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Jens Zimmerman. *Humanism and Religion: A Call for the Renewal of Western Culture*. Oxford University Press 2012. 400 pp. \$150.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199697755).

Regarding the concept of the ‘human’, western civilization today finds itself in a rather paradoxical position. For on the one hand, it is the inheritor of a very rich and complex tradition grounded in religious notions of human dignity, personhood, free choice of the will, and so on. On the other hand, beginning with the Enlightenment, western civilization bore witness to a sharp and pointed attack upon the metaphysical and religious influences at play in the formation of the concept of the human. Discarding such influences, a new framework for thinking the human developed, a *secularist* framework that emphasized critical thinking and evidence over metaphysical speculation and religious belief. In general, this new secularist framework came to be known under the heading of ‘humanism’.

Now the underlying paradox, according to Jens Zimmerman in his *Humanism and Religion*, is that this later secularist critique has over time inevitably led to the suffocation and sterilization of the concept of the human so that today we find ourselves in many ways unable to provide a sufficient theoretical framework for upholding fundamental values upon which the very concept of the human has been built. The reason for this—and this is his central thesis—has to do with the fact that ideas employed by secularist thinkers in the critique and supposed secularist rejuvenation of this concept are in fact borrowed, in somewhat muted form, from the religious tradition. Zimmerman likewise strengthens this thesis for the particular case of Christianity inasmuch as in the Christian notion of the incarnation, God becomes man so that the human is raised up to the divine.

Divided into eight chapters, Zimmerman’s work is an exhaustively researched *tour de force* of the history and roots of secularist humanism. In the first chapter, ‘Western Culture after Christendom’, the above-discussed thesis is established, viz., that on account of the rise of secularism coupled with the rejection of its religious roots, western culture has lost its ability ‘to answer questions of identity and purpose’ (12). The solution to this apparent stagnancy, as Zimmerman suggests, demands a ‘retrieval’ of the religious roots (as well as those metaphysical roots that are inevitably included within it, in particular Platonism) from which the very idea of humanity was birthed and from which it thereafter developed.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 on the ‘The Theological Origins of Humanism’ is in fact quite extensive and serves as Zimmerman’s basic starting point for his retrieval inasmuch as it traces the roots of humanism from early Patristic humanism into Medieval scholastic humanism and still further into the religiously-founded humanism of the Renaissance thinkers. Here the basic argument is twofold. The first point is that even the very earliest Christian theologies were humanistic, ‘because they believed in the incarnation’ (38). Indeed, it is the incarnation that sets apart Christian humanism from all other religious forms (Islamic, Jewish, etc.) inasmuch as through the incarnation finitude is brought into mediation with infinitude and alternatively the otherwise quite immanent status of human existence transcends itself through the person of Jesus Christ as the flesh and blood instantiation of the *imago dei* (60). The second point is that the secularist emphasis upon reason apart from faith is in fact incomplete inasmuch as, ‘the general fiduciary structure of knowledge points to the divine’ (73). In consequence, the search for knowledge, rather than finding an obstacle in faith, in fact demands faith inasmuch as it represents ‘a higher form of what all understanding requires’ (73).

In the third chapter, 'Humanism From Vico to Dilthey', Zimmerman outlines the rise of secularist humanism. In the first place, Giambattista Vico figures in as the father of humanism, principally in his *The New Science*. Primary concepts central to Vico include the objectification of human self-understanding, knowledge through history, the formative role of education and common (moral) sense (*sensus communis*). Where Vico departs from Christian humanism, however, is in his tying these educational aims to an apotheosis of the self so that the goal of education is not to form the human being in light of its divinely given nature but to form instead the 'truly human' (133) on its own terms. Vico's early emphasis upon self-understanding thereafter becomes central to Friedrich Schleiermacher's later development and universalization of hermeneutics. Following this, in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, the departure from Christian into secular humanism is solidified inasmuch as the hermeneutic drive toward self-understanding is interpreted not in terms of the transcendent reaching out toward the divine but instead in terms of the immanent participation of the human being in the historical spirit of its age (150).

In the next two chapters, Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas are set in opposition regarding both their competing interpretations of the human and the transcendent principle that grounds it. In Chapter 4, 'Martin Heidegger's Post-Metaphysical Hyper-Humanism', it is noted that although Heidegger is often thought to pursue an anti-humanist position, his interpretation of Dasein is nonetheless infused with various post/hyper-humanistic tendencies so that the superiority, along with the possibility of transcendence of the human, is retained in a kind of 'ontology of freedom' (196). Inevitably, although the concept of the human is radicalized within Heidegger, its humanistic structures are nonetheless retained. Following this in Chapter 5, 'Levinas's Humanism of the Other', the opposition between Levinas and Heidegger is summarized quite nicely in the initial introductory remarks where Zimmerman suggests that whereas for Heidegger transcendence is 'the openness of the human being to Being itself', with Levinas transcendence instead becomes 'an ethical relationship to another human being' (200), to which is further coupled the infinite other.

In Chapter 6, 'Hans-Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutic Humanism', the discussion turns to Gadamer's retrieval and rehabilitation of the humanistic tradition. In general, the argument in this chapter builds upon the previous chapters and so serves as a summary of the humanistic concepts that have been established throughout the work, including the transcendent power of art and the aesthetic, common moral sense (*sensus communis*), education as formation (*Bildung*), self-understanding through history and like concepts. Siding with other scholars (see e.g., Jean Grondin's *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*), Zimmerman represents Gadamerian hermeneutics as something of the climax of this tradition. Despite this, in Chapter 7, 'Christian Responses: Maurice Blondel and Dietrich Bonhoeffer', Zimmerman does offer at least an alternative Christian response to Gadamer's (at bottom) secularist approach where the role of the divine is once again introduced in relation to the underlying possibilities of human transcendence.

In the eighth and final chapter, 'Towards a Religious Humanism?', the question of whether or not a religious humanism that joins together the human with the divine through the re-integration of faith and reason is considered. In this chapter, Jürgen Habermas is first cited as standing within the Enlightenment tradition and its drive toward the autonomy of reason. At the same time, Zimmerman notes, Habermas has more recently recognized the, 'increasing inability of secular reason to uphold human values against progressive modern technologies' (319)—thus spelling the end of the age of secularism. Further issues revolving around these lines are discussed, including Derrida's recognition that belief in the sense of 'acquiescence in the presence of transcendence' (322) always plays a role in the determination of thinking and reasoning.

The book concludes with three ‘axioms’ of humanism that find roots within the religious tradition. The first axiom is that ‘self-knowledge (truth) requires ethical transcendence’. This axiom echoes the Christian tradition’s (as well as Levinas’) emphasis upon the ‘intra-social’ role of the other in human transcendence. The second axiom states that ‘self-knowledge is hermeneutical’. In this axiom, Zimmerman ties humanistic concepts of self-understanding through history to Christian concepts of the self-disclosure of God through history. Thus knowledge of self and other (God) cannot arise as a non-mediated insight but instead demands the mediation of an historically-bounded ‘textual’ tradition that itself requires interpretation. The final axiom, ‘self-knowledge (truth) requires aesthetics’, emphasizes the fact that the transcendent power of art and the aesthetic itself finds grounding in the incarnation where God takes on the form of the human being (the *imago dei*) and inevitably ‘shows’ himself through the human.

Whether or not Zimmerman has adequately defended his thesis, *Humanism and Religious* is a powerful critique of secularist humanism as seen from the perspective of a religiously-founded concept of the human. It shows that far from having settled the debate as to whether reason is sufficient apart from faith, the historical insights borne of faith have nonetheless been invaluable to those notions connected with the concept of the human that have thereafter developed along secularist lines. The question then is whether the future direction of humanism can continue to follow a secularist trend or else demands reintegration with religiously-informed ideals for the purpose of reinvigoration. From this latter perspective, Zimmerman’s work offers a rich and compelling argument.

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