

# THE IMAGE OF HUMANITY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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The subject is both fascinating and problematic – fascinating, because it takes us to the heart of the dilemmas and tragedies of the modern world, but problematic because there is no such thing as a single, unified modern culture. The culture of the West at the close of the second millennium is notoriously fragmented, diverse and pluralist. Indeed, some analysts question whether the intellectual and moral chaos of the West merits the term ‘culture’ at all. Thus, the Oxford sociologist Bryan Wilson writes, ‘The erosion of the traditional culture of western society has been in process... for a considerable time. We have been learning or half-learning how to live without a culture, or with the rags and tatters of an earlier culture still clutched about the parts of us that we least care to expose.’<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly then, there is no consensus among Western thinkers about human nature; indeed, contemporary theories concerning humankind often propose diametrically opposed views. In the absence of God humanity has become a problem. Where the psalmist could ask in wonder and amazement ‘What is man that you are mindful of him?’, modern people living in a culture that has declared God to be dead, simply ask in confusion ‘What is man?’ In view of the supermarket of anthropological theories on offer today this paper should really be entitled ‘*Images of Humanity in Contemporary Culture*’.

## **The Basic Dilemma: Humanity between Heaven and Earth**

Christians have always recognized that human beings are defined and distinguished by two fundamental characteristics. On the one hand, they are *creatures* – they belong within creation and are subject to the limitations of nature and of death. At the same time, they possess self-consciousness and, uniquely among created beings, are aware of the

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<sup>1</sup> B. Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford, 1979), p.112.

*transcendent*. In the words of Koheleth in Ecclesiastes, despite radically secular world-views and hedonist lifestyles they discover an ineradicable sense of eternity set within their hearts (cf. Eccl. 3:11).

However, where Christianity held these two dimensions together in creative tension, secular anthropologies swing wildly between one and the other. At one extreme we find a naturalistic reductionism which focusses on humanity as a biological organism in such a manner as to explain human nature away. At the other end of the scale we find a romantic self-deification which ignores the earthiness of human beings and encourages them to indulge in dangerous fantasies. In the words of Stephen Evans, 'The post-Christian world cannot make up its mind about the human person... it cannot decide whether the human person is a monster to be tamed or a divine-like creature who must simply be freed to express or "realize" its own innate potentialities.'<sup>2</sup>

This secular dilemma has been expressed with great clarity by Ernest Becker. In his remarkable book *The Denial of Death*, he shows how Renaissance thinkers stressed the divine-like qualities of man, emphasizing those characteristics which clearly separate human beings from nature. But, Becker says, this same being is also 'a worm and food for worms'. Humanity is a terrible paradox, 'out of nature and hopelessly in it... up in the stars and yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-grasping body'. Excluding both God and eternity from view, secular thought struggles to come to terms with this paradox. 'Man is literally split in two; he has the awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever.'<sup>3</sup>

Becker claims that the basic driving force in modern culture is human fear of death. An illustration of this can be seen in the tragic words of Simone de Beauvoir; 'I think with sadness

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Evans, 'Healing Old Wounds and Recovering Old Insights: Toward a Christian View of the Person for Today,' in Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (eds.), *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids, 1988), p.68.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York, 1973), p.26.

THE IMAGE OF HUMANITY IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE of all the books I've read, all the places I've seen, all the knowledge I've amassed and that will be no more. All the music, all the paintings, all the culture, so many places: and suddenly nothing....'<sup>4</sup> However, before we consider those who, like de Beauvoir, have openly faced the reality of death, we need to note an influential theory of humanity which suppresses this feeling of terror.

### **Human Being as Machine**

The view I wish to notice here has been described as 'scientific humanism'. In sharp contrast to the ethical humanism which strives to retain human dignity and freedom, this theory emphasizes biological conditioning and denies the traditional claim that human beings are unique. According to scientific humanists, men and women are embedded within nature, locked into the evolutionary process. Everything previously understood to be distinctive and unique in humankind is explicable in terms of genetic engineering. B.F. Skinner, the distinguished American psychologist, deliberately distanced himself from classical humanism by giving his most famous book the provocative title, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Skinner argued that modern anthropology was trapped between an outmoded traditional philosophy of human nature and a consistently scientific view of humanity. Discredited notions of human freedom and responsibility must be replaced by a consistent materialism in order that rational, scientific social planning and management may come into their own.

As the prestige of science has been eroded in recent years, such deterministic theories of human nature have lost favour. However, views similar to those of Skinner continue to be advocated, notably within the discipline of socio-biology. Richard Dawkins, for example, argues that science is perfectly capable of dealing with all the classical questions concerning the meaning and purpose of human existence. He quotes with approval a zoologist who claimed that all attempts to answer questions like 'What is man?' or 'What are we for?' prior to 1859 should be completely ignored. Dawkins' view of the human person is clearly based on evolutionary biology

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* (London, 1980), p.693.

and leads him to conclude that 'we, like all other animals, are machines created by our genes'.

The moral and ethical implications of such a theory become plain when we are told that the 'universal love and welfare of the species as a whole are concepts which simply do not make evolutionary sense'. Furthermore, if there is no such thing as human nature, if people possess no dignity which distinguishes them from other species, then my death is, quite literally, no different from that of a dog. Clearly, the way is wide open here for genetic engineering and for the attempt to create a utopian society by means of what Skinner called 'behavioural technology'. So far as the beginning of life is concerned, Dawkins states that the notion that the human foetus can claim some special protection over that accorded to an adult chimpanzee 'has no proper basis in evolutionary biology'.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to judge the extent of the influence of scientific humanism of this kind. On the one hand, such a reductionist view of human beings runs counter to the mood of our times according to which people are encouraged to break free from the limits of nature by means of a plethora of quests for the transcendent. On the other hand, the impact of such ideas should not be underestimated; in areas like penal theory, medical research and the treatment of mental disorders, behaviourist ideas often underlie practices which involve treating people like machines. Similarly, animal rights activists often deny the uniqueness of the human person and appear to show greater concern for the well-being of rats and mice than they do for people.

### **'Ye Shall Be as Gods'**

If one stream of secular thought flows toward the pole of 'nature' and defines the human in terms of rootedness within the world, the other moves toward the opposite pole and proclaims the divinity of human beings. Nietzsche, whose philosophy has been extremely influential among artists and writers, explicitly denied that humanity is the result of special design or purpose. In his view, the 'death of God' demanded the emergence of a new race of men who would take upon

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (St Albans, 1978), p.11.

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themselves the task of recreating the world. Nietzsche wrote, 'Once you said "God" when you gazed upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say "superman"'.<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx also saw God as an obstacle to human liberation and understood his socio-political project in explicitly Promethean terms. Religion, said Marx, 'is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself'.<sup>7</sup> These nineteenth-century thinkers really did believe that humanity could and should replace God and that, in doing so, the way would be opened to a new world of freedom, justice and happiness.

It did not take long, however, for the realization to dawn that modern men and women, alone in an empty cosmos, now carried a crushing burden of responsibility. Nietzsche might exult in the task facing the human race in the absence of God, but for those who followed him, the profoundly negative consequences of the human attempt to rule the world soon became plain. Max Weber, anticipating the stifling growth of bureaucracy and rationality, spoke of our becoming trapped in an 'iron cage' while Sartre, in a famous phrase, described modern people as 'condemned to freedom'. Albert Camus, one of the most honest and courageous of all modern writers, saw the tragedy of post-Christian humanity in terms of the ancient myth of Sisyphus. Having stolen the secrets of the gods and put death in chains, Sisyphus was condemned endlessly to push a rock up a hill, only to watch it repeatedly roll back again. So, Camus said, modern man has paid a terrible price for his freedom; like Sisyphus 'his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing'.<sup>8</sup> This note of despair has become pervasive in modern culture; it can be heard in the music of composers as different as Vaughan Williams and Shostokovich and is reflected in the bleak canvasses of European artists like Picasso and Edvard Munch. Perhaps nowhere is the desperate loneliness of

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6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *A Nietzsche Reader* (Harmondsworth, 1977), p.242.

7 *Marx and Engels on Religion* (Moscow, 1975), p.39.

8 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p.108.

modern people more movingly portrayed than in the work of the American painter, Edward Hopper. His 'Nighthawks' is a terrifying picture of the lostness of people in the industrialized, urban wilderness.

However, in addition to bearing the burden of despair and loneliness which is the lot of secular men and women, contemporary thinkers must also explain why the liberation from ancient restraints and superstitions proclaimed by Nietzsche and Marx actually opened the floodgates to barbarity and violence on a scale unprecedented in history. How is it, to be precise, that human beings were no sooner pronounced free from the obligation to worship God, than they allowed a succession of *human* tyrants to place new chains around their ankles? Why was it that, at the very point at which people aspired to become like God, Europe fell under the control of fascism, Nazism and Stalinism? The psychologist Eric Fromm addressed this issue in his book *The Fear of Freedom* and concluded that while the culture of the West provided individuals with certain external liberties, it actually left them more isolated, anxious and powerless than ever. 'Behind a front of satisfaction and optimism', Fromm wrote, 'modern man is deeply unhappy; as a matter of fact, he is on the verge of desperation.'<sup>9</sup> People so terrified of the freedom offered to them in the modern era become easy prey for 'hero' figures whose ideologies provide a sense of meaning and purpose and whose charisma and power give security to the anxious. The work of Fromm, while seriously deficient from the Christian perspective, offers an enlightening diagnosis of our times and reminds us of the fragile nature of our civilization and the continuing vulnerability of modern humanity to the claims of false messiahs.

### **The Hedonistic Alternative**

As Koheleth realized long ago, faced with the stark terrors of life in a godless universe most people will turn tail and take flight from reality, immersing themselves in activities which provide a shield against the truth of existence. In this connection it has to be said that if we wish to identify the

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<sup>9</sup> Eric Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London, 1984), p.220.

'image of humanity in contemporary culture' we will need to spend a month reading the tabloid press as well as studying the kind of works cited above. Actually, little has changed from the time of Ecclesiastes; money, sex and drugs still provide the escape routes for people who lack the strength to look death in the face. Pascal, who observed the restlessness of modern people with such acuteness and sympathy, wrote, 'Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things.'<sup>10</sup> What is new today is the range of technologies by means of which the 'silence of eternity' can be shattered and rational thought and reflection rendered impossible. The lack of quietness and the sheer volume of noise now taken for granted in the West, whether piped into shopping malls or emanating from a million walkmans, is itself testimony to the futility of life 'beneath the sun'. Ernest Becker neatly sums up the modern flight from reality when he says, 'Modern man is drinking or drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing.'<sup>11</sup>

### **'A Being Reaching out Beyond Himself'**

As the Enlightenment project to build a new world of freedom and happiness on a humanist basis has foundered, psychologists and sociologists have asked whether this failure may be the result of something fundamental in human nature having been overlooked. Peter Berger, for example, says that secularized world-views appear to frustrate deeply grounded human needs, including 'the aspiration to exist in a meaningful and ultimately hopeful cosmos'.<sup>12</sup> In similar vein Becker observes, 'The every day food quest alone cannot answer to his restlessness; the cycle of eat, fight, procreate, and sleep – that absorbs the members of other species – has only the barest meaning for man.'<sup>13</sup> Albert Camus, to whom I have referred earlier, developed his 'philosophy of the absurd' on the basis of two fundamental convictions – that it

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<sup>10</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Harmondsworth, 1966), p.66.

<sup>11</sup> Becker, *Denial*, p.284.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Berger, *Facing Up To Modernity* (New York, 1977), p.210.

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil. An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man* (New York, 1968), p.171.

is impossible at present to discern any meaning in the world, and yet the human heart continues to ache with longing for just such a transcendent purpose. Camus' atheism is very different from that of Nietzsche and leads him to say, 'The certainty of a God giving meaning to life far surpasses in attractiveness the ability to behave badly with impunity. The choice would not be hard to make. But there is no choice and that is where the bitterness comes in.'<sup>14</sup> The significant point here is that Camus' anthropology recognizes both the deep human longing for a meaning that transcends this life and the extreme difficulty of living in the world without such knowledge.

Another important witness to the human need to discover a meaning to life which transcends present experience is Viktor Frankl. As a therapist he concluded that many of his patients were not, in fact, suffering from physical or psychological disorders. Their problem, according to Frankl, was 'spiritual'; people were unable to face life because they had no way of making sense of it. Frankl described 'existential frustration' as 'the collective neurosis' of our time, a profound crisis at the level of *meaning* which was incapacitating modern people and leaving them in a state of dis-ease and boredom. At the same time Frankl observed that despite the frantic search for pleasure, people remained unsatisfied and he pointed out that happiness forever eludes those who make it the object of their lives. Happiness, Frankl insists, is a by-product of the discovery of the ultimate meaning of my existence; when made into the goal of life it becomes an idol which will turn to dust in my hands. Thus, Frankl concludes that the quest for ultimate meaning is a definitive mark of the human person: 'The essentially self-transcendent quality of human existence renders man a being reaching out beyond himself.'<sup>15</sup>

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14 Camus, *Myth*, p.65.

15 Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning - An Introduction to Logotherapy* (Boston, 1964), p.8.



**Modern Anthropology and the Tasks of Theology**

In view of the crisis facing modern people in the context of a culture which is manifestly unable to satisfy the human craving for meaning, what response should theology make?

First, I suggest that there is need for a sympathetic understanding of the dilemmas confronting modern people. Unfortunately, theology in general, and evangelical theology in particular, still wears the clothes and speaks the language of the ghetto. It remains largely an internal business divorced from the apologetic and missionary task which should, in an age such as this, be its primary concern. Our ears must be open to the cries of pain and despair coming from contemporary writers and artists. Take, for example, this description of grief on the part of one of John Fowles' characters on hearing the news that his girlfriend has died: 'Staring out to sea, I finally forced myself to stop thinking of her as someone still somewhere... but as a shovelful of ashes already scattered, as a broken link, a biological dead end, an eternal withdrawal from reality, a once complex object that now dwindled, dwindled, left nothing behind except a smudge like a fallen speck of soot on a blank sheet of paper... I did not cry for her... but I sat in the silence of that night, that infinite hostility to man, to permanence, to love, remembering her, remembering her.'<sup>16</sup> Given such a tragic view of humankind, theology must be done with compassion, cultural relevance and a servant-like determination to engage in serious dialogue with a generation which knows itself to be facing the abyss.

Secondly, I suggest that we need to be cautious in speaking about God. I am not proposing that Christian theology should become defensive or inhibited in its witness to faith – far from it. And yet, there is a shallow triumphalism which, for all its apparent certainty, is desperately lacking in reality. The late Klaus Bockmuehl, responding seriously to the Marxist critique of religion, said, '...we must show that God is not just a language event.... When we speak of the reality of God, we tend to sound as though we are talking about life on Mars – no one knows much about it and even if one did, it

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<sup>16</sup> John Fowles, *The Magus* (London, 1977), p.441.

would not make a difference in everyday life.<sup>17</sup> Jacques Ellul, who has a way of putting his finger on the right spot, wrote a book entitled *Hope in Time of Abandonment* in which he said that, reviewing the work of the churches over the past century, he had the feeling of being in front of a very bad orchestra! Ellul insisted that in the present crisis, Christians needed to *feel* the tragedy of the withdrawness of God from Western culture: 'what I see is that we are abandoned by God. Oh I do not say forever, or that we are excluded from salvation, but that here and now in this moment of history, in this night which perhaps has refused the light, no actual light is shining any longer.'<sup>18</sup> If Ellul is correct, then theology must not only seek relevance, but it must be done on our knees with the cry of the psalms of lament on our lips – asking God 'Why?' and 'How long?'

Thirdly, given the absence of consensus in our culture concerning the nature of the human person, our doctrine of humanity is clearly of critical importance. However, we cannot simply repeat the formulations of the past since, as is well known, it is precisely Christian teaching concerning the uniqueness of humankind which has come under sustained critical scrutiny in recent years. We must listen to our critics and not dismiss out of hand the charge that, by stressing humankind's separateness from other species and right to rule creation, historical Christianity must take some responsibility for the looming ecological catastrophe. We may have to acknowledge that by teaching a particular concept of the 'image of God' the church has had a part in creating a technological society in which, as Douglas John Hall says, it is almost impossible to 'live like the truly human beings exemplified by the One who walked with his disciples in the wheat fields and slept in a storm-tossed boat and ate fish from unpolluted waters'.<sup>19</sup> While we should certainly resist the temptation to develop a merely faddish 'green theology', the

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17 Klaus Bockmuehl, *The Challenge of Marxism* (Leicester, 1980), p.81.

18 Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York, 1977), p.181.

19 Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God – Dominion or Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, 1986), p.111.

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fact remains that Scripture provides a secure basis for an understanding of personhood which, rather than threatening the earth, stimulates responsible stewardship and grateful respect. More than that, when the *imago Dei* is understood biblically, so that men and women regain their sanity only as they enter into a relationship of love and obedience with their creator, then Christian theology has in its hands a message with the potential to renew hope and bring new life to a despairing age. As Ernest Becker wrote at the conclusion of his last book, 'If we were not fear-stricken animals who repressed awareness of ourselves and our world, *then* we would live in peace and unafraid of death, trusting to our creator God and celebrating his creation'.<sup>20</sup> It is our privilege to tell modern people that just such a life of freedom and hope is possible as we recognize our status as forgiven sinners and sons and daughters of the Father.

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<sup>20</sup> Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York, 1975), p.163.