Christian Anthropology

‘Being Human’

In a classic Australian children’s book by Jenny Wagner called *The Bunyip of Berkerley’s Creek*, a rather strange creature emerges from the depths of a billabong asking “What am I? What am I?” This small, colourfully illustrated picture book is obviously far removed from the self-reflection of thinkers like Plato and Aristotle or the existential musings of literary genius’ like Sartre and Dostoevsky. However, in a simple way, *The Bunyip of Berkerley’s Creek* is exploring the same anthropological theme these great thinkers examined, for it is essentially asking the very old and the very human questions of identity and destiny.

Philosophical Influences

The quest for the insights and answers into what makes us human has a long and varied history. For the Spartan’s, the fullness of a person’s humanity was measured by their physical perfection and their capacity to endure physical hardship. The ancient Greeks considered that the ability to reason philosophically and the competence to understand the mysteries of mathematics was the deciding factor that set human apart from other creatures – and even other persons. The Romans sought to secure their identity and destiny through their technological inventiveness and their organisational expertise. And during the European Renaissance, the celebration of being human found its highest expression in art and architecture with an appreciation of the beauty of the human body and a love of their natural – albeit idealised – world.

With the advent of the Enlightenment, Western cultures began to define human identity and human destiny in terms of the faculty of human reason. As science began to ‘explain’ some of the mysteries of the natural world, and as the workings of the human mind and body become more quantifiable, the exploration of what it meant to be human became increasing interpreted through empirical data. Philosophically, the Enlightenment gave birth to modernity and claimed that everything, including the human person, could be measured and explained through various rational scientific studies. Human reality was no longer shaped and directed by the ‘divine hand of God’ but by the ‘human hand of reason and science.’ The faculty of reason with its ability to measure and control human life meant that humans were now authors of their own identity and masters of their own destiny.

In contemporary philosophy, the strictly scientific or empirical explanation of the human person that effectively characterised modernity has given way to a more multifaceted and integrated understanding. While no-one would deny the power of the human intellect, with its amazing ability to categorise experience and manipulate data, contemporary Western philosophy no longer reduces the human condition to the faculty of reason. Post-modern philosophy takes a more hermeneutical and dynamic approach to human life and human destiny. There is a growing awareness that a human person is always ‘more than’ the sum of their physical parts. There is a transcendent reality to human persons that extends beyond the purely physical experiences of their immediate material environment. Contemporary philosophies now acknowledge that the reality of being human is a complex and dynamic mixture of both physical and metaphysical experiences. Furthermore, these experiences touch all facets of human life through history and tradition, culture and politics, science and religion. The erosion of many of the national borders and the revolution in communications that so clearly marked the twentieth century meant that the people and the societies of our contemporary world have to deal with a plurality of diverse events and ideas. Human experience can no longer be explained by any one overarching ideology. Consequently, the reality of the
human person cannot be reduced to one aspect of human life nor can it be effectively contained within one model of cultural expression.

In terms of a contemporary Western approach to anthropology, thinkers like Darwin, Marx and Freud stand out as significant. From the work of these scholars we can get some understanding of the foundational considerations that have come to shape and direct our appreciation of the human condition. In his theory of evolution, Darwin revealed the essential relationship the human person has with the natural world. Our physical existence and biological development is, in fact, tied up with and tied into the material world of our environment. However, our physical environment is not the only determining factor of our humanity and so the human person cannot be reduced to the biological or genetic development of their species.

In the work of Karl Marx we are reminded that human persons are essentially historical beings and so history and society both play a decisive role in the formation and development of the human condition. As history directs the social construction of people’s lives an understanding of how we act to influence and direct the historical institutions of our culture and society has become an important anthropological consideration.

From Freud we have learnt the importance of exploring the inner person and the way our psychological integration affects the interpersonal relationships that influence our formation as human persons. Freud looked to the subconscious mind to unlock the mysteries of human life and experience as he explored what it meant to be human through the examination of the unconscious drives and desires of the human psyche.

So basically, contemporary Western philosophies stress the fact that human life, human societies and indeed all of human history is a dynamic unfinished process.

To be human is to be:

- Wholly subjective yet able to critically reflect on one’s own subjectivity;
- Historically conditioned yet always in a state of flux and open to change;
- Rooted in the practical historical reality of the now yet with the sense and knowledge of a future – whatever that future might be;
- Inheriting a past that is fixed yet with the knowledge that we have an obligation to take responsibility for the future.

Interwoven within these philosophical movements we can find another tradition that has had a profound influence in how Western cultures understand the human person. While the Greeks defined the human person through rational philosophy and the Romans understood human destiny by way of social and political organisation, the biblical tradition of Judaism and Christianity sought to explore their identity and articulate their destiny in terms of their relationship with God. Accordingly, the contemporary Western understanding of what it means to be human also owes much to the religious insights and faith beliefs of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

**Biblical Influences**

Alongside the various philosophical explorations of Western culture, the biblical traditions have developed an equally strong understanding of what makes us human. For the biblical traditions, the human person is best understood as existing within an intimate relationship with God. The belief that both the identity and the destiny of the human person is secured in the creative activity of one loving God is central to Christianity. This God is the creator of the physical universe and so the world and all it contains not only emerges from the creative hand of God but its existence also reveals something about God. Furthermore, the whole of creation is continually blessed or
graced by God’s ongoing and dynamic participation in the life and history of the created world. The commitment to the world and the ongoing participation or grace of God in creation is the framework within which the fullness of human life takes place.

So, nature and grace both work together in human lives. Nature gives us that, which with the grace of God, can be transformed into wholeness and redemption. In other words, what has been given to us in nature is open to transformation by God in grace. Because grace is freely given by God to the whole of creation, all creation is open to transformation in God. Even the reality of human sin, which through selfishness or pride dislocates our lives and our relationships in the world, does not negate the reality of God’s grace. Grace and sin can and do co-exist in the human condition. Furthermore, they are never just abstract concepts or vague notions of personal good and bad. Rather, grace and sin have deeply physical and historical implications for they impact on the reality of human life at a personal, local, national and even global level.

While we are obviously physical, historical, beings who fit within the natural order of creation we cannot be reduced to the physical reality of our material composition. In light of our intimate relationship with God and in response to God’s ongoing commitment or grace in the world, we are called to lived out and experience this existence within a transcendent horizon. So the human person is the place where the transcendent order of the divine and the material reality of the created universe come together in a most unique and intimate way. Humans are, in the traditional phrase, both physical and spiritual creatures. They are inescapably part of the natural world but their material reality has been infused with divine life. In other words, the whole experience of ‘being human’ is always both a physical and a spiritual or transcendent experience.

At different times in Western history we find that one of these aspects has been favoured over the other. For example in medieval times there was a disproportionate focus on the spiritual life of the ‘world to come’ and so the material experiences of human life ‘in this world’ became devalued and even secondary. Conversely, in more contemporary times there has been a devaluing of the spiritual or transcendent quality of the human condition and the material or empirical experiences have become the main point of reference for understanding the human person. However, the Christian tradition continues to hold these two aspects of the human person together. It maintains that human persons are created by God and therefore always part of creation. However, they have also been infused with a freedom – or principle of divine life – and so they participate in the transcendent life of creation. In effect, humans are ‘co-creators’ with God of themselves, their world and their history.

In the Christian tradition this emphasis on the transcendent reality of humanity serves to safeguard the spiritual integrity and the inherent dignity of every human person. It rejects the dualistic split between: the body and the soul; intellect and feelings; reason and faith. Accordingly, transcendental anthropology rejects the notion that an authentic understanding of the human person can be found through only a biological or only a spiritual exploration of personhood. A balanced Christian anthropology maintains that while the human person is obviously touched by – and lives within – the physical, spiritual, emotional, cultural, political, economic, and historical framework of our world, it cannot be reduced to any one of these. Rather, the meaning of human existence extends beyond the concrete reality of the human person – and even beyond physical life as we know it – and is orientated towards God who is the source, sustainer and final perfection of the person’s existence.

The theological concept that explores the notion of God being the final perfection of human life and existence is eschatology. Basically, eschatology refers to ‘the last things’. In traditional or scholastic theology it came to be understood as the consideration of the last things as death, the last judgement, purgatory, hell and heaven. But the last things refers not only to these events but especially to that which is ultimate. It refers to the
consummation and completion of God’s saving work. Contemporary theology is now stressing the intimate and indissoluble connection between our present reality and the promise of the kingdom - a connection that lay at the heart of the teaching and preaching of Jesus’ ministry. Eschatology then, is all about building up the Kingdom. There is here an obvious connection between salvation – or our final destiny - and the historical processes and responsibilities of Christian life. Indeed, the Christian scriptures are full of references to the kingdom values of justice, mercy and well-being and strongly emphasise Jesus’ praxis of table fellowship with the ‘non persons’ of his time. If our human destiny begins with our creation in this world then our human relationships within this world must be part of the movement towards fulfilling this destiny. This biblical view of salvation sees our human efforts as a continuation of the work of creative and salvific work of God.