5 The Greek Body and Christian Thought

ENGLAND

Physical Anthropology and Humanism

The scientific interest in man which prompted the development of anthropological knowledge from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards was, initially, a secular phenomenon. However, it had important consequences for Christian thought. Physical anthropology was an aspect of the emergence in western European culture of two philosophies: materialism and humanism. Materialism was developed during the second half of the century by La Mettrie, Holbach, Helvetius and others. It had two main tenets: it challenged the belief in the existence of God and degraded man to a mere animal and a machine; and it called for the scientific study of man as a body; that is, an object or machine, rather than a mind or spirit.

Humanism, as it was developed by nineteenth-century positivists, advocated ‘la religion de l’humanité elle-même’, and in this context, physical anthropology was, in effect, the new theology. It set out to discover the nature of man, ‘l’humanité essentielle’, with the aim of setting up humanity in its most perfect manifestation, in that ‘excellence ... dont les grands hommes sont l’expression’, as the ‘Grand Être’, the god, of what Comte called the positive age. Perfect humanity was thus upheld as a source of culture, and as the proper goal of every man’s intellectual, moral and aesthetic energies – ‘vers laquelle [perfect humanity] tous les hommes doivent s’éllever’. Positivist humanism was opposed to the cultural devaluation of man and of the human body which stemmed from the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

The discovery early in the century of the characteristics of fifth-century BC Greek art also played a considerable part in the development of these new ideas. The example of Pheidian art reinforced both the development of physical anthropology and the humanism which saw man as the measure of all things. Indeed, the realisation that the sculptures of the temple of Athena Parthenos or of the temple of Jupiter Panhellenius in Aegina showed real men, not superhuman beings, was stunning. The fact that the temples of the period of Greece’s highest achievement – largely

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the work of Athens – were monuments to men, not gods, that the gods who guided ancient Greece were men, and vigorous men at that, was received by many with enthusiasm. This discovery also contradicted the neo-classical account of Greek religious conceptions as idealist, the result of imagination rather than observation, and of their gods as pretty\textsuperscript{6} as well as supernatural beings. Walter Pater expressed the new view of Greek religion in his essay, \textit{The Marbles of Aigina}. In these he recognised ‘the full expression of … humanism … the freshest sense of that new-found inward value … the presence of man…’\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{The Christian Implications of Physical Anthropology}

The new ideas about man proposed by humanism and materialism, and the acceptance, in educated circles, of scientific knowledge as a source of truth and a basis of action had two important religious consequences. First, these ideas were incompatible with Judaeo-Christian beliefs and ethics; and second, they changed religious thought. The new affirmation of the materiality of man and the introduction of man into scientific study precipitated a review of Biblical accounts of man and of the human body and the emergence of certain new theological and ethical questions which are in evidence in religious writings of this period. The following themes from the Judaeo-Christian repertoire come into prominence: first, man’s relationship to nature. This was the belief in the ‘Wisdom, the Logos, by whom God made the world’,\textsuperscript{8} the belief in the existence of a single unified order rather than flux pervading all things in the universe; second, the remembrance of man’s original perfection as created in God’s own image, ‘In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him’ (Gen. 5.1.); third, man’s separation from nature and God through the ‘fall’, ‘Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground …’ (Gen. 3.23); fourth, the further division of mankind into three races and the physical and moral downgrading of the African race – a theme taken from the story of Noah and his three sons Shem, Ham and Japhet and the curse of Ham and his son Canaan, ‘… Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren’ (Gen. 9.25); fifth, the idea of Christ’s humanity as a re-embodiment of God’s design – a theme taken from the doctrine of the Incarnation, ‘And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us’ (St John’s Gospel 1.14)\textsuperscript{9} – Christ was the ‘assumption of a finely adapted and perfect human nature by the Divine Word’;\textsuperscript{10} and sixth, the idea of salvation, the reconciliation and reunification of man with God through man’s rediscovery of God’s will.

These concerns led to a revival of natural theology, the belief in the manifestation of the divine will in nature. The development of natural the-