CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Christian anthropology is the branch of theological study that investigates the origin, nature, and destiny of humans and of the universe in which they live. These fundamental questions of human existence—“Where have we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?”—are addressed from a distinctively Christian point of view. Reflection upon human origins and destiny yields the doctrines of creation and eschatology. Concrete human existence is studied within its various contexts and systems—as personal and social, as unfolding within history, as rooted in networks of communities and traditions, as situated within political, economic, technological, and cultural systems, and as embedded within the material ecology of earth and the cosmos. Christian anthropology offers perspectives on the constitutive elements and experiences of human personhood—bodiliness and spirit, freedom and limitation, solitude and companionship, work and play, suffering and death, and, in specifically theological terms, sin and grace.

A comprehensive account of the situation of the human necessitates the broad range of topics that are taken up under the rubric of Christian anthropology. On the level of the human race as a whole, the Christian tradition envisions humanity’s situation as progressing through a sequence of distinct states of existence, namely, the state of being created by God, the state of fallenness brought on by the misuse of human freedom, the state of redemption made available by the missions of Christ and the Spirit in history, and the future state of eschatological fulfillment for which the human race hopes. Thus human existence in its condition as originally created passes through stages of distortion, redemption, and the hope for perfection. Correspondingly, individual persons come to discover within themselves the dimensions of creatureliness, fallenness, redeemedness, and hopefulness that simultaneously constitute their humanity from a Christian perspective. The entire trajectory that begins with creation and ends with the realization of a promised eschaton makes up what is referred to in the Christian tradition as the divine economy (oikonomia), that is, the plan or design by which God governs, manages, administers the affairs of the created “household” (from oikos, “house,” and nomos, “rule” or “law”).

Christian anthropology is distinct from the secular disciplines of anthropology, such as cultural anthropology, in that it moves beyond the descriptive and empirical toward the prescriptive and the normative. In other words, Christian thought does not simply consider how people actually live, but also makes claims about how people could live, should live, ought to live. The non-theological fields of study contribute enormously to the understanding of the human, and Christian anthropology builds upon their discoveries, integrating them into an overarching vision that goes beyond the methodological boundaries of anthropology as a secular discipline. Christian anthropology is certainly not alone in this regard; it may be compared with the anthropologies of other religious traditions and philosophical systems that also claim to state a normative vision of human existence.

The Human Person in Christian Thought
From its earliest periods the Christian tradition has appropriated the concept of the human person as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27). The *imago Dei* has been and continues to be a cornerstone in particular of Catholic theological anthropology. From a Christian viewpoint the interpretation of this concept is decidedly christological and eschatological. That is, Jesus of Nazareth manifests in tangible and visible human form the authentic and fulfilled *imago Dei*, to which humans are called to be conformed in a gradual process that will only reach its culmination in the eschaton.

The revelation of divine personhood in Jesus Christ constitutes the norm for what human personhood is called to fully become. An understanding of divine personhood is necessarily trinitarian, for it is only in the mutuality and reciprocity of the giving and receiving of love among the persons of the Triune God that the full scope of personhood is manifested. The fundamental elements of personhood may be designated as *receptivity* and *donativity*. Only in an authentic communion of persons (*communio personarum*) can these capabilities be realized.

Receptivity refers to the capacity and openness of a person to receive from others the gifts that they offer, birth spiritual and material, and above all the gift of their very selves. Donativity, or generativity, is the corresponding and reciprocal capacity to give to others and to make a gift of oneself to others. It is only in the pattern or rhythm of receptivity and donativity that genuine personhood can be realized.

For the Christian, the prime expression of this rhythm is found in the relationship between Jesus Christ and the God who is his Father. In his earthly life Jesus reveals the fullness of self-giving or donativity by pouring out his life for others. In the gift of the Eucharist and through his passion and death Jesus’ self-giving reaches its greatest realization. At the same time, his capacity to make a gift of himself to others is grounded in the fact that he has first received everything that he has and is from the Father. But the receptivity and donativity of the earthly Christ is itself grounded in the eternal rhythm of the mutual relationship between the Father and the Son, in which the Father “generates” or “begets” the Son by a complete “giving away” of himself to the Son. So extensive is this donativity of the Father that the Son is truly “one in being” with him. In turn, so to speak, the Son offers all that he is back to the Father, who thus “receives” his own full identity as Father precisely in this mutual relationship with the Son. And the Spirit then is realized as the Spirit “of the Father and the Son,” that is, the bond of mutual giving and receiving that is so complete as to stand as a distinctly existing entity in relation to Father and Son.

If the essential dynamic of Trinitarian life and personhood is the mutual giving and receiving of the Father and the Son, so for human beings, made “in the image and likeness of God,” true personhood is to be found to the extent that this same rhythm and pattern of receptivity and donativity is embraced and lived out. The concrete realization of how this rhythm is to be realized will of course require ongoing discernment and judgment on the part of individuals and communities who seek to take their direction and inspiration from the Triune God as revealed by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. But the underlying “logic” or “grammar” of the Christian life, that is, the fundamental dynamic to
be realized in ever so many particular instances, is this rhythm of receptivity and donativity.

The specific ordering of these capacities to one another is a crucial element of Christian anthropology. The receptive dimension of personhood is prior to the donative or generative; that is, what comes first in the order of human experience is the receiving, indeed, of existence itself. All human acts of giving or donating flow from the prior reception of capabilities, charisms, talents, opportunities—in a word, of grace. This point has been defended at crucial moments of theological development in the Christian tradition. Thus Paul is at pains to proclaim the priority of the gift of faith with respect to the merit of good works. Likewise, Augustine, in his disputations with the Pelagian movement, argued for the absolute precedence of grace received purely as gift relative to any human initiative. Again, in the controversies of the Reformation, debates concerning the relationship of justification to sanctification reflected the importance of achieving an adequate articulation of the receptive and donative elements of anthropology. The Catholic perspective, as expressed in the Council of Trent’s Decree on Justification, holds for the prevenience of the grace of justification while simultaneously insisting on the necessity of human cooperation in the movement toward holiness.

Contemporary theological reflection continues to address these issues. While in general there has been a greater emphasis on human agency and the categories of work, labor, and creativity in more recent anthropologies, there have also been fresh articulations of the priority of the receptive element of personhood to all human action. Thus, while the notion of the human person as “created co-creator” has gained currency as an interpretation of the *imago Dei*, so theologians such as Hans von Balthasar have argued for the primacy of receptivity as a counterweight to the tendency of modern ideologies to view persons primarily through what they do, what they make, what they produce.

The Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes* represents the most extensive treatment of theological anthropology in the recent teaching documents of the Catholic Church. Subsequently, Pope John Paul II, in the wide sweep of his writings, has drawn on the teaching of *Gaudium et spes* to highlight specific aspects of anthropology. In particular, two passages from *GS* appear with regularity in the various encyclicals and letters of John Paul. First, he frequently cites the passage at the beginning of n. 22, that “It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear.” With similar frequency he cites the final passage of n. 24—“Man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself.”

While the former reference establishes the necessity of an adequate Christology as a precondition for anthropology, the latter reference obviously highlights the donative or generative dimension of anthropology without the complementary and indeed prior element of receptivity. This is not to say that John Paul does not recognize the antecedence of receptivity to human action and agency in his anthropology. But some commentators have expressed concern that John Paul’s thought could be misinterpreted as a reversal of the traditional Christian position. This concern is perhaps augmented by
the importance that John Paul places on work as a means of human fulfillment in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*.

While there has perhaps been a need in recent Christian theology to recover the importance of “action” as compared to “contemplation” in anthropology, there remains, on the whole, a continuity with the tradition that sees authentic human agency—the giving and offering of self to others through active and productive performance—as flowing from a prior receptivity of gift and grace. In any given time and situation the precise interplay of these elements may vary, but, for the Christian, the Augustinian truth that humans are “made good in order to do the good” grounds the Aristotelian truth that humans “do the good in order to become good.”

It is the mutual sharing of goods and of persons that establishes the possibility of *communio* within the Church as a reflection of the *communio* of the divine persons. This “gift exchange” takes place among persons in a given local church, among local churches as such, and, indeed, among the churches in the diverse cultures of the world as reflective of the unity and diversity of the universal Church. If human identity is fundamentally rooted in the reception and giving of gifts, then it becomes clear that only in a matrix or network of reciprocal relationships do individuals become persons in the fullest sense of the term. Furthermore, the identity of the Church is precisely found in *missio*, its mission to the world, which ultimately is to broaden the circles of *communio* to their most inclusive extent, embracing the entire human family.

One further issue in this line of thought deserves mention, and that is the question of associating the dimensions of receptivity and donativity to specifically feminine and masculine forms of being in the world. Some, drawing especially on the work of von Balthasar, have argued that there is an intrinsic link between receptivity and femininity, on the one hand, and donativity and masculinity, on the other. This position does not deny that all persons, male and female, find their identity in the interplay of receptivity and donativity, but it does claim that receptivity is *proper* to females while donativity is *proper* to males. This line of reasoning, sometimes referred to as the “theology of complementarity,” can be used to support claims about the appropriate social roles of men and women in family, society, and the Church. In particular, this perspective is at times employed in arguments for the exclusion of women from presbyteral orders in the Roman Catholic Church. While this school of thought has found some support, perhaps in response to a perceived drift toward androgyny in Western culture, on the whole the linkage of receptivity and donativity to specific genders remains on the level of assertion rather than persuasive argumentation.

**Nature and Grace Reconceived**

The traditional anthropological categories of nature and grace retain their validity, although their usage has at times led to unwarranted separation between the “order of creation” and the “order of redemption,” that is, between those realities arising from creation itself and those realities brought about by the missions of the Word and the Spirit in the world. That which is created is already absolutely gratuitous; therefore, it is more
appropriate to speak of “nature” as a form of grace, as “the first grace” or “the grace of creation,” while those gifts that come specifically through the missions of Word and Spirit may be termed “the second grace” or “the grace of redemption.”

Any number of attributes may be considered to be part of the innate makeup of human persons as created. The attempt to define human nature as such has often focused on those characteristics that are unique to the species, such as rationality, freedom, the use of symbols and language, etc., and which differentiate the human from all other forms of created reality. More broadly, it is helpful to think of the array of “anthropological constants,” that is, those universal categories that are instantiated in each particular human being in a unique constellation, such as “situatedness” in history and culture, ethnicity, bodiliness, etc., as well as universal categories of experience such as suffering, contingency, moral responsibility, and so forth. The categories of receptivity and donativity as discussed above do not replace this wider consideration of the makeup of the human, but they are the more relevant predicates in a specifically theological anthropology.

An additional element that is specific to human existence and nature is the presence of normative ideals of living and action, which give rise to a distinction between human nature in the empirical or descriptive sense and human nature in the normative or prescriptive sense. This distinction grounds the possibility and, indeed, the actuality that human existence will fall short of what it could be should be, ought to be. This reality in turn grounds, from the Christian perspective, the human need for redemption or salvation, both from the non-moral or “ontic” evils and suffering of a finite created order as well as from the specifically moral evils arising from the sinful misuse of human capabilities.

The Christian proclaims that human existence is further qualified by the possibilities opened up through the activity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in history. Thus, the original condition of humanity as given in creation itself is enveloped in a larger horizon of divine activity that reveals the full scope of the divine economy and the destiny of the human race. Quite consistently from its beginnings the Christian tradition has articulated its understanding of the effects of these further graces in two distinct but intertwined threads of thought. The first effect of these graces is described as redeeming, healing, justifying, liberating—that is, grace effects a freedom-from those powers and forces that enslave or bind the human capacity to act. The second effect of these graces, building upon the first, is described as divinizing, elevating, sanctifying, creating—that is, grace effects a freedom-for, an empowerment of human beings to move toward their ultimate fulfillment of life in communion with God. The grace of Jesus Christ both overcomes the negative effects of sin and evil and actualizes the full range of possibilities latent in the original act of creation.

A brief survey of Christian theological history reveals the continuity of this double designation of the effects of grace. In the patristic era, Western theologies gave particular attention to grace as redeeming human existence from the condition described through the images of slavery, indebtedness, woundedness, and guilt. By comparison, Eastern theologies more readily spoke of the grace of Christ as making possible the theosis or
divinization of the human being. Again, in the Scholastic era, Thomas Aquinas spoke of both *gratia sanans* (the grace that heals) and *gratia elevans* (the grace that elevates). The corresponding categories more often utilized in the period of the Reformation are *justification* (the initial establishment of a right relationship with God) and *sanctification* (the ongoing development and flourishing of that relationship). Finally, contemporary theological language more readily employs the terms *liberating* and *creating* to name this twofold gratuity brought about by Christ.

It may be observed that the twofold rhythm of grace found in the order of redemption has a certain correspondence with the receptive and donative capacities given to human beings as created. That grace which redeems, heals, justifies, and liberates more properly corresponds to the receptive dimension, in that it is gift in the absolute sense of having no connection to the merit or value of any human work or initiative. In traditional terms, it is *operative grace*, that is, “what God does in us without us.” Subsequently, that grace which divinizes, elevates, sanctifies, and creates corresponds to the donative dimension, in that it more directly calls forth human action as a partner. Again, in traditional terms, this is *co-operative grace*, that is, “what God does in us with us.” Thus, the maxim that “grace builds on nature” is illustrated, if receptivity and donativity are considered potentialities given to humans in creation (“by nature”) that are fully enabled and empowered by a corresponding twofold effect of grace in the order of redemption.

By way of conclusion, it is to be noted again that ultimately it will only be from the point of view of the eschaton that the full scope of the divine *oikonomia* will be revealed. Only at that point will the full contours of the human movement through createdness, fallenness, redeemedness, and consummation become apparent. Christian faith rests on the conviction that the resurrection of Christ represents the sign and guarantee that effectively moves human history toward its fulfillment.

**Bibliography:**  

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