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TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

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I want to begin this paper with a statement by Michael Ramsey: "The purposes of God have been, are and will remain to keep us human". For Michael Ramsey, the Gospel proclaims that God ensures the continuing potential for the Catholic Faith to be a Christian humanism revealed and secured by the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, God incarnate "for us and for our salvation."

To begin to unpack the contents of such a Christian humanism is my purpose, and I start with Moses in exile facing the enigma of the burning bush. Moses discovers in the bush the presence of God and finds that God requires him to return to Egypt to redeem his people. But Moses asks, "Who shall I say has sent me to them?" God answers, "I am who I am" or perhaps "I shall be what I shall be". "Tell them 'I am' has sent you."

It is this "I am" which the author of the Fourth Gospel picks up in the "I am" sayings of Jesus—"Before Abraham was, I am" etc. We know that for the Jew, someone's name describes that person's character—Jacob is he who usurps, Isaac is he who laughs, Abram is the Great Father etc. Thus, "I am who I am" is both a description of God's character and a veiling of that character behind a tautology. Much has been made of this name by the Fathers and the Schoolmen in terms of God being by nature the Source of Being, the uncreated Creator of all that is. We are familiar with the philosophical theology that develops this line of thought, alien though it would be to the Jewish mind which originally wrote the name down in the Exodus story.

The name defies character description, so that idolatry is

avoided. There is no image implicit in the name—God is beyond images and therefore any image that we make is based not on his name but on his actions. Images of God which emerge from his relationship with man are not derived from this name. So it is that we call him Creator, Saviour, Redeemer, Judge, the Holy One, the Lord of History, King etc., knowing that each of these names is but a pointer or a provisional model of the divine nature which remains veiled. Hence Ezekiel in his great vision of God on his throne is careful always to hedge about his description of aspects of his vision with the phrase “the appearance of the likeness of...” at every stage.

And yet Ezekiel’s vision has the outline of the nature of God—or at least the form of God behind the veil, and that form is a human form. It is difficult for us who believe in the Incarnation of God as Jesus of Nazareth to realise how daring Ezekiel is being in his description of his vision, and how careful he is being to avoid the condemnation of idolatry.

“I am who I am”, Yahweh, is not to be confined by the use of his name so that he can be defined as an intellectual construct, rather he chooses to reveal himself through sovereign works that grant us a vision and an understanding which incite faith. And that faith is held by the believer as reasonable, but not finally and conclusively susceptible to rational proof since it has no ultimately definable object in philosophical terms.

Having pondered the mysterious and veiled nature of God, I would like to turn to our own human nature as understood in the Old Testament and reinterpreted in the New Testament.

The foundation text lies in the myth of Creation in Genesis, that God made man in his own image and likeness. This traditionally has been interpreted along the lines of man having free will and self-awareness. We are free to choose and we know that we are free to choose, even allowing for limitations that sin places on our choices and on our self-awareness. Vice restricts our freedom and lowers our horizon of human potential to immediate self-centred need.

However, even allowing for this restriction, we continue to affirm the responsible and responsive nature of mankind and to deny that sin totally obliterates or removes the image of God in which we are made.

The question I wish to ask is whether, in the light of the

divine name “I am who I am”, it is sufficient to define the image of God, reflecting at least in principle the nature of God and in practice never entirely without some reflection of that nature, however dim or distorted, solely in terms of free will and self-awareness? Is God defined by his free will and self-awareness, or is he, as the writers of Exodus, and Ezekiel, suggest, less definable than that, more mysterious, more enigmatic, more veiled and therefore more unknown than known?

If so, then I would suggest that the image and likeness of God in us is also partly or largely veiled and that its depths are not known to us, but known only to God. From these depths emerge free will and self-awareness, but they do not define us totally any more than any combination of God’s attributes define him.

Is not the relationship between God and us more like one deep calling to another rather than one construct complementing another? Do we not know instinctively that other people are mysteriously other than we perceive them to be and that we ourselves have hidden depths that even we ourselves have not plumbed, let alone other people? Relationships emerge from this alchemy of hiddenness which we instinctively rely upon and which prove to have a commonness which surface diversity between human beings does not completely mask. We appeal to human nature as greater than individual, national or racial differences when we communicate across cultures, political systems, and racial temperaments.

Even those whom we have known and loved for a long time remain to some extent unpredictable, and in our heart of hearts—a significant commonplace phrase—we prefer it so.

What I am trying to explore is the nature of man as a reflection of the nature of God, created so in order to be able to relate to God in a way that is peculiar to him and to us, and the crucial part that the divine name “I am who I am” plays in understanding both natures and their interaction. The concept of image as the reflection of the original is felicitous both in retaining the divine imitative in human affairs and in encouraging man to see himself as more than a mechanistic natural phenomenon. Surely, what God is hoping for is the courage of man to say “I am who I am” because I am in the

image of “I am who I am”, not in the sense that Adam and Eve desired knowledge of good and evil, but in the sense of being happy to be defined as a human being by virtue of being related to him as his image.

If we can say that the definition of ourselves that satisfies our need for sense, purpose and destiny lies in our relatedness to the mysterious otherness of the God who is “I am who I am”, then perhaps we can find release from, and certainly an easing away from the restrictions that are imposed upon us by more specific names—be they relational, social, in terms of employment, cultural, national or racial.

Of course, this use of “I am who I am” to describe ourselves is not to be seen as either the crude materialistic anthropomorphism of God as used in reverse by Mormonism, nor as a theosophical divinisation of man. Nor is it the shallow existentialism of Sartre, or the ontological identification of man with God. Rather, it is the means of release from categorising us and God by emphasising the divine initiative in creating by grace a human nature which depends on divine nature for character. If you seek further definition then I have not made my point clear—we are exploring an apophatic approach which releases us into the mystery of God and man by refusing to define each in a way that leads to comprehensibility.

When we turn to the New Testament and the person of Christ, then only the author of the Fourth Gospel has the direct reference across to Jesus as “I am”. But other writers make the same point about the Incarnation in their own language: Hebrews—“Jesus the stamp of God’s nature”; Philippians—“Form of God”; Revelation—Jesus “The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end”; St. Luke—“Jesus sent him away to tell others what God had done for him. And he set out and told others what Jesus had done for him”, etc.

Redeemed mankind is described as recreated in the image of Christ, but this apparently greater definition of the new creation continues to retain the mysterious otherness of God, both in the revelation of “I am who I am” as Holy Trinity with all the hiddenness of relationship which that implies and in the utterly incomprehensible relationship between God and man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as expressed in the apophatic nature of the Chalcedonian Definition. It is a

definition which in its key elements deliberately refuses to define and reveals the inadequacy of positive logical and philosophical thought to express what is ineffable.

However, the Incarnation is not a “bolt out of the blue” in the sense of an unprepared-for event—the Salvation History of Israel anticipates the mystery, and the basis of that anticipation lies even more deeply in the divine Name and its image in us than in the human need for salvation. The humanity of God, incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, is there as an image in mankind from the beginning. The reality becomes more than reflected in Jesus—it becomes embodied so that salvation can be brought to the whole human being, and the image of God disfigured and distorted by sin can be restored and revitalised in us as the image of Christ.

I want to conclude with a few practical consequences. First, if we really believe that every human being is created in the image of God and by faith and sacramental incorporation into Christ is recreated in the image of Christ, and if we believe that that image in us is what makes us human and enables us to feel after God and find him, then it follows that the persistent and unrelenting purpose of God in relating to us is to keep us human. He created us human with all the potential to know him as “I am”—He longs for each of us to say “I am who I am” because “I am who I am” has made us in his own image. We need no other definition of ourselves than the definition that God’s name gives us.

This releases us into a truly catholic view of our fellow human beings. We affirm that all of us are made in the image of God and have the potential for recreation in the image of Christ. This is the basis for a mission strategy which refuses to put people into categories, to pigeon-hole them according to class, colour, sex, race, culture, interest, orientation or any other divisive definition which invites confrontation and alienation. We are to be at heart thankful people who enjoy the diversity of human beings, grateful for their differing contributions and insights, sympathetic to their various limitations and absurdities, amazed by their creativity and inventiveness, saddened by their foolishness and prejudices, because beneath and beyond and within this diversity is a recognisable common humanity that we can touch and meet, and with which we can communicate at least in a rudimentary way.

The Catholic Faith stands for the humanity of God and the humanity of mankind. It defends the value and worth of each and every individual human being because together, at our best, we reflect the many coloured grace of God which animates his image in us. The word "Catholic" has come to mean the thoughtless repetition of narrow and polemically defined dogmas whereas the God of all the universe requires of us a cosmic vision that is inclusive, not exclusive, that promotes wholeness, not division, that speaks of generosity, not rejection. Make "Catholic" mean any less and perhaps it does not deserve to survive.

Secondly, God has recognised and shouldered his responsibility for our inhumanity, by surrendering his Son into our wicked hands, to die for our sin upon the Cross. The true man, Jesus the Christ, offers himself as the sacrifice that takes our inhumanity away and recreates the image of God in us as the image of himself, the God-man, in his resurrection from the dead. Therefore the Catholic faith stands for the possibility of salvation for every person, for the healing and cleansing power of forgiveness to restore in those who seek it the image which they have disfigured and distorted. As such, it practises forgiveness widely, freely and generously.

Thirdly, the Catholic Faith leans heavily upon the mercy of God and desires eagerly to fulfil the will of God, and therefore no human being is beyond its care and concern. No depravity or sorrow, no deprivation or pain is powerful enough to prevent the catholic embrace of one human being by another.

Fourthly, the Catholic Faith sees the world from God's point of view, with a wonder and joy that sees our human destiny as heaven, where all barriers are down, all divisions are discarded, and all emphases are integrated into one joyful vision of the glory and holiness of God. Therefore we seek to promote an inclusive holiness, a universal human dignity, a vision of mankind which is filled with the transcendence of God and thus transcends our man-made differences. We believe that God has become man that we might become God. As II Peter says, "we are to be made partakers of the divine nature". This vision overcomes our differences while rejoicing in our diversity, drawing each and every one of us to our destiny—life in communion with each other within union with God.

Such a faith is dedicated to wholeness, to holiness, to reconciliation and to peace, to goodness and to love. It is also dedicated to the full exercise of our human resources for the common good. We have been told over recent years that there is no such thing as a "thinking Catholic". Quite the reverse is true—God has given us minds to use, and we cannot abdicate the responsibility of seeking a thoughtful articulation of faith, rooted in prayer and mission, which expresses what we believe in terms that reach out to as many of our contemporaries as possible. And what is true of minds is equally true of our emotions—we are called to feel widely with the compassion of Christ and not to shut our hearts against the cry of the poor, the needy and the lost, lest they invade and change the sanctuary of our religion.

And if the mind and heart are to be open to others, then they need generous practical action to put into effect what mind and heart, working together as conscience, tell us God is willing us to do for him.

Our full humanity—body and soul—is the beneficiary of God's creative and redeeming love and is destined for fulfilment in him. Therefore, says St. Irenaeus, "The end of man is the vision of God" and in the meanwhile as we move forward towards our destiny, "The glory of God is man fully alive".

This paper has been an exploratory attempt to affirm the Catholic vision as a Christian humanism rooted in the nature of God and the nature of man. I claim no more for it than a tentative first attempt to grapple with a double mystery which defies a final definitive exposition. I welcome any criticism and guidance which will assist my own progress in faith as I continue to ponder this theme. And I hope that in a small way what I have said will be useful.

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