

Christ and the Human Condition, 2021

Co-missioners,

The exhibitionism of our latest space adventurers, Messrs. Branson and Bezos—[Musk perhaps to follow](#)—prompted Mike Hoy to pen the essay we send you this week. Michael the Confessor (as we ought to call him) will drive us to Christ for the hope these others would seem to offer but can't begin to.

Read carefully. Chew well.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Christ and the Human Condition, 2021

by Michael Hoy



Sixty years ago Hannah Arendt, writing in the prologue of her renowned work, *The Human Condition*, noted two significant events of that era. The first was the launching of Sputnik in 1957, which she regarded as “second in importance to no other, not even the splitting of the atom.” One American reporter at the time, in spite of the geopolitical tensions of the cold war, referred to Sputnik as an event of “unmitigated joy”, a “relief about the first ‘step toward escape from men’s imprisonment to the earth.’” Arendt disagreed, and with some alarm. “The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition.” She regarded this race for space as being premised on a false claim—that human beings can escape their creational limitation (perhaps the limitations of death itself!).

The second major event that Arendt lifted up was the “advent of automation”—the replacing of human laboring. That, too, she suspected might be perceived as a sign of “joy” (robots will do the work for us!), though perhaps not “unmitigated” when one considers that much of human condition has already been reduced

to the activity of *animal laborans* (laboring animals)—“making a living.” But this neglects the other two “fundamental human activities” of our human condition—the creativity of work and political action. These latter activities, she feared, were already diminishing, if not diminished altogether. What would happen if now labor was taken away? In summary, Arendt’s concern with regard to these two events is that they contributed to our desire to “escape from the earth” and “alienate us from the earth.”

The word “human” (as in “the human condition”) is one of several other words that begin with the same three letters (humility, humiliation, humanities). All of them are traceable to a common Latin root—*humus*, meaning “dirt” or “soil”. In the Yahwist account of creation in Genesis, human beings are created and fashioned by their Creator from the ground. There are two events in our own lives that remind us of this creational “grounding”—when ashes are placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday and when we stand at gravesides (Jürgen Moltmann). “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” There is a strong theological/creational connection between our humanity and the very earth from which we came—and the planet on which we live.

Yet all indications are that we are not fond of this “remembrance” of the dust we have come from and will eventually return to. Some of this may be because we fear the limits it reminds us of. Nevertheless, all the *humus* words are falling out of favor.

“Humility” has too much the unpleasant connotation of “lowering” ourselves. Nobody wants that, especially in our narcissistic-individualistic-hoarding “society”.

“Humiliation” can seem a little more understandable as an

unwanted word, given its connotation of treating *others* like dirt . Feminists, in particular, have rightly encouraged us to avoid diminishing ourselves or letting ourselves be diminished. But tragically, such humiliation exists, and is inherent to systemic forms of oppression and persecution which often go unchallenged. Our decisions not to challenge them is our decision to accept the status quo.

Even the “humanities” (a subject I once taught) is falling out of favor and declining in universities—and why? Mostly because they do not produce any qualitative value in a market economy.



Which leads us to the word “humanity”. Humanity is increasingly divided—politically, economically, and socially, as all of us see. I would add that we are also divided theologically—from our Creator, from the creation, and from our fellow human

creational beings. The arrogant posture of humanity today (and for centuries prior) is to brazenly distinguish some humans (with power and privilege) from other humans (without power or privilege), putting these “other” humans “in their place” in their lower “castes” (Isabel Wilkerson). Even in the resurgence of the Delta variant, humanity cannot get on the same page to stop the unnecessary dis-ease and death. We are, as a species, struggling to relate to one another, in many cases “killing” ourselves, and living with the ever-present threat of annihilating ourselves.

Now we are witnessing the event of a new space race. But unlike the space race of the past, this one is not being led by governments, but by super-wealthy individuals. Jubilant billionaires are seeking to go where no one has gone before (or

at least not recently). And they are not alone in their jubilation. I have heard one American reporter recently praise this feat as an important “back-up plan” to the reality of our difficult conditions here on earth. The assumption is that we can find in space what we cannot find on our planet. Hmm.

Yet what do these three (billionaire) amigos have to say about their own feat? Jeff Bezos, still in the clouds of joy on reaching space, boasts that his explorations were all possible thanks to the hard work of the people at Amazon—prompting the backlash of criticism that these same people are already underpaid and overworked. Elon Musk and his SpaceX program hopes for us to colonize other planets, like Mars—even though we still haven’t resolved the inherent difficulties of our “human condition” on own planet. What makes Musk think that we will not do the same damn things to other planets that we have done to our own? Richard Branson, the first of these jubilant explorers, does not disagree with critics (Senator Bernie Sanders, for example) who see this billionaire space exploration as the unseemly splurging of the wealthy at a time when the majority of people in America still live paycheck-to-paycheck. What does Branson offer in defense? He suggests that all people can now have the opportunity to better appreciate both earth and space when they get on one of his Virgin flights—which currently come with the price-tag of a quarter of a million dollars (a cost that several hundred other wealthy individuals apparently are willing to pay).

But now comes my own confession, and maybe yours as well. For a long time I have been a fan of Star Trek, along with Star Wars and a host of other programs in which space travel is already accepted as a common reality. In these films and programs, our “entertainment” is leaving the earth in order to explore the galaxy (and not just through telescopes), though often finding in that galaxy many more things from which we all need to be

protected—forces of cosmic proportions in extraterrestrial (often violent) beings. Yet we wouldn't have to go to the stars to find that kind of struggle.

Nonetheless, even these films and programs occasionally offer some tidbits of honorable mention about earth, and even some veiled references to faith. In one famous *Star Trek* episode, there is even a not-so-veiled reference to the New Testament (Matthew 6:28) by the ever-logical Vulcan Mr. Spock: "They [the tribbles, furry creatures with no sentient qualities] remind me of the lilies of the field. They toil not, neither do they spin. But they seem to eat a great deal. I see no practical use for them." That's a far cry from what Jesus meant in the Sermon on the Mount when he spoke these words to encourage suffering sentient beings caught in the snares of life (then and now)—even though it might still fit well with the logic of those in positions of power who suppress the masses that cry out under the suffering weight of their bondage. One other illustration that seems a little more palatable to our senses comes from an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. A Wall Street tycoon, revived from cryogenic sleep, wants to reclaim his personal empire of stocks and wealth from centuries prior (no surprise there). But Captain Picard informs him of a frank truth from this century in the future: "People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We've eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions. We've grown out of our infancy." It would seem, then, that all we need to do is focus our energies in growing out of our infancy. But where is the evidence that we are even motivated to do that, especially given that we are already diminishing things *humus*?

I have always appreciated the insight that Patrick Keifert once (maybe more than once) offered about *Star Trek* (and perhaps the rest of these treks into space): "It lacks any real imagination, because there is no more Christianity."

We are already more than twenty years beyond what was supposed to be “the Christian century.” And some prognosticators have suggested, not without evidence, that in another twenty years the existence of mainline Protestantism, and maybe also its religious right counterpart, may be extinct. What form the church may take then, we cannot say, even if those of my generation may live to see those days, *deo volente*, though not without lament and diaspora. Yet that lament should come with a deeper onus of confession. We have held on to the fragmented remnants of Christendom, by which we cling to the *power* that Christendom represents, even to the point of diminishing, disowning, or abandoning the best of our own tradition and its evangelical core.

Our faithful confession of “God the Father almighty” as our Creator has been twisted and turned into an unfaithful garnishing and grasping for *power* in so much of Christianity today—pervading our worship, preaching, institutions, and beliefs. To be sure, it was on full display in the storming of the Capitol this past January. Christian nationalists carried banners declaring “Jesus saves” and “Jesus 2020” side-by-side with banners of “Trump 2020”—and used the flagpoles for those banners to beat up on Capitol police who stood in their way. This is a clear coupling of Manichean-belief (“We are good, you are evil!”) with the Nietzschean (and often violent) cry of our political era (“My way, or else!”) [1]. But even the smugly arrogant and falsely innocent who might condemn these things are not off the hook as they continue to condone institutions and systemic sins of our human condition, not only leaving them unexamined but embracing the status quo in such vaunted phrases like “American exceptionalism” and “American way of life.” There is no acknowledgment of suffering weakness, or the underlying struggle with fear and limits in our human condition. There is only the desire to find power and to use it *uber alles*.

Fake Christianity will never lead us beyond the fake gospels and not-so-fake nihilism of our age. Those who truly recognize these “signs of the times”—especially among the psychologically ill, lonely, despairing, and suicidal who cannot escape their suffering (as Ernest Becker, Paul Tillich, Helmut Thielicke, Douglas John Hall, Noreena Heertz, and others have noted)—are often closer to the truth that needs to be confessed about our human condition and our desire for power. Indeed, calling things what they are was for Luther indicative of a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). All our grasping for power (*from* others! not *for* others!) does not move the needle one bit in our current theologies of glory (*theologia gloria*).

How much have we missed the gospel in our unfaithfulness in all our “power” centuries? How much do we miss it still? Why do we cling to the “weakened” power of empire (or utopia) and all its benefits? Why do we continue to long for the “glory days” when the churches were full and not so full of graying heads? We cannot be two-fisted about this (cf. Matthew 6:24). But we can be invited and prodded to let go of that “power” to which we so often cling, and cling instead by faith to the gift and power that Jesus the Christ came to bring.

Instead of the power in our Constantinian-Manichean-Nietzschean varieties, we might turn to what Paul claimed as the power, and even wisdom, for us all in our human condition. “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim *Christ crucified*, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the *power* of God and the *wisdom* of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-23)

The message of this gospel, at the heart and center of the Scriptures and our biblical tradition, is a message about a suffering *humanity*, calling for the kind of *humility* in suffering solidarity for those who are suffering, and yes, even *humiliation*, which is even more painfully and tragically present for all-people (as in a deadly pan-demic, or equally deadly climate change, neither of which we are getting out of anytime soon). It is not simply a fate of individuals, though in our individualism we are often still trying to carve out our own vaunted “safe” places (often devoid of all “others” with whom we are in relationship on this earth). Yet the good news for all these suffering “earth”-lings—especially (preferentially so) for those who cannot hide or conceal the shame of their suffering, but also for those who continue to think that they can still conceal it (the rest of us)—is that “the sufferings of this present time” was deeply shared for our sakes by Jesus the Christ, one



who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in *human* likeness.
And being found in *human* form,
he *humiliated* himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8; italics mine)

I offer a couple of references to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, because I really do believe we are living in a Bonhoeffer moment. The

first of these is in regard to his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. It changed—no, more than that, it rocked—my perception of life even when I first read it as a required text for ethics in college. Some have criticized Bonhoeffer in this treatise for displaying too much of a moralistic viewpoint in his concept of “costly grace” (even though lesser forms of moralism still pervade an awful lot of preaching in both conservative and mainline traditions). My sense is that this criticism is a misunderstanding not only of Bonhoeffer, but of the biblical tradition itself on which Bonhoeffer builds his theology. First and foremost, the grace we get from our Lord comes from his suffering it into existence on the cross. Luther says the same in his explanation of the Creed’s Second Article, Small Catechism: “He has redeemed me [at great cost]” But, second, as our Lord is surely *with* us in all our sufferings, we are also *with* Christ in following him into “the *sufferings* of this present time” (Romans 8:18; italics mine). As the Reformers also said in their chief article on justification (and Robert Bertram more specifically in summation), faith alone justifies, but faith is never alone. Yes, this “cost” (we could call it risk) of discipleship can lead to hesitancy, even as it did for Jesus’ first disciples. But we are more than merely church-goers (even via the wonder of that technological marvel called Zoom). We are those who get to profess and confess the gospel of Jesus the Christ for the world—for the suffering earth and all its earth-lings!

Second, I would lift up one of Bonhoeffer’s final letters from prison on July 16, 1944 (a date significant perhaps also for its seventy-seventh anniversary for us in this moment). His words speak to us in the midst of all of the above mentioned (and unmentioned) sufferings through inhumanity and disowning of all things *humus*, through all the sufferings under the oppressions of power and wealth, and all our afflictions, infections, and

sufferings from Manichean-Nietzschean rhetoric (and sometimes violence) that divides us further and tragically deafens our ears to the promise of the gospel: “Man’s [sic] religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world: God is *deus ex machina*. The Bible [however] directs man [sic] to God’s powerlessness and suffering: only the suffering God can help.”

It takes faith and hope to risk that much in the suffering God. Whether faith and hope are (as Arendt claims they are) “two essential characteristics of human existence,” they are certainly hard to grasp apart from their source in Jesus of Nazareth (whom the secular Jewish philosopher Arendt also credits for being the miracle of faith and hope in our human condition). We need to be nurtured in the promise of Jesus the Christ, even as we are called to risk as his disciples into (and for the sake of) a suffering humanity and a suffering creation. It is our mutual, baptismal task together to be that nurturing peoples for one another in the promise, regardless of what happens to our church bodies in the future. Ministry, as the Reformers knew, was never clergy or lay, but old or new (Bertram)—where the new is the final word beyond the old, and where even our suffering for the sake of the promise bears and brings life for all of humanity and for all of creation.

So we, in faith and hope, join *with* the suffering Christ (and the God of suffering he re-presents), and even in the midst of suffering for the human condition we “count it all joy” (James 1:2; cf. 1 Peter 1:6)!

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Endnote:

[1] I call this “Nietzschean,” though I suspect the better term is “post-Nietzschean.” Nietzsche is not as bad as he is often

made out to be; but his concept of "will to power" has been so perverted in our era that it has justified all too many violent encounters.