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THE TRUE MEANING OF HUMANISM:
RELIGION AND HUMAN VALUES

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If humanism is defined as the defense of human dignity, human rights, and human values, then few people today would declare themselves in opposition to it. Yet the meaning of humanism is highly controversial: there are both "secular" and "religious" proponents of the movement, and each vie for the honor of representing "true humanism." Ever since the term was coined in the early nineteenth century, humanism has tended to be associated with its secular version. Secular humanists oppose religion for two basic types of reasons (ethical and epistemic): they maintain it is harmful and that its ideas are false. In considering (and critiquing) their arguments, I contend that there are both humanistic and anti-humanistic forms of religion. The first (religious humanism) promotes respect for human dignity while the second (religious anti-humanism) undermines it. Further, I contend that there are rational grounds for theistic belief – grounds that can be found in human experience and in the very ideals that humanism claims to champion.

Keywords: human dignity, religious violence, "new atheists," self-determination, divine image and likeness, salvation, Christian humanism, Renaissance humanism, liberalism

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Humanism is one of the great movements and also one of the great controversies in modern intellectual history. Let me begin with a broad definition: Humanism is the defense and promotion of human values and of human flourishing. Its goal is a more humane world. Progress toward that goal is to be achieved through reason, an ethics of human empathy, respect for human dignity, and human rights. Certainly the vast majority of humanists would accept that definition; many people share the same ideals, even those who do not normally call themselves humanists. Humanism can be defined even more simply: respect for human dignity, for the intrinsic and insuperable value of being human, for the principle that every person is an end-in-itself and ought never to be treated merely as a means. If we accept that definition, then humanism can claim an essential truth, perhaps even the essential truth. There, already, is a large part of what I mean by the title of my paper: the true meaning of humanism is respect for human dignity.

So where is the controversy? The controversy is over religion – does it help or hinder humanism? Is humanism better with or without it? In short, is religion a force for good or ill?[1].

For most humanists today who wear that name as a badge of honor, there really is no controversy: they maintain that religion is a force for ill, and that human progress depends on "the end of faith," as prominent humanist Sam Harris put it in the title of his 2004 book, which became a *New York Times* bestseller. He is worth quoting: "Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity – a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible. When foisted upon each generation anew, it renders us incapable of realizing just how much of our world has been unnecessarily ceded to a dark and barbarous past"[2]. That is an example of how present-day humanism defines itself in opposition to religion.

To put that in historical context, let me say a few words about the term itself "humanism." It was coined in the early nineteenth century by German educational reformers who wanted to promote a curriculum based on the humanities, especially the study of ancient Greek and Latin and, more generally, of classical literature, history, and culture. The new term derived from a Renaissance-era word, *umanisti*, whose outlook was hardly irreligious[3]. In fact, as we will see, Renaissance humanism was a type of religious humanism, even if the *umanisti* did not use the abstract term "humanism." Since the Renaissance, religious humanism has had some prominent champions, including the great twentieth-century Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain[4]. But the religious variant is an outlier among modern forms of humanism, which by and large define themselves as secular, irreligious, or atheistic. Once the term came into use, it did not take long for it to be associated with atheism or secularism in the sense of "non-religious." Already by 1844, Karl Marx, the same Marx for whom religion was the "opiate of the masses," gave it that association. He wrote that communism, "as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism"[5]. Naturalism is a more precise term for atheism: it is the view that there is no reality except the natural universe in space and time and that everything, for example the human mind, can ultimately be reduced to naturalistic processes. Marx's identification of humanism with naturalism or atheism set the basic humanist agenda down to our own times.

One of today's best known humanists is A.C. Grayling, a British philosopher and public intellectual. The title of his 2013 book is characteristic: *The God Argument: The Case Against Religion and for Humanism*. There he writes, "In a truly secular world, one where religion has withered to the relative insignificance of astrology… [there] an ethical outlook which can serve everyone everywhere, and can bring the world together into a single moral community, will at last be possi-

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[1] This paper was first presented as a lecture at the College of St. Scholastica (Duluth, Minnesota), Alworth Center for the Study of Peace and Justice 2014–2015 Lecture Series, *Is Religion a Force for Good or Ill?* In October 2018 it was also delivered as a lecture at Nazarbayev University (Astana, Kazakhstan), Department of History, Philosophy and Religious Studies.

[2] Harris, S. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York, 2005, p. 25.

[3] Kristeller, P. O. *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*. New York, 1979, pp. 21–32. Davies, T. *Humanism*, 2nd ed. London, 2008, pp. 1–4, 10–11, 15–17, 68–72, 94–104.

[4] See in particular his 1936 treatise *Integral Humanism*: Maritain, J. *Integral Humanism, Freedom in the Modern World, and a Letter on Independence*. Notre Dame, IN, 1996.

[5] Marx, K. "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844", *The Marx-Engels Reader,* 2nd ed. New York, 1978, p. 84. Davies, T. *Humanism*, pp. 12–13.

ble. That outlook is humanism"[6]. Another British philosopher, Stephen Law, is the author of the handy guide, *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction*. He lists seven main characteristics of humanism. First, humanists rely on science and reason. Second, "humanists are either atheists or at least agnostic." They "believe that this life is the only life we have." Regardless of its atheism or agnosticism, humanism, Law continues, "involves a commitment to the existence and importance of moral value," in particular to individual moral autonomy. Humanists believe that human life can have meaning without it being bestowed from above by God. Finally, Law says that humanists are secularists in that they think the state should take a neutral position with respect to religion[7].

In the United States, perhaps the most prominent humanist was Paul Kurtz, who died in 2012. He called his movement "secular humanism" and regarded religious skepticism as one of its hallmarks. He was fond of writing manifestos and declarations. Let me quote one of them for a summary of his views on religion. He begins by recognizing that religious experience is important for people, but denies that "such experiences have anything to do with the supernatural." He continues: "we find that traditional views of the existence of God either are meaningless, have not yet been demonstrated to be true, or are tyrannically exploitative"[8]. And there is much more along those lines.

From these representative examples, it is clear that most humanists today think that religion is a force for ill, or at least not for good. Why? Their basic argument goes something like this: "Religion places God above man and in the process debases the human; it exalts the divine and devalues the human. People waste their time and energy worshiping God and worrying about the next world rather than concentrating their efforts on improving this world, the only one we know. Religion is not only a waste; it actually makes the world worse since we persecute, fight, and kill each other over it. Religious violence is especially lamentable, because there is nothing to fight over – there is no God, so far as we know." In other words, humanists oppose religion for two different types of reasons. The first can be classified as broadly ethical: religion is held to undermine the defense and promotion of human values and well-being, which is the very purpose of humanism.

The second type of argument can be called epistemic. The epistemic argument is that, even were religion not harmful to human values, still there are no rational grounds for belief in God, so a commitment to truth demands that we debunk such belief. Over the past fifteen years or so the epistemic argument in particular has been stridently advanced by a group of thinkers known as the "new atheists." They claim that science proves belief in God to be a delusion, to paraphrase the title of one of their most famous books[9]. In sum: humanists oppose religion because they maintain it is violent and that its ideas are false.

In what follows, I will try to address each of these two different types of reasons for thinking that religion is a force for ill. I will devote the most time to the first, and will grant that humanists are right that religion can be harmful and violent – though not (as they think) because of some deep and systemic flaw in religion as such, but rather because, *when religion is violent, it proceeds from a debased understanding of God and man*. In the concluding part of my paper, I will

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[6]   Grayling, A. C. *The God Argument: The Case Against Religion and for Humanism*. New York, 2013, p. 138.

[7]   Law, S. *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, 2011, pp. 2–3.

[8]   Kurtz, P. *In Defense of Secular Humanism*. Buffalo, NY, 1983, p. 18.

[9]   Dawkins, R. *The God Delusion*. New York, 2006.

argue, against the "new atheists," that there are rational grounds for theism, and that those grounds are to be found in human experience, if fully appreciated for what it is, and in the very ideals that humanism claims to champion.

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The ethical case against religion is summed up concisely enough by Sam Harris, who says that religion is "the most prolific source of violence in our history" and that faith is "the mother of hatred... wherever people define their moral identities in religious terms"[10]. These are extravagant claims. Secular humanists like Harris are mistaken in thinking that religion by its very nature promotes violence, but there is a type of religious outlook that does, and humanists are, of course, right to deplore it. Religion is a huge category of human experience. To say that someone is religious tells us very little about her particular beliefs or the ways they relate to her life. One very broad definition is that religion refers to the ways that human beings seek meaning by relating their life to a greater, perhaps transcendent whole. In his classic study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), William James gave a famous definition: Religion "consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto"[11]. Some religions are theistic, some are not. What a religion says about human beings is at least as important as what it says about the divine. Religion can be humanistic or anti-humanistic, by which I mean it can either promote respect for human dignity or undermine it, and that is how, in the context of religious history and thought, I will use those two terms: humanistic and anti-humanistic. It might well be that there is no important distinction in religion, and no more important criterion for deciding which religious ideas or beliefs to accept and which ones to reject.

Let us look first at the basic structure of humanistic forms of religion, then at the basic structure of the anti-humanistic forms. The first point to be made is that the world's religions are an incomparably rich source of reflection about human value, worth, and dignity. In fact, for most of its history, until the Enlightenment, the idea of human dignity was a religious idea: it was formulated and expressed in religious terms. The first book of the Hebrew Bible contains a seminal formulation of human dignity, Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." The Jewish writers so esteemed human worth that they compared it with God. That esteem was one of the sources of their very idea of God, one of the foundations of their faith; the human and the divine were two aspects of one reality. Genesis 1:26 expresses an idea common to the other religions that emerged during what the German philosopher Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age, the middle several hundred years of the first millennium BCE[12]. That common idea is simple and powerful: the sacredness of human life, a sacredness recognized more from within than revealed from on high. In Hinduism, it is expressed in the doctrine of atman or the soul: the indwelling of the divine, of Brahman, that makes every human being a person. Moksha, salvation or full union with Brahman, is to be achieved through fulfilling the inner moral law, or dharma. In Confucianism, heaven (tian) is not a transcendent state of salvation but the moral order that permeates the cosmos. Human beings are capable of aligning themselves with this immanent moral order by cultivating the supreme Confucian virtue of *ren*, perhaps best translated simply as

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[10]   Harris, S. *The End of Faith*, pp. 27, 30.

[11]   James, W. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York, 1982, p. 53.

[12]   Jaspers, K. *The Origin and Goal of History*. New Haven, CT, 1953.

humanity. Ren is an achieved quality, and on the ground of our capacity for becoming ever more fully human, the Confucian philosopher Mencius declared boldly that the "human individual is of infinite value"[13].

Ideas like these are the foundational moments in the humanistic tradition in religion, or in religious humanism. According to this tradition, the divine, whatever it may be in itself, is *for us* an ideal motivating our efforts to become ever more worthy of it, to approximate it ever more closely, to realize it ever more fully in ourselves and in the world. As Jesus put it simply in Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect." In religious humanism, human dignity involves a dual capacity: first, for recognizing the ideal, or the divine image, and, second, for perfectibility or moral improvement according to it. This is the distinctive human capacity for *ideal self-determination*. In the Christian patristic period, in the first several centuries of the common era, the Church fathers, especially in the Byzantine East, laid the foundations for this type of powerful theological interpretation of Genesis 1:26: human beings are created in God's image, but we must assimilate to God's likeness by our own efforts. As we will see, Renaissance religious humanists further developed this type of "image and likeness" theology in their defense of human dignity.

Christianity is a humanistic type of religion in another basic way. Its defining doctrine is the incarnation of the divine in the human, which means that the human is worthy of embodying the divine. And the reverse is true as well: God became human so that humans might become divine. This doctrine of salvation as divinization or *theosis* was taught by Athanasius of Alexandria (296–373) and other Church fathers – again, especially in the Byzantine East. The profound humanism of Christianity was affirmed in the most striking way at the Church Council held in Chalcedon in the year 451. The Council's main concern was Christology. It confirmed the two natures of Christ, divine and human, which abide in him in perfect harmony, without "division or confusion," to use the Chalcedonian formula. It is hard to imagine a more powerful vindication of human worth: the humanity of Christ is preserved even alongside his divinity.

The early Christian contribution to the recognition of human dignity has been emphasized by David Bentley Hart, a prominent Eastern Orthodox scholar and writer. In 2009 he published *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. The book's third part is called "Revolution: The Christian Invention of the Human." Hart opens one of its chapters ("The Face of the Faceless") with the Gospel account of Peter's betrayal of Christ on the eve of the crucifixion: Upon hearing the cock's crow at dawn, Peter remembered Christ's words that he would deny him, the Lord, not once but three times. Seized by grief that he has done just that, Peter went apart and wept bitterly. Hart remarks that "there may well be no stranger or more remarkable moment in the whole of scripture." His explanation why is worth quoting at length:

> What is obvious to us – Peter's wounded soul, the profundity of his devotion to his teacher, the torment of his guilt, the crushing knowledge that Christ's imminent death forever foreclosed the possibility of seeking forgiveness for his betrayal – is obvious in very large part because we are heirs of a culture that, in a sense, sprang from Peter's tears. To us, this rather small and ordinary narrative detail is unquestionably an ornament of the story, one that ennobles it, proves its gravity, widens its embrace of our common humanity. In this sense, all of us – even unbelievers – are "Christians" in our moral expectations of the world. To

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[13]   Quoted in Lauren, P. G. *The Evolution of International Human Rights*, 3rd ed. Philadelphia, 2011, p. 12.

the literate classes of late antiquity, however, this tale of Peter weeping would more likely have seemed like an aesthetic mistake; for Peter, as a rustic, could not possibly… have possessed the sort of tragic dignity necessary to make it worthy of anyone's notice[14].

The Christian revolution is that now we do notice and see in Peter, a Galilaean peasant, "the image of man in the highest and deepest and most tragic sense," as the great literary critic Erich Auerbach noted half a century ago[15]. Later in the chapter Hart describes the Gospel vision of reality as a total humanism: "a vision, that is, of humanity in its widest and deepest scope, one that finds the full nobility and mystery and beauty of the human countenance – the human person – in each unique instance of the common nature. Seen thus, Christ's supposed descent from the 'form of God' into the 'form of a slave' is not so much a paradox as a perfect confirmation of the indwelling of the divine image in each soul"[16].

Earlier I referred to the basic structure of religious humanism. We can now see its essential elements. Let me highlight three. First and foremost is the idea of the sacredness of the human person, or of human dignity. This idea entails that human beings, while essentially related to the divine, are not wholly dependent on it: we are endowed with free will and are capable of self-determination (autonomy). Religious humanism maintains that while we are created in, or otherwise carry, the divine image, it is our responsibility to achieve, through our own efforts, an ever greater "likeness" to the divine ideal.

The second element of religious humanism is its distinctive approach to salvation. The basic meaning of salvation is deliverance or release from death, suffering and evil, and, more generally, from the contingency, finitude, and imperfection of the natural world. In Christianity and other religions, salvation is associated with blessed, eternal life in God. A fundamental issue, especially in Christianity, is whether salvation takes place with or without human participation and cooperation, whether human beings are capable of working toward salvation, whether they must "earn" the grace that ultimately saves – or, as the German philosopher Immanuel Kant once put it, the grace that makes up the deficit for what we cannot accomplish, after we have done our best[17]. The approach that emphasizes human participation, the efficacy of human work and progress toward salvation, is sometimes called "perfectibility," not in the sense that human beings can perfect themselves, but that we can and ought to strive to realize, as much as humanly possible, the good. The New Testament basis for perfectibility is Matthew 5:48, which I quoted earlier: "Be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect." That is the focal point of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus's teaching about the path to the Kingdom of God. So in religious humanism, salvation is conceived as a joint divine-human project. It entails active human work toward salvation, rather than resignation before an exaggerated sense of a weak and sinful human nature, as an excuse to do nothing and await salvation as an external gift. There is a beautiful statement of this activist approach in Buddhism: "Be lamps unto yourselves", the Buddha taught. "Betake yourselves to no external refuge. Hold fast as a refuge to the Truth. Work out your own salvation with diligence"[18].

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[14] Hart, D. B. *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies.* New Haven, 2009, pp. 166–167.

[15] Ibid., p. 167, quoting Auerbach's book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton, 1953, p. 41.

[16] Hart, D. B. *Atheist Delusions*, p. 174.

[17] Kant, I. "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason", in: I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*. Cambridge, 1996, pp. 95–96, 193.

[18] Quoted in Burtt, E. A. *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*. New York, 1955, p. 50.

The third element of religious humanism is religious pluralism. No religion can legitimately claim to be the only way to God, but each is legitimate in its own way, or at least can be. For this truth we can turn to the great Sufi philosopher Ibn al-Arabi (1165–1240), who taught that divinity and humanity are two aspects of one divine reality and that each human person is a unique, precious epiphany of the hidden God. His approach to faith was pluralistic and ecumenical: "Do not attach yourself to any particular creed exclusively, so that you may disbelieve all the rest; otherwise you will lose much good, nay, you will fail to recognize the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresent and omnipotent, is not limited by any one creed, for he says, 'Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of al-Lah' (Koran 2:109)"[19].

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The antipode of religious humanism is religious anti-humanism. Even as some writers of the Hebrew Bible were affirming that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, others, perhaps a century earlier, in the Book of Deuteronomy, were declaring that the Israelites were God's chosen people, and that God commanded them to wage violence, war and even genocide on those who were not chosen and who worshipped other gods. Of this Karen Armstrong writes, "Like any human idea, the notion of God can be exploited and abused. The myth of a Chosen People and a divine election has often inspired a narrow, tribal theology from the time of the Deuteronomist right up to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim fundamentalism that is unhappily rife in our own day"[20]. The point can be put more strongly: if the notion of divine election is taken to mean the some people are chosen or saved solely on the basis of their religious affiliation while others are damned on that basis, then the notion is the religious equivalent of racism, sexism, and other dehumanizing ideologies – ideologies which are often found together. Furthermore, in the same way that racism and sexism are prone to violence, so too is religious fundamentalism.

There is another, related but distinct, root of religious anti-humanism. It is the view that human beings are so debilitated by sin that they have no autonomous capacity for the good or for moral progress. This is the Christian doctrine of original sin, of humanity's fallen nature and depravity. It can be traced to St. Augustine, the most influential figure in Western Christianity after Jesus and St. Paul. Augustine converted in the year 386 at the age of 31. He described his conversion in his autobiographical *Confessions*, one of the great works of Christian literature. In 391 he was ordained a priest in Hippo in North Africa. Four years later he was appointed bishop there, a position he held until his death in 430. His theological masterpieces include *The City of God* and *On the Trinity*.

Augustine developed his theology of sin and salvation in his controversy with the British monk Pelagius. This was one of the great theological struggles in church history. Pelagius defended free will, the human capacity for good, and the activist, perfectibilist position on salvation. Augustine, by contrast, had a very dark view of human nature, which he thought was corrupted by an overwhelming inclination for evil. Original sin, he said, had turned humanity into a "mass of perdition," from which no one can free himself, because the will is held in bondage to sin. He uses the term "lump" to describe humanity in its state of loss, referring

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[19] Quoted in Armstrong, K. *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York, 1994, pp. 238–239.

[20] Armstrong, K. *A History of God*, p. 20.

to "the damned lump of humanity"[21]. Left to our own devices, we are doomed. For Augustine, salvation thus largely meant salvation from ourselves, through the external, unilateral action of unmerited grace. Another part of his fatalistic theory was predestination: while everyone deserves to be damned, through God's mercy some have already been saved. Whatever earthly good the elect do is a result of grace, not human effort, which is ineffectual. This dispute between Augustine and Pelagius had momentous consequences. Augustine's anti-humanism prevailed over Pelagius's humanism. In fact, Augustine succeeded in having Pelagianism condemned as a heresy at the Church synod held at Carthage in 418.

By the fifth century, Christianity had become the state religion of the Roman Empire. The Church was an increasingly powerful institution, which was not a bad thing given that the western empire was collapsing under the Germanic invasions. A strong and independent church could help preserve some semblance of civilization. It could also use its power to enforce what it determined to be theological truth or orthodoxy. An early example of the declaration of orthodoxy was the Nicene Creed (325). Heresy was defined in opposition to orthodoxy, and the Church had already begun suppressing it. The persecution of heresy depended, in the words of one twentieth-century scholar, "on the conviction that there is an ascertained body of religious truth which must be believed... in order to attain salvation. The Church was regarded as the sole custodian of this body of truth"[22]. That meant that outside the Church there was no salvation – *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*.

This view went well with Augustine's idea of original sin, but not so well with his idea of predestination – for if the fate of every human soul has already been decided, then how could the Church, or anything for that matter, affect the outcome? Augustine did not let this problem deter him. He argued that heretics and enemies of the Church did threaten salvation, and therefore it was legitimate to use force – state power – against them, though he did not think that they should be killed. (To his credit, he was opposed in principle to the death penalty.) In a letter to some Donatists, whom he was combating, he wrote, "nothing can cause more complete death to the soul than the freedom to disseminate error"[23]. Princeton University's Peter Brown, one of the great authorities on Augustine, has written that for all his personal moderation and honesty, nonetheless in his justification of the persecution of heresy there lurked something potentially "fallacious, horrible and insidious"[24]. It is difficult to avoid that conclusion that the Church father helped lay the ideological foundations for centuries of violence meted out against heretics, religious dissenters, and non-Christians, a record that left a terrible stain not only on the Catholic Church, but also on Protestantism, since Martin Luther and John Calvin were fervent Augustinians.

In their case against religion, today's humanists and new atheists are able to point to this record, and they do – sometimes, it seems, with glee. There is no point in belaboring the details, but here are the main episodes. The Church established the Medieval Inquisition as an institution in 1231 and put the Dominicans

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[21] St. Augustine, *Enchiridion: On Faith, Hope, and Love*. Quoted in Armstrong, K. *A History of God*, pp. 123–124.

[22] Jordan, W. K. *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA, 1932, p. 24. Quoted in Zagorin, P. *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*. Princeton, 2003, p. 17.

[23] Quoted in Zagorin, P. *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*, p. 33.

[24] Brown, P. "St. Augustine's Attitude to Religious Coercion", in: P. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*. New York, 1972, p. 277. Quoted in Zagorin, P. *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West*, p. 33.

in charge. The punishment for heretics who refused to recant was death, carried out by secular authorities. It often took the dreadful form of being burned alive. Perhaps 2000 people died in the Medieval Inquisition. In 1478 the Spanish Inquisition was established. The first inquisitor-general, or grand inquisitor, was the Dominican friar Tomás de Torquemada (1420–1498), who directed the brutal persecution and mass expulsion of Jews and Muslims. He condemned perhaps 2000 people to death by burning. Apart from the persecution of heresy in the strict sense, there were other, related forms of religious violence in the medieval and early modern periods. In 1095 the first of numerous crusades was launched. They were directed not only against Islam in the Holy Land but also against popular heresies in Europe such as the Cathars (or Albigensians) and the Hussites. The victims of the crusades numbered at least a million, 20,000 in the Albigensian crusade alone. Over the centuries, both in and apart from the crusades, Jews were massacred in frightful numbers. Just as the Reconquista was completed in Spain, Columbus and the Conquistadors took the crusading spirit to the New World, where they massacred native peoples in the name of Christ. Back in Europe, the witch hunts started in earnest in the 1500s. Perhaps 50,000 people, mostly women, perished. By then, Europe was tearing itself apart in the so-called wars of religion, though religion was only one factor. Many millions died in these wars, mainly in the century before 1648.

It would be absurd to reduce these complex events spanning more than half a millennium to a single cause such as Augustinian anti-humanism, but nonetheless they do, in varying degrees, bear relation to the idea that since salvation depended not on individual moral effort but on correct belief as determined by the Church, then the Church's alleged enemies – heretics, other dissenters, Jews, Muslims, and women demonized as witches – all had to be defeated. Even if it was seldom the only cause of violence, this view could provide theological justification for persecution and violence done for the usual sordid human reasons. Violence comes from having power over others, and the (pretended) power to mediate salvation is a very great power indeed. The medieval Church claimed this power. In the Reformation, the number of Christian churches went from one to many, with most of them committed to their own version of "outside the church there is no salvation", nor is there any apart from correct belief. The predictable result was an escalation in the level of violence.

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Augustinian anti-humanism had a deep impact on medieval and early modern Christianity, but Christian humanism was never extinguished. Benedictine monasteries were the centers of learning and scholarship in medieval Christendom. As the Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch recently put it, "the survival of European civilization would have been inconceivable without monasteries and nunneries"[25]. The Benedictines cultivated classical learning and the liberal arts. In their monastic *scriptoria*, they collected, preserved and copied ancient and classical manuscripts, which otherwise would have been lost to the world. Their work made possible the further development of humanism in the Renaissance. It is fitting that the first Renaissance treatise on human dignity (Bartolomeo Facio's *De excellentia ac praestantia hominis*, ca. 1447), was written with the encouragement and help of a Benedictine monk, Antonio da Barga (d. 1452)[26].

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[25] MacCulloch, D. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. New York, 2009, p. 358.
[26] Kristeller, P. O. *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, p. 171.

The Renaissance began in Italy in the fourteenth century and was centered in Florence. Humanism was its most important intellectual movement[27]. As we have seen, the term "humanism" was devised early in the nineteenth-century and applied retrospectively to the Renaissance to designate the study of the humanities. The term "humanist" was used in the Renaissance, in Latin (*humanista*) and the vernacular languages, to refer to a teacher or student of the humanities (*studia humanitatis*). At the time the humanities meant grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Humanistic study was based on classical languages and literature, Greek and especially Latin. The first great humanists were Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375). They and their followers admired the culture of classical antiquity and hoped to bring about its rebirth or renaissance. Petrarch's favorite author was Cicero, who gave the humanists their ideal: *humanitas*. Cicero used this term to translate another, *paideia*, the Greek word for education and culture. By *humanitas* he wanted to convey the idea that "humanity" is not something given, except as a potential. It is rather a quality to be achieved and cultivated through education and culture. Thus, the highest purpose of humanistic study is the fullest realization of one's humanity. That is the meaning of Renaissance humanism. It was both classical and Christian. One historian has written of "Petrarch's dream of a cultural and moral regeneration of Christian society," and another has said that the *studia humanitatis* was to be "coupled with a revived and purer Christianity", a type of dual Renaisssance[28].

From Petrarch on, one of the main themes of Renaissance humanism was human dignity[29]. Here as well, the humanists learned from Cicero. In his seminal text *De Officiis* (*On Duties*), he uses the term *dignitas* and identifies its source as reason, which – in *De Legibus* (*On the Laws*) – he says is "the first common possession of man and God". The humanists also closely studied the Stoics, who taught that reason is a portion of the divine in every person. After Facio's Benedictine-inspired treatise on human dignity, the next work on the theme was written by Gianozzo Manetti (1396–1459), the Florentine ambassador to Naples and a humanist noted for his philosophical and theological interests, his biblical translations, and his Hebrew studies. In 1452–53, he completed his manuscript, *De Dignitate et Excellentia Hominis* (On the Dignity and Excellence of Man), which was a response to Pope Innocent III's perfectly Augustinian *De miseria humanae conditionis* (On the Misery of Human Life). For some, Innocent III (1198–1216) was not so innocent: in 1200 he launched the Albigensian Crusade and in 1204 the Fourth Crusade.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, the defense of human dignity was taken up by a circle of Renaissance Platonic philosophers led by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499). The circle is known as the Florentine Academy, though it was rather informal[30]. In 1482 Ficino published his masterpiece, *Platonic Theology*. The book's main idea is the divinity and immortality of the human soul, which Ficino saw in its infinite, ideal aspirations[31]. They constitute the soul's likeness to God, which human beings – as rational, free, and moral agents – are responsible for progressively realizing. The transcendent culmination of this process of human perfectibility is divinization or theosis, a concept Ficino and other Renaissance

[27]   Kristeller, P. O. *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, pp. 21–32; Nauert, C. G. *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, 2006.

[28]   Nauert, C. G. *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*, p. 43. Rice, E. F. *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460–1559*. New York, 1970, p. 70.

[29]   Kristeller, P. O. *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, pp. 169–181.

[30]   Ibid., pp. 50–65.

[31]   Ibid., pp. 181–196.

philosophers borrowed from the Church fathers[32]. The idea that human dignity consists in our capacity for perfectibility, for assimilation to the divine likeness, was characteristic of Renaissance humanism. Thus, contrary to anachronistic, secularizing interpretations, Renaissance humanism was a profound religious humanism, as the historian Charles Trinkaus showed in a classic study, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*.

The religious nature of Renaissance humanism is also clear in the thought of one of its best known figures, the young Florentine prince Giovani Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494)[33]. In 1486 he wrote an oration which later editors titled, *De hominis dignitate* (On human dignity). It is often regarded as the manifesto of the Italian Renaissance. In it Pico recounts how God made man a "creature of indeterminate nature" and said to him:

> We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine[34].

In 1942 the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer wrote, in a seminal essay on Pico, that this idea of man as a free "maker and molder" of himself, with the power to ascend to divine heights, meant that the likeness to God "is not a gift bestowed on man to begin with, but an achievement for him to work out"[35]. For Pico, Cassirer suggests, our likeness to God consists in freedom and in the perfectibility that it makes possible[36]. Through freedom humans beings are not only related to God, but "actually one with Him. For human *freedom* is of such a kind that any increase in its meaning or value is impossible... Thus when Pico ascribes to man an independent and innate creative power, he has in this one fundamental respect made man equal to Divinity"[37]. This is a particularly striking way of expressing Pico's idea, which he shared with Ficino, that the source of human dignity is the wondrous capacity for self-determination and perfectibility. Three centuries after Pico's oration, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant published his epochal

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[32] Trinkaus, C. *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 Vols. Chicago; Notre Dame, 1970–1995. On Ficino's idea that human dignity consists in our natural pursuit of deification, see ibid., Vol. 2, Ch. 9, "Humanist Themes in Marsilio Ficino's Philosophy of Human Immortality."

[33] This and the next three paragraphs follow the introduction ("The Humanist Tradition In Russian Philosophy") to *A History of Russian Philosophy, 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*. Cambridge, 2010, pp. 6–8. In this connection it is worth noting that Vladimir Soloviev, Russian greatest religious philosopher, was a profound Christian humanist. His biographer Radlov compared him with Pico: Radlov, E. L. *Vladimir Soloviev: zhizn' i uchenie* [Vladimir Soloviev: Life and Teachings]. St. Petersburg, 1913, pp. 49–50. The comparison is noted by Boikov, V. F. "The Nightingale Song of Russian Philosophy", *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, 2007, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 39, 52–53.

[34] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, "Oration on the Dignity of Man", *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*. Chicago, 1948, pp. 224–225.

[35] Cassirer, E. "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: A Study in the History of Renaissance Ideas", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1942, Vol. 3, Nos. 2/3, pp. 123–144, 319–346 (here, pp. 320–321).

[36] Thus it is not surprising that "Pico reaffirms the basic Pelagian thesis" against original sin and the dogma that salvation is possible only through God's grace (Cassirer, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," p. 329). Tzvetan Todorov writes that "humanism takes up the tradition attributed to the name Pelagius, for whom the salvation of men is in their own hands" (Todorov, T. *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. Princeton, 2002, p. 43).

[37] Cassirer, E. "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola", p. 336.

Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785). In it he advanced a conception of human dignity similar to Pico's – a fact that the neo-Kantian philosopher Cassirer could not have failed to appreciate.

Ficino, Pico and other Renaissance humanists were convinced that faith and reason were compatible. At the beginning of *De hominis dignitate* Pico refers to man as "a great miracle". This was no mere rhetorical flourish. Human freedom and creativity, the ability to pose ideals and realize them, transforming ourselves and the world, were for Pico the grounds not only of human dignity but also of faith in divine reality. For the humanists, the very presence of the free, creative human spirit in the physical world implied God's existence. Their approach to faith was premised on and affirmed human autonomy and dignity; therefore it logically excluded coercion. Pico's views are again characteristic. For him, Cassirer writes, "any compulsion in the things of faith is… not only to be rejected on moral and religious grounds: it is also ineffective and futile"[38].

In their defense of human dignity, Renaissance humanists drew on a wide range of sources, including, as we have seen, Cicero, the Stoics, and Plato. Another source was Greek patristic theology. The great intellectual historian Werner Jaeger, at the end of his book *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, emphasized this influence: "From the Renaissance the line leads straight back to the Christian humanism of the [Greek] fathers of the fourth century and to their idea of man's dignity... With the Greeks who emigrated after the fall of Constantinople (1453) there came to Italy the whole literary tradition of the Byzantine East, and the works of the Greek fathers were its choicest part"[39].

From Italy humanism spread to northern Europe. The best known figures are Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1467–1536), of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, and the Englishman Sir Thomas More (1478–1535). I will confine my remarks to Erasmus, who is often regarded as the preeminent humanist scholar of the Renaissance, and also as the period's best representative of Christian humanism. He was the first international scholarly celebrity, a fame made possible by the new printing press. His published works, such as *Adages* and *Praise of Folly*, were best sellers. Most important was his annotated edition of the Greek New Testament, with a parallel new Latin translation, tacitly intended to supersede St. Jerome's centuries-old version, known as the Vulgate. He hoped that his edition would further, in his words, "the restoration and rebuilding of the Christian religion"[40]. The term he generally used for his Christian humanism was *philosophia Christi*, or the philosophy or wisdom of Christ as presented in the Gospels. His humanist optimism was the direct antithesis of Augustinian pessimism. According to Professor MacCulloch, Erasmus "had too much respect for creativity and dignity in human beings to accept Augustine's premise that the human mind had been utterly corrupted in the fall. <...> Instead he preferred that other giant of the early Church's theology, the great counterpoint to Augustine across the centuries, Origen [of Alexandria, c. 185–254]". Erasmus himself wrote that "a single page of Origen teaches me more Christian philosophy than ten of Augustine"[41].

[38]   Cassirer, E. "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola", p. 328.

[39]   Jaeger, W. *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*. Cambridge, 1961, pp. 100–101. See also Kristeller, P. O. *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, pp. 135–163. Much earlier the Russian Slavophile Ivan Kireevskii (1806–1856) made this important connection: "The eyes of many Europeans were opened by the writings of the Holy Fathers that were brought from Greece after its fall." See his essay, "On the Necessity and Possibility of New Principles in Philosophy" (1856), *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader*. Hudson, NY, 1998, p. 253.

[40]   Erasmus, D. *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*, 3rd ed. New Yorks, 1987, p. 19.

[41]   MacCulloch, D. *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, pp. 601–602.

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In 1517 Erasmus expressed the hope that Christendom was entering a new golden age of peace, justice, learning, and piety. It was not to be. That year marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, with the publication and widespread circulation of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*. After another 150 years of religious strife and violence, European Christians finally started to realize that they should stop killing at least each other over their religious differences. Initially this realization took the form of mere toleration, or forbearance from religious persecution in the interests of civil peace and order. But by early in the European Enlightenment, by about the year 1700, toleration had developed into the positive concept of freedom of conscience. In 1689 the English political philosopher John Locke published his *Letter Concerning Toleration*. In it he wrote that "the care of each man's salvation belongs only to himself" and rests on genuine faith, which can only be a matter of inward conviction, not external compulsion[42]. Though he called it toleration it was very close to the positive right of freedom of conscience: the recognition that religious belief is a matter of individual conscience and cannot be externally coerced.

Freedom of conscience is the first and most basic natural or human right, as Locke seems to have understood, because it goes to the very core of human dignity. That core is the capacity for self-determination and perfectibility according to inwardly and freely recognized ideals. Now, as we have seen, religious humanists revered this capacity for "ideal self-determination" all along, describing it as our likeness to God. The modern concept of freedom of conscience at last recognized it as a natural right. To put it another way: with freedom of conscience, religious humanism became the law of the land and, at least in principle, triumphed over religious anti-humanism. Recognition of freedom of conscience was a major historical threshold: it was the beginning of liberalism, or of constitutional government and the rule of law, based on respect for human dignity and natural or human rights. Humanists today champion liberalism and human rights, often without recognizing that religious humanism forms their long pre-history. Liberalism did not emerge in opposition to religion, as many humanists today think, but only in opposition to one of its forms. And it grew organically out of another form, religious humanism, in which it has very deep roots.

By this point, I think any fair-minded humanist would have to concede that religion is a very big category, that it includes not only anti-humanist but also humanist forms, and that the historical tradition of religious humanism deepened and advanced the most important thing of all, human dignity.

By the last third of the nineteenth century, the religious roots of humanism had been largely severed. Earlier I referred to Marx's identification of humanism with naturalism or atheism. There were also more openly hideous forms of atheism, such as Social Darwinism and the new, so-called scientific racism, which culminated in Nazism. Modern forms of religious fundamentalism emerged in response to atheism, though in some important respects they are its mirror image. Together, all these anti-humanistic ideologies, including those like Communism that called themselves humanism, made the twentieth century the most murderous one in human history. With that tragic recognition, let me turn to the next part of my paper.

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[42]   Locke, J. *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Buffalo, NY, 1990, pp. 57, 19–20.

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Several times I have described the "image of God" as the ideal in "ideal self-determination". But is the image of God real, or, more precisely, is God, reflected in the image, real? That is the question at stake in the epistemic case against belief in God, advanced by the new atheists who claim that there are no rational grounds for theism. I will turn briefly to that argument now. Let me begin with Kant's approach to the rationality of theism. The idea that human dignity consists in the capacity for ideal self-determination is a Kantian argument, as I noted above in connection with Pico. The argument has been vastly influential ever since Kant advanced it in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). For Kant the ideal that drives our self-determination is not directly the "image of God" but rather what he calls the "moral law". Right away that is confusing, because "law" implies something externally imposed, while self-determination has to come from within. But in fact Kant's moral law is a pure, intrinsic ideal of reason. It functions just like the "image of God". Essentially, the moral law is given inwardly by conscience. Now, the upshot is that Kant thinks that the capacity for ideal self-determination is not only the source of human dignity, but that it is also a rational basis for belief in God, because it cannot be reduced to naturalistic explanation. It is type of ideal causation that overrides natural causation and refutes determinism in the ordinary meaning of the term. Therefore the distinctive human capacity for ideal self-determination has metaphysical or theistic implications.

Already we have found rational grounds for theism, and we have found them in human nature itself, which is why Pico called human beings a "great miracle".

The new atheists take a much different approach to the problem of the rationality of theism. They understand the word "God" to mean a being who created the universe. Proceeding from that understanding, they then correctly state that there is no convincing scientific evidence for such a being, and that, moreover, such a being itself would require a scientific explanation. But in this they have fundamentally misunderstood the concept of God. Theism, if philosophically formulated, does not maintain that God is a being, but rather that God is the necessary ground or source of being, and in that sense the creator. Theists also use the terms "necessary being", "eternal being", and "infinite being", but in a wholly different sense than "a being". The new atheists do not to understand the true idea of God – the Absolute. They write long books attacking straw men[43].

The theistic concept of God crucially involves the distinction between contingent and necessary existence. The natural universe in space and time is contingent, which means it exists, but not of necessity. Nothing in or about it entails or requires its existence. One can easily imagine its non-existence. In fact, its contingency is the most basic and striking fact about the universe, taken on its own. The big bang does not affect this fact, nor does any conceivable natural origin of the universe. Even if the universe has always existed, as the now generally discarded steady-state theory maintained, still it would be contingent. The fact that the universe does exist, but that obviously its existence does not come from itself or, in other words, is not its essence, entails a transcendent ground of being, necessary being, God. This is the cosmological proof, in roughly the version presented by St. Thomas Aquinas in the third of his five ways or arguments for God. Though it is referred to as an argument or proof, it might also be called the cosmological or metaphysical experience, because it follows

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[43] For a trenchant critique in a highly commendable book, see Hart, D. B. *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. New Haven, 2013, esp. Chs. 1 and 3.

from human experience of the contingency of existence. The great creation myths are rooted in this experience. It is expressed in Leibniz's famous question, "Why is there something rather than nothing"? Though the cosmological experience is a basic human experience, not everyone opens him or herself to it, especially in recent times.

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The cosmological or metaphysical experience is one indication that it is the very nature of human consciousness to transcend the empirical world. It does so by ideals such as truth, beauty, and the good. These ideals are intrinsic to reason, yet their reality cannot be empirically demonstrated. That is their very nature as ideals, which is why they belong to both faith and reason. They coalesce in one supreme ideal, the image of God.

Earlier I remarked that recognition of the sacred value of human persons was itself a source of Genesis 1:26. This ancient Judaic insight has often been rediscovered anew, once, for example, in the perhaps unlikely context of the early twentieth-century philosophical method known as phenomenology. In Weimar Germany, after the First World War, there was a brilliant, young phenomenologist struggling for an academic career. Edith Stein was born in 1891 on Yom Kippur into an observant Jewish family. In 1917 she defended, with great distinction, her doctoral dissertation, *On the Problem of Empathy*. She converted to Catholicism in 1922, began teaching at St. Magdalen College for Women in the town of Speyer, lived with the Dominican sisters there, and pursued scholarship as service to God, as she put it. In April 1933, soon after Hitler took power, she sent a letter to Pope Pius XI asking him to denounce the regime. Referring to herself as "a child of the Jewish people who, by the grace of God, for the past eleven years has also been a child of the Catholic Church", she wrote the Pope that responsibility for the Nazis must fall, "after all, on those who brought them to this point and it also falls on those who keep silent"[44]. Later that year she became a Carmelite sister, taking the religious name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. In 1936 she completed one of her most important books, *Finite and Eternal Being*. On New Year's Eve 1938, after the *Kristallnacht* pogrom against German Jews, the Carmelites transferred Sister Teresa Benedicta to one of their monasteries in the Netherlands to help her escape the Nazis, ultimately to no avail. In August 1942 she and her sister Rosa, also serving with the Carmelites, were deported to Auschwitz and killed. Stein left a very rich spiritual and philosophical legacy. In 1998 she was canonized by Pope John Paul II. In Nazi Germany and in the occupied Netherlands, she witnessed human beings at their worst and confronted in its starkest form what philosophers call the problem of evil. It must have been an extraordinary faith, both in God and humanity, that enabled her, throughout these years, to maintain that Christ was still, as she said, "the ideal of human perfection", and that "we hold the image of the Lord continually before our eyes in order to make ourselves like him"[45].

Could there be a more powerful testimony to the true meaning of humanism?

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[44] Available at the website of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations: https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources.

[45] The two quotes are from her essays "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace" and "On the History and Spirit of Carmel" in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*. Washington, D.C., 1986–2017, Vol. 2, pp. 59–85 and Vol. 4, pp. 1–6 respectively.

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Истинное значение гуманизма: религия и человеческие ценности

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Гуманизм как движение, направленное на защиту человеческого достоинства, человеческих прав и ценностей, вряд ли имеет много противников. Однако само понятие гуманизма крайне противоречиво: существуют как сторонники «светского», так и «религиозного» гуманистического движения, каждое из которых претендует на звание «истинного гуманизма». С тех пор как термин был впервые введен в начале девятнадцатого века, гуманизм преимущественно ассоциируется со своей светской версией. Светские гуманисты находятся в оппозиции по отношению к религии по двум главным соображениям (этическим и эпистемологческим): религия наносит вред и построена на ложных идеях. Рассматривая (и критикуя) их доводы, я прихожу к выводу о существовании как гуманистической, так и антигуманистической форм религии. Первая (религиозный гуманизм) поддерживает идею уважения к человеческому достоинству, в то время как вторая (религиозный антигуманизм) подрывает ее. Далее я заявляю, что существуют рациональные основания теистической веры – они могу быть обнаружены как в человеческом опыте, так и самих идеалах, на защиту которых встает гуманизм.

Ключевые слова: человеческое достоинство, религиозное насилие, «новые атеисты», самоопределение, божественный образ и подобие, спасение, христианский гуманизм, гуманизм Ренессанса, либерализм