

The Vision Of Man

Elmer J. F. Arndt, PhD

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Author Biography

[Dr. Arndt, who died in December, 1969, was professor of historical theology and ethics at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, where he also directed the continuing education program. He held the S.T.M. degree from Union Theological Seminary and the Ph.D. from Yale University. Professor Arndt, as you can tell from this essay was a profound thinker. The non-use of inclusive language was quite standard when this essay was written nearly thirty years ago. While apologizing for it, the editor did not feel it necessary to change the text.]



Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology

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The fact that man poses and continues to pose the question, What is man? indicates that the answer to the question is not self-evident. The variety of answers which have been given to the question suggests the complexity of the subject. The vastly enhanced power at man's disposal to affect his natural and social environment --- indeed, to affect the historical destiny of great portions of humanity --- and consequently to give a fateful significance to many decisions bestows a sense of practical urgency on the quest for an understanding of man which is in accord with the facts, provides an adequate interpretation of the drama of the self and human societies in history, and offers a guide for choice between the options on which the life or death of humanity depends.

An understanding of the nature of man is not only a descriptive account of human nature but also, more or less implicitly or explicitly, a statement concerning human destiny. It not only describes what man has been, and is, but also is a statement of man's future. It is not only an attempt to describe man as he actually is but also an affirmation of a norm --- man as he should be or man as he aspires to be or man as he hopes to be. Every understanding of man is also an expression of a vision of man, that is, a statement of human destiny whether that statement expresses an ultimate despair or an ultimate hope, an affirmation or a denial of the ultimate significance of the human drama.

If it is true, as I think it is, that the understanding of man and of his destiny is not only theoretically important for suggesting the direction of further research but also of practical importance for providing the direction guiding practical decisions, then the understanding of man is a subject of decisive importance.

Contemporary men, who agree that the understanding of man is a matter of decisive importance for themselves and for humanity, find that the question is not made easier by the fact that there is no dominant view either on a global scale or in western culture or in eastern culture. There are rival views competing for the loyalty of men. Each of the rival views must make its case for acceptance. And, in the last analysis, the individual decides to which understanding of man he will subscribe.

Even in the West the Christian understanding of man (assuming for the moment that there is an understanding of man which can be so described) no longer occupies a dominant, and certainly not an unchallenged, position even in areas regarded but a short time ago as "Christian." It is surely too evident that the understanding of man held by most Christians is challenged by a number of "popular" understandings of man. The understandings of man represented by the magazine *Playboy* and by many of the advertisements for commercial products in mass communication media are two familiar examples of "popular" understandings which compete with other understandings. More systematically developed understandings of man, such as those developed by Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, non-theistic humanists, and the atheistic existentialists, are rival claimants; and though there is something to be learned and assimilated (or at least so we would maintain) from at least some of these understandings the fact is that they do present themselves as alternatives to the "Christian" understanding of man.

Such an introductory setting suggests a much more ambitious and comprehensive discussion of methodological and substantial issues than can be even hinted at in this very brief essay. At best this discussion can hope to be at best but a very tiny contribution to a much more extended and much more fully developed discussion.

This essay, unashamedly, is devoted to what might aptly be termed a preliminary investigation within the context of those understandings of man which, with more or less justification, claim to be "Christian." It is an attempt to sketch in broad outlines the distinctive traits of a "Christian" understanding of man. Such an attempt foregoes, without any judgment on the merits of different positions, discussion of methodological issues which are presently --- as they have been at other times as well --- very live questions. It leaves to other occasions a systematic and critical discussion of the biblical-Christian understanding of man and the understanding of man associated with other faith claims.

The self-imposed limits of this essay assign it to the “elementary” level. But “elementary” is not a synonym for simple and certainly not for simplistic. On the contrary; perhaps one function of an elementary discussion of the nature of man is to underscore the fact that human nature and its destiny is a matter of some complexity. We suggest that it is the complexity --- in contrast to simplicity --- of human nature which makes possible the variety of understandings. Even Christian thought about man and his destiny exhibits a variety of emphases and perspectives and consequently bears its witness to the complexity of its subject matter.

Sometimes the particular emphasis or point of view is to be accounted for by a rival philosophy or theology. Thus the relatively optimistic estimate of man’s actual condition by the Greek Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries is to be partly attributed to the fact that Manichaeism, Christianity’s rival, taught fatalism and the intrinsically evil nature of matter. The pessimism of the Augustinian view was perhaps accentuated in protest against the facile and extreme optimism of the Pelagians. The insistence of St. Thomas Aquinas on the freedom of the will (cf. *Contra Gentiles II*, XLVIII) occurs in a very different context from that of Martin Luther’s sentence from the “Conclusion” to *The Bondage of the Will* :

For if we believe it to be true, that God foreknows and fore-ordains all things; that he can be neither deceived nor hindered in his prescience and predestination, and that nothing can take place but according to his will (which reason herself is compelled to confess); then, even according to the testimony of reason herself, there can be no “free-will --- in man, in angel, --- or in any creature.

Or, to take a more contemporary example, it seems plausible to me to understand Reinhold Niebuhr’s insistence that “love as forgiveness is the most difficult and impossible of moral achievements” and “yet it is a possibility if the impossibility of love is recognized and the sin in the self is acknowledged’ as a protest --- a justified protest --- against views of man and his behavior which were “oblivious to the power and persistence of self-regard in both individual and collective terms.” Again, Paul Tillich’s use of such a term as “estrangement” to describe man’s predicament reflects a concern to find language which is comprehensible to the modern man.

There is the fact of variety --- even opposed viewpoints --- in emphases, perspective, and methodology to be found in the understanding of human nature in Christian thought. Such variety found both among the Fathers, their successors and contemporary Christian thinkers makes it impossible to speak simply of “the Christian understanding of man” as though there was complete unanimity on all points between Soren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, Teilhard de Chardin, and Karl Barth.

Nevertheless, the variety and differences should not obliterate the unity in the variety. There are basic motifs which are common to the understandings of man in the several periods of Christian theology and to the great exponents of Christian anthropology.

One of the characteristics of the Christian doctrine of man is that man is understood in relational terms. His origin, his nature, his predicament, and his destiny are stated in Christian thought in language which express relationships. Preeminent among the relationships which describe human beings are the relationships between God and man. But men stand in relationships to each other; and human beings also have relationships to the non-human natural world.

Consider the language employed to describe the relationships between God and man. God is man’s Creator (as well as the Creator of everything other than himself which exists), and consequently, man is a creature. Thus, like all creatures, man is dependent on God who posits him in existence and sustains his existence. Like the whole of the created world, of which he is a part, the existence of man is an expression of God’s goodness who confers the good of existence on beings.

Further, the God-man relationship is expressed in the teaching that man is created in the “image of God.” This is not the place to enter into a discussion concerning what characteristic or capacity is to be identified with the

image of God. Interesting as it may be to pursue the arguments which have led many to identify reason with the image of God and others human freedom, the fact on which we wish to concentrate is that the language of the “image of God” is basically relational. An image is a reflection of an original. The image participates in the original, without being a part of the original or identical with it. If I understand rightly, the Christian language concerning man created in the image of God expresses the necessary condition for the right relation which man should have to God (as well as the possibility of man’s self-alienation from God) and for the fulfillment of human destiny.

It is hardly necessary to mention each of the pairs of terms which express the rightful relation of God to man and man to God which occur so frequently in the Scriptures and in Christian worship and prayer. They are expressive of relationship: Father-son; Lord-servant; Redeemer-redeemed; Sanctifier-sanctified; and the like. The covenant language is obviously relational.

The same is the case when Christian thought expresses man’s predicament. Man is a “sinner,” that is, a creature who has used freedom to be disobedient, to turn away from, to assert a false independence of God. The rightful relationship which should obtain has been replaced by a wrong relationship. Moreover, this wrong relationship is not necessitated by any defect of nature (that is, of man’s limitations --- his finitude or his natural constitution). The disruption of man’s rightful relation to God is occasioned by an act of will, a voluntary choice of independence, of inordinate self-assertion. The consequence is that man is in the predicament of living a disorientated life, in conflict with God, his fellowman, and himself. Whether man’s predicament is described in terms of the image of man as maker or man as legislator or another image, the language employed is relational.

The destiny of man redeemed is also expressed in relational terms. Whether the emphasis is intellectualist --- the vision of God --- or voluntaristic --- the love of God --- or some other, man’s destiny is not only a life whose quality is in contrast to the weakness, frustration and disorientation of his actual historical existence but also fulfills the new relationships to God, his fellowmen, and himself which is the present gift of God to faith. The consummation, Christians have taught, is the fulfillment of God’s purpose, a universal harmony of Creator and his redeemed creatures, in unqualified devotion to universal good.

The Christian understanding of man and his destiny has included not only the relationships of God to man and of man to God but man’s relationships to his fellow man and to the non-human natural world as well. Thus Christian thought has affirmed the corporate unity of mankind. The individual is organically related to the totality of humanity. The individualism something different from the value of the individual --- of the modern western world is hardly compatible with the biblical (and classical Christian) emphasis on human solidarity and the redemptive work of God constituting a people to whom he entrusts a mission to all men.

The basic law of life governing the relations between men is the “law” of love. Christian love stops at no boundaries of class, nationality, race, ideological loyalty or any other partial value constituting a human society. Human destiny, so far as man’s relations to his fellow man are concerned, is a unity which is neither a collection of unrelated individuals nor a collectivity which destroys the individual.

Moreover, man belongs to the natural world which is good as well as transcends it. His destiny is not escape from the world of nature. He is bound to the world of nature by his body and his redemption is not escape from his body. In opposition to the body-mind dualism of classical culture, Christians affirmed, “I believe the resurrection of the flesh.” From the earliest times, the majority of Christians thought of redemption in cosmic terms, not, in the fashion of the Gnostics, of a release of spiritual particles unfortunately now embedded and imprisoned in corporeal stuff.

The approach followed above was chosen in order to set in bold relief the relational character of Christian language concerning human nature and its destiny. Perhaps enough has been said to make that case. If that is so, it must also be admitted that the account fails to convey the traditional Christian recounting of the human

drama: The setting of the human drama in the great contest between God and Satan and the redemptive work of God in Christ, beginning with the incarnation and continuing through victory over Satan and the powers of sin and death and culminating in the mission of the Holy Spirit who creates the Church of Jesus Christ.

In spite of its incompleteness, the emphasis on the understanding of man in terms of relations does point to a vision of man which underscores an understanding of man in terms of being acted upon and acting and engaged in interaction. Instead of the images of man as a maker or as a legislator it sees man as a responsive and a responsible being. God acts upon man and man responds to God's action in faith or unfaith, in obedience or disobedience, in ungrudging gratitude or ungrateful hostility, in acknowledged dependence or prideful self-assertion. His fellow men act upon him and so does the world of nature.

Man acts as well as suffers action upon himself. He responds to the divine action upon him. He responds to his mother's loving care or indifference or hostility and to his father's authority depending on how it is exercised. He participates in human societies which act upon him and to which he re-acts. He chooses his loyalties and commitments which in no small measure determine how he will estimate the actions of other men and societies upon him and his re-actions to such actions upon him.

The actions of men, as individuals and as societies, on the individual and the reactions of individuals to actions upon them is an exceedingly complex interaction. There is both cooperation and conflict; there is both devotion to the common good and loyalty to a partial good instead of loyalty to a universal good. There is both the more or less ruthless quest for power over others and acts of self-sacrificial love for the well-being of another. There is self-sacrifice for one's own nation and hateful hostility to a nation or people which threatens --- actually or supposedly one's own.

Man is responsive; he is also accountable for his responses. Thus man understands himself not merely as responsive but as responsible as well. He chooses the values or an organization of values to which he is more or less loyal and he knows that he is accountable for his fundamental choice. He makes particular decisions and knows he is accountable for his fundamental choice. He makes particular decisions and knows he is accountable for those decisions. He enters into implicit or explicit agreements with others and acknowledges his accountability for his fidelity or betrayal of his commitments.

The Christian understanding of man has always insisted on man's accountability for his responses to actions upon him and his interactions; more, it has emphasized man's accountability for the self he actually is and the self he aspires to become. He is accountable for his diseased and corrupted condition as a sinful creature. He is accountable for his acceptance or rejection of the grace of God offered in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He must give account of his life at the Last Judgment.

Man is accountable because he is endowed with volition. Who he is and who he becomes is not wholly determined by physical, chemical, biological, psychological, or sociological processes. He transcends the natural order; he is an actor, a maker of decisions and not merely a passive entity acted upon by internal drives and the external environment. Man is a self and selfhood involves a degree of transcendence, of self-determination, of freedom from complete domination by the order of causation.

This element of transcendence, in the Christian understanding of man, is fundamental. But the element of transcendence should not be understood to mean that man is exempt from various conditions. He transcends but he is not exempt from physical and chemical and genetic conditions. He is conditioned by sociological and psychic structures and processes. The Christian understanding of man's transcendence must be understood in relation to, not in disregard of, man's creatureliness and his finiteness. For example, the Christian understanding of man should be open to the facts discovered by the life sciences, social studies, and studies in personality dynamics.

In principle, such a program obviously implies a rejection of the position that the Christian understanding of man is to be derived exclusively from the Scriptures. It implies rather a synthesis of the biblical understanding with the understandings contributed by empirical studies.

But the requirement of a vision of man includes more than an understanding of human nature which synthesizes the understandings of man as he is in his predicament and his potentialities, the structures and processes which condition his existence in history and the role man plays in the drama of history. The vision of man includes not only the past and present but the future as well, who he is and who he may become. It includes the question whether the whole human adventure has meaning or whether man's best aspirations are doomed to final defeat or whether they are destined to fulfillment.

Man's profoundest yearning is for a cure for his despair, his sickness unto death. The good news proclaimed by the Christian community is that there is a remedy for despair --- the transforming and renewing grace of God in Christ grounded in the very nature of God himself. The inescapable question of man's destiny, of ultimate despair or ultimate meaning turns on the question whether there are resources available beyond those which man can engender and control; in Christian language, whether there is grace available to man.

The Christian society --- the Church --- has affirmed the availability of grace --- of a resource beyond the control of man. On the one hand, Christian understanding has understood the human predicament in radical terms. That predicament consists not in the loss of man's volition but in a misdirected will. The good that I would do, I do not; and what I would not do, that I do. This conflict --- a conflict within the self, this impotence to choose effectively the good and to be loyal to a universal loyalty, this inability to be unfailingly faithful to the good acknowledged, this loss of integrity --- is the human predicament from which man cannot extricate himself.

Man's profoundest yearning is for a cure for his despair, his sickness unto death. The good news proclaimed by the Christian community is that there is a remedy for despair --- the transforming and renewing grace of God in Christ grounded in the very nature of God himself. That grace cannot in the strict sense of the word be demonstrated. But the availability of that promised grace is validated by lives transformed, by the lives of persons who have been freed from the intolerable burden of guilt, by lives freed from the tyranny of destructive anxieties, by lives demonstrating their power to love, by lives lived with serenity, thankful faithfulness and courage in the service of their fellow men.

The gospel of God brings to men a new vision of what history might be and of what man might be. The New Testament prophet who "saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" had no illusions concerning the depths of despair and suffering and frustration of "the first heaven and the first earth"; but he affirmed the possibility --- indeed, the promise --- of a new beginning, of a recreation of a creation distorted and in agony. His hope was in the creative power and goodness of God whose purpose would be victorious over all opposition.

The vision of man's destiny as affirming rather than denying the meaningfulness of human life may be given a variety of content in detail and, depicted with varying emphases by Christian theologians and philosophers. The description of that destiny may be expressed in terms which address the aspirations of men in this or that culture and their perception of the conditions or powers which frustrate those aspirations. Christian theology has subjected man's aspiration to critical scrutiny in the light of its own understanding of God's purpose for man. But such critical examination has been carried on not in order to deny the fulfillment of man's existence but rather to offer a vision of man which is truly human.

The vision of human life fulfilled according to the mind of Christ, whose life and teachings portray what it means to be truly human, has been and is grounded on the conviction of the faithfulness of God to man even when men are unfaithful to God and the assured confidence of his faithfulness in the future sustain the

conviction that the human drama is neither controlled by a mindless fate nor an ultimately meaningless episode in the history of an indifferent or hostile universe. Rather, the conviction of the faithfulness of God who raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and exalted him and who summons men to trust and loyalty to his redemptive mission, is the ultimate ground for the vision of man transformed according to the pattern of Jesus, the Christ of God.