

Christian Humanism, Progressive Christianity, and Social Transformation

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Abstract

This article explores my understanding of Christian humanism in conversation with Martin Prozesky's notion of progressive Christianity and their relevance for social transformation. Central to the conversation is how we understand the role of creeds and confessions in Christian faith, and the significance of the confession that Jesus, the truly human one, is the Christ of faith. This leads me into a discussion on the Incarnation as the foundation for Christian humanism, and Eucharistic community as the embodiment and agent of social transformation.

Keywords: Christian humanism, Progressive Christianity, Christian Theology, creeds, confessions, Christian faith, incarnation, eucharist, Social Transformation

Martin Prozesky and I trained as theologians in preparation for ordination to the ministry of the church, but both of us eventually taught in university Departments of Religion. During that period we co-edited two volumes: *A Southern African Guide to World Religions* (1991), and *Living Faiths in South Africa* (1995), which continue to be used as textbooks. Since those days, now so much in the past, we have each journeyed along intellectual and personal paths that have intersected and diverged. I have always respected Martin's

scholarship and the integrity of his convictions, and am delighted that I can now contribute to this *Festschrift* in his honour. What follows, picks up on an all too brief a conversation we had about Christian humanism some years ago, taking it further in pursuit of an understanding of Christian faith that can be affirmed with integrity for the sake of a more humane world.

Martin and I have much in common, not least the conviction that progressive religion has a critical role to play in the struggle for a more just society in South Africa. I have no doubt that Martin and I also share the conviction that being Christian in any meaningful sense requires a commitment to the integrity of life and human flourishing expressed through love, justice and beauty. We may differ on how this is theologically justified and we may use a different vocabulary in doing so, not least because of the sources we draw on and the mentors that have influenced our theological development. But this does not set us apart in vision and practice, on the contrary it requires that we both show an openness to and a solidarity with people of other faiths, or none at all, who share our concern for the well-being of humanity and the planet. So I think that we are probably closer to each other than apart, and perhaps more so now as time moves on. Yet, I suspect that we are still not *theologically entirely* on the same page. For that reason the focus of my essay is on my understanding of the theological basis for Christian humanism and how this might relate to Martin's 'progressive Christianity' and the task at hand.

My understanding of Christian humanism has been enriched by the work of two friends and colleagues: William Schweiker, Distinguished Service Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Chicago¹, and Jens Zimmermann, Canada Research Chair of Interpretation, Religion and Culture and Professor of English and modern languages at Trinity Western University in British Columbia². The influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on my thinking will also be apparent in what follows³. My own foray into the subject can be found chiefly in my books *Being Human: Confessions of a Christian Humanist*; *Led into Mystery*; and *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* (de Gruchy 2006; 2011b; and 2011c).

¹ See Klemm and Schweiker (2008); Schweiker (2010); and Schweiker (2008: 100-115).

² See Zimmermann (2012a); and Zimmermann (2012b).

³ See especially the two sections on 'History and the Good' in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, *Ethics* (2005: 219-298. See also de Gruchy (2011a).

I Christian Humanism, Progressive Christianity and Christology

Christian humanism is, for some, an oxymoron for the simple reason that humanism today generally refers to its secular variety, and Christianity has long been regarded as its antagonist. There is truth in that assessment, but it does not take into account the varieties of Christianity, sometimes represented by different denominations but often transcending institutional boundaries, hence such appellations as liberal, conservative or progressive. So to use the terms 'Christian' or 'Christianity' meaningfully requires clarification. The same is true of 'humanism' given its complex genealogy in the West from classical culture through the development of Christianity until it morphed into post-Enlightenment secular humanism and a variety of contemporary neo-humanisms. Today, some historic forms of humanism smack of an anthropocentrism that is problematic given our current understanding of ourselves in relation to the biosphere and cosmos.

Martin describes himself as a progressive Christian, a description to which I immediately warm even though I do not know precisely what he means and, in a sense, must make certain assumptions that may not be entirely accurate. I assume, for example, that by progressive he is saying that his understanding of Christianity is socially and politically transformative, not reactionary. But what, then, about his *theological* understanding of Christianity? About this, I assume that a clue can be gleaned from recent correspondence in which he said that he did not regard central Christian doctrines as literally true or doing justice to what Jesus was primarily about, and described himself not as post-Christian, but as 'post-credal and post-ecclesiastical'. He also mentioned that he was attracted to Ninian Smart's term 'transcendental humanism', but not understood in a dualistic conventional, literal, theistic way⁴. These comments must suffice to get my conversation with him going, though what they convey to me may not be precisely what they mean for Martin. After all, the prefix 'post' seldom signifies a simple shift from one position to another as is evident when we speak of 'post-modernism' or 'post-modernity'. Paradigm shifts are a critical suspension and transformative

⁴ See Prozesky's forthcoming book *Honest to Goodness*, and 'Ethics, Spirituality and the Secular' in *Secular Spirituality as a Contextual Critique of Religion*, edited by du Toit and Mayson (2006: 127-138).

retrieval of tradition. So what do ‘post-credal’, ‘post-ecclesiastical’ and ‘transcendental humanism’ convey to me, and would I describe my Christian humanism in similar terms?

During the struggle against apartheid, Martin and I were constantly aware that our concern for justice, too often denied by fellow white Christians, was shared by people of other faiths as well as by secular humanists even though they did not share the same Christian beliefs and commitments. We were united in our affirmation of human dignity and, at the same time, divided from many of our co-religionists who remained silent or gave their support to apartheid. This alliance with others in the struggle irrespective of faith commitment was strategic, yet it was also, at least from a Christian perspective, one that was theologically derived. As Bonhoeffer indicates in his *Ethics*, the dividing line established by Jesus was not primarily between his disciples and others, but between those who, whether in his name or not, struggled against dehumanizing and idolatrous powers in solidarity with the oppressed, alienated and downtrodden. For Bonhoeffer this gave decisive substance to the faith-claim that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (Bonhoeffer 2005: 82), which, I suggest, is fundamental to Christianity, a matter to which I will shortly return.

Long before 9/11 and the stark lines drawn by the exponents of the badly conceived and described culture war between the Christian West and Islam, Martin and I had transgressed such boundaries of exclusion. Since those tragic and terrifying events and their consequences, which characterize much of our current global reality, our common dislike of imperial and triumphalist Christianity has been reinforced. As I understand Martin’s position, this is part of what is implied by his choice of the term ‘progressive’ to qualify his Christianity. In my own case I chose to distance myself from these idolatries by calling myself a Christian humanist. But neither of us identify with those forms of Christianity (or any religion for that matter) that are reactionary and right-wing in orientation. I think I can also safely say that we reject all forms of fundamentalism including scientism and secularism, any humanism that is a closed anthropocentric system incapable of criticism and transformation, all forms of ecclesiastical and religious triumphalism, and denominational sectarianism, and rejoice whenever we experience the church as an inclusive and progressive community of concerned and compassionate fellow-believers. In short, for us, being Christian means to be truly human rather than being religious in any narrow sense of that word; it also means striving to become

more fully human in solidarity with the rest of humankind in the struggle for a more humane, just and peaceable world that respects human dignity and freedom, as well as the integrity of creation. I am a humanist because I am a Christian, and as a Christian I seek to be the best humanist I can be, and I know that Martin would agree.

But what about Martin's use of the terms 'post-credal', 'post-ecclesiastical', and 'transcendental humanism?' Let me begin with 'post-credal'. Does this mean that we hold to no beliefs, that there is nothing of substance to which we can append our 'credo'? Put so crassly, that is surely not what Martin means. But if, as I think most likely, it means moving beyond the classical Christian creeds, does it mean a rejection of *everything* they generally affirm, not just their form and structure, but also their substance? I don't actually know how Martin would respond to that, but I assume, once again, that he would be more nuanced than his words superficially suggest. However, instead of second-guessing him, I would like to clarify my own position in order to take our conversation further.

In my own ecclesial tradition (Congregational) creeds are not normally part of the liturgy, and forced subscription to them has always been strenuously resisted. We have not been called 'Nonconformists' for nothing! Maybe that means that already, since the seventeenth century, my own tradition was post-credal. This does not mean we were creedless, for we affirmed various Reformed confessions of faith, and continue to acknowledge the historical, theological and ecumenical importance of the historic creeds even though they do not normally feature in our liturgies. They are important because they keep us in conversation with historical Christianity. But we insist that their contextual character does not bind us to past understandings of Christian faith. I am sure that many Christians in other traditions where the creeds are more central would agree with that position.

There are, after all, faithful church members, ministers and priests who dutifully say the creeds, but who have serious reservations about some of their assertions taken literally even though they may appear to affirm them as though they do. This means that a degree of dishonesty can intrude the liturgy undermining the doxological character of the creeds and the integrity of the worshippers. I fear this often results from the ineptitude of priests and ministers in helping people understand the Bible hermeneutically, long before they get round to explaining the creeds and the reasons why they are embedded in the liturgy. Apart from any lack of training in this regard, this failure often arises

from a fear of being censured, or by an unwillingness to upset those who do take the creeds literally. But the fact that people in the pews who recite the creeds week by week assume that it is all meant to be understood literally, while many theologians and clergy understand them differently, seems to me a sad, dishonest and counterproductive state of affairs.

The classical creeds emerged in the Patristic struggle against what was perceived to be heresy. Those who drafted them sought to draw boundaries between true and false belief in the contest between contending interpretations of the significance of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and ‘incarnate Son of God’. Irrespective of how they were understood then or the purposes to which they were sometimes put, they became doxological expressions that encapsulated the mysteries of Christian faith in the language of both history and myth. If myth is properly understood, I have no problem with the formulation ‘the myth of God Incarnate’ made infamous by John Hick, though the term is as James Dunn suggests, inappropriate in early Christology (Dunn 1980: 262). What is appropriate is C.S. Lewis’ assertion that in the Jesus narrative myth became fact without losing its mythical character, something that Bonhoeffer also said⁵. Christianity expresses itself in the language of myth as much as it does in the language of history, and the two merge in the creeds which encapsulate the Christian *mythos* as understood in its early genesis.

The original meaning of *mythos* as narrative or story is the product of human imagination. So we can speak of the Christian *mythos* in the same way as we might talk about an historical novel, though the analogy is not perfect (Jennings 1976:9). The Christian *mythos* is that in Jesus of Nazareth, God became truly human in order that we might become fully human in the image of God. This is the theological basis for Christian humanism, as Zimmermann has thoroughly articulated in his *Incarnational Humanism*. But as he tells us, something that I too affirm, we are not seeking ‘to invent something new but rather to retrieve an ancient Christian humanism for our time in response to the general demand for a common humanity beyond religious, denominational, and secular divides’. Yet, both he and I also assert, that ‘orthodox Christology provides the most promising source for a common vision of a truly human society’ (Zimmermann 2012b: 10). This does not mean that what is often taken for ‘orthodoxy’ has always got it right when it comes to a praxis that is faithful to its Christological source. But if not, what can it mean?

⁵ See my discussion in *Led into Mystery* (de Gruchy 2011b: 76-81).

As someone who spoke and wrote about the theological justification of apartheid as a heresy, I obviously recognize that there come moments in history when the boundaries that define what it means to be Christian and the church of Jesus Christ have to be drawn. My understanding of the church as an inclusive community is contingent precisely on the rejection of false boundaries determined by ethnicity, gender, class or sexual orientation. I am not suggesting that this is *the* ‘orthodox’ way to understand the classical creeds, but I am saying that there are boundaries that determine the character of the church even if there is disagreement as to where and when those boundaries are to be drawn. This was the problem which confronted Bonhoeffer in responding to the German Christians who supported Hitler and promoted the Nazification of the Protestant Church. Both sides in the *Kirchenkampf* recited the creeds and affirmed the Lutheran confessions, but Bonhoeffer understood them hermeneutically not literally, christologically and not ideologically. There may have been consensus on, for example, the ‘two natures of Christ’ but there was clearly disagreement on *who* Jesus Christ was for them at that historical juncture⁶. The Barmen Declaration was a confessional response to that question within that historical context and, as such, assumed credal significance if not status.

Although Bonhoeffer’s own response to his question ‘who is Jesus Christ for us today’ was hermeneutically located within that context, it was undoubtedly in continuity with the ancient creeds, despite the influence of his great liberal teacher Adolf von Harnack, for whom they were highly problematic. For Harnack, following Jesus rather than believing in the ‘Christ of the creeds’ was the essence of Christianity (von Harnack 1986: 146-149). In taking this position, Harnack rightly maintained that discipleship is not the same as believing in a doctrine about Jesus as the Christ. Yet contrasting discipleship and believing in a doctrine in this way is surely a category mistake. Discipleship and *faith as commitment* to Jesus as Lord belong together, as Bonhoeffer expressed so powerfully in *Discipleship* (Bonhoeffer 2001: 63). Harnack’s problem, as Rudolf Bultmann said, was that he did ‘not clearly see the difference between the *kerygmatic* character of the Gospel and an ‘Enlightenment doctrine or an ethical appeal’ (von Harnack 1986: xv). Jesus became the timeless truth about God and eternity, about the human soul and

⁶ See the notes on Bonhoeffer’s lectures on Christology in Berlin in 1933, in Bonhoeffer (2009: 299-360).

the good life, rather than the witness to God's coming kingdom amidst the historical and political realities of his day.

It is true that many seek to follow Jesus without accepting the claim that he is the Christ of Christian faith, but it seems to me that faith in Jesus as 'the Christ' is fundamental to being Christian. I am *not* saying that there is no 'Jesus before Christianity', as Albert Nolan portrayed in his book of that title, nor am I saying that Jesus only has significance within Christianity, for Jesus was not a Christian; nor am I saying that you have to be a Christian to follow Jesus, or that many who follow Jesus do not do so much better than many Christians. What I am saying is that Christianity as it evolved already in the apostolic period was Christological not Jesu-logical, and that the doctrine of the Incarnation was already implicit. To my mind, no one has explored this development more fully than Dunn whose conclusion is that while we 'cannot claim that Jesus believed himself to be the incarnate Son of God', we can say that this conviction was 'an appropriate reflection on and elaboration of Jesus' own sense of sonship and eschatological mission' (Dunn 1980: 254).

In sum, we cannot delete the doctrine of the Incarnation from Christianity without destroying its integrity as Christian faith. Having said that, I would equally say that to believe that 'God was in Christ' is not the same as believing in the doctrine *as doctrine*. It is, rather, as Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Ethics* (in continuity with what he said in *Discipleship* but put differently), becoming 'conformed to the Incarnate One'. And this is fundamental to Christian humanism. 'To be conformed to the one who has become human – that is what being human really means' (Bonhoeffer 2005: 94). In fact, nowhere to my knowledge have the *humanist* ethical implications of the Incarnation been so well expressed as in this section of the *Ethics* where, *inter alia*, Bonhoeffer writes: 'The message of God's becoming human attacks at the heart of an era when contempt for humanity or idolization of humanity is the height of wisdom, among bad people as well as good' (Bonhoeffer 2005: 85). To stress the point, I am not talking about believing in a doctrine, but about life being shaped by the reality to which that doctrine points. For Bonhoeffer this was fundamental to following Jesus and therefore to the Christian *mythos*. And, of course, the same applied to being conformed to the 'crucified One' and the 'risen One', that is, living in solidarity with the suffering and struggles of the world, and living and acting in hope of new life and the just transformation of present reality.

Christian humanism, as I understand it, then, is founded on a 'high

Christology' shaped by a reading of the gospel *mythos*, but kenotic, not triumphalist in character. By this I mean that when we confess Jesus Christ as 'truly God' we are saying that the God in whom we believe has been revealed in *history* as the one who, *for us*, is most truly human. Too often Christians turn this around so that their definitions of God (all-powerful, all-knowing, etc.) are applied to Jesus and lead to triumphalist claims on the part of the church. Of course, to say Jesus is the 'truly human One' is a confession of faith that arises out of a reading of the Christian tradition, even though it begs many questions. For example, in what *sense* is Jesus to be regarded as such? Is Jesus the *only* truly human One? Are the rest of us humans not truly human and, if not, are we less than human? How then are we to define being human, and being more truly so? Discussion of these requires another lengthy conversation which is beyond the scope of this essay, but some hints as to how that may develop must be given here.

What I have said thus far is about the basis for *Christian* humanism, something premised on a faith claim. As such it is alien to people of other faiths and secular humanists even though there may be agreement on the importance of its outcomes and acceptance of the need for such a theological strategy. But it is precisely at this point that Schweiker focuses his critique and challenge to my approach. Without denying the importance of historical traditions or Christian confession, he rightly wants *theological* humanism to be 'tested in the unending work of interpretation and rumination aimed at understanding'. This is necessary if we are to avoid a triumphalism – even in the name of humanity – that reduces 'the other' to the status of junior partner in the humanist endeavour. In fact it requires a theological humanism fashioned in dialogue and solidarity with those who come to similar conclusions yet from a different perspective. And that, in turn, may require of us a new, liberating language in which to express our faith in Christ, as Bonhoeffer anticipated. I agree. This does not mean ditching the fundamental premise of Christianity, otherwise there is no specifically Christian contribution to the discussion. But if my confessional Christian humanism is, at one level, affirmed by Schweiker, at another he prompts me to go further for the sake of a broader theological humanism in which the integrity of life becomes the key affirmation.

What, then, needs to be considered as we take the Christian humanist or theological neo-humanist project further? A priority must surely be to engage with humanists of other traditions in clarifying both areas of agreement and disagreement and thus, together with them, set an agenda for further

discussion and engagement as we did in the New Humanist project at STIAS (Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies) in which Schweiker participated (de Gruchy 2011c). This requires those of us who are Christians to explore in greater depth the theological foundations of our own faith claims and perspectives. But it will also help us understand better what resources we bring to the table as Christians who seek to be humanists, and as humanists who seek to be Christian. So now, within the parameters of this essay, I want to explore further, with Zimmermann, the genealogy of a genuinely Christian humanism, and its potential for the renewal of culture and the common good, and in doing so reflect a little on the significance of the church. Apart from sharing in a common task, what do we bring to the dialogue table?

II Christian Humanism, the New Humanity & Social Transformation

Zimmermann's premise is that Western secularism is exhausted, having lost its roots in the religious tradition that gave birth to secularity and modernity. The resultant vacuum has been filled by the resurgence of religion, chiefly in fundamentalist forms. The consequences are serious and potentially disastrous, especially given the fact that the West is increasingly culturally plural in character due to the influx of many immigrants for whom secularism is alien, humanism threatening and Christianity problematic. At the same time, for many secularists, religion has not only lost whatever significance it might have had and become the prime target of rebuttal, the enemy of humanism, and the cause of social conflict. This is undoubtedly true of some forms of religion, but not true of all religion. On the contrary, religion, including Christianity, is historically and remains potentially a source of humanism. Examining the Christian humanist tradition is, therefore, an 'essential hermeneutical task' in making possible the renewal of Western culture and 'integrating other religiously formed cultures into Western societies' (Zimmermann 2012b: 3). Zimmermann's agenda is focused specifically on the West; Prozesky and I are more global in interest and specifically concerned about South Africa. But we all share the same concern for the recovery and building of humane values that enable the flourishing of life in building societies and nations, and the role of Christianity as one significant agent in doing so.

A preliminary question which must be brought to the fore is whether and to what extent Zimmermann's analysis and prognosis relates meaningfully

to our South African context. This was part of the rationale for my initiation of and participation in the project at STIAS in 2009-2010 which eventually led to the publication of *The Humanist Imperative in South Africa* to which I previously referred. Two factors suggest that there is a connection between this project and Zimmermann's. The *first* is that South African culture has been profoundly influenced by the West as a result of colonization, and by Christianity as a result of Christian missionary endeavour, not least the education of those cohorts of African leaders who established the African National Congress. In many respects they were Christian humanists in the sense described by Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and embodied in the likes of Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela. Their imprint on the Freedom Charter and our present Constitution is part of that humanist legacy, as is our Constitution. The *second* has to do with the extent to which Christianity in our context has lost its humanist thrust implicit, if not necessarily explicit, in Christology. The reasons are not unlike those in other contemporary societies dominated by fundamentalism and more susceptible to secularism than previously. So Zimmermann's contribution to the debate, while centered on the West, resonates with the issues as I understand them in our own situation in important respects.

Heeding Heidegger's injunction to critically retrieve tradition in order to transform the world, Zimmermann's aim is neither to return to Christendom, within which Christianity attempts to reign supreme over culture, nor to resuscitate previous forms of Christian humanism. Instead, he goes behind modernity to explore the theological origins of humanism in the West with its foundations already laid in classical culture. Western humanism, he reminds us, is deeply rooted in the biblical assertion that humanity bears the 'image of God'. The Patristic faith-claim that God becomes fully human in Christ in order that humans may become truly like God, and therefore truly human is foundational. So too, is the correlation of faith and reason, with faith being necessary for rationality and self-understanding. The result is 'a profound sense of human dignity, solidarity, and freedom based on a reasonable faith' (Zimmermann 2012a:87).

Scholastic humanism in the Middle Ages, Zimmermann observes going further, was built on and developed Patristic humanism in a way that some regard as 'the most important kind of humanism Europe has ever produced' (Zimmermann 2012b: 101), giving rise to modern science and then secular humanism. Unfortunately scholastic theology was incapable of keeping

pace with these developments, and not only became rigid but also fractured. It thereby undermined the synthesis of faith and reason which Renaissance humanism sought to affirm. That humanism, articulated in the work of Erasmus, the pre-eminent Christian humanist of his day, was more than the forerunner of a post-Enlightenment secular humanism; it was an attempt to recover the Christian humanism of the Patristic period which laid the foundation for Western culture as expressed in education, art and science. But already in the Renaissance the ontology which provided the basis for Christian humanism was being eroded from within until the synthesis between faith and reason, theology, philosophy and science, collapsed.

In a way that is reminiscent of some of Bonhoeffer's key insights in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Bonhoeffer 2010: 475f), Zimmermann critically traces the development of post-Renaissance humanism from Vico through Schleiermacher to Dilthey, a gradual transition from 'metaphysical to post-metaphysical humanism' which leads to a rejection of humanism's 'spiritual-theological foundations' (Zimmermann 2012b: 150). This movement away from the Patristic tradition radically altered the basis on which Western cultural humanism has to be sustained, not just philosophically but in a world radically changed by historical developments and the dominance of empirical science. The inevitable result was the birth not just of secular humanism but also anti-humanism typified by Nietzsche and his nihilistic heirs which eventually found devastating expression in the Holocaust.

The hermeneutical task confronting us, then, is to re-articulate a religious humanist ethos and praxis based on the conviction that 'this can renew Western identity and its zeal for knowledge subservient to the common good of a full humanity' (Zimmermann 2012b: 317). This corresponds with Schweiker's position and leads Zimmermann to a discussion of dominant strands in contemporary Islam which firmly reject Western secularism but seem unable to retrieve their own humanist tradition and avoid the dangers of fundamentalism. For Zimmermann, this needs to begin specifically with 'the Judeo-Christian roots of values such as human dignity, freedom, hope and social responsibility', in a way that enables both secular and other religious world views to 'unite towards the common goal of becoming most fully human' (Zimmermann 2012b: 318). But he is also aware of the need to engage Muslim scholars as well. This leads him to a discussion of contemporary Islam which firmly rejects Western secularism but is largely unable to retrieve its own humanist tradition and avoid the dangers of fundamentalism. Muslim and

Christian scholars, as well as those of other faith traditions, need to engage each other around these issues in order to generate a general humanist ethos capable of tackling the crisis in Western (and global) culture.

Critical towards this end is the reintegrating of faith and reason which takes us beyond the deconstruction of fideism and secularism to a widening of the concept of reason, an avoidance of fundamentalism, and a deepening of the meaning of faith. Three axioms should guide such mutual reflection. *First*, that self-knowledge or truth requires ethical transcendence; *second*, that such self-knowledge is hermeneutical; and *third*, that it requires aesthetics. Certainly, without the recovery of some sense of transcendence the future of the humanities is unlikely, humanism itself beyond recovery, and the crisis in Western culture irresolvable (Schweiker 2010).

In response to this challenge, Zimmermann engages the work of key Western philosophers of recent times. Amongst them are Derrida, Lyotard, Kristeva, Kearney and Vattimo who provide insight though none is able to recover the synthesis between faith and reason of past tradition and therefore provide the philosophical basis for the recovery of Incarnational humanism today. More promising is Gadamer's 'hermeneutic humanism', which recognizes religious dialogue as essential for the future of humanity, and of the renewal of the humanities as key to the renewal of culture, and Levinas' 'humanism of the Other' which provides the 'most striking example of the need of incarnational theology' (Zimmermann 2012b:216). What is needed, Zimmermann insists, is not just a 'transcendental humanism', but one which is incarnational, beyond dualism and rooted in historical experience. This brings Zimmermann to the theologians who are his chief interlocutors, Maurice Blondel and especially Bonhoeffer. What unites the Catholic philosopher and the Lutheran theologian is their affirmation of the Incarnation as the basis for correlating faith and reason, philosophy and theology, and therefore the unity of knowledge in the service of humanity. But it is Bonhoeffer's Christological humanism that finally becomes the major resource for the recovery of Christian humanism for today for both Zimmermann and myself.

The recognition of Bonhoeffer as a Christian humanist is of seminal importance in my own work, though Zimmermann has examined his legacy more thoroughly within the broader narrative of Patristic humanism⁷. Bonhoeffer's Christian humanism, Zimmermann writes:

⁷ See essays in Zimmermann and Gregor (2010).

points in the right direction: given that so much of our political and social problems are connected to the question of identity and religion, his emphasis on Christology and a new humanity provides arguably the best example of a religious humanism intrinsically able to open itself to reason, and to labour for the common good (Zimmermann 2012b: 315).

The ground is now prepared for me to re-engage Prozesky's term 'post-ecclesiastical', for Bonhoeffer's Christology is ecclesiological at its core.

In his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer boldly declared that 'Christ exists as the church-community' (Bonhoeffer 1998: 189ff). By this he was not referring to a particular ecclesiastical institution, but to that vicarious representative community in which Christ is present in the world as the beginning of a new humanity, or humanity restored. This was a constant theme throughout his theological development, until finally in his prison letters he spoke of 'Jesus's 'being for others' 'as the experience of transcendence', and as consequence, 'the church is only the church when it is there for others' (Bonhoeffer 2010: 499, 501). In other words, the character of the *ecclesia* is determined by the way it answers the question: 'who is Jesus Christ for us today?' How the church embodies that answer determines whether or not the church is faithful to the Jesus of history and the Christ it confesses in the creed. The birth of the new humanity in Christ crucified and risen is already a given. But the church as a sociological empirical reality only becomes the church as it conforms to his life, death and resurrection. This, for Bonhoeffer, radically changes the meaning of transcendence and of what 'transcendental humanism' (not that he used that term) should mean, namely 'participating in this being of Jesus' in 'being there for others' (Bonhoeffer 2010: 501).

If appropriated, incarnational humanism fundamentally reshapes the life of the church in the world today as a Eucharistic community in solidarity with the whole of humanity. To be the church can be nothing less. 'Our current intellectual and cultural crisis', Zimmermann writes, demands a sense of solidarity and common humanity that is *intrinsic* to the Christian faith', and for this reason the church needs to recover 'the early church's spirit of passionate engagement with culture based on the mystery of the incarnation' (Zimmermann 2012a: 324).

The ongoing struggle to establish communities in which the common good and the good of each is achieved, lies at the heart of what is meant by the

church as an agent of a new humanity. Understood in this way (though much in Christian practice contradicts it), the church is not a closed conglomerate of like-minded individuals or an institution in which individuals forfeit their personal being. Rather it is meant to be a community always in the process of formation in which human beings relate to each other beyond the divisions of race, class, culture, gender or sexual orientation, yet in ways that respect difference. As such the church should provide a model of reconciliation for the broader human community as well as a basis for solidarity in the struggle for a more just world. For the Christian humanist such a community is not closed or exclusive in character, but exists for and in solidarity with others. Only then is it faithful to the Jesus of history and the *mythos* that energizes those who believe he is the Christ.

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