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THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN IN
CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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“What is man, that You are mindful of him . . . ?”

—Ps 8:4

“He [Jesus Christ] is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

—Col 1:17

Introduction

It is not difficult to find Christians who set aside, if not disdain, secular wisdom on the grounds that the gospel is the truth and therefore anything other than the gospel can only be detrimental. Similarly, it is not difficult to find humanists and social scientists who maintain that a Christian approach to human challenges and perplexities, but also opportunities, is inherently one-sided, unnuanced, and non-life-affirming so as to be able only to impair humankind’s evident capacity for manifold self-enrichment.

Both parties are impoverished by such attitudes. Both parties need to suspend their suspicion and assess open-mindedly what the other has to offer, without relinquishing their own critical angle of vision. While it is frequently argued that religion can blind us to a creaturely wisdom ordained by God for the blessing of all humankind, it must be pointed out no less frequently that the haunting and persistently lethal self-contradiction in human beings is profoundly probed in a faith commitment that discloses the naïveté and destructive hubris of much human self-assessment.

This paper addresses leaders in Christian higher education—professors, instructors, curriculum designers, and administrators—in the hope of encouraging a thorough integration of theology with the liberal arts and social sciences.

The Complexity of the Human Person

In my *Theology of the Human Person* course, I remind students repeatedly that human existence is enormously complex, if only because of the countless relationships and determinations that characterize us. I am a husband, a father, a grandparent, a brother, an uncle, and a friend to several people. I am also a professor.

In addition, I am a Canadian, and therefore my angle of vision on many matters differs from an American's or a European's. I am white, Protestant, Anglophone, and a British subject, with all that that determination has meant historically and still means.

I am male, educated, and articulate; I grew up dirt-poor but have managed to enter the economic middle class, and therefore understand both worlds. Above all, I am a clergyman who has repeated his ordination vows every day since 13 May 1970.

In class, I emphasize life's complexity because more than a few students want to maintain that life is simple. They want to maintain that life is simple for the sake of rendering life manageable—one aspect of which is the deployment of pigeonholes and boxes in which to place other people, thereby making it easier to step around, pick their way past, or even write off persons and situations that perplex or threaten them.

Relentlessly I remind students that any assumption of simplicity “this side” of complexity renders life simplistic, artificial, and shrivelled—all for the sake of enhancing self-protection, self-security, self-superiority, and self-righteousness. All attempts at upholding an ersatz simplicity are readily exposed as naïve. Life is inherently complex.

From Complexity to Complication to (Self-)Contradiction

Next, I tell students that if such complexity weren't enough, all of us complicate our lives on account of sin.

How much more complicated does sin render an existence that is already complex? It is Peter, speaking for the Twelve, who insists that they have left everything to follow the Master; and it is also Peter (and by extension the Twelve) whom Jesus pronounces as nothing less than Satanic.¹ We do well to note this: it is Christ's most intimate friends whom he declares his greatest enemies.

Plainly, sin complicates life's complexity so very thoroughly as to render the complication a contradiction. "Contradiction" is no exaggeration: that creature who alone is created in the image and likeness of God has obscured that image so thoroughly as to render it non-recognizable. "You are of your father the devil," Jesus declares concerning those who claim descent from and therefore spiritual affinity with Abraham and ultimately with God the Father.² Without exaggeration, the contradiction is so very far-reaching as to leave no area or aspect of our existence contradiction-free.³

Then who are we? What are we? We are one giant self-contradiction.

Eschatological Resolution

At this point in class I expound an even profounder truth, namely, that there is a genuine, profound simplicity on the other side, the "far side," of complexity: there is the profoundest simplicity of our identity in Christ. Eschatologically, we are *not* the giant self-contradiction we display every day; eschatologically, we are not left scrambling to salvage integration and identity from the "screw-up" we have rendered ourselves. Eschatologically, in Christ we have been appointed to appear "without blemish

1. Mark 8:33. Jesus addresses Peter while "turning" (i.e., to face) and "seeing" the disciples. All Scripture quotations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

2. John 8:44.

3. The Reformation's understanding of "total depravity" means, among other things, that there is no area, aspect, or dimension of the human that is sin-free, and that the comprehensiveness of the corrupted human is matched by a total inability to supply a remedy.

before the presence of his [God's] glory with rejoicing."⁴ In Christ *now*, we are awaiting our eschatological manifestation—in the company of the man who ran around naked in the Gadarene hills, and who, at the approach of Jesus, is found “sitting, clothed, and in his right mind”⁵ (where “in one’s right mind,” or “right-minded,” means not merely sane but, more profoundly, thinking in conformity with the Kingdom of God). At all times, we must remind each other of, and thus have reflected back to us, not the penultimate word concerning our sin-fuelled contradiction but the ultimate pronouncement that, as the beneficiaries of Jesus Christ, having “clothed” ourselves with Christ, we have the clothes that “make the man”: we have an identity that is irrefragible.⁶

In this regard, while one of Martin Luther’s favorite texts was Rom 1:17, with its pronouncement concerning justification,⁷ another text he cherished was Col 3:3: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”⁸ The man of sin, the giant self-contradiction—*that* person has been slain at the cross, and the real Luther, the one God sees, cherishes, and vindicates, is established and secured in Christ.

All of which is to say that because our real life, our true life, is hidden with Christ in God, God knows who we are. God knows who we are, and reflects our identity in Christ back to us. Looking to our Lord, we are reconfirmed in our apprehension of who we are because of whose we are and whom we have thereby

4. Jude 1:24.

5. Mark 5:15.

6. Eph 4:24; Col 3:9. Here, Paul likens the Christian life to our shedding filthy clothes and adorning ourselves resplendently with “the new nature” vouchsafed to us in Jesus Christ.

7. The early Luther (up to 1518) extolled justification by faith somewhat one-sidedly, with the effect that the Christological ground of faith’s righteousness appeared underemphasized. The later Luther made the appropriate correction, recognizing that the faith of believers admits them to Christ’s righteousness but is not salvific in and of itself. To say that it is would turn faith, so-called, into yet another meritorious work. For an example of Luther’s panegyric on justification by faith see Luther, *Works*, 34:336–37.

8. For the significance of Col 3:3 in Luther’s theology and homiletic see his “Sermon for Easter Wednesday: Colossians 3:1–7,” 217–30.

been made. We must look to Jesus Christ every day, or we shall soon forget who we are, especially on those days when our own behaviour leaves us in speechless dismay at the wretched creature who has just appeared.

Our Identity in Christ

Then who are we? The psalmist poses this question in Ps 8: “What is man, that you are mindful of him, and the son of man, that you care for him?”—only to proffer by way of an answer, “You have made him a little lower than God; you crown him with glory and honor; you give him dominion [not domination, as ecologists rightly remind us] over the work of your hands.”⁹

Here we are exposed to a startling feature of Scripture’s understanding of the human. Whereas secular anthropologies define the human in terms of what is lower than us, Scripture defines the human in terms of what is higher: God.

Secular anthropologies, for instance, insist that humans are not animals only. We possess not merely consciousness but self-consciousness. We are not driven by instincts; instead we have drives. (Animals cannot postpone the gratification of instincts, whereas humans can postpone the gratification of drives.) Humans uniquely possess language. Humans are capable of abstract thought and reflection. We promote culture.¹⁰

Biblical anthropology, on the other hand, maintains that to be made “little less than God” is to be made in the image and

9. Ps 8:4–6.

10. By “culture,” we mean the arts (literary, dramatic, fine, musical), customs, and social institutions by means of which a society reflects upon itself, orders its outer life, enriches the inner life of its members, and thereby distinguishes itself from the animal world by enabling humans to fend off immediacy. While the animal world exhibits increasing levels of consciousness corresponding to increasingly complex neural structures, humans possess *self-consciousness*, a qualitative difference from the quantitative consciousness of higher and lower forms of animal life. Self-consciousness, the human ability to delay gratification of drives, and language are prerequisites for culture. While language is not the only feature of culture, it is foundational: “What makes us human is that we know how to speak.” Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, 109.

likeness of God. We are that creature to whom God speaks.¹¹ God's addressing us awakens in us the capacity and the desire to address him in response. His speech thus renders us response-*able*, and, by the same token, response-*ible*.¹²

From a theological standpoint (without thereby slighting the work of neurologists and social psychologists), human speech is facilitated by the Word (in the Reformational sense of God-in-person present, acting and speaking). The primordial use of human speech is to address God. Not surprisingly, then, Professor Emil Fackenheim (at one time the brightest luminary in the University of Toronto's famed department of philosophy) remarked one day, "*The characteristic of the living God is that God speaks; and therefore we are most characteristically human when we pray.*"¹³ For to pray, of course, is to speak when spoken to.

Our Savior is the Only Judge We Shall Ever Have

It has already been stated that we are created. This point is crucial. First, because we are created *ex nihilo*, not from pre-existing matter, there is no material on which we may or must work now in order to develop or improve ourselves ontologically or to render ourselves finally or fully human. In other words, because we are created *ex nihilo* we are, right now, as fully and finally human as we can ever be.¹⁴ Therefore, we are released from the curse of perfectionism, whether bodily, mental, or religious.¹⁵

11. See comment below (in the section "Significance of the *Imago Dei*") on the Triune God's encountering us by means of the Word.

12. Notwithstanding the expertise anthropologists display in discussing the origin of language among the earliest instances of *homo sapiens*, from a theological standpoint God's speech is what facilitates human speech. While there is no end to the means of human communication, speech remains the least ambiguous. Karl Barth reflects as much in his statement: "Language is the truly human attribute . . . to suppress language, you will be entering into a sphere altogether ambiguous and equivocal." Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, 109.

13. Fackenheim uttered this remark in a class on Hegel where Fackenheim was contrasting Scripture's Yahweh with the "Absolute" or "Spirit" of Hegel's metaphysical idealism.

14. To say that we are as human as we can ever be is not the same as saying that we are the best humans we could ever be. But since God has created us

Second, because we are created *ex nihilo*, the God who has done this has exclusive rights to us. As sole Creator, he is by that fact sole Lord.

Third, the One who has created us *ex nihilo* can just as readily reduce us *ad nihilum*. As sole Creator he is *ipso facto* also the Destroyer. For every pronouncement Scripture makes concerning God as Creator it makes fifty concerning God as Destroyer.¹⁶

As insecure as we are in ourselves (psychically, physically, politically, economically), then, are we that much more insecure before God?

We are not, for we know God to be our creator only as a predicate of knowing him to be our redeemer. In the logic of Scripture, it is knowledge of the redeemer that generates knowledge of the creator.¹⁷ It is only as Israel is the beneficiary of God's salvific mercy at the Red Sea, and of God's claim at Sinai, that Israel knows it is not God, the world is not God, and the pagan deities are not God. Likewise, it is only as the apostles are the beneficiaries of Christ's cross and resurrection that they know him to be the One through whom and for whom the universe has been fashioned, and know as well that *Καῖσαρ κύριος* ("Caesar is

in God's image, and the image of God is solely within the jurisdiction of God, we cannot forfeit that image; although sin horrifically distorts our humanness, sinners can never render themselves non-human. *Creatio ex nihilo* spares us trying to remake ourselves and others using the original "raw material," since there wasn't any; simultaneously it warns us against all attempts at social engineering. For an expansion of this point see Anderson, *On Being Human*, 33–43.

15. For an expansion of this point, see Anderson, *On Being Human*, 20–32.

16. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture speaks of God as Destroyer. Exemplifying this biblical notion, Paul warns Christians (1 Cor 10:10) concerning the peril of presumption.

17. Calvin, for instance, makes this point repeatedly in his *Institutes*. In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin insists that only by means of faith in Christ the redeemer can we know God to be creator. Graphically, Calvin exclaims that we can know God to be creator only as we are "borne up above all heavens, in the chariot of his [Christ's] cross." Calvin, *Genesis*, 63.

lord”) is false and the mystery religions nothing more than froth.¹⁸

It is none other than the Destroyer who has pledged himself to Israel irrevocably, has gone to hell and back for us, and will consign himself to degradation and death before he consigns any one of us. After all, to date he has spared us when he hasn’t spared his Son, that is, hasn’t spared himself.¹⁹

The Significance of the Imago Dei

Jesus Christ, the one in whom all this is vouchsafed to us, is exclusively the image of God, εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ.²⁰ We are not the image of God; we are fashioned *in* the image and likeness of God. We are the only creatures fashioned in the image of God. Plainly this point is crucial—yet Scripture says almost nothing about what it means. Instead of announcing that the Image of God means this or that, Scripture makes us walk through text after text glimpsing allusions and hints here and there.

One such clue is ready-to-hand in the God who is eternally Triune: namely, God relates to us through his Word, a speech/event wherein the God who *acts for us* also *gives himself to us* and simultaneously *illuminates us concerning what he has done by speaking to us*.

Another clue is self-transcendence. Human finite self-transcendence, I am convinced, is an aspect of the image of the God who is infinitely self-transcendent. It is important to note, however, that while the two are related, the former is not a smaller-scale version of the latter; human self-transcendence is not divine self-transcendence more or less housed in the human, so that when we are probing human self-transcendence we are anonymously probing God. Similarly, finite human self-

18. Reflecting their familiarity with the Hebrew Bible, the apostles are aware that while the religions are insubstantial, they are not for that reason harmless. According to biblical logic, idolatry is lethal. For an expansion of this point, see Fackenheim, *Encounters*, 171–98.

19. Rom 8:32.

20. Col 1:15.

consciousness is not a smaller-scale version of divine self-consciousness;²¹ but it is an aspect of being made in God's image.

The implications of the "image of God" could be probed at length. Certainly one aspect of it that is highlighted in the creation story is gender-specificity and gender-complementarity. "Let us make man (אָדָם) in our image . . . male and female (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה) he created them."²² It is man and woman *together* (אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה) who constitute the image of God.²³ Hence I can encounter myself as God's image-bearer only in the course of encountering my gender-correlate. With respect to a dog, I say, "I am not this." With respect to a woman, I say, "I am not this (female) even though I *am* this (bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh²⁴)."

Then am I not, myself, made in the image of God? Yes—but I am myself only in the context of what I'm not: woman. The primordial encounter with the human "other" is an encounter with the sexually-differentiated "other." And encounter with this "other" is essential to my encountering myself.²⁵

21. Paul Tillich's theology is open to criticism on this point. While Tillich refrains from upholding the classical understanding of the Incarnation, he nonetheless speaks of God as being *and* finite being. See Tillich, "Being and God," Part II in *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, 163–289.

22. Gen 1:26–27.

23. Gen 2:23–24.

24. Gen 2:23.

25. While the Word, God's self-bestowal and self-communication, is the primary determination of the human as human, it is not the sole determination. Additional determinations are the human "other" and the self, human selfhood presupposing the individual as agent, as the subject of its own existence. With respect to the human "other," the primordial "other" in Scripture is one's gender-correlate. To say this is not to deny the significance of any human "other"; it is, however, to reflect Scripture's insistence that the distinction between man and woman is not a concomitant of the Fall (like other distinctions) but rather a distinction built into the created order as ordained by God. For this reason, Scripture deems any attempt at denying it as sin. At the same time, because of the pronouncement in Gen 2:23 where Adam says of Eve, "This is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," the distinction between male and female is complementary and *not* inherently alienating. For an amplification of encountering the "other" as essential to encountering oneself, see Anderson, *On Being Human*, 44–54, 104–29.

We must always be aware that the person who is not married (or not sexually active) nonetheless is who she is only through her proximity to her gender-complement. I am always moved at Luke's insistence²⁶ that as Jesus moved ". . . through cities and villages" he was accompanied not only by the Twelve but also by women, both married and unmarried.

With respect to gender-specificity and gender-complementarity as essential to the human: we appear to grasp this pre-reflectively. When a baby is born, the first question we ask is, "Boy or girl?" Once we have the answer, what do we do with it? Nothing at all. Then why did we ask the question? Because deep down, pre-reflectively, we are aware that to be human is to be gender-correlated.

All the other differences that distinguish people (economic, social, educational) are not implicates of the creation but implicates of the fall, and in the wake of the fall they do not merely distinguish but also alienate. Such differences can be overcome, and we rightly attempt to overcome them. Economic disparity (certainly divisive) we attempt to overcome through graduated income tax, social assistance, and student bursaries; educational disparity (no less divisive) we attempt to overcome through compulsory, tax-supported public education. The distinction between male and female, however, is God-appointed and programmed into the creation. Any attempt to transcend it or deny it is sin. Scripture speaks unambiguously here.²⁷

In short, because Eve is Eve and not Adam, she is neither an extension of Adam nor a clone of Adam. Profoundly, she is other than Adam; yet because she is made from Adam (specifically,

26. Luke 8:1-2.

27. For this reason, the Torah forbids cross-dressing, inasmuch as cross-dressing is the attempt to deceive others by promoting gender confusion. See Deut 22:5: "A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God."

his rib), her proximity to him is not inherently alienating (*contra* those feminists who maintain males to be lethal by definition).²⁸

While the man/woman constellation is not the only instance of human/human otherness, this constellation of otherness is primary and remains essential to the definition of “human.”

Human Wisdom is God-Ordained

Let us return to a point made earlier: human existence is complex, complicated, and contradictory. Ultimately, it is self-contradictory. In the wake of this phenomenon, I tell my students (especially those studying to be counsellors) that we should not disdain help from any quarter. In this regard, we do well to remember that while the wisdom of the world is not the wisdom of the gospel, the wisdom of the world is genuinely wise in its own domain.²⁹ Whenever students tell me that all they need is the Bible, I remind them that while John Wesley described himself as *homo unius libri*, a man of one book,³⁰ he also said that the person who read only the Bible was no more than an “enthusiast” (a fanatic) who would not even understand the Bible.³¹ I remind them too that Moses was commanded to “despoil the Egyptians,” inasmuch as there was among the Egyptians (the people most immediately resistant to God’s plan and purpose) much that God’s people needed.³²

To be sure, the sociologist has one angle of vision on the human situation. And so has the psychologist, the biologist, the economist, the historian, or the philosopher. At the end of the day all such disciplines address the human situation. I say advisedly the human “situation” rather than the human “condition”; the

28. In this regard, see, e.g., Catherine LaCugna, who maintains that the inherent lethality of males disqualifies Jesus as savior of women. LaCugna, *God for Us*, 18.

29. 1 Cor 1:18.

30. “At any price give me the Book of God . . . Let me be *homo unius libri*.” Quoted in Wesley, *Works of John Wesley*, 1:105.

31. For a carefully nuanced exposition of Wesley’s understanding of biblical authority, see Jones, “The Rule of Scripture,” 39–61.

32. Exod 3:22.

human condition—that we are sinners before God whose judgment has left us alienated from him as well as from each other, ourselves, and the creation as a whole—only the gospel can address. Plainly the human condition is profounder than the human situation; nevertheless, since the latter is taken up into the former, any help, from any source, with respect to the human situation is to be welcomed. The mark of educated people, Aristotle maintained, is that they expect the degree of precision that the subject matter allows.³³ If Aristotle is right, then we are educated only as we seek the degree of precision that the subject matter allows.

For this reason, I am eager to profit from any discipline's precision. I have several friends who are psychiatrists (some of whom are also neurologists); invariably I have found them helpful in my understanding of the human generally, and specifically in my pastoral work among those who suffer from mental illness. My psychiatrist friends have an angle of vision on human complexity *with its attendant suffering* that I cannot afford to ignore, let alone disdain.

Philipp Melancthon, the first systematic theologian of the Reformation, and the author of the *Augsburg Confession*—the most important Christian confession of the past 500 years—wrote, “The need of the church spans the world of all disciplines.”³⁴ Melancthon, like all the magisterial reformers, was superbly trained as a humanist before he turned to theology. Calvin's first publication was a commentary on Seneca. Indeed, Calvin, we should note, did as much to shape modern French as Shakespeare did modern English.³⁵

33. This notion, found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, is discussed in Madigan, *Christian Revelation*, 90.

34. Melancthon, *De Philosophia Oratio*, quoted in Keen, ed., *Melancthon Reader*, 68.

35. For a discussion of Calvin's preoccupation with the French language for the sake of evangelizing France, see Oberman, *Initia Calvini*, 15–16.

Philosophy

In his commentary on Colossians, Melancthon insisted, “The theologian who isn’t a philosopher is never to be trusted.”³⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, a pre-eminent Roman Catholic theologian, maintains that a theology that does not converse with philosophy is forever one-sided, naïve, and shrill.³⁷

We ought always to remember that theology cannot be articulated without philosophy. As von Balthasar asks rhetorically, “Ought one not . . . to say that the Christian, as proclaimer of God’s glory . . . takes upon himself [*sic*]*—*whether he wants to or not—the burden of metaphysics?”³⁸ This is not to allow philosophy to adulterate the gospel; it is rather to acknowledge that since Scripture “thinks” (principally) imagistically and theology thinks conceptually, theology will always need philosophical tools. That is, because the language of Scripture is concrete while that of theology is abstract, theology characteristically discusses biblical verities in philosophical vocabulary. Where Scripture says, “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29), theology “translates” the imagistic concreteness into abstract concept; e.g., “God destroys all that is not holy.”

A classic instance of the necessity of philosophy for theological precision is the dispute between Arius and Athanasius on the ontological status of the Son, Jesus Christ. Is the Son of the *same* nature as the Father or merely of a *similar* nature? The difference is crucial. While both Arius and Athanasius used biblical vocabulary and spoke of Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God, they had in mind meanings that were nothing less than antithetical. Arius insisted that the Son of God was more than human but less than divine; Athanasius, that the Son of God was fully human and

36. For a comprehensive discussion of the necessity and limits of philosophy for theologians, see Graybill, *Evangelical Free Will*, 132–68.

37. While this notion occurs throughout von Balthasar’s work, he is always aware that in the wake of the fall the integrity of reasoning is compromised with respect to the knowledge of God and of ourselves. Since grace, owned in faith, can alone restore reason’s integrity, von Balthasar maintains that faith is humankind’s consummately rational act. See von Balthasar, *Prayer*, 61–62.

38. von Balthasar, *My Work*, 85.

fully divine. In order to highlight Arius' error—and thereby preserve the gospel—Athanasius knew he had to resort to the philosophical vocabulary of *ὁμοούσιος* vs. *ὁμοιούσιος*. *Ὁμοούσιος* (Father and Son possess the same nature) implies that what the Son does in his earthly ministry is ratified eternally in heaven. *Ὁμοιούσιος* (Father and Son have similar but not identical natures) implies that the Son's activity in his earthly ministry is the Son's only, with the result that humankind is still in its sins.³⁹

Karl Barth, always insisting that philosophy should not adulterate the content of theology, nevertheless admits its necessity for articulating theology. Barth readily admits, for example, that an exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity requires philosophical vocabulary.⁴⁰ Recognizing that theology might possibly be contaminated by the use of philosophical vocabulary, he nonetheless argues that this possibility does not disqualify the use of that vocabulary. In doing so he makes the analogy with God's command to “despoil the Egyptians” of their silver and gold, adding: “Fine, but on the condition that no one uses this piece of gold or that piece of silver to make a golden calf in the desert . . . [T]his is the danger in every language, because every language has its snares.”⁴¹

Roman Catholic theology has traditionally not merely allowed but even mandated an approved philosophy for its theology, namely, Aristotle's. Pope John Paul II insisted that the Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas was essential to the Roman Catholic understanding of the faith.⁴² Protestant theology in the tradition of the Reformation, on the other hand, is ever alert concerning philosophical contamination of the gospel. Luther, disdainful of Aristotle, speaks of him as the “blind, heathen master,” even “this damned, rascally heathen . . . God has sent him as a

39. For a concise statement that *ὁμοούσιος* locates the meanings of biblical words and the realities to which they point, see T. F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 128–29.

40. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:378.

41. Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, 123.

42. Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, *passim*.

plague upon us for our sins.”⁴³ Philipp Melanchthon insisted that metaphysics can never be normative for theology; philosophy’s tools, however, may and must be used to construct theology.⁴⁴

History

Cicero remarked, “To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain forever a child.”⁴⁵ He is correct.

Related to such infantilism is the faddishness of the historically ignorant. The study of history is the study of tradition. Tradition is like the keel and ballast on a sailboat. Without a keel a boat can only be driven in the direction of the prevailing wind; equipped with a keel, a boat can sail across the wind or even against the wind. And ballast, that torpedo-shaped, leaden weight at the bottom of the keel, is what rights a sailboat when a squall heels it. Ballast is the counterpoise that rights the ship and keeps it from capsizing.

Yet more is at stake. For to remain ignorant of history is not only to remain infantile and vulnerable to fads; worse, it is to be treacherous. The study of history fends off amnesia. In everyday life, the person who loses her memory cannot remember where she left her umbrella, but this is nothing, since she can always acquire another one. What’s important is that the amnesiac, lacking all memory of herself, does not know who she is: she has no identity. Having no identity, she doesn’t know how to behave in accord with who she is, and for this reason can never be trusted. Likewise the church, university, or seminary that is ignorant of history lacks an identity and can never be trusted.

Literature

As necessary as these tools are (life sciences, social sciences, philosophy, and history), the most precise diagnostic tool

43. This quotation is from Luther, “An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” quoted in Dragseth, ed., *Devil’s Whore*, 179.

44. See Graybill, *Evangelical Free Will*, 134.

45. Cicero, *Brutus* 32.120. The original Latin was *Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.*

remains literature.⁴⁶ Fiction probes the interpenetration of all aspects of life's multidimensionality; to disdain fiction suggests that one can overlook the people whose complexity it presents. Worse, to disdain fiction appears to advertise an indifference to human anguish.

Not least, fiction tells us what our society thinks of the church and its gospel. I have long noted that fiction tells us this by telling us what it thinks of the clergy. Examples follow.

John Updike. The clergy are tragic figures: weak, compromised, unable to shed their vocation yet unable to honor it; not so much deplorable as pathetic.⁴⁷

Hugh MacLennan. The clergy (Scottish Presbyterians) are one with the banking families to which they belong; they are possessed of icy spirits, grasping hands, and bloodless hearts.⁴⁸

Robertson Davies. The clergy are bumbling buffoons; they are semi-comical, harmless jerks who are ineffective and forgettable.⁴⁹

Alice Munro (acclaimed the best short-story writer in English). The clergy are shallow, intellectually unsophisticated careerists who trade on their social status to exploit vulnerable people.⁵⁰

Fiction holds up to the church a mirror into which church leaders must look.

46. I have long deplored the theological student's cavalier dismissal of fiction on the grounds that it isn't "true." Such a dismissal presupposes a grievous misunderstanding of "truth" in a theological context. To disdain fiction is to set aside the teaching ministry of Jesus, since his revelatory parables are purely fictive.

47. See, Updike, *A Month of Sundays*.

48. See, MacLennan, *Watch and Two Solitudes*.

49. See, Davies, *Rebel Angels*.

50. See her several collections of short stories, such as Munro, *Moons* and *Progress*.

Actuality and Reality

By now, the students are wondering if there is any hope. At this point I ask them to ponder the difference between actuality and reality.

Any material object is actual: it is neither imaginary nor mythological. But it is not real. Jesus Christ, the effectual presence of God, is real. He is truth in the sense of ἀλήθεια, “I am . . . the truth” of John’s gospel.⁵¹ Ἀλήθεια, a word John borrows from classical philosophy, means “being or reality disclosing itself.”⁵² Jesus Christ—not the metaphysical category of being-itself, but the person of Jesus Christ—is truth, is reality, and renders himself knowable and known as such.

In his humanity, Jesus Christ is the truth and reality of our life. He is the one human being who faithfully keeps covenant with the Father. Since he is the *Incarnate One*, it is *God as human* who humanly keeps *humankind’s* covenant with God. As we cling in faith to Jesus Christ, we are identified with him; as the Father sees the obedient Son, with whom he is ever pleased, God sees us included in the Son.⁵³

In actuality, we are covenant-breakers (i.e., sinners). In reality, we are covenant-keepers—thanks to our intimate union with him who is *the* covenant-keeper on behalf of us all.

51. John 14:6.

52. Martin Heidegger adopts the classical meaning of “truth.” See *Being and Time*.

53. This point is made relentlessly by both James B. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. James B. Torrance eschews the crypto-Unitarianism found in so much of the church’s understanding and worship. Characteristically he insists, for instance, that believers’ repentance is inadequate, both because they can repent only of the sin they know, and because their repentance, however well-intentioned, is always sin-riddled. Therefore their repentance is acceptable to God only as it is assumed and cleansed by the Son’s definitive “repenting” of their sin at the Jordan (in anticipation of the cross). To be sure, the Son’s vicarious repentance does not render theirs unnecessary; it does, however, render theirs possible and effective. J. B. Torrance, *Worship*, 43–48. Reflecting the same logic, Thomas F. Torrance avers that not only is Jesus Christ the mediator of revelation and reconciliation, but in his vicarious humanity he is also the mediator of the human response mandated by the gospel. T. F. Torrance, *Mediation*, 47–72.

Conclusion

When, in the course of classroom teaching, I pick up a book and focus on it, I can read it readily. As I focus on it and read it, I am aware of an audience “out there” in the classroom; I can certainly see that audience, but it is relatively out of focus. If I focus on the audience, of course I can see it clearly; but then I find the book (which I cannot pretend does not exist) relatively out of focus.

So, then, which has greater clarity for us? The actuality of “this present evil age,” or the reality of that Kingdom which the King has brought with him and whose indisputable manifestation we await? The actuality of the undeniable self-contradiction we are in ourselves, or the reality of the obedient, cheerful, grateful covenant-keeper we are in Christ? The very useful and important but nonetheless penultimate descriptions of our actuality provided by the humanities, the social sciences, and the life sciences, or Jesus Christ, the One “in whom all things hold together”?⁵⁴

Like the apostle John, Paul tells us that all things were created by Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. And “in Christ,” Paul declares, in defiance of competing, divergent claims to define the human, “all things hold together.” “Hold together” (*συνίστημι*) is a term taken from the Stoic philosophy of the ancient Greeks. But whereas the ancient Greek philosophers said that a philosophical principle upheld the cosmos,⁵⁵ Christians knew it to be a person: the living person of the Lord Jesus Christ, large enough to comprehend the totality of the world. This is the reality that assumes our actuality into it, and in assuming it, integrates it for the sake of transforming it.

If Jesus Christ is the Lord of all and holds all things together, and if his living person is the reality that assumes and integrates all of our actuality, how can Christian higher education do anything less than seek to bring every area of human study under that integrating Lordship?

54. Col 1:17.

55. See Allen and Springsted, *Philosophy*, 42–43. See also Simpson and Bruce, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 200.

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