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The Humanism of Paul D. Devanandan[†]

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Introduction

Several decades have passed, signalling what has been termed the emergence of a "new anthropology." In 1966, Dr H. H. Wolf in an article published in the *Ecumenical Review* chose to focus his attention upon M. M. Thomas as the ablest exponent of this trend; but few acknowledge Devanandan's contribution to these developments, and fewer credit him with a "new anthropology" of his own.

In this paper I have time only to concentrate upon what is perhaps the central and distinctive feature of his humanistic thinking. This paper will be arguing that in Devanandan's writings there is a "new anthropology in the making"; nevertheless it is a real humanism, even though its basis, nature and goals have been redefined, and presented to the contemporary social and religious revolutions, within their struggle for the worth and dignity of the human person, in a new way.

The Origins of Devanandan's Humanistic Concern

There are a number of points where, biographically, theologically and socially, the origins of his humanism may be placed. Let me outline a few of these areas.

In 1931, Devanandan was in America. In one of his earliest published writings ("Religion and Youth in America") he was sharp to acknowledge the challenge in the rise of humanistic philosophy in the West. "Humanism is undermining orthodoxy," he wrote, breaking down the "old cocksureness of an implicit faith." With this recognition Devanandan also appropriated many of the social values of the Liberalism of his day; in 1938 at the SCM Rangoon Quadrennial Conference he and other concerned Christians pressed for a Christian social order. "We as Christians ought to act as pioneers in radically removing the more important social evils which are prevalent in India by personal example," he stressed.¹

Devanandan was also a passionately involved nationalist—both in the pre-1947 struggles and the post-Independence "nation-building" stage, and was convinced that a "wholesome humanism is the

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¹ From the Commission Report quoted by Devanandan in "The Rangoon Quadrennial Conference of the SCM," *Young Men of India*, 1938, vol. 50, p. 36.

best rallying ground for religious understanding and for national unity."² However, his own views on the Christian's contribution within the national struggle—partly influenced by K. T. Paul of the YMCA—would not allow a separation of "political hopes from religious ideals." Moreover, the Christian's contribution is a mission of peace, not unrelated to the Great Commission to preach the good news "to all nations."³ Though deeply human, his nationalistic concerns were by no means superficial since, he felt, any human efforts to achieve national unity must reckon with the living God who is the generating power of all true community being. From this insight two of Devanandan's deepest convictions are revealed. The first is that the fulfilment of the goals of humanism are in every way associated with the fulfilment of God's purpose for men. Without the latter the former cannot be obtained. And secondly, behind the concern to pinpoint the areas of Christian humanistic responsibility Devanandan is stressing a concept of religion as down to earth. If the Christian faith stands for anything at all it stands for the redemption of the whole man.

From 1932-49, Devanandan was teaching history of religions in U.T.C., Bangalore. Out of his work and personal interest grew a concern for inter-religious dialogue, the basis for which he increasingly felt was the common humanity of all religious and non-religious men. Because God in Christ has broken down all the barriers between men, Jew and Gentile, believer and unbeliever, this is at once the only basis for dialogue and collaboration with men of other faiths and no faith for the common task of service to other men.⁴ However, many of Devanandan's insights into the necessity of acknowledging the common humanity of all men were afforded by the modern developments in renescent Hinduism which were coming more and more to a belief in the dignity of the human person (*svadharma*) and the importance of community (*lokasangraha*). Whilst Hinduism was experiencing difficulties reconciling these new beliefs to the classical theology, Christianity's answer to the solution had been provided by the Doctrine of Creation. It emphasised the double-sidedness of man—man the creature and man the child of God. Furthermore, it stressed the mutual relationship between man the creature and God the Creator. This insight became central to many of Devanandan's treatments of the human—that one side of the relationship could not be given attention at the expense of the other.

² Paper presented to the Seminar on National Integration held in New Delhi, 1959, included in *Preparation for Dialogue*, eds. N. Devanandan and M. M. Thomas (Devanandan Memorial Volume II), CISRS, Bangalore, 1964, p. 127.

³ P. D. Devanandan, *Christian Concern in Hinduism*, CISRS, Bangalore, 1961, p. 86.

⁴ Devanandan, *I Will Lift Mine Eyes Unto the Hills. Sermons and Bible Studies*, eds. S.J. Samartha and N. Devanandan (Devanandan Memorial Volume I), CISRS, Bangalore, pp. 118 f.

Socially, Devanandan was aware of the awful fact of human need, and therefore for Christian *diakonia* in response to it. Yet he was also aware that any attempt to eradicate social evils must bear in mind that the root cause was man's self-interest and sinfulness. On these grounds we cannot entertain hopes of a classless society, which are founded on a partial view of man or on a false notion of the self-sufficiency of man. Thus the task of restructuring society must be, firstly, associated with the ultimate hope of the coming of the Kingdom of God "when all the children of men shall have been transformed to become the children of God."⁵ And secondly, a view of man and his worth can only be measured in terms of man as God's creature and in the light of God's eschatological purpose for his Creation.

At this point it may be useful to draw attention to a number of thinkers who played a part in the formation of Devanandan's humanistic thinking. In an article "Tagore—The Man and His Message,"⁶ Devanandan focused on the poet's insistence on man, not "the magnified animal; but man who is of infinite worth in God's purposive scheme of life." Secondly, Nicholas Berdyaev's indictment of humanism as having a tragic dialectic which contradicted its own ends found its way into Devanandan's reconstruction of a "true" humanism. Man's striving for his individuality was the key to man's destruction and bondage. Maritain in his famous *True Humanism* emphasised rather that "it is God who has the first initiative and gives life to our freedom." Thus the only true humanism testifies that "the creature should be truly respected in his connexion with God and because he is totally dependent on Him."⁷ Maritain himself equated a "true humanism" with what he called "theocentric humanism."

If we are to attach any labels to Devanandan's thinking, then Maritain's phrase fits better than most. For whilst one cannot avoid in Devanandan's writings his concern in things human as a very human response to a desperately human need, his humanism is by no means concerned with man as the measure of all things, man as self-directing. Certainly, when we encounter Devanandan's humanism after 1938, it is a radically theocentric position he holds. What goes in a human sphere has a divine counterpart—an interrelationship between God and man, which is meticulously followed through in his treatment of the human. Devanandan's humanism, during this period of his life may also be called, after Maritain, a "humanism of the Incarnation" with its emphasis on Jesus Christ as the New Creation, through whom the reconciliation between man and God has been made, and to whom the destiny of man has been entrusted. Humanity could never become the New Humanity without the New Man, who is the pattern of man's salvation.⁸

⁵ Devanandan, "The Christian Institute for the Study of Society," *National Christian Council Review*, 1951, Vol. 71, p. 326.

⁶ Devanandan, *United Theological College Magazine*, April, 1942, p. 16.

⁷ Devanandan, quotation from Maritain's *True Humanism* in review article, "Christians in Society—Some books on Christian Ethics," *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸ Devanandan, *I Will Lift Mine Eyes Unto the Hills*, p. 154.

Theocentric Humanism

Alongside a concern for social justice was a desire to live "the Jesus way of life"⁹ in many of Devanandan's early articles. When he took up a teaching post in the United Theological College, he was very much a child of the theological liberalism of his day. But towards the end of the 1930s, and largely as a result of the influence of Hendrik Kraemer at the IMC Tambaram Conference in 1938, he felt an emptiness in the Liberal tradition which became increasingly evident to him. On Devanandan's death, his friend and colleague, M.M. Thomas wrote:

As a student of theological liberalism which reduced his Christianity to a kind of religious philosophy, he revolted against it and found in Kraemer a basis for the renewal of his theology.¹⁰

In 1940, in commenting on an address by Justice P. Chenchiah, he spoke out his new convictions:

The essence of the Gospel is not a new *teaching* about God; it is the good news that "God so loved the world . . ." ¹¹

There had been a change, a conversion in Devanandan's thinking, which formed the substance of his later humanism—which could be termed a "theocentric humanism." At the opening of Devanandan House (now CISRS Staff Quarters in Bangalore) in 1964, D. T. Niles noted this remarkable change in Devanandan:

Paul Devanandan came to the staff of the United Theological College in the final year of my study in the College. He was then speaking of Christianity in terms of its moral and philosophical values. Later when he came to Ceylon, he was speaking of Divine Forgiveness and Justification by Faith as the Core of the Gospel. I asked him what happened. He said, "Niles, I have been through hell . . ." He had been through an experience, when he saw that man had no standing ground other than the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ and the Justification it provided.¹²

⁹ "Religion and Youth in America," *Young Men of India*, 1931, Vol. 43, p. 93.

¹⁰ M.M. Thomas in Introduction of *I Will Lift Mine Eyes Unto the Hills*, but quoted from M.M. Thomas "Paul D. Devanandan," in *In Memory of Paul D. Devanandan*, CISRS, Bangalore, 1962.

¹¹ Devanandan, "Gospel to the Modern Hindu I," *Guardian*, 26-9-1940, p. 604.

¹² Quoted from M.M. Thomas "The Significance of Paul D. Devanandan for a Theology of Dialogue," *Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. H. Jai Singh (Devanandan Memorial Volume III), CISRS, Bangalore, 1967, p. 5.

The social gospel movement he now regarded as an enemy of mission: the Gospel could not be seen in terms of values, either "experiential or experimental alone . . . The Christian ideal is a commitment, a surrendering of the will in order that the will of God may be done."¹³ Instead of a moralism, a radical Christo-centricity based on God's revelation in Christ for the world of men was the substance of Devanandan's preaching. For him, this "conversion" meant a new recognition of God the Creator as the sovereign of every part of life¹⁴ and now redemptively active in the world. In the Kingdom of God which has now come upon us is a statement of God's purpose for the world; he is moving it towards an end involving all of human life and relationships in a transformation. God was in secular history, to all those who through faith could discern His movements, making it salvation history.

The significance of such a new theocentricity for a Christian humanism, for Devanandan, most of all involved a revaluation of the meaning of man in the context of the Creator God; in fact, it meant that any view of man without first understanding God as his Creator and Redeemer made nonsense of the true nature of man and could not make humanism complete. On this basis, a Christian, theocentric revaluation may also be carried out in four other areas.

In the first place, Devanandan saw that in subjecting our *values* to this scrutiny, our concept of *history* must be modified. It is not a meaningless string of secular events but the arena of God's activity in which we can perceive him at work. In fact,

to the discerning eye of faith the eternal future is being fulfilled in the eternal present. It is in this sense that our Lord declared that he had come not to destroy but to fulfil.¹⁵

The Christian's hope is not beyond time in the distant future, but a New Creation in Christ in the here and now, where the future is actually conditioned by the present. Man's destiny, therefore, whilst consummated eschatologically, is even now being worked out in the social revolutions in which God Himself is creatively at work for the realisation of man's full humanity.

This, secondly, requires a revaluation of *human personality*. There can be no full understanding of man unless it is accompanied by a full appreciation of the Personhood of God:

Man cannot come into his own unless the worth of man is founded on the belief in a Supreme Person in the doing of whose will man becomes truly valuable.¹⁶

¹³ Devanandan, "Gospel for the Modern Hindu II," *Guardian*, 3-10-40, p. 618.

¹⁴ "Gospel for the Modern Hindu I," p. 604.

¹⁵ Devanandan, *Christian Issues in Southern Asia*, Friendship Press, New York, 1953, p. 94.

¹⁶ "Christian Message in Relation to the Cultural Heritage of India," p. 247.

This can be the only true basis for a Christian humanism in Devanandan's thinking. Without that relation humanism is contradicted by the very struggle for human freedom it seeks; true freedom and the dignity of the human individual is achieved only when man acknowledges his servanthood.

Thirdly, the value of the *social order* can similarly be understood only in the context of God's redemptive work which affects all relations in society; indeed, the "total sweep of the Good News envelopes God's entire Creation."¹⁷ Thus, the Christian understanding of the nature of human life and its destiny—thereby involving an acknowledgement of the Kingdom of God in some sense present in the world—implicates the Church in social action on behalf of all men. It is

one of the primary tasks of Christian evangelism . . . That means ours is a revolutionary faith which asks to realise here on earth abiding standards of righteousness and justice because these are of the very nature of the Church.¹⁸

Fourthly, there must be a reevaluation of the *traditional organisation of the Christian community*. The ideal of the true community is the Church. Although not the New Creation itself, it is the "pledge," the "earnest" and the "first fruits" of the New Creation in Christ; it is the community in whom the indwelling Spirit of God is at work to make men what they are intended to be.¹⁹ It is therefore the Church's responsibility to bring men into a face-to-face encounter with Christ, the New Man; and in the "Body of Christ," the Church, men are enabled to experience the new life of the New Creation. But true community is to be realised at the end of time with the consummation of the Kingdom. Devanandan's concept of the true community, however, extends wider than the Church, including a vision of the true, fulfilled man, which is now to be gained or discerned in the world, secular history and the events of our time. It offers the basis for a "true humanism" of which God is the sole protagonist, since through his initiative it may be said, "all men now share in the New Creation in Christ . . . A new humanity is now in the making, in which all are being reconciled to God, one to another and each to his own self."²⁰ There are a number of aspects to true community which illustrate this inter-relation between the divine and the human.

¹⁷ Devanandan, *Our Task Today: Revision of Evangelistic Concern*, CISRS, Bangalore, 1958, p. 6.

¹⁸ Devanandan, "The Challenge of Hinduism," *National Christian Council Review*, 1952, Vol. 72, p. 183.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁰ *I Will Lift Mine Eyes Unto the Hills*, p. 113.

True community (*lokasangraha*) is that "in which alone a person finds himself as a person among persons and in a relation to the Person."²¹

Secondly, man finds his self-fulfilment in service to other men. The doctrine of Creation asserts that man is not alone but derives his worth in an interactive role as man-in-relation-with-other-men.

Thirdly, *lokasangraha* is regarded as the ideal for human living; and its opposite is man the sinner, man-in-opposition-to-God, and forgetful of fellow men. This is the root of injustice and other social evils. Sinful human living—in rebellion against God—is neither true community nor the fulfilment of God's purpose for man.

Lokasangraha signifies devotion-in-community. Giving devotion to God is closely associated with giving service to men as the other side of man's obligations. It is not possible, therefore, to divorce man-in-relation-to-other-men from man-in-relation-to-God because the divine-human spheres are so interlinked. Again, man's relations with other men find their ideal and standard in God's loving relationship with his creatures. *Lokasangraha*, thus, emphasises the double-sidedness of men.

If the Christian claims that "the work of the transformation begun in the human person who has so committed himself to God in Christ is altogether the work of God,"²² God's redemptive work must also be on behalf of the whole human community without exception, irrespective of credal boundaries. However, although Devanandān has stressed that God's action extended beyond the boundaries of the Church, he nowhere identified true community with the end result of secular humanism; nor could the humanistic awakening in Neo-Hinduism, and the subsequent emphasis placed on *lokasangraha* there, reach fulfilment in itself. The eye of faith can perceive a little of the unfathomable mystery of the pattern of God's purposes for man, but we must exercise caution in identifying God with the substance of the everyday world. One's talk of God's presence in the world, instituting true community, and therefore an "authentic humanity," should be in terms of the New Creation in Christ, which is the fulfilment of human aspirations and struggles for a genuine humanism. But if the goals of humanism cannot wholly be achieved outside the message of the Good News of the New Creation in Christ, and God's reconciling of the world to Himself, such efforts which do not reckon with the ultimate of the New Creation need to be brought into a face-to-face confrontation with the living Christ.

Out of Devanandān's new theocentricity emerged two important implications for a proper basis for humanism. In re-evaluating one's approach to the human person, unless one is aware of God's finality, there can be no true humanism. In comprehending man, therefore,

²¹ Devanandān, "Man—Whence and Whither," *Preparation for Dialogue*, p. 149.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

one acknowledges a double-sidedness to man's true nature. And secondly, Christian involvement in humanism is vitally related to the preaching of the Gospel, since humanism is completed by keeping God's eschatological purpose for man in mind. Humanism, in fact, is only redeemable as a theocentric humanism where the stress is on God's action *for* men, where its tragic dialectic is finally defeated. Such a basis is the sole justification and standard for Christian involvement in crucial social issues.

There is a subtlety of stress in Devanandan's "theocentric humanism" which is easy, but not desirable, to miss. Towards the end of his life, Devanandan wished for some modifications to the Barthian/Kraemerian framework he had appropriated. Kraemer's conclusions in 1938 that religions were "human quests for God," essentially under the wrath of God made dialogue virtually impossible.²³ Such dialogue or confrontation was essential to the Christian task since it offered vital clues of God's activity in the world, and was the "only way" to make Christian witness "arrestingly relevant and meaningful."²⁴ Devanandan's response was a 'revolt against Kraemer, searching for the *post*-Kraemer approach to the relation between Christianity and other religions'²⁵ in which God's presence in secularism and renascent religion was emphasised.

It is difficult to hold that all non-Christian faith is purely a human quest for God and that in all such "seeking" there is no "finding" or "being found."²⁷

On the contrary, he was inspired to say that

God Himself is at work to awaken men of faith in other religions too, teaching men to know and love Him as He is, the Father of our Lord Jesus.²⁸

²³ The proper basis for dialogue as the "common humanity of all" is set within the context of God's activity in the human, breaking down the barriers. If we cannot say that God is at work in the world's religions, then it places them outside the Creative will of God and his redemptive purpose. But the characteristic of God's will is that it is universal, spanning all religions and secularism also. To hold Kraemer's "radical discontinuity" between the Christian revelation and the non-Christian religions, places a divide between them so deep and wide that Christians cannot ever think in terms of dialogue and witness—only judgement.

²⁴ *Christian Issues in Southern Asia*, p. 91.

²⁵ Dr Thomas's comment in "The Significance of Paul D. Devanandan for a Theology on Inter-Faith Dialogue," p. 6.

²⁶ Devanandan, "Christian and Non-Christian Faith," *The Indian Journal of Theology*, 1957, Vol. 6, p. 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²⁸ *The Gospel and the Hindu Intellectual*, CISRS, Bangalore, 1959, p. 21.

The changes to be made were to the prevalent tendency since 1938 to emphasise the "wholly otherness" of God. Devanandan held to the importance of the dogma as much as any other man; his rebellion was not against that. His objection was more that

Revelation as *from God* has been stressed at the expense of revelation *to and for the world of men*...The theological approach has tended to overlook the underlying anthropological concern. Perhaps the time has come now for us to focus attention on the human aspect of God's redemptive action—on man as he really is, the creature for whose sake Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead.²⁹

Devanandan's focus was on the underlying anthropological concern which had hitherto been badly neglected; his approach is theocentric yes, but also humanistic; it is a two handedness of approach which makes his contribution to Indian indigenous theology this century so original—a true "theocentric humanism."

In thus concentrating on "revelation to and for the world of men," Devanandan is affirming the relationship between God the Creator and man the creature, once again, which is the foundation of his humanism, and of the only true humanism. For in Devanandan God is the dynamic God who is at work in the here and now, and "the nature of God . . . is bound up with what is believed about man and the world."³⁰ Without this inter-relation there is no foundation for humanism, Christian witness, understanding of other faiths and dialogue with them, no basis for Christian participation in nation building and so on. In other words, Devanandan's concentration upon God's work in the world of men is basic to his thinking. On the one hand, his "theocentric humanism" calls for a proper understanding of man in his proper place, viewed from the standpoint of the Creator God's "revelation to and for the world of men." On the other hand, it prompts an understanding of God seen in the context of Creation and Redemption—that is, God as having a crucial place in the world as its Creator and Redeemer, which are the grounds for our knowledge of Him. In these terms, then, the Christian message to the non-Christian has real meaning, declaring that man's destiny is under the purpose of God, who is present in men's struggles, drawing the New Creation to its completion in Christ.

The New Creation

No treatment of Devanandan's humanism can be complete without paying full attention to the concept of the New Creation. Unfortunately, there is space left only to make a few remarks.

²⁹ *Christian Concern in Hinduism*, p. 11.

³⁰ *I Will Lift Mine Eyes Unto the Hills*, p. 113.

As men we await a fulfilment, which has its "earnest" in the here, and now—"a new humanity is now in the making."³¹ Yet whilst it is a "has been done," it is also a "not yet." Thus central to Devanandan's understanding is the view that whilst in some sense we may speak of God's salvation for men, there is no straight identification between the two. For Devanandan salvation was "for" a "new humanity to which and for which we are saved."³² It is a forward movement in which we can partially discern the pattern of God's working, which is also revealed in the New Man, Jesus Christ. A Christian understanding of man should not, therefore, ignore the fact that his destiny is to be consummated at the End which is in Christ Jesus, the New Creation.

The Good News is that it envelopes the whole Creation. God himself in Christ has initiated a reconciliation between men and God, which breaks down the barriers, and takes in the "whole network of human relations."³³ God's purpose for man should not be separated from the work of bringing men to a realisation of their worth and dignity in modern humanism, since in Christ he has already made possible man's redemption and fulfilment of his destiny. The vital link between what men do and what God has done and is now doing in the ferment is Jesus Christ. He is the New Man in whom the New Creation is a present reality.

Unlike Chenchiah before him, who also utilised the concept Devanandan insisted that the New Creation in Christ is the direct result of personal conversion. It signals the transformation from the old, unfulfilled and sinful humanity to the New Humanity; it entails a remodelling of the personality so that the central place is no longer given to self but God.³⁴ If humanism is to properly understand man and his dignity, then it must reckon with the need for transformation into a new man, and the reconciliation of God-in-Christ which has enabled man-in-opposition-to-God to become man-in-relation-to-God. In the restoring of the relationship between God the Creator and man the creature once again, man can be understood in his totality, in his double-sidedness, which is the true view of man.

What emerges quite clearly here is the crucial role God's reconciliatory act in Christ, the pattern of men's salvation, plays in Devanandan's understanding of the New Creation. So too without this reconciliation we are bereft of a true humanism, condemned to

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³² Devanandan, "The Ministry of Reconciliation," Bible Study on Eph. 2:13-14f., *ibid.*, p. 125. God's revelation is seen by Devanandan as connected to the setting up of what he termed an "authentic humanity" (p. 121) in the New Creation. It again illustrates the relationship between God the Creator and man the creature which runs throughout his "theocentric humanism," or as he called it, "transcendent humanism" (p. 121). It emphasised for him that God's revelation of Himself was for the world of men.

³³ Devanandan, Bible Study on Eph. 2:15-16, *ibid.*, pp. 130, 132.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

view man in himself, and thus left in bondage to the tragic dialectic of modern humanism. But for Devanandan, Jesus Christ, the New Creation, sets man free to become himself in relation to God, realise his fulfilment in relation to his fellow creatures, and recognise his own worth. The "realised eschatology" inherent in his view of the New Creation emphasises these three important aspects for the fulfilment of a true, "theocentric humanism." There is "a new humanity in the making, in which all men are being reconciled to God, one to another and each to his own self." Yet as well as the attempt to redefine humanism, always implicit in his writings, there is also the note of the paradox of man, as Niebuhr called it, man as creature and man as "Child of God," which underlines the necessity of theocentricity in approach. Without one's concentration on "revelation to and for the world of men," either the "underlying anthropological concern" is to be totally neglected, or one's humanism becomes idolatrous or self-defeating.

Conclusion

Two things follow from this study. Firstly, an investigation of Devanandan's writings concludes that a pervasive concern to see man and God in relation to one another does most certainly exist. This prompts the label "theocentric humanism" which may typify the approach to the human he offers. In his own words, it may also be called a "transcendent humanism." This was the culmination point of a genuine concern in humanism which he had learnt in early life and a profound spiritual experience which transformed his thinking from liberal to radically God-centred. Secondly, if we must speak of Devanandan's "theocentric humanism," it should be in terms of his attempt to discover and outline the true basis for humanism, if it is not to fall into the trap of self-contradiction. Thus, his contribution is of a "theocentric humanism" closely linked to the concept of the New Creation in Christ. If his words have any power now, it is as a warning that a Christian humanism has its strength in God-in-Christ and nowhere else.