



Is Christian humanism what is needed in the Age of the Anthropocene?

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Dear John,

When I was asked for a contribution to the Festschrift for Steve I opted to write him a letter, reminiscing about a journey through the Karoo when we talked through the night about our fathers. Now I am writing you a letter as well, basically to tell you how I have been struggling with your retrieval of the concept of Christian humanism. When I was invited to contribute in honouring you in this way, this was the theme I had in mind. I found myself unable to produce the essay by the extended deadline, not because I did not have enough time or anything like that; it was because I could not get enough clarity on the topic. I simply did not know what to say. I wondered whether you also encountered such moments in your career? I wish that was an apophatic moment, but I fear that was not the case. I was given some last-minute grace by the editors and then opted for writing a letter instead.

Around the time when you first introduced the theme of Christian humanism – it must have been before 2009 – I remember a talk at the Kweekskool in Stellenbosch where I asked you whether Christian humanism is what we need to address ecological concerns. Can such a concept overcome an underlying anthropocentrism? You admitted that you received the same question from other audiences and then retorted: But what else? What other guiding vision for society can be offered?

I sensed the double-sided innovation that you introduced in retrieving the concept of Christian humanism. On the one hand, it indicates that Christianity (or the gospel) is not an aim in itself. It is focused on something beyond itself. Its message of salvation is aimed at the well-being of God's world and God's people. Such well-being may be expressed as the vision

of a more humane world (the coming reign of God?). Likewise, as you argued in your book on democracy, that is not an aim in itself either, good governance is. Christians therefore *should* contribute towards humanism as an expression of an appropriate moral vision.

On the other hand, in conversation with secular critics you suggest that Christians can be humanists too and *could* make a distinct contribution towards such humanism. Your retrieval of John Calvin's legacy was a case in point. You realised that the "could" is highly contested on two fronts, namely whether Christianity can make such a contribution (or is in fact detrimental to that) or whether any such contribution is really distinctive (so that its possible contribution may be understood merely in functional terms as that of one role player amongst many others). You nevertheless argued that the best of the tradition can be retrieved, also in a secular (or post-secular?) society to contribute to a common global agenda of working for justice, peace and the integrity of creation (to use the terms of the "Conciliar Process"). For your secular and evangelical conversation partners alike, this claim that Christians may be humanists remains deeply counter-intuitive – which I think also suggests the attractiveness of what you have been advocating.

In one of the Calvin conferences in 2009, also at the Kweekskool, I read a paper on the relationship between creation and salvation in Calvin's theology. I made ample use of Arnold van Ruler's interpretation of Calvin. At the heart of Van Ruler's oeuvre is the conviction that salvation is not an aim in itself. Salvation is not about salvation, or about being saved or even about the Saviour. Salvation is about being. We need to be saved in order to be. In short, God's work of salvation is aimed at the restoration of God's work of creation. Van Ruler's theology is the most radical affirmation of what is material, bodily and earthly that I have come across. In question time I looked in your direction and then commented that if this what you have in mind with Christian humanism, I would warmly endorse it. Being Christian is not an aim in itself. We need to become Christian in order to become human. That, I presume, is a plausible interpretation of Bonhoeffer's theology too. Not all would concur that we do need to become Christian in order to become human, but you nodded in agreement.

That was not the end of the story though. Since 2014 I have been working on a project on “Redeeming Sin? The aim is to retrieve the category of sin in the public sphere on the basis of a proposal that sin-talk could be regarded, at least from the outside, as a form of social diagnostics. After a more theoretical contribution on the possible place of Christian sin-talk in multi-disciplinary conversations on such diagnostics, I took up a fellowship on “The ethics of the Anthropocene” at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. I am now using various toolkits, including the theological critique against apartheid in the 1980s to explore secular discourse on sin in the Anthropocene. What is the diagnosis here? What has gone wrong so that we ended up with this? I am playing around with the role of habits of the heart, structural violence, ideology, quasi-soteriology, idolatry and heresy to see how far these may be stretched to understand the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene for obvious reasons raises questions about the ideology of anthropocentrism. Who is this *Anthropos* that has become a “geological force of nature”? The point is that we have not only made an impact on ecosystems or bioregions but on complex “Earth systems” – which has become a whole new area of scientific research. From the perspective of the global South the further question is: Whose Anthropocene is it? Can this *Anthropos* hide its Anglo-Saxon, white, male, indeed Christian pedigree? This leads to ongoing debates on naming the Anthropocene as such – with various alternatives, including the Capitalocene, being offered.

Anthropocentrism is one thing, humanism another. There have been those who defend some (weaker) form of anthropocentrism as inevitable. As humans we can only speak as humans and in human terms about what is non-human. Holmes Rolston has helped me to distinguish between what is anthropogenic (generated by humans) and what is anthropocentric (centring around human needs). Since Kant we cannot but recognise the human faculties that structure all knowledge of what is true, good and beautiful. The notion of contextuality is indeed in line with Kant’s thinking. The turn to the subject is extended towards the linguistic, hermeneutic, social, gendered, spatial and ecological “turns”. Most authors in the field of ecotheology since the famous essay of Lynn White have recognised that it is arrogant to think that the whole history of life on earth centres around us as humans. This is deemed to be dangerous, leaving behind a trail of death and destruction. I recall an assessment by James Nash: It is cosmologically

silly! According to many we therefore need to rediscover that we are “at home on earth”, that we are neither the “crown of creation”, nor the self-appointed stewards who have to manage the earth (and other species) in our best interest. Copernicus helped us to see that the sun does not revolve around the earth. Darwin helped to account for the complex evolution of species and human descent from other hominid species. Geologists introduced the notion of “deep time” to recognise that sentient life was preceded by a much longer period of single-cellular life. We humans therefore have to redefine our place and role within the community of life.

All of these intellectual movements decentralised the place and role of human beings. But with the Anthropocene in general and with anthropogenic climate change in particular humans seem to have moved back to the centre of the story. As David Grinspoon (who collaborated with Will Storrar at CTI) has it, the Earth is now in human hands. The focus may be on the negative impact of human societies, but the question is then still what enables human beings to become so destructive. While animal ethology has stressed the continuity between human behaviour and that of other animals, the cognitive sciences have focus on the complexity of the human brain. I have enjoyed reading Terrence Deacon’s work on *The Symbolic Species* because this hints at an ability to use symbols (and not just signs or indices) unparalleled elsewhere. Indeed, the human brain is, as far as we know, the most complex thing that has ever emerged in the history of the universe. The interaction between humans (language, economic systems, megacities) is even more complex. So, if complexity is the criterion, then human beings may well be back in the centre of things. So, the question is how should this shift should be understood and assessed?

Given these considerations, the question for me is what to make of humanism where in one way or other humans do indeed occupy the centre of attention. Can one sustain a form of humanism without falling into the destructive traps of anthropocentrism? The next question is of course which form of humanism since there are so many versions. In reading texts on decoloniality with my colleague Teddy Sakupapa and some UWC students I was struck to what extent Steven Bantu Biko and Franz Fanon understood themselves as humanists, but of a rather different kind from that of Calvin, one would tend to think.

There are nevertheless three core convictions underlying most forms of humanism, that are all based on the assumption of human distinctiveness, namely an emphasis on human dignity, on human rights and on human (moral) responsibilities. I presume that there is sufficient consensus on these three core convictions. There may be different views on what a humane society entails and that may account for diverging forms of humanism. The emphasis on dignity seems to resonate across cultures.

However, even if there is consensus that all humans have dignity and equal dignity, the basis for such dignity remains highly contested. From a religious perspective one may of course argue that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God and that all human beings (and only them) therefore have such dignity. But if one then probes deeper to ask in what the image of God exists, there is again no consensus. The tendency is to base such dignity on some form of human distinctiveness. On this basis the intrinsic worth of other animals may be still be recognised but such worth is then graded. There can be no equal intrinsic worth – or else we cannot defend why we may eat chickens but not children, or (if you're vegan), chick peas but not chickens. Neither can we make a distinction between household pets and household pests.

The trouble, as far as I can see, is that any claim for human distinctiveness soon becomes fiercely contested in the context of animal ethology and evolutionary psychology. If one focuses on any particular human trait as the basis for such dignity, then the next question becomes why such dignity should not be graded, not only amongst species but also within the human species. This would of course undermine human rights discourse. By contrast, if one claims that all human beings have an inalienable dignity, including the comatose, the senile and the severely disabled, but that only human beings have such dignity, such a position inevitably becomes anthropocentric. Put differently, if dignity can be graded on the basis of some or other aspect of human distinctiveness (rationality, artistic creativity, religious sensibility or the like), then humans may have more such dignity than chimps for example. But then nothing prevents such dignity to be graded also amongst humans. I have been trying for several years to get my head around this but keep getting stuck. The best suggestion that I could come up with, is that affirming the dignity of all human beings as equal is an intra-species rule (thus alluding to contract theories) that we

adopted as important for our survival and flourishing. I wonder whether you see any light here?

Let me get back to the Anthropocene. The return of humans to the planetary centre as a (perhaps the) dominant geological force shaping the planet forced a certain urgency on these debates on humanism. One can no longer simply retrieve an almost naïve form of humanism without recognising the long-term impact of the human project and the major shifts associated with the cultural big bang (70 000 years ago), the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution, the digital revolution and current tendencies towards artificial intelligence. One cannot retrieve the humanism of Erasmus, Calvin, Teilhard, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Mandela, Biko, or Tutu without addressing the pressing question how the place of the human project in evolutionary history is to be understood.

When the idea for the Festschrift was raised, I entitled my provisional proposal “Is Christian humanism what is needed in the Age of the Anthropocene?” The more I thought and read about this question, the more I realised that I have no clue what the answer may be. I gradually saw at least three distinctive positions but none of these is at all attractive, namely ecomodernism, posthumanism and transhumanism. Let me share with you something about each of these.

Posthumanists treat humans as one species alongside others embedded in ecosystems. They underplay human distinctiveness for the sake of sustainability. Their intuition is that the modern turn to the subject exacerbates an underlying anthropocentrism in the Western tradition that has been religiously legitimised by the Abrahamic faiths that introduced a clear distinction between Creator and creature, desacralized the world and declared the human species to be the “crown of creation”. This critique is extended also to secular forms of humanism. Some suggest that human exceptionalism is the root of the problem and that monotheism has served to undergird such assumptions, namely to explain what is so special about humans and why humans may dominate other forms of life. Have you read Yuval Harari’s *Homo Deus*? Here is a quote that I came across that made me think of your position on Christian humanism: “The founding idea of humanist religions such as liberalism, communism and Nazism is that *Homo sapiens* has some unique and sacred essence that is the source

of all meaning and authority in the universe. Everything that happens in the cosmos is judged to be good or bad according to its impact on *Homo sapiens*” (p. 114–115). Indeed, for him humanism is itself the dominant world religion and attempting to fulfil the humanist dream is likely to cause its disintegration (p. 76).

The diagnosis of posthumanist approaches is that anthropocentrism is the root cause underlying ecological destruction. The critiques of domination in the name of differences of gender, race and class is thus extended to domination in the name of differences of species. The attempt to create a more humane society, even the humane treatment of other animals does not address the underlying problem. It is to treat other animals as if they were human. The argument is that humans have to rediscover their proper place in the “community of life” and in the evolution of species. The human species arrived late on the scene in terms of biological and especially cosmic evolution. It pales into insignificance in the vast expanses of space and time. At worst posthumanists adopt a misanthropic position. The human species is like a cancerous growth, a pest, and not obviously worth preserving. Put theologically: God may allow a new beloved species to emerge, perhaps from despised species such as rats or cockroaches. Clearly, humanism is then part of the problem and not of the solution. Strangely, even in the humanities, such posthumanism has arguably become the dominant trend.

The posthumanist critique of humanism has itself prompted a critique that some refer to as “ecomodernism”. The argument is that the posthumanist critique is mistaken. It throws the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. It is reductionist in the sense that the value richness introduced by levels of sentience, consciousness, self-consciousness and symbolic consciousness is not recognised. This does imply a hierarchy, but this can hardly be avoided and is the basis for distinctions between what is mineral, plant, animal and human. The evolution of life on earth has a tendency towards increasing levels of diversity and complexity. This should be affirmed. The Enlightenment project of modernism rightly recognised features such as human freedom, autonomy, rationality and dignity and build modern notions of civilization around that. The fruits of such civilization are there for all to see, namely advances in the fields of technology, the use of energy, food production, medicine, communication, mobility, democracy, a recognition of human rights and critiques against war, violence against

women, exclusion on the basis of race, class, gender and sexual orientation and so forth. Such fruits are readily embraced by non-Western cultures too.

It may be true that the advent of modernity brought many side-effects, including pollution, the exploitation of labour, a loss of biodiversity and now climate change and ocean acidification. However, each of these challenges have been recognised and are being addressed. This is best done on the basis of the core assumptions of modernity, making use of more advanced forms of technology that would produce more but have less impact. The modernist project should be extended towards its next phase, namely ecomodernism –so the argument goes. It may also be true that modernity was based on slave labour, colonial exploitation and imperialist rule, but as modernity developed these oppressive aspects were recognised on the basis of the core assumptions of modernity, critiqued and subsequently addressed. The Enlightenment project remains unfinished in the sense that poverty, hunger, a lack of education, disease, gender-based violence, and more localised forms of war are still present. The track-record of modernity to address such challenges is excellent and offers confidence that future challenges can be addressed, for example through programmes focused on the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs). The achievement of such goals is being undermined by posthumanist critiques that underplay the value of the Enlightenment. It is also being undermined by religious forms of fundamentalism and a legitimisation of narrow group identities. Not surprisingly, ecomodernism is unabashedly secular and often atheist in orientation. There is hardly room for any form of Christian ecomodernism.

Have you read Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*? Like Yuval Harari's books it is found everywhere in bookshops. It comes with a strong recommendation from Bill Gates as the best book he has read in decades! That does say something about the book, I tend to think ... Pinker promotes such an ecomodernist retrieval of humanism. He puts his trust in human progress through rationality, open and critical inquiry and technological advances. He gathers together an array of data to demonstrate such progress in numerous fields, including food, health, wealth, equality, war, democracy, rights. He acknowledges environmental concerns, including climate change and the need for decarbonisation, but insists that these are problems to be solved, not insurmountable obstacles. It is possible to

decouple human flourishing from the exploitation of natural resources. He does not mince his words on posthumanism: “it’s time to retire the morality play in which modern humans are a vile race of despoilers and plunderers who will hasten the apocalypse unless they undo the Industrial Revolution, renounce technology and return to an ascetic harmony with nature. ... The tide of modernity does not sweep humanity headlong toward ever more unsustainable use of resources.” (p. 136).

Pinker’s emphasis on Enlightenment humanism is unapologetic and at times arrogant in its Western predispositions. His position is unabashedly secular although he welcomes forms of spirituality that aligns itself with humanist values. The way in which he constructs the story of human progress is remarkable. I want to share with you this long quote from the conclusion of the book:

The story of human progress is truly heroic. It is glorious. It is uplifting. It is even, I daresay, spiritual. It goes something like this.

We are born into a pitiless universe, facing steep odds against life-enabling order and in constant jeopardy of falling apart. We were shaped by a force that is ruthlessly competitive. We are made from crooked timber, vulnerable to illusions, self-centredness, and at times astounding stupidity.

Yet human nature has also been blessed with resources that open a space for a kind of redemption. We are endowed with the power to combine ideas recursively, to have thoughts about our thoughts. We have an instinct for language, allowing us to share the fruits of our experience and ingenuity. We are deepened with the capacity for sympathy – for pity, imagination, compassion, commiseration ...

These endowments have found ways to magnify their own power. ... We will never have a perfect world, and it would be dangerous to seek one. But there is no limit to the betterments we can attain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing. The heroic story is not just another myth ... And the story belongs not to any tribe but to all of humanity – to any sentient creature with the power of reason and the urge to persist in its being. For it requires only the convictions that life is better than death, health is better

than sickness, abundance is better than want, freedom is better than coercion, happiness is better than suffering, and knowledge is better than superstition and ignorance (p. 452–453).

Ecomodernists typically celebrate the advent of the Anthropocene. Erle Ellis, one of their main representatives, cheerily declares that the Anthropocene is far from the crisis it is portrayed as; instead it offers a new beginning, “ripe with human-directed opportunity” (p. 43). He explains that “our unprecedented and growing powers also allow us the opportunity to create a planet that is better for both its human and nonhuman inhabitants. It is an opportunity that we should embrace” (p. 38). We have the responsibility and therefore the ability to make the planet habitable for ourselves. If that means that we have to adjust the thermostat of the atmosphere through geoengineering, that is just what we need to do. He argues that the Anthropocene is neither good nor bad. Here is a typical quote from him:

We are poised at an important time in human and Earth history. For the first time, we have clear knowledge that we can and are changing the way the entire planet functions. This is an amazing opportunity – humanity has now made the leap to an entirely new level of planetary importance.

Another ecomodernist author is Mark Lynas. In *The God Species* he explores the myth of Prometheus who stole fire, the preserve of the gods, from the supreme god Zeus and brought it to humans. He comments that the human use of fire has given us an evolutionary advantage through cooking food (releasing more energy for human brains to develop), protection against predators and warmth during cold nights. This food-fuel relationship defines the fire-ape, *homo pyrophilus*. At the advent of the Anthropocene such use of fire became expanded through the use of fossil fuels for transport, industry and technology. Lynas comments that “being armed with fire put the rest of the world at our mercy” and adds “Using the tool of the gods, we were to become as gods” (p. 29). Indeed, humans are now like gods: they not only desire favourable weather (for social comfort and to maintain economic and military interests) but also hope to have the technical means to bring that about. For Lynas, the God species should not shirk from such responsibility but should learn to use such divine power

wisely. In the words of Stewart Brand often quoted by Lynas and other ecomodernists, “We are as gods and HAVE to get good at it”. To which Mark Lynas adds an “Amen to that”! (p. 22).

Transhumanists take the argument of ecomodernists a few steps further. They argue that the human species is indeed the highest form of life and that we are entitled to rule the earth, but that *homo sapiens* is only one stage in the evolution of intelligence. They explore genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, various implants to aid human longevity and brain functioning. So being human becomes another designer product. They are keen on astrobiology and colonising other planets in the hope of developing a silicon-based form of intelligence that can survive the worst climate catastrophe. Yuval Harari envisages an Internet-of-all-Things where the flow of information will spread across and from the earth to pervade the whole galaxy. Either way, *Homo sapiens* will be superseded and eventually replaced by *Homo deus* in the same way that *Homo sapiens* outperformed, marginalised and eventually replaced *Homo Neanderthalensis*, probably through better communication and thus cooperation strategies. This may well result, Harari observes, “in the creation of a new superhuman caste that abandon its liberal roots and treat normal humans no better than nineteenth-century Europeans treated Africans” (p. 408). Ouch!

Alternatively, humans are merely the tools for the creation of a cosmic data-processing system. Such a system would be like God: “It will be everywhere and will control everything, and humans are destined to merge into it” (p. 444). Harari adds:

In the days of Locke, Hume and Voltaire humanists argued that “God is a product of the human imagination”. Dataism now gives humanists a taste of their own medicine, and tells them: “yes, God is the product of the human imagination, but human imagination in turn is just the product of biochemical algorithms.” In the eighteenth-century humanisms side-lined God by shifting from a deo-centric to a homo-centric world view. In the twenty-first century, Dataism may side-line humans by shifting from a homo-centric to a data-centric view (p. 453–454).

One may therefore say that transhumanists extend the Enlightenment critique of religion in such a way that humans not only have to become

autonomous but should rebel against god in order to replace god. Through the rise of modern science, we are even able to exercise God's power, to bring forth life based on chemical algorithms. This is the hope of humans to achieve immortality, to become divine. Accordingly, we might as well abandon the lesser gods of money, status and consumption, and indeed the celestial God. The prophet of such Promethean aspirations was Friedrich Nietzsche. God had to be declared dead so that the *Übermensch* can come to fruition. Humans, or rather some humans, more exactly trans-humans, may hope to become not only the "masters of the planet", but through artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, the dream of extended longevity, geoengineering and space travel (even time travel) also the masters of the universe. In the words of Harari, "having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles, we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods, and turn *Homo sapiens* into *Homo deus*" (p. 24). Humans are able to find meaning in themselves without reference to some great cosmic plan, to create meaning in a meaningless world. Contrary to all expectations, God's death did not lead to social collapse.

I wonder what you would make of the Jewish philosopher Susan Neiman's book *Evil in Modern Thought*. It offers a brilliant discussion of Western philosophy and its sustained attempt to come to terms first with natural evil (symbolised by the Lisbon earthquake) and then social evil (symbolised by Auschwitz):

The wish to displace God that is contained in every attempt to re-create the world is the very essence of the sin of pride. It's pride that can lead to rebellion caused by the contemplation of all the evil in Creation. If God failed to get it right, why don't we do without Him and take over the job ourselves. The urge to humility is a product of acquiescence, if not terror: we agree not to understand why there is evil (p. 114).

In the context of the Promethean dreams to control the Earth's climate, the Enlightenment critique of religion, namely that humans create their gods in their own image, according to their needs, desires and aspirations, has therefore been radicalized. We become gods when we are able to create "God" in our own image. This is no longer meant as a critique of religion but as a celebration of human ability. We can not only "make" God but

engineer God to ensure that there is a space for a system-compatible God – as Brad Allenby has it. This becomes a matter not only of “playing God” but of becoming divine, with godlike attributes. Athanasian orthodoxy is radicalized: God in Jesus Christ became human so that we can become divine (instead). To gain human autonomy it is not enough to imitate or abandon God; God must be killed so that we can become divine instead. Athanasius will turn in his grave, I think!

While there are some Christian theologians who engage with trans-humanism it is hard to see how such a position could be Christianised in the way that the adjective “Christian” could legitimately be added to humanism. I think transhumanists will be flabbergasted if you mention any notion of Christian humanism to them.

I think you would agree that none of these options are attractive but also that a mere retrieval of Christian humanism or any other form of humanism will no longer do.

There is one other possibility on the table namely the need for a “new anthropocentrism” as proposed by the Australian public intellectual Clive Hamilton. Have you come across his work? He has written books such as *Requiem for a Species* (on climate change), *Earthmasters* (on geo-engineering) and now *Defiant Earth* (on the human project). He is atheist by persuasion but shows a lot of appreciation for theological problems and is quite willing to work together with theologians. I once shared the floor with him at a one-day colloquium on “Climate change as a crisis for humanity”, hosted by the Uniting Theological College, Sydney in Sydney.

Hamilton’s intuition is that the human project, as disastrous as it has been, should not be abandoned prematurely simply because it is the most remarkable epoch in the history of this planet. Seen from the outside, our planet is the planet of humans. He recognises that the evolution of life stretched over billions of years and that conditions for multicellular life will begin to deteriorate in another few billion years as the sun heats up and eventually becomes a supernova. We are, as it were, in a sweet spot for life to flourish. He emphasises that the impact of what humans do in a century will remain evident for hundreds of thousands of years, probably skipping an ice age or two. There is a real possibility that civilization will collapse and even that the human species will become extinct within a

few hundred years. I have been amazed to see how scientists have become the vilified prophets of our day, complaining that politicians don't listen to them. While nuclear activists have been warning that there is a very small chance of a catastrophe that could produce a nuclear winter, climate scientists have been telling us that there is a large probability (the IPCC's scenarios) of several major catastrophes (the Amazons, Greenland's melting ice, the West-Antarctic ice sheet) before the end of this century. And we don't need to do anything specifically for that to occur, we just have to follow a business as usual approach!

If humans do become extinct, Hamilton fears that it cannot be guaranteed that the evolution of intelligent life will get back on track as we are the last species of hominins still around. The loss of humanity will therefore be a cosmic tragedy – much beauty irrevocably lost. On this basis Hamilton explores the Western philosophic tradition to recover a Soterian instead of a Promethian form of humanism that would recognise human distinctiveness but in such a way that it would not be ecologically destructive. The project is from my point of view very attractive. I just wish that he didn't label that a "new anthropocentrism" since that can only lead to conceptual confusion. You would be interested to know that this is also Larry Rasmussen's verdict on *Defiant Earth*. The deeper problem is that he of course cannot resolve the underlying problem of understanding the basis for human dignity and cannot avoid grading such dignity either.

In my search for direction I also came across a few essays on the Anthropocene by the Marxist historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. Do you know his work? Unlike many other Marxists, he resists naming the proposed new geological epoch the Capitalocene. He recognises the need to challenge the divide between the so-called natural sciences and the so-called humanities and social sciences. This cannot hold any longer if humans form part of nature and have become a geological force. He also recognises the need to rethink the human: What does it mean to be human in the age of humans? He identifies three distinct images of the human (besides antihumanist and posthumanist views): "the universalist-Enlightenment view of the human as potentially the same everywhere, the subject with capacity to bear and exercise rights; the postcolonial-postmodern view of the human as the same but endowed everywhere with ... differences of class, sexuality, gender, history, and so on ... [and] the figure of the human in the age of the

Anthropocene, the era when humans act as a geological force on the planet, changing its climate for millennia to come.”

Chakrabarty observes that the one need not render invalid or displace the other. One may need to speak of humanities in the plural, but to speak of a common humanity has enabled resistance against racism and sexism. He adds that the human subject in the age of the Anthropocene is distinct from the Kantian emphasis on universality or the postmodern / postcolonial emphasis on difference: “If critical commentary on globalization focuses on issues of anthropological difference, the scientific literature on global warming thinks of humans as constitutively one – a species, a collectivity whose commitment to fossil-fuel based, energy-consuming civilization is now a threat to that civilization itself” (p. 9). Indeed, climate change “calls us to visions of the human that neither rights talk, nor the critique of the subject ever contemplated” (p. 9). It does not make rights-talk or the postcolonial critique of the subject redundant, but it does elicit reflection on the unprecedented planetary scale of human impact on earth systems and not only local or regional environments.

For Chakrabarty, because the forces of globalisation and global warming intersect, there is a need to view human beings simultaneously through contradictory registers: as both a geological force and as political agents in an unequal, unjust world. There is a need to hold onto a universal history of life while retaining a postcolonial suspicion of the universal. Chakrabarty’s willingness to hold together these three contrasting, even contradictory images of being human is at least honest in the sense that it recognises the unresolved nature of the debate. The tensions are undeniable but not easily overcome.

John, this is as far as I could come in addressing the question that I raised in conversation with you. I still don’t have any answers and was reluctant to write a polished essay on this since I have no real clue what to say. But maybe a collegial letter sharing some thoughts and finds would do, don’t you think?

Sincerely

Ernst Conradie

PS: I thought you may want to pick up some of the references that I mentioned above. I don't need to remind you of your own books of Christian humanism but here are some of the others:

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