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‘Know Thyself’? A Lesson in Christological Anthropology from Irenaeus of Lyons

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This paper attempts to demonstrate the practical significance of Irenaeus’ Christological anthropology in its provision of a radical alternative method for coming to an understanding of what it means to be human.

Knowing the Human

At the navel of the Greek world at its classical height stood the temple of Apollo at Delphi. On its walls was written the maxim that Socrates was to take as his own: ‘Know Thyself’. Thus it was implied to the Hellenic mind that knowledge – and knowledge of humanity in particular – could be acquired by common introspection.

It might be said that little since has changed. Today, as then, it is the introspection of the Delphic maxim that still dominates methodology in questions about humanity and the human relation to God and the world. Feuerbach’s assertion that ‘knowledge of God is self-knowledge’ can only be supported by the anthropological assumption that ‘knowledge of man is self-knowledge’. A more popular and contemporary example of dependence upon Delphic methodology can be found in today’s ubiquitous ‘ethics of authenticity’, well articulated by that far from contemporary ‘tedious old fool,’ Polonius, as he addressed Laertes:

**This above all: to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.¹**

The result is that anthropology can look much like a puppy chasing its tail, for the anthropologist is thus both the subject and the object of his own investigation. It is no wonder that man of the third millennium finds himself so helplessly far into an identity crisis.

All this is to succumb to the perennial temptation for the human to leap to asking ‘what?’ of ‘this quintessence of dust’. Yet to make the ‘what?’ the preliminary question in anthropology is necessarily to assume the Delphic conception of the possibility of an immanent understanding of humanity.

¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act One, Scene iii

The movement in the early post-apostolic Church that most came to embody the ideals of Delphi was that seen in the extremely loosely associated collection of sects that we now refer to as Gnosticism. The *gnosis* (knowledge) of the Gnostic was, to a very great extent, self-knowledge. Against the Gnostic mythologising that championed this introspection, Irenaeus, the second century bishop of Lugdunum (Lyons), resolutely placed his anthropology within a dynamic narrative that forces methodological considerations first. That is, before we may ask ‘*what?*’, we are compelled to ask *where* we might find our answer. Where is the proper object of anthropology?

The Proper Object of Anthropology

In his *magnum opus*, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus sets out his understanding of the divine economy of creation and redemption, fulfilled through Christ’s recapitulation of Adam. Within this project, Adam could never but be one in need of growth. Whilst the Greeks and Romans imagined Athena or Minerva emerging fully armed and mature from the brain of her divine father, Irenaeus held Adam not to be a divine emanation or generation, but a creation, and so by very nature immature. Even before the fall, whilst he most certainly was counted as innocent, that innocence did not amount to righteousness or perfection. Instead, Irenaeus presents Adam in Eden as the necessarily incomplete foundation of a far grander scheme. Adam’s imperfection as man – an imperfection not to be equated with, despite its susceptibility to, evil – is rooted in the necessary imperfection of contingent and created being. Thus there is a problem for anthropology far more profound than a mere ‘missing link’: even before the corruption of humanity in the fall, Adam could never be seen as the proper object of anthropology, but only as the child that Christ would suffer to call to himself as the recipient of salvation.

To use what Irenaeus saw as the protoevangelical words that constitute humanity (‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’), Adam was never created the image or likeness of God, and neither can his race be of themselves. But, said Irenaeus, in reference to Colossians 1:15, ‘the image of God is the Son, according to whose image was man made’. Adam was created *in* the image of God, or as ‘the image of the Image’. He was created to be

the type of Jesus Christ, who is the revelation and reality of the true being of mankind. It was only with the visible appearance of the true Image in the incarnation that Adam, created to be like Christ, could be perfected after the Image and Likeness of God.

As the type of the true, spiritual man, Adam, for Irenaeus, was formed to be a soulish being. That is to say, not only was Adam imperfect, he was also intrinsically needy – a passive and receptive being, thirsty for that life of the Spirit that his soulish being typified. Jesus, as the anointed Christ, is the true man filled and equipped with the Spirit (or, as Irenaeus so often put it, the Wisdom) of God. For Irenaeus, it is he, and not (as the peculiar optimism of the Enlightenment had supposed) fallen mankind, who is the true *homo sapiens*, the man filled and equipped with the *sapientia*, the Wisdom of God. ‘Where the Spirit of the Father is, there is Living Man’.

Having noted all this, we need be wary of a certain confusion. Renaissance thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola, in their emphasis on the unfinished nature of the image, may at a glance seem to belong to the Irenaean tradition here. So too, read from the context of the ascendancy of process thought, Irenaeus himself can be made to appear as a proto-Hegelian or proto-Darwinian à la Teilhard de Chardin. However, Irenaeus was no Whig beforetime, dreaming of an immanent human progress in which Christ was relegated to the role of the kindly colonial catalyst. Such a dream could not have survived the horrors of the waves of persecution that had (in 177 in particular) and would hit Lugdunum. Irenaeus is too elegant a theologian to be a proto-Darwinian or proto-Marxist. He does not envisage the growth or completion of humanity through God-consciousness, the dialectic of history, or the survival of the fittest. Such models again remove redemption from the anthropological mooring Irenaeus would give it and harbour it in genetics, economics, the psychological, or anywhere but the project of mankind.

A Revised Anthropological Methodology

What Irenaeus achieved (in terms of his anthropology, at least) was a clear demonstration that Christological anthropology can be more than simply a part of the trend for the dismantling of boundaries between academic disciplines. It is not

only the case that Christology and anthropology genuinely relate, particularly in Irenaeus, but that for Irenaeus, anthropology can only be done in the light of Christology, not introspection.

Instead of 'Know Thyself', Irenaeus suggests we know Christ, the true man. Any anthropology that has not started from this point, according to Irenaeus, is ruled out not just by virtue of the fall, but creation too, since Adam was only ever 'after the image' of the Image. In fact, given that *aletheia* (truth), as Heraclitus observed, is a privative expression, speaking of non-concealment, for Jesus to be 'true' man entails that without the revelation of this man, the nature of humanity is concealed to mankind. Thus Irenaeus' anthropology simply expresses his overall theological methodology: 'if you do not believe, neither will you understand'. If faith is concerned with finding reality externally to ourselves, then Irenaeus has presented not some compartmentalised 'life of faith', but human reality as to be found outside of ourselves, in Christ.

To a culture characterised by the *acedia* of ego-loss and weightlessness, further exacerbated by the problems of human uniqueness and species differentiation heralded by genetic modification and the advent of artificial intelligence, this is indispensable: my identity, reality and hope, are not, contra the self-realisation movement, to be found within my own fickle self. Rather, vitally for the church of Lugdunum and beyond, he called for the priority of reality and potential in Christ as opposed to the present experience of persecution.

Yet the modern West is in a rather different situation to the church of Lugdunum. Commenting on Psa 8 ('What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honour and put everything under his feet...') in his great work on anthropology, Reinhold Niebuhr states:

the vantage point from which man judges his insignificance is a rather significant vantage point. This fact has not been lost on the moderns, whose modesty before the cosmic immensity was modified considerably by pride in their discovery of this immensity.²

The irony is, that in reaching out across the cos-

mos for objective information, man only found himself to be more of a riddle, the cadaver of his identity only the worse for all the dissection it had undergone.

That is, all anthropologies that have sought to ask 'what?' of man first, before determining where the proper object of anthropological study lies, have necessarily slid towards qualification-based understandings of humanity, mankind being reduced to subsistence as the proverbial mere featherless bipeds. A party to this has been the philosophical tradition of the Academy with its supposition of the priority of the work over the person – 'we become just by doing just acts'.³ The results are abstractly or introspectively conceived properties that bear little sense of the dynamism Irenaeus envisaged as the project of humanity. Such definitions – seen most classically in Boethius' classification of the person as 'an individual substance of a rational nature' – are unavoidably qualitative.

Even those attempts to break free from the monster of introspection have all too often foundered on functional descriptions, the result, for example, of quality comparisons with other animals (such lists of features that supposedly distinguish man from other animals inevitably undergoing systematic condemnation from Darwinian evangelists seeking to display such features as common to other animals).⁴ Yet it might be argued that this is something of the import of Paul's argument in Romans 1:23. When man ceases to understand himself in reference to the true *imago Dei* he is compelled then to understand himself in reference to the animals. If true, this places such anthropology right within the ambit of perverted worship.

2 Niebuhr, R., *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Vol. 1. (London; Nisbet, 1941), 3

3 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* trans. and introduction by David Ross; revised by J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson. (Oxford & New York; OUP, 1998), 29

4 Colin Gunton has demonstrated the way in which this argument for the distinctive ontology of the human is very near to the traditional form of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, in which it is man's finite reason that distinguishes him from the irrationality of animals and the infinity of God. Here it is the property of the human mind that provides a criterion of radical discontinuity from the rest of creation. In sharp contrast to Irenaeus' theology of animals, this model has the tendency to reduce animals to mere mechanistic being, their cries of pain perhaps being no more than the squeaks of unlubricated machinery. (Gunton, C. E., *The Promise of Trini-*

tarian Theology (Edinburgh; T & T Clark, 1997), 100-1.)

The ethical fallout is catastrophic, for on such a basis life, death, health and identity are imparted on the basis of qualifications inherent in the individual. The striking Memphis sanitation workers of the spring of 1968 perhaps expressed the problem most poignantly with their placards reading 'I am a man'.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is fitting that we should turn, as we finish, to Feuerbach. The usual, crude interpretation of his aphorism 'man is what he eats' make him a soft target for Christian anti-materialism.⁵ More to the point, such thinking appears to be a case of the worst sort of functional anthropology. Yet, as Alexander Schmemmann has suggested, there is a more fundamental, if unintended, truth underlying Feuerbach's dictum: from the instruction to eat that immediately follows the command to propagate and have dominion (Gen. 1:28-30), we humans can be seen, as Irenaeus saw Adam, to be hungry creatures.⁶ We find our fulfilment and our true being in feeding upon Christ, the true man.

5 Feuerbach, L., *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot, intro. Karl Barth (New York; Harper Torchbooks, 1957); cf. Barth's comments in the introduction, xiii-xiv.

6 Schmemmann, A., *For the Life of the World* (New York; SVS, 1997), 11ff.

Recommended Further Reading:

- Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: SVS, 1997)
- Hughes, P. E., *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001)
- Osborn, E., *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge; CUP, 2001)
- Behr, J., *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York; OUP, 2000)

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