

ESSAY

BA course year 1 no. 7
"Christian Anthropology"

What is Christian Anthropology? Explain the synthesis of philosophy and anthropology in the worldview of Christian anthropology?

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1. Introduction

The term „anthropology“ comes from two Greek words („anthropos“ = man; logos = word, thought or study), so we look at what or who the human being is.

The theological or Christian anthropology doesn't only reflect in this systematic way (philosophy) but on the understanding of the human being which we can reach as revealed by God or in the light of Christ and on the importance of that revelation for us.

“The Christian sees in man not an individual but a person; and it seems to me that this passage from individual to person contains the whole span of the transition from antiquity to Christianity, from Plato to faith”¹. Indeed has the term “person” only come by the biblical tradition into the history of human thinking and is in principle linked with Christianity though a great deal of philosophers and psychologists stress the importance of interpersonal relationships in the development of the human person.

The elements of theological anthropology are questions how we are related to our bodies, how we are related to other human beings, the consideration what we ought not to do, which contains the thinking about our freedom and responsibility, the truth that we die and finally the thinking of what human nature involves and about how person and nature are connected with another. We'll look at this questions closer in the following:

2. A person in general

2.1 Being person means being in relationship

The starting-point of this thesis is, that “the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other;... it has its being in its relationship; and... this relationship is necessarily personal”².

Therefore, the idea of an absolutely individual person and an isolated agent is in itself self-contradictory. Any person is necessarily in relation to the Other without whom and apart from this essential relation he would not exist: Persons are constituted by their mutual relation to other persons. “I” exist only as one element in the complex

¹ Josef Ratzinger, Introduction to Christianity, London 1971, 113.

² John Macmurray, Persons in Relation, London 1961, 17.

'You and I'"³. But within this relation which constitutes both the existence of the "I" and of the "You", I can isolate myself from You in intention, so that my relation to You becomes impersonal; of course, because man is person, he cannot fall back into animality, his only way is humanity or inhumanity which are nothing else than effects of "personality" or impersonality.

Treating a person impersonally, I treat You as object, refusing the personal relationship, I diminish my being subject in this relationship because I do not respond to the other as subject; only in inter-subjective relation I can respond to another person as a person, I can enter into an inter-personal relationship. Impersonality, which is always possible because the form of the personal involves its own negation, is the negative aspect of the personal; "since only a person can behave impersonally, just as only a subject can think objectively"⁴.

To give some everyday examples for impersonal relations you could name a doctor regarding his patient as a case, a politician treating the people whom he represents as subordinate and powerless, an official priest who regards the universal priesthood of all faithful as a weak reflection of the official priesthood etc... Each of these examples includes that the personhood of the other practically is not recognized, in some cases this could even lead to a complete denial of other's personhood (e.g. Nazi-doctors). Nevertheless, even the most aggressive and egocentric "individuals" are persons – they have the right to be recognized as such and at the same time the duty to become, what they already are, to flourish in their personality, not to diminish it.

Flourishing means in the words of John Rawls: "To recognize another as a person one must respond to him in certain ways; and these ways are intimately connected with the various prima facie duties. Acknowledging these duties in some degree, and so having the elements of morality, is not a matter of choice or of intuiting moral qualities or a matter of the expression of feelings or attitudes... it is simply the pursuance of one of the forms of conduct in which the recognition of others as persons is manifested"⁵. For Rawls justice results out of personal interaction.⁶

What we have seen now is that "person being in relationship" does not automatically mean humanity, "human beings are capable of treating their fellow-men with both

³ ibid. 24.

⁴ ibid. 28.

⁵ John Rawls, Justice as Reciprocity, 259

⁶ „Rawls does not at all intend to argue that justice is the inevitable result of human interaction, he does argue in effect that it is the inevitable result of personal interaction“ (Dennett 190)

cruelty and kindness in all their relations”⁷, but also that human life – even in its most individual elements – is a common life. And this may be summed up by saying that the unit of personal existence does not lie in the individual, but it is at least two persons in personal relation. We are persons not by individual right, but in virtue of our relation to one another. “The personal is constituted by personal relatedness. The unit of the personal is not the “I”, but the “You and I”⁸, what Martin Buber pointed out most sharply:

Man becomes an “I” through a “You” – “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter”⁹. The I-consciousness crystallizes more and more each time in relational events which take shape and scatter. This I-consciousness appears, for a long time, only woven into the relation to a You, “discernible as that which reaches for but is not a You; but it comes closer to the bursting point until one day the bonds are broken and the I confronts its detached self for a moment like a You – and then it takes possession of itself and henceforth enters into relations in full consciousness”¹⁰.

Transforming Buber’s I-consciousness into the field of experience, the meaning of this “self-confrontation” could be expanded on my view if the other’s (your, his, her, their) view of me. Of course, I am not able to see myself as others see me, but I am constantly supposing them seeing me in particular ways, which leads to an acting in the light of the actual or supposed attitudes, opinions, needs etc... the other has in respect of me. Therefore, my identity “is refracted through the media of the different inflections of “the other” – singular and plural, male and female, ... so my identity undergoes myriad metamorphoses or alterations, in terms of the others I become to the others”¹¹.

In fact, this includes also my duty to keep myself open for the possibility that the other person himself can still find his way beyond himself to new possibilities in so far as “personality is not so much like a structure as like a river – it continuously flows, and to be a person is to be engaged in a perpetual process of becoming”¹². I am obliged to help him in becoming a person by my criticism of the stage he already reached,

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and his Communities*, London 1969, 63; Niebuhr sees the chief source of man’s inhumanity to man in the tribal limits of his sense of obligation to others.

⁸ Macmurray 61.

⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Edinburgh 1970, 62.

¹⁰ Buber 80.

¹¹ *Interpersonal Perception* 4.

¹² Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*, London 1946, 36.

which goes along with the respect for his own particular possibilities. “Where anyone finds respect, there he is taken seriously as a man”¹³.

2.2 Communication

At this stage, the “How” of being in relationship shall be examined on the example of speaking. Like body and sexuality¹⁴ as well as work¹⁵, speaking is an essential (and existential) mode of how a person lives and acts in the world, how he is a being with others.

Man contacts other minds through the medium of language¹⁶; only in this and acting are not two totally distinct characteristics of man but even are intimately linked, moreover, relatively identical. If speaking is acting, which is the basis of every theory of speech acts, there is also a moral moment involved in speaking which is essentially speaking towards others. And as man is person in relationship, in his essence therefore communicative, speaking is not only means but a fundamental moment of his being person. “The ability to speak is then, in the proper sense, the capacity to enter into reciprocal communication with others”¹⁷.

The “Fathers” of the philosophy of ordinary language are John Langshaw Austin¹⁸ and John R. Searle who followed his teacher Austin in his first work¹⁹ in the subtle, complex and new area of the philosophy of ordinary language.

This theory is also very important for Christian theology, as we will see without investigating it in detail. Suffice it now to hint that since the human person is made in the image and likeness of God, he is made (action!) through the creative word of God; since we confess Jesus Christ as the incarnate “logos”, the living word of God is active in our lives. Therefore, the relationship of God and man is based on the word which is free, creative, loving, living and giving, that makes man a person. Not at least can the part of man in this relationship be called obedience: The German word “Gehorsam” (obedience) derives from “hören, horchen” (to hear, to listen), a silent openness to the giving of God, which is always vocation in this sense; silence and hearing are also part of succeeded communication in so far as “the power of speech

¹³ Wolfhard Pannenberg, *What is Man?*, Philadelphia 1975, 85.

¹⁴ Man and woman are two kinds of being of the human being – this difference is not secondary; nobody can neglect or take out of consideration his or her and him or her being male or female in interpersonal relationships

¹⁵ esp John Paul II emphasizes the value of work as personal self-actualisation

¹⁶ cf. Celestine N. Bittle, *The whole man*, Milwaukee 1949, 626.

¹⁷ Macmurray, 60.

¹⁸ See John Langshaw Austin (1911 – 1960), *How to do things with Words*, Oxford 1970

¹⁹ see John R. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge 1970

is as much the capacity to understand what is said to us as it is to say things”²⁰. Hearing then is followed by a response – now the English language offers also a link with “responsibility” as in German: “Antwort” – “Verantwortung” (response – responsibility). That implies that response is not made blindly but responsibly as a free person. Freedom not understood as the possibility to do all you like but the freedom (decision) to do (respond) what you recognize and respect to be called or vocated to. So there is a dialogical and “responsorial” aspect in freedom.

Only one further example of the ethical value of dialogue shall now be given: Plato’s dialogues show that only in the dialogue it is possible to find the truth which therefore also contains a dialogical moment. Communication is essential for persons in so far as they are involved with their whole existence in what they say to others and hear from others.

3. The specific Christian Concept of Person

3.1 The personal God

To begin with, let us quote again Martin Buber: “The designation of God as a person is indispensable for all who, like myself, do not mean a principle when they say “God”, although mystics like Eckhart occasionally equate “Being” with him, and who, like myself, do not mean an idea when they say “God”, although philosophers like Plato could at times take him for one – all who, like myself, mean by “God” him that, whatever else he may be in addition, enters into a direct relationship to him”²¹.

Buber admits that the concept of personhood is utterly incapable of describing the nature of God but he wants to have it necessarily permitted to say that God is also a person, even if there appears the contradiction in appealing to the familiar content of the concept of a person. According to Buber, a person is, by definition, an independent individual and yet also relativized by the plurality of other independent individuals; and this could of course not be said of God who is absolute person. It is paradoxical but it is as the absolute person that God enters into the direct relationship with man. “Hence the man who turns toward him need not turn his back on any other I-You relationship: quite legitimately he brings them all to God and allows them to become transfigured in the countenance of God”²².

²⁰ Macmurray 60.

²¹ Buber 180.

²² *ibid.* 183.

God shows himself as person in dealing with man in an historical dialogue, allowing man really be himself too a person²³. Indeed we have to know God as a person before we can understand that the decisive question is not, what God is, but as whom he wishes to show himself with regard to the world. A person does not have attributes but freely and personally adopted attitudes towards another person. And this is above true of God's absolute and sovereign Personhood with regard to his world.²⁴

Religion then is the response of a person who has recognized You as the origin and the end of his life, and who, as a result, takes up a new, deliberate and free attitude towards You, and attitude of self-donation of binding oneself with his heart's free choice to You to Whom we are already bound. "The Centre of the human person is not itself but You. My real name, my secret identity, is Yes to You. And my life-choice is this: open to You or closed to You"²⁵?

God is constantly You for us – even an eremite cannot be regarded as being without relationship. Man can neglect but not flee the word of revelation which is, according to the most precise translation of Martin Buber: "I am there as whoever I am there"²⁶.

3.2 Creation – in the image and likeness of the personal God

As a source of the Christian view of man as a person in relationship there is the verse in which God says: "Let us make man in our own image and likeness" (Gen 1,26 – 27).

The personal God creates man as a person with whom he can enter in a dialogue. Thus, only in relation to a personal and freely creating God is being person and humanity finally to be justified because from the idea of the personal God results the decisive insight about man as an image of God; man is not mere individual but receives his being from God and lives towards him, as well as he is from others and towards them. He only exists in relationship which is instituted by the creation of the personal and loving God; God loves everything that is (Wis 11,24) and gives

²³ Cf. Karl Rahner, Theos in the New Testament, in: Theological Investigations I, 79 – 148, London/Baltimore 1961, 105.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.* 112; the existentially personal and active character of God's behaviour, in contrast to some fixed metaphysical attributes of his essence can be found in the Bible when he is called good, merciful, loving etc. He is forgiving (Mt 6;14; Mc 11,25), merciful (Lk 1,72.78; 6,36; Eph 2,4), kind (Mt 19,17), loving (Rom 5,5)... cf. *ibid.* 114.

²⁵ Joseph McCarroll, Journey to the Centre of the Person, Dublin 1986, 142.

²⁶ Buber 160; „The eternal source of strength flows, the eternal touch is waiting, the eternal voice sounds, nothing more“ (*ibid.* 160)

everything its nature, his mercy embraces all that he has made (Ps 145,9), the whole creation as a work of his graciousness and goodness (Ps 136,1-9).

The loving and caring will of God is manifested in Creation, the Exodus and the Covenant, a special personal guidance. The climax of his love which shows him as the absolute person (not supra – person) in the Old Testament is that he does not give up his desire for a personal relationship because of the adultery of his people. “But it was concealed in the Mystery of God’s eternal decree that this relationship would go beyond that between a master and his servant and that it would be irrevocable... <in the> Sending and Incarnation of his only begotten Son”²⁷, which occurs in the New Covenant.

3.3 Christ – the ground of God’s personhood

Christ is the event in which God’s inmost life is communicated to men, in his love to them, fully and without restraint because God, as person, freely wished to love us and so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son (Jn 3,16). “Christian theism is the only kind of theism which can substantiate belief in a personal God, and so give over to philosophical theism the concept of a divine person which seeks to establish on other grounds. This is because God himself becomes a human person in Jesus Christ... He too was a person – in – relation... The real identity between Jesus and God enables us to extend some of our predicates about Christ’s perfect manhood and human nature to God the Son and to God himself. God is personal because God has become a person in Christ”²⁸.

God, therefore, becomes a person for us through making the world and, as we can add now, then interacting with it in his uniting with the human person Jesus of Nazareth. For instance, in the offer to say “Our Father” to God, the master-knight relationship between God and men is transformed into the most personal Father-Son relationship. God is our Father and only in so far as he is our Father he is mine in a very personal way, as a person. By recognizing that the others call God “my Father” and trusting that they do it rightly, I can recognize God as my Father who is our Father. This proves also that personal relationship to God involves essentially the horizontal plane, necessarily the others. Thus faith has a very social moment. But the social element is of course closely woven with faith: “God’s power is at work in the encounter between persons. Men are persons only before God, and personal

²⁷ Theos 122.

²⁸ Adrian Thatcher; Christian Theism and the Concept of a Person, 180 – 196, 188.

encounter only happens where the I and the thou are open for the reality of God. It is probably no accident that our concept of person has its origin in Christian theology, just in the sense that mutuality of the I and the thou characterize personality. Personal community among men is made possible by the mutuality that is revealed in the relation between relation to his creation. Therefore, it became possible in its full, conscious depth only on Christian ground²⁹.

Now we have seen that it is the incarnation which gives Christians their sole and convincing ground for claiming that the God of creation is a personal God³⁰ and of all that man has experienced about God in saving history, the decisive thing is that God the Father has called us in his Son to the most intimate community with him (1Jn 4,16)³¹.

4. Why do we think about man in theology?

Why is it important to think about man in theology? On this way we see better our need for God and how God's gift of Himself to us in Christ truly fulfills us as human beings in a way otherwise utterly impossible.

There are two aspects, which make Christian anthropology needed:

- The need to make the truths of our faith more accessible to people who may not otherwise find them relevant.
- The need of the light, Christian revelation throws upon the meaning of human existence.

counted words: 3067

²⁹ Pannenberg 90.

³⁰ Thatcher 188.

³¹ Theos 117.