The Struggle to Be Human:
Christian Humanism and the Future of Our Common life

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What does it mean to be human?

This most basic of moral questions lies at the heart of the chair I have the privilege to occupy. Moral and Pastoral Theology asks what it means to be human before God, in relation to one another, and the rest of creation. More specifically, as Christian theology, it asks what the revelation of God in the humanity of Jesus Christ reveals about our humanity: who we are, what we are for, what distorts and diminishes our humanity, and what enables us to flourish.

Moral and Pastoral Theology asks these questions neither in the abstract nor in purely speculative terms. Rather, it attends to the material and social conditions under which human beings live. It asks what it means to live well before God when we are creatures who eat, work, have families, inhabit places, learn, suffer, die, and whose lives and loves are intimately interwoven with and from nonhuman life. There is, therefore, a necessarily inductive quality to its work as it begins in the middle of things, its judgments thickened with the voices, wounds and joys of those struggling to be human within fields of practice such as medicine, business, and agriculture, and in specific places and cultural contexts.

This focus on specific practices, places and times is reflected in the history of the chair.

The Regius Professorship of Pastoral Theology was established in 1840, a year that sits amidst a period of great upheaval.

A year earlier, more than a million people put their names to the first Chartist petition demanding suffrage for working men. Parliament rejected it but it initiated an at times violent struggle that fundamentally changed Britain's political order and laid the groundwork for modern representative democracy. The Chartist movement itself anticipated the revolutions that swept Europe in 1848. Similarly, The World Anti-Slavery Convention met for the first time in London in June 1840, bringing together abolitionists from around the world and in the process invented a new political form: the transnational social movement.

In 1840 the Penny Post came in circulation and radically lowered the cost of communication. Its introduction points to how people, goods, money and information were moving at speeds and across distances unimaginable only a generation before.

Meanwhile, Britain's transformation at home was inseparable from its imperial expansion abroad. In 1840 Britain was fighting the Opium War in China and started the First Anglo-

Afghan War. These and other colonial ventures would reshape Britain's relationship with the world and help increase its empire until it reached its greatest expanse in 1922.

So this Regius Chair was born amid a world in flux. Indeed, I would contend its foundational aim was to develop forms of theological enquiry adequate to the realities then emerging and the profound transformations these wrought on both church and society.

Think of the world between 1840s and 1933 when the position first became the Regius Chair of *Moral* and not just Pastoral Theology. In 1840, if you travelled any distance, you walked, use horses, or sailed. By 1933 you could travel by car, railway or aeroplane. In 1840, the economy remained fundamentally agrarian. By the 1930s Britain was an industrial, capitalist and highly urbanised society embedded in international networks of trade and finance. New technologies and forms of political economy transformed not simply what people could do, but how they understood time, distance, work, family, community and themselves.

Transformations of this magnitude inevitably raise fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of human life. My predecessors grappled with these questions in debates on issues as varied as contraception and general strikes. They recognised that changing material and social conditions generate profound moral, political, and pastoral questions by reshaping the exercise of human agency. Their answers varied, and some of their judgements we may now question. But their underlying task remains essential: to interpret changing interpersonal and structural conditions in the light of Christian understandings of what it means to be human and what human life is for, while allowing those changing conditions to challenge and deepen theological understanding.

This movement between interpreting the signs of the times in the light of Christ and discerning how to live faithfully within them lies at the heart of Christian ethics. However, its task is not simply to judge the world as it is, but to discern and propound the forms of relationship, practice, and common life through which it might become what it could and should be: a world in which human beings flourish as those made in the image of God and for whom Christ died.

A century after the foundation of this chair, the context within which it received its full name was one where Christian thinkers once again found themselves asking what it meant to be human amid a world being violently remade.

Industrial capitalism, bourgeois and increasingly secularising forms of individualism, mechanised warfare and mass death, the Great Depression, the rise of fascism and communism, the emergence of bureaucratic states capable of classifying, mobilising and controlling entire populations, and new technologies of mass communication that enabled propaganda on an unprecedented scale - all reopened fundamental questions about what human beings are and what human life is for. Was a person primarily member of a race, class, or biological material to be improved through eugenics? Or was there something about being human that resisted reduction to these categories? In Oxford and elsewhere one response, a response to which the then holders of this Chair aligned themselves with, was Christian humanism.

We tend to remember the most prominent protagonists of mid-twentieth century Christian humanism in Britain principally as literary figures: C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, Dorothy L. Sayers, and T.S. Eliot.[1] Yet their poetry, novels, plays, and essays were also interventions in a struggle over what it meant to be human.[2] Alongside them were directly ecclesial figures such as Archbishop William Temple, whose 1942 *Christianity and Social Order* sought to articulate the societal and governmental implications of Christian claims about human dignity.[3] Kenneth Kirk, who held the chair from 1933-1938, set out a retrieval of moral theology that articulates central convictions of Christian humanism.[4] Leonard Hodgson, who succeeded to the Chair in 1938 and held it until 1944, wrote *Democracy and Dictatorship in the Light of Christian Faith* in 1935 to shore up support for democracy amid the move of Christians to authoritarian forms of politics; while V. A. Demant, who served as Regius Professor from 1949 to 1971, in *his* augural lecture lamented the "collapse of Christian humanism and its ethics."[5] … *Plus ça change*.

Against accounts of human beings as racial specimens, economic units, autonomous individuals, or a mass to be organised by an all-encompassing state, the likes of Temple, Hodgson, Kirk, and Demant, alongside their literary compatriots like CS Lewis, sought to recover and rearticulate an account of human dignity, freedom, creativity, sociality, conscience, transcendence, and moral responsibility rooted in a Christian anthropology.

Again, we can and should question judgments they made. Importantly, the Christian humanism I want to articulate will draw upon a much wider range of voices than those normally associated with Christian humanists of this period who, with a few exceptions, tended to be patrician and paternalistic in outlook, interpreting the world from the top down. Because of this outlook they could not see that to understand slavery, we need to listen to the testimony of the enslaved such as Cugoano and Mary Prince. If we want to understand industrialisation, don't just talk to the factory owner or economist, but also listen to workers on the factory floor. To understand empire, we cannot simply look outwards from Oxford or London. We need to look back from the places that were colonised, listening to the political theologies of Gandhi and Leopold Senghor, not just those of Temple and J.H. Oldham.

You might hear this as a call for "decolonising the curriculum." I confess I find that language clunky and ideologically overdetermined. I would call it simply telling the truth. For we cannot tell the truth about who we are without listening to those who experienced the underside of the histories that made us. If Moral and Pastoral Theology is to be attentive to the conditions of human life, it must attend especially to those places where the meaning of our humanity is most severely tested and put under pressure materially and socially. And that is not simply an epistemological point about the conditions of truth telling. It is also a theological one. Christianity makes the claim that if we want to know who we are, we must learn to look at the world from its wounds and, first and foremost, from the wounded body of Christ on a cross. A point I shall return to. The enslaved, the colonised, the factory worker, the refugee, the prisoner, the sick person: these are not simply subjects of moral concern. On a theological account, their lives disclose things about being human and our common life that the secure and advantaged

mostly cannot see. Indeed, without attention to these experiences we cannot tell the truth about who we are, the world we live in, where we are going, and the real meaning and purpose of what we are doing.

So part of the work I hope to pursue from this Chair is to develop the work of the Christian humanists of the 1930s and 40s. But alongside continuing their work of retrieving insights from conventional Patristic, Medieval and Reformation voices, I will extend this retrieval to a *ressourcement* from marginalised, oppressed, and nonwestern sources to learn from forms of Christian moral, political and pastoral reflection generated in precisely those places where the struggle over the meaning of the human was and is most acute. I would add also, although I don't have the space to develop the point here, that this work of *ressourcement* must be done in dialogue with those in the tradition who have centred the mutually constitutive relationship between human and nonhuman life – what I've called elsewhere a georgic tradition of moral and political theology.

Which brings us to today and the present context to which such insights can be related. My suggestion here is that we are living through another transformation of comparable magnitude to that experienced from the 1840s to the 1930s.

Once again, the material and social conditions of human life are being reorganised around us. To take but one example, the ability to edit human DNA, the capacity to merge humans and machines at a cellular level, and artificial intelligence that arguably shares characteristics of human consciousness lead some to ask whether there will emerge different kinds of humans or even post-humans. Indeed, across multiple domains, from gender to ecology to international relations, the meaning and purposes of human life are being contested and reconfigured. These developments cannot be understood in isolation. Together, they constitute interrelated pressures that unsettle inherited accounts of personhood and point to how the changes we experience do not simply raise questions about what we can or should do. They are changing our understanding of who we are.

At the same time, our political barriers and ideological divisions lead us to deny, demonise and dehumanise others. Indeed, we are living amid powerful currents that threaten to dissolve the idea of a shared humanity as a coherent moral and political reality.

So we face a peculiar conjunction. On the one hand, extraordinary confidence that we can remake the human. On the other, a diminishing capacity to recognise and sustain a sense of participating in a shared humanity.

My proposal is that Christian humanism provides indispensable resources for addressing this context. But to see why, we must first understand more clearly two, underlying and interrelated crises.

Two interrelated crises

The first is a crisis of agency. People feel acted upon by forces they can neither understand nor resist. Artificial intelligence is only the most recent expression of this dynamic. It generates faceless processes driven by algorithms that decide who gets the mortgage, the interview, the surgery, the scholarship – without any accountability or come back. The crisis here is *not* first and foremost one of technology. It is a crisis of *agency*.

Rather than being enabled to act with and for others, we discover ourselves constantly positioned to act *against* others, in competition, in ideological conflict, in actual war. We find we must act by ourselves, hassling and hustling, alone in a crowd, rather than cultivating forms of meaningful and purposeful shared life.

My intuition is that what people want is to have their sense of agency restored—to recover the belief that their lives are not meaningless or merely managed, that there are ways we can act together rather than simply act alone or in competition with others, and that they can act to shape the world they live in rather than be passive consumers of judgments taken about them without them.

Alongside this loss of agency sits the second crisis: a loss of trust in the institutions that shape our common life. Hospitals, universities, schools, courts, museums — are seen as distant, procedural, and ideological rather than as spaces of belonging and common purpose that contribute to our shared flourishing.

From the left, the charge is that institutions are oppressive—racist, patriarchal, homophobic, extractivist, ableist. From the right, the accusation is that they are bureaucratic, unaccountable, elitist, and "woke." In both cases, the result is the same: a *disenchantment* and *disidentification* with the very structures that once gave shape, continuity, and purpose to our common life across generations.

Our current crisis, I would argue, is not one of people, ideas, or even money. It is a crisis of *institutional imagination*. We know the challenges before us: environmental degradation, social polarisation, mass migration, lack of housing, food insecurity, and the like, but we no longer trust the institutions we have, and cannot imagine the institutions we need to address the long-term problems we face.

And there are good reasons for this lack of trust in institutions and the structures that determine our living and working conditions. We are treated by them as either units of social administration to be managed or units of data to be processed, optimised, and surveilled, with our relationships and emotions sold back to us as clicks and likes.

And instead of the tools and technologies we create serving us and making life better, we find our lives and identities reengineered to serve them and their logics, and in this reversal where we serve our tools rather than our tools serving us, we find our own lives are drained of joy, of wonder, of human depth and connection. Life gets faster and more efficient, but less humane.

To understand our institutional moment, we need to recover some historical perspective.

The modern world, for all its individualism, was built through institutions. From the late 18th century onward, we saw the invention of the modern university, museum, political party, trade union, prison, public library, sports clubs, and myriad other institutions. Each was an attempt to answer a collective problem or pursue a shared good and organise what was necessary for addressing that end through a form of common life that could be sustained over time.

How do you get clean, potable water to a rapidly expanding urban population concentrated in increasingly close-knit living conditions? You create an institution: the municipal sewage and waterworks. This institution not only solves the problem, but it is also a means by which to form the people with the vision to address the problem, the ethos to fulfil that vision with care and moral concern, and the technical knowledge to do the job well. The same goes for solving any other of the social ills and questions that emerged with industrialisation and modernisation.

The church was at the heart of the birth of much of this institutional world. Parishes and congregations shaped civic order at a local level; Christians laid the foundations of the university, the hospital, public education, and public housing. Archbishop Temple's involvement in the formation of the welfare state being but one case in point.

But by the end of the 20th century that institutional imagination faltered. Society became, in Robert Putnam's phrase, comprised of people *bowling alone*.

The deeper pattern underlying these dynamics is the shift from institutions of care and moral purpose to institutions that control and commodify and that lack any sense of their meaning and purpose. Everything becomes a market, every person an individualised and atomised producer or consumer who must brand and sell themselves to be noticed. Hospitals, for example, are no longer institutions that serve the moral good of health. They are "healthcare providers," patients are "service users."

This language is not neutral. It recasts what are moral relationships in transactional terms. When a nurse treats a patient as a data point rather than a person, mere biology rather than as someone with a biography, *both* are dehumanised.

Underlying and driving these shifts is the anti-humanistic vision of what the late Pope Francis and Pope Leo call the "technocratic paradigm."

The technocratic paradigm has a wholly instrumental view of nature, separating and alienating us from creation. It operates with what Francis calls a "tyrannical anthropocentrism" (LS #68) as well as a hyper individualism. It equates scientific and technological progress with human progress while denying any moral and spiritual basis to life such that everything is subject to a will to power without moral limits save for a cursory utilitarian calculus. And it is precisely this paradigm that fuels post and transhumanist visions that want to disassemble and re-

engineer our shared humanity so it can be either fired off to Mars or fed into a large language model.

The reality we know in our bones is that human life cannot be reduced to ones and zeros, and then managed and optimized for either market share or a social engineering project. In short, we cannot live by money and technology alone. And this brings me back to Christian humanism.

What is Christian humanism?

At the heart of any theological vision for renewing human agency and reimagining our institutions in this context lies a simple but radical conviction: every human is made in the image of God.

Let me say a little more about the theological vision that underlies this claim through elaborating on the central commitments of Christian humanism.

Christian humanism gives a striking answer to the question with which I began: if you want to know what humanity truly is, look to Jesus Christ.

Toward the end of John's Gospel, Pontius Pilate presents the beaten and humiliated Jesus to the crowd and says, "Behold the human." Ironically, Pilate speaks more truth than he realizes. The Christian tradition hears in those words the revelation that "Here is true humanity."

For Christian humanism, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus provide the clearest picture of what humanity is meant to be. And the hope is that, however much our humanity has been distorted by sin or idolatry it can be restored through learning to imitate Christ.

That imitation takes many forms. One form is contemplation: looking at an icon or painting of Christ, or reading stories that portray a Christlike way of life. Another is participation: doing the kinds of things Christ did—especially caring for the vulnerable, the forgotten, and the excluded.

Christian humanism begins, then, from the conviction that our humanity is revealed in Christ. But it also insists that we recover our humanity not merely through ideas, but through practices: through acts of service, compassion, and solidarity.

And it is crucial to notice which Christ we are invited to contemplate and imitate.

The scene before Pilate is not one of triumph or worldly success. Christ stands there beaten, humiliated, bound, abandoned, and about to be executed by the state. The central image of Christian humanism is therefore not the powerful ruler, autonomous individual, or self-made success story. It is the wounded body of Christ.

Within a Christian humanist framework, human flourishing is not discovered by leaving the difficulties of this world behind. Christianity is not a form of spiritual escapism or inner consolation. It does not warrant a movement *away* from the messy material realities of life. It demands a movement into them.

Into suffering. Into loss. Into the traumatised and fragile places of human and nonhuman life. Christian humanism insists that we discover our humanity precisely there.

The parable of the Good Samaritan powerfully makes this point. It is the Samaritan who acts as the truly human figure in the story, his humanity revealed in the moment of encounter where he crosses boundaries of fear, hostility, and social division to show mercy and loving kindness. The parable suggests we discover our humanity through our encounter with those who are not like us, especially those who suffer and those we consider our enemies. And in the Christian imagination, that is also where we most fully encounter Christ.

This is the central claim of a frequent interpretation of Matthew 25. "When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned?" asks those questioned by Jesus. And he answers: whenever you cared for the least of these, you cared for me.

So the presence of Christ is not confined to sacred spaces or religious rituals. Alongside bread and wine and times of prayer, Christ also becomes present in the encounter with vulnerable human beings—in the stranger, the prisoner, the poor, the excluded.

Early Christian writers such as Gregory of Nyssa built on the insight that we discover Christ most deeply at the places of suffering and weakness and at that point, discover our own humanity. In one remarkable sermon from the fourth century, he condemns slavery by arguing that enslaved people must be recognised as fully human because they bear the image of God. His argument is Christological: if Christ is present among the lowly and oppressed, then to encounter the slave is also to encounter Christ. In other words, Gregory understands that in and through Christ our humanity is discovered through solidarity with the neglected and exploited.

And Gregory's brother, Basil of Caesarea invented an institution that was inspired by and embodied this theological vision; namely, the hospital. For both Gregory and Basil this institution that enabled care for the poor, sick, and socially excluded like lepers was a direct expression of Christian humanism and the recognition of the image of God in every person.

Christian humanism is not then a theory. It is a therapy for recovering our humanity in and through Christ.

The Core Features of Christian Humanism

Historically, this vision generated a series of interconnected projects, the first of which is **philosophical and theological**. It asks what it means to be human and explores that question through theological anthropology: human beings as creatures made in the image of God, as

finite and fallen, as redeemed in Christ, and as open to a future fulfilment beyond the limits of history.

Second, it is an **educational and formational project**. Christian humanism has long been concerned with the cultivation of wisdom, virtue, and good judgment. This is the world of *paideia*, *Bildung*, the liberal arts, and *humanitas*: traditions of education aimed not simply at producing workers or consumers, but formed and humane persons capable of living well with others. This aspect of Christian humanism took the institutional form of schools and universities. And as an aside, this is something the recovery of Christian humanism can contribute to the humanities which, if we are honest, has lost its vocation, which is to interrogate what human life is for, what gives it meaning and purpose, and what virtues, practices, and relationships enable us to flourish. For the humanities are not simply academic enterprises, but about learning how to live humanly. Its telos is the formation of persons capable of discerning and pursuing truth, goodness, and beauty, exercising practical wisdom, and realising their humanity through relationships with others. Crucially, the very practice of debating these questions is itself an exercise in formation, cultivating the capacity to live well together amid profound disagreements about the meaning and purposes of human life – something we desperately need to teach in these polarised times.[6]

Third, Christian humanism becomes a **civic and political project**. Because every person possesses dignity, political and economic life must be ordered in ways that resist domination, corruption, and dehumanisation. This tradition therefore helped shape ideas and institutions that fostered equality, liberty, civic participation, and democracy.

Fourth, Christian humanism is also an **aesthetic project**. It asks how art, literature, music, and other forms of cultural production reveal the drama and dignity of human life. As an artistic enterprise, Christian humanism holds that humans are not reducible to rational or economic calculators; they are imaginative, desiring, meaning-making beings who shape and reshape culture through their longing for beauty, truth, and belonging.

Finally, Christian humanism is a **scholarly project**. The great humanist traditions of learning were never simply about technique or method. Scholarship was understood as serving moral, civic, and spiritual formation through enriching our shared scientific and intellectual life. Figures such as Erasmus exemplify this ideal of learning in service of human flourishing.

This interconnected set of projects should not be seen as a solely European development. In its early modern form, it emerges in response to the encounter with the New World and is taken up around the world. Think of the indigenous Peruvian theologian Guaman Poma writing his 1000 page treatise *The First New Chronicle and Good Government* in 1612; or the formerly enslaved African, Olaudah Equiano writing his spiritual autobiography and abolitionist treatise in 1789; Sojourner Truth campaigning to end slavery in the 19th Century; or John Wu advocating for Christian Humanism in China in the 20th Century.

Taken together, these strands form a rich vision of the human person: relational rather than isolated, dignified rather than instrumentalised, formed through love, and always open to transcendence.

Christian humanism may seem self-evident, but it stands in sharp contrast to and is contested by several dominant ways of understanding what it means to be human that shape much of our contemporary cultural and political landscape. These alternatives appear across the political spectrum, taking both progressive and reactionary forms.

The first alternative is **radical individualism** or libertarianism: the human being is autonomous; self-sufficient; defined by choice, power, or achievement; a Homo economicus, whose flourishing consists of a consumer lifestyle and material wealth

Shared traditions, institutions, and forms of common life are irrelevant, ignored or seen as restrictive rather than enabling. What matters most is the sovereign self: my choices, my desires, my self-definition.

But if we define humanity that way, what happens to: the elderly person who has forgotten everything? The refugee with no status? The unborn? The one who is no longer economically productive or never will be? Are they less human? Christian humanism answers: No.

Instead, Christian humanism argues that we do not become fully human alone. While it sees much of value in the modern concern for liberty and freedom of conscience, it affirms human beings are relational creatures formed through families, communities, traditions, and shared responsibilities. Freedom detached from solidarity and forms of thick association breeds not just loneliness but deaths of despair, not just distrust but a society devouring itself.

The second alternative is what we might call **identitarianism**.

By this I mean the belief that human identity is fundamentally determined by belonging to a particular ethnic, cultural, or national group. In this view, we become organised around closed circles of belonging: insiders and outsiders, friends and enemies, those who authentically belong and those who don't.

This is seen in the family, faith, and flag identitarianism on the right, and the gender, sexuality, and race identitarianism on the left. On both left and right, this identitarianism often leads to the idea that human flourishing depends primarily on the recognition and expression of one's group identity. If that identity is denied then one's humanity itself is understood to be violated.

Christian humanism resists this way of thinking because it refuses the idea that humans can be reduced to inherited or ascribed identities. Such a view turns culture into destiny and denies the possibility of solidarity across deep differences.

The third alternative is **determinism**.

This is the view that human beings are ultimately reducible to impersonal forces—whether biological, economic, technological, historical, or evolutionary. In different forms, this outlook appears in scientific materialism, social Darwinism, certain strands of Marxism, fascism, technocracy, and some contemporary forms of transhumanism.

The common thread is the belief that freedom, moral responsibility, and creativity are largely illusions. Human beings become products of systems, structures, instincts, or material conditions. Justice gives way to power. Human life is interpreted primarily through either domination, survival, or the efficient and effective administration of biological and psychological processes.

Christian humanism rejects this reduction of persons to mechanisms or historical processes. It insists that human beings are neither simply programmable matter nor expressions of collective forces. People possess agency, moral depth, creativity, and the capacity for change and transformation.

Underlying all three of these alternatives—libertarianism, identitarianism, and determinism—is a diminished and reductive account of the human person.

Tragically, Christians have given weight to and baptised each of these alternatives, such that large sections of the church identify their faith with policies and practices that institutionalise cruelty toward the stranger, contempt for the poor, and promote the dismantling of the very institutions of social care their forebears founded. In the process core Christian doctrines are twisted and deformed beyond recognition with Jesus remade into a tribal god and love of neighbour labelled "toxic empathy."

In this world of shattered mirrors and lacerating distortions of the image of God, Christian humanism offers a path out.

Imago Dei, Democracy, and Reimagining Institutions

If we follow a Christian humanist vision of what it means to be human, then institutions are not merely mechanisms for efficiency of administration or making money; they are means through which we realise our shared humanity. The image of God is not fully expressed in isolation but in *common life* – or to use more theological language, it is realised in forms of covenantal fellowship or *koinonia*.

Our hospitals, schools, businesses and congregations are not just systems; they are—at least potentially—schools of mutual recognition, participation and contribution through which we cultivate forms of common life that enable us to realise who we are as persons in and through relationship with each other, over time, and at different scales. Good institutions do not simply act upon people; they enable people to act with and for each other. They distribute agency rather than centralize it. They cultivate participation rather than compliance. In doing so, they

create the conditions under which human beings can genuinely flourish through free, mutually responsible relationships with others.

The challenge before us is to foster institutions that are genuinely agency-centred.

What the Catholic social critic Ivan Illich called "convivial institutions" widen the circle of decision-making, distribute power, share knowledge, and rather than privileging only credentialed expertise they recognise multiple forms of wisdom and experience. They thereby enhance and enable shared human agency.

We already see examples of this kind of convivial institutional life around us, some historic, and others just emerging. To name but a few: Broad based community organizing; credit unions; hospices; worker cooperatives; the classical-schools movement in the US; mutual aid networks; primary healthcare co-production initiatives; community land trusts; the digital commons; community gardens; and social enterprises rooted in local participation.

Across these exercises in co-production and co-governance, the goal is not ownership in the capitalist sense of possession and control. It is ownership in the democratic sense: people having a real hand and voice in shaping the social and material worlds they inhabit.

What we need desperately is the creation of more convivial institutions, particularly around emerging technologies such as AI.

Such institutions do not simply change the world; through involvement in them their participants are themselves changed. They grow into forms of responsibility, solidarity, and shared action through which their personhood is realised and deepened.

This connection between agency, participation, and human flourishing is why Christian humanism has so often advocated for participatory forms of democracy and how such forms of democracy are the antidote and alternative to authoritarianism.

It is this theological conviction that human beings are relational creatures, created for communion with God, neighbour, and the wider creation which leads Christian humanists of the 1930s and 40s like Jacques Maritain, Karl Barth, and V. A. Demant to link faithful witness to participatory democratic life.[7] If human beings are created for relationship, mutual responsibility, and shared tending of creation, then social and political institutions should reflect and nurture those capacities.

Within this framework, democratic participation is morally and spiritually formative. Through participating in shared decision-making, shared action, and practices of solidarity, people begin to realise something of their vocation as human beings created for communion rather than domination.

From this perspective, democracy is not merely a mechanism for selecting governments. It is a moral and spiritual practice through which people learn to live together as free and responsible persons.

Participatory forms of democracy and their institutional embodiment are a vital way of responding to the contemporary crisis of agency when our societies are struggling with the destructive effects of unregulated markets, technological disruption, ecological breakdown, widening inequality, and the profound loss of agency these generate.

The economic historian Karl Polanyi observed in his 1944 classic, *The Great Transformation* that such moments like ours inevitably generate "counter-movements": collective attempts to counter the destructive effects of the unchecked impersonal forces of capitalism and technology.

Some of these counter-movements become authoritarian. Fascism is one historical example. Contemporary forms of authoritarian populism provide another. In such movements, people seek to recover agency by concentrating power in a single leader who promises to rescue "the people" from chaos and disorder.

Other counter-movements, however, take democratic form. Labour, environmental, and civil rights movements all represent efforts to reclaim agency through shared action and each generated forms of participatory institution. Both authoritarian and democratic responses arise from the same crisis: the feeling that ordinary people no longer have meaningful control over the conditions of their lives. But they diverge sharply in how they respond.

Authoritarian movements concentrate agency in the hands of the one, the few, or the party. Democratic movements seek to distribute agency more widely and cultivate what community organisers call "relational power": the power generated when people act together for shared purposes.

And this brings us back to why small d, participatory forms of democracy and Christian humanism go together. Participatory democracy honours the dignity of each person precisely by enabling people to contribute to the shaping of a common life. Rather than being passive recipients of decisions made by distant elites, markets, bureaucracies, or algorithms, people become active participants in forming the worlds they inhabit together.

Democracy is therefore not first about elections, party competition, or constitutional procedures. Those are the mechanisms of a democratic system. At its deepest level, democracy is sustained by social practices through which people exercise agency together and participate in shaping their living and working conditions.

Democracy, in this sense, is fundamentally a practice of neighbouring. It is one of the ways we discover our shared humanity across differences of class, culture, race, religion, and ideological conviction. It is thereby a humanistic enterprise.

Participatory democracy also bears witness to a deep theological truth: that solidarity across difference is possible because human beings are already bound together in relations of mutual dependence and shared creatureliness in and through Christ.

Christian humanism therefore offers a radically different vision of the future from one driven solely by capital accumulation, technological advances, and social control. It points instead toward forms of economic, political, and cultural life that deepen human agency, strengthen solidarity, and cultivate ecological mutuality.

At its heart lies a simple but demanding conviction: human beings become most fully themselves not through domination, isolation, or consumption, but through participation in a just and generous common life.

And in Christian terms, such a life bears witness—even now—to the work of the Holy Spirit: forming a people out of fragmentation, cultivating communion where there was alienation, and enabling strangers to become neighbours.

Conclusion

This account of Christian humanism lays the path for how I will pick up the mantle of the Regius Chair and take up the task I share with my predecessors: namely, to do the intellectual and imaginative labour of moral, political and pastoral theology through analysing how our shared humanity is constituted and contested; identifying what deforms and diminishes it; discerning what enables human beings to flourish under our present material and social conditions; and asking how those conditions might themselves be transformed so that we can live well together before God, with one another, and the rest of creation.

To render this more concrete, my research will examine human–human relations as shaped by democratic and non-democratic political orders, asking how solidarity might be cultivated across deep religious, cultural and ideological differences. It will investigate human–technology relations, particularly the ways emerging technologies are reshaping personhood and our common life. It will address human–money relations, examining how debt, investment and financial institutions embody accounts of human value and structure our possibilities for common action. And it will engage directly with the question of humanity itself as a moral and political good, bringing Christian humanism into critical conversation with anti-humanist, transhumanist and post-humanist accounts of the human. Finally, it will examine human–non-human relations as constitutive of our humanity, particularly as these are mediated through agriculture, food systems and the use and ownership of land.

Taken together, these lines of enquiry seek to renew Moral and Pastoral Theology as a theological and interdisciplinary enterprise: one that asks what it means to be human before God by attending to the relationships, practices, and institutions through which our humanity is formed. Like my previous work, it will be scholarship pursued in collaboration with those

struggling to cultivate just and generous forms of common life—forms in which a humane vision of flourishing might take flesh and give life. I invite you to join me in this struggle.

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[1] Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2018); and Jonas Kurlberg, *Christian Modernism in an Age of Totalitarianism: T. S. Eliot, Karl Mannheim and the Moot* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

[2] On a parallel literary development in the United States see Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

[3] On the parallel development of Christian humanist thought among theologians and church leaders in French Catholic circles see Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919–1933* (University of Toronto Press, 2005); Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Harvard University Press, 2021); James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Harvard University Press, 2018); Brenna Moore, *Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges of Modern Catholicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

[4] See in particular Kenneth Kirk, *Conscience and Its Problems: An Introduction to Casuistry* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1933); and idem, *The Crisis of Christian Rationalism: Three Lectures* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1936) which is a critique of forms of secular, anthropocentric humanism.

[5] V. A. Demant, *The Responsibility and Scope of Pastoral Theology Today: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered Before the University of Oxford on 3 March 1950* (Clarendon Press, 1950), 9.

[6] One of the central challenges Christian humanism poses to the contemporary humanities is that they have largely abandoned the very questions that constitute their true mission and purpose: What is a human life for? What gives it meaning and purpose? What virtues, practices, and relationships must we cultivate to live well, both individually and together? What are the material and social conditions needed to cultivate and sustain such labour? The task of the humanities is not simply to answer these questions, but to cultivate the capacity to ask, interrogate, and debate them. Indeed, the very process of wrestling with such questions is itself an exercise in human formation: a way of coming to know ourselves, of learning to discern what is true, good, and beautiful, and of becoming the kinds of people capable of living well with others amid profound disagreements about what human flourishing entails. Yet the humanities have too often forsaken this vocation. They either justify themselves instrumentally, as a means to produce people able to serve the needs of capitalism or the state; collapse into projects of critique and deconstruction that cultivate suspicion, or even despair, towards any substantive account of truth, goodness, or beauty; or retreat into technical exercises in method and interpretation, pursued as ends in themselves, divorced from any wider vision of human and social flourishing. Each represents, in its own way, a fundamental failure of nerve. Christian humanism calls the humanities to recover their nerve by recovering their vocation: to make the great questions of human existence once again central to intellectual inquiry and education. For the humanities are not merely about the study of human life, but about learning how to live humanely. Their telos is the cultivation of persons capable of discerning and pursuing truth, goodness, and beauty; of exercising practical wisdom and virtue; and of realising their humanity in and through relationships with others. On this account, the humanities are not simply a body of knowledge or a set of critical techniques, but a formative practice through which we learn what it means to be human and how to inhabit a common world well, even amid deep disagreement about the ends and purposes of human life.

[7] See Jacques Maritain, "Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1939), 1-17; idem, *Christianity and Democracy* (Books for Libraries, 1980 [1944]); Karl Barth, "The New Humanism and the Humanism of God," *Theology Today* 8, no. 2 (1951): 157-166; idem, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Gloucester, MA: Smith, 1968). See also Jens Zimmerman, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism* (Oxford University Press, 2019); John

de Gruchy, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer as Christian Humanist,” *in Being Human, Becoming Human,* eds. Jens Zimmermann and Brian Gregor (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 3–25.