brought to his feet inferior creation and led him to a true appreciation of his place at

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald Vann, O.P.: *On Being Human*, page 38.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Vann, O.P.: *op. cit.*, page 14.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Dawson: *op. cit.*, page 64.

the head of corporeal creation, led him to a knowledge of the supernatural things from the consideration of the natural. Man knew his position at the head of material creation and his place in the scale of being in the supernatural order. "The less noble things are designed for him, and the whole universe with all its parts is designed for God as its end, inasmuch as in them is reflected by a sort of mirroring the divine goodness, to the glory of God."<sup>10</sup> Then indeed the "full man" was developed, for the end of man was seen in full light and the means to accomplish this end were held with surety.

This was the point of unity. But unfortunately the unification did not endure and it is more lamentable that the dissolution was from within, not indeed from any fault inherent in the system of thought itself, but from the decadence of the spirit of scholasticism. "After the sound period of inquiry . . . comes the academic spirit of pedantry."<sup>11</sup> Men came to revere the masters more than the truth of what they, the masters, taught. Dialectics became mere display. The times were too restless. Frivolous study brought ignorance of the real scholastic doctrines and gave grounds for the later misunderstandings between philosophy and science. It was inevitable that a reaction should occur. It is the reaction which did occur that goes under the name of humanism. "It was a reaction against that dark sort of asceticism which proclaimed so loudly the spiritual misery and malady of men, their inability to rise from the slough of sinful flesh, the despicable 'terrestreity of their quiddative nature' till in the end man had begun to look like a very sorry sort of worm. It was not unnatural that the worm should turn."<sup>12</sup>

With the toppling of philosophy and theology from their thrones, there arose to absolute supremacy, man, "the measure of all things." He was the height and god of the universe, accountable only to himself. New standards were formed to conform with the wants of the new god. Comfort and wealth, luxury and science, progress,—all were for him. The rapid discoveries of science gave him all these things and so "practical" science was enthroned in the highest chair of learning. Its task was to measure and judge the utility of things. The educators quickly took the cue and the system of education became "humanistic," striving to perfect man merely as man by the training of his intellect and will to produce the "ordered life" by the "higher will." This was the first spin given to the wheel of phi-

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<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theologica* I. 65, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Vann, O.P.: *op. cit.*, page 8.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Vann, O.P.: *op. cit.*, page 14.

losophy and its handmaid, education.

What a kaleidoscope the history of these two presents! System succeeded system, each carrying the process of stripping man of his rights and depriving him of his responsibilities, each carrying the process to a more logical conclusion. With the stripping of his dignity as a supernatural being, greatest of the works of corporeal creation, man quickly lost his respect for the moral law in the Protestant Revolt. His respect for the state vanished in the French Revolution. The philosophers pursued the matter farther and then deprived man of his remaining possessions, one after another. They took from him his reason, his privacy, his property. In their eyes he became but a higher beast, driven not by intellect and will but by "impulses and neuroses," a being subject entirely to the state, without any rights of his own. Left without anything other than himself to which he could look for either guidance or support, man set about making new and desirable goals, of blood or race, of the rule of the proletariat, of the omnipotent government. The decline and the seeking for new objectives has been well traced for us by the author quoted often within this paper: "The Renaissance found scholasticism in the decadence already referred to. Thus it was that the new learning lacked principle to synthesize it. The camps became again completely split. . . . The latent paganism of the Renaissance resulted in a divinsation of nature: in a naturalism, an excessive concentration within the confines of humanity . . . Romanticism, the reaction to the reaction, reared its head. The nature worship of the Renaissance became the sentimentality of the nineteenth century . . . Romanticism soon met its own reaction; was destroyed, and for a brief spell materialist industrial optimism carried Europe towards its present mechanized civilization."<sup>13</sup> To complete the sketch by showing the ultimate stage reached in the fall from the heights, Christopher Dawson adds: "In the political and social sphere, the revolt against the medieval principles of hierarchy and the reassertion of the rights of the secular power led to the absolutism of the modern state. This again was followed by a second revolt—the assertion of the rights of man against the secular authority which culminated in the French Revolution. . . . It led on the one hand, to the disintegration of the organic principle in society into an individual atomism, which leaves the individual isolated and helpless before the new economic forces, and on the other, to the growth of the new bureaucratic state."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Gerald Vann, O.P.: *op. cit.*, pages 40-42.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Dawson: *Essays in Order*, page 162. *Christianity and the New Age*. Macmillan, New York. 1931.

Science and material progress are supreme and religion is looked upon as emotionalism, something without reason. Systems of thought and education are bewildering in their multiplicity but they are united only in giving primacy to "progress." This and the advances made in inventing new luxuries have produced a humanism of the Hollywood type. The universal ease of obtaining pleasures has weakened the moral stamina of the race. Confidence in freedom is lost.

For the lost ideals, substitutes are hastily being offered by the new ideologies to the nations, and the people are snatching at each "ism" that will impose strict standards and call for sacrifice. To oppose these false standards of a one-sided humanism is the work of that true humanism which shows signs of revival along with the second spring of scholasticism. Unfortunately, in the effort to meet humanists on their own grounds too great concessions were made in the past. The steps thus taken must be retraced. Science must resume her rightful place in the general Catholic system and advances must be made by Catholics in this branch of learning according to the urgings of the Sovereign Pontiffs. But, and this is the greatest need, Theology, queen of the sciences, must be restored to the dominant position in the modern Catholic university.<sup>15</sup> Apologetics, the prime stage in the study of theology, is not, as such, productive of the greatest results. Theology must come into her own again. When that is accomplished, we shall see true humanism in modern practice.

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<sup>15</sup> See Newman's Idea of a University, *Theology a Branch of Knowledge*.