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The Quest For Authentic Humanity: Becoming Like Christ

by Augustine Musopole

Summary: Liberation theology is concerned about liberating people to become authentically human. But what does that mean? The author's thesis is that true humanity is becoming like Christ. After surveying Biblical concepts of the image of God and the person of Christ the author concludes that liberation theology is incomplete in its understanding of what constitutes authentic humanity. Religion is ultimately relational--involving love for God and one's neighbor. As he states at the end: "without the restoration of human integrity in and through Jesus any human liberation remains incomplete and only a temporary measure."

The Quest For Full Humanity

One of the major concerns of liberation theology is the quest for full and authentic humanity. Negatively, liberation theology seeks to expose and eradicate oppression and injustice of every kind under which people are treated as non-persons. Positively, they seek to establish justice and to restore a full and authentic humanity to the "wretched of the earth", to use Fanon's phrase.

For liberation theology, to liberate people is to restore their self-worth as persons on a personal, economic and political level. This is a fundamental aspect of salvation from their perspective. As Leonardo Boff explains:

Salvation defines the terminal situation of the human being in God. It is secured once and for all by the redemptive act of Jesus Christ. But it is not only in eternity. It is anticipated. The human being must enter upon

a whole salvation process, a process that begins here on earth and ends in eternity. . . Historical liberations are thus anticipations and concretizations, ever limited, but real, of the salvation that will be full and complete only in eternity.¹

Liberation theologies have sought to widen the understanding of the meaning of salvation to include liberation from all forms of captivity. Such a liberation is a precondition for the realization of full and authentic humanity. Ela, speaking from an African context, underscores this point when he says,

An awareness of the problems of development calls for a profound conversion to the gospel in a new situation in which the first duty of the human being is to be fully a human being. Now, if the glory of God never demands the human being's mutilation, then it is the task of the Christians to discover and manifest a faith in Christ that does not dispense the human being from the obligation to be a free, responsible subject.²

At the very heart of justice issues and human rights is the question of becoming authentically human.

The mission of the Church is also seen in these terms following the manifesto of Jesus' own ministry when he declared:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.³

Here was a mission that was completely focused on the human plight and its alleviation. In the life of Jesus, we see this ministry holistically fulfilled. There was not a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual as is often maintained. Such a dichotomy distorts mission praxis. Jesus spoke of each in terms of the other. He would perform a physical cure and then pronounce forgiveness of sin as he blessed the victim with shalom. Does this imply an agreement between Christ and liberation theology? Such a superficial

identification must be resisted. What is needed is a deeper look at the biblical understanding of authentic humanity.

One of the most pertinent questions in theology today is: What does it mean to be human? To make it more personal, the question is: Who am I? In the context of all sorts of oppression, this is a genuine question. Among other things, one is defined by the way one is treated by others. This is true of God also. God's treatment of us defines us concretely. Since there is no contradiction between God's word and God's actions, what God says we are is confirmed by God's actions.

However this is not the case with human beings. What we say to others is not always what we do to them. This is why it was possible to believe that all people were created in the image of God while at the same time the Church remained segregated. It is possible to believe that all people are made in the image of God and yet hate some and wish they went to hell.

It is not only liberation theologies that have recognized the urgency of this question, but the whole human rights movement is about this matter. The killings that went on in Uganda during Idi Amin's inhuman rule, the tortures and even killings inflicted on political prisoners and the deliberate starvation of whole populations as a political means of subjugating them all raise the question of the meaning of our humanity. The domestic violence perpetrated against women and children which is often justified by outmoded cultural customs and the exploitation of peasant workers caught up in a dependent situation by Africa's *petit bourgeoisie* make this question an urgent one. When one looks at the inhuman conditions of our city slums, one cannot fail to ask what it means to be human in such conditions. One cannot see victims of drugs, alcoholism, poverty, homelessness and never stop to ask, "What does it mean to be authentically human?" My thesis is that God's intention in Jesus is to make human beings Christlike, which is our full and authentic humanity, and that this is meant to define us by deed and not simply by word. What does the Bible have to say?

The Image Of God And Authentic Humanity

As Christians we naturally turn to the Bible for answers in the knowledge that if my existence is the question, then the answer has to come from outside of

human boundaries. That is where the Bible begins. The book of Genesis describes for us what we are all about:

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him, male and female, he created them.⁴

It is humankind that is created in the image of God and not God who is created in the image of humankind. Idolatry arises when we represent God, whether by thought, action or symbol, as if God were made in the image of human beings.⁵

It is to reduce God to the creaturely level.

The primary question in knowing ourselves, according to the Bible, is not, "Who am I?" but rather "Who is this God in whose image I am made?" It is John Calvin who has said that our knowledge of God and ourselves are inter-related. We cannot know God without knowing ourselves and we cannot know ourselves adequately without the knowledge of God.⁶

The words "image" and "likeness" refer to the same things and they reinforce and amplify each other according to the Hebrew style of parallelism. The God in whose image and likeness we are made is the God who describes the Godself as, "I AM THAT I AM".⁷ One thing that can be deduced from this enigmatic self-definition of God is that God is true to Himself. God's integrity is not an attribute, but who God is essentially. To be God is to have integrity and authenticity. God's personal being is the source and standard of human integrity, faithfulness, love, etc. Therefore, to be made in the image of God is to share in the character of God, the ability to be true to self as human beings.

No wonder the lack of integrity is one of the symptoms of being under the power of sin, and therefore under subhuman conditions. When Jesus tells his disciples to be perfect as their heavenly father is perfect he is drawing their attention to human integrity.⁸

In his gospel, John describes God as spirit.⁹ Spirit is likened to the wind, invisible and yet real. Just as the wind sustains life, so does the Spirit of God. To be made in the image of God is to have a spiritual bonding with God and to share in God's creative spirit. To be in the image of God means being open to God and having the capability of communion and communication with Him. Viewed from the biblical perspective authentic humanity means becoming an integrated person where one's mind and body, thought and feelings, senses and

emotions, rationality and intuitions are responsive to God. To be made in the image of God is to have a kinship relationship with God. We are created to relate and participate in God. We cannot opt out of this relationship, just as no one can opt out of a blood relationship. The attitude to it may change, but not the kinship itself. Either we relate positively or negatively.

Genesis also tells us that we are a humanity in two related varieties. As male and female, we each are made in God's image and likeness. The main theological and anthropological point of the second creation story is the creation of Eve, to which Adam responds: "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."¹⁰ There is a mutual and participatory kinship. Being both made in God's image, our sexuality as male and female has spiritual dimensions. It is as sexual beings that we are created in the image of God, and it is also as such, spiritual and sexual, that we relate to each other and grow as families and communities. However, it is our spirituality that defines all our human relationships ultimately.

Religion And Authentic Humanity

The creation of man in the image of God tells us why religion cannot be defined only in terms of our relationship to God, but must also include our relationship to one another. The deuteronomic historians and the prophets make this abundantly clear. Jesus takes it up in Matthew's gospel when he says that if someone has a grievance against you and you have to make an offering, be reconciled first, then come and make your offering.¹¹ Or when he says that our being forgiven by God is contingent on our forgiving other people first.¹² Or when he says that the sabbath is made for human beings and not human beings for the sabbath.¹³ Religion has to do with the way we relate to each other and to God, whether well or badly. This is what is meant when it is said that to be human is to be religious. Whenever we relate to others, be it personally, economically, socially or politically, we are involved in religion--good or bad religion. It is out of this religious relatedness that community and communion or individualism (based on personal or group interest) and non communion emerge. Therefore, to be made in the image and likeness of God, is to be made for community and communion, for belonging and loving, for membership and fellowship.

It is in the context of this spiritually charged community-in-communion that we are supposed to discharge our various God-given responsibilities, namely, responsible personhood as those who are made in the image of God, responsible parenthood as those who are sexually spiritual, and responsible management of the environment as those who are meant to participate in the reign of God. To be made in the image and likeness of God is to be responsible to God (the theological and primary aspect); to the self in terms of integrity (anthropological aspects based on the theological); to others as a community (the sociological based on the first two); and to the environment (the ecological context in which we discharge all these duties). These four relational dimensions define the context of the meaning of our humanity. To be human is not a theoretical understanding, but an actual praxis of being human and becoming human in one act of living. It is not a thinking, but a doing or rather a being-in-action under, for, and with God. It is a call to integrity. As we call attention to the integrity of creation, we need to call even more attention to integrity in the other three dimensions: theological, anthropological and sociological. Righteousness is the state of being in integrity. It speaks of right relationships and dealings. This brings to mind the biblical statement that "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people."¹⁴

The spirit of any nation suffers when integrity is lacking. To be human is to maintain total integrity. The laws are enacted to prevent the loss of integrity and encourage its maintainance.

Jesus And The Authentic Image Of God

As Christians, the image and likeness in which we are made can be understood best in the light of Jesus Christ as the second Adam. However, Jesus as the second Adam becomes significant in view of what happened in the first Adam. The story of the Fall portrays graphically how our integrity as human beings was lost and how that loss affected all other aspects of our being in the world. Paul summarizes the verdict on the human condition with these words: "All have sinned and come short of God's glory."¹⁵ In the gospels of John and Matthew the mission of Jesus is tied to liberation from sin. The angel told Joseph in regard to Mary's expected child,

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.¹⁶

John the Baptist told the masses to look to "the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!"¹⁷

Paul tells us that sin entered the world through one man and led to the condemnation of all to death.¹⁸ With the loss of human integrity, the fullness and authenticity of life were also greatly impaired and have not been fully restored because of the prevalence of sin. Sin is a matter of bad relationships due to the loss of moral integrity or righteousness. Therefore, it amounts to bad religion. It is a spiritual dislocation, disease, ill-health or dis-integration. Jesus brings salvation (health, wholeness, integrity) by breaking the power of sin in our lives and setting people free for total righteousness. Jesus liberates people by removing the cause of their lack of integrity and thereby doing away with their condemnation. We are restored on the road to our authentic humanity. Paul tells us that if anyone is in Christ Jesus, he is a new creation.¹⁹ To be in Jesus is to be born anew into the spirit of Jesus who is the image of the invisible God.²⁰ To be human is to have the integrity of God's image in us restored by Jesus.

The Embodiment And Manifestation Of Human Integrity

The Gospel proclaims that the integrity of our humanity can be restored through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Through this relationship we are put on the road toward exhibiting full and authentic humanity in all aspects of our lives. How does this happen?

Mark's gospel opens with the words, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."²¹ Mark is not only referring to the ministry of John the Baptist which he goes on to describe after quoting Isaiah. He is also telling the reader that his whole book is about the beginning of the Gospel which he is called to proclaim. Therefore, the beginning of the Gospel had to do with the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus is the Gospel and the Gospel is Jesus. The good news concerning our human integrity is Jesus and without Jesus, we have nothing good to say about the restoration of our human integrity. The best that we can say is the experience of wretchedness that Paul describes:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good that I want to do-- no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing...What a wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord.²²

In the gospels, the titles "Son of God", and "Son of Man" are used of Jesus. There has been much scholarly discussion on the origins, authenticity and meaning of these titles.²³ I will not go into that discussion, but I would like to make one humble suggestion. While the titles may be affirming the messianic and apocalyptic roles of Jesus and his two natures, they do so not so much as to emphasize the dualistic character of his person, but rather to assert their identity. Apart from the messianic import of the titles, they also belong to a linguistic genre to which the following names and titles belong, for instance, Barnabbas meaning , "son of courage", Boanerges meaning "sons of thunder", and also "son of peace", "son of righteousness", "son of light", etc. The import of these names is that they describe one fundamental characteristic of the person thus designated. While it is the on-lookers who called Jesus "Son of God", it is Jesus who called himself "Son of Man." In so doing, he is actually saying to the on-lookers that this which they see and recognize as divine, is what humanity is supposed to be. This means that in Jesus we find our authentic humanity. It is to this way of being in the world that Jesus invites us to follow him in order to escape the contradiction that Paul has described for us above. How do we begin to move towards this Christlikeness which is our authentic humanity?

The first message of Jesus in Mark's gospel is, "The time has come, the **reign** of God is near, *repent* and *believe* the good news."²⁴ Repentance is a call to a radical turn around. It is the negation of our contradictory way of life. If the Gospel is Jesus, to believe it is to put one's trust in Jesus. It means an engaged commitment. The need to repent and believe are demanded in the light of the imminent reign of God as manifested in Jesus. Therefore, Jesus is demanding a revolutionary change of allegiance from the rule of the kingdoms of this world to the rule of God. In a world filled with ideological definitions of humanity

(Marxist, Freudian, evolutionist, humanist, biological, liberal and capitalist) this kingdom oriented definition of humanity in Christ comes as a challenge. To be truly human means to surrender our humanity to the demands of the reign of God through the acknowledgement of Jesus as Saviour and Lord. It is to engage in a praxis based on the values of the reign of God.

To believe the Gospel involves the willingness to learn from the one who embodies the Gospel completely and to act it out in faithfulness to him. It is to become a disciple in the process of learning how to become authentically human in order to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. It is not merely rhetoric on the part of Jesus when he makes his way of loving the standard for the disciples.

A new commandment I give you--love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.²⁵

And again:

My commandment is this-- Love each other as I have loved you.²⁶

Love-in-action is the core value of the reign of God and the true mark of discipleship.

The tragedy of the Church in Africa today (as well as elsewhere) is that it has many members, but few disciples. This is largely due to our educational philosophy which is patterned on secular models and not on the goals of our Christian calling--being Christlike. Our catechetical practice is geared too often towards the accumulation of head knowledge only at the expense of a lived experience as disciples where to know means to live it out. We should never be satisfied with being processed Christians. This is especially important for those of us who have come out of Christian homes where religion is a major element of our culture.

We must become professing Christians. To be a professing Christian is not an assent to some doctrinal statement, but rather to Jesus as the Christ, who is the embodiment of the Gospel of our human integrity. It is to opt for a Jesus-perspective on life as the ultimate perspective. It is to place all perspectives under the perspective of Jesus. Using the imagery of an

animal-drawn plough, Jesus refers to discipleship as the taking on of his yoke. This course with rabbi Jesus in authentic humanity is a hands-on-experience and obedience is the only attitude that bears results.

Christlikeness And The Community Of Faith

Jesus has given gifts to the community of faith to aid us in our learning and growing process towards Christlikeness--the mark of authentic humanity. Paul states the objective as being that "...we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."²⁷ This is a collective enterprise. It falls within the sociological dimension of our humanity. We can never be authentically human in isolation. Even seminary degrees are no substitute for this personal experience and growth towards the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. We settle for less than the best to our own peril and loss. Note that this growth and maturity comes with engagement in service or ministry whereby the Church gets built up both in terms of membership and quality of Christian living.

Conclusion

To be Christlike is not to escape from the world, but to be engaged in it for and with Christ. To be authentically human is not to be less Christlike, but rather to be more Christlike. When we become more unlike Christ, we also become less authentic as human beings and more like beasts with a human body. We become inhuman in our relationship with others and God. Either way, we undergo an existential mutation.

Like Paul we have to forget what lies behind and to begin to strive for the upward call in Christ,²⁸ which is our authentic humanity, our integrity, our salvation and liberation. Without the restoration of human integrity in and through Jesus any human liberation remains incomplete and only a temporary measure. To be fully restored involves the theological, anthropological, the sociological and ecological dimensions of our humanity. These four dimensions define the extent of human salvation and liberation as well, a liberation found only in and through Christ.

Endnotes

¹ Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 18.

² Jeanne-Marc Ela, *African Cry*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 87.

³ Lk. 4:18-19. NIV

⁴ Gen. 1:27.

⁵ cf. Rom. 1:18-23.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics edition, (London: SCM) pp. 35-38.

⁷ Ex. 3:13.

⁸ Mt. 5:47.

⁹ Jn. 4:24.

¹⁰ Gen. 2:23. RSV.

¹¹ Mt. 5:23-24.

¹² Mt. 6:13-14.

¹³ Mk. 2:27.

¹⁴ Prov. 14:34.

¹⁵ Rom. 3:23.

¹⁶Mt. 1:21. NIV.

¹⁸Rom 5:12-21.

¹⁹2 Cor. 5:17.

²⁰Col. 1:15.

²¹Mk. 1:1.

²²Rom. 7:15, 18, 24.

²³ See Seyoon Kim. *The Son of Man as the Son of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985).

²⁴Mk. 1:15.

²⁵Jn. 13:34.

²⁶Jn. 15:12.

²⁷Eph. 4:13.

²⁸cf. Phil. 3:12-14.