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Anthropology
in the service of
hope

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There is a widespread recognition that anthropology is a factor underlying much of the social, political, economic, and religious malaise of modern Ireland. Anthropology is the study of what it means to be a human being, an examination of what is at the core of human identity, an analysis of what promotes human flourishing, an exploration of human nature in the light of the social sciences, history, philosophy and religion. The surest sign of a deep crisis in anthropology is our contemporary inability to talk seriously about death in the public forum.

The aim of this article is to construct an anthropology that builds bridges between human beings, that paves the way for a new dialogue between secularists and believers, that facilitates the formation of a coalition of hope among people of secular and theistic convictions. The article will seek to do this in four steps.

Part One will show that anthropology is in crisis in a number of different disciplines. Part Two outlines some of the elements that could contribute to a reconstruction of anthropology in the twenty-first century. Part Three shows how a renewed anthropology could build bridges for a new coalition of hope among secularists and believers. Part Four concludes with a brief introduction to the shape of a theology of hope within this coalition.

ANTHROPOLOGY — A CONTESTED AREA

Anthropology is a red thread running through many areas of life: ecology, economics, ethics, education, philosophy, and theology.

In ecology, Pope Francis and the U.N. Conference on Climate Change in Paris both agreed in 2015 with the scientific view that the ecological crisis is caused mostly by human activity and certain expressions of anthropocentrism. Pope Francis is explicit in his criticism of what he calls “tyrannical”, “distorted”, “excessive”

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and “misguided” forms of anthropocentrism. Further, he points out that there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology¹.

In economics, Jeffrey Sachs, US economist and U.N adviser, gave a key-note address on “Economics for the Common Good” to a conference in the London School of Economics, 12-13 December 2016 . In his opening words he pointed out that “Economics went wildly off-track by a profoundly flawed model of human nature and a flawed model of human purpose”².

In the area of ethics the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, has sought to open a national debate on “Ethics for All”. He has suggested that part of the problem has been the rise of “extreme individualism, grounded in a hegemonic version of the market without limit”. Further, he argues that the failure to “question the concept of individualism and insatiable consumption” has been a contributing factor to our recent economic crisis³.

In the field of education, there is concern about the increasing influence of technology, metrics, and managerialism at all levels of education in Ireland. A new emphasis is placed on production, where outcomes are prescribed in advance of the learning experience. A major difficulty with this approach to education is the presence of an anthropological reductionism which neglects areas such as the holistic development of students, inter-personal skills, collaboration, leadership, empathetic memory, and the exercise of the creative imagination.

In philosophy, modern and post-modern, anthropology has been, and continues to be deeply debated. Modern philosophy has been marked by a turn to the subject, and this has resulted in the emergence of the sovereign subject of modernity. The separated self was, and is, so strong, so confident, and so independent that it became the ground of its own being: self-sufficient, self-defining, and self-sustaining without reference to any reality outside itself.

By way of reaction, post-modern philosophy radically deconstructed the self-sufficient subject of modernity. This programme of deconstruction can be summed up in the words of Michael Foucault: “Man is an invention of recent date” and will be “erased like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea”⁴. For some post-moderns the self is just a rhetorical flourish, a linguistic and cultural construct to facilitate the interaction of differences

Within Catholic feminist theology, there is a storm stirring around

1 *Laudato Si' : On Care for our Common Home, 2015* (hereafter as *LS*): a.68, 69, 119,122, 118

2 ‘*Economics for the common good*’. Available at www.jeffsachs.org/2016 (accessed 17 December 2016).

3 Address to NUIG, 30 November 2015, as reported in *The Irish Times* (1 December)

4 Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Science*, New York: Random House, 1970: 387

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anthropology in relation to identity, sexuality and gender, and how these impact on the role of women in the life of the church. Recent Popes, but especially St John-Paul II have presented an anthropology of men and women as essentially different but complementary, as complete not in themselves but only in relation to each other. This particular anthropology has handicapped the participation of the Catholic church in public debates concerning marriage equality, ecclesial governance, and ministry. The experience and *praxis* of women in contemporary society as well the impact of the Christ-event on human identity in the new Testament(eg, Gal.3:28; 5:6; 6:15; 2 Cor.5:17) needs to inform this debate.

RESTRUCTURING ANTHROPOLOGIES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Given the problems around anthropology in the above areas, it is clear that some reconstruction of anthropology is necessary for the twenty-first century. In restructuring what it means to be human, we must move beyond the modern idea that one anthropology fits all. Some authors talk about multi-polar anthropologies, while others refer to the multi-dimensional character of human identity. There are, in truth, many different selves: the private and public self, the social and professional self, the secular and religious self. The human, therefore, is a multi-layered, finely wrought work of art permanently in process.

In moving towards a multi-polar account of human identity, pride of place must be given to the dignity that belongs to every human being, a dignity that transcends race, sex, health and class. It is no accident that the language of human dignity came to the fore after World War II as a reaction to the atrocities during that war and the Holocaust.

The concept of human dignity was given particular expression in the U.N. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Human dignity is about the intrinsic value that belongs to every human being. People are born with this dignity, carry this dignity throughout life, and die with this dignity. This unique, universal dignity embraces respect for the freedom of the individual, for the affective and rational life of each person, and for the conscience of every human being. Closely related to this near worldwide acceptance of human dignity and complementary to it is a recognition that the human is a radically relational reality.

This relational dimension stands out in stark contrast to the individualism of the modern era. In reaction to Descartes' influential 'I think, therefore, I am', we must move towards an anthropology which recognises, first of all, that 'we are before I am' or as an African proverb puts it: "We relate, therefore, I am". Teilhard de Chardin, reflecting on evolution, observes that what comes first

is not being but union, which gives rise to being⁵. Being is first a 'we' before it can become an 'I'. To exist, therefore, is always to co-exist, to be is always to be in relationship, being (*esse*) is always being towards (*esse ad*).

Linked to this relational understanding of human identity is the discovery that it is only in the gift of self to others that we find out who we really are. Self-realisation comes about in the giving of oneself to the other. Self-surrender yields self-discovery. The human is at his or her best in the gift of self to the other. What begins to emerge within this focus on the relational and social self is that we do not come into the world with a ready-made self, we are not born with an 'I'; instead, we leave the world with an emerging, relational self as an unfinished project.

Flowing from this relational anthropology is the discovery of the importance of dialogue. It is in and through dialogue that the genesis, development and flourishing of human identity takes place. The human not only enters into dialogue with others, but it is in the dynamics of dialogue that there awakens within the human something distinctive that would otherwise remain dormant.

A further dimension to the complexity of the self is the importance of recognising that the self exists only as embodied. Human identity, human consciousness, and interiority are only available as embodied. Neuro-science highlights the intimate relationship that exists between psychological phenomena and physical phenomena, between the activities of the self and the reactions of the brain. There is a sense in which human subjectivity is more than matter and yet it is only available in and through particular activities of the brain. This emphasis on embodiment calls for a new respect and valuation of the human body.

No account of anthropology would be complete without reference to the impact of cosmology, biological evolution, and the historical emergence of self-understanding. The new cosmologies and theories of evolution highlight the interdependent, interrelated, and interconnected character of everything in the world. We live in a finely-tuned universe, and this drives home the underlying unity of the cosmos, the earth and the human. Equally, it is now becoming frighteningly clear, in the light of the ecological crisis, that we interfere with this unity at our peril, and that this applies right across the spectrum of life, from the macrocosm of the universe to the microcosm of the human. Moreover, many see the self as the earth in a state of self-consciousness and freedom, with all the responsibility that flows from reflective self-consciousness and freedom for the well-being of the earth. The human is, in the

5 P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, London: Collins, 1971: 227

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words of Gerard Manley Hopkins “earth’s eye, tongue or heart”⁶, or as Denise Levertov puts it “earth’s mind, mirror, and reflective source”⁷

TOWARDS A COALITION OF HOPE

In the light of these multi-layered anthropologies we can begin to explore the possibilities of a new coalition of hope between secularists and believers.

It is often said that faith was the big question of the twentieth century: the possibility of faith in God in the face of so much suffering, tragedy and war. In the twenty-first century, it is hope that is the big question in the face of so much apathy and indifference, so much cynicism and scepticism, so much failure and uncertainty. Within this new context, the possibility of forming a coalition of hope between secularists and believers in the service of a more humane, more just, and a more ecologically aware world is urgent. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was prescient in pointing out that “the future of humanity rests with people who are capable of providing the generations to come with reasons for living and for hope”⁸

To open this conversation, I wish to distinguish between human hope and religious hope, even though they are closely related. Human hope is a this-worldly hope and is inspired by attention to the dynamics of human experience, the movements of history, and the needs of society. Religious hope is both a this-worldly hope *and* an other-worldly hope.

Further, it should be noted that ‘I cannot hope alone’. It is possible, perhaps, to be optimistic alone, but hope is that which connects us to others, through the discovery that ‘I cannot go it alone in this life’. In addition, hope, in contrast to optimism, is in short supply at present, partly because it has been supplanted by the modern myth of progress (optimism), by the cultural denial of death, and by the rise of a rugged individualism. And yet, it must be acknowledged that implicit and unspoken hopes exist in the lives of most people who just don’t have the time to articulate them. A further introductory point about hope is that it is closely committed to *praxis*, that is to bringing about change and transformation within our own lives and that of society. I do what I hope and hope what I do.

Back in 1970, Paul Ricoeur described hope as a protest against the premature closure of all systems of thought, especially religious and political fundamentalisms, as well as philosophical

6 “Ribblesdale”, 1918

7 “Tragic Error”, 1993.

8 *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, Par. 31,

reductionisms and nihilisms. Hope keeps thought and action open and reacts against claims to absolute knowledge. Hope is a deep impulse that resists closure and refuses finality.

How then does hope get started? What is it that activates hope? To answer these questions, we must take a close look at human experience. At some stage in life, we have ‘contrast-experiences’, that is experiences which point up a sharp contrast between what is and what could be. This occurs whenever there are violations of human dignity, when human rights are denied, when relationships break down, and when justice is trampled upon. Such experiences awaken a sense of indignation and outrage, a call to protest and action, a refusal to accept the *status quo*.

How do we move from these and other ‘contrast experiences’ to hope? Part of the problem, historically speaking, is that we have become imprisoned in the practices of the past which rule the present. Western societies have been held captive to a market-driven capitalism and a neo-liberal model of economics, where policies and decisions are measured according to the ‘values’ of the market and their support for the economy. Considerations about serving the dignity of the individual, the well-being of the human community and the earth-community, the integrity of human relationships, and respecting human embodiment are of a secondary order relative to the primacy of the market and dominance of the economy.

No-one has been more outspoken and prophetic in this regard than Pope Francis. He talks about an ‘economy that kills’ and berates those economic paradigms that promise more because they are premised on the lie that the resources of the earth are unlimited⁹.

The dominance of the reigning models of capitalism and economics could be altered by a careful historical analysis of the social and political *status quo*. The role of the historian, according to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, is “to brush history against the grain” so that the forgotten hopes of past generations can re-emerge in the present. Memory has the power to re-open history to allow the voices of the victims of history to speak in the present and ensure that the injustices of the past may not be repeated in the future. The grip of the past on the present can be broken open, and the possibility of hope in the present can begin to emerge through empathy with the victims of history.

This power of empathetic memory to generate hope in the present will only succeed to the extent that it is linked to imagination, not just to re-visit the past but, more importantly, to offer alternatives in the present for the future. Without the exercise of the creative imagination, there can be no hope. It is not enough

9 LS, 106, 210 and 60.

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to protest. Instead, protest must be accompanied by alternative, well worked out policies and realistic plans through the exercise of imagination.

Imagination is the enemy of absolutes, especially the absolutes of history, politics, and religion that can paralyse us in the present. There is nothing pre-ordained about the injustices and inequalities of the present. Instead, imagination has the capacity to offer alternatives to the political and ecological *status quo*. Further, it is imagination that provides the springboard for action in the present. Moreover, imagination can be the healer of the hopeless, especially those who suffer from psychological illness. It is not too much imagination, but too little imagination, that causes solitude, anxiety, and desolation¹⁰

It is on the back of contrast experiences, alongside the role of the empathetic memory in reopening history and the power of the creative imagination to see alternative horizons, that it becomes possible for secularists and believers to form a coalition of hope.

THE INCLUSIVE SHAPE OF CHRISTIAN HOPE

It would be theologically wrong to suggest that Christian hope stands in opposition to human hope. These two hopes are closely connected, and yet different. Two examples may help to illustrate this point. The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* from the Second Vatican Council contains the seeds of a theology of hope at different levels. First of all it points out in the opening paragraph:

“The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”

The punchline in this statement is that nothing which is genuinely human fails to find an echo in the heart of Christian hope. Christian hope and human hope can unite around what is “genuinely human” in addressing the grief and anguish of humanity today.

Secondly, the same document points out explicitly that Christian hope is not exempt from responsibility for developing the well-being of this life: “It is a mistake” and “one of the gravest errors of our time” for those who believe in another world to neglect their responsibilities for this world¹¹. Here, the Council was reacting

10 William F. Lynch. *Images of Hope: Imagination as the Healer of the Hopeless*, Notre Dame: UNDP, (1965),1974,: 243

11 GS, Par. 39 and 43.

against the Marxist critique of religion as the opium of the people. In the contrast, the Council sought to make it clear that Christian hope embraces earthly responsibilities and should unite with all who are committed to these responsibilities.

What is distinctive and different about Christian hope is that it takes its inspiration and direction from the person of the crucified and risen Christ. Christian hope is Christo-centric in shape. There are different dimensions to this Christo-centric character of Christian hope.

There is, first of all, a historical dimension to Christian hope. Christian hope seeks to keep alive the memory of Jesus Christ at a number of levels. There is the memory of Jesus the prophet and social reformer, the one who began his mission proclaiming good news to the poor, release to captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed (Lk.4:16ff). This mission and ministry of Jesus is summed up in parables through the imaginative vision of the coming reign of God, a reign of God already dawning in the life of Jesus as this worldly with promises for the future.

During his life, Jesus put this vision into practice through a number of subversive actions: healing the hopeless, reconciling outsiders, offering mercy and forgiveness for outcasts, creating an inclusive table fellowship, cleansing the temple, washing feet, and instituting a new Passover meal. This imaginative vision and *praxis* of Jesus is directed at both society and religion. No-one is exempt from the prophetic critique of this social and religious reformer. Christian hope, therefore, seeks to keep alive this memory of Jesus Christ. There is much in the historical life of Jesus Christ of interest to human hope: attention to the plight of the poor, feeding the hungry, commitment to justice, promotion of freedom, the reform of society and religion.

A second layer to the Christ-centred character of Christian hope is the way it is played out in the historical drama of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This unity of the death and resurrection of Jesus holds together tensions around the structure, colour, and rhythm of Christian hope. The structure of Christian hope is 'cruciform'. The cross is at the centre of Christian hope. There is no way around the suffering and death that were a part of the life of Jesus and are a part of the human condition. The colour of Christian hope is a 'bright-darkness'. Christian hope embraces the darkness of life and death in search for the light of Resurrection. The rhythm of Christian hope is the Paschal process of dying and rising, of passing over from one place and returning to another, of decentring the self to re-centre the self on the crucified and risen Christ.

A third layer to the Christocentric character of Christian hope is

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the claim that the Resurrection of Christ is the ground of Christian hope, and it is here that secularists and believers will differ most. The bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead represents symbolically the goal of life and the destiny of creation: the risen Christ is described as “the first born of all creation”(Col.1:15), “the first born from the dead”(Col.1:18; see also Rom.8:29 and Acts 26:23), and “the first fruits of those who have died” (1Cor.15:20 and 23).

The resurrection of Christ from the dead gives a glimpse of the orientation of the spiritual energy that drives the unfolding of the cosmos, the evolution of biological life, and the historical drama of human existence—appearing now in Christ in a new mode of unimaginable creativity, splendour and beauty.

In brief, there is enough common ground between human hopes and Christian hope to initiate a new national conversation, and at the same time we acknowledge there are differences which are perhaps more complimentary than contradictory.

Economics at the service of ... The economic vision of Pope Francis is a human vision. In full accord with the tradition of Catholic social teaching, it insists that all people should be able to contribute to, and benefit from, humanity’s collective economic endeavors. Yet it is also an expansive vision that appreciates the relationship between human flourishing and the health of the earth – both because creation has value in its own right and because a degraded environment hurts the poor, the excluded and those not yet born.

- VINCENT MILLER (editor), *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si'*, Bloomsbury, 2017, p160.