

Introduction

IT IS REPORTED THAT there are as many as 100 billion neurons that make up the human nervous system.¹ It has also been noted of the brain's operation that the "number [of possible states of activation] is thought to be larger than the number of atoms in the known universe."² It is therefore an understatement to say that this biological organ is quite complex. And, yet, it is a fundamental part of what makes us who we are as human beings.

There is more to human nature than our biological functioning as well. The field of psychology, as we shall see, contains a number of schools of thought that study the human psyche from different perspectives. From psychodynamic theorists, to social-cognitive researchers, to transpersonal explorers, psychology in and of itself is quite complex.

However, we must also know that the study and exploration of human nature does not begin in contemporary times. History, particularly western Christian history, is full of texts that offer detailed explorations of the human condition from both internal reflections and external observations. The *Conferences* of John Cassian, for instance, contain intrapersonal insights and reflections reported by monks living in the deserts of North Africa of early Christian history.³ Thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo, Maximus the Confessor, Martin Luther, and Immanuel Kant all offer discussions on the nature and essence of the human condition as we shall see in this book.

Yet, given this voluminous body of knowledge, there doesn't yet seem to be a consensus that has emerged either in relation to the basic components that appear to be more commonly experienced and

1. Bear, Connors, and Paradiso, *Neuroscience*, 24.
2. Siegel, *Mindsight*, 38.
3. Cassian, *John Cassian: The Conferences*.

enduring elements of human nature or in relation to the terminology that is used in referring to these components and their interrelationships. While there are common models that are used in today's religious and spiritual circles, such as "body-mind-spirit,"⁴ many of these still leave questions relating to what these terms mean and how these components are related to one another. There is, therefore, still work to be done to parse out what the basic elements of human nature might be and to address their interrelationships.

Nevertheless, those working religious education and spiritual formation positions are tasked with working for the spiritual upliftment of the individuals and communities that they are called to work with. On the surface, it might initially seem to be a relatively simple vocation: journey with people towards the greater fulfillment of their lives with God. However, as one begins to work closely with individuals, one can begin to realize just how complex humans are. In other words, we can begin to see how the insights of the historical and contemporary thinkers and theorists mentioned above might help to shed insight into our work.

Consider for a moment that your car has broken down and that you have no prior knowledge of how vehicles work and that you cannot afford to pay someone else to fix it. In this situation, you could pop the hood and begin trying to figure out what all of the different components are and how they work all on your own. Or, you can seek the help of others who are more knowledgeable in this area who can help you to learn at least enough about your car to get it running again. Clearly, the second option is the more preferable one.

Apply this now to our work as religious educators and spiritual formators. In order to help others (as well as ourselves) to grow in their lives with God, it will be very helpful to have some foundational background in relation to human nature. As we have already seen, and will see in much more detail below, human beings are infinitely complex (literally, given our inherent connections to our Infinite Creator); far more than the vehicles that carry us around on a regular basis. If we would benefit from the insights and support of others in better understanding our cars, how much more might we benefit from an education on human nature in our formation work with others?

However, as asserted above, there does not yet seem to be consensus in relation to the basic elements of human nature and their

4. For examples of this, see such works as Hauser, *Moving in the Spirit*; Van Kaam, *Fundamental Formation*; Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*.

inter-relationships. In light of this, we might wonder at what can be done. First, we can simply choose one of the theories of human nature from our own communities or from others and use it as is in our ministries. Or, we can attempt to create our own based mostly on our own personal experiences and background. Finally, we can seek to synthesize a more unified theory from among two or more other models. Anyone of these methods would provide us with a model that could then be used to help guide our formative work. But which of these methods should we use? How will we know that the theory we are using is really helpful for our specific programs and communities? When we do choose or synthesize one, how might we go about applying it to our specific formation programs?

This book is an attempt to help answer these questions and to provide some of the background and education to support this ministerial work. The following are the primary goals of this text: 1) To provide an exploration of the diverse views of human nature as they are found in both western Christianity and modern science; 2) To see how we might begin to construct our own generalized theological anthropology in lights of these views; and 3) To see how we might apply these synthesized models of human nature to our own specific spiritual formation and religious education programs. In addition, this book will construct and offer a generalized theory that may be used more broadly beyond the human person.

In order to pursue these ends, we must first understand that there are multiple levels at which most congregational, non-profit, and educational ministries operate: individual, relational, and communal.⁵ We can work with individuals to help them with their own personal spiritual lives, lives that filled with compassion, self-worth, connection, service, joy, et cetera. Secondly, we need to work with the relationships that are formed and are forming in our communities. From close intimate ones, to cliques and small groups, these relationships should embody and manifest God's intimacy, forgiveness, healing, support, self-differentiation, et cetera. Finally, we can work with communities and organizations as a whole. This entails working with the social, political, and economic aspects so that they are more fully in-line with God's Life of justice, stewardship, et cetera. Each of these comprises the work of those in ministry and each level must be attended to with the same intentionality and discernment as any of the others.

5. For further discussions of these levels, see the introductory chapters of Kyle, *Living Spiritual Praxis*; Kyle, *Sacred Systems*.

Within this scheme, this work is located primarily at the individual level. It is an effort to help us to better understand some of the rich array of dynamics and movements that comprise our spiritual being and becoming as humans. Towards these ends, this book will unfold along the following lines. In the first chapter, we will explore a series of theological anthropologies that have been a part of western Christian history. Our goal here is not an in-depth study of each of these various thinkers, but rather an attempt to identify what some of the common elements of human nature that have been identified across this history. Immediately following these explorations, we will identify what some of these common elements are as well as the theories of change and theologies latent within and among them, both of which are central for the work of spiritual formation.

In the second chapter, we will then turn our attention to some of the modern science schools of thought that have and continue to offer insights into the human condition. Again, we are not seeking an extensive education in each of these fields, but rather a brief introduction to some of the main aspects of human nature that have been identified. As with the first chapter, we will then identify the common elements that the various schools have studied. We will also reflect on the nature of change found among them and compare some of the common elements with those found in our western Christian thinkers.

With this historical and contemporary background in place, we will then walk through a process to create a more unified and synthesized theological anthropology. As we shall see, what is most important here is not so much the model of human nature that is presented but rather the processes that were engaged to synthesize such a model. Readers are not expected to accept this theory as *the* unified model that still seems to be missing in relation to human nature as discussed above. Instead, you are encouraged to follow along and create your own model, one that is more appropriate to your own locale and all that God is doing therein.

The fourth chapter then takes us on more of an abstracted side-step wherein I take the unified model from the previous chapter and inductively generate a more universal model for formation work. With what could be categorized as a “universal theory of organism,” this model is intended to help derive and articulate more generalized principles and guidelines for our ministries. The primary goal of this abstracted chapter is really to help us to better understand the nature and essence of spiritual formation and religious education.

The final chapter then brings us back to the ground where we will be learning how to use the unified model from the third chapter, as well as the principles and guidelines from the fourth, to guide our program development. Here a detailed case example will be presented in which a spirituality and peacebuilding program is designed following what may be called “theory-based” program development method. Again, the goal here is not the specificities of the case example itself, but rather the processes that are engaged which can help to guide the creation of our own formation programs.

Overall, the work of religious education and spiritual formation is a complex endeavor. As we shall see, just focusing on a single individual and their own growth is an infinitely interconnected and complicated kind of work. If we are to do this work effectively, we must do so in well-informed ways just as we should when attempting to fix our own cars. It is therefore hoped that this book will not only provide us with a fuller understanding of some of the views of human nature that are available, but also to provide some level of guidance in how we might begin to utilize and apply this background knowledge to the ministries to which God has called us to. At their heart, these are ministries that strive towards the spiritual being and becoming of our world.