

THE CRISIS OF HUMANISM

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I believe that the western European tradition of humanistic culture is facing the most serious threats in its millennial history. The threats come from three distinct, but interrelated quarters, religious, political, and social. In recent decades the world has witnessed a phenomenal rise of religious fundamentalism whose tenets question the essential principles of tolerance that have animated the humanistic tradition since the Enlightenment. Often the militant sects reintroduce the very same kinds of persecutions perpetrated by the totalitarian regimes from which they were themselves liberated since World War II. The demise of totalitarianism, first Fascist, then Marxist, has also released a veritable flood of cultural and ethnic forces, some macro some micro, many of which have been repressed for centuries, all demanding recognition, independence, and a place in the modern political and economic sun. These forces challenge the humanistic tradition in two ways: the ambitions they reflect are often felt with such urgency and intensity that they result in unreasonable demands and violent methods—including "ethnic cleansing." Some of these forces, moreover, arise from cultural traditions that do not, and have never, shared the humanistic values we cherish; the proponents of these alternate traditions consider their values no less valid than our own, and resent our efforts to impose our views as a form of cultural, and indeed of political imperialism, no less pernicious than the military imperialism of old.

The social challenge comes from elements of our own societies who consider themselves as having been at best neglected, at worst deliberately disenfranchised by the humanistic tradition, which is considered culturally elitist and morally prejudiced in favor of the successful, male, Caucasian, Christian heterosexual.

I believe that those of us who are steeped in and committed to the humanistic values of our western heritage have the duty—and unprecedented opportunity—to recognize that these accusations are in large measure justified. The humanistic tradition has indeed been guilty of the cardinal sins of its own value system, the sins of arrogance and myopia. The crisis of humanism is in large part a crisis of its own making. In my lifetime, I have seen the tradition of humanism fail twice before to meet the challenges that faced it, those of Communism and Fascism, movements that deliberately subordinated the individual to a "higher," totalitarian purpose. Our tradition now faces the precisely opposite challenge of multiculturalism and political correctness, which subordinate the collective ideals of humanity and tolerance to the self-interested values of exclusivistic minorities. If the humanistic tradition fails this time to acknowledge and respond to the legitimate demands of those who have remained outside its ken, to expand its horizon and learn how to realize its own ideals by the very act of doing so, I fear it may disappear forever.