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Knud E. Løgstrup

“Humanism and Christianity”.

Translated by Kees van Kooten Niekerk, Bjørn Rabjerg and Robert Stern¹

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Abstract: Dieser Artikel ist die Übersetzung des zuerst in 1950 veröffentlichten Schlüsseltextes “Humanisme og kristendom” des dänischen Philosophen und Theologen Knud E. Løgstrup (1905–1981). In diesem Text legt Løgstrup seine Konzeption der Debatte zwischen Humanismus und Christentum dar. Er argumentiert dafür, dass die beiden Positionen nicht als einander entgegengesetzt zu betrachten sind, da beide die Interdependenz und Verletzlichkeit des Menschseins als Grundlage für eine “stumme” Forderung nach Umsorge erkennen – auch wenn der Humanismus in dieser Forderung lediglich die Leistung sozialer Normen sehen und das Christentum sie mit Lehren der Kirche verwechseln kann. So betrachtet, greift der Text als erster Entwurf jenen Ideen vor, die Løgstrup in seinem späteren Hauptwerk *Den etiske fordring* (1956) entwickeln sollte.

Keywords: Knud E. Løgstrup, Humanism, Christian Ethics, ideology, Christian politics, the ethical demand, human interdependence, Jesus’s proclamation

1 Translators’ notes: This is a translation of Knud E. Løgstrup, “Humanisme og kristendom,” originally published in *Heretica* 3 (1950): 456–474; reprinted in *Kulturdebat 1944–58*, ed. Erik Knudsen, Ole Wivel. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1958, 280–292. Pagination in square brackets is to the first edition. We are grateful to Hans Fink for his help with this translation. For a discussion of Løgstrup’s article, see Bjørn Rabjerg, Robert Stern, “On K. E. Løgstrup’s ‘Humanism and Christianity’”, this journal pp. 97–107.

Kees van Kooten Niekerk: Aarhus University, Department of Theology, Jens Chr. Skous Vej 3, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark, E-Mail: kees@hotmail.dk

Bjørn Rabjerg: Aarhus University, Department of Theology, Jens Chr. Skous Vej 3, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark, E-Mail: teobjr@cas.au.dk

Robert Stern: University of Sheffield, Department of Philosophy, 45 Victoria Street, Sheffield S3 7QB, United Kingdom, E-Mail: r.stern@sheffield.ac.uk

[456] Humanism is – among many other things – having the sense of a certain conflict, the implication being that where the sense of the conflict is lost, inhumanity arises. What conflict?

We never have something to do with another human being without holding something of that person's life in our hands. It can be very little, a passing mood, a dampening or quickening of spirit, a disgust we deepen or take away. But it can also be of tremendous significance, so that it is simply up to us whether the other person's life flourishes or not. We can only hope that it may often be the case that it was very little that depended on us. But it is certainly fortunate for the sake of our peace of mind that we have no idea what we have had of other people's courage in life or flourishing, sincerity or duplicity in our hands, through what we were and said and did in our relationship with them, but that this is hidden. Then, while exploiting the fact that this crucial matter is hidden, we can indulge in the illusion that our contribution to the life we have with each other is nothing more than what we accomplish in a tangible and demonstrable sense. But it can happen that science suddenly reveals what otherwise is hidden and places openly in the light of day the extent to which we are each other's fate. I am thinking of psychology's and psychiatry's demonstration of how a child's life is determined for their whole future by the adult's behaviour towards it, how parental [457] ambitions for their children, which in bourgeois life's ambiguity is considered commendable, humanly speaking is a curse because it means an upbringing that for life may deprive the child of the most precious thing of all, its courage in life. Now, in everyday life, the adult's relationship with the child is probably the place where in the most far-reaching sense one has the other's life in one's hands, which explains why it is precisely here that science has been able to observe it; but it applies equally well in all sorts of degrees to the relationships with which we have to do with one another.

This means that in any encounter between people there is an unspoken claim, regardless of the circumstances under which the meeting takes place and the character it has. We do not give this much thought for several reasons. Because we have a strange and unconscious notion that we do not belong within the world in which a human being has their life. Concerning the world that for the individual is their life's content, we have a peculiar notion that the individual themselves is this world, so we and everyone else are outside it and only from time to time come into contact with it. If for that reason meetings between people normally consist in nothing more than their worlds touching each other, only for them to carry on fully intact and undisturbed, then it all cannot be terribly important. It only becomes important where a human being, as an exception and by accident, through a misdemeanor or good or ill will, breaks into another human being's world. However, in fact, this is a curious idea,

whose peculiarity is not diminished by the fact that we take it for granted to such a great extent. Indeed, really the circumstances are quite different: we are one another's world. Literature has always known this, philosophy and theology by contrast remarkably seldom.

But on the other hand, what *does* occupy us is how everything we accomplish [458] belongs to the other's world. That is another reason why we do not have a sense of the unspoken claim that is given in every meeting between people. We are used to thinking culturally, and we are close to *only* being able to think culturally about what one individual in a positive or negative sense is for the other. This is because meaning is something cultural, inasmuch as it is disseminated by a public medium, a novel, a scientific inquiry, a political work, or whatever it might be. Therefore, its influence is also detectable – to the extent that sometimes in due course it may give rise to historical studies. In this indirect way, namely through cultural activities – from the most simple digging of a piece of land to the most complex performance – we know that we belong to each other's world. Yet, there are many things that tempt one to forget that a meeting takes place here. This meeting is so often mediated through the cultural medium, so indirect, that one person cannot tell who the other is. The author does not know their readers, or the politician their voters. Just as the cultural work has its own laws or rules, which demand training and perhaps talent, and which therefore can completely and utterly absorb one's interest. Nevertheless, all cultural work exists for the sake of human life, not least as the individual lives it in contact with others.

But despite everything that in one way or another diverts thought away from it, it is still the case that we are each other's world and each other's fate. It is through this fact that the claim is given, which therefore is unspoken and by no means identical with the other person's express wishes or requirements. This is the reason for the conflict I have in mind, and which belongs to humanism.

[459] The demand which is contained in any relationship with another human being is not articulated in the expectations on me which the other person says or indicates. If they coincide, this is purely accidental. Often, they do not, but the relationship is indeed one solitary challenge to oppose the very thing that the other human being expects and wishes me to do, because this alone serves them best. The challenge, therefore, presupposes that I know better than the other person what is best for them. If this were not the case, a communication between us – on a basic and existential level – of the kind where one person has to do with another person would not be possible.

For if it were merely a matter of responding to the expectation of the other and fulfilling their wish, our life together would simply consist in – irresponsibly – making ourselves into the tool of the other person. There would no longer

be any challenge in our mutual relationships, but these relationships would just consist in pandering to one another. And indeed this is no mere theory. In ordinary parlance, what is taken to count as ‘being nice’ consists in just going along with the other person, abstaining from any contradiction which would annoy them, refraining from any criticism that would insult, avoiding the confrontation that would not be well received. To ‘be nice’ is to shy away from contradiction in order to lead the conversation on to what we can agree about, so that one can refrain from criticism and instead find a way to praise them, to at all costs avoid confrontation in order to settle down cozily in mutual agreement on something irrelevant. What people commonly call ‘love’ is usually the kind of accommodation that results in an insincere relationship. What is commonly called love is usually a mawkishness which shies away from the truth between people like the plague. And the situation is not altered by the fact that it could involve a [460] sacrifice that is both required and made. For, without the will to truth, even sacrifice turns to flattery. In short, if there were no difference between the challenge implicit in every relationship and the other person’s spoken request, our life together would consist in abandoning oneself to the crowd; for a crowd can consist in just one human being, if my relation to that person is just to go along with them, however much this may call on me to make a great sacrifice and in chatter be construed as niceness.²

So, we have to recognize that the demand which is implicit in every meeting between human beings never becomes vocal but is and remains silent, so that I myself with whatever I may have left in terms of insight, imagination and understanding must work out what it involves. While the demand is given with the relationship as such and is therefore silent, it is me to whom it is addressed and who must determine, from relationship to relationship and from situation to situation, what its content is. Not in the sense that I can arbitrarily, whimsically, and at my own discretion give it whatever content I like. In that case, there would be no demand at all. But it is there, and since it is given with the very fact that I belong to the world in which the other person has their existence, and therefore I have something of the other human being’s life in my hands, it is obviously a demand to take care of this life. But as regards how this is

2 In using the terminology of “the crowd” and “chatter,” Løgstrup is here referring to Kierkegaardian and Heideggerian notions which he discusses at greater length in his lectures in Berlin that were published the same year: K. E. Løgstrup, *Kierkegaards und Heideggers Existenzanalyse und ihr Verhältnis zur Verkündigung*. Berlin: Eric Blaschker Verlag, 1950; *Kierkegaards og Heideggers Existenzanalyse og dens Forhold til Forkyndelsen*, ed. Svend Andersen. Aarhus: Klim, 2013; *Kierkegaard’s and Heidegger’s Analysis of Existence and Its Relation to Proclamation*, translated by Robert Stern et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

to happen, nothing is said. Even though it concerns the other human being, they themselves are not in a position to say anything about this; for, as was mentioned before, it may well involve something completely opposed to their expectations and wishes. I must become clear about it for myself.

But is this not intrusion and encroachment? For one might indeed ask: how then does the individual come to know what best serves the other person, especially when what supposedly [461] is best for them disappoints them or fills them with resentment? To put it briefly, the individual comes to know this from their own understanding of life. But of what concern is that to the other person, who perhaps does not even share it? Why should they have an understanding of life imputed to them or perhaps even forced on them, which is entirely alien to them and which they can neither adopt nor appreciate?

In the nineteenth century, my topic would probably not have been called humanism and Christianity, but idealism and Christianity. A prominent idea in the idealistic ethics of the nineteenth century, largely through the influence of Kant, was respect for the independence and autonomy of the other human being. This ethics is severely criticized today by both philosophers and theologians; and this critique is justified, as mutual respect for one another's autonomy and independence threatened to be all there is to ethics. The ethical came to consist in self-formation, and respect for the other in their self-formation. Respect for the other person's independence was used to legitimate one's own self-formation, and in the end this inevitably led to a cult of personality.³ This view was based on the idea that every human being is a world unto themselves, of which other people were basically no part. Consequently, there was no consideration of the conflict within which the idea of respect for the other human being's independence and autonomy arises and belongs. This conflict arises as the question: of what concern is my understanding of life to the other person, when because of it, I fancy that I know better than the other person what is best for them.

³ Løgstrup does not give a reference here, but the critique of perfectionistic anthropology and personalism (understood as the idea that ethical development of one's person is of supreme value) was an important topic both in Løgstrup and in contemporary theological existentialism. We see evidence of this also in Rudolf Bultmann's identically named article "Humanismus und Christentum," which Løgstrup undoubtedly knew, where Bultmann connects humanism with the formation of personhood and culture according to the ideas of the spirit: cf. "[...] soll die menschliche Gemeinschaft in der Kultur nach den Ideen des Geistes geformt werden und der Einzelmensch zur Persönlichkeit". Rudolf Bultmann, "Humanismus und Christentum," originally published in *Studium Generale*, 1 (1948): 70–77, reprinted in Idem, *Glauben und Verstehen. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Band 2. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 133–148, here 133 f.; translated into English by James C. G. Greig as "Humanism and Christianity." In Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*. London: SCM Press, 1955, 151–167, here 152: "the human community is to be formed in civilization according to the ideas of the mind, and the individual is to be formed into a personality."

Now an understanding of life can be many things. It is a highly abstract expression. It can be about something very basic, [462] for example that to live a human life requires the will to be sincere. To disappoint a person's desire for flattery and pandering could therefore hardly be viewed as an attempt to impose on them a foreign understanding of life – except perhaps by the disappointed person themselves. There is a certain conception of what human existence is, which one has to assume is unavoidable.

However, an understanding of life can take on more and more definite features, and a firm structure, so that in this way it becomes more and more narrow. It can become hardened into an ideology, so that for the individual it becomes something simply absolute. The more this happens, the more the individual will view their relationship to other human beings as an occasion for intrusion and possibly encroachment. The view of life that has stiffened into an ideology becomes, for the individual, what gives their life meaning, now in the sense of inverting their order of rank: their life exists for the sake of their view of life, rather than the other way around. It is not so much a case of their own life giving content to the view of life, because it in its humanity has its meaning in itself, as the reverse: it is the view of life that gives content to life – a life that without that view is empty. The life view becomes the thing for which they simply exist. Consequently, they take it that what is valid for their own existence must also as a result be valid for everyone else's as well. The ultimate truth which they have got hold of, must also be the ultimate truth for the other person – otherwise it would not be ultimate. In the name of this ultimate truth, they therefore know – with undeniable certainty – what best serves the other. Consequently, they do not need to let themselves be disturbed by the idea of respect for the independence or autonomy of other human beings. Moreover, the further this process goes on, the easier it becomes to encroach on the other person with good conscience: [463] after all, it is the ultimate truth, it is the absolute view of life, to which one is responsible.

Just as it is possible to lose all appreciation of the conflict under discussion here, through an attitude of pandering, in the policy of mutual admiration, or in the indifference towards each other, which is hidden under the guise of respect for the other's life in their own world; so it can also be lost in a similar way when the view of life becomes so rigid and so religiously final that we think we know what serves the other best in the sense that it is only through our view of life that not only our own life is given meaning and content, but also the life of the other human being.

By contrast, humanism is to remain standing where (for now to use a traditional vocabulary), philistinism's and ideology's roads intersect without setting out on either the one road or the other.

Humanism is retaining a lively awareness that we always stand in the conflict between a consideration which amounts to indulgence, acquiescence, and flattery on the one hand, and an inconsiderateness that for the sake of our own understanding of life becomes intrusion and encroachment on the other. The conflict has no solution at the level of principle. But there is always a possible solution through making a judgement as best we can in the circumstances, even if we don't actually achieve it in the given situation and even if we usually get it wrong. However, finding a solution through judgement is only possible with the help of a sense for the conflict. Amongst many other things, this sense belongs to humanism.

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Now what is Christianity's relation to this humanism? In the first place it depends on what is meant by Christianity. Church history shows us that as a cultural phenomenon, [464] as an institution and a way of thinking, as a politics and morality, Christianity, because it turned into an ideology, was in general an enemy of humanism. The Christian understanding of life becomes systematized theoretically and practically in such a way that it becomes a solidified system and a corresponding strategy and tactics emerges out of it. The understanding is detached from the life of which it is an understanding, becoming independent and impersonal and nearly acquiring the reality of a thing.

Everything is then in place so that it can override life, so our human life becomes something that exists for the sake of the life view. It is this inversion which, not completely but sufficiently perhaps for the present context, is my definition of an ideology.

Now, it is not only in the course of history that Christianity has been a cultural phenomenon, but it is just as much so today. It is therefore usually also ideological. Without going into details, the ideological inversion is there in the ordinary ecclesiastical notion that being a Christian is to serve the Gospel. The other person thus becomes the object of a cause that should be promoted. This manifests itself in manifold ways. Christians become interested in the church's power, prestige and influence. There exists an association in our country that has just this as its only purpose.⁴ The Christian sees the church as a battle front within the people. There is a magazine in our country which is even called this.⁵

⁴ This is a reference to *Kirkens Front* – see next note.

⁵ This appears to be a reference to *Kirkens Front* (The Church's Front). This began as an illegal publication in 1943 founded by a theology student Johannes Dragsdahl under inspiration from Arne Sørensen, the charismatic leader of Dansk Samling, a conservative illegal organization for

The confession and service that the individual Christian owes his neighbour is organized and collectivized at times with the stated grounds that only in this way can it be sufficiently effective. But now anyone can see and hear that the church's ways of working are ideologically determined. Of course, we are the same people whether we are in the one place or the other. [465] To every delusion of bourgeois and popular life there corresponds a delusion within the church. Drawing a parallel can often be enlightening.

But, when the idea of the church, its position in the people, and its ways of working, is so ideologically ingrained, then in addition to the already given general reason, there is probably also a special reason as well which I just want to mention, without however going into detail: namely that the church refuses to accept the consequence of the secularisation that is given with the message which is its *raison d'être*. As far as I can see, the philosophers and theologians are right who assert that the Judeo-Christian belief in creation, because it makes nature a profane organism, helps to hand it over to investigation by modern natural science, as argued by Erich Frank, Rudolf Bultmann, and Friedrich Gogarten. With the Judeo-Christian belief in creation, for modern man the world once and for all ceased to be animated or divine. In a similar way, Christianity's establishment of the incommensurability between time and eternity, which is a break with all Greek thinking, is a prerequisite for our concepts of time and of history, as a result of which our life is determined by the future, not least in our secular thinking. And, finally, Jesus's proclamation is in the same way the precondition for understanding that the civic and political arrangements of our lives together are not a religious but a secular matter. His proclamation never concerns the relationship to another human being understood as a relationship determined by kinship or national affiliation, or as regulated and guaranteed morally, legally and economically. Jesus polemicizes constantly against using religion, the relationship to God, as an additional regulation and control of these relations alongside the familial, national, [466] moral, legal and economic ones. Precisely in this lies the radicality of his message.

Nevertheless, the massive majority of the Protestant church and its theologians protest against the secularization process, which is among other things and perhaps mainly based on an infatuation with Christianity as an ideology. For it is obvious that an ideology must of course be used to regulate and safeguard civil and political life. What else should it be used to do? If the ideology

resistance against the Germans. The publication of the periodical continued after the war but stopped in 1958. Løgstrup is therefore criticizing some of his former allies in the resistance here. Curiously, there seems to be no connection between the periodical and the association. (Thanks to Ole Jensen and Hans Fink for the information in this note.)

is religious, it is regulation and safeguarding squared, so to speak: a regulation and safeguarding again of the familial, national, moral and legal regulation and safeguards, which are thus not sufficient. Admittedly this step is never fully taken by the Protestant church; Luther and in this country Grundtvig are an obstacle to that. By contrast it is taken by the Roman Catholic Church; for it has a full-fledged Christian philosophy with which it can combat any tendency to secularization. In my estimation, it is above all else the stance towards secularization which is the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism that matters nowadays.

In order to avoid a misunderstanding which is very common, secular thinking has nothing to do with the thesis of social life's so-called 'laws of their own' [Eigengesetzlichkeit].⁶ Thinking in a secular way does not mean that human beings abdicate in favour of things.

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But how does the proclamation that underlies Christianity as a cultural phenomenon relate to humanism? One thing humanism shares not only with Jesus's proclamation but also with the Old Testament prophecy, is that our life's mystery is not the gender difference [467] and fertility that connects us with nature and is nature in us, but it is the unspoken demand, that lies in the life that we have together. Our life's mysteriousness is not, as in nature religions, its natural basis, the sexual act and procreation, but our life's mystery is its humanity, everything which, despite the fact that we belong to nature, at the same time separates us from it. This is simply the most elementary presupposition of humanism as well as Christianity, including Judaism. However, what is not so obvious is the answer to the question of what then the specifically human consists in. Is it all the culture-creating abilities that we use to organize ourselves in a world that is full of the tools that we have formed, and the works that we have made, in which we feel at home and to which we have given the mark of our own life and which therefore gives us security? One can indeed call this humanism, as humanism can be so many things. But if this is the right answer, then it is not

6 As far as Løgstrup is concerned, this concept comes from German Lutheran ordinance-theology in the 1930s, while the term itself can be traced back to Max Weber. It involves the claim that different areas of social life (e. g. politics and economy) have their own, inherent laws. In an early lecture held in 1934 Løgstrup had subscribed to this idea, but now he dissociates himself from it. For further discussion, see Kees van Kooten Niekerk, "Vejen til *Den etiske fordring*." In *Livtag med Den etiske fordring*, ed. David Bugge, Peter Aaboe Sørensen. Aarhus: Klim, 2007, 9–46, which is available in English here: <https://ethicaldemand.wordpress.com/resources-and-link/>.

in the really human, but only in the natural basis, that the ungraspable is found. If on the other hand, the responsibility and the guilt that are given with the fact that we in trust and distrust are each other's world, is that which divides us from nature, then our life's ungraspability and mystery lies in the really human. That is how I understand humanism.

But why should that be called ungraspable, let alone something mysterious? When the other person through the trust with which they meet me, places a part of their life or maybe their whole life into my hands, then it is quite obvious that I owe it to them to take care of it. This indeed can be grasped. Yes, as long as it is a trust that I appreciate and as long as it enhances my courage in life. But what if the other is a person with whom I have no concern and their trust is most disturbing, since it [468] breaks into my existence in a most disruptive way? Or what if the other meets me with distrust? For indeed the fact of the matter is that it is not just in trust of the other that we are each other's world, but we are this no less in hostility. How many thoughts and feelings and actions does not enmity engage! To how large an extent does not a person often have their enemy's whole life in their hand in the way that they meet the person! How dependent is the person on the one that they hate – sometimes more dependent than on the one they love!

If, therefore, I become responsible for what another human being places of their own existence in my hands, whoever it is, whether it is one of my nearest and dearest or if it is a stranger with whom I have no business, and no matter what way they do it, whether it is in trust or hostility, then the demand is both ungraspable and mysterious. For there is no moderation in it. Why on earth should I disregard any consideration for myself, even if it be a very moderate one, in favour of a consideration for a human being who is absolutely none of my business, and who does not belong at all to the world, which now in a narrower sense I have made my own? Why should any assessment of the other in terms of culture, character and morality be disregarded?

Therefore, the problem also arises of the justification of morality, which throughout the history of philosophy has been solved in the most ingenious ways. Now, this can be either a redundant or a very useful problem. Taken in the usual way, where it has to do with what ethical life hinges upon, namely, its origins and the ethical motives' source, the problem is one of the most redundant there is. [469] For ethical life is given by the fact that we cannot live a human life at all without our relationships having the character of responsibility. The fact of responsibility – which is that everything that gives the responsible person an occasion to say and do anything, they shall say and do not for themselves, but for the sake of the other human being, for whom they are responsible – renders redundant any justification that looks around for the origins of morality.

The justification of morality becomes nothing but an embellishment for the fact that we are one another's world. The other human being is, if you will, already the justification before any justification.

However, if we look for the motive of the search for moral justification – and the consequence of such a justification – then this is one of the most useful things there is. For this does in fact always mean that the demand is moderated because one way or another it somehow brings the moment of reciprocity into the ethical relationship between human beings. The person who is under the demand, also has rightful entitlements of their own. Moral justification obscures the demand's ungraspable and mysterious lack of reciprocity and is thus a way to regulate and secure life in line with other regulations and safeguards, such as for example the administration of justice and politics. This is its usefulness!

Then you can again ask: is this humanism? For humanism can be both the one and the other. Is humanism the regulation and safeguarding of a human life in the name of mutual interest and quid pro quo? Not in the way I have taken humanism, but rather I have taken it as renouncing the justification in order to let the fact of the demand remain standing in its unreasonable lack of reciprocity. And so too does Christianity.

But it does so by proclaiming that the demand is God's. [470] Thus the idea is that it is demanded of the individual that they should take care of the other human being's life, because it is to a greater or lesser degree delivered up to them by either the trust or distrust the other shows them. But since it is not said that this caring is carried out by complying with the other's express wishes, as on the contrary it can at times only be achieved by going against them, so the requirement is unspoken. This is what the human perspective can say about it. Christianity proclaims by contrast that the demand is silent because it is God's.

Self-assertion and the drive for self-preservation resist the requirement in the name of reciprocity, saying: it must stop somewhere! It must be more moderate! After all, I must also have my own rightful entitlements. Otherwise the whole thing becomes ungraspable! It is also absolutely certain that we set boundaries, and very narrow ones, to what, as we say, can be 'reasonably' expected of us. But these are limits that do not have their origin in the demand; they are not laid down by the demand itself, but we set them on it precisely so that we do not have to hear it and recognize ourselves as guilty in relation to it. That is what the human perspective can say. Christianity proclaims by contrast that the demand is immoderate because it is divine.

However, this is still not yet what is characteristic for Christianity. Rather the content of Jesus's proclamation and the content of the proclamation about Jesus is that God never demands what he does not himself give. This is the real reason why the demand itself does not lay down any limits on itself. The

demand’s lack of reciprocity depends – in Christianity – on the fact that life has been bestowed on the individual. Every word and every deed that can be used to help the other human being, is bestowed on the individual, because life itself with its [471] possibilities for communication in words and deeds has been bestowed. Any possibility of compassion towards and forgiveness of the other has been bestowed on the individual, just as the individual person has been shown compassion and granted forgiveness in a divine sense.⁷ When we therefore set limits to the demand so that what can be required of us must be moderate, it is – Christianly speaking – because we deny that life with all its possibilities is a gift. That which we do not owe to God we do not owe to our neighbour.

That the demand does not lay down limits to itself does not mean that what is required is something extraordinary in a heroic sense. As is apparent from Jesus’s proclamation, it may just as well be very ordinary words and actions in a very ordinary life. Nevertheless the demand is immoderate, even if in a given situation it is an extremely minimal thing that is to be done. For the individual who is put under the unspoken demand has to decide for themselves what serves the other best, and that is to say that they have to decide this selflessly. No matter how big or how small what is to be done may be, it is the case that the demand is immoderate, because it can only be obeyed selflessly.

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⁷ We have chosen to translate the Danish word “barmhertighed” as “compassion” rather than “mercy”. Løgstrup’s use of the word “barmhertig” is closely connected to the biblical story of *the good Samaritan*, in Danish *den barmhertige samaritan* (Luke 10:10–37). “Barmhertighed” is the Danish translation of Greek *eleos* and Hebrew *hesed*, which Luther translated as “Barmherzigkeit”, and which is traditionally translated as “mercy”. However, the problem with “mercy” as a term in English is that it is primarily applied to cases which involve sparing someone from punishment; but this does not correspond to Løgstrup’s understanding of the Samaritan story, which instead involves the desire to relieve the suffering of other people and acting accordingly. For this reason, “compassion” seems to be a more suitable translation than “mercy”, although previously in the Løgstrup literature and translations “mercy” has been used as the preferred translation, e. g. when translating the sovereign expression of life “barmhertighed”. Nonetheless, this could raise the following worry: compassion is too passive and thus unlike mercy is more of a merely emotional state than mercy; but it is of crucial importance both to the Samaritan story and to Løgstrup’s use of “barmhertighed” that action is also involved: “Go, and do likewise”, as Jesus replies (Luke 10:37). Here Løgstrup draws a distinction between “medlidenhed”, which is merely passive (and so more like “sympathy” or “fellow-feeling”), and “barmhertighed”, which involves action. However, it is not clear this difficulty really arises, as in English “compassion” also usually involves acting, as a person who merely *felt* compassion but did not act would not count as *being* compassionate. Therefore, Løgstrup’s important distinction is captured by the use of “compassion” rather than “pity” or “sympathy”.

When asked about the relationship between humanism and Christianity, one of the questions is – and probably the crucial one – whether the difference is only religious or also ethical. If the human is all culture-creating abilities that are used to create a world in which we feel at home, or if the human is the will to regulate and safeguard our lives together under the mark of mutual interest, then the difference between humanism and Christianity is not only religious, but ethical. By contrast, if the human is the demand that is given with the fact that [472] the individual is part of the world in which the other has their life and therefore holds part of the life of the other, or perhaps the other's whole life, in their hands, so that they can only place limits on the demand by incurring guilt, then the difference between humanism and Christianity is only religious.

But if there is no ethical difference between humanism and Christianity in terms of the demand, is there not then a difference in terms of the conflict I was talking about at the beginning? After all, Christianity makes the demand understandable. Mind you, not for those for whom the human is culture-creating, because for them what is understandable is only what helps to make the world a home, which we have designed ourselves and is marked by us. Of course it is also not understandable for those to whom the human is reciprocity. Christianity only makes the demand understandable religiously – in two ways: it is God's and therefore speaks in the silence and not in everything that the other chatters on about. The demand does not itself lay down any limits, because God does not demand anything other than what he himself bestows. But then the question is whether or not the person who accepts the Christian understanding of the demand, with this understanding masters the conflict that the demand puts the individual in. Is there then not this ethical difference between humanism and Christianity?

To this the answer is no. The person who receives the Christian understanding is, as far as the conflict is concerned, in exactly the same position as the one who from the human point of view renounces any religious understanding. This understanding is of no use in removing the conflict from the world, being able to do without judgement, and instead providing certainty in the situation regarding what it is right to say and do.

For if it were good for that, the Christian understanding [473] of the demand would abolish its silence. But is this not what – Christianly understood – has happened in Jesus's proclamation?

No, precisely not. What is peculiar here is that everything that Jesus has said – and which has been handed down to us – every story and parable, every answer in a conversation or an argument, every concisely formulated utterance, is a proclamation of that particular demand which in itself is silent. That is indeed why there is nothing handy about his proclamation. Therefore, every

attempt made to systematize it has failed. It contains no instructions, no precepts, no morals, no casuistry – nothing that takes responsibility away from human beings by a priori solving in advance the conflicts into which the demand places a human being. All his words speak of the one demand, but with not one word does he break its silence.

This has been the prerogative of Christianity as a church and theology, as politics and morality. However, when one uses the understanding that the demand is God’s to break its silence, then one pretends to know something else and more concerning the demand than what in an unspoken way lies in the fact that the other’s life in trust or distrust, to a greater or lesser extent, is delivered up to me. Then the Christian pretends to have a divinely guaranteed knowledge about what in the given situation should be said and done and how the relationships between us shall be ordered. Then God has become an argument, morally and politically. The silence is broken, often in a very noisy way, in obstinacy and in an unendurable and loquacious sense of knowing better than anyone else.

Does understanding then offer no help in resolving the conflict that the demand puts us in, which was that if the service should not consist in indulgence and perhaps pandering, one risks that it will come to consist in encroachment, just as the only guarantee for not rendering oneself guilty of [474] encroachment is to let the service consist in indulgence? The answer is that understanding only provides the help that is implicit in its own content. Understanding that everything that is required of the individual is bestowed on them prevents one – provided one sticks to this understanding – while considering what should be said and done, from turning one’s thought away from the other who is to be served, toward the triumph of one’s own words and deeds, as surely as triumph is incompatible with gratitude. By contrast, the help never consists in leaping over the conflict with some sort of divinely guaranteed prescription for what needs to be said or done – in leaping over one’s own responsibility, one’s own deliberations and efforts, with all their possibilities of failure, because our insight is short-sighted, our humanity corrupted, and our love selfish.

If Christianity’s understanding of the demand were suitable for bringing the conflict out of the world and in this regard placing the Christian on a different footing from the humanist, then what God gave human beings would not be our life with all its possibilities, but it would just be a matter of fixed opinions, a life view, a theology, if you will. Then the demand would be a highly limited, a finite demand that without being responsible, without requiring any work from one’s own humanity and insight, we should realize and apply those opinions or life view or theology. Then the demand could be heard elsewhere than in guilt.

Then Christianity would be a safeguarding squared through religiosity of that life that we are already looking to safeguard culturally, morally and legally.

Everyone is inclined to regard Christianity in this way. There are just as many church-Christian ideologies that betray Christianity, as there are humanistic ideologies that betray humanism. Of course.