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Review: Humanist geography: An individual's search for meaning by Yi-Fu Tuan

University of Wisconsin Press, Madison and London, 2012, 216 pp., cloth US\$26.50
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Yi-Fu Tuan's latest book is a defence of individualism aimed at a wide lay readership, "a book on education that could benefit children everywhere" (p. ix). It is also a fascinating illustration of the relevance of geographies of religion to ongoing interests in humanistic geography. Indeed, one of Tuan's central arguments is that "religious thinking both undergoes and completes humanist thinking" and is therefore not "a relic that humanism has to outgrow," for that would be a "regrettable" narrowing of the "scope of inquiry" in humanistic geography that "offends the spirit of humanism" (p. 5). It is this latter interest in religion that I want to critically interrogate in this review, highlighting a trend that has been explicit throughout humanistic geography, but has tended to be ideologically sidelined by geographers for far too long.

Tuan's approach to humanist geography is derived from his own biographical experience, seeking to understand individual selves in modernity through a personal phenomenology. The book has five parts. The first section is a set of autobiographical chapters contrasting the traditional morality of his Chinese education in Chongqing with Western encouragements to curiosity during his time in Sydney, Oxford, Berkeley, Minneapolis, and his long-standing tenure at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. In the second part, Tuan waxes philosophical as he contemplates the experience of fragmentation and isolation as symptomatic of modern selves, demonstrating that while families are often seen as communitarian sites even as cities are arguably spaces of isolation, there can be experiences of fragmentation within families as well as a "moral universe" of mutual care among individuals in urban sites. In the third part, Tuan elaborates on the theologically conceived "dark side" of sin, showing that in the humanities, individualism has suffered as a concept because human evil has been equated with an inflated sense of egotistical avarice that leads to different expressions of violence. The fourth section is a positive contrast to the previous part, expanding on a humanistic tradition that develops how the empirical senses and the capabilities of the mind can actually be harnessed for good in place making. The fifth section then returns to the individual, concluding that it must be through religion that individuals realize their fullest potential in the classical Renaissance tradition vis-à-vis their communities.

At the heart of Tuan's understanding of individual humanism are *relationality* and *human capabilities*, particularly as they relate to how modern individuals contribute positive good to their communities. While stressing his belief in human evil, Tuan's central intervention in humanistic geographies, and in humanistic thought more generally, is that the goodness of individuals has not been sufficiently stressed. For Tuan, this optimism is inextricably tied back to questions of religion, particularly in his own dealing with the tension between Buddhism and Christianity. He wrestles with this particularly in his final parting thoughts where, while he confesses to an affinity with Buddhist modes of compassion, he turns finally to the personal faith of Christianity because he does not want to lose his individuality in an absorption into *nirvana*.

Tuan's work thus reveals a long-standing but seldom noted interest in humanistic geography: the geography of religion. Indeed, throughout Tuan's *oeuvre*, he has demonstrated that the roots of humanistic geography lie in the experience of the ineffable through religion. Tuan rightly embodies the emerging trend within geographies of religion to contest the notion that spaces can be non-religiously conceived in the first place. Although he does not draw from the work of geographers who

make similar arguments, Tuan's account of how Christian theologies and Buddhist philosophies are both implicitly and explicitly grounded in the humanistic search for individual meaning demonstrates that spatial secularization should not be conceptualized as exorcising religion from contemporary space. Instead, secular modernity is a reworking of theological traditions whose continued presence needs to be revealed.

Accordingly, Tuan's newest contribution continues to push the ongoing effort to interrogate secularization in human geography, a project that has the potential to re-conceptualize the fundamental epistemological bases of the discipline. This book is conceived as a popular work, which may explain why Tuan keeps his citations of recent geographical work to a minimum, but this should not stop geographers from relating it to their ongoing scholarly research. Certainly, those who wish to pursue more materialistic explanations may debate Tuan's claims about the theological underpinnings of humanistic geography. The re-initiation of this conversation, however, is precisely why Tuan has presented the geographical community with a book that provocatively reveals the theology behind his own and others' work located within the traditions of humanistic geography.

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