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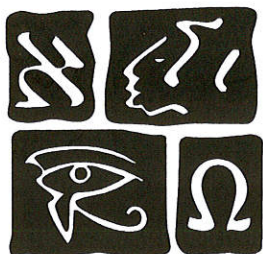
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FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

Hugh W. Nibley

Humanism and the Gospel

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Summary:

These lecture notes discuss the history of humanism from the Sophists to Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. Hugh Nibley emphasizes the fallacies of such a philosophy. Humanism is a substitute for religion when religion goes sour, and as such, humanism is dogmatic, careerist, and intolerant.

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Humanism and the Gospel

Hugh W. Nibley

Webster: Humanism,

"The study of the humanities; polite learning, especially that of which there was a great revival by those called Humanists who brought the Greek and Roman classics into vogue during the Renaissance."

"A system, mode, or attitude of thought or action centering upon distinctively human interests or ideals, especially as contrasted with naturalistic or religious interests."

Humanism is very ancient. It turns up regularly as an Ersatz for religion when religion goes sour. The settled tradition is that while humanism and science represent straight and honest thinking, religion is a primitive, pre-rational, emotional, wishful type of thinking, essentially superstitious. That humanism and science represent bold new thought while religion represents traditional, hide-bound, uncritical thinking.

What this view overlooks is the fact that the bold and original thinking of today inevitably becomes the hidebound authoritarian tradition of tomorrow. So that the theory itself, the belief that we have a body of study that is fresh and forward looking and that we can easily spot it and give allegiance to it is itself a hoary superstition.

The scientists in our time have been first to recognize this.

e.g. The Egyptian held up as the type of muddled pre-logical thinking
G. Santillana: because their science is too advanced for Egyptologists.**
10 years ago Stonehenge was for nuts and romantics: Abbay Hawkins

Lucien Levy-Bruhl: the Savage does not think as we do, vs. Cl. Levi-Strauss

More sharp and incisive in his thinking than any anthropologist.

The classic position of Humanism is represented by the Sophists:

Gorgias: the first attack was on religion. This made them hangers-on of the Milesians

Empedocles: what's the use of all this science?

Protagoras' 3 books: MAN is the measure of all things (the Humanist slogan)

Epicurus -- Horace, nihil humanum mihi alienum...

The Scientific pose impressed the public and the young.

Religion was sick, because men insisted on making it an implement of personal and national success, rather than a check on personal and national ambition.

Humanism always fails one in a crisis. The Stoics tried to make it a firm support, exploiting the proud, defiant spirit of man asserting its integrity in spite of everything: "I am the Captain of my soul." But in the end the support had to be entirely negative: the one comfort was to disdain comfort, the one assurance was to accept the proposition that no assurance was forthcoming -- it was a heroic attitude but an indignant and peevish one; spite can be a powerful feeling, but it is not good enough to live by. It appealed to the military, Achilles the greatest soldier of them all summed it up -- "Ala phile, thane kai su..."

Many novels have been written showing how the humanism of Late Antiquity could not stand up to the positive values of the New Religion, which however are described in sentimental, philosophical and rhetorical terms which are strictly Humanistic. That the R.C. Church all over Europe took to the New Humanism of

the Ren. with passion shows that the old religion had again gone sour: Cardinals, Reformers hailed the New Humanism which was simply the rediscovery of those same authors who had placed clear thinking and feeling above the faded and outworn religions of the Empire.

The Humanism of the Ren. did not last long: Housman shows how quickly scholarship went sour, a steady decline through the 17th and 18th until the 19th centuries

It shared its skeptical, anti-religious attitude with Science, and it was science that took over.

The trouble is that [Humanism is a fair-weather philosophy]

What Homer can teach us, says Goethe, is that Life is a Hell -- he can tell us that in such moving terms, and show us our common fate with such power and vividness that we actually feel an ennobling, uplifting emotion as we read his pages, like life-long political prisoners in Russian prisons we can even take some comfort and pride in bearing up in our plight -- but beyond that Homer can do nothing for us. He cannot help us out.

Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare are the supreme humanists -- and yet what gives each his enduring appeal is the fact that he cannot leave the OTHER world alone. Without constant references to other world and constant hints, allusions, and insinuations that there is something beyond the purely human sphere and predicament, everything becomes as dull as dishwater. But Shakespeare, Homer and Dante simply cannot leave other worlds alone. A "daimon tis" in constantly intervening in human affairs; flashbacks to High Olympus and the Night-life of the gods are a poet's fancy: they were singled out by the Fathers of

the Church for mockery as the very essence of the old religion they sought to discredit. This was a completely false position. It is not the merry Boccaccio tales that the ancients reveal their religious beliefs, but in frequent but usually hidden references to the mysteries, to myths and legends of double-meaning, and to cult-practices and traditions of great age and significance. These have been consistently overlooked by modern scholarship, but today they are being recognized everywhere.

Just as scholarship, with its limited philological training, has missed the truly sound and scientific knowledge of the Ancients because it was not attuned to the scientific idiom, so it has missed the religious content of the vast corpus of ancient writings, because it has not known what to look for and disdained to make any concessions to "pre-humanistic thought.

Shakespeare is very interesting here. His last and ripest play is a humanist document if there ever was one. He is not able to leave the other worlds alone, so he makes peace by allowing them full scope, as he does in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, but consigning them to the realm of fancy (not like the ghost in *Hamlet* or the witches in *Macbeth*). He seems to down-grade the supernatural by making it a world of delusion -- yet it is the presence of that other world that gives the play its great appeal: "Our revels now are ended..."

How does he want us to think of the Great Globe itself -- as a mere figment of our own minds? But today we see photographs of it in its jewel-like splendor: what he dared to imagine was reality! Did our imagination bring it into existence? Can we dissolve it into nothing simply by imagining it out of the picture? It turns out that the whole thing is far more real than Shakespeare is aware: the Great Globe does exist - we did not bring it into existence; where did he get the idea that it would pass away -- just because WE pass away? He got it

from the Bible. In the end everything, every ray of hope that humanism or science have to offer comes from the old religion.

As a humanist Shakespeare glorifies men -- but in what terms? Frustration:

Hamlet ii: What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable____ in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights me not...this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, -- why it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilential congregation of vapors!

It so happens that the greatest of humanists are the most frustrated:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes

Beethoven to Grillparzer

Michelangelo's anguish

Michelangelo's anguish - The inadequacy of humanism is the theme of the great modern novels: Hemingway, Mann, Camus, Solzhenitsyn - it is precisely these great spirits who see, as the rest of us do not, the outrageous disproportion between man the supreme being of the universe, and the_____

The rest of the human race avoids this humiliation by making as if man were all he is cracked up to be -- humanism is a religion of vanity: eyewash, pretenses far exceeding capacity. But since man is the highest mind in the universe, he alone is to be the judge: who then shall dare make fun of him? [The robes, offices, titles, awards, prizes, laudations, acclamations, all given by man to himself, can impress fools and keep mediocre spirits buoyed up with the illusion of success, but honest men know they are nothing.]

In our day humanists and scientists alike have sought fulfillment and reassurance in the Great Institution, which is really the negation of humanism:

C.P. Snow: the aim of all existence is Eminence -- and the foremost scientists will stop at nothing to get it. Because it is all that life holds for them.

G.B. Shaw: it has to be in fun

H.G. Wells: the best world that man can think of -- a S.F. nightmare

[The greatest scientist and the greatest scholar were not humanists at all, but always looking for something beyond, always going back again and again to Genesis and Revelations: Newton and Scaliger.]

[Humanism and the Gospel: you take either YOURSELF or the Gospel very seriously]

Peter vs. Simon Magus CL. Rec.II, 23-25. W. and Prophets 166ff. In this controversy Peter is the real humanitarian

So was J.S. and B.Y., but they felt for mankind precisely because they are so weak and helpless; the Restored Gospel holds no brief for Humanism:

Mosiah 4:5: For behold, if the knowledge of the goodness of God at this time has awakened you to a sense of your nothingness, and your worthless and fallen state...this is the man who receiveth salvation, through the atonement which was prepared from the foundation of the world for all mankind...11....I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness...if ye do this ye shall always rejoice, and be filled with the love of God...and ye will NOT have a mind to injure one another, but to live

peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due. And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry or naked, etc.

This is that other type of humanism, the humanism of a John Wesley or a St. Francis, which is devoid of all the characteristic marks of worldly humanism: the careerism, the envy, the jealousy, the feuding, the vanity, rivalry, display, politicking, the posturing, "O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth..." (Hel. 12:7) says the Prophet Samuel viewing such a state of things among the Nephites.

Returning to our original proposition: that Humanism is a Substitute for religion that has spoiled, and that Humanism itself, occupying the position of the discredited religion in turn becomes dogmatic, careerist, and intolerant.

Is this just Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee?

No! Religion always claims that awareness of the Other World which Humanism and science formally deny.

So we are faced with a choice between just TWO world views: "It is true that philosophical idealists tend to agree with positivists and naturalists that religion will no longer be necessary when a 'rational' culture can be developed to replace it." (Albright, Hist. Arch. and Chr. Humanism, p.47)

The Modern idea is that for thousands of years the human race went along one track, but at last the human mind is emancipated and we have discovered the other. The strange thing is that as far as the record goes men have always thought that way: that gospel was being proclaimed -- man emergence into the light of reason in the OK of Egypt, with as much right as we proclaim it today.

We have a choice between two views of the world, but BOTH are spoiled.

[The disillusionment of the honest humanist is swift and certain, but only today are we discovering how badly we have misjudged the religious tradition. We have put the whole thing into a single package and thrown the package out of the window. What we have failed to see is that the religion which disgusted the intellectuals was a dishonest religion -- vitiated by human weakness and priestcraft. No people ever denounced priestcraft more strongly than the first LDS -- does that mean they were denying all religion? Far from it. But priestcraft gave the world no choice: If you reject us, they said, you are rejecting all religion and throwing out God himself: you must accept our package or nothing. "So be it!" said the weary world, and rejected the lot. The clergy are like those corporations who denounce any who criticize them and their corrupt and greedy practices as enemies to all free enterprise, capitalism, to freedom itself.

But Mormonism looked back behind conventional Christianity and Judaism and saw another religion, the Gospel as given to Adam in the beginning in its purity. This religion embraced a great body of true knowledge essential to guiding man's behavior in this life and giving him the greatest possible benefit from it.]

Today Santillana and others are showing us that there may very well have been just such a body of knowledge. Certainly the Egyptians are keenly aware that their ancestors possessed such a treasure and then lost it.

If we only knew what was the real background of ancient religions we might no longer be reduced to a choice between two impossible alternatives. J.S. indicated that we might get a glimpse of such a background through the study of

Egyptian documents, they being based on a diligent IMITATION of valid teachings and practices.

