The Human Venture: On Raising the Bid
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I.

The eight articles in this issue come together to reflect and suggest a new agenda for Christian thinking about the relationship between God and humankind. A familiar and an arguably attractive approach has been to understand the human in relationship to a God who was the subject of independent and prior description. Thus Claus Westermann can remind us that the phrase the image and likeness of God “is not a declaration about man, but about the creation of man.”1 Or, if one seeks to distinguish now between the whole human being as sinner and the whole human being as creature, Edmund Schlink cautions us:

...it is evident that this is merely a conceptual distinction, in no case an empirical one.2

One could make significant conceptual distinctions without empirical reference precisely because “the doctrine of man” in such an approach is controlled by a doctrine of God eluding clear empirical description or definition.

Something is different in the way(s) these authors write about the human and the human agenda in our time. (Whence, by the way, comes the changed phrasing from the “doctrine of man” to “the human” itself?) James Burtness puts us in touch with Bonhoeffer, who spoke of some kind of coming of age with which the Christian church would need to reckon. Karen Bloomquist sounds more like Marx, as she critiques a theology which functions ideologically to keep the working-class in their place. Patricia Wilson-Kastner moves boldly from description and critique to construction, arguing that the unity of humankind is the basis of the church. The unity of humanity is the basis of the church! Such sentences should not slide by us too easily. We are being pointed, it seems, to a humankind whose nature and needs can be understood and so addressed without dependence on churchly appeals to special revelation. Perhaps Lutheran talk

1Claus Westermann, Creation (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 56.
meet here types aspiring to be hard scientists and managing at least to be dutifully dull *vis-à-vis* the religious life? If those are our expectations, how confusing it must be to have Capps suggest that in the recent years of theory and research in the sociology of religion we are able to discern human gestures which constitute signals of transcendence. Admittedly this is religious material, but the scientific screen seems not to have filtered out a sense of God. Hope and judgment are here, if not play and humor. Indeed Capps goes beyond Peter Berger in finding in two other research areas—alternative religions and secularization—an additional signal: that of vocation.

If we attempt to do justice theologically to the human, we may find that we need thus to speak of God. But the earlier observation about the emphatic turn to the human is not thereby undone. For now we shall speak of a God who is God for such as we are. Such speaking will move toward a recovery of the doctrine of creation and of that of providence. It will have its effect in the “second article” as well, as someone like Bonhoeffer calls us to reject “two-sphere” thinking precisely because in Christ one can no longer think of God apart from the world or the world apart from God. Moreover, this emphasis will lead some with Bonhoeffer to a material adjustment in the doctrine of God, as we come to learn that “only a suffering God can help.”

Apparently a suffering God does help, or so Robin Scroggs’ reading of Paul suggests:

> The eschatological realities of freedom, peace, joy, and love are here *now*, as one stands before the true God who bestows life, not as a promise of future reward, but as the reality of faith in the present. (223)

Christian theology has a great deal of work to do to formulate a doctrine of God which preserves God’s qualitative superiority to the human but yet states that superiority in the terms of God’s relationship to and with the human. An earlier issue of this journal (*The Triune God*) reveals some work in that direction. But the subject of this issue is the human. (Back) there we find that the turn to the human does not leave God behind, but does arrive at an empowered and authorized humankind.

Thus to speak of the human in this time is to speak of responsibility. Lowell Erdahl’s piece is perhaps the clearest in its sense of urgency. Bloomquist is also calling for change, as is Wilson-Kastner. In this work of liberation and peacemaking the Christian makes common cause with people outside the church. Indeed Loren Halvorson makes very explicit the appeal to common human insight, when he writes:


The Greek notion that the human is the measure of all things raises some theological problems, but the more modest point that the human is the measure of some things, ought not. (246)

Of course much depends on what one takes those “some things” to be. But it is clear that Christian reflection consciously moves to join human wisdom in this imperilled time. Christ may indeed serve as a prophetic prototype (Erdahl), but none of our authors proposes that we check
the ecclesiastical credentials of our colleagues in the desperate quest for survival and justice.

II.

If these articles may be taken to be representative, what may we look for in forthcoming theological reflection concerning the human? Four observations seem in order:

(1) Theology will proceed more slowly than in the past. Since formal theological categories derived from the doctrine of God will no longer suffice to control the discussion, we will need to fill the rubrics laboriously “from below,” as it were. But such filling needs to be done cautiously, and so slowly. The current theological preoccupation with “wholism” (which echoes here and there in these articles too) is an excellent illustration. Distinctions could be dissolved in a gooey cosmic soup, stirred by memories of old talk of God as beyond the subject-object distinction. Here theology may get much needed help from metaphysics and epistemology. Theology has a stake in linearity and in the reliability of our knowing processes—at least in principle. With such descriptive distinctions in place it may be possible to make the distinction between description and prescription significant by offering discriminate normative speech about God’s work within the world.

(2) The work of God will need to be seen precisely there, within the world. Theology will need to eschew the tidiness of a nature-history split. History needs to be protected by retaining the concept of linearity, but nature needs itself to be recognized as “historical.” So too the human will need to be understood “from below”—that is, as a complicated member of the animal kingdom, who shares in the full range of microscopic processes of which the hard sciences speak. Such processes are constitutive of humanity, not merely of the environment in which denatured “Man” resides. But they are not exhaustive. Thus theology will need to ponder how the natural is so gathered in the human as to constitute the distinctive.

(3) Prescriptively, the Christian understanding of sin needs to be developed in dialogue with an empirical understanding of the human. Will it do simply to stress that sin is a religious (against God) reality and not a moral (against the human) reality? Given the unity of the human person, is it not too facile to distinguish between the freedom toward that which is below us and the bondage toward that which is above us? Can our understanding of sin be amplified to incorporate diffidence and so not only defiance?5 How shall we understand the

5See, for example, Wanda Warren Berry, “Images of Sin and Salvation in Feminist Theology” in the Anglican Theological Review 60 (1978) 25-54. Berry corrects Niebuhr’s one-sided development of Kierkegaard’s distinction (The Sickness unto Death) between sins of strength and sins of weakness.

continuity in sin in a time when the decline of philosophical realism makes an argument from a human race little more than an appeal to a collectivity dependent upon individual determinants?6 When the church at Carthage in 418 declared that sin spreads “not by imitation, but by propagation,” what was being said positively? These issues are not new, of course; but they face the Christian theologian with new urgency when the turn to the human releases reflection from the control of formal categories dependent on the doctrine of God.

(4) The nature of theological certainty may need to be reconsidered. Religion seeks certainty and one may well name as God that One who surely wills one thing. But our naming is emphatically human, as is our thinking. Moreover, we speak here of the human and, at least descriptively, humankind clearly lacks the unity claimed for God. We may have to settle for less
certainty in how we think of, and so in how we approach, the human reality. Perhaps it will be possible to live with this uncertainty, with this tentativity, if the decisive unity of God is the more firmly delineated in the terms of the One who is unconditionally for us. In any case, we may have little choice, if our human experience is like that of which Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

I live my life in growing orbits
which move out over the things of the world
Perhaps I can never achieve the last
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years.
And I still don’t know if I am a falcon
or a storm, or a great song.

In this human venture the bid is clearly raised today, but not yet made. Christians choose to sing.

See, for example, Juan Luis Segundo, *Evolution and Guilt* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974). For a discussion of this theme among recent Roman Catholic writers (who write more amply, if less severely, of this theme than, say, Lutherans seem to do), see Brian O. McDermott, “The Theology of Original Sin,” *Theological Studies* 38 (1977) 478-512.

Rainer Maria Rilke from *Book for the Hours of Prayer*, 1899, as cited by Robert Bly in *News of the Universe* (San Francisco: Sierra, 1980) 76.