“Embracing challenges that emerge from modern and postmodern culture, gender studies, the natural and human sciences, studies of trauma and violence, and technology, Ross remains convinced that the Christian tradition has wisdom to offer to all those who continue to ponder the meaning of being human. With clarity and grace, she offers a splendid overview of theological anthropology and its contemporary challenges. Anthropology: Seeking Light and Beauty is an invitation to join in a lively conversation about the future of humankind in relation to God and to all of creation.”

Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP
Professor of Theology
University of Notre Dame

“Professor Ross deftly weaves wisdom from classical Christian sources together with insights from contemporary thinkers to form a tapestry that inspires us to think courageously about what it means to be a human being today. Her commitment to the values of truth and justice is evident throughout, and so are her wide-ranging knowledge, her profound Catholic faith, her esteem for science and the arts, and her engaging style of presentation. This is a splendid text, designed to appeal to a wide range of readers!”

Anne E. Patrick
William H. Laird Professor of Religion and the Liberal Arts, emerita
Carleton College
Series Advisory Board

Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College
Brian E. Daley, SJ, University of Notre Dame
Robert M. Doran, SJ, Marquette University
Margaret Farley, Yale Divinity School, Emerita
Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Harvard Divinity School
Roberto S. Goizueta, Boston College
Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP, University of Notre Dame
Michael J. Himes, Boston College
Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Drew University, Emerita
Michael McGarry, CSP, President of the Paulist Fathers
Robert J. Schreiter, CPPS, Catholic Theological Union

Other titles in the Engaging Theology series:

Church: Living Communion by Paul Lakeland
God: Three Who Are One by Joseph Bracken, SJ
Jesus: Word Made Flesh by Gerard S. Sloyan
Scripture: History and Interpretation by Dianne Bergant, CSA
## Contents

Editor’s Preface ix

Preface and Acknowledgments xi

Chapter One: Ancient Resources on Being Human 1

- Biblical Resources 1
  - Interpreting the Bible 1
  - Some Biblical Narratives 4
  - Jesus as Exemplar 9
  - Paul 12

- Early Christianity on Being Human 13
  - Gnosticism, Irenaeus, and Early Christian Martyrs 14
  - Asceticism 16
  - Platonism and Origen 19
  - Augustine 20

- Conclusion 24

Chapter Two: Resources from the Medieval and Reformation Periods 27

- Medieval Thought 27
  - Monasticism and Learning 27
  - Monasticism and Living One’s Faith 32
  - The Desire for God 33
  - Scholasticism and Thomas Aquinas 36

- The Reformation 39
  - Martin Luther 40
  - John Calvin 42
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Theology of the Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Farley and “Just Love”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex and Sexual Variation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter Six:
The Human Capacity for Evil and the Hope for Salvation | 109 |
| The Human Capacity for and Propensity to Evil | 111 |
| Human Beings, the Sciences, and Evil | 112 |
| René Girard’s Theory of Violence and Mimetic Desire | 114 |
| Understanding the Perpetrators of Evil | 116 |
| Victims of Evil | 123 |
| Trauma Victims | 124 |
| Social Trauma | 127 |
| Witnesses to Evil | 130 |

Chapter Seven:
Theology, Science, and Human Personhood | 133 |
| What Makes Us the Imago Dei? | 135 |
| Animals and Human Beings | 139 |
| Human Beings and the World around Us | 141 |
| Neuroscience and the Human | 144 |
| Technology, Medicine, and the Human Person | 148 |
| Conclusion | 152 |

Conclusion: Seeking Light and Beauty | 155 |

Index | 163 |
Editor’s Preface

In calling the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII challenged those he gathered to take a bold leap forward. Their boldness would bring a church still reluctant to accept modernity into full dialogue with it. The challenge was not for modernity to account for itself, nor for the church to change its faith, but for the church to transform its conception of faith in order to speak to a new and different situation.

Today we stand in a postmodern world. The assumptions of modernity are steeply challenged, while the features of postmodernity are not yet fully understood. Now another world invites reflection and dialogue, and the challenge is to discover how the meanings and values of Christian faith speak effectively to this new situation.

This series takes up the challenge. Central concerns of the tradition—God, Jesus, Scripture, Anthropology, Church, and Discipleship—here are lifted up. In brief but comprehensive volumes, leading Catholic thinkers lay out these topics with a historically conscious eye and a desire to discern their meaning and value for today.

Designed as a complete set for an introductory course in theology, individual volumes are also appropriate for specialized courses. Engaging Theology responds to the need for teaching resources alive to contemporary scholarly developments, to the current issues in theology, and to the real questions about religious beliefs and values that people raise today.

Tatha Wiley
Series Editor
Preface and Acknowledgments

The more I observed, the clearer it seemed to me that human beings—and I now include myself in that group—are apparently born with, or soon develop, an emptiness, a vacuum, a dead zone at the core of their being.
—Nevada Barr, Seeking Enlightenment . . . Hat by Hat

You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You.
—St. Augustine, The Confessions

Defining what being human means is no easy task: embodied spirit, rational animal, body that learns language, hearer of the word, economic actor, person in relationship with God . . . the list can go on and on. Both Nevada Barr, a contemporary mystery writer, and Augustine of Hippo, one of the great Doctors of the Church, say something compelling about our humanity: we are driven by desire. We human beings seek, want, covet, love, ask, and wonder. We chase after something that will make us whole, from the minute we are born until we are no longer able to desire and we die. Sometimes we do this to “fill a hole” that can never be filled. Other times we realize that we wanted something only when we have it in our hands. The lack of desire for food is often a sign that death is near. Desiring is something that has physical and spiritual dimensions. It is necessary to our existence, since if we do not desire to eat, or to be in relationship, we will die. But desire can also lead to despair and death. Desire is both biological and spiritual.

Desire is positive, as Augustine notes above, and it is also negative. The desire for more and more things that American consumer society encourages in us does not lead to happiness.1 Studies have shown that lottery winners revert to their prewinning state of emotional equilibrium

within a year after they hit the jackpot. But a lack of desire for anything is a clear sign of depression. This idea of seeking to fill our emptiness will be one of the main threads of this extended Christian theological reflection on being human.

Surely human beings seek to fill their emptiness in various ways. As Buddhism sees it, for example, our attachments are the very cause of our suffering; following the way of enlightenment promises a way out of the cycle of death and rebirth. The Christian tradition’s understanding is that God is revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection offer us a way of life and a promise of God’s solidarity with us through death and beyond. Even Jesus expressed his desire to be with his friends: “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. . . .” (Luke 22:15). A Christian theological anthropology has Christ as its center—a Christ who desires to be with his friends, a God who desires that there be a world in which God’s glory can be revealed.

But before exploring further some of the many dimensions of human desires as constitutive of our humanity, it must be said at the beginning of this study that the desires of all human beings, especially those who have been denied their basic humanity, must stand as a basic criterion for the adequacy of anything written here. What were the desires of young black men who were lynched for merely looking at a white woman? What are the desires of women who risk their lives for an education? What are the desires of refugees who live in tents because their homes were burned down by their neighbors? What were the desires of our ancestors who may have come to America searching for a better life or who came here in chains? I will try to keep the material context of human desires at the forefront of our considerations as a check against the tendency to assume that a particular set of desires is universally shared, as well as against an overly abstract idea of the human person.

Nor can the nature of our seeking and this emptiness be assumed. Traditional Christian theology has held that human beings (sinfully) desire to “be like God” and thus fall into sin because our desires overtake our rational capacities. Christian feminist scholarship has countered that the desires for power and wealth have historically been the province of men; women have often desired closeness in relationships, sometimes at the expense of their own personhood. Women’s desires are often

ignored, belittled, or even condemned as demonic—particularly women’s sexual desires. Our desires are sometimes not even our own, as Western consumer societies seek to convince us of the many things we did not heretofore realize we “needed.”

The title of this book comes from the words of a hymn that I sang often as a student during my five years at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Janet Erskine Stuart, RSCJ (1857–1914), wrote the words to “Spirit Seeking Light and Beauty,” a haunting hymn that I have never forgotten. I think that she must have had Augustine’s words from the *Confessions* in mind:

Spirit seeking light and beauty,
Heart that longest for thy rest,
Soul that asketh understanding,
Only thus may ye be blest.

Through the vastness of creation,
Though your restless heart may roam,
God is all that you can long for,
God is all his creatures’ home.

Human beings do indeed seek light and beauty, but we end up looking for them, as another song goes, “in all the wrong places.” We also seek money, sex, and power, things that nurture us and things that drain us. In his treatise on happiness, Thomas Aquinas lists those things that human beings vainly seek in their pursuit of happiness—wealth, honor, fame, power, bodily pleasure—a list of things that are still sought after in our own time. How can we make sense of our desires in the twenty-first century?

It is no surprise that theological anthropology is one of the most discussed and debated topics in the church today. While texts on the “doctrine of man” were the norm until the 1970s, since then liberation movements, identity politics, and scientific findings, among other factors, have significantly changed the theological-anthropological landscape. Discussions of human nature have become far more complex than in the past. Take, for example, the idea that the human being is a “rational

---


animal," the description of the human so often discussed in Catholic theology. Human rationality is not in dispute, at least to this writer, but today we realize it is far more complex, and the lines between human and animal are far more blurry, than was thought until the recent past. In fact, we now know that 96 percent of our genetic makeup is shared with chimpanzees. Scientists have uncovered more and more evidence of "reasoning" in nonhuman animals as diverse as African grey parrots and humpback whales, to say nothing of our primate relatives. So what is it about our particular mode of reasoning that makes us "human"? And even among human beings, how does reasoning take place, and what is the difference between emotion—thought by some ancient and even modern thinkers to bring us closer to nonhuman life—and reason? These are all disputed questions.

Another recent shift in thinking involves questioning what may be termed the image of the "normatively human." The very term "the doctrine of man" suggests that "man," as pictured in Leonardo da Vinci’s famous drawing, is male and white. Ancient Western thinkers placed the adult (white) male at the top of a hierarchy, with females, children, and slaves subservient to them. In white, racist societies, men of color shared this lower status, if indeed they were even deemed fully human. Women were thought to lack not only the superior rationality of men but also the capacity to image God as fully as men. Yet biological evidence points to the fact that we are all female before we are male because the human embryo begins life as female. Only when a Y chromosome is activated does the fetus become male. Thomas Aquinas’s oft-quoted (and often misunderstood) statement based on Aristotle’s metaphysics that women are “misbegotten males” might need, in the face of scientific evidence, to be altered to say that men are “first-begotten females.”

A further consideration in recent thinking about the human is an increased emphasis on human bodiliness and sexuality. While the fact that humans are embodied may seem at first to be obvious, the role of the body in Western Christian religious and philosophical thought has often been minimal or even downplayed, with sexuality in particular being that dimension of personhood that is seen to be farthest from the divine. Since human beings’ distinctiveness was rooted in their ratio-

nality, their embodiment and sexuality were seen as what was shared with “beasts.” But more recent Christian thinking has sought to place the body’s role in theological anthropology into a more central place, given that the major contention of the Christian faith is that God entered humanity in bodily form. Our notions of humanness inevitably include some sense of the body’s place (or its absence), and so to suggest that our embodiment is only ancillary to our humanity is not only wildly mistaken but also contrary to the creedral affirmation of the resurrection of the body.

Yet another issue to note is that of gender and its increased complexity. Is our sexuality and our sexual orientation to others determined genetically? Are we born “gay” or “straight”? What about persons who identify themselves as bisexual or transgendered or who feel that they are born in the wrong sex and change their gender through hormones and/or surgery? Christian theological teaching on sexuality has tended to assume a normative heterosexuality: men ought to be and are attracted to women, and women ought to be and are attracted to men, and this is how God intended things to be.7 As the saying goes, “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” But evidence from evolutionary biology shows that this simplistic answer is woefully inadequate when considering the wide range of both animal and human sexual behaviors. And while magisterial Roman Catholicism holds that same-sex desires are “intrinsically disordered,”8 the experiences of many people across the spectrum suggest that grace can be found in traditionally unexpected places, including committed same-sex relationships.

A final neglected factor is how we consider the context of our humanity. All of the great philosophers and theologians have assumed a human capacity to think, feel, and act (more or less) freely. That is to say, we take (or do not take) responsibility for our actions, consider how we can affect others, and imagine our futures. But not all people partake fully, or even adequately, in this freedom. Situations of grinding poverty, sociopolitical unrest, or enforced slavery have in the past and still in the present affected how human beings are able to live a human life: a life that has the

---

capacity to reflect the image of God that we all carry, a life that is more than meeting the most basic of human needs. As a number of scholars have argued, theological work will be judged by its adequacy to the experiences of the least among us. So there it must begin.9

These considerations will be among the central questions in this book, which seeks to sort out the issues that concern Christian theological anthropology in the early twenty-first century. I make no claim to universality here, and my own limitations as a white, heterosexual, married, childless woman with a privileged educational and social background will no doubt flavor and constrain the discussions in ways of which I will be unaware. This particular theological anthropology comes out of a North American context and may thus reflect the rather individualistic bias of Western culture. Still, my hope is that this book will map the issues involved in thinking about the human in ways that open doors to further discussion and debate.

The structure of this book reflects the method of my own education and the way that I continue to organize my courses. At the University of Chicago Divinity School, where I did my graduate work, seminars typically began with a “review of the tradition.” Courses would devote a number of weeks on the great classical, medieval, Reformation, and modern thinkers before plunging into recent scholarship for more current considerations of significant issues like love, hermeneutics, or revelation. I continue to find this a helpful method because it reminds us that many ideas that seem to be very new in fact have a long heritage in the tradition.

The first three chapters constitute this “review of the tradition.” I first consider how the biblical witness offers us multiple resources for understanding what it means to be human and also poses many questions that persist into the present. Why did God allow evil to be present in the Garden of Eden? Why does the Bible seem to support unequal treatment of women? As I move into the historical tradition, I comment on how various writers understood the human as image of God, the nature of sin, the desire for knowledge, and the obligations of living a Christian life.

The last four chapters take on some issues that I consider to raise serious questions in the present. They challenge the Christian theologian to consider how a theological anthropology responds to these questions.

---

If we are living in a “postmodern” age, what does this mean for a Christian understanding of the human person? How does our sexuality express the image of God within us? How do we account for violence and evil? And, finally, how are we to reconcile new developments in science and technology with our theology of the person? Through all of these reflections, the underlying question of the nature of the human and of human desires for God, self, and others remain central.

I wish to express my gratitude to a number of people who have assisted this project. Tatha Wiley, my editor, was both a tireless cheerleader and an astute reader. She made many suggestions and corrections, and she has helped to save me from a number of awkward and erroneous statements. I am also grateful to Hans Christoffersen, my publisher, whose gentle prodding and consistent support meant so much and helped to keep me on track when this project seemed interminable, and to Eric Christensen, whose careful copyediting made this book more readable. I am also very grateful to my graduate assistants, Daniel Dion and Joseph Gulhaugen, who read the manuscript, tracked down countless references, and brought my attention to works of which I was unaware. I would also like to thank Brent Little, whose work on the index is greatly appreciated. Anne Patrick generously read over the entire manuscript and offered many helpful suggestions, and I thank her for her time and friendship. The staff of the Theology Department, Catherine Wolf and Marianne Wolfe, who helped keep many mornings as free as possible and helped with word processing and formatting questions, deserve sustained applause.

While I have been thinking about these issues for a long time, my graduate class in Theological Anthropology in the fall of 2008 was enormously helpful in raising questions and suggesting approaches to the topic, as well as hearing me “try out” a number of the ideas developed in these pages. I am also grateful to so many friends and colleagues who listened to me think through these ideas. Finally, I cannot say enough in thanks to my husband, William George, who read the entire manuscript and made many helpful suggestions, gently pointed out where I was wrong or incomplete, and offered enthusiastic and generous encouragement. I dedicate this book to my students, undergraduate and graduate, over the years, whose questions, corrections, and insights have taught me more than I can say.
**Chapter One**

**Ancient Resources on Being Human**

**Biblical Resources**

**Interpreting the Bible**

The Christian theological tradition relies on a distinct set of sources for its theological reflection. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley named these four sources: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. More recently, David Tracy developed a “method of critical correlation,” drawing on both “the Christian fact” and “common human experience.”

However one describes one’s sources, the Christian Bible is fundamental and necessary for theological reflection because the Bible is the Word of God.

But to begin with the Bible is almost immediately to face another problem: How do we use these ancient texts, with their magical stories of talking serpents, their morally problematic stories of God commanding the Israelites to slaughter their enemies, or their edifying stories of self-sacrificial love, as a guideline for understanding the nature of being human? Particularly in the present context of conflicted attitudes toward sexuality, the status of the creation stories, narratives of sexual power and abuse in the Hebrew Scriptures, and Pauline and deutero-Pauline

---

injunctions about sexual mores all make the use of the Bible highly problematic in determining criteria for human moral action and defining what it means to be human.\(^2\) Most mainline Christian denominations approach the scriptural texts from both a critical and an appreciative position. Paul Ricoeur’s description of the critical process of reading texts provides a helpful strategy.\(^3\)

There is, to begin, a first naïveté, where one reads or hears the scriptural texts as “literally true” (the world was created in seven chronological days, Moses literally parted the Red Sea, Jesus fed the multitudes with miraculously multiplied bread and fish). Such a notion of truth is a simple one, where words mean what they say—nothing more and nothing less. The simple belief of children is often that of a first naïveté, as when children wonder how Santa is going to deliver presents to them when there is no chimney, or how he is going to make it to every house in the world. But biblical literalism is in fact more complex than this childish simplicity. Modern biblical literalism is a response to the challenges of modernity; to wit, how can one reconcile the creation of the world with the scientific evidence of evolution?\(^4\) In contrast to the long tradition of multiple levels of biblical interpretation, a tradition that goes back to the earliest years of Christianity, modern biblical literalism sees “truth” in empirical and verifiable forms that owe much more to modernity than to the long history of Christian biblical interpretation.\(^5\) The issue of whether fundamentalists are right to think that God created the world in seven days, rather than that the world evolved over millions of years following the massive explosion of the “big bang,” is much more a question of the human place in the cosmos than of the precise chronology of the divine creative process.

The second moment, the moment of criticism, according to Ricoeur, comes when the evidence of our maturing senses and our intelligence reacts against the mythical and fantastical descriptions of the Bible. It cannot possibly be true that these events happened the way that they are described; such stories collide with all of the evidence and intelligence

---

\(^2\) The term “deutero-Pauline” refers to the consensus by New Testament scholars that some of the letters attributed to Paul were most probably written by his followers; this was a common practice in the ancient world.


that we have available to us. There is a sense of being deceived, a critical moment when one realizes that one’s traditional sources are not to be trusted. Often the response is to reject these biblical accounts as purely mythical, to turn away from religion altogether and embrace scientific evidence, which is empirical and verifiable. But this time of criticism, necessary as it is, can be dealt with in too swift—and indeed, too immature—a way. Such criticism often coincides with adolescence, when clear and unambiguous answers are the desired ones. Once the biblical accounts are uncovered as mythical, one’s response may be to reject them altogether as superstitious and incredible. So we need to ask: Is it possible to read these texts in a different way? Surely the stories we know from childhood have deeper meanings!

Over the thirty years of my professional career, all too often I have encountered highly educated colleagues who assume that since I am not only a theologian but also a “practicing” Catholic, I must be a biblical literalist. One of them was stunned to hear that I used Freud in my Introduction to Theology class. Some prospective faculty at our Jesuit, Catholic university still ask if they can teach evolution in our classrooms. Their responses suggest that they agree with Freud, who saw religion as an infantile way of dealing with the terrors of nature and the inevitable disappointments of life. The possibility of a critical but in-depth reading of religious texts has not occurred to many well-educated people. Such a naïve reading of religion is often the result of very bad religious education or no religious education at all.

But with maturity can come a second naïveté, a sense that while these stories may not all be true in the sense of historical facts, they can reveal truth in a far deeper sense. The story of the exodus has been read as a story of God’s protection of a persecuted and oppressed group and their emergence into freedom. The parables of Jesus can be read as invitations to enter a world where the meaning of life in the kingdom of God is described in stories that draw on everyday experiences and where expectations are challenged, turned upside down, and transformed. Note as well that this approach to interpreting the Bible rests on a developmental conception of the person: we normally grow in our capacity to understand over time.


This capsule description of the critical process, relying on Ricoeur, does not do justice to the complexities of biblical criticism, with its painstaking reconstruction of biblical texts using the scholarly tools of form and redaction criticism, with literary criticism parsing the nature of ancient literary forms, and with the archeological work that has made the ancient texts come alive and revealed the significance of geographical locations. The reader interested in a more thorough introduction to biblical criticism is best advised to seek other sources.8 My point in this brief excursus into Ricoeur’s ideas is to provide a rough outline of how one can find meaning in ancient texts that do not meet the modern criteria of historical veracity, since they are not “historical” works, but which still have powerful meaning for what it is to be human. What are some ways of reading these ancient texts that can shed light on our humanity, even in the present?

**Some Biblical Narratives**

The ancient Genesis narrative story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent9 tells a story that most of us learned as children: the first human couple disobeyed God’s command that they not eat of the tree of life and were sent permanently out of Paradise. Since then, all humans have suffered the consequences. “In Adam, we all fell.” But a closer reading of the story raises all sorts of questions. Why are there two stories, the first with the man and woman being created simultaneously (Gen 1:1–2:4a) and the second with the woman created from the rib of the man (Gen. 2:4b-25)? The man and the woman are described as being “in the image and likeness of God”; in what dimensions do we most resemble our Creator? If Paradise was so perfect, what was the serpent doing there? And why would God have issued this odd command? The story also tells us something about the desires of these archetypal people. The man desires a companion, for the animals are not suitable as friends. The woman sees the tree as “desirable for gaining wisdom” (Gen 3:6). And, as they are expelled from Paradise, part of the woman’s punishment is described by God: “your urge shall be for your husband, / and he shall be your master” (Gen 3:16).

Surely the author(s) of this text saw human desire as a very mixed blessing. On the one hand, being able to recognize beauty, as the woman did in seeing what the tree had to offer, is a good thing. And desiring

---

wisdom seems to be a good thing as well. But on the other hand, it seems that their desire outreached itself and led to their downfall. Was their desire the problem? If the real issue was disobedience, what was the author’s point in deliberately putting the tree off-limits and thus setting the first couple up for temptation? Surely God’s intent was not to create unthinking robots, doing only what they were told, or maliciously to place temptation in the midst of their otherwise happy and untroubled lives. So there is a deeper mystery in this story, a mystery that has to do with who we are, what gives us life, and where we are going. Something went amiss, the narrator tells us, and all of humanity suffers the consequences.10

The following story in Genesis (Gen 4:1-16) of Cain and Abel receives far less attention than the Adam and Eve narrative. But it too is a significant story because of its focus on fraternal relations and the first murder. Like the preceding story, this one raises questions of its own. Why was Cain’s offering seen as lesser than Abel’s? Why was Cain banished but then protected by God? No real answers are given in the text, although some commentaries suggest that the younger son Abel is akin to other younger sons (e.g., Jacob and Isaac) who fare better than their elder siblings.11 God’s response to Cain’s “insolence”—“Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9)—is one of both justice (banishment from tilling the soil) and mercy (protection through his “mark”). The inheritance from their parents is one of a world fractured by relationships of jealousy and pain.

The American writer Jane Smiley’s 1989 novella Good Will is a powerful retelling of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve.12 Bob, a Vietnam veteran, and his wife, Liz, have decided to live “off the grid” in rural Pennsylvania, where they are raising their son, Tommy. Bob prides himself on his ability to make a living with almost no money—he tells a newspaper interviewer that his income in the previous year was $342.93. He and Liz raise livestock, grow nearly everything they eat, and live in a house that Bob himself designed and built. They live in “paradise,” as the reporter comments. But there is a serpent in this paradise, even though it does not come in the form of a snake. Seemingly out of the blue, and to Bob and Liz’s astonishment, their son, Tommy, displays racist and violent behavior. As the story proceeds, the reader learns more

about Bob’s desire to control everything about his wife’s and son’s lives. Against Bob’s wishes, his wife wants to worship with a local church. His son recoils at the slaughter of the lambs they have been raising, suggesting an echo of the Cain and Abel narrative. Bob is frustrated and angry with both of them. In the end, Tommy’s violence is their undoing, as a fire that he sets leads to the loss of their home and their whole world. They are expelled from their paradise by the forced sale of their farm and come to live like “normal” people: in a rented apartment, with jobs, school, even television. At the end of the story, Bob wistfully comments, “Let us have fragments.” Let the tragedies of their lives and the small joys of their new life “lie together” in this new, less-than-perfect life. As he considers “the vast, inhuman peace of the stars” alongside “the smaller, nearer, but not too near human peace” of the small town near his farm, he comes to realize that Paradise has indeed been lost, but there is now a knowledge and wisdom that has been gained from his life.13

Smiley’s retelling of the Genesis narrative, set in the twentieth century, helps us to see the depth and complexity of the original story. Typically, we learn the Genesis narrative as a story of simple disobedience: the man and the woman were given a command, they violated it, and they paid for it. But such a simple reading skirts away from the many questions that arise. The mystery of this story—why we are the way that we are, why we hide from God, why we are at odds with each other—remains, and we see in Smiley’s story how the echoes of this ancient tale of talking snakes and eating fruit takes on a new voice in experiences that we see every day.14

Being human is indeed a mystery, and the Genesis story opens up a number of questions and issues. As we will see here and in later chapters, simplistic ideas of human goodness or of our tendencies toward evil are not only wrong but also harmful. To assume, for example, that all of one’s students will always come to class, do their assignments on time, and never, ever cheat is, at least to this veteran of over thirty years in the classroom, hopelessly naïve. Yet to assume the worst is also to set up a recipe for disaster: a teacher who has no hopes or dreams for her students will have a very unhappy and unsuccessful experience. The best teachers I know are idealistic but also realistic. They set high standards yet are also careful that assignments or tests are not occasions of temptation. They are

clear but also flexible. Biblical wisdom on the human situation seems also to recognize the ambiguity of our existence, even as it still reveals its own patriarchal and hierarchical views of human relationships.

Fragmentation is one of the metaphors that has been used to describe the human situation in the present, with the loss of the certainty of the “modern” world. Our postmodern situation does not offer us the security of stable selves or a stable society. But this fragmentation is something that has much biblical witness as well. So many of the biblical stories are ambiguous and incomplete and leave the reader with a host of questions.

Consider, for example, the story of Jephthah and his nameless daughter (Judg 11). While this story is surely a prime example of a biblical “text of terror,” Jephthah’s own history is also a tragic one. Thrown out of his house because of his “illegitimate” birth, Jephthah, like so many rudderless young men, joins a gang and becomes known for his fighting skills. Later, he is hired by the elders of Gilead—the community that had rejected him—to help them defeat the Ammonites. The text tells us that “[t]he spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah” (Judg 11:29), indicating that Jephthah would be victorious. But not trusting this sign, Jephthah makes a vow to God that he will sacrifice “whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites” (Judg 11:31). Inevitably, it is his own daughter who greets him and who is ultimately sacrificed so that Jephthah can fulfill his vow. While his daughter’s death is the tragic climax to this horrifying story, Jephthah’s own background as a social outcast cannot be ignored.

Like the Genesis narrative, this text raises a host of questions. Why did Jephthah make such a foolish and unnecessary vow? Was his daughter aware of this vow? Who and where was her mother? Why was there no rescue call from God for this innocent child, as there was when Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac, to stop this violent act and provide an alternative? Jephthah finds himself rejected by society through no fault of his own; perhaps it is his own insecurity that drives him to this feat of braggadocio. The context is already tragic, and even after the terrible sacrifice of his daughter’s life, forty-two thousand Ephraimites were later murdered. Was this all due to Jephthah’s desire to belong or to show those who had rejected him that he would nevertheless triumph? We do not know the answer to these questions, but both Jephthah’s misguided desires and his daughter’s desire to please...

her father, both of whom are inheritors of a patriarchal culture, lead to unnecessary and violent death.

Gender dynamics play a role in these stories. The author of the Genesis narrative describes the woman’s punishment as subjection to her husband—a point that has been used for thousands of years to justify the continued subordination of women to men. The woman’s curiosity and desire have been interpreted to mean that she was weaker and more vulnerable to temptation than the man, particularly by New Testament writers like Timothy (cf. 1 Tim 2:9-15). In the story of Jephthah and his unnamed daughter, we are told that she and her companions spent three months “mourning her virginity,” since she would never bear children—the main source of a woman’s identity in that culture. And in other biblical narratives, we are given what many have interpreted to be divine authority to treat women badly. Renita Weems writes powerfully of the ways that the prophetic tradition described Israel in the language of harlotry, suggesting that women’s infidelity is the prime example of Israel’s infidelity to God.16 These are stories written by men and for men, and the examples the writers used show their androcentric perspective.

Nevertheless, there are also positive resources for a more egalitarian view of gender relations in the Bible. The first Genesis narrative, where male and female are created simultaneously, and Paul’s statement in Galatians that there “is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female” (3:28) have provided biblical interpreters a warrant for an understanding of humanity that emphasizes what women and men have in common. And feminist biblical interpreters have found a wealth of resources for a highly complex and often surprisingly positive view of women’s capacity to image God, many of which are seldom quoted or even remembered.17

Slavery is another topic with ambiguous biblical resources. For most of human history, slavery has been an accepted social institution. Hagar, Sarah’s slave, was actually the mother of Abraham’s first son, but as slaves, neither she nor her son, Ishmael, enjoyed the privileges or protection of her relationship with the patriarch Abraham. In the nineteenth

---


century, advocates for slavery cited the Bible as a reason for the continuation of the practice of owning (to say nothing of abusing, selling, or killing) human beings. In the New Testament, Paul tells Philemon to return to his master, and while Paul enjoins this master to treat Philemon fairly, interpreters have pointed out that Paul does not question the social structure that supports this (Phlm 1:13).

So in what ways do these narratives tell us what it means to be created “in God’s image”? We are given no one clear answer. In the modern context, some scholars have maintained that it is because of God’s giving “dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth” and God’s exhortation to humans to “[b]e fertile and multiply” and to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28) that Christianity bears the most blame for the ecological crisis. As the “image of God,” Israelite kings exercised their power in morally questionable ways. Thus the biblical tradition as a resource for human dignity is again revealed as an ambiguous one: “Slaves, obey your human masters in everything” (Col 3:22); “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord” (Eph 5:22). Do we consider these God’s words to humanity? Or are these simply human words from an ancient culture struggling to maintain power and the status quo? The fact that these passages are still debated thousands of years after their composition attests to their continuing power.

**Jesus as Exemplar**

For Christians, the ultimate model of what it means to be human is found in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (recognized as the Christ, the Messiah and Savior of the world) and in the affirmation that Jesus is God with us in the flesh. Interpretations of the significance of Jesus’ life and death have, of course, reflected what humans have valued over the centuries. Jaroslav Pelikan’s classic study provides a host of names and titles for Christ that are also models for human life: the Rabbi, the Bridegroom of the Soul, the Universal Man, the Poet of the Spirit, the Teacher of Common Sense, the Liberator. There are also titles for Jesus that focus more on his divinity: the King of Kings, the Cosmic Christ, the Prince of Peace. Early Christian debates on Jesus—his suffering, his death, and his role as Savior of humanity—concerned the relationship between his

---

divine and human natures and sometimes led to interesting observations and questions about Jesus’ humanity. To what extent did Jesus know of his mission? Was Jesus ever sexually aroused? Did he have all of the normal bodily functions of a human being, even the ones that are not mentioned in polite company? How did his divinity affect his humanity? For Christians in the two millennia since his life and death, the task of “following Christ” and living a life in imitation of Christ has been a constant theme.

Contemporary biblical scholarship on Jesus has been a controversial area, raising questions about Jesus that some find troublesome or even blasphemous. The “Jesus Seminar” has focused on what can be most firmly grounded in the historical tradition and thus traced back to Jesus himself. Miracle stories and anything related to the supernatural have been largely dismissed by some modern scholars. Sallie McFague’s summary of Jesus’ mission as “destabilizing, nonhierarchical, and inclusive” has been picked up by some scholars as representing core aspects of Jesus’ message. Since Christology is an issue in and of itself, and is the subject of another text in this series, I will not treat it extensively here but rather indicate how interpretations of Jesus along particular themes have played a central role in understandings of what it means to be human.

The story of Jesus’ life and death evokes both positive and negative responses. What it says about how we are to live our lives is not as clear as one may think. The nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was highly critical of what he saw as the weakness of Jesus’ humanity and argued that Christianity encouraged passivity in the face of challenges to humanity. Some contemporary responses to the significance of Jesus emphasize his “masculinity” in an effort to encourage more male participation in Christianity. For our purposes here, I

would emphasize the following points. First, Christians have found a model for life in the person of Jesus, particularly in his self-sacrificing love as it led to his death, as it has been interpreted over two millennia. From the second-century instructional writings like The Didache to the late medieval work The Imitation of Christ to the contemporary bumper-sticker slogan “What Would Jesus Do?” Christians have found in Jesus a paradigm for how to live an upright life. However one’s life is ultimately lived out, faithful Christians see in Jesus a pattern for living that serves as a guide to their own lives. This, of course, takes many forms. Jesus can be seen as a model for business leadership, a monk, or a martyr, as well as a model of self-giving love. Somehow, Jesus is always at the center of a Christian theological anthropology; who he is suggests who we ought to be.

Second, Jesus models right relationship with God. The prayers that Jesus said and taught, his openness to God’s will, and his awareness of God’s presence in everyday life all serve as ways to live and relate to the divine. Jesus’ complete openness to God, whom he addressed with the intimate term “Abba,” provides a model for the spiritual life, where a person strives to live out this openness to God’s will.

Third, Jesus’ attitude toward his culture and the world around him sets up a number of questions for later Christians. How should a Christian regard civil government? (“[R]epay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar” [Matt 22:21].) How should a Christian regard wealth? (“[I]t is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” [Matt 19:24].) One’s family? (“I have come to set . . . / a daughter against her mother” [Matt 10:35].) War and peace? (“I have come to bring not peace but the sword” [Matt 10:34].) Gender relations?


(See Jesus’ divorce statements in Matt 5:31-32.) As is obvious from these examples, there is no clear and unambiguous message that we can take from Jesus’ pronouncements on the world around him. Jesus was both a part of his own culture and also a critic of some of its practices. While Jesus is indeed a touchstone for Christian theological anthropology, there is no simple way to develop what this message means, as we shall see. What was central for Jesus was life in the kingdom (basileia) of God: a kingdom that is in direct contrast to the empire of Rome, that is at work within us and in the way we live our lives, that is not of this world but nevertheless enjoins us to disregard the social norms that keep certain people on the margins (the Samaritan woman, the man who was cared for by the “Good” Samaritan, lepers, adulterers, tax collectors) and to live the radical message of God’s overflowing love for all regardless of status. Jesus was skeptical of imperial power and all of its trappings, but he also enjoyed a good meal with friends. In sum, Jesus is the biblical criterion for theological anthropology: in the Christian tradition all understandings of what it means to be human must reckon with his life and his message.

Paul

The first theologian of the Christian Scriptures, the apostle Paul, interpreted his own experience of the risen Christ as the community of Jesus’ followers grew, and his reflections on his experience have had a powerful influence on Christian thinking about humanity. Paul’s language and concepts were developed out of his Greek educational and cultural background and provided a new way of expressing the message of the itinerant Jewish preacher. As an educated Hellenistic Jew, Paul had absorbed the categories of Greek thought that made distinctions between the soul and the body, between the spirit and the flesh—distinctions that were largely uncharacteristic of the Jewish tradition. These ways of talking about being human have had an enormous staying power into the present. Paul’s suggestion that continence is superior to marriage (1 Cor 7:31-32) is one of the most often-quoted phrases that suggest that our sexuality keeps us from being closer to God. Paul’s dialectic of spirit and flesh, drawn from his Hellenistic education and context, has sometimes been interpreted to mean that our material and embodied lives are ultimately insignificant in the light of Christ. In the following pages, we will explore further dimensions of this dualism of body and soul.

Paul’s writings on the conduct of women in the early church are particularly significant, as they have been understood to provide norms for the later church. How do we interpret Paul’s words in Galatians 3:28 about religion, slavery, and gender, mentioned above? While much feminist scholarship sees this passage as reflecting the egalitarian basis of the very early Christian community, later writings attributed to Paul (a common technique in ancient writings) declare that women should keep silent in church, wear head coverings as a sign of their submission, and find their identity in obedience to their husbands (1 Tim 2:11-12). Not so long ago, the Southern Baptist Convention used these passages to argue against women’s leadership, despite the fact that Paul refers often to the many women whom he identifies as coworkers. And while Paul declares that being a follower of Christ entails freedom from the law, his own social location as a Roman citizen and a Jewish convert to the Jesus movement inevitably color his views on gender.

Paul’s dialectic of spirit and flesh, taken from his Hellenistic context, raises further questions later connected with body/soul dualism. Did Paul write this way because he anticipated the end of the world in his own lifetime? How does the conflict of spirit and flesh inform the profoundly incarnational message of the life of Jesus and the message that he preached?

In sum, biblical sources for theological anthropology are rich, complex, ambiguous, and even contradictory. For centuries, people who considered themselves “good Christians” used the Bible to justify the practice of slavery and the domination of women. The Bible is still used to support capital punishment, the condemnation of same-sex relationships, and the subordination of women. Also fundamental to the biblical tradition are recurring themes of the human desire for God, God’s desire for human beings, and the many ways that these desires intersect and collide with each other.

**Early Christianity on Being Human**

Christian theology makes a distinction between the canonical Scriptures, which are inspired by God and thus have priority as revelation, and tradition, which is the record of the church as it responds to issues over the years and which has come to reflect the received wisdom and

28. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*. 
shared faith of the Christian community. Tradition, in the sense that I will be using the term, refers to the texts and figures that have attained authoritative status in the church. At some point in the first two centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the early church made some decisions about what constituted “Scripture” and what constituted the ongoing teaching and learning of the church. And much of what determined what was to be authoritative emerged from controversies concerning the very meaning of the Christian message. As Christianity spread into the Mediterranean world, it encountered a number of religious movements and ideas about the human that it could not ignore. Some of these movements were incorporated into Christianity in various ways; others continued to pose questions about the Christian message. All of them raise significant issues for theological anthropology.

Gnosticism, Irenaeus, and Early Christian Martyrs

When we turn to some of the first Christians who wrote on human nature, one of their main challenges was answering Gnosticism, a philosophy of life that is deeply suspicious of desire. One could venture to say that Gnosticism is a way of thinking about life that is found in nearly every period of time. Gnosticism—from the Greek word for knowledge, gnōsis—is about possessing the necessary and secret knowledge for salvation. Gnosticism tends to see the world in polarized terms (spirit versus matter) and is deeply suspicious of the flesh. It was a concern for early Christian writers because of the ways that it affected both Christology and theological anthropology.

Gnostics believed that human beings in their present state had fallen from a previous condition of beatitude and spirit and that our present existence in mortal flesh is the tragic result of this fall.29 Thus, Jesus the Christ, as divine, could not have been fully human, since that would mean that he shared in the sinfulness and mortality of the human race—unthinkable for the divine! Therefore, in response to Gnostics, early Christian authors took great pains to emphasize the humanity of Jesus: that he truly was born of a woman, lived a human life, suffered, died, and was raised by God. But the Gnostic phenomenon is one that has recurred many times in human history; it expresses a deep tension between flesh and spirit. As Paul notes, to be “of the flesh” (1 Cor 3:3) is not a good thing, while at the same time he and others recognize that

the fact that embodiment is a gift from God—“Therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:20). Human beings need ways of navigating this difficult relationship, and Gnosticism was one way of providing the necessary knowledge for doing this.

Ancient Gnosticism took different forms: one held that material reality was of so little significance that human beings could do whatever they wanted with their bodies, so sexual licentiousness was tolerated. What did it matter what one did if the body was in truth inconsequential? The other form held that the only way out of human entrapment in material reality was through rigorous asceticism. Although their methods were different, both forms shared a fundamental disgust with human embodiment, particularly in its “lowest” forms. Such a perspective, early Christians realized, was profoundly contradictory to the most basic tenet of Christian belief: the incarnation in which God takes on flesh, suffers, and dies.

Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 202) was the earliest and most articulate spokesperson for the goodness of enfleshed humanity, and his oft-quoted maxim “The glory of God is [the human being] fully alive” sums up Christianity’s rootedness in human embodiment.30 To be human is to grow, change, and eventually die, but Irenaeus did not see these processes as inherently flawed or evil. Growing and maturing are essential dimensions of being human. For Irenaeus, human experience is key. God did not create us like angels, who know everything at once; rather, we “slowly progress” and learn from our experiences, as Thomas Aquinas will later concur.31 Our very humanity is a work in progress. Human beings need to realize and accept what it means to be human. “We, however, complain that instead of being made gods from the beginning, we are first human and then divine.”32 Irenaeus’s sense that human growth and development is both good and intended by God is very significant and will be a theme picked up by many later Christian theologians; it was extraordinarily important that such an articulate spokesperson for the goodness of creation and of the body was there for Christianity in its early years.

While Gnosticism per se is arguably no longer the main threat to Christianity in the present, it is worth reflecting on the stubborn

---

30. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies IV.XX.7.
Anthropology

persistence of antimaterial ideas in Christian history. Whereas Christian-
ity’s main assertion is that God has come to dwell with humanity in the
flesh, the superiority of the “soul” over the body is often simply
assumed.

In the first three centuries of Christianity, Gnosticism and related
issues, such as whether or not the God of creation and the God of salvaa-
tion were the same, were the major ideas under debate. Waves of perse-
cution by imperial Rome were followed by periods of tolerance, as
Christianity developed its own distinctive identity in relation to its Jew-
ish heritage, affirmed its continuity with Judaism by including the He-
brew Scriptures (as the “Old” Testament) in its canon of sacred texts,
and sought to understand the Word of God. In those uncertain times,
the more complex questions of how the humanity of Jesus could coexist
with his divinity would have to wait for fuller debate until the fourth
and fifth centuries when things were religiously and politically calmer.
In those early years, the martyrdom of many Christians in these sporadic
persecutions (the Greek word for “martyr” literally means “witness”) resulted in a new way of living the Christian life: as followers of Jesus
in the highest sense. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson, “martyrs are the
ideal disciples because they follow Jesus Christ even to his death on a
cross.”33 Women and men, young and old, clergy and lay, all could and
did become martyrs. And as Maureen Tilley observes, “asceticism logi-
cally and practically preceded martyrdom. In fact, it made martyrdom
possible.”34 Rigorous practices of self-denial trained the early Christian
martyrs for their later trials. Martyrdom was something that both women
and men experienced and offered role models for women and men of
later centuries.

Asceticism

Once the anti-Christian persecutions ended in the early fourth century,
asceticism took on some new forms, as the threat of martyrdom no longer
provided a context or rationale for its practice. Asceticism, a form of rigor-
ous self-discipline, had always been one option for ancient religious tradi-
tions; certainly John the Baptist provides one significant example, as do
the Essenes, a very strict Jewish sect, in a context where the significance
of the body was contested. Heavy taxation, oppressive government, and

33. Elizabeth A. Johnson, Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading
of the Communion of Saints (New York: Continuum, 1998), 73.
34. Maureen Tilley, quoted in Johnson, Friends of God and Prophets, 72.
the countercultural themes of the Christian message—where providing children for the fatherland was not the highest ideal—served as justification for withdrawing from the world and living a life of renunciation of desires. For women, foregoing marriage and children meant that they could live lives of prayer and devotion and enjoy a kind of independence not possible in the traditional patriarchal household. For men, the ascetic life also meant avoidance of military service and the heavy responsibilities associated with being the paterfamilias. The point to be made here is that asceticism is a complex practice that comes not only from devotion but also from a social, economic, and political context where living ascetically may at the time appear to be more attractive and even more practical for many reasons. While asceticism is a thread that still winds its way throughout the Christian tradition, its focus on disciplining the body will always, in some way, be a response to how the body is understood in a given historical context.

The value of asceticism is a theme that will recur often in the Christian tradition’s reflections on being human. Although the Nicene Creed proclaims belief in the resurrection of the body, signifying its goodness by pointing to its future glorification by God, some, even today, hold that what is most truly human is our soul or spirit, with the body coming in a distant second place. Our human desires for food, sex, and pleasure are thus continually suspect, and the ascetic impetus seeks to dampen those desires, if not extinguish them entirely. This debate played out in ancient discussions of the value of marriage. Jovinian (d. ca. 405) argued that marriage was equal to virginity as a calling from God, but he was roundly condemned by his peers, especially Jerome. Jesus, of course, was assumed to be a virgin (as far as we know, or as tradition has always held), as was his mother Mary, although the complexity of the meaning of “virginity” in the ancient world is seldom given adequate attention. And while ascetic practice in the present is usually associated with the denial of sexual desires, in the ancient world the focus was more often on quelling one’s desire for food.

Any discussion of asceticism must also contend with the misogyny that is another thread—in this case, a poisonous one—running through

35. For a rich treatment of this theme, see Brown, The Body and Society, 108–9.
36. See Brown, The Body and Society, especially chap. 11.
the Christian tradition. By no means is Christianity alone in its misogyny. But its focus on a celibate, male savior, born of a virgin mother, and the development of a community that for many reasons, including misogyny, excluded—and continues to exclude—women from its official leadership led to implications that were overwhelmingly negative for their focus on women’s inherent sinfulness. Tertullian’s claim that women are the “devil’s gateway,” passages in the New Testament that women are responsible for the Fall of humanity, and condemnations of women as closer to evil than men in the medieval witch hunts—these are just some of the many ways that male religious leaders saw women as enemies of the Christian message. In Gnostic literature and also in orthodox spiritual literature, for a woman to “become male” was a positive thing: it meant that she transcended the female flesh that dragged her down and that she was closer to God, as the full image of God was found in men but only secondarily in women. These ideas are, of course, not only wrong but also sinful, since women are created in the image of God as much as are men (Gen1:26-27).

The practice of asceticism poses interesting questions about human desires. Can we, through rigorous acts of self-denial, train our bodies to desire less? Does practicing asceticism make us more in control of ourselves? In the present context, we might consider how the Western (and increasingly global) obsession with thinness as a sign of beauty and of control suggests that the perfect body is simply a question of hard work and self-discipline, and those who are overweight must therefore be lazy and unable to control their appetites. In the ancient world, however, asceticism provided one significant way of showing how human beings

39. Although the book needs to be taken in its context, and the examples need to be seen within their own cultural frameworks, Mary Daly’s Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon, 1978) provides five powerful examples of misogyny across cultures: foot binding (in China), female genital mutilation (in Africa), widow burning (in India), witch hunting and killing (in Europe and North America), and the practices of gynecology and psychiatry in contemporary Western culture.


41. See Caroline Knapp, Appetites: Why Women Want (New York: Counterpoint, 2003). The NBC reality television show The Biggest Loser suggests that even the morbidly obese can, through hard physical exercise and rigorous diet control, achieve a close-to-ideal body weight. It is interesting to note that many of the “losers” have regained much of their weight. Cf. Gina Pace, “Life after ‘Loser’: Every Day Is a Struggle,” MSNBC, January 5, 2009, http://today.msnbc.msn.com/id/28449267; and
could improve themselves along the rocky road to salvation. Along with other ancient practices such as Stoicism, an ethical system that preached indifference to desires and passions and with which Christian asceticism has some connections, ascetical practices demonstrated that if human beings could sufficiently discipline themselves, they could overcome, at least in part, their sinful desires. Later, we will see how, with Augustine, the ascetical practices of self-control were decidedly not the direct route to salvation, as they suggested that we can achieve it through our own efforts; indeed, the idea that we can “save ourselves” through our own efforts will prove to be one whose time comes back again and again in Christian history, albeit in different forms in different times. Nevertheless, Augustine saw our selfish human desires as most powerfully evident in our sexuality, a theme to which we will return.

Platonism and Origen

Yet another related and significant train of thought in early Christianity related to conceptions of the human person is Platonism in its various forms. Derived from the ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato, Platonism sees rationality as the highest quality of human beings. The person who is truly in the image of God is the one whose desires are under rational control. As a philosophy of life, Platonism predates Christianity; its antiquity provided a justification for its adaptation by Christians, since all that is good comes from God.

Platonism sees the mind or spirit as superior to the body. In a philosophy where men are associated with the mind and women with the body, being female is necessarily inferior to being male. Yet Platonism is not simply another form of Gnosticism. The body is a necessary reality, and when we are fully in control of ourselves, we are also fully in control of our bodies. Our reality here on earth is, to be sure, only a shadow of the higher and more spiritual realities that are above, but this does not mean that our earthly realities are bad—rather, they are lower while at the same time necessary. One scholar of early Christianity defines the influence of Platonism this way: “Christian Platonism identifies the divine image in humanity not as the autonomy of self-determination but


42. See, e.g., Roger Haight, The Experience and Language of Grace (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), for his observation on liberation theology and connections with Pelagianism.
Anthropology as rationality, the human capacity for knowledge of God.” Early Christian thinkers who were well-educated in the secular classical tradition found powerful connections between their theological and philosophical education (the ancients did not separate these two fields as we do today) and their Christian beliefs: surely the ancient philosophers were inspired by the same Spirit that inspires Christians! Therefore, the human spirit within us, a spirit that was implanted in us by God, desires union with God and must overcome the obstacles that the body poses. Justin Martyr is known for his “baptism” of the ancient figures of Moses and Plato as being inspired by the same spirit of Christianity.

Christian Platonists understood that humans were created as body and soul and that the proper relationship between them was the superiority of the spirit over the flesh: in Paradise, our bodies were perfectly obedient to the spirit. This point is later echoed in Augustine’s vision of sex in Paradise: it would have been perfectly rational and practiced only for the purpose of procreation. But in this life our desire for God is distracted by desire for other things that are lesser than God. As the Genesis 2 story reveals, the first couple allowed themselves to be distracted by such things.

One of the most significant Platonists of the early church is Origen (ca. 185–254). Origen shared the Platonist sense that the body is dragged down by the soul. Peter Brown describes Origen’s theological anthropology in typical Platonist language, where “the present human body reflected the needs of a single, somewhat cramped moment in the spirit’s progress back to a former limitless identity.” Given this situation, abstinence from sex would hasten the person’s progress. As the story goes, Origen castrated himself so that he would be freed from the lower urges of his sexuality. Origen’s theological anthropology was, interestingly, threefold: the spirit was the highest level, with the soul next as the seat of morality, and finally the body. The body was the unruly member of this trio, and while it was a creation of God, it needed constant supervision.

Augustine

No theological anthropology can take a shortcut around the monumental figure of Augustine (354–430), whose long and powerful shadow over Christian conceptions of self and personhood is unavoidable. Unlike

45. Brown, The Body and Society, 47.
many other early Christian writers, Augustine shared his life story in his *Confessions*. This book became a template for the Christian story. His voluminous writings defy categorization, and scholars continue to debate his influence on Christian theology. Augustine’s story includes many of the influences discussed above, as well as Manicheanism, an elaborate religious tradition with strong Gnostic roots that attracted Augustine in his youth. While he never rose above the lower status of “hearer,” he was taken by its system of knowledge. And while he repudiated Manicheanism when he became a Christian, some scholars think its influences remained in his later thought, particularly in his thinking on sexuality. Asceticism, with its concern for disciplining the body, was also important for Augustine. While he is often blamed for helping to develop Christianity’s suspicious attitude toward sexual desire, in fact Augustine argued that sexuality was a good created by God. This good had been damaged by the Fall of Adam and Eve, and in our postlapsarian world all of our human desires were tainted by sin.

Desire is at the heart of Augustine’s understanding of what it means to be human. His classic statement, quoted in the opening epigraph of this book, holds that all human beings have a desire for God, but this desire is tempted by lesser things and sinfully makes idols of them. The key to our living a Christian life is to love God above all, as well as to love God through the things of this world, never as ends in themselves but always as a means of loving God. There is a strongly Platonist thread running through Augustine’s work. Our wills, since the Fall, are no longer free; we cannot save ourselves. Thus, human sinfulness, inherited from our first parents, emerges when our desire gets out of hand, when we seek to satisfy only our lowest urges, and when we give in to them rather than control them. Any freedom that we have is a freedom to choose among the many evils we confront in our lives, and without God’s grace we are not free to choose the good.

Augustine’s understanding of the limitations of human freedom would continue to be a contested point for successive generations of theologians. In particular, the Reformation thinkers found in Augustine

---


47. See Margaret Miles on Augustine for a nuanced reading: *Augustine on the Body* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979); or *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine’s Confessions* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

48. See his *On Christian Doctrine*, especially bk. IV.
the complete and utter reliance on grace—and not on the church or the will of the person—that they saw as central to the Christian message. Later in Augustine’s life, his concern about an elevated concept of the freedom of the will took on a zealousness as he attacked Pelagius’s conviction that human beings learned sin from their environment and could overcome sin through their own efforts. For Augustine, if we think that we can overcome sin through our own efforts, then what need do we have for God? For the church? For grace?

For Augustine, we are constituted by our desires. Our sexual desires in particular epitomize the ways in which our constant need to satisfy ourselves are played out. Concupiscence, that drive to satisfy the self—in the lingo of Chicago politics, ubi est meum? (Where’s mine?)—is what constitutes our post-Fall existence, and getting “what’s mine” in our sexual fulfillment and pleasure is the issue that haunted Augustine for much of his life. For Augustine, the sin of our first parents was one of concupiscence: Adam and Eve desired something for themselves that was at odds with God’s will; concupiscence ultimately finds its paramount expression in sexuality. In and of itself, sex is not bad; as Augustine argues, there was indeed sex in Paradise since it was created by God for procreation. But under the sway of fallen human existence, any and all acts of sex are sinful. The most sinful sexual acts are those that are performed for pleasure alone. Thus, any contraceptive act is done for the pleasure of the person and not for the purpose for which God made it.

For Augustine, then, sexuality is the prime, although not the sole, location for our sinfulness. Sexuality is where our concupiscence rears its ugly head most boldly, and Augustine was keenly aware of this and wrote copiously about it, as he struggled with his own sexuality. But it is worth asking whether or not this focus on self-satisfaction and sex holds true universally. Perhaps it is the case for male sexuality, where desire and physical sexuality join so completely. Put bluntly, for men, without desire there is no erection, no sexual act. But for women, it is not always the case that sexual expression is accompanied by desire. While sexual pleasure and autonomy have taken on great significance for women especially in the global North, sexual abuse, rape, and sexual violence continue to plague women all over the world. In many parts of the world, women have virtually no power of consent to sex. So the long association of sex with sinfulness has a potentially different significance for women than for men. This is not to say that women have no sexual desire! Indeed, one could argue that the phenomenon of
women’s sexual desire and its expressions has found a voice only in recent years, with the women’s movement and the sexual revolution of the late twentieth century. Female sexual desire continues to be seen as a threat to society in some cultures, as the practice of female genital mutilation attests. But it is interesting to note that church teaching has historically paid little if any attention to women’s sexual desires and a great deal to men’s.

When it comes to Augustine’s views on women, we face again another complex set of ideas. Augustine was famously devoted to his mother, Monica, and her centrality in the *Confessions* cannot be overlooked. For many years, Augustine lived with an unnamed woman (his concubine) in a relationship marked by love and fidelity; they had a son together. Such a relationship was common in the ancient world, particularly when marriage to the right person of the right social class was not yet possible. When Augustine decided to live a celibate life, his companion returned to Africa. Yet Augustine believed that women were not the best suited for friendship; he excluded women from his monastic community and he saw women as the weaker sex. Like many thinkers, Augustine’s attitude toward women was marked by deep conflict and ambiguity, attitudes that sadly remain alive and well in the present.

Much, much more could be said about Augustine’s influences on theological anthropology. For our purposes here, let me highlight the following. First, by the time of Augustine’s death, the early church had settled on an attitude toward the body that both recognized its intrinsic goodness and maintained its connection with sinfulness. That is to say, in working through christological doctrines, which by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 maintained that Jesus Christ was “true God and true man,” the church had affirmed that the body was a good creation of God. Thus the church had countered, more or less effectively, the Gnostic conviction that the body was an obstacle to salvation.

Second, this affirmation of the body was accompanied by a strong Platonist thread that saw the body as inferior to the soul and therefore in need of discipline. There remained some suspicion of the body, particularly of the sexual body. Ascetic practices were encouraged, and the idea that married life was a lesser choice than the virginal life became more and more prominent. As Peter Brown puts it in his masterful study of the role of the body in early Christianity, by the time of the early Middle Ages, “Christian notions of sexuality had tended to prise the human person loose from the physical world,” and thus church leaders “had protected human sacred space from the formless, purely biological,
products of the body that periodically reminded the faithful of their indissoluble connection with the physical world."^{49}

Third, conceptions of the significance of gender had become more established within Christian teaching. Despite the leadership of women in the very early church, male leadership had become the norm by the second century, and statements about the inferiority of women were more and more frequently proclaimed and even assumed by Christian theologians. Yet despite their relegation to a lower sphere, women continued to make serious contributions to the early church. Vowed religious life, particularly for well-off women, became a refuge from arranged marriages and constant childbearing and a place where one could become educated and reflect on the significance of the Christian life. Holy women served as spiritual advisers to some of the most prominent theologians of the early church and were held up by them as models of piety.

**Conclusion**

What resources for theological anthropology can be found in this complex mix of biblical narrative and early Christian teaching? Let me suggest several. First, human beings are created in God's image. This is affirmed in both creation stories in Genesis. The first account, in contrast to competing stories in the ancient Mediterranean world, asserts God's direct creation of matter and the inherent goodness of creation. The second offers a narrative of creation as relational: between humans and animals, male and female, humanity and God. It is largely assumed by biblical writers that men are more closely the image of God, but women's virtue and significance, while often challenged, is by no means absent.

Second, there are deep fractures in divine-human and human-human relations—as well as between humans and the nonhuman world, modern commentators would add. Brother kills brother; humans turn their backs on God; nations abandon God for idols, and they capture and even slaughter their enemies as well as their own people; slaves are used and abused and even in the New Testament are admonished to obey their masters; children are unnecessarily sacrificed; women and men are raped. The list of biblical atrocities can go on and on. Let me make clear, however, that this list is no match for the atrocities that continue to plague the world of today. This point is sometimes forgotten by those who

mistakenly view the Jewish tradition as simply “preparation” for the fuller Christian message. Human sinfulness and evil, and God’s compassion for us, are well attested in the entire biblical witness, Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament alike.

Third, the Christian tradition struggled and continues to struggle with an ambivalence about the place of the body and sexuality. While Christianity teaches that God became one of us in the flesh, the flesh continues to be seen as the place where we are most prone to sinfulness. Celibacy is still seen as a higher calling than married life, despite the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that all Christians are called to the same holiness (*Lumen Gentium* 5).

Fourth, there is a marked ambivalence about women’s role in Christianity. While many of the ancient fathers of the church were nurtured and supported by women throughout their lives and counted women among their companions, the role of women remained subordinate to that of men. Certainly, much of this subordination was simply part and parcel of the social context in which they lived. But the genuine contributions of women to the thinking and practice of Christianity were often underplayed, if not ignored.

Finally, the social context of human life played a significant role in ancient Christianity; indeed, much recent scholarship on the New Testament and the early church emphasizes the influence of secular culture. It is important, then, that readers of early church documents see these texts within their context, which is very different than the present. All of these matters touch on human desires: for God, for happiness, for martyrdom, for sexual pleasure. As we move further along in the Christian story, we will see these themes emerge again and again.