Some Anthropological Aspects of Creation Theology

JOSE ALVIAR

In a previous article* I gave an overview of recent trends in the exposition of the doctrine of creation. In the present article I would like to focus on more specific aspects of creation theology, particularly anthropological themes, which are currently formulated with new accents.

Man, created in God's image and likeness

The old creation manuals commonly discussed the creation of man by taking hold of the second chapter of Genesis, a highly colorful account of man's appearance on earth. The manuals' exposition habitually began with the question of the degree of literalness with which the divine "fashioning" of man from the earth's "dust" could be taken. (Was man really directly molded by God from clay, or are we here faced with figurative language)? After such prolegomena, the exposition passed on to discuss the anthropological truths derivable from the Genesis 2 account, such as man's corporal and spiritual nature, and the soul's proceeding from God. Genesis 1, formulated in more abstract terms, tended to occupy a secondary place in such theological accounts of man's creation.

The style and method employed by Pope John Paul II in his 1986 Wednesday catechesis, as well as that used in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* contrast notably with these earlier trends. Now, in expounding the mystery of man's creation, Genesis 1 is considered

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* *Cf. Philippiniana Sacra,* vol. XXIX, no. 87 (Sept.-Dec., 1994), pp. 485-493.

• *PHILIPPINIANA SACRA*, Vol. XXXI, No. 92 (May-August, 1996) 303-309

at least on a par with Genesis 2 as a source of information. (The two accounts are, in fact, complementary: Genesis 1 tells of the *entire* human person as created in God's image; Genesis 2 speaks of the *double dimension* of human nature).

The increased importance assigned to the Genesis 1 account, particularly to the theme of the "image," signifies the recovery of a rich patristic heritage, as this idea was much utilized by the Church Fathers in referring to man. (The abstract notion of "image", of course, is somewhat more difficult to handle; however, this biblical category provides invaluable information on man's nature).

Genesis 1 may thus be said to communicate a twofold revelation on the human being:

1. *Man is a creature.* Like all other beings in the universe, his existence and life are traceable to a Divine Agent's eternal design and action in history;

2. *Man is, however, a creature distinct from the others*, since he is the only one fashioned according to his Maker's image. (This novel trait of human nature is likewise indicated by the Bible's frequent use of the verb *barah* — roughly "to create" — when describing man's appearance on earth.

Now, what does creation in God's image mean? Numerous and varied implications have been suggested, since the time of the Fathers, as contained in this biblical definition of man. Some of the more enduring proposals may be enumerated thus:

a. Man, like God, possesses a spiritual nature. He has an immortal element in him; he is capable of knowing and loving (*cf. Gaudium et Spes* 12, 3) and of entering into a relationship of communion with others.

b. Man is not just "something", but "someone" — a *person,* and not simply a *thing.*

c. Man is the only creature on earth loved by God for what he is (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24, 3).

d. Man is called to act as God's representative, wisely governing all of visible creation.

These interpretations do not complete with, or mutually exclude, each other, but rather combine to yield a multicolored portrait

of the human reality. A host of revealed lights about man is therefore condensed in the biblical category of "image."

The double dimension of human nature

In line with the principle of Scriptural unity, modern biblical scholars and theologians next turn to the second chapter of Genesis in search of complementary information on the nature and origin of man. In the case of Genesis 2, two characteristics may be found in modern theological interpretations: (a) acceptance of the possibility that symbolic language is once being employed; (b) caution against deducing an exaggeratedly dualistic conception of man.

These two aspects may be perceived, for instance, in no. 362 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* which runs:

> The human person, created according to God's image, is being both corporal and spiritual. The biblical account expresses this reality with a *symbolic language* when it affirms that 'God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed in his nostrils the breath of life, and man thus became a living being' (Gen 2, 7). Therefore, *man in his totality is desired by God.* (Italics mine)

Note, first, the Catechism's mention of symbolic language. Enhanced understanding of Genesis' peculiar literary gender lets us avoid limiting themselves to a purely literal reading of the creation account. This exegetical amplitude does not, of course, necessarily exclude the possibility that a direct divine fashioning of inert earthly stuff did take place to produce the first human; it does, however, suggest an interpretative principle: If Genesis 2 employs symbolic language, the exegete's primary task should be to seek out the perennial truths God wished to convey through such language. The use of figures indicates that the Bible is here not primordially conveying "how exactly" man arrived at the cosmic scene (e.g. the precise chemical or biological processes that led to his appearance on earth), but rather communicating profounder truths on man's origin, namely, the "what" and the "why" of creation. And these are the indubitable theological lessons we may derive from the Genesis 2 account:

1. The fashioning of man's body from the dust of the earth indicates man's humble and lofty extremes: on the one hand his body

is comprised of elements like any other entity in the cosmos, and is thus contingent and mutable; on the other hand, man entire, body and spirit, is the object of the Maker's lasting predilection.

2. God's breathing life into man's body is the hagiographer's Jewish way of saying that in man there exists a vivifying principle —neither identifiable with, nor (in life) separable from, the matter it informs—, which owes its existence to a special divine action. The appearance of the spiritual soul within the material cosmos, then, does not — cannot — simply arise as a homogeneous event embedded in matter's evolution history; it requires divine intervention in a special way. Though this mode remains difficult to specify, it may at least be formulated in its essential lines as follows: *The spiritual, vivifying principle in every human being enjoys a special relation of origin to the Creator.*

[Conceptualizing the divine origin of the human soul requires some caution: we cannot simply imagine God creating a "whole and independent spiritual substance" and then infusing it into a second "complete substance," i.e. the body. That would be Platonic dualism. We must bear in mind that the matter and spirit in each individual, being metaphysical co-principles, make a complete and perfect "match." Body and soul "reclaim" each other in a unique fashion: *this* body is apt only for *this* soul, and vice versa — impossible for any free-wheeling reincarnation or transcarnation to occur. In this sense God, too, takes into account the biological and genetic contribution of the parents, when He provides their newly-conceived creature its spiritual, vivifying "form." The soul is in one sense "new" because matter alone cannot produce it; but in another sense "old," in that the divine action inserts it in conjunction with humankind's continuous genetic history].

The unitary character of human nature

It will be noted, in the earlier cited point of the *Catechism* (no. 362), that man is first defined in a unitary fashion, as a "person", "created in God's image", and only afterwards described as "two-dimensional," e.g. a creature both corporal and spiritual. Towards the end, this point of the Catechism returns to man's unitary nature: "Man in his totality is desired by God."

This leads us to another point found in modern creational anthropology, and which represents a middle path between exaggerated monistic or dualistic conceptions of human nature.

Man, according to Revelation, is not a combination of material atoms destined to disgregation —as materialists, both ancient and modern, would say. But neither is he a spirit-now-trapped-in-a-body —as Platonists would say. Revelation insists that man has both matter and spirit in intimate combination, acting as intrinsic principles of his being. The soul, says the Council of Vienne (1312), is the "form" of man's body; that is to say, man's spirit and matter do not constitute two complete natures juxtaposed or "glued" together, but rather metaphysical elements which, combined, constitute a single reality.

It is true that the soul, due to its spiritual nature, is capable of survival and reward (or punishment) after the individual's death; this, however, is but a "temporary" state of affairs according to Christians belief, since man's total nature is destined to be reconstituted at time's end, in that supernatural event we call the Resurrection of the Body.

This manner of conceiving matter and man's body has two important implications:

1. The [anti-gnostic, anti-maniquean] conclusions that material reality forms part of God's creational design for the world and for man, and may not be considered as evil *per se*; as Genesis 1 insists: "God saw that it" —the composite universe he had created— "was good";

2. The highly unitary [and thus un-Platonic] vision of man's essence. Man was wisely designated by God as a being with body and soul harmoniously united. With the totality of his being, powers, and functions —intellect, will, passions, sentiments, spirit, senses, body— man becomes the subject of the struggle for salvation, and of eschatological reward or punishment.

Admittedly, due to original sin, his body is now in a worsened state, possessing lesser energies for working good; nevertheless, his body continues to enjoy a creational nobility. This is true to the point that the ultimate picture of man proposed by Revelation is not that of a being who has come again to possess his body in a glorified state.

The creation of woman

Both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, viewed from a modern perspective, provide important insights on man as a "sexuated" being. In fact Genesis 1, 26, narrates that "God said, Let us make man," and the following verse, 27, states that "God made according to his image and likeness; man and woman he made them." It becomes immediately evident from these passages that the man-woman differentiation forms an intrinsic part of God's creational design for humanity. Human nature is destined to be "expressed" in either of two ways, masculine or feminine, and both specifications are endowed with a creational goodness.

A corollary lesson may likewise be drawn from the Genesis 1 narration: that both man and woman are "created in the image of God." Both manifestations of humanity, therefore, possess equal dignity and worth; both are the object of the Creator's love; both are capable of communion with God and with fellow humans.

Perhaps it is Genesis 2 which provides a more detailed revelation on the sexual concretion of human nature. (Note, again, that modern interpretations of Eve's creation contemplate the possibility of a non-literal, symbolic language. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* for instance, comments:

> "The woman, whom God 'forms' (note quotation marks) from the side of man and presents to him, awakens in the latter a cry of admiration, and an exclamation of love and communion: 'This indeed is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh' (Gen 2, 23). Man discovers in the woman another 'I', of the same humanity."

The modern widening of interpretative possibilities of Gen 2, to include symbolic ones as well, once again suggests that what should principally occupy our attention is the quest for the deep theological truths the Bible wishes to communicate; the "how exactly" —in this case, the precise process involving the first woman's appearance on earth— may remain a matter for free discussion. Did gradual evolution play a part? Or did a sudden, direct intervention by God occur? At this point in time it does not seem possible to reply with certainty).

The key lessons certainly derivable from Genesis 2's account are the following:

1. The basic identity and equality in the nature of man and woman;

2. God's creational intention of establishing a complementary and potential communion between male and female, a design expressed, for instance, in matrimony and procreation.

After this enumeration of basic truths on human sexuality, a further observation is in order. Note that the Biblical revelation regarding man and woman simultaneously stresses the *equality* and the *internal diversification* of human nature. Male and female are *equal,* but *different.* It is precisely this diversity or otherness which holds between sexes that permits marital communion and procreation. It is perhaps relevant, in the face of modern simplistic conceptions of woman, to remember that divine Revelation, when defending her equal dignity, does not portray her simply as the "image of man," destined to do *all* and *only* those tasks performed by males. As *Mulieris dignitatem,* no. 30 points out, women, with ther own feminine traits, must discover, and make, their specific contribution to humanity and salvation history. That is the creational —and creative— challenge facing them. ❑