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Adam and Eve, who are you?



Hope for Europe

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Adam and Eve, who are you?

A Study in Theological Anthropology

Thomas K. Johnson

One of the great questions of postmodern culture is the question, „What is a human being?“ Sometimes it seems that our culture is shuddering in its inability to answer this fundamental question. When I have asked university classes what makes a student different from a dog or an ape, they generally have a hard time giving a coherent answer. In the philosophy department office where I teach there is a special place for books on theories of human nature, that is, philosophical anthropology. Students and professors alike are struggling to know who we are.

It is important for Christian leaders to take notice of the deep questions bothering our non-Christian neighbors, for these questions provide a starting point for the proclamation of the gospel. The Bible provides the answers for the deep questions people ask. God came to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, asking, „Where are you?“ God did not ask this question because he lacked information; he asked this question as an early step in calling them back to himself. Ever since, through his general revelation, God has been asking us prodigals difficult questions that are only answered through his special revelation, the Bible. The pregnant question in the Garden, „Where are you?“ can be seen as the summary of several similar questions that God is still asking,

questions that come to fallen people through life experience. In this way God is engaging people in a dialog that should lead us home to himself. The cultural questioning of „what is a human being“ arises because God is quietly asking, „Adam and Eve, who are you?“

As we examine this theme, there will be several other topics in theological anthropology that will be left for another time. These include:

1. *The basis for the value of each person in the image of God;*
2. *Much of the doctrine of Original Sin;*
3. *The nature of soul and body; and*
4. *The created social-cultural nature of people.*

I want to focus our attention on what might be called the „religious dynamic“ in human nature because this theme is both neglected and very helpful for the work of the gospel.

Briefly stated, people are incurably religious because they are continually addressed by God’s general revelation. When God created us in his own image that meant, among other things, that we were created for a relationship with him. And ever since the Fall, God has not ceased to speak to all people through creation itself. Therefore, as Paul says

(Romans 1:19), „what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain.“ Because God is speaking through creation, all people have a religious reaction and are always worshipping something, even if what they worship is a God-substitute. Even the most „secular“ or agnostic of our neighbors can not stop being religious, even though he may want not to be religious.

There are in Scripture several related themes that will take us farther in understanding the people we are to reach with the gospel.

I Unbelievers live with a massive contradiction within themselves

Because of God’s general revelation, people really know a tremendous amount about the God of the Bible, even while they claim to be atheists, agnostics, Buddhists, Hindus, or Marxists. As Paul says, „since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made“ (Romans 1:20). This means there is a deep contradiction within an unbeliever between what he or she really knows and what a person claims to know. Unbelievers claim to know something different from what they really know.

This is what moved Tertullian to talk of the soul, especially of unbelievers, as being „by nature Christian“ (The Apology). This is difficult to describe. In some way the knowledge of God held by unbe-

lievers must be subconscious or unconscious, because it totally contradicts what they claim to consciously know. Sigmund Freud was far from the first person to talk about the repression of knowledge and its effects. Across the centuries as theologians have used Romans 1 to interpret human experience, the repression of knowledge has been a repeated theme. You can read this theme in the Church Fathers, during the Reformation, as well as in modern apologists. The consensus of a wide range of Christian thinkers over the centuries is that people know far more about the God of the Bible than they admit to knowing. Because God is speaking through creation itself, people know a lot about God even when they claim not to know about him.

It may be difficult for us to clarify exactly what people know about God via general revelation. It clearly does not include anything about Christ and salvation, for this is learned only by special revelation. From Romans 1 it appears that people probably know something about the unity of God, along with his majesty, holiness, and his moral law. And if people know something of God’s holy demands while knowing nothing of God’s grace in Christ, God will usually appear to be very frightening to an unbeliever. The knowledge of God that is suppressed by unbelievers is a very distorted view of God. Without knowing God’s grace in Christ, God easily appears to be so frightening that people almost have to deny and repress this knowledge in a feeble attempt to cling to sanity. It is important for us to keep in mind the centrality of this

repressed, distorted knowledge of God in the moral/spiritual lives of unbelievers.

This distorted, repressed knowledge of God helps us understand an important contradiction in modern secular culture. Many of the modern and postmodern secular worldviews and philosophies of the last 300 years would claim that people should be skeptical of any claims to really know anything, whether that knowledge is of everyday things or ethics, logic, or natural science. Modern epistemology generally ends in skepticism. And yet almost all of our neighbors act as if they believe their own worldview or philosophy only part of the time. Their philosophy may tell them that their senses do not give them truth about the world in itself, and yet they look both ways before crossing a street. Their relativist moral philosophy may tell them they cannot really know right and wrong, and yet they shout loudly that the acts of terrorists are a moral outrage. This profound contradiction that we see in the minds of unbelievers arises because they do not completely believe their own words. While a person may claim to be a Marxist, Darwinist, Freudian, or agnostic, that person also lives with a substantial though distorted and repressed knowledge of God. Part of the time they act and talk according to this repressed knowledge of God, instead of according to the beliefs they claim to accept. (For this we can be grateful to God, since it leads to many good results for all of us. This is common grace.)

Christian leaders, whether serving in the church, in politics or business, in education or evangelism, should keep in

mind the fundamental contradiction in the moral/spiritual lives of our unbelieving neighbors. When we speak to unbelievers we should be aware that we can assume the things they know about God but have repressed. And we must keep in mind that the knowledge of God that they have repressed may be as frightening as the worst nightmare.

2 Self-justification is a standard part of fallen human nature

When God first spoke to Adam and Eve after the Fall, our first parents were quick to justify themselves, Adam blaming Eve, while Eve blamed the serpent. Neither quickly cried out, „God, be merciful to me, a sinner.“ As true sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, ever since that time, we have been declaring ourselves just and able to do whatever is required of us. In his moral philosophy Immanuel Kant was not only representing the best of secular western thought, he was also representing sinful man, when he said, „If I should, I can.“ To this the Christian must respond by saying, „This is sinful, a self delusion.“

In his general revelation God includes his law, which Christians traditionally called the „natural law“ as a short way of referring to God’s law proclaimed through nature or creation. And as Luther pointed out, God’s law always condemns us. This condemnation is very uncomfortable, especially for people who do not also know of God’s forgiveness in Christ. So the reaction of the unbeliever tends to be two-fold:

1. *People try to reduce what they think God demands to manageable minimum.*
2. *People claim they can do whatever is required of them.*

This is why non-Christian religions, worldviews, and philosophies so strongly and consistently preach works-righteousness and self-salvation. Salvation by God's grace alone directly contradicts all the natural ideas of our sinful hearts. The Bible preaches salvation by grace alone while our sinful hearts preach salvation by works alone. Even after we have been Christians for many years, yet the sinful nature whispers in our ears, „You do not really need God's forgiveness and grace. You can do all he demands.“

The pronounced tendency of the sinful self toward self-justification explains an interesting self-contradiction in modern culture. On the one hand modern culture has been saying for several generations that there is no Original Sin. Whether you read a children's schoolbook, a newspaper, or a philosophical text, everyone seems to agree that human problems are in our environment or society, that there is no problem within the human heart, the core of our being. Curiously, western democrats are likely to agree with Karl Marx in shouting, „There is no Original Sin.“ On the other hand, Original Sin is the Christian doctrine that is most easily proved empirically. It is far easier to prove Original Sin than it is to prove the Resurrection of Jesus. To prove the Resurrection will take a lot of detailed historical work. To prove Original Sin, we only need to turn on the evening news. The main way the news differs from

one day to the next is who is killing whom and then claiming to be doing a good thing by killing them. Almost every page of every newspaper empirically verifies the doctrine of Original Sin, even while modern culture is united in preaching the goodness of man. The explanation of this contradiction is that the sinful heart is constantly trying to justify itself before the accusing law coming from God's general revelation.

3 People always look some where for their hope, comfort, joy, or salvation

In Psalm 130:7 we read, „O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.“ The unstated assumption of this and similar texts is that if the people do not find their hope in God, they will find their hope somewhere else. People always put their hope in something or someone, and if people do not put their hope in God, they will put their hope in someone or something that God has created. This is idolatry.

It is interesting to notice that when the people of Israel made the Golden Calf (Exodus 32) they called the idol „the Lord“ and they said the idol had brought them out of Egypt. But their purpose in saying this was not primarily to say something about the past. They were worried about the future. They were expressing their trust that the Calf would save them again in the future. The short summary of the religion of the Golden Calf would be „The Calf saves.“ And in the Bible this event serves as a typical illustration of idolatry.

In today's world we see people putting their hope in all sorts of „saviors.“ They hope to find their comfort, joy, and meaning in wealth, security, adventure, freedom, or sex. And the stories we hear in advertising and popular culture tend to be a series of false gospels, with one person after the next proclaiming how their idol will fill the empty spot in the hearts of our neighbors and friends. Ironically, people tend not to fully believe all these false gospels, for in a distorted way they know something of the truth of God. And it is this distorted, repressed general revelation of God that keeps them searching for something to fill the gospel-shaped vacuum in the human heart. Without the intervention of God by his Word and Spirit, people will tend to put their hope in „created things rather than the Creator-who is forever praised.“ (Romans 1:25)

When we preach the gospel to our neighbors and friends, we need to remember that they are always looking for hope, joy, meaning, or forgiveness. And in their searching people will probably try a variety of idols, even if they do not call these things idols or think of their searching as religious.

4 The object of worship will substantially shape people's lives

In Psalm 135:18 we are told of idol worshippers, „Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.“ This biblical text confirms what we read in most introductory books of

sociology or cultural anthropology. Religion plays a very large role in shaping the lives and culture of people. But as biblical Christians we must go beyond the standard textbooks and say that most religion is idolatry, and even modern „secular“ people are extremely religious.

It is a commonplace among Christian apologists to say that the different secular philosophies and worldviews arise out of turning some part or aspect of creation into a conceptual idol; then all of life and experience is interpreted in light of that philosophical idolatry. The different types of philosophy and the different secular worldviews are often facades for different types of intellectual idolatry. This common claim arises from seeing the central role that religious trust plays in human life, including intellectual life. To this standard Christian claim we must make an addition: much of modern secular culture is shaped by the idolatry of wealth, security, and freedom. Where people find their hope deeply effects everything they do and say. And the culture of the developed world, I think, is largely the result of worshipping an unholy trinity-substitute: wealth, security, and freedom. As people look for hope today, they listen to and trust in the deceptive promises made by other gods, though people do not see their trust in wealth, security, and freedom as a religious act. But their lives are shaped, really distorted, by what they trust.

As we preach to our neighbors, we need to point out that their idols cannot keep their promises. Wealth does not lead to happiness and absolute freedom does not lead to fulfillment. We also need to point

out that their idols lead to distorted lives. The worship of freedom has led to millions of broken marriages and families, which has led to vast amounts of pain of all sorts. The worship of wealth has led to meaninglessness and a neglect of love, justice, and faithfulness. Much of the pain in our world is the result of modern idolatry. This idolatry is not only seen in the church, it is also prominent in people who proudly claim to „secular“ or „unreligious.“ Yet their lives look like a constant flight from the Creator, while they restlessly try the modern Savior-substitutes.

5 Conclusion

Our world is asking, „Who are we?“ People are struggling with this question because God is asking, „Adam and Eve, who are you?“ We can be confident that the Bible gives the most compelling and profound answers to ever be found. The short version of the answer is that we are prodigals who have run from the Father’s house. The solution is to return to the Father’s house and simply say, „I have sinned.“

The author



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