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The Modern Conception of Man in the Light of the Christian Faith

A. B. MASILAMANI

The story of man is the most baffling and elusive of all the subjects man has attempted ever since he became an explorer of the mystery of life. It is 'baffling and elusive' because, in this case, the inquirer is himself the object of his investigation. Man not only knows but knows that he knows and this capacity is his special prerogative and his particular problem. '... he knows tomorrow, he knows the world and what is not the world . . . but this man is the sea, he is above all the world—whatever he reaches he desires to be beyond it.'¹ 'What is man?' is the question of the Ages: 'Know Thyself' is the loadstone of all philosophy: 'Man is the measure of All Things' is the curse of the history of this planet.

Generally speaking, man pursued his quest for himself along two broad avenues: religion and science. The greatest assertion he made about himself in the name of religion is that he is God; and conversely, the latest definition he gave to himself in the name of science is that he is an animal. As the divine, he sees himself in everything and everything in himself and as the latest dominant type of biological evolution he sees in himself the architect of his destiny and the destiny of all sentient life. In the former conception man is oblivious of his 'creatureliness' and in the latter of his spirituality. However antithetical these two views seem to be, they seem to agree on one thing: in both, man is conceived as the most supreme form of life: either he is the incarnation of God or is the last and the finest form of the eternal Matter. The judgement of the Christian faith on both these views is that, in so far as man is in his 'fallen' condition, his estimates of himself cannot escape the imperfections and limitations inherent in his nature.

With the passage of time, the modern man is so conditioned by the influences of the scientific method and its results that he is less and less interested in his traditional religious beliefs. 'True

¹ *Aitareya Aranyaka*, II: 1-3, as quoted in Rawson's *Katha Up.*, p. 217.

as it is that the tremendous advances which have been made in the physical sciences during the last century, adding immeasurably to man's comfort and his control of nature, have been accompanied by a decline in traditional religious beliefs, it is not less certain that man has never before been faced with such a gigantic threat to his very survival. Says Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, 'Today, when humanity is in grave danger and our civilization precariously balanced, we must re-discover lost values and recapture reverences and wonder which have fallen victims to the increasing secularization of human life and consciousness'.² Man must 're-discover lost values' if he is to find a way out of the present tragic situation. As a solution, Dr. Radhakrishnan suggests that man must know that he is the immortal spirit, the Son of God, which he is. 'When this universal incarnation takes place, when we can support the higher life, then the cosmic process will receive its crowning justification and the evolution of the centuries unfold its profound significance.'³ The pendulum swings back to the other extreme; man is potentially and essentially the divine. The modern man is trying to synthesize the deliverances of the Idealistic Rationalism and the Materialistic Rationalism with the result that he is utterly confused. As Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr says, 'it is not unfair to affirm that modern culture . . . is to be credited with the greatest confusion in the understanding of nature and with the greatest confusion in the understanding of man'.⁴ Unless and until man's 'humanity' is clearly distinguished both from the pure biological existence and the pure divine existence and understood in its right relationship to both, this confusion continues. It is not in a return to 'lost values' but a return 'to God' that the key to the understanding of human nature may be found.

According to Dr. Niebuhr, 'all modern views of human nature are adaptations, transformations and varying compounds primarily of two distinctive views of man: (a) The view of classical antiquity, that is of the Graeco-Roman world, and (b) the Biblical view'.⁵

THE CLASSICAL VIEW

According to the classical view, man is essentially a rational being. The body in which his spirit lives is non-essential. The reason in man is equated with the spirit and the spirit with God. Thus, the idealistic rationalism of the classical view equates man with God on the one hand and establishes a duality between the spirit and the body. In its attempt to rescue the spirit from the particularity which the body imposes on man, thus bestowing on him the freedom from and transcendence over nature, classicism

² *The Hindu*, Weekly Magazine, page i, for 25th December, 1960.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

destroys the individuality of man when it loses him in 'the undifferentiated totality of the divine'. Man is above nature and therefore above evil. Whatever evil there is in him, it belongs to his lower nature which is non-essential. Man is on the inevitable path of progress once he frees himself from the fetters of his lower nature. But this freedom, when fully realized, results in the loss of man's individuality in the total Being of God. 'Idealism begins by emphasizing man's freedom and transcendence over nature but ends by losing the individual in the universalities of rational concepts and ultimately in the undifferentiated totality of the divine.'⁶ The Christian view of man agrees with the classical view in so far as it refutes the naturalistic argument that man essentially belongs to nature but stoutly opposes it when it claims potential divinity to man. The soul of man is an endowment from God. Man is neither pure mind nor pure matter. He is a combination of both. In the finite existence, matter is as real as the soul; and the body and the soul are a unity. Evil belongs to the whole man, not to any part of him. The Christian view of man does not equate man with God: he is God's creation. The 'creatureliness' and 'sinfulness' of man are his essential nature and his freedom from nature gains any significance only when he submits it to the sovereignty of God. According to the Christian Faith man is an individual and his individuality is not defined by his physical body nor his spirit but by the 'image of God' which is impressed on his soul-body unity. This individuality is indestructible and is responsible to God and therefore it cannot afford to treat the physical existence as illusion and the spiritual existence as undefined freedom to know itself, be itself and ultimately lose itself in the pure Spirit. The classical view which gives man unlimited freedom of spirit is being exploited by the modern man in as many ways as it suits him, but the amazing thing is that he uses it with the utmost effectiveness in his pursuits after the materialistic gains. The bankruptcy of the classical view is never so nakedly exposed as today when it is shown as not being able to help him to achieve what it offers him.

THE NATURALISTIC VIEW

The naturalistic view of man is just the opposite of the classical view. According to this view man is not essentially different from any other member of the animal kingdom. This theory believes in the evolution process of nature producing various forms of life in accordance with the principle of Natural Selection. 'Natural Selection which is an ordering principle produces biological improvements, adaptations to a great variety of environments and ways of life, and tends towards greater biological efficiency and higher levels of organization.'⁷ Biologists believe that man is the latest and last dominant form of

⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, p. 23.

⁷ Hodder & Stoughton, *The Destiny of Man*, p. 15.

the process of evolution. The naturalistic view defines man as 'the meeting-place for forces and influences which play upon him, mould, manipulate, and stimulate him, like any other animal'. Modern biologists now claim that 'in many parts of the world he (man) has now succeeded in producing conditions in which Natural Selection has entirely ceased to operate on man'.⁸ Sir Julian Huxley makes a very bold claim when he says, 'it appears that in any case major evolution has come to an end except in one direction of better brains and minds—a direction pre-empted by man. In other directions a limit has been reached'.⁹ Man need not any longer be a blind medium of the evolutionary forces for with his brain-power he can order his world and resist any other form of evolution which might threaten his supremacy. Thus man becomes his own master and guide.

If the classical view in its ultimate emphasis has equated man with God, the naturalistic view has degraded man to the level of pure biological existence. He has no future, neither has his present any pattern. His individuality which he derives from his physical organism is destroyed when his body disintegrates into the elements of matter. The mind of man is another form of matter and beyond matter nothing exists. Robbed of his soul, his individuality is lost in his species and, ultimately in death, his moral values replaced by his group-interests, and his entire existence traced to an accident; man according to this view becomes an exciting farce produced by blind materialistic force.

This view subscribes to the deterministic theory of human life. Although man need not be a 'blind medium' of the evolutionary forces, his real freedom is necessarily limited to what vital forces operate on him. Man's moral standards become relative to his needs and ambitions and his fellowmen become for him opportunities for exploitation and self-improvement.

The value of this view is in its emphasis on the real nature of the physical existence of man. Its teaching that the bodily life of man is not illusory but real counters the claims of the idealistic rationalists who deny essential values to matter. But the Christian Gospel refutes its extreme claims that the physical existence of man is his be-all and end-all. According to the Christian Faith man is a creature of God who created him and laid eternity in him. Man is endowed with the Image of God. He is a child of two worlds: the world of physical existence and the world of eternal existence, but in both he is destined to live his life in fellowship with God. But the naturalistic view has a better appeal to the average modern man who is (i) opposed to the Christian teaching of the sinfulness of man, (ii) interested in the materialistic pursuits of life, and (iii) interested in his fellowmen as opportunities for exploitation and self-advancement.

⁸ Hodder & Stoughton, *The Destiny of Man*, p. 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

CULTURAL VIEW

Dr. H. H. Farmer in his book *God and Men* says in reference to this view: 'This view distinguishes and isolates man from the rest of the animal world—even though in other ways he obviously is an animal—in that he is able to speak, to be interested in, and to enjoy, what are, vaguely called higher, spiritual or cultural values.'¹⁰ As we have it, this view does not discuss the basic nature of man although it seems to partake of both the classical and naturalistic views of man. It is interested in formulating the necessary conditions which best ensure lasting happiness to man. Man's creative powers such as art, music, dance and literature are the aids for the realization of his essential nature which consists of truth, goodness and beauty.

'These things shall be: a loftier race,
Than e'er the world hath known, shall rise,
With flame of freedom in their souls
And light of knowledge in their eyes.
They shall be gentle, brave and strong,
To spill no drop of blood, but dare
All that may plant man's lordship firm
On earth, and fire, and sea, and air.
New arts shall bloom of loftier mould,
And mightier music thrill the skies,
And every life shall be a song,
When all the earth is paradise.'¹¹

The Christian Faith does not deny that there are wonderful powers in man and that their rightful use gives him happiness; but is that all the true meaning of human existence? And Dr. Farmer says, 'Hitler (we are told) loved Wagner and Nero is said to have played the fiddle while Rome burned . . .' Culture is a product of a civilization but not its creator. Christianity teaches that virtue is not its end. All the noble qualities and virtues which are sought to be fostered by cultural exercises can only be produced, nurtured, used and enjoyed when they are rooted in a faith which accepts the sovereign rule of God at the centre of man's heart.

VITALIST VIEW

This view claims that the essential nature of man is in his Life—life with a capital L. 'Let us accept ourselves as the mysterious life-force which throbs through all sentiment existence has made us—vital organisms with, be it always remembered, bodily and sensory as well as intellectual processes; and as such let us *be* ourselves and express ourselves.'¹² What Dr. Niebuhr

¹⁰ H. H. Farmer, *God and Men*, p. 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

would describe it as Romanticism, this view is a reaction against both the idealistic rationalism and the naturalistic rationalism. Man is not simply the mind nor the body but a combination of both: he is body-mind. As in the classical view he is not to transcend the materialistic scene as to lose himself in the Supreme Mind nor is he to be so identified with matter as to be lost in the predetermined forces which mould his existence. Within himself is the vital force which supplies him with creative as well as destructive powers. Life is vitality and is shared by all sentient beings but man has in him the highest expression of this vital force and it is his duty to carve out his destiny by properly using it. This means that man has to take cognizance of four things: (i) the vitality of nature, (ii) the forms and unities of nature, (iii) the freedom of the spirit to transcend natural forms within limits and to direct and redirect the vitalities, (iv) and the capacity of the spirit to create a new realm of coherence and order. But this view has no clear notion as to what extent the freedom of the spirit can enter into the vitalities of nature and creatively uphold them and to what degree nature's unities and forms subject themselves to the human spirit for the necessary revision and adaptation. This view, it seems to me, is nothing but a re-statement of the Christian view of man with the obvious difference that it places the vital force in nature and the ordering capacity in the spirit of man, thus shutting God out. This is an extremely serious view of man as the expressions of the vital force could produce so many diabolical forms. The Nazi movement is but one example of what man could make of himself when he puts his trust in a philosophy like this.

‘And once again we observe that there is truth in this view: it does endeavour to take note of at least some of the facts of our nature. Man is body as well as mind, or rather he is body-mind, neither to be separated from the other; he is flesh as well as spirit, passional as well as cultural, instinctive and sensual as well as rational and intellectual; and the little daylight patch of his fully conscious awareness is carried all the time on subconscious “deeps” whose impulses and activities are infinitely more mysterious and incalculable than we realize or, perhaps, in our flat, bourgeois, conventional morality, ready to admit it.’¹³ The God of the Christian Faith is both the vital force and the creative logos and it is only in relation to him that man can ever live fully. Whatever vitalities are seen in nature and whatever creative capacities seen in man, they are derived directly from God who ‘is the source of vitality as well as order’.¹⁴

PSYCHO-SOCIAL VIEW

Not very long ago, Sir Julian Huxley put up a theory which he calls the Psychozoa; which is interpreted as the psycho-social

¹³ H. H. Farmer, *God and Men*, p. 65.

¹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, p. 29.

view of man. The essence of this theory may be summed up as follows :

Major evolution has come to an end except in the one direction of better brains and minds, a direction pre-empted by man. Thus man is not only the most successful latest dominant type to date, the most advanced product of evolution, but the only type capable of achieving any important advance in time to come.

Man has now reached a point at which his knowledge of the evolutionary process has enabled him to begin defining his own place in it, or starting on a scientific exploration of his destiny.

It is our business as men to discover and to realize new and richer possibilities for life, a greater degree of fulfilment for ourselves and for the evolutionary process of which man is now the spearhead.

'The setting-up of values and the exercise of moral judgements is an inevitable consequence of the new capacities of man, his capacities for framing and expressing concepts, for rational and imaginative thought.'¹⁵

Major evolution has come to an end! 'Prehuman evolution has come up against what we may call the biological barrier. Only man has been able to cross the barrier into the new psychosocial domain.'¹⁶ We are not to argue how and why the biological evolution has come to an end but to notice the new direction of evolution on this planet. It is to be in the mind of man. Sir Julian further says, 'Such further evolution could, of course, be retrogressive rather than progressive, a deviation instead of an advance'.¹⁷ We notice again that there is not only a direction but a new dimension to the forces of evolution.

What interests us most is the scientist's prophecy that man's important question is 'what *ought* he to do'. There is an 'oughtness' in man's make-up and that is his standard. Scientists will still claim that his guidance should come from within himself but the Christian Faith once again proclaims that this guidance could only be got in God through Jesus Christ. The possibilities of a nuclear war threatening us, the fear of over-population worrying us, the possibilities of space-travel astounding us and the inherent evil in man overshadowing all our bright hopes, man cannot but be driven to the question, what *ought* he to do if he wants to avert a major calamity. Sir Charles Darwin says in a booklet of essays on the suggested theory of Sir Julian Huxley, 'In the struggle for survival man will have little energy to spare for the sort of controlled evolution that Huxley hopes for'.¹⁸ Bishop J. W. C. Wand joining in this discussion says, 'The time may indeed be ripe for man to take his own evolution in hand',

¹⁵ Hodder & Stoughton: *The Destiny of Man*, Introduction.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

but there is very little sign that he will do it sensibly. It needs much more than a calm appraisal of the possibilities to shake him out of his lethargy . . . It is here the religious man, and particularly the Christian, is in a better position than others. He does not expect the incentive to come from within. He believes that 'mechanism which directs the course of evolution' and its 'ordering principle' are guided by a divine mind to a good and beneficent purpose.

'The Christian holds it for certain that in the historic Jesus of Nazareth the divine mind has already entered after a new manner into his own universe, and inaugurated a fresh stage in its progress to perfection, both individual and communal.'¹⁹

C. S. Lewis in his book *Beyond Personality* made a statement which anticipates the present dilemma of man. 'Now if you care to talk in these terms, the Christian view is precisely that the Next Step has already appeared. And it is really new. It is not a change from brainy men to brainier men; it is a change that goes off in a totally different direction—a change from being the creatures of God to being sons of God. The first instance appeared in Palestine two thousand years ago.'²⁰

The classical view presents man as divine and the naturalistic view presents man as animal and the Christian Faith unveils the true nature of man when it says 'ECCE HOMO' and points to Christ.

'Jesus Christ, then, is the typical, the representative man, but at the same time, the leader, the first-born of the new humanity, conformed to the creator's plan.'²¹

Hyderabad,
31st December, 1960.

¹⁹ Hodder & Stoughton: *The Destiny of Man*, Introduction, pp. 41-42.

²⁰ *Here Christianity*, p. 170.

²¹ *Vocabulary of the Bible*, p. 253.

When we think of the Emmanuel and contemplate on God-head and manhood, we shall see that each of them is not only different from the other, but that they are remote from each other and sharply distinct. Moreover, when the union of both is confessed, the difference signifying the natures of which is the one Christ does not disappear, though by reason of the hypostatic union division is discarded.

SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH