

The Wreck of Western Culture Humanism Revisited

John Carroll

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Reviewer: Phillip Tolliday, Adelaide College of Divinity

The thesis of this book is quite simple: it is that the experiment labeled ‘humanism’ has failed. Since Carroll realises that this will appear as *news* to a great many people—though perhaps in the wake of September 11, 2001, some have found it more plausible—he is keen to argue that despite any appearances to the contrary, humanism lies in ruins. Not only is this true now, it has been true for a long time, if only we had eyes to see. It is the burden of Carroll’s argument to give us those eyes.

The book is arranged in four parts. Part one, ‘Foundation’, discusses the Renaissance and the Reformation in its Protestant form, where the primary figures are Luther and Calvin. But he also has a chapter on what he calls the ‘Alternative Reformation’, where his focus is on reformation through the arts and his interlocutors are Poussin, Donatello, Raphael and Caravaggio. Part two, entitled ‘Middle Acts’, continues tracing the humanist story through art. Beginning with Velazquez and Rembrandt, who stand for what Carroll describes as ‘discord’, he continues with the ‘Bourgeois Fusion’ embodied in the works of Vermeer and Bach. Concluding this part of the book is a chapter on ‘Enlightenment and Romance’, and here the *dramatis personae* are Descartes, Mozart and Kant—not exactly a triumvirate that falls naturally to mind. Speaking of falling brings us to Part three, simply entitled, ‘Fall’. At this point, that is, at the end of the Enlightenment, ‘the spell breaks’ (157). In chapter nine, entitled ‘Mockery, Mockery Everywhere’, the villains are Marx and Darwin. It is they who finally unmask the twin forces that have been rotting the cultural authority so deeply loved by humanism. These forces are *rancour* and *chaos*. Now released, these forces will only gain in strength, and their power will be directly proportional to the increasing weakness of cultural authority. This is the story of the nineteenth century. By 1900 ‘it is all over, and where twentieth-century culture remain[s] in the humanist mode...it no more than continue[s] to work through a destructive logic already well established’ (161). The first stage is that of the mockers, a time when we witness the ‘active demolition of the old cultures’ (161). The second stage is a recognition of nihilism. This is where Carroll takes his readers ‘Into the Heart of Darkness’, embodied in the works of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to say nothing of Joseph Conrad. The third movement is what Carroll calls the ‘withdrawal into the unconscious, the surrender to oblivion’ (162), and here, not surprisingly, is Freud. Part four, the shortest part of the book, focuses on two Americans. The first is Henry James, author of *The Ambassadors*, the second, John Ford, a film-maker notable for such films as *Rio Grande* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. The final chapter in the book also focuses upon America, as the embodiment of the New World. It tells the story of the attack on the twin towers. This was an attack, claims Carroll, that was as much a metaphysical assault upon humanism—the final nail in the coffin—as the physical obliteration resulting in a ‘sixteen acre chasm’ (260).

Hamlet is discussed and interspersed throughout the book, and, together with a discussion of Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (the front cover of the book), becomes a metaphor for humanism. Carroll argues that subsequent commentaries on *Hamlet* provide us with an indicator of first the power and then the perceived weaknesses of humanism. 'Up until 1770 Hamlet himself had been taken as a brave, heroic man—a sentimental hero. After 1770 the focus on his character began, stressing his madness, his weakness, his intellectuality. The "Hamlet Problem" commenced' (38). And throughout the book *Hamlet* serves to point to the emptiness within humanism. Doubtless there are many reasons for this, but surely the most potent is that Hamlet is the embodiment of a weakness of will. Hamlet knows what he ought to do, he knows what he wants to do, but it seems that he cannot do it. The consequence of him not being able to do it is that almost all the major players end up by being killed. Carroll calls *Hamlet* melodrama, not tragedy, for the latter must embody elements of passion, will and action—elements conspicuously missing from *Hamlet*, and, as Carroll would have us suspect, from humanism too. Essentially, the 'I am', sometimes alleged to be the *leitmotiv* of humanism, disappears into what Carroll calls 'Hamlet's shadow metaphysics' (136). Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' morphs into Hamlet's 'I think, therefore I am turned to stone' (48–50) and then finally 'I think, therefore I am dead—therefore I do not exist' (138).

The theme of the weakness of the human will is one well known in Western Christianity. Having roots in the New Testament, it is picked up and developed by Augustine and later by Luther. But in all these instances, weakness of will is never the final word, indeed it cannot be the final word, because the human will is underwritten, as it were, by God. But Carroll invites us to ask the question of just what happens when it is not thus underwritten. Humanism, he claims, was always parasitic upon Christianity. It 'never succeeded in its own right', and, though 'the Renaissance created the glittering humanist fantasy...once it lost its Christian root the ethic on which it sought to ground itself was not its own' (126).

If there is one point at which humanism failed, it was in its inability to know itself and to know its limits. Humanism, says Carroll, 'transgressed both. The *I* it sought to know was the wrong one; and the insecure *me* that finally emerged took to gorging itself on excesses generated abundantly by its civilization' (257). He notes that the project of humanism was 'to undermine the "I am that I am"...and to replace it with "*I* am", where the *I* is the individual human being' (3–4). And in the end, humanism failed because 'its *I* is not the centre of creation' (262), contrary to its fondest wishes and expectations.

Luther and Calvin are painted as two figures who, though seemingly unable to hold out against the humanist onslaught, later emerge as prophetic heralds who had 'preached darkness and suffering against the reasonable and the comfortable' (64). Significantly, Nietzsche 'singles out comfort as the decadent heart of [his] time, the last god that is no god' (64). The wheel turns slowly, but in turning it discloses the groundlessness of humanism and thus of the *I* now 'unchained...from its sun'. So be it! cries Nietzsche, 'Nihilism is inevitable. Let us then welcome it, embrace it' (195). And then along came 9/11.

The Wreck of Western Culture is fast-paced and it is a fascinating read. It is also, I think, quite a disturbing read. It points to the weakness of humanism and the power of religion.

The potency of religion is not to be doubted—though in recent times its capacity to inflict evil and suffering more than match its ability to heal and reconcile. For healing and reconciliation we have often looked towards those who are tolerant and reasonable. We have considered freedom to be a good to be desired. Many of us do not regard the term ‘Christian humanism’ as oxymoronic—but are we right? Carroll tells us that ‘the early men of the Renaissance were not aware that they would have to choose. They were Christians’ (4). His thesis is: we are aware, or at least since 11 September, 2001, we should be. We do have a choice to make, and that choice is clear.

There are many places where I am in sympathy with Carroll. I agree that we have over-extended reason. I accept that culture is no bulwark against savagery. I recognise that the humanist siren call that ‘knowledge will make us better’ (268) is illusory. So there were lots of areas where I caught myself nodding in agreement, and never more so than with the primary thesis: that humanism lies in ruins. But unlike John Carroll, I don’t regard this as a cause for celebration. Instead, at a time when the potency of religion is being more widely recognised and appreciated, I find myself wishing that humanism was more rather than less powerful.