

# Can we give an adequate account of human experience without reference to God?

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A theological analysis of human experience faces strong competition from other approaches which find no need to make reference to God. If the Christian message is to be taken seriously in the world of modern thought, those who profess faith in Jesus Christ must 'earnestly contend for the faith' (Jude 3). The Christian faith is frequently written off as empty subjectivism. Its critics assert that the Christian faith has no reference to objective reality. They protest that all talk of God represents a retreat from the real world to a world of ideas, a world which has its origin in the human mind. In view of this situation, it is imperative that Christians 'give a reason for the hope that is within (them)' (1 Pet. 3:15).

## *Atheism and Deism*

The existence of God cannot be taken for granted by the theologians. Anyone who would speak of God at all is obliged to take account of the strength of atheistic criticism. The atheist will not permit the theologian to introduce God into his analysis of human experience. He will tell us that we are simply begging the question when we bring God into our account of human life. The atheistic philosopher may include the idea of God within his analysis of the history of ideas. He will not, however, entertain the notion that there may be a divine Reality with which we must concern ourselves if we are to give an adequate account of human experience. When the idea of God is evaluated from an atheistic point of view, the relationship between 'God' and humanity is seen in terms of conflict. Taking the side of humanity, the atheist defends humanity's right to its space. This space must not be invaded by an authoritarian imposition from above.

Different from yet related to the atheistic view is the deistic approach. Here, God is not ruled out. His existence is affirmed. On the face of things, this seems to be the exact opposite of the atheistic outlook. One says 'Yes' to God while the other says 'No'. The

similarity between atheism and deism becomes clearer when we ask the deist, 'What kind of God do you believe in?' What the deist offers us is a rational explanation of the beginning of the universe. When we ask further questions—'What do we know about this God? What is he like?'—deism has nothing more to say to us.

How is Christian theology to relate to the perspectives offered by atheism and deism? First impressions can be misleading. An initial reaction may be to describe deism as a friend and atheism as a foe. This would, however, be a superficial analysis. When confronted by a direct negative—atheism—theology must respond by 'giving a reason' for its faith. When faced with the deistic view, there can be a superficial assumption that there is not really much difference between the God of deism and the God of Christian theology. This can lead to the situation where a taste of God insulates people against getting to know him more fully. People are content with the God of deism, and have no desire to discover more about the God who has revealed himself in Scripture—in the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus Christ.

Christian theology brings a richness of perspective to the discussion concerning God. This richness is completely lacking in the deistic view. To oppose atheism with deism is to present a view which may be satisfying to those who will rest content with a rational explanation of the origin of the universe. The deistic view of God will not, however, satisfy those who are looking for a deeper understanding of the meaning, purpose and direction of human experience. Those who embrace the God of deism, on the understanding that this is all that is to be said about God, may well find themselves being drawn towards atheism. At this point, Christian theology enters, insisting that deism does not tell us all that is to be said about God. Christian theology must move beyond a God concept which is so remote from human experience that it often seems closer to atheism than to the God of revelation, the God of Israel,

the God of Jesus Christ. A 'God', who is so vague and lacking in colour, would hardly seem to have much relevance to the deep questions arising from human experience. The Christian doctrine of God, with the richness of description given of him in the Scriptures, holds out so much potential for addressing these questions, which require a deeper analysis than that provided by the debate between atheism and deism.

### *Theological Anthropology*

How can Christian theology help us to understand human experience? Atheism contends that we must choose anthropology and dismiss theology. Deism may not be quite so blatant in its dismissal of theology. Nevertheless, the effect is much the same. Our tongues are tied. There is very little we can say about God. The 'God' of deism is more like 'the unknown God' of Athens Hill than the God proclaimed by Paul on Athens Hill (Acts 17:22 ff). Deism, like atheism, views the relationship between God and humanity in terms of conflict. While God is not completely excluded, he is placed at such a distance from human experience that we are virtually being asked to choose anthropology rather than theology. Certainly, we are making anthropology our chief focus of attention and giving theology such a limited space that it hardly seems a very important pursuit.

Should Christian theology be content with a fairly insignificant place within the multi-disciplinary attempt to understand human experience? Should we not register our protest against every tendency to set anthropology and theology over against each other? An easy separation of the two—anthropology is concerned with humanity, theology is concerned with God—is a misrepresentation of the Christian understanding of the relationship between anthropology and theology. In the opening chapters of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, we are encouraged to hold anthropology and theology together. Genesis 1:26 tells us that God created humanity in his own image. Matthew 1:23 tells us that Jesus Christ is 'God with us'. Rather than surrendering to a doctrine of separation between anthropology and theology, we should be thinking in terms of an anthropology which leads to theology, and a theology which is of supreme relevance to anthropology. We may speak here of a theological anthropology—bringing theological insights to bear on our exploration of human experience. We may speak also of an anthropological theology—doing theology in a way that is constantly attentive to its relevance to our understanding of human experience.

Holding anthropology and theology together, we must emphasize the integral unity of reality and relation. In theological study, we stress the reality of the

living God, emphasizing that we must seek to understand him in relation to our own human experience. In anthropological study, we are concerned with the everyday realities of human experience, while recognizing that the deeper meaning of human life is discovered only when we see it in relation to God. By insisting on the integral unity of reality and relation, we seek to overcome the dichotomy between an anthropology, which, in its preoccupation with the everyday realities of human experience, has forgotten about our relationship to God, and a theology, which, in its proper concern with stressing the objective reality of God has paid insufficient attention to the ways in which this God relates to our day-by-day life.

In theology, we concern ourselves with the living God. If, however, we take seriously our conviction that humanity is created in God's image, we will also concern ourselves with understanding human experience—always in the light of divine revelation. In anthropology, we study human life. We look at what we see, and we ask, 'Is this the whole picture?' or 'Is it an incomplete picture, a picture which can be complete only when we see it in relation to God?' Our concern is not simply to be theologians or anthropologists. It is to develop an approach which is both theological and anthropological.

### *The Essential Scriptures*

In pursuit of an approach which is both theological and anthropological, the Christian must turn to the Scriptures asking how the questions of man and God are posed there. 'What is man?, Who is God?'—How do the Scriptures ask the questions? Here, we may turn to two Old Testament passages. The first asks the question of man, while the second asks the question of God. Psalm 8:4 asks, 'What is man?', 'What does it mean to be human?' This question is not asked in a way that would suggest that humanity is a self-contained entity which can be understood on its own terms without reference to God. To understand the psalmist's question, we need to read the whole of it, : 'What is man that thou art mindful of him,?' Micah 7:18 asks the question, 'Who is God?'. This question is not asked as if it were a purely academic question, the answer to which is irrelevant to our understanding of human experience. The question is asked in a way that extends to our understanding of ourselves as well as our understanding of God. The question of God is asked by Micah in direct relation to our experience of him 'Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity . . .?' In both of these passages, we see the integral unity of reality and relation—the human question which raises the question of our relation to

God, the divine question by which we enquire about the God who related himself to us in his work of redemption.

***From Above or From Below***

Whenever we seek to establish a relationship between theology and anthropology, we face the question of our starting-point: Are we to come ‘from above’, beginning with God? Are we to come ‘from below’, beginning with humanity? The two approaches are often set over against each other. Those who favour a ‘from below’ approach are critical of the ‘from above’ approach, which, in their view, represents a heteronomous tendency that they find unacceptable. Those who are concerned about the theological tendencies which, in their opinion, present humanity as autonomous, independent of the divine sovereignty favour a ‘from above’ approach. What are we to make of this contrast between the ‘from above’ and the ‘from below’ approaches? Should we set the two over against each other? Or, should we view this contrast as a false dichotomy? It could be argued that both approaches are somewhat one-sided. Those who favour a ‘from-below’ approach are often so fearful of falling into an unwarranted authoritarianism that they run the risk of losing any real perspective on the true authority of Scripture. On the other hand, those, who are so defensive about their own particular formulations concerning biblical inerrancy, can often give their critics plenty of cause to dismiss the ‘from above’ approach. Rather than being forced to choose between a heteronomous divinity and an autonomous humanity, we might think in terms of a theonomy, which recognizes the divine sovereignty without swallowing up human freedom. When we use such categories as ‘from above’ and ‘from below’, we would be wiser to think in terms of ‘both-and’ rather than ‘either-or’. This ‘both-and’ aspect is inherent within the structure of divine revelation. In one sense, the revelation comes ‘from above’. It is God’s revelation. In another sense, however, the revelation comes ‘from below’. It does not fall straight down from heaven. It has been written by men. When we see revelation as both ‘from above’ and ‘from below’, we have an approach which enables us to give due attention to both theology and anthropology.

The problem with the ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ approaches when each is isolated from the other, may be summed up thus: the ‘from above’ approach is too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly use, the ‘from below’ approach is too earthly-minded to be of any heavenly use. What is required is neither a ‘from below’ approach, which hardly seems to get off the ground at all, nor a ‘from above’ approach, which never quite touches down on ‘terra-firma’. We may express this

differently. We need both a kerygmatic theology and an answering theology—a theology which confidently proclaims that there is a Word from the Lord, and a theology which takes seriously the questions arising from the human situation. It is important that these two approaches should be complementary aspects of a single theology which acknowledges both the spiritual character and the apologetic relevance of the gospel. Recognizing the spiritual character of the gospel, we must insist on its irreducible content. This gospel cannot be altered from one generation to another without diluting its message. On the other hand, it should be stressed that the form in which the gospel is presented may vary considerably from one generation to another. It cannot be assumed that the most suitable form of presentation in one generation will be equally effective in the next.

**Knowledge of human life**

The Christian communicator will seek to acquire a breadth of understanding derived from a variety of different approaches to human life. The broad term ‘anthropology’ is a kind of ‘umbrella’ for a range of different types of knowledge concerning what it means to be human—anatomy and physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, the arts, literature . . . No-one can be expected to be an expert in all these different fields. Nevertheless, we should be aware of the many different factors which shape our human experience. While the Christian communicator should have a continuing interest in understanding human life. Most important, however, is the Christian’s commitment to raising the question of the divine. The Christian reads and hears the question of the divine. The Christian reads and hears what various commentators on the human situation are saying, and then asks, ‘Are we really getting to know ourselves if we do not also raise the question of God?’ Understanding human experience involves more than acquiring more knowledge of observable ‘facts’ concerning ‘humanity’. We must also seek to understand ourselves. This involves seeking the meaning, purpose and direction of our own lives. It is here that we ask the question, ‘Can human experience—in its deepest dimension—be understood without reference to God?’

To take this question seriously is to focus attention on the God ‘in whom we live, and move, and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). God is not to be viewed as an optional extra, some ‘thing’ we can take or leave, according to our personal preference. We do not think of God as a kind of top ‘layer’ of the ‘cake’ of life, the ‘icing on the cake’, something we can do without if we are not particularly partial to the ‘icing’. We may change the analogy here. Those who would not regard God as life’s top ‘layer’ might speak in terms of a pint of beer. The real thing or the substance of life is, according

to the humanists, what we see; the 'froth' has no substance to it. This is what the humanist tells us about our talk of God. It is 'froth'. It has no substance to it. Whether we use the analogy of 'the icing on the cake' or the 'head on the pint of beer', we must stress that the Christian speaks in a very different way of God. He is not the top 'layer', 'the icing on the cake' the last thing to be thought of, the 'nice touch which tops it all off', the 'luxury' we can do without. He is the Foundation upon which all of life is built. Take him away, and what appears to be substance will turn out to be 'froth'. He is not 'froth', a kind of emotional 'shot-in-the-arm' for people of a sentimental temperament. He is the substance of life, the solid rock upon which a true understanding of human experience is based. 'Take God away' says the Christian 'and you are taking the heart out of human life. You are not taking away something which won't be missed. If you are to understand life—what it's all about—you must not remove God from view.'

### **The God who is there**

When we think of God as the One 'in whom, we live, and move, and have our being', we must not imagine that we are directing attention chiefly to our own inner experience. However important personal experience of God may be we do not make this the focal point of our thinking. God is not only the One 'in whom we live, and move, and have our being'. He is 'the Ground of our being', He is also 'the God who is here'. We are not to think of his immanence, in such a way as to reduce him to the level of human life. We are not to think of his transcendence in such a way as to remove him beyond the reach of our faith. God himself is 'what eye has not seen, what ear has not heard, what has not entered into the heart of man' (1 Cor. 2:9). He is beyond our comprehension. While we cannot fully comprehend God, we do affirm that he 'has revealed (himself) to us by his Spirit' (1 Cor. 2:10). God is not simply an echo of our human experience. Such a God would be a god, made in humanity's own image, quite different from the biblical God, who has created humanity in his own image. Whenever our own experience is given the central place in our thinking, we bring God down to our level, and we leave ourselves open to the charge, 'Your God is too small'. However, while we do not give human experience a normative significance, we do not under estimate its importance. God has revealed himself in a way that takes full account of our human experience.

### **Revelation and the Spirit**

The importance of our human experience may be seen in both the giving and receiving of revelation. In 1 Peter

1:11, we read of both the 'searching by the prophets' and the work of 'the Spirit of Christ' within them. The message came 'from above'. It did not have its origin in human experience. Nevertheless, it did not come to them apart from an intense searching to discover what the Lord was saying. If this was true in the experience of the writers of Scripture, it is also true in the experience of those who hear and read the Word. We benefit from the gospel as it is 'preached . . . with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven' (1 Pet. 1:12). The work of the Spirit in us leads to obedience to the truth (1 Pet. 1:22). This is the way of spiritual growth. The work of the Spirit does not rise from within ourselves—a projection of our desire to rise above the mundane. He is 'the Holy Spirit, sent down from heaven'. The work of the Spirit takes effect in our human experience. When he is at work within us, we do not remain unchanged. We are changed. With this dual emphasis—more than human experience, yet not less than human experience—we hold together the theological and the anthropological. We cannot remain content with a purely horizontal perspective on life. We believe in the vertical dimension which changes our life on earth. We dare not, however, retreat into a theological 'ivory tower'. The One who is sent from above intends to change our life here below.

Some tell us that the very introduction of words like 'God' and 'relation' leads to an inevitable conflict between the divine and the human, the theological and the anthropological. Scripture indicates to us a deeper harmony in which the purpose of God the Creator is fulfilled in the life of humanity, his creation, and the purpose of human life finds its fulfilment in the God by whom and for whom we have been created. We take seriously theology's affirmation of faith in the living God who created humanity in his own image. Following on from this, we expect to learn about God as we study human experience, and we expect our understanding of human experience to increase as we explore the reality of God in relation to humanity.

Adopting this approach, we seek to avoid two pitfalls—authoritarianism and anthropocentrism. We take care to avoid an authoritarian imposition of theology upon anthropology. The significance of human experience is not to be swallowed up by an oppressive view of divine sovereignty. In conservative reaction to the tendency towards anthropocentrism, we dare not go too far the other way. Nevertheless, we do have to take care to indicate where our approach to theological anthropology differs from the kind of anthropocentrism which has little theological substance. The balance between theology and anthropology, has been lost where the perspective has become so anthropocentric that little, if any, room is left for the living God. Reference to God may be allowed, but only by way of a polite gesture which carries no threat to anthropology's control of its 'dialogue' with theology. Where God is given so little

room, his existence or non-existence becomes a matter of considerable indifference. He has become a 'domesticated' God, who is not permitted to say anything out of place. He is rather like the child who is allowed to speak when spoken to. Such a God is controlled by us. He is brought into the discussion at our convenience. He is a God, created in humanity's own image, a God who is not permitted to raise questions regarding the way the world is and the way it should be. Such a God is very different from the God of the Bible.

### True freedom

The biblical God is concerned about the quality of our human life. He will not, however, permit us to lose sight of him in our preoccupation with human life. His purpose is not to limit our human freedom. This freedom is not, however, a freedom to do as we please, regardless of his purpose for our lives. True freedom is the freedom which comes to us through Christ. We are to 'stand fast in the liberty with which Christ has made us free' (Gal. 5:1). This is the freedom of which Jesus spoke, 'you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free; if the Son shall make you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:32, 36). The biblical God is not the enemy of scientific progress and technological advance. He is, however, concerned that we should not forget him in the process. He brings 'enlightenment' into the human situation. While not despising the 'enlightenment' which comes by way of science and technology, he is concerned that we should live in the light of the gospel. An 'enlightenment' which leads us to cast aside the light of the gospel is no 'enlightenment' at all. It is walking in darkness without Christ, who is the Light of the World. If anthropology and theology are to move forward together, we will welcome scientific progress without sacrificing spiritual growth. We do not limit ourselves to the descriptive process, learning about God's world, the way it is. We raise the prescriptive question, turning to God's Word, inviting him to show us how things should be in his world. We do not ask only, 'What can be done?' We also ask, 'What should be done?'. If there is to be spiritual progress as well as scientific progress, we must reckon with human guilt—we have not lived God's way.

If there is to be both scientific and spiritual progress, there will be challenges for both theology and the sciences. Theology dare not simply co-exist alongside the sciences, with each remaining within its mutually cutting edge which must not be lost. The whole of human life is to be viewed from the standpoint of the divine Word, 'thus says the Lord'. How will the sciences respond to the prescriptive question concerning what should be done? Science seeks to understand the world, the way it really is. This is what it means to be 'empirical' in our investigation. The theologian must raise the question, 'Should we accept "empiricism" as an over-arching

world-view, a strait-jacket which restricts us to a descriptive analysis and prevents us from holding the view that the world is not what it ought to be, that the world needs to be changed?' Awkward questions need to be asked and answered. It will not be easy for theologians to raise these questions. It will not be easy for scientists to know how best to respond to it. The answers given by the scientists may not be the ones the theologians are looking for. Nevertheless, it will be a measure of progress if there is increased dialogue, and not simply two monologues—one scientific and the other theological—going on side-by-side. The raising of the questions and the eliciting of responses—these will certainly be steps in the right direction. The increasing polarization between theology and the sciences is clearly a most important issue to be addressed in a theological anthropology project.

Raising the question—'Where does a prescriptive approach fit into the field of scientific study?'—is not for the theologian simply an ethical issue. It is, first and foremost, a theological question. It is the question of God. We do not simply ask about a prescriptive approach. We ask also about its basis—'Is there a God in the light of whom we ought to live one way, and not another way? If there is a God, what kind of God is he, and how does he want us to live?' The two questions—'Is there a God?' and 'What kind of God is he?'—are clearly related. The way in which they are related will influence the kind of contribution we make to an increased understanding of human experience. Some tell us that we dare not rush on to the question, 'What kind of God is he?' without first facing the question, 'Is there a God?'. On the other hand, it could be argued that we should consider the question of God's character first. Then, with a clearer idea of the kind of God we are talking about, the discussion concerning this existence will be more constructive. The problem with taking the question of his existence first is that the concept of God being discussed may be so vaguely defined that the God of the Christian hardly comes into view at all. When this happens, we have not moved very far forward. If the arguments for God's existence have been accepted, the question must be asked, 'Is the "God" reached by way of these arguments really the God of the Christian faith?'. If the arguments have been rejected the question remains, 'Has the God of the Christian faith been rejected, or just a pale shadow of him?' Take the question of God's existence first, and you may never get beyond 'the God of the proofs'. Accepting 'the God of the proofs' does not necessarily entail an openness to receiving what the Bible says about God. It can mean accepting the bare idea of God, and then defining God in any way we like, according to our own personal preference. Rejecting 'the God of the proof' may lead to an unwillingness to listen to what the gospel of Jesus Christ has to say.

We should not, therefore, enter the dialogue between theology and anthropology, believing only that there is a God—'there must be something, somewhere'. Rather, we should draw upon the full resources of the Christian faith so that we are portraying the God who has revealed himself in Christ and through the Scriptures, and not simply a God whose existence can be inferred from the created world. As we commit ourselves to this dialogue, we must commit ourselves—both emotionally and intellectually—to God. We do not merely give intellectual assent to him. Every thought is to be brought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). We do not merely feel an

emotional 'pull' towards him. We are to study his Word and learn what he is like. With this combination of emotional and intellectual commitment, we lay the foundation for an integrity of life which will commend itself to those who will listen to our appeal that God should be taken seriously in a world that has largely forgotten him. Can we give an adequate account of human experience without reference to God? The answer to this question will vary from person to person. Our goal is to commend an approach which holds God and humanity together. In our anthropology, we raise the question of God. In our theology, we do not forget that we must pursue relevance as well as faithfulness.