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CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AS HUMANISTIC EDUCATION? OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE WITHIN THE SECULARIZED CULTURE

Abstract: There is a strong and original relationship between Christian faith and Humanism, but it is necessary not to reduce the Christian education to Humanism. In fact, it was the Christian faith which gave birth to Humanism, not vice versa. It is necessary to put the distinction in order to avoid the reduction of the Christian education to the generic philanthropy. The Christian faith is, first of all, an encounter with Jesus, not only from the existential point of view, but also as a peculiar knowledge through Christ as God's Word.

Keywords: education, Christianity, humanism, evangelization.

Introduction

My purpose is to show the strong relationship between Christian faith and Humanism and – at the same time – to assert that it is better not to reduce Christian education to humanistic education. In fact, if we do this, we are at risk to secularize completely the Christian message: perhaps today's faith crisis is related to that tendency too. From the methodological point of view I aim to show – first of all – the innovative approach towards human identity implemented by Biblical mind and by Christian evangelization. From this starting point the article will outline the relationship between Christian faith and Humanism in order to give orientation to today's Christian education. The concept of person will be essential to give foundation to the originality of Christian faith from the anthropological point of view.

Christian faith and the acknowledgment of human dignity

Surely Greek philosophy recognized human originality (Jaeger, 1939-44). We have evidence of it in a passage of Aristotle's *Politics* describing the difference between animal language and human language: "The mere voice, it is true, can indicate

pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities” (1253a). Actually, before Aristotle, his master Plato did the same thing when, in his *Cratylus*, he explains the word *ánthropos* in this way: “The name ‘man’ (*ánthropos*) indicates that the other animals do not examine, or consider, or look up at (*anathreĩ*) any of the things that they see, but man has no sooner seen – that is, *ópope* – than he looks up at and considers that which he has seen. Therefore, of all the animals man alone is rightly called man (*ánthropos*), because he looks up at (*anathreĩ*) what he has seen (*ópope*)” (399c).

So all is well? Unfortunately, no. In fact, the same civilization so attentive to the value of human being (so “human friendly” as to name the human creature *micrókosmos*, i.e., “the world in miniature”, clearly referring to the harmony – *kósmos* – pervading everything) is also characterized by slavery as a public institution not open to any doubt. Aristotle is the strongest witness, asserting: “Of property, the first and most indispensable kind is that which is also best and most amenable to Housecraft; and this is the human chattel. Our first step therefore must be to procure good slaves” (*Economics*, 1344a). He says that the master must be fair: “In our intercourse with slaves we must neither suffer them to be insolent nor treat them with cruelty. A share of honour should be given to those who are doing more of a freeman’s work, and abundance of food to those who are labouring with their hands” (*ibidem*), but no doubt about the legitimacy of slavery. Within his *Politics* Aristotle describes the slave as a domestic property: “Since therefore property is a part of a household and the art of acquiring property a part of household management (for without the necessities even life, as well as the good life, is impossible), and since, just as for the particular arts it would be necessary for the proper tools to be forthcoming if their work is to be accomplished, so also the manager of a household must have his tools, and of tools some are lifeless and others living (for example, for a helmsman a rudder is a lifeless tool and a look-out man a living tool) so an assistant in the arts belongs to a class of tools, so also an article of property is a tool for the purpose of life, and property generally is a collection of tools, and a slave is a live article of property” (1253b). It is horrible to us, but it wasn’t so to ancient mind.

Within Greek and Roman society slavery was submitted to its own rules (Fisher, 1998; Bradley, 2013). People became slaves because of their crimes, debts or due to wars. Later on, there was no acceptance to treat slaves badly. Seneca is the most famous ancient author engaged in making slaves’ conditions better; he claims, speaking to a master: “Yes, he is a slave”, but immediately he adds: “How do you know that his soul is a slave? What if it is free?” (*Letters to Lucilius*, XLVII, 17). However,

Seneca himself owned slaves! So none – within ancient civilization – inferred that it was necessary to abandon slavery: it was considered a matter of economy and politics, not something morally or anthropologically relevant. The situation changed only because of Christian evangelization.

According to the Christian doctrine, the human being is the only embodied creature of God's image (*Genesis* 1:26), and it is why a qualitative difference between the human creature and all the other animals is recognized. *Psalm* 8 openly claims human uniqueness:

“Lord, our Lord,
 how majestic is your name in all the earth!
 You have set your glory
 in the heavens.
 Through the praise of children and infants
 you have established a stronghold against your enemies,
 to silence the foe and the avenger.
 When I consider your heavens,
 the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars,
 which you have set in place,
 what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
 human beings that you care for them?
 You have made them a little lower than the angels
 and crowned them with glory and honour.
 You made them rulers over the works of your hands;
 you put everything under their feet:
 all flocks and herds,
 and the animals of the wild,
 the birds in the sky,
 and the fish in the sea,
 all that swim the paths of the seas.
 Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

We can compare *Psalm* 8 to the well-known chorus by Sophocles' *Antigone* (vv. 332-360):

“Wonders are many, and none is more *deinós* than man.
 This power spans the sea,
 even when it surges white before the gales of the south-wind,
 and makes a path under swells that threaten to engulf him.
 Earth, too, the eldest of the gods, the immortal, the unwearied,
 he wears away to his own ends,
 turning the soil with the offspring of horses as the plough weaves to and fro
 year after year. The light-hearted tribe of birds and the clans of wild beasts
 and the sea-brood of the deep
 he snares in the meshes of his twisted nets, and he leads them captive, very-
 skilled man.

He masters by his arts the beast who dwells in the wilds and roams the hills.
 He tames the shaggy-maned horse, putting the yoke upon its neck,
 and tames the tireless mountain bull.
 Speech and thought fast as the wind and the moods that give order to a city
 he has taught himself,
 and how to flee the arrows of the inhospitable frost under clear skies
 and the arrows of the storming rain.
 He has resource for everything.
 Lacking resource in nothing he strides towards what must come.
 From Death alone he shall procure no escape,
 but from baffling diseases he has devised flights".

What is the difference? The Biblical poem is full of admiration towards the human being as a creature of God; the Greek poem admires the human being, but fear is present in it too, because it treats human creature as self-made: that is why admiration and fear stand side by side within the "double meaning" word *deinós* – "wonderful" and "fearful". Within the Biblical mind human identity is essentially related to God; within Greek mind it is not, because human identity is related to nature identity: there is no *original* difference between human being and natural beings.

The clearest rejection of Greek and Roman attitude towards the human being is testified by Gregory of Nyssa, who strongly criticized the doctrine of *micrókosmos* (Gilson 1985, pp. 56-59): "Let us now resume our consideration of the Divine word, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'. How mean and how unworthy of the majesty of man are the fancies of some heathen writers, who magnify humanity, as they supposed, by their comparison of it to this world! For they say that man is microcosm, composed of the same elements as the universe. Those who bestow on human nature such praise as this by a high-sounding name, forget that they are dignifying man with the attributes of the gnat and the mouse: for they too are composed of these four elements – because assuredly about the animated nature of every existing thing we behold a part, greater or less, of those elements without which it is not natural that any sensitive being should exist. What great thing is there, then, in man's being accounted a representation and likeness of the world – of the heaven that passes away, of the earth that changes, of all things that they contain, which pass away with the departure of that which compasses them round? In what then does the greatness of man consist, according to the doctrine of the Church? Not in his likeness to the created world, but in his being in the image of the nature of the Creator" (*On the making of man*, 16).

How did this turning point in history occur? It was because of the new anthropology created by Christian faith and described by the new meaning of the Latin word *person* and of the Greek word *prósopon* (Pieper 2011; Saracino 2015).

The idea of “person” as the root of Christian anthropological revolution

As I said before, according to the Bible, man and woman are recognized as “God’s image”. From this doctrine comes the idea of a peculiar relationship between the human creature and the Creator, so strong that the Redemption (*Hebrews 2,16*) is presented as the salvation of men and women as sinners, not of rebel angels! It is particularly emphasized that God – in Christ – loves each person absolutely, with no-ending love, as St Paul says: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Could oppression, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Even as it is written, ‘For your sake we are killed all day long. We were accounted as sheep for the slaughter’. No, in all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Romans, 8:35-39*).

With regard to the subject I mentioned before, the main document is the *Letter to Philemon*. It was written to a Christian, named Philemon, who owned slaves (clearly, at the beginning, it was usual also among Christians because of the social assent to slavery). St Paul met Philemon’s slave during his captivity and baptized him in prison. Now St Paul sends the slave back to his master, but he says to Philemon: “I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord” (1:12-16). Actually Christian faith doesn’t act as an outside revolution (like did Spartacus’s rebellion one century before) but inside, within the moral human inner and spiritual life. In the middle of Modernity, an unsuspected witness – Montesquieu – openly admits that it was Christian faith which rejected slavery (*The spirit of the laws, XV, 8*), even if Christian people were involved in the practice of slavery. Also for this reason Pope John Paul II celebrated the “Day of pardon” (12.3.2000). In his homily he said: “While we praise God who, in his merciful love, has produced in the Church a wonderful harvest of holiness, missionary zeal, total dedication to Christ and neighbour, we cannot fail to recognize *the infidelities to the Gospel committed by some of our brethren*, especially during the second millennium. Let us ask pardon for the divisions which have occurred among Christians, for the violence some have used in the service of the truth and for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions” (n. 4).

What is the heart of the new Christian anthropology? It is the idea of person: the most revolutionary Christian concept from the cultural point of view. Actually, the word was not unknown to the ancient civilization, but it was used in an absolutely different way. In Latin civilization the word *persona* (and the Greek *prósopon*) means something outward and superficial, like the mask worn by actors or the legal status (today we still use the term “legal personality”). On the contrary, unlike the ancient society, today’s “person” indicates a human subject endowed with dignity, so that the reference is the inner, not the outward identity, and includes both psychological and spiritual depth. Richard of Saint Victor says: “As an example of individual substantiality we have no available vocabulary. However, in order for this reasoning to be clearer, we can think of a proper name. Thus, we derive ‘Danielity’ from ‘Daniel’, just as we derive ‘humanity’ from ‘human’. ‘Danielity’, therefore, must be interpreted as the substantiality – or, if preferred, that substance – that allows Daniel to be that substance, which he is in himself, and which no other substance can share. Then, while humanity and corporeity are common to many, ‘Danielity’ is absolutely incommunicable in the sense that it belongs to him in such a way that it cannot be anyone else’s” (*On Trinity*, II, 12). Each man and each woman are unique, that’s why St Thomas explains the etymology of “person” as “*per se una*”, “unified by itself” (*Summa theologica*, I, q. 29, a. 4).

Where does the new meaning come from? It is a consequence of Christian evangelization. In fact, Christian ancient theologians used the word “person” to identify the Christian God as an intrinsic communion among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – the three Persons in the one Substance of the Holy Trinity. Now the word is associated to the deepest God’s identity as structurally relational. Because of the biblical doctrine, regarding the human creature as a “God’s image”, the same word identifies – from now on – the human identity as structurally relational.

The first human relation is to God, the Creator, as I underlined before by referring to *Psalm 8*. According to the ancient mind, the human being in front of the gods was in front of the masters; in the light of Christian Revelation, the human creature being in front of God is in front of the Father – this is the “core news” of Christian *euaggéliion*. St Paul says: “For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’. The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (*Romans*, 8:14-17). “To be person” means to be recognized as a God’s child and the new human identity – St Paul speaks of a “new man” (*Ephesians* 2:15; 4:22-24; *Colossians* 3:9-11) – is related to the new anthropological condition under the love of the God who “is love” (*1John* 4:8.16). St Paul, who directly had experienced God’s love, is the strongest witness, as I mentioned before. This is why, nowadays Pope Francis (2014) constantly proclaims God’s mercy. He follows in the wake of St John Paul II (Bransfield, 2010), the Pope who consecrated

the “Low Sunday” as “Feast of Divine Mercy” and identified the very Christian announcement concerning the “new evangelization” in this way: “*Humanity is loved by God!*” This very simple yet profound proclamation is owed to humanity by the Church. Each Christian’s words and life must make this proclamation resound: God loves you, Christ came for you, Christ is for you” (*Christifideles laici*, n. 34).

Clearly, Christian faith placed mankind in the centre of creation. We must remember that Christian anthropocentrism is not absolute, but relative and consequent to theocentrism. It is a fine thread and it is today at risk to be misinterpreted (Bequette 2004).

Christian education as theocentric education in order not to reject Humanism, but to confirm it

The very roots of the human rights lie in the Christian anthropocentrism. It’s a matter essential for our society, because human rights allow to recognize a common ground in today’s social/political/ethical complexity. The same roots are at the starting point of Modern anthropocentrism; in fact, human rights were coded during the last centuries. This is why we cannot forget that the same Modernity proclaiming the human rights is the birthplace of secularization as the tendency to make the Christian faith completely immanent, nothing more than a “secular faith”. I will give only an example of this by mentioning the conversion of the faith in the Providence to the “faith in the progress”. It is not by chance that Pope Francis strongly criticizes the “worldliness” within the Church.

It is necessary to be aware of the consequences of Modern secularization not only for the Christian faith but also for the common culture. In fact, as long as the Western anthropocentrism was founded on the Christian Revelation, it was not self-referent. On the contrary, because of secularization the reference to God was not recognized any longer and it resulted in a Promethean attitude towards the creation: this is why, in the relation between man and the natural world, it became popular to use natural resources without any limitation. The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* is effective about the subject: “Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism [...]. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our “dominion” over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship” (n. 116). Currently, Modern ecological irresponsibility is related to the rejection of God’s power over the creation. The “Christian revolution” gave birth to the full Humanism because of the acknowledgment of human dignity as related to God’s personal and unfailing love. Secularization kept the anthropocentrism alive, but radically changed it because of the self-reference claimed by the human being not under God’s rule any longer. This is why today we face the post-Humanistic trends caused by the ecological crisis. Obviously, I think that these tendencies must

be rejected, by taking sides in favour of Humanism, but I hold that we must not reduce Christian education to Humanistic education. In fact, today's faith crisis needs to recognize what is essential to the Christian faith. Humanism clearly belongs to it, but it is a mistake to reduce Christianity to Humanism because – during Modernity – Humanism became a secular idea too, not related to Christian faith any longer, as it happened, on the contrary, within the first Humanistic generation (Francesco Petrarca, Guarino Veronese, Vittorino da Feltre etc.).

As the secularization went on, the change within the human attitude toward the knowledge of and the action in the world became clearer and clearer. In fact, the idea of science became more and more useful and the way of acting more and more functional, as it is clearly testified by Francis Bacon's well known statement: "Knowledge and human power are synonymous" (*Novum Organum of the true suggestions for the interpretation of nature*, Aphorisms, 3). That's why it changed the idea of truth, subdued to pragmatism and utilitarianism. Consequently, the relation between faith and truth became problematic. Obviously the widespread skepticism involves the faith itself within the larger crisis of the truth, as it is openly said by *Lumen Fidei*: "Today more than ever, we need to be reminded of this bond between faith and truth, given the crisis of truth in our age. In contemporary culture, we often tend to consider the only real truth to be that of technology: truth is what we succeed in building and measuring by our scientific know-how, truth is what works and what makes life easier and more comfortable. Nowadays this appears as the only truth that is certain, the only truth that can be shared, the only truth that can serve as a basis for discussion or for common undertakings" (n. 25).

What does not work within the identification between "truth" and technical "functionality"? That human life is useful to do nothing because – as expressed by the word "person" – the human being is a "value by itself". This is why today's faith crisis related to the truth crisis is also an anthropologic crisis. From this point of view, it is necessary to remember the relationship between Humanism and Christianity; however, it is not enough because the Christian faith is not only or principally anthropocentric, but theocentric: Jesus Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (*John* 14:6), is "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end" (*Revelation* 21:6). At the beginning of the Bible there is God creating the universe and at the end there is Christ promising his last coming: the whole narration is from God to God – here the origin of Christian theocentrism.

During last centuries, secularization made people forget the essentiality of the faith in human life and for this reason today's culture seems very similar to the ancient pagan culture, for example by legitimizing suicide like in the ancient Stoic morality. The pagan civilization – during its late period – was sceptic and materialistic. What did the first Christian theologians do in that situation? They made credible the faith as such. Let's read what Arnobius wrote: "is there in life any kind of business demanding diligence and activity, which the doers undertake, engage in, and essay, without believing that it can be done? Do you travel about, do you

sail on the sea without believing that you will return home when your business is done? Do you break up the earth with the plough, and fill it with different kinds of seeds without believing that you will gather in the fruit with the changes of the seasons? Do you unite with partners in marriage, without believing that it will be pure, and a union serviceable to the husband? Do you beget children without believing that they will pass safely through the different stages of life to the goal of age?" (*Against the heathen*, II, 8). Let us not forget that, according to Plato, *pístis* is at the lower knowledge level. In his *Republic* (VI, 509d-511e), he divides knowledge into levels: the word *pístis* deals with the sensible knowledge, related to the material things which are only apparent, because the actual reality is the spiritual *idéa*.

Today something very similar happens when it is said that faith is not a real knowledge because it cannot offer any descriptive certainty or that it regards only what is true from the personal/subjective/inner/private point of view. Nevertheless nowadays we know that the most advanced epistemology does not recognize any longer "verifiability", but "falsification". According to Popper, what makes knowledge "scientific"? It is not undergoing an experimental verification, but the fact that it could be falsified – in the future – by other experiences. In that way he left the Positivist conception, according to which the scientific knowledge is definitive, and embraced his evolutionary idea of science beginning from the concrete changeable experience. In Popper's mind the scientific laws are not untouchable ideas but temporary constructions: they are scientific because they are open to be reconsidered. "I hold – he says – that scientific theories are never fully justifiable or verifiable, but that they are nevertheless testable. I shall therefore say that the *objectivity* of scientific statements lies in the fact that they can be *inter-subjectively* tested" (Popper 2002, p. 22). In the light of this turning point and from the secular point of view, Pope Benedict's words from his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* gain credibility: "the enlargement of our concept of reason is indispensable to succeed in adequately weighing all the elements involved in the question of the human development and in the solution of socio-economic problems". In fact, it deals not only with strictly socio-economic problems, but also with cultural-philosophical ones as we can understand from Pope's very words: "The excessive segmentation of knowledge, the rejection of metaphysics by the human sciences, the difficulties encountered by dialogue between science and theology are damaging not only to the development of knowledge, but also to the development of peoples, because these things make it harder to see the integral good of man in its various dimensions" (n. 31).

Conclusion

What does it entail for Christian education? First of all, Christian faith is *faith*, so not only something related to the existential encounter with Jesus, but a way of knowledge too: not the lowest, but the highest. Facing today's neo-Positivist

attitude, Christian education is challenged to make the faith recognized as essential to human knowledge of the world and consequent behaviour (Sarah, 2015). In fact, being the human creature identified by freedom (because of human dignity), it is peculiar to humanity to be open to the future. Actually, the faith is the proper knowledge concerning the future: for this reason, it is allied, not opposite to freedom. Starting from the acknowledgement of the essentiality to human identity of faith, recognized – the faith – as a way of knowledge (not only an existential experience), it is possible to reconsider the relationship between faith and Humanism. As I mentioned before, there is a genetic relationship between Christian faith and Humanism, but, being Humanism secularized along Modernity, if we connect Christian education to Humanism as such, Christian education is at risk of secularizing completely, for example within a generic philanthropy. Pope Francis denounced it clearly during his sermon in his first Holy Mass in front of the Cardinals after his election: “We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord” (14.3.2013). The same thing happens to the Christian education: if we profess it only or principally as a humanistic education, it is not Christian any more, not because Humanism is an enemy of the Christian faith, but because the Christian faith gave birth to Humanism, not vice versa. Only if we make clear that to be Christians means to know by Grace something original about mankind and everything else, we can recognize Humanism too, the true Humanism. Obviously, by speaking of the faith as knowledge, I do not refer to Gnosis, because the Christian idea of faith is related to the Grace: it is a gift. But the human creature intentionally accepts and cooperates with it (or refuses it) because – as St Thomas says – “Grace doesn’t destroy nature, but perfects it” (*Summa theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2). Starting from this benchmark, the Christian education keeps the primacy of the faith, avoiding its secularization, and educates to true Humanism too. This could be a new question to pay attention to in the Christian cultural identity in order to promote Christian education.

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WYCHOWANIE CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIE JAKO EDUKACJA HUMANISTYCZNA? SZANSE I WYZWANIA W ZSEKULARYZOWANEJ KULTURZE

Streszczenie: Istnieje silna i oryginalna relacja między wiarą chrześcijańską a humanizmem, ale nie należy zawęzać wiary chrześcijańskiej do humanizmu. W rzeczywistości bowiem wiara ta wytworzyła humanizm, a nie odwrotnie. Aby uniknąć redukcji wiary chrześcijańskiej do ogólnie pojmowanej filantropii, konieczne jest dostrzeżenie i zachowanie tego rozróżnienia. Właściwie wiara chrześcijańska to przede wszystkim spotkanie z Jezusem Chrystusem i nie tylko z egzystencjalnego punktu widzenia, lecz również jako szczególna wiedza zapośredniczona przez Niego jako Słowo Boże.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja, chrześcijaństwo, humanizm, ewangelizacja.

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