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THE THEOLOGICAL ESTIMATE OF MAN

The Theme

THE GENERAL THEME under which the subject of this paper has to be treated is “Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs”. This immediately raises two difficulties. The first is that a theological estimate of man by its very nature is rooted in only one source, namely, the gospel from which it is a derivative. Hence, African beliefs cannot obviously be used as such. But the gospel addresses man—every man. It cannot possibly do so without taking into consideration man’s estimate of himself.

It follows, then, that while a section of this paper should deal with the various theological lines of approach, a second section should consider the African view of man. A synthesis would seem desirable; yet a synthesis is impossible without reflecting upon the African contemporary situation from which, indeed, a synthesis is anticipated to emerge in time.

The second difficulty is with the use of the term “African”. Objections have been raised from certain quarters, theological and otherwise, against the free way in which it has been used. Africa is such a large continent, composed of hundreds of peoples of several races, and it would be misleading to make general statements about “African” beliefs and practices. Those who raise the objections point, and justly do so, to the great differences that exist among Africans. To prove their point, they tend to go to extremes, shutting out the possibility that similarities, identical in many cases, do exist, and that in a real sense it is possible to talk of an “African personality”, an “African way of life”, and “an African approach”. This, too, could be done with a bias; but fear of prejudice should not unduly bend the evidence toward the counter tendency.

The present writer does not, however, attempt to speak except of his Africa: Egypt, his homeland, the Upper Nile of the Sudan, and Kenya, where he worked and undertook the study of the African heritage. Mention will be made of particular peoples (avoiding as much as possible the term "tribe", which has acquired through misuse wrong connotations) in respect of whom particular contributions are made.

Basic Assumptions

The aim of presenting the various ways in which the subject of man was treated by theologians is *variety* rather than comprehensiveness, for it is established beyond doubt that we have, in the way of theological thinking about man, not a set, rigid doctrine, but a deposit of theological heritage open for increase and renewal. In spite of the great variety, that deposit not only represents the continuity of the theological life of the Church since her early beginnings until today, but also establishes the basic assumption that theologians did not live and think in isolation from their respective localities, age and generation. To address their contemporary situation and to make themselves understood they must have used concepts, terminology and ways of thinking accessible to them through their training and experience.

As an illustration, consider, for instance, the theology of the second century, when the young Christian community had to be on the defensive against assaults from outside and heresies from inside. One main issue was the pressing need to define the faith which led the Apostolic Fathers to treat the gospel as another law. The new converts were taught to secure the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life through meritorious works and obeying the "new law of Christ". Against the "heretics" very strong words were often used. Ignatius calls them "wild beasts, mad dogs, biting secretly". He describes sin as deadly sickness for the healing of which there is only one physician, "fleshly and spiritual, begotten and unbegotten, God in man, true life in death".¹

Justin Martyr (second century), one of the Apologists, being

¹ Ignatius, *Ad Eph.* vii. 2. See Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London, O.U.P., 1943), p. 42.

himself a convert from paganism to Christianity, conceives of the idea that men are by nature "children of necessity and ignorance", and that through baptism they are regenerated and become "children of freedom and knowledge". He disputes the permanent obligation of the law. Christ's unique position (Divinity) entitles Him to abrogate it. A true interpretation of the Scriptures, he said, "justifies the admission of the Gentiles into the Church without requiring them to observe the demands of the law".²

St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) offers in his life a remarkable illustration of how theology is deeply influenced by the theologian's experiences. Without going into the inconsistencies of his theology, it is enough to point out that his doctrine of "irresistible grace" is the natural outcome of a life that could not avoid the claims of God. Only a man who knew the anguish of defeat in the face of his carnal lust could think of it as the root of human damnation and human loss of free will. Listen to his words of confession addressing God:³

I sent up these sorrowful words: How long, how long?
Tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now?
Why not is there this hour an end of my uncleanness?

I. ESTIMATING MAN—THEOLOGICAL LINES OF APPROACH

Four distinct ways of approach to our subject are discernible:

- a. Estimating man on the basis of the Genesis record of man's origin and sin.
- b. The Christ-centred approach.
- c. The social approach.
- d. The evolutionary approach.

(a) *Estimating Man on the Basis of the Genesis Record of Man's Origin and Sin*⁴

Irenaeus (A.D. 120-200) maintains that man was not created in a state of perfection from the beginning, "for things which

² F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London, Duckworth, 1960), pp. 50-52. Cp. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 109.

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII, xii, 28.

⁴ For a comprehensive survey, see Sydney Cave, *The Christian Estimate of Man* (London, Duckworth, 1944).

have recently come to birth cannot be eternal; and, not being eternal they fall short of perfection for that very reason. And being newly created they are therefore childish and immature, and not yet trained for an adult way of life."

The "image of God" is explained as "incorruption"—the gift which got lost with the Fall, but restored through the Incarnation. Yet, man's fall served God's purposes to lead man into maturity.

On the nature of man, Irenaeus says, "The complete man is a mixture and a union, consisting of a soul, which takes to itself the Spirit of the Father, to which is united the flesh which was fashioned in the image of God." The soul is perceived as midway between the flesh and the spirit.⁵

Origen (c. A.D. 185-254), the Platonic theologian from the Alexandrian school, explains rationally the universality of sin in the context of the whole universe. According to him, the souls were created in the beginning and had an existence comparable to that of the angels—a state from which some have fallen and become tied to the flesh. According to the diversity of their works different states are assigned to them in this world. Some are born as human children; and some, indeed, may "reach such degradation, and forgetting their rational nature and dignity they sink down to the order of irrational beings and brutes".

The "image of God" in man is thus explained as "rational dignity", "the possibility of perfection". It is differentiated from the "likeness of God" which is reserved for the final consummation and which man must appropriate for himself by "the eagerness of his own efforts". This is possible because the Creator "granted to the intelligences the power of movement at their own free will, and that was in order that the good done in them might be their own, by being maintained by the use of their own will".⁶

From among the African writers we meet with Tertullian (A.D. 160-240?), the Stoic lawyer who found in Jesus Christ the sufficiency of knowledge. In his preoccupation with defending Christianity against Marcionism, he presented the

⁵ F. L. Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 113 ff., and Bettenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 92 ff. Cp. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, V, 16.

⁶ F. L. Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 270-280.

gospel as law. Sin is universal, he said, because man's soul is born sinful. Man has inherited Adam's body and soul, although a grain of goodness still lingers in the human soul mixed with the inherited uncleanness. Sin committed after baptism can only be forgiven through penance and humility. Presumption is man's original sin and his most grave one.

In spite of his firm stand against the Marcionite view that creation was brought into being by the Demiurge, Tertullian could only conceive of marriage as something related to fornication, while abstinence from it is related to sanctity.⁷

St. Augustine, taken as a heretic or not, has influenced the thinking of the Church for generations. His estimate of man, while far from being consistent in all his works, makes the following points:

(1) Man's nature was created at first faultless and without any sin. All the good qualities which it still possesses in its form, life, senses, intellect, it has from the Most High God, its Creator and Maker.

(2) It was expedient that man should be at first so created as to have it in his power both to will what was right and to will what was wrong, not without reward and punishment promised.

(3) Through Adam's sin his whole posterity were corrupted in him, and were born under the penalty of death, which he had incurred. All descended from him, and from the woman who had led him into sin; being the offspring of carnal lust on which the same punishment of disobedience was visited, they were tainted with the original sin, and were by it drawn through diverse errors and sufferings into that last and endless punishment which they suffer in common with the fallen angels, their corruptors and masters, and the partakers of their doom.

(4) Children who die and to whom baptism, the bath of regeneration, was out of reach, and were thus unable to be justified, are condemned.

It is even probable that children are involved in the guilt not only of the first pair, but of their immediate parents.

(5) Man cannot restore himself to life. For when man by his free will sinned, sin being victorious over him, man's freedom of will was lost.

⁷ *Tertullian: de pudicitia*, 4-5.

(6) Election rests completely with God. Part of the human race is elected and predestined for eternal life. It is only to these that God's grace is bestowed inwardly, the grace from which the beginning of faith comes.⁸

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the Dominican theologian, successfully combined the Scriptures, Augustine, Aristotle and Neo-Platonism in one well-integrated system of thought. In many cases, he is an echo of St. Augustine, only enlarged, softened and philosophized. The following are but a few of his contributions to our subject:

There is a variety of divine resources God makes available for man, says St. Thomas. First of all, there is the grace without which man cannot inherit eternal life, nor can he in any way rise from sin. Man cannot prepare himself to receive the light of grace except by the gratuitous grace of God moving him inwardly.

In order to live righteously man needs a twofold help of God: first, a habitual gift whereby "corrupted human nature is healed". After its being healed, it is "lifted up so as to work deeds meritorious of eternal life, which *exceed the capability of nature*". Secondly, man needs the help of grace in order to be moved by God to act.

The gift of habitual grace is not therefore given to us that we may no longer need the divine help; for every creature needs to be preserved in the good received from him. . . . Man will need the divine help even in the state of glory, where grace shall be fully perfected.⁹

The differentiation between habitual grace and divine assistance is clear on the question of perseverance. St. Thomas explains perseverance in three ways: (a) in "standing fast lest man be moved by the assault of sadness"; (b) as a habit whereby man has the purpose of "persevering in good until the end". In these two, perseverance is infused together with grace, like all other virtues. (c) The third way is that perseverance is the "abiding in good to the end of life". In this habitual grace is not needed, only divine assistance "to guide and guard against

⁸ Whitney J. Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, pp. 521-579, 657-730, 790.

⁹ *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 109, art. 9 ad 1.

the attacks of the passions". Man will need to continue beseeching God for this gift, that he might be kept from evil until the *end of his life*.

Perhaps not least among the contributions of St. Thomas is his teaching that theology should take note of the circumstances of human actions. "Theologians", he says, "consider human acts under the aspect of merit and demerit, which is proper to human acts; and for this it is requisite that they should be voluntary."¹⁰

Martin Luther (1483-1546) sees in man's nature a resemblance to three compartments of the Tabernacle. The spirit corresponds to the "holy of holies"—"high, deep and noble, where the incomprehensible, invisible, and eternal are lodged. The dwelling place of faith and the Word of God." The soul corresponds to the "holy place" where things that could be comprehended lodge and get processed by the reason. The body is the "outer court". "Its work (with its members) is but to carry out and apply that which the soul knows and the spirit believes."

Luther's view of Adam before the Fall resembles that of St. Thomas. He explains:

Adam was endowed . . . with a twofold life: an animal and an immortal life. The latter however was not as yet plainly revealed, but held in hope. Had he not fallen by sin therefore, he would have eaten and drunk, and worked, and generated in all innocence, sinlessness, and happiness.

Luther hesitates to give any opinion about the "image of God" after which Adam was formed. "It has been completely lost", he states, "and we can never fully attain to the knowledge of what it was." He refuses to accept that memory, mind and will compose the image of God in man. Satan has the same faculties in a much stronger form. Yet whatever it was, it was perfection and excellence, and "Adam possessed in it its moral substance".

Of original sin, he insists that it plainly appears both in "sins and in the punishment of them"; how great and terrible it, indeed, is. "Look only at lust," he contends. "Is it not most mighty, both in concupiscence and in disgust?" As a result

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Ia Iiae, q. 109, art. 10; q. 7, art. 2.

of the Fall, man's will and intellect became completely corrupt. The object of the gospel, hence, is seen as to restore to the origin, and indeed to a "higher image" all men, so that they may live in and with God, and be "one" with Him.

Luther believed that all men have gone out of the way, and are unrighteous, evil, sinners, and condemned. "There is nothing in man which is good." But God forgives sins merely out of His grace and for Christ's sake.¹¹

John Calvin (1509-1564) is well known for reviving Augustinianism with its predestination. Calvin's theology, however, was formed under the three pressures of his personal struggle, the historic crisis of his time, and the suffering of Evangelical Christians in France. Under such circumstances, what is sought and what usually emerges is a straightforward theology with a clear-cut answer for every situation, with strong leanings towards the deterministic elements of religion, expressed in the strongest way possible. That is Calvin's theology.

Calvin sees the creation of man as the noblest and most remarkable example of God's justice, wisdom and goodness. Yet, man cannot have a clear and complete knowledge of God unless accompanied by a corresponding knowledge of himself. The "likeness of God" extends to the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all other kinds of living creatures. And although the primacy of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, in his original condition, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow.

Calvin leaves no doubt that when Adam fell from that original state, by this defection, he was alienated from God. Therefore, even though we grant that God's image in man was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity. Estrangement from God meant the death of man's soul. Thus, through his fall, Adam has consigned his race to ruin for he has perverted the whole order of nature in heaven and earth.

Beside general providence, God exercises especial care over each of His works, in that He so attends to the regulation of

¹¹ Hugh Thompson Kerr, Jr., ed., *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1943, pp. 77-89.