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Ki Joo Choi

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The Vocation of the Catholic University: Reconsidering Christian Humanism and the Role of the Arts

Ki Joo Choi

A remarkable feature of contemporary academic life is the renewed interest in the question of what universities and colleges are called to do. While most institutions of higher learning would not necessarily employ the term, such a question is certainly a question of academic vocation. Motivations for this return to the question of academic vocation are numerous and varied, but one that stands out distinctively is the economic realities of today's colleges and universities. Specifically, as any parent accompanying their child through the college application process nowadays can very well attest, the cost of a college education in recent years has soared and continues to soar. At many schools, the total cost of tuition, room, and board over four years can cost more than the average price of a single family home in many American neighborhoods. As a result, private college education, especially, has become increasingly out of the reach of many lower, moderate, and even middle class Americans.¹ To be sure, recent moves by some of the richest universities, such as Harvard and Yale, will help to mitigate the problems of rising tuition, but the issue of affordability is far from resolved.² For this reason, many colleges and universities find themselves engaged in discussions about whether what they provide is actually worth the increasing costs. What exactly is our vocation—at the macro, institutional level and at the more micro level of specific disciplines and departments? More personally, what is the vocation of the individual academic or scholar?

One response that is often reiterated is that the goals of the academy are simply the expansion of knowledge. Part of the subtext to such a view is the idea that the goals of the academy are not primarily social or political, but merely the pursuit of scholarly excellence. Of course, this is not to assume that scholarly excellence is irrelevant to the wider society but that this is only a consequence, not a first cause. In this sense, the primary goals are not to make students “the most generous, patient, good-hearted and honest people on earth,” as Stanley Fish recently described, but to merely bring honor to itself—that is, we ought to pursue scholarship with the intent of producing scholarly excellence. So, in speaking about the humanities in particular, Fish argues that the “humanities are their own good.”³

Variations on such a position are numerous, but one that has taken particular hold of the modern academy is what Anthony Kronman, the former dean of Yale Law School, refers to as political liberalism.⁴ Kronman argues that the most ardent defenders of political liberalism in the academy are those who are the most committed to diversity in higher education.⁵ One reason often advanced is that consideration of the possible social relevance of the work of the academic disciplines inevitably assumes a particular notion of the human, social good. The reality of diversity demands that we recognize that there are competing, diverse visions of the good life. Accordingly, this reality requires neutrality on the question of the social relevance of the academic enterprise, lest we commit the “sin” of moral hegemony.⁶

From the perspective of Catholic universities and colleges, the values of political liberalism ought not to be overlooked but taken as a cautionary note. Political liberalism at its best, I think, constitutes an important guard against ideological appropriations of academic scholarship (or ideologically driven education). But given the political, economic, and social context that so many college students will enter upon graduation, I think it is fair, perhaps urgent, to ask whether the utility of political liberalism has come and gone. Consider for instance some global economic realities. The Princeton philosopher Peter Singer recently highlighted several striking statistics from UNICEF: approximately 30,000 children die every day (or approximately 10 million children a year) from poverty related causes. More specifically,

half a million children die a year from rotavirus. Additionally, approximately a billion people live on one U.S. dollar a day, while approximately another billion of the global population are considered affluent.⁷ Astonishingly, these economic realities are not new developments, but magnifications of what was noted as the increasing economic divide between rich and poor in the mid-twentieth century by Vatican Council II. For example, *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," remarked that "[i]n no other age has humanity enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic well-being; and yet a huge proportion of the people of the world is plagued by hunger and extreme need while countless numbers are totally illiterate."⁸ With globalization, the internationalization of capitalist institutions and forces, the ascendancy of transnational corporations, and the rising and enveloping culture of consumerism and consumption, issues of global poverty, the disparity between rich and poor, and the precariousness of human dignity have not only persisted but deepened.

Global poverty was one of the "signs of the times" of Vatican Council II—and is it not more so today? While I do not want to claim that these dire economic realities are the only pressing realities that face our communities, our educational institutions, and/or our students, the realities of global poverty raise serious questions about what we as members of the academy are responsible for—what exactly is our calling as scholars and educators? And it seems to me that given the tens of millions of people whose lives hang in the balance—and the way in which the kind of choices we make (consumer, political, even career choices) tip that balance in one direction or another—the values of political liberalism seem insufficient. That human lives, literally, are at stake raises the question of whether political liberalism is a compelling and adequate set of values for the organization and self-understanding of our teaching and scholarly-research enterprises, particularly in a Catholic setting.

What then might be an alternative to political liberalism? If the "signs of the times" are to be taken as an important, necessary methodological point of departure for how we ought *to be* in the world, then both Michael Buckley, S.J., and David Hollenbach, S.J., may indeed be correct in calling for a retrieval of Christian humanism within Catholic universities and colleges.¹⁰ To be sure, the very idea of Christian humanism is today a contested notion, at least within the academic fields of religious studies and theology. Much of the controversy centers around issues of identity, traditionalism, ecclesial particularity, challenges of modernity (and post-modernity, if there is such a thing), the prospects for mutual understanding, and so on. But despite the "politics" of Christian humanism, the values of Christian humanism, in distinction to the values of political liberalism, may prove more relevant and pressing today. Accordingly, the theological reflections of the great twentieth-century Jesuit, Karl Rahner, may be necessary more than ever to the self-understanding of contemporary Catholic higher education.

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To the question of why Christian humanism and what it means for the vocation of scholars, educators, and academic institutions, Rahner provides key insights. Like the idea of Christian humanism itself, Rahner is a contested figure in many contemporary theological circles. But the level of disagreement he now engenders within Catholic and broader Christian communities are good indications that his work is serious enough to wrangle over and thus certainly worthy of sustained consideration.

At its most basic, Christian humanism, Rahner tells us, indicates a theological account of why the sphere of human affairs ought to be a critical focus for the Christian in general and the Christian theologian more specifically. Insofar as God makes himself known to us in the person of Jesus Christ who is the "the God-man," Rahner claims that "Christianity acknowledges an absolute meaning and validity in every concrete human being." One of the difficulties of Rahner's Christian humanism is simply deciphering and moving through his highly dense and abstract theological descriptions. In more specific and non-technical terms, Rahner's essential point is simply that in loving our neighbor—in "the shape

of self-forgetfulness”—we experience an “absolute origin that is not ourselves,” that is, the love of God. Thus, for Rahner, because of the God-man Christ and the drama of salvation this God-man signifies, “there exists an original and ultimate unity of the love of God and of one’s neighbor...so that...the love of God only occurs (and man only knows who God is) when man loves his neighbour.”¹¹

The concrete significance of the unity of love of neighbor and love of God is that the salvation of the individual person is not mediated in some sort of esoteric spirituality or in splendid isolation outside of human history. Rather, it is mediated in the human sphere, when, to be more specific, she, in selfless responsibility and freedom, serves all her fellow-persons.

The theologian is aware that—if man is essentially a “political” being—this love of one’s neighbour must not be the mere inclination of the affections or private intercommunication, which can be the most sublime form of egoism precisely because it can be so intimate and bring such happiness, but must become the sober service of “political” love as well, whose concern is the whole of mankind, turning the most distant person into the nearest neighbour and having occasion to hold the nearest person sternly at a distance.¹²

But for Rahner, love of neighbor does not merely mean loving the other near and far. It also means loving the other in all her dimensions: personal, public, economic, political, and cultural. As Rahner writes, “the actual mediation of this salvation cannot be solely a matter of the individual’s inner life, but must itself be a historical and social quantity, service to one’s ‘neighbor,’ in whom all men are present.”¹³

The foregoing underscores why Rahner thinks that Christian theology must always be “political theology.”¹⁴ As pertaining to the political, theology’s task is above all to inquire about and announce “*what* and *who* man is.”¹⁵ The human person, says Rahner, is one whose very being is by virtue of God’s desire to be in relationship. To love God, therefore, is to stand in the presence of God who is absolute mystery and humanity’s destiny. This love, however, can only be actualized in historical existence, which means through the love of neighbor. Correlatively, Rahner suggests that theology as political theology is a kind of practical theology, which is to say a theology that informs humanity of *how* to love, or the manner in which one ought to practice her call to love neighbor.¹⁶ True neighbor love entails a profound attentiveness to the social well-being of the other. After all, is not the human person a being who exists in political communities, participates in civic societies and economic systems, is a member of a family, seeks friendships? Loving the neighbor divorced from such social concerns is an impoverished if not empty love. While human personhood is not wholly determined by the world (Rahner is not a materialist),¹⁷ human personhood abstracted from the world would belie the reality of human creatureliness.

In referring to theology as political or practical, Rahner is trying to suggest that God’s grace—as revealed to us in the God-man Christ—invites us to God’s “absolute future” or “the ‘kingdom of God.’”¹⁸ At the same time, the actualization of this invitation involves the task of working toward what he refers to as a “concrete humanism” or the “humane future.”¹⁹ This is another way of saying that the Christian cannot, above all, be neglectful of our present history, the social condition of the human person. The Christian must always seek a more humane existence in the service or anticipation of the coming Kingdom of God in its fullness. So Rahner claims, “we are obliged to say that the creation of a humane future is not something optional for the Christian, but is the means by which he prepares himself in actuality and not merely in theory, for God’s absolute future.”²⁰ It is in this sense that Rahner thinks that Christian theology is a humanistic endeavor, that is, an endeavor that seeks further understanding of human nature and, correlatively, the flourishing of human personhood in the world. And insofar as theology’s task is humanistic in this manner, Rahner thinks that Christian theology should exist in solidarity with other “humanisms” or the non-theological disciplines. This is a striking statement in its recognition

of other academic, scholarly disciplines as partners to theology in furthering understanding of the human person and the pursuit of the humane future. In fact, Rahner can be read as suggesting that the other disciplines may at times be better positioned and equipped to deepen such knowledge of human personhood.²¹

For Rahner, one can call Christianity a kind of humanism insofar as “it can enter into dialogue with other humanisms.”²² But this dialogue must entail the recognition by the other humanisms that their claims about the human person are not absolute, but must be seen as contributing to the fullness of what it means to be human in the world. In fact, Rahner thinks that one of theology’s tasks is to remind the non-theological disciplines of this recognition: that no one discipline’s work is of unqualified certainty and value. Theology, therefore, is to be prophetic. Rahner is unambiguous on this point. “Christianity does not erect a particular *concrete* humanism but denies it an *absolute* value.”²³ Later, he states more forcefully, “But Christianity pronounces judgment on any humanism which sets itself up as absolute and thus explicitly or implicitly tries to inhibit man’s openness to further concrete history and hence to God’s absolute future.”²⁴

The task of dialogue between the various disciplines or humanisms is, more specifically, to gain “clearer awareness of those hoped-for aspects of the future which have *as yet been anticipated only dimly*—justice, freedom, dignity, unity and diversity in society.”²⁵ Theology, therefore, must learn from the other humanisms if it is to better contribute to the humane future. In turn, the other humanisms must take it upon themselves to affirm that their findings about the human person are not the singular answer to the question of the humane future, that is, to the promotion of “justice, freedom, dignity, unity and diversity in society.” Such matters cannot be resolved by the work of only one discipline (as if one discipline can have the “future tucked away in his pocket like a complete five-year plan”²⁶), but requires mutual collaboration of all. As Rahner opines, “Must Christian and non-Christian humanists be enemies? I do not think so, provided that both sides realize that their obligations are to the future...”²⁷ The task of theology and the non-theological disciplines is to work together as humanists, which is to say, to contribute in mutually sustaining ways to the advancement of human flourishing. This task is frustrated when one discipline claims that it knows once and for all the solution to such advancement, i.e. the humane future. The fullness of the humane future belongs to God in the coming and full realization of his Kingdom and not to any one humanism, whether theology or the non-theological disciplines. It is this very anticipation of the coming Kingdom that warrants epistemic humility in all humanistic endeavors; the theologian as well as the scientist—all humanists!—must be open to continuous inquiry, to each others’ insights. Such openness, then, marks our love and hope for the future that is here and yet to come.

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Rahner’s Christian humanism provides a conceptual framework that advances the importance or, quite possibly, the necessity of pluralistic discourse, that is, discourse between all the humanisms or disciplines of human inquiry. At the very least, such a conception reframes the academic vocation of universities and colleges away from the valuational neutrality of political liberalism to the prophetic. Our call—as theologians, economists, jurists, historians, anthropologists, scientists and many others—is not to remove oneself from the fundamental questions of the good life, but to engage our work as both scholars and teachers in the service of such questions. More specifically, the vocation of a Catholic university—as a society of various humanisms—is mutual collaboration, dialogue, and inquiry toward the *fullness* of human personhood, i.e., toward a humane future, “justice, freedom, dignity, unity and diversity in society.” Only in pursuing such mutual deliberation, can we realize more deeply what all human persons are called to do in response to God’s love for us: love the neighbor. Scholarship and education, then, takes place in view of service to others—or, a readiness to love. How does what we do as scholars and teachers contribute to the human person, to her dignity, well-being, or flourishing, whether in the political or non-political, in the public or private, the religious or secular? This is the question that ought to inform the

academic vocation of catholic higher education, so long as the values of Christian humanism and not that of political liberalism are given priority. Otherwise, scholarship and teaching within the parameters of neutrality in the way political liberalism defines it can too easily underscore and enable the kind of individualism that can be as detrimental as the moral hegemony that political liberalism so fears. If questions of the good life—or the question of the humane future as Christian humanism would put it—are bracketed from our studies, teachings, and research and consigned to the domain of personal, private, or individual decision, then knowledge is subject to one's own valuations—knowledge and education is only valuable to the extent that it is valuable to me. In a society in which so many lives hang in the balance, in a society in which one's choices can affect dramatically the well being of a fellow person near and far, is the appropriation of knowledge and education for the mere advancement of one's competitive advantage sufficient? Is it responsible? The question of responsibility—to whom are we accountable in our work as scholars and teachers—is at the heart of education that is driven by the spirit of Christian humanism.

But how might a Catholic university foster the kind of mutual deliberation among the disciplines that Christian humanism proposes as necessary to the more genuine realization of humanity's call to love our neighbor? In addition to Christian humanism, I want to propose in these final paragraphs that Catholic universities and colleges need to engender what one could call Christian aestheticism. It may be more precise to refer to Christian aestheticism as a constituent part of Christian humanism insofar as its aim is to promote the culture of Christian humanism. In any event, by Christian aestheticism I mean to propose a privileged place for the arts in the academy and a retrieval of beauty. Again, Rahner proves insightful as a point of departure. Consider his reflections on poetry. Like our discussion of his conception of Christian humanism, love of neighbor figures prominently in Rahner's discussion of poetry. If in loving neighbor we become open to the grace of God, then "the capacity and the practice of perceiving the poetic work is a presupposition" of loving the neighbor and thus "hearing the word of God," of being receptive to God's grace.²⁸ But why? Because God has revealed himself to us as the Word made flesh. This returns us to earlier comments about the significance of the God-man Christ. More specifically, it calls attention to the reality that "the human word has existed as the embodiment of the Word of God...[A]nd ever since this Word has been heard in its permanent embodiment, there [has been a] brightness and a secret promise in every word."²⁹ But not literally in *every* human word but, more specifically, in the word of poetry.

Rahner ascribes particular power to the poetic word; it can school³⁰ us to hear God's grace more acutely, profoundly, or urgently in its capacity to appeal to the heart and not merely the intellect.³¹ The power of poetry lies in its capacity to confront its audience with the question of who they are.

In doing so, he [the hearer of the poetic word] may be entangled in guilt, perversity, hatred of self and diabolical pride, he may see himself as a sinner and identify himself with his sin. But even so, he is more exposed to the happy danger of meeting God, than the narrow-minded Philistine who always skirts cautiously the chasms of existence, to stay on the superficial level where one is never faced with doubts—nor with God.³²

But what does it exactly mean to say that the poetic word has the capacity of exposing us "to the happy danger of meeting God?" Interestingly, Rahner alludes to a theme we have already witnessed in his reflections on Christian humanism: in the poetic word, "we go therein to meet the unique future that calls us."³³ This is the future that God promises, his Kingdom, which is here but not yet in its fullness.

Rahner does not think that all persons will be affected by the power of poetry. As he admits, “It cannot be objected that there are enough true Christians who have no truck with the Muses.” Some will possess the “faculties which the poet and those open to poetry possess,” while others will lack them.³⁴ But while he may not be a naïve aesthetic idealist, Rahner’s primary aim is to argue for the normative significance of poetry. From a Christian stance, should poetry be relegated to the level of secondary concern, or should it be supported and allowed to flourish more than it often is today? In some instances, poetry may indeed fall on deaf ears (especially “under the achievements of technological skill and suffocated by the chatter of the masses”³⁵), but does that necessarily mean that to speak of the evocative power of poetry is ultimately hollow speech? Insofar as God’s revelation of himself to us is mediated in and through our worldly reality, particularly in the human word (once again, this reflects the reality of the God-man Christ), the poetic word can constitute opportunities for focused moments of inquiry about the Word of God. This is a normative claim, despite whatever challenges the poetic word may encounter in reality. “[B]ecause it grows out of the divine word which bears within it the inmost essence of the poetic word,” Rahner claims that “the poetic word is also promised ever new victories in endless struggle.”³⁶

What are these victories? At the very least, it includes the perception of the good. That is, to hear the Word of God in the worldly, human words of poetry is to also perceive the good. Stated more specifically, to encounter the Word in the human word is to also encounter who we are and thus hear what we are called to be. Such a claim underscores the more general notion or premise that the inquiry and perception of what is real or true through the poetic word illumines at the same time what we ought to be and do.

If poetry links the true and the good, then Christian humanism requires the cultivation of the poetic word; it must be allowed to be spoken and heard! With respect to the idea of the Catholic university, we might say that a university that does not actively foster and promote the arts (and for Rahner this means especially poetry) dis-empowers its capacity to manifest the values of Christian humanism. It is the arts that offer those moments in which we, the members of the academic community, can reflect more deeply on our academic vocation by inquiring about what it means to be human and thus what our responsibilities ought to be to each other—in other words, the good.

But how can this be so? How might the poetic word, in its capacity to touch our hearts, incite deliberation about the true and, correlatively, the good? The literary theorist Elaine Scarry offers one possibility in her slim but provocative text *On Beauty and Being Just*. While the primary focus of the text is the rehabilitation of the concept of beauty within the modern academy, Scarry’s implicit aim in this rehabilitation is garnering greater support for the arts in general. For Scarry, a basic attribute of beauty—its perception, whether in a poem, painting, landscape, or libretto—is its capacity to “[invite] the search for something beyond itself.”³⁷ Accordingly, Scarry argues that “the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering.”³⁸ “We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.”³⁹ The self, one’s own interest and desires, are no longer the primary object of attention, but now exists in the “service of something else.”⁴⁰ The beautiful painting, the beautiful narrative, or perhaps the beautiful poem, to the extent that it is truly beautiful, incites inquiry, the desire to know more deeply the nature of the beautiful object perceived and the reality it points to. Can we not recall moments when upon suddenly seeing something beautiful we find ourselves staring more intently, asking out loud or to ourselves what it is that we are seeing? Or, what it is that we are reading? Even hearing? Or, more generally, what the object in question is all about? It is in these moments of inquiry that we begin to forget our own notions (in fact, the very act of inquiry requires that we let go of our preconceptions or regard them more tentatively), and in so doing we begin to find ourselves “standing in a different relation to the world that we were a moment before.”⁴¹ We no longer stand alone, but in relation to another; we come face to

face, even for a brief moment and sometimes for sustained periods of time, with the experience of selflessness and other-regard.⁴²

Can a university exist without the arts? Yes, certainly. But such a place may very well be a place of diminished moral discourse—a place in which discussion of the humane future, about who we are and our responsibilities to each other, are far from robust and sustained. The demands and deadlines of daily academic life, for both educators and students, can too easily foster an inward turn. But what about a community actively committed to the life of the arts, in their plurality? In their capacity to draw us to themselves, we are drawn away from ourselves. Such a movement of the mind and heart are requisites of a community capable of engaging one another in discourse and mutual deliberation about ourselves and our world. The arts in the academy, therefore, are a kind of school within a school, promoting the habits and dispositions integral to the culture of Christian humanism.

1. Cf. John Douglas, *The Conditions for Admissions: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities* (Stanford University Press, 2007); Daniel Golden, *The Price of Admissions: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges—and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates* (Three Rivers Press, 2007).

2. See, for example, Jonathan D. Glater, “Harvard’s Aid to Rivals Pressures Middle Class,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2007.

3. Stanley Fish, “Will the Humanities Save Us?” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2008, downloaded on January 6, 2008 at <http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/06will-the-humanities-save-us/index.html?ref=opinion>

4. Cf. Anthony T. Kronman, “Against Political Correctness: A Liberal’s *Cri de Coeur*,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, September/October 2007. See also Anthony T. Kronman, *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (Yale University Press, 2007).

5. Cf. Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton University Press, 1994), esp. 3-24.

6. The neutrality of political liberalism as an educational philosophy draws upon the larger public and legal philosophy of liberalism as developed in the American context. See, for instance, Rogers M. Smith, *Liberalism and American Constitutional Law*, second edition (Harvard University Press, 1990).

7. Peter Singer, “What Should a Billionaire Give—and What Should You?” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 17, 2006.

8. “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Costello Publishing Company, 1994), 166.

9. *Ibid.*, 165.

10. See David Hollenbach, S.J., “The Catholic University Under the Sign of the Cross: Christian Humanism in a Broken World,” in Michael J. Himes and Stephen J. Pope, eds., *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, S.J.* (Herder and Herder, 1996), 279-298.

11. Karl Rahner, S.J., “Christian Humanism,” in *Theological Investigations*, IX, Graham Harrison, trans. (Herder and Herder, 1972), 188.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 201.

14. *Ibid.*, 189.

15. *Ibid.*, 191.

16. *Ibid.*, 191, 195.

17. See, for example, *ibid.*, 191.

18. *Ibid.*, 189.

19. *Ibid.*, 196, 201.

20. *Ibid.*, 201.

21. *Ibid.*, 192.

22. *Ibid.*, 194.

23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 197.
25. Ibid., 203, emphasis added.
26. Ibid., 203.
27. Ibid., 202-203.
28. Karl Rahner, S.J., "Poetry and the Christian," in *Theological Investigations*, IV, Kevin Smyth, trans. (Helicon Pres, 1966), 363.
29. Ibid., 362.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 360.
32. Ibid., 365.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 363.
35. Ibid., 364.
36. Ibid.
37. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 29.
38. Ibid., 111.
39. Ibid., 112.
40. Ibid., 113.
41. Ibid., 112.
42. See also Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in *Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge Classics, 2001, 1970): "Beauty is the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience and change of consciousness. I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important....Art, and by 'art' from now on I mean good art, not fantasy art, affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession." (82-83)