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Reply: Beyond Optimism and Pessimism, Praise and Blame

"Apocalypse Now and Not Yet" is a nicely written essay even if any direct connections with my paper on geography and humanism are hard to fathom. "The Search for Humanism" addresses the paper, chapter and verse, but seems to have missed its spirit entirely. "Apocalypse" invites speculation on the future in discourse ranging from theology to science fiction, while the "search" fixes an inquisitorial gaze on the past, outraged about the disrespect shown for Enlightenment rationality and the apparently wanton flirtations with relativism and nihilism apparent in my interpretation of Western humanism.

Chappell's lament about forgotten heroes and reminders about those myriad authors whose names were omitted in my paper are quite understandable and informative. His chief concern, however, seems to be about correct labeling of people and intellectual territories into clear-cut and mutually exclusive categories. Rarely is a scholar mentioned without a prefix. And in the allocation of praise and blame, no distinction is acknowledged between authors and texts, between ideas and their eventual use or abuse. Such concern for rubrics and boundary-definition is characterized as "Faustian" in my paper and indeed I deliberately highlighted ideas and texts which transcended such fences. Linnaeus who, according to Chappell (p. 340) was not "known for studying humanity at all," authored poetic travel accounts and encouraged the study of economics, geography, natural history and a theology of creation. As for moralistic judgments, I'm reminded of Manuel's remarks concerning von Herder's work: "the notion that a thinker should be held morally responsible before some self-appointed historical Grand Judge for the subsequent fortune of his thought is a patent absurdity" (Manuel 1968, xvi). Labels and rubrics are convenient for the ordering of one's notebooks and libraries; fun, too, for the sophomoric who's who and whodunit exercises of graduate student days. But they can freeze images and ossify the potentially creative impact of inherited literature when they are accorded the kind of ontological status which Chappell apparently advocates. It is precisely with the aim of liberating the dis-
humanism is defined in my paper. A recent theme is the notion of humanitas as potentially free to work out its own destiny through the full use of its talents, especially so. Magna Charta for the humanities announced a study of humanity in its own terms, as part of nature, not as object of Divine grace. Some humanists have certainly not denied the potential relevance of such movements for theology and personal spirituality, most would cringe at the image of human projected therein. Many of Western humanists’ emancipatory claims, far from denying the creative presence of God in human affairs, reified in fact heralds of new approaches to theology and religion. Phoenix in my account seeks to evoke the mystery of regeneration and rebirth emerging from within: a stark contrast to externally-imposed events from “otherworldly reality.”

Eschatology is a fascinating field, the waxing and waning of its appeal reflecting the oscillations of pessimism and optimism in Western literatures. North Americans today reflect on the apocalypse of science fiction, nuclear holocaust, pre- or postmillenialist prophecy, for they apparently wield influence on attitudes toward environment (Curry-Roper 1990). Eschatology’s central concern is with ends. “Ends,” course, imply “beginnings,” and on the question of beginnings, the Western tradition entertained several irreconcilable theories (Arrau-Ponty 1978). Myths of cosmic catastrophes, e.g., universal flood or fire, which ended the world and annihilated humans except a single couple, abound. The end of the world was followed by the appearance of the regenerate Hercules (Eliade 1963, 54).

The Book of Genesis tells one such story, and, as well as the Johannine Apocalypse, has in mind as projecting a linear progression of from “beginnings” to the “end of days.” as sharp contrasts are drawn between the aeolic-Christian tradition and those where apocalyptic flow is construed as cyclical, oscillatory, perennially returning; where “ends” coincide with thresholds to new beginnings. The theo-poetic figures of Phoenix-Faust-Narcissus in my paper are intended to evoke a sense of cyclical flow even within our Western recollection.

The essential point is that eschatological and apocalyptic texts should be interpreted as allory rather than dogma. And it is this tendency in apocalyptic movements to transpose such texts from allegorical to literal terms that would evoke caution for the humanist. Eschatological theories which ascribe ultimate power to “otherworldly reality” have often been used by certain humans to enslave others, from the divine rights of kings, to Blut und Boden, to what’s good for General Motors. The idea of humankind and nature as being essentially in a fallen state, with only an “elect” whose salvation was virtually guaranteed, recalls the perennial tension between the Ciceronian (humans vs. barbarus) and Terrentian (nihil humanum a me alienum puto) approaches to life. History abounds with cases where theological texts have been abrogated by secular ideologies to defend the superiority of certain groups and subjugation of others with weapons or welfare, missions or management.

Speaking of ends, few scientists today would question the prospect of an “end” in time for the earth itself and its living inhabitants. Western theologians might well reconsider their inherited eschatologies where focus has rested primarily on relationships between God and humans, late-comers anyhow in the terrestrial story. How different cultures have construed the place of humanity within this wider drama—mytho-poetically, rationally, or liturgically—could indeed provide a fascinating focus for the humanist geographer. In the context of promoting mutual understanding among the earth’s various civilizations—one of the central aims of my paper—this invitation to parley on such culture-bound currents of thought as are featured in the commentary seems quaintly narcissist.

As the second millennium reaches its close, one again faces a neo-Manichean type of environmental eschatology which spreads feelings of insecurity and guilt, and in some cases despair. Insights from history, and from the vast variety of human environmental experiences, are particularly needed at this time. Christians might well remember the saga of Phoenix and Faust in their own history and rediscover a spirituality which embraces the whole of living creation (Doughty 1981; Fox 1984). And in the contemporary panic about ends of the earth, the geographer might well heed the words of James Lovelock: “It’s not the Earth that’s fragile; it’s we who are fragile. Nature has withstood catastrophes far worse than what we’ve delivered. Nothing we do will destroy nature. But we can...
easily destroy ourselves” (1990, 44). Contemporary prophets of doom bemoan the destruction of forests and wildlife and the eventual threat to populations and economies. But beyond pessimism and optimism, the most fragile and most endangered resource today is hope. That’s what Phoenix in my paper is all about.

Notes

1. In his Iter Dalekarlicum (1734) Linnaeus wrote:

   O Great Creator and Preserver of all things, You who
   On Lapland heights let us reach so high above
   Falun’s mine - - - so deep below
   On Lapland heights have shown me diem sine nocte
   Falun’s mine - - - noctem sine die
   On Lapland heights to feel the unrelenting cold
   Falun’s mine - - - the unrelenting heat
   From one high point to see all 4 seasons at a glance
   Falun’s mine where none of the 4 seasons ever is
   Through mortal dangers on these Lappland
   heights you’ve borne me unharmed
   Falun’s Bergslag - - - for health so harmful
   Praised be all that You have created
   From the beginning to the end

   (Translation mine, from the 18c mss. in Swedish,
   ed. Gullander 1980, 192)

2. Eschatological pronouncements such as Nietzsche’s abandonment of all Western traditions as symptoms of decadence to be replaced by a new age and race of Übermensch in a rebirth of Dionysos, Spengler’s Decline of the West, Heidegger’s “other beginning” after the Gnostic Weltacht of the universal evil of technology, Foucault’s early ideas about the “end of man” to be replaced by another linguistic-cosmogenic epistem, are construed as expressions of a love/hate relationship to inherited Faustian forms and (at best) revealing the “twilight longings” for a new Phoenix (for a more profound critique, see Gadamer 1975, xxiv-xxvi).

References


