

Non-Violence in the Humanist Tradition

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TO BEGIN WITH, a preamble. The Humanist tradition is largely one of writing and campaigning for ‘good causes’, often under the aegis of other groups. We do not have large, highly resourced organisations with millions of members and buildings all over towns and cities throughout the world. Active membership of humanist organisations in Ireland runs into hundreds, not thousands. Yet 14% of the population of Northern Ireland say that they have no religion and might well consider themselves as humanists or freethinkers. Certainly, the overwhelming majority of humanist wedding and funeral ceremonies conducted by the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland are for people who are not or were not members of our group. So when we talk about a humanist tradition we are talking about something quite loose and amorphous, yet real enough for the people involved and having a real though often subtle impact on the wider world.

In this sense, of course, the humanist tradition is older and more universal than Christianity. Gautama Buddha in India, Confucius in China, and Protagoras, Anaxagoras and Democritus in Greece can all be labelled Humanists and all lived hundreds of years before Jesus. Protagoras, often referred to as ‘the first humanist’, formulated the dictum that ‘man is the measure of all things’. In other words, these early humanists based their ethic on human needs and human principles rather than divine commands. The Golden Rule, for example, is found in the writings of Confucius. He puts it better than Jesus: “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself”. As for the ethic of love and forgiveness, it is also found in Confucius, Lao Tzu and the Buddha. The Tao states:

“Recompense to none evil for evil; repay evil with good”. Even Seneca, a contemporary of Jesus, wrote: “Someone gets angry with you. Challenge him with kindness in return. Enmity immediately tumbles away when one side lets it”.

So Jesus was neither unique nor original in this respect. Arguably, he adopted some humanist ideas in his own critique of violence – indeed we modern secular humanists would tend to believe that the Gospel writers stole from this pacifist humanist tradition. His pleas to turn the other cheek and to be the ‘good Samaritan’ are indeed commendable, and so too is his tolerance towards the adulterers, the lepers, the paralytics, the deaf and the blind. Yet Jesus himself was obviously not a humanist in the secular meaning of the word, and it is also doubtful whether he could be called a humanist in the philosophical, political or social senses. His political ‘philosophy’, if we could call it that, is a profoundly reactionary message which fails to provide any practical policies for the good of society.

In the Middle Ages, the largely pacifist message of Jesus was greatly modified by Augustine and Aquinas in the doctrine of the just war, and it wasn’t until the Renaissance that it was challenged by humanists. Renaissance humanists were usually also Christians, but of a tolerant, liberal, non-sectarian kind. They were generally also pacifists, or at least inclined to non-violence. Humanist pacifism appealed to such philosophical and theological principles as the common humanity and brotherhood of all persons as children of God, the follies of war, and the ability of rational individuals to govern themselves and their states on the basis of reason.

Erasmus, Shakespeare and Bacon are obvious examples. Erasmus said: “War is sweet to those who haven’t tasted it”; and “The most disadvantageous peace is better than the most just war”. In *Querela Pacis* (The Complaint of Peace, 1517), headed with the epigraph, ‘The sum of all religion is peace and unanim-

ity’, from which these quotes come, Erasmus wrote that “Peace is the highest good to which even the lovers of the world turn all their efforts”. He also wrote: “God hath shaped this creature man not to war, but to friendship, not to destruction, but to health, not to wrong but to kindness and benevolence”. In *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516) he suggested that rather than normal health, war and violence should be seen as aberrant pathology - in nature, in society and in the individual. Rather than being identical with force, Erasmus sees power or authority as distinct from it. The duty of Erasmus’s prince consists not of making or preparing for war, but rather of avoiding it and serving his people, on whose satisfaction he depends for legitimacy. Real power and true heroism lie not in physical dominance over others but in self mastery. To establish and maintain peace should be the goal of all princes, a goal achieved by the greatest spiritual and temporal leaders in history, Jesus and Augustus.



Desiderius Erasmus

Between 1517 and 1529 alone, *Querela Pacis* went through twenty four editions and was translated into most European languages. Its engaged pacifism typified opinions originating in a circle of Humanist scholars in England known as the London Reformers, including Thomas More, John Linacre and John Colet. Erasmus’s purpose of cultivating a humanist peacemaking Prince was adopted both by the tutor of Queen Elizabeth, Roger Ascham, in his *Schoolmaster*, and by Castiglione in his educational