

# Christian Humanism: A Faith for All Seasons

*The 2003 Winifred Weter Lecture*

Gregory Wolfe

It is a curious fact that the artist who produced the most compelling and accessible vision of Christian humanism in the twentieth century was a multiply-married, luxury-loving, alcoholic atheist by the name of Robert Bolt. It is worth noting that he came to this choice of lifestyle after a strict Methodist upbringing. And I might add that not long after throwing off his Methodist faith, he became a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. I am not sure what conclusions to draw from these facts.

But on a more serious note, I can say with a straight face that Bolt not only remained obsessed by Christianity his whole life, but also continued to think Christianly to the end of his days. He was what might be called a “flying buttress”—someone who remains resolutely outside the church, but who does a great deal to prop it up. In the divine economy, I suspect that there is a mansion in heaven for tortured Augustinian souls like that of Mr. Bolt and perhaps in God’s mercy it has room service.

I cannot remember precisely when I saw the film version of Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons* for the first time. I think it was sometime during my high school years. But from the moment I first saw the actor Paul Scofield as Sir Thomas More, I was riveted. That mixture of gravitas and mirth, stoicism and vulnerability, piety and legal hardball was mesmerizing and energizing. In all my subsequent studies of More’s life and thought, I have never had cause to doubt that Bolt caught something profound about the man in his play, however partial and biased a portrait it may be.

The story kept playing in my mind during a difficult transitional period in my life. I had been raised within the conservative intellectual movement. My father was an active member of this movement as early as the 1950s, and as an undergraduate I attended Hillsdale College, long known as a hotbed of political conservatism. My first job after graduation was at *National Review* magazine, where I worked for William F. Buckley, Jr. This was the summer and fall of 1980, which as you may recall was the triumphant march to the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

I should have been ecstatic during these weeks and months, and perhaps I was in fits and spurts, in a manic sort of way. But I also frequently found myself depressed and conflicted. The reason was this: the core of my undergraduate education had been an introduction to the spiritual and intellectual depths of the Western tradition, but when I looked at those who claimed to be the defenders of that tradition, I saw only rigid

ideologues who had become so politicized they had begun to undermine the very things they thought they were upholding. Slowly but surely I came to believe that the “culture wars,” in which I had been trained to fight, represented a dangerous hardening of the national arteries. In short, I began to see the shrill slogans and nostrums of our politicized era like bits of plaque that were accumulating and choking off the flow of dialectic and deliberation, putting the body politic in danger of a heart attack.

I also sensed that religion was deeply implicated in the culture wars, and that disturbed me, because I was trying to forge a Christian worldview in these years. Too often, it seemed to me, Christianity was being reduced to mere polemics and apologetics. While I would grant that these forms of discourse have their place within a larger framework of religious life, I felt that they were choking out other forms of thought and expression, and that in the process they were becoming crude and blunt. They were being used as weapons. The result was the faith was being stripped of its rich cultural heritage—a heritage that contained more humble, nuanced, and ambiguous understandings of God and man. And I was also developing an intuition throughout this time that there was an older, wiser religious vision that offered the antidote to our brittle, fragmented, polarized society—a vision I sensed in *A Man for All Seasons* and later came to know as Christian humanism.

Today the phrase Christian humanism sounds like an oxymoron in the ears of most people. The only word that most of us can remember being applied as a modifier is “secular.” But it was not always so. Robert Bolt dropped a few breadcrumbs that I would later follow back to the original, and true, source of humanism—that source being the Judeo-Christian faith.

Bolt’s play centers around the last years of Thomas More, the great lawyer, orator, and statesman who was eventually beheaded by Henry VIII of England for opposing Henry’s divorce of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. A true Renaissance man, More was not only steeped in the intricacies of the law and an eloquent orator, but he was also one of the leading thinkers of his day, fluent in Greek and Latin, the author of the enigmatic satire *Utopia*, as well as learned tracts on theology and spirituality. He had served as the king’s ambassador on the Continent and eventually rose to the highest political post in the land, that of Lord Chancellor. More was a leading figure in Renaissance Humanism, a movement that numbered among its members some of Europe’s brightest stars, including the great Dutch scholar, Desiderius Erasmus.

In *A Man for All Seasons*, More is depicted as a man caught between two extremes, two implacable forces, which might be crudely summarized as church and state. On the one hand, he comes under pressure from his hotheaded future son-in-law William Roper to oppose the King on theological and ecclesiastical grounds. The Spanish ambassador, whose motives are a grab-bag of principle and political expediency, urges More to defend Queen Catherine and uphold the decision of the Pope to refuse Henry’s request for a divorce. The ambassador plays to More’s Catholic loyalties, while also hinting that the Spanish king will reward him

handsomely for services rendered. On the other hand, there is the Machiavellian politician Thomas Cromwell, who ruthlessly makes straight the way for Henry's will to power. Cromwell at first tries to enlist More on the side of the king, arguing in terms of Realpolitik. But when More resists, Cromwell resorts to any means he can to trap More, offering bribes, suborning perjury, planting spies.

Bolt's play leaves us in no doubt that More is a man of adamant principle, untouched by petty greed or vanity. A loving husband and father, he also proves to be ahead of his time by taking care that his daughter Margaret receives a superior education. (The need to educate women was, by the way, a key tenet of many Christian humanists of the period.) According to More's most recent (and best) biographer, Peter Ackroyd, Margaret was in fact "the most learned woman of her day." In *A Man for All Seasons*, More tries to fend off Margaret's suitor, William Roper, at first because of his hot-headed attacks on corruption in the Catholic church and his eagerness to join in the cause of Martin Luther's Reformation. What Bolt doesn't reveal in the play, perhaps for the sake of dramatic simplicity, is that More himself was an outspoken critic of meaningless religious superstitions, the selling of indulgences, and other forms of decay within the Church.

Indeed, if you listen closely to the opening scene of the play—it is very easy to miss—More's servant enters into a room where More, his wife Alice and daughter Margaret, the Duke of Norfolk, and several others are laughing heartily. The subject of that conversation is the number of corrupt priests. Someone pipes up: "Bishop Fisher says every second bastard born is fathered by a priest these days." Then one member of the party says the priests in a particular region are very holy, to which someone replies, "and therefore very few." More laughs along with everyone else. In short, this group of sophisticated humanists harbors no illusions about the level of corruption in the church: the church is something one can joke about, even if there is a serious, and disturbing, point behind the jest.

Roper, on the other hand, is young, earnest, and keen on church reform. In the play More's attitude toward the impetuous Roper is far from harsh. He turns to Margaret at one point and says: "Nice boy. Terribly strong principles though." A few scenes later Roper reappears, but now he has abjured his Lutheranism and is equally hot to defend the Catholic church from her enemies. When More objects to Roper's assertion that the enemies of the church are doing the Devil's work, reminding the young man that there are some things which as Lord Chancellor he cannot hear, Roper accuses him of a courtier's "sophistication." Moments later, when an embittered and ambitious man named Richard Rich seems to give away the fact that he is a spy of Cromwell's, More's family call on him to arrest Rich. Margaret calls Rich a "bad man."

MORE. There is no law against that.

ROPER. There is! God's law!

MORE. Then God can arrest him.

ROPER. Sophistication upon sophistication!

MORE. No, sheer simplicity. The law, Roper, the law. I know what's legal not what's right. And I'll stick to what's legal.

ROPER. Then you set man's law above God's!

MORE. No, far below; but let me draw your attention to a fact—I'm not God. The currents and eddies of right and wrong, which you find such plain sailing, I can't navigate. I'm no voyager. But in the thickets of the law, oh, there I'm a forester.

When More goes on to say that he would give the Devil the benefit of law, Roper is incredulous. More goes on to ask his prospective son-in-law whether he would cut through the forest of laws in order to get after the Devil. The answer, of course is a resounding yes. Then More says: "And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you—where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast—man's laws, not God's—and if you cut them down—and you're just the man to do it—d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?"

Caught between the religious fundamentalism exemplified by Roper and the secular will to power represented by Cromwell, More seeks refuge in the law. The genius of Bolt's play is that we as viewers actually begin to become impatient with More's endless willingness to hide within the minutiae of the law. When even Margaret and Roper, who have demonstrated their support for More, seem to tire of the cat-and-mouse game, More gives one final defense of his tactics, this time with a theological twist. He says to Margaret:

God made the angels to show him splendor—as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind! If he suffers us to fall to such a case that there is no escaping, then we may stand to our tackle as best we can, and yes, Will, then we may clamor like champions..if we have the spittle for it. And no doubt it delights God to see splendor where He only looked for complexity. But it's God's part, not our own, to bring ourselves to that extremity! Our natural business lies in escaping...

In *A Man for All Seasons* Bolt does not have the leisure to extrapolate the full range of subtlety of More's thought, and perhaps, as a working playwright, he only intuited the heart of More's philosophy. But from More's voluminous writings, it is clear that he regards the law as the product of human culture. It is, to be sure, an imperfect expression of God's law, but it serves as a mediating force between the abstract principles of heaven and the passions and follies of earth. Even when he said on the scaffold that he died "the king's good servant, but God's first," he did not compromise his belief that the Law of Succession passed by Parliament had essentially contravened legal tradition. According to his biographer, Peter Ackroyd, "He asserted the laws of God and of reason, as they had been inherited, and he simply did not believe that the English parliament could repeal the ordinances of a thousand years."

Bolt rightly has More use the law as his primary metaphor, given his legal and political experience, but it can be argued that many other products of human culture might also be used in much the same way. The brilliant scholar of comparative literature, Virgil Nemoianu, has written that for the Humanists “Culture is seen as a kind of tumbling ground for the spiritual, the social, the historical and the psychological. For them the human being individually, and the human species collectively, act as a key, as the intersectional locus where all areas of the cosmos can meet.” He continues: “Culture actually behaves as an enormous mediating force between the creaturely and the divine. According to [the Christian humanists], aesthetic culture is that which seeks to articulate the opening toward transcendence that appears as a human constant in all human societies known to us.”

The elements of human culture that have drawn me are literature and the arts—another forest of human wit and imagination that softens the pride of abstract ideas and utopian politics. The centerpiece of Humanist theories of education was literature—the study of classic Greek and Latin texts such as those of Homer, Aeschylus, Thucydides, Cicero, and Terence. And there was no more eminent champion of this passion for literature than the man who coined the phrase, *A Man for All Seasons*, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam.

In the summer of 1499, the young Erasmus came to England at the invitation of William Blount, the fourth Baron Mountjoy. During his studies at the University of Paris, Erasmus had to support himself by tutoring younger students, and Mountjoy had been one of them.

When he arrived in England Erasmus had established only a small reputation. But Mountjoy sensed something extraordinary in his tutor and wanted him to meet England’s leading lights. There is a tradition that at the dinner party where Erasmus met Thomas More for the first time, the Dutchman joked that he had come “*ex inferis*”—a Latin pun that could mean he had arrived from the cellar, the Low Countries, or Hell. Latin, of course, was at that time a living language, and would have been the language in which More and Erasmus communicated. But Latin was much more to these men than a way for Europeans of different national origins to converse; it was the foundation of the New Learning, the Renaissance passion for the literature and philosophy of the classical world.

A little later in his visit to England, Erasmus was visited at Mountjoy’s Greenwich estate by More and a lawyer friend of More’s named Edward Arnold. They invited Erasmus out for a walk. More led them to the royal palace at Eltham, where they met the nine year-old Prince Henry, the boy who would become King Henry VIII. More and Arnold presented the prince with some “writings” (as Erasmus later put it in his memoir). Erasmus, embarrassed that he had nothing to offer to the young prince, hurried home and produced a poem in honor of England for the future monarch. Erasmus was impressed that More, an outstanding lawyer but not an aristocrat, had such easy access to the royal family.

In fact, the prince's father, Henry VII, had himself become a patron of this school of thinkers whose study of classical literature (*studia humanitatis*) earned them the name of Humanists. Prince Harry would benefit from the new educational reforms and techniques instituted by the Humanists. When he acceded to the throne, More and Erasmus had every reason to hope that their king, who could write music as well as theological discourses, would become an enlightened ruler, perhaps even the presiding spirit of a new Golden Age in which government would be more just and equitable and the church free of corruption and superstition.

There was to be no Golden Age, but there can be little doubt that that day in the summer of 1499 was a golden moment, the meeting of two great minds and the beginning of one of the great intellectual friendships of all time. The approaching storm clouds—of Henry's tyranny, the sundering of the church, and a century of civil war on the continent—were just over the horizon.

Myths and misperceptions about Renaissance Humanism are legion, including the notion that it constituted a radical break from the Middle Ages, now a thoroughly debunked idea among scholars of those eras. But it is undisputed that the Renaissance was characterized by the a passion for *bonae litterae*—literally, Good Letters (a phrase that has no real modern English equivalent), the study of the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. Latin, being the more accessible language, tended to dominate, but most of the major Renaissance humanists also knew Greek.

In a youthful manifesto, the *Antibarbari* (Against the Barbarians), the young Erasmus of Rotterdam argued that the pagan writers, far from being hostages to the Devil, constituted a *preparatio evangelium*—preparing the hearts and minds of the ancient world for the Gospel message. He had little time for those who said that the pagan writers were demons who would corrupt the faithful. “These people say, ‘Am I to carry books by damned men in my hand and in my bosom, and read them all over again and reverence them? Virgil is burning in hell, and is a Christian going to read his poems?’ As if many a Christian were not burning there too, whose writing—if any good ones survive—would not be shunned for that reason by anybody.”

Underlying the Christian humanist vision is a theological conviction that the Fall of man had damaged, but not obliterated, human nature. Thus the pagan writers, while they did not have the benefit of divine revelation, could approach, if not fully reach, the deepest truths about man's place in the universe. After the Fall, the image of God in man was marred, but not completely effaced. Another way of putting this is that *nature* bears witness to God, even if it needs to be completed and fulfilled by *grace*. This was not a view formulated for the first time in the Renaissance; it can be found in many of the great medieval thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas. It is also closely related to the Renaissance humanist focus on the dignity of man, a phrase that became the title of Pico della Mirandola's famous oration.

Three other key principles are associated with the humanist passion for Good Letters: the primacy of rhetoric, a return to the sources, and the development of a

historical sensibility. From ancient times, rhetoric had been studied as the art of persuasion in public speech. The goal of education in rhetoric was to produce orators, men capable of participating in the civil discourse of their society. Over the centuries, rhetorical theory changed and expanded. By the Renaissance, the Humanists began to shift the emphasis from persuasion and orations to elegance and correctness of style and a diversity of literary forms, including letters, dialogues, and poetry. As Paul Oskar Kristeller has written: “The emphasis in rhetoric [in the Renaissance] had shifted from persuasion to style and imitation, and to literary criticism...”

For More, Erasmus and his fellow humanists, rhetoric was the centerpiece of their educational theory. They had become convinced that the tradition of scholasticism, which reached its high point in the Middle Ages in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, had decayed into a dry, abstract system dominated by the form of discourse known as dialectics, which consisted of a seemingly unending series of logical distinctions and conundrums. The most infamous piece of scholastic dialectics is the question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Taken out of context, such disputations sound far sillier than they actually were; for all their mockery of scholasticism, Erasmus and More tended to exempt the best medieval thinkers, such as Aquinas, from their satire.

But by the Renaissance the scholastic system had degenerated. In pressing for the reform of education Erasmus and his peers hoped that future generations would avoid the ethereal speculations of the scholastics and instead immerse themselves in the concrete particulars of literature as found in classical mythology, poetry, and drama. The humanists felt that literature was closer to life, that it provided a better lens onto the moral and spiritual life of man. In short, they elevated imagination to its rightful place alongside faith or reason as one of the fundamental faculties of human nature. Erasmus often vented his frustration when his comic and satirical works were attacked and misunderstood. Those “whose ears are only open to propositions, conclusions and corollaries” are deaf to the more subtle literary techniques of irony and ambiguity.

The second principle behind the humanists’ absorption in Good Letters was the belief that reform, the painful process of stripping away corruption and calcified practices, could only be brought about by returning to the sources. *Ad fontes!* (to the founts, or origins) became their motto. G.K. Chesterton, arguably one of the twentieth-century’s greatest Christian humanists, once said, apropos of this instinct, that any attempt at reform required, by definition, “a return to form.” At the source of the river, the water is the purest. One step in this process was a mastery of the best that pagan culture had to offer.

The work that the young Erasmus was engaged in during and after his first visit to England came to be known as the *Adagia*. It consisted of 818 adages or proverbial sayings from the classical world, along with lively annotations by Erasmus. Throughout his life, in edition after edition, Erasmus added new adages, until the final edition, printed in the year of his death, 1536, contained 4,151. The *Adagia* is

not a work likely to set a modern reader on fire—its form is something alien to our sensibilities—but it came to be one of his major claims to fame. Far from being an exercise in pedantry, it provided an introduction to a bewildering array of classical authors. Like a modern literary critic, Erasmus explored multiple levels of meaning in these phrases—phrases that seemed to possess condensed and mysterious meanings. Moreover, as Peter Ackroyd writes, when Erasmus added his annotations to these maxims, “he invokes a long temporal perspective, in which the implications and connotations of those phrases have changed; he is creating a history of usage.”

This awareness of the way language changes over time—the way words accrete layers of meaning like geological strata—helps us to understand why Erasmus cannot be accused of wanting to live in some past era. Some Renaissance thinkers may have been naïve enough to believe that they might return to an ideal classical order, but Erasmus and most of the humanists were not that deluded. The whole thrust of the return to the sources was not to restore a lost world but to find in the past the kernels of truth that subsequent ages had obscured. As the late Cardinal Henri de Lubac put it: “To get away from old things passing themselves off as tradition it is necessary to go back to the farthest past—which will reveal itself to be the nearest present.”

It is here that the third principle of the humanists’ study of Good Letters enters the picture: the development of a historical sensibility. By tracing the usage of these adages, Erasmus took literature out of the ether and placed it firmly in the context of history. This may have been the most controversial of all his activities, since for many in his generation, the contextualizing of literature seemed to open up the possibility of what we today might call historical relativism. But to think of Erasmus as someone out to deconstruct the meaning of ancient texts would be to commit an egregious anachronism. His goal was more modest, and a lot more profound: he and his fellow humanists simply wanted to set the record straight. That is, they wanted to ensure that all the textual errors and misreadings that had crept into the literary record over the ages, as manuscripts were copied and passed from hand to hand, were corrected or at least accounted for. They were the pioneers of modern critical scholarship; they were editors, annotators, philologists.

What set northern humanists like More and Erasmus apart from the Italians was a desire to return not only to the pristine texts of pagan antiquity, but also to the Bible. An exemplar of this movement was the German scholar Johannes Reuchlin, who had mastered Hebrew in order to emend the received text of the Old Testament. On his first trip to England, Erasmus had met John Colet, a theologian who had absorbed the Platonist philosophy of the Italian humanists and was applying it to the epistle of St. Paul in a series of lectures at Oxford University. Erasmus devoted several years to the study of Greek so that he could undertake the next major undertaking after the initial edition of the *Adagia*: an annotated, corrected edition of St. Jerome Latin’s Vulgate—the official version of the Bible for the past millennium. In the light of modern scholarship, Erasmus’s edition can be seen as a rather primitive effort, riddled with errors; for all his encyclopedic

knowledge, he was not fully equipped for the task. In fact, he saw his main achievement in the project as his commentary on the text, rather than in the editing process. But by daring to bring a critical sensibility to the Vulgate he established a principle that would lead directly to modern biblical scholarship.

Erasmus's edition of the New Testament made him a sensation throughout Europe. He dedicated it to Pope Leo X, who graciously accepted the dedication and commended Erasmus for his efforts. There were critics, of course. The more conservative humanist theologians at Louvain, in particular, were scandalized that one man would tamper with the received text of the Vulgate. One of the Louvain scholars, Martin Dorp, had written Erasmus to dissuade him from moving forward. Erasmus and More responded to Dorp with long, eloquent letters that did much to moderate his opposition. But other conservatives were not so easily placated. They found his foreword to the New Testament, known as the *Paraclesis*, to be filled with dangerous ideas, including the notion that the Bible should ultimately be translated into vernacular languages and read directly by the common people. "I absolutely dissent," Erasmus wrote, "from those people who don't want the holy scriptures to be read in translation by the unlearned—as if, forsooth, Christ taught such complex doctrine that hardly anyone outside a handful of theologians could understand it, or as if the chief strength of the Christian religion lay in people's ignorance of it."

It is not hard to see why Erasmus was looked upon as a hero by many of those who would become the leading lights of the Reformation. Between his scathing attacks on church corruption and superstitious practices, and his evangelical desire to make the Bible accessible to every Christian, Erasmus inspired a generation of reformers, including, at least for a time, Martin Luther. In their early letters to one another, Luther is respectful of the older man and Erasmus cautiously commends the German monk for his zeal and principle. When Luther famously nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Erasmus was supportive. In the early days when Luther was first condemned by the Catholic authorities, Erasmus labored to get the reformer a fair hearing.

But the storm clouds were approaching. In the light of the tremendous forces unleashed by the Reformation, the moderation of an Erasmus may seem a negligible thing, a paper boat tossed about in a raging ocean that soon will swamp it. It is possible to see Erasmus as someone who helped to unleash forces he did not understand, or as someone who was ultimately irrelevant to the larger tectonic shifts of the time. There can be little doubt that in the increasingly tense and contentious atmosphere of the 1520s and 30s, Erasmus himself became testy and defensive. A favorite adjective to describe this side of his personality is "waspy." Some biographers have speculated that his illegitimacy made him abnormally sensitive to criticism. And yet, while such criticisms contain a large share of truth, they obscure a deeper truth: that Erasmus's moderation was based on something more than timidity.

Both sides in the struggle worked tirelessly to recruit him. He steadfastly refused to become a spokesman for the Catholic church (including that refusal, late in his

life, of the cardinal's hat), but many of the reformers fundamentally misjudged his willingness to break with the church. As fierce as his attacks on the church might be, Erasmus was even more passionate about the need for unity and consensus. He preferred the slow processes of reform from within to outright revolution. And so, with great reluctance, he began to write against Luther.

Throughout his career, Erasmus went out of his way to denounce war and its consequences, whether the conflict be physical or merely intellectual. Writing to Luther, who had begun one of his pamphlets with the word "Assertio" (I assert), Erasmus replied:

I am quite aware that I am a poor match in such a contest. I am less experienced than other men and I have always had a deep-seated aversion to fighting. Consequently, I have always preferred playing in the freer field of the muses than fighting ironclad in close combat. In addition, so great is my dislike of assertions that I prefer the views of the skeptics wherever the authority of Scripture and the decision of the church permit—a church to which at all times I willingly submit my own views... I prefer this natural inclination to one I can observe in certain people who are so blindly addicted to one opinion that they cannot tolerate what differs from it.

Comments like this have encouraged the secular partisans of the Enlightenment to claim Erasmus for their own and prevented staunch defenders of Christian orthodoxy from warming to him. But the skepticism that Erasmus embraces does not indicate a lack of faith. On the contrary, it should be seen as an expression similar in spirit to the famous saying of St. Augustine: "In necessary things, unity; in disputed things, liberty; in all things, charity." What Erasmus contested was the tendency on both sides of the conflict to take disputed things and turn them into necessary things.

Some points need elucidating and some decisions have to be made, I don't deny, but on the other hand there are a great many questions which are better ignored than investigated, seeing that part of our knowledge lies in accepting that there are some things we cannot know, and a great many more where uncertainty is more beneficial than a firm standpoint.

Again, it would be wrong to think that Erasmus is advocating in this quote a sort of "know-nothing" attitude. What he feared was the obsession to push human reason beyond its limits, the drive to explain in abstract, propositional terms the great mysteries of faith. That explains why he ended up believing that the Reformers were just a new version of the scholastics: they, too, over-rationalized and abstracted, leaving the faithful wracked by fierce disputes over petty ideas.

In a 1527 letter to one of the reformers, Martin Bucer, Erasmus wrote: "I seem to see a cruel and bloody century ahead... It is a long-drawn-out tragedy..." Seven years later, with the conflict escalating into physical warfare, Erasmus heard the news that Thomas More had been executed by Henry VIII, the king who was to become

the enlightened humanist ruler. He wrote to one friend: “In More’s death I seem to undergo my own.”

What was it, then, that made More “a man for all seasons” and caused a contemporary to say “Erasmus stands apart”? More was a man of principle who often chose not to stand on principle, a deeply spiritual man (always attracted to the monastic life) who was immersed in the public realm, a satirist of corruption in the church who staunchly opposed attempts to undermine church authority. More sought a third way between religious fundamentalism and secular politics and yet he could hardly be described as a compromiser. Erasmus was a deeply pious man who reveled in the pagan classics, a traditionalist bent on wide-ranging reform, a supremely cultured man who believed in the virtue of simplicity.

Where some have seen in this men only a series of contradictions, I came to believe that More and Erasmus exemplified the fruitful tension that the great religious minds have called paradox. In them I could see my own struggle to find a path between the Scylla of hyper-conservative Christianity and the Charybdis of secular liberalism.

More and Erasmus were central figures in the Renaissance movement that gave rise to the phrase Christian humanism, but the more I reflected on their lives and writings, the more resonances I saw with other thinkers from other times. I became convinced that this vision did not originate in the Renaissance but has always been present in the church’s history. Christian humanism I believe, rises to greater prominence in times when both the faith and the social order are wracked by fierce ideological conflicts, but its spirit has been present from the beginning.

On the face of it, the term “Christian humanism” seems to suggest paradox, a tension between two opposed terms—between heaven and earth. But it is a creative, rather than a deconstructive, tension. Perhaps the best analogy for understanding Christian humanism comes from the doctrine of the Incarnation, which holds that Jesus was both human and divine. This paradoxical meeting of these two natures is the pattern by which we can begin to understand the many dualities we experience in life: flesh and spirit, nature and grace, God and Caesar, faith and reason, justice and mercy.

When emphasis is placed on the divine at the expense of the human (the conservative fault), Jesus becomes an ethereal authority figure who is remote from earthly life and experience. When he is thought of as merely human (the liberal error), he becomes nothing more than a superior social worker or popular guru.

The Christian humanist refuses to collapse paradox in on itself. This has an important implication for how he or she approaches the world of culture. Those who make a radical opposition between faith and the world hold such a negative view of human nature that the products of culture are seen as inevitably corrupt and worthless. On the other hand, those who are eager to accommodate themselves to the dominant trends of the time baptize nearly everything, even things that may not be compatible with the dictates of the faith. But the distinctive mark of Christian

humanism is its willingness to adapt and transform culture, following the dictum of an early Church Father, who said that “Wherever there is truth, it is the Lord’s.” Because Christian humanists believe that whatever is good, true, and beautiful is part of God’s design, they have the confidence that their faith can assimilate the works of culture. Assimilation, rather than rejection or accommodation, constitutes the heart of the Christian humanist’s vision.

When the first Christians came to the realization that Christ’s return was not likely to be imminent, they had to address the question of how to exist in the world, how to engage the cultures in which they lived. There has always been a tension at the heart of Christianity in which believers see themselves as called to be “in the world but not of it.” The essence of the faith is that Jesus Christ, the son of God, took human form in order to redeem a fallen world through his sacrificial death and resurrection. To be of “the world”—or to use another New Testament metaphor, “the flesh”—is to remain unredeemed. In that sense, Christianity has always been grounded in an inescapable “either/or” question: to accept Christ or reject him, to strive to conform oneself to the holiness of God or to live in and for the self.

But if Christians are not to be of the world, they are still called to love it and to live in it. After all, John 3:16 begins with the phrase “God so loved the world.” The world is not evil; that is a Gnostic idea. Of course, generation after generation of believers have struggled to define what living “in the world” means. Some have interpreted their faith in such a way that they are only in the world as a ghost or a hologram might be: these are the conservatives who live in a world of abstractions—the harsh moralistic principles that keep them in orbit above the world.

Then there are those liberals who have sought to be so much part of the world that they merge into it, losing their Christian identity.

It seems fair to say that the model of how to be in the world ought to be Christ himself. In the doctrine of the Incarnation Christians understand Jesus to be fully human and fully divine. All of the heresies and errors that afflict the church—and, I might add, in the individual believer’s spiritual life—can be measured by their tendency to stress either the human or the divine dimensions at the expense of the other.

Ironically, this tendency to place one aspect of Christ’s nature above the other tends to present itself initially as a distinct advantage. For example, those who focus on the human dimension of Christ’s nature—demonstrate the virtues of empathy for the human condition. At their best, they exemplify Christ’s compassion and overriding concern for the poor and the oppressed. In their passion for social justice, liberals seek to alleviate suffering, break down barriers between people, bring about an equality of results. When it comes to a conflict between the letter of the law and the spirit, liberals opt for the spirit.

Conservatives, who dwell of the divinity of Christ, have a vivid sense of the human propensity to error and evil. For them, the moral dimension is paramount: without law and order, society falls into anarchy. The conservative looks at the story of Christ’s rescuing of the woman taken in adultery and instead of noting his

leniency with her, compared to his damning attack on the Pharisees, points out that he reminds the woman to “sin no more.” So long as the rules are fair, conservatives say, the only equality worth striving for is equality of opportunity.

Living within the paradox of the Incarnation is something we find very difficult to do. What should be a firm platform beneath our feet seems all too often to be a swaying tightrope. Down through the centuries Christian humanists have succeeded in staying on this tightrope more consistently than those around them. They refuse to collapse paradox in on itself, straining to keep the dualities of judgment and mercy, faith and reason, nature and grace, God and Caesar in a state of healthy tension. Their refusal to join in partisan battles often earns them the reputation of being aloof or pusillanimous. It’s also why Christian humanists don’t tend to found schools of thought or band together in cliques. More often than not, they choose to go it alone, communicating perhaps with kindred spirits across distances of time and space.

I like to think that in the history of the church Christian humanists are like the thirty six just men of Hasidic belief: at all times, the Hasidic legend goes, there must be thirty six *tzadikkim* or else the world will come to an end.

In conclusion, I’d like to return to Robert Bolt and his other brilliant portrait of Christian humanism in the epic film, *The Mission*. The film recounts the story of the Jesuit missionaries who attempted to penetrate the rainforests of Brazil and bring the faith to the Guarani, one of the region’s remotest and most inaccessible tribes. As the film opens, we see a missionary ejected from the tribe in a literal and gruesomely ironic fashion: he is tied to a cross and sent down the Parana River, only to tumble over the edge of the huge Iguassu Falls. This missionary had evidently tried to preach at the tribesmen and had been rejected. But the Jesuit priest played by Jeremy Irons enters a clearing near where the tribe lives, sits down on a rock, and begins playing an oboe. The Guarani were an intensely musical people, though the only instrument they played was drums. The priest’s simple gesture appealed directly to the humanity of the tribespeople, enabled them to recognize what was human in him. The Guarani approach him with their spears raised but as he continues to play the spears fall to their sides. They soon accept him and, ultimately, convert to Christianity.

The themes of *The Mission* parallel those of *A Man for All Seasons*: the Jesuit mission, which became enormously successful, was brutally terminated by church superiors caught up in internal politics. Once again, the spirit of Christian humanism comes to a tragic end. But the indelible image of the priest playing the oboe remains the key moment in the film. It represents Bolt’s return to the idea that human culture can become the medium through which heaven and earth meet. This time, instead of law, it is art that mediates grace, bringing communion where otherwise they would only be conflict and fear.

To the Christian humanist culture and art can become analogues for the Incarnation. In particular, art is seen as being like a sacrament: a union of form and

content, the inherence of divine meaning in the crafted materials of this earth. In a little-known essay entitled “Art and Sacrament” the twentieth-century artist and poet, David Jones, wrote that the Eucharist—the preeminent Christian sacrament—consisted of bread and wine, not wheat and grapes. In other words, the gifts offered to God at the altar are not the untouched products of the earth, but artifacts, transformed by human hands through an art. As the literary scholar Virgil Nemoianu has written, “Christian humanism is nothing but reclaiming the basic inheritance of the world as it is: the natural and organic connection between the works of culture and the religious roots and vistas of the human being. It is the current separation that is artificial, not the other way round.”

Seen in this light, it is possible to look into the history of the church and see that the Christian humanist response has always been to reach out and assimilate the works of culture into a new spiritual synthesis. As Nemoianu notes in his essay “Christian Humanism Through the Centuries,” the third and fourth gospels, Luke and John, already show the disciples of Christ tailoring their story for a more cosmopolitan audience. The opening words of the Gospel of John—“In the Beginning was the Word”—employ a metaphor with enormous philosophical and aesthetic depth. Within two hundred years of Christ’s death, the faithful have moved beyond the ancient prohibitions concerning religious images, creating sarcophagus sculptures and wall paintings that transform late classical images of Apollo into the handsome young Jesus, holding the lamb over his shoulder. Apollo becomes the Good Shepherd. When the school of Neoplatonism arises, partly in response to the rise of Christianity, the Cappadocian Fathers—Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen, and Basil—boldly appropriate its insights into their theology.

The same process can be seen over and over again during the last two thousand years. Augustine and Aquinas, Melancthon and Calvin, Newman and Bonhoeffer, Eliot and O’Connor. It is a process whose importance cannot be underestimated, because it goes to the heart of the church’s vitality and ability to communicate visions of truth, goodness, and beauty to the surrounding culture. After centuries of secularization, the West has exhausted the moral and spiritual capital of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The moral anarchy of our consumerist society cries out for vision. As fundamentalists barricade themselves into their fortresses and liberal believers hasten to baptize every passing secular trend, the need for Christian humanism is greater than ever.

It is my belief that we are living through a period when new Christian humanists are emerging to offer that vision without which, the Bible says, the “people perish.” Think of the work of writers like Annie Dillard, Richard Rodriguez, Kathleen Norris, Gerald Early, and Anne Lamott; composers like Arvo Part, Henryk Gorecki, and John Tavener; filmmakers like Wim Wenders and the late Krzysztof Kieslowski. The list could go on and on.

You’ve been very patient. Allow me to end with two quotations that seem to sum up the heart of Christian humanism. The Catholic writer Gerald Vann once wrote “Today the old adage, ‘Don’t preach to the starving, give them bread,’ can be

given a new application: ‘Don’t preach divinity to the subhumanized; first give them back their humanity...’ We cannot save others from subhumanity if we are subhuman ourselves.” And Hans Rookmaaker, the Dutch Calvinist art historian, once said: “Christ didn’t come to make us Christians. He came to make us fully human.”