

God and Human Dignity

Edited by

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they might think. God's forgiveness and grace should liberate Christians to risk equal regard with the assurance that they are justified before God even if they fall short.⁴⁷

Sixth, the Christian narrative of the cross adds an element of supererogation to the love ethic of equal regard. The narrative of Jesus' passion — his trial and crucifixion, and the mingling of these events with the motifs of the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 53 — adds an element of self-sacrificial love to Christian love as equal regard. Neither a flat love ethic of equal regard nor a mixed-deontological theory of the kind found in Finnis and Nussbaum can address the disruptions of sin and evil. The Christian story, as Louis Janssens interprets it, does not tell us to sacrifice ourselves aimlessly.⁴⁸ It does not even tell us that self-sacrificial love is the center of the Christian life. Instead, it tells a profound story showing that in order to live a love ethic of equal regard, one must be willing to go the second mile — to work hard, endure, and even sacrifice — not as an end in itself but as a means to restoring love as equal regard. The Christian story tells about the role of sacrifice in renewing the core ethic of mutuality and equal regard. Neither Finnis nor Nussbaum, devoid as they are of narratives of the cross and forgiveness, say anything about how just love for the good of other and self is sustained and renewed in light of sin and brokenness.

Conclusion

These are some of the ways that the Christian narrative informs and enriches the more directly ethical dimension of human existence. This narrative, however, if devoid of a principle of obligation and a view of premoral goods, can be vague about what we should do to address the ethical challenges of life. Indeed, it may be the contemporary drift toward a vague narrative ethics that accounts for the church's marginalization in public life. This also may explain the church's impotence to address moral issues such as homosexuality, abortion, assisted suicide, divorce, and marital disruption.

Christian anthropology is multidimensional, and so is the Christian story when properly told. I have described this multidimensionality. Most likely, readers will sense that my position represents a tentative step toward a new Christian humanism — a Christianity that includes within the themes of creation, judgment, and salvation a proximate concern for human flourishing. If this is what readers conclude, they will be right.

47. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, p. 198.

48. Janssens, "Norms and Priorities of a Love Ethics," p. 228.

Theological Anthropology versus Anthropological Reductionism

MICHAEL WELKER

This final essay addresses the problem of anthropological reductionism. The dominant anthropological paradigm of modernity centers on self-conscious subjectivity. Today, along with its religious "grounding" and its moral challenges, this paradigm is increasingly questioned and criticized by new approaches toward human-being being made in the sciences and humanities. In this chapter I argue that theology should not go to war on the side of new reductionistic approaches against the old ones. It should first appreciate the integrating power of the standard modern paradigm of theological and philosophical anthropology based on self-conscious subjectivity. At the same time, however, it should work on an "Aufhebung" (a sublation), a relativization and development of this paradigm. More precisely, it should try to provide a genuinely theological framework that allows it to host and to relate several anthropological approaches, including the modern one, in order to do justice to the complexity of the human being and to respect the nobility of God's purposes with humankind.

In recent years, brain research, research on the genome, the exploration of individual and communal memory, a new focus on the bodiliness and physicality of human existence, new interests in the textures of emotion and feeling, and other innovations in the field of anthropological research have created great expectations and considerable enthusiasm. On the one hand, very old questions such as "What are the essential characteristics of the human being?" or "What does it mean to be human?" have been given the promise of new and inspiring answers. On the other hand, what seemed to turn into a new world or a golden age of deepened anthropological research

and discourse soon appeared as an intimidating maze or even as a frightening minefield. The field of anthropological research and discourse has been overshadowed by the pressing problem of reductionism or, rather, competing reductionisms. And some of the forms of reductionism seem to have most unpleasant or even dangerous repercussions not only on the way we think about human life but also on human life itself.

Reductionisms: Unavoidable Ones and Dangerous Ones

Reductionisms emerge when certain phenomena of an area of possible experience, or certain theoretical or experimental tools and certain figures of thought that can help to disclose this area, are taken to be the *only* phenomena, the *one* guiding principle, or the *sole* key to disclose it. As soon as such an approach convinces a broader group of scholars or even a broader public, a reductionism becomes "live." A reductionism can become powerful as soon as research working with it comes up with astounding new insights which lead to all kinds of successes in theory and praxis. If the research promises new potentials not only to produce further insights but also to enhance political and military power, technological and economic success, or physical welfare and new possibilities of healing, the power of the reductionism increases considerably.

Seen in this perspective, a reductionism does not only have an impact on scholarly opinions, does not only make its way into encyclopedias and textbooks: it starts to have an impact on political and economic policies and their readiness to distribute trust and money. It leads to the institutionalization of new academic disciplines, laboratories, and research institutes. In anthropology it awakens public hopes for better, easier, less endangered, and longer lives; economic expectations of new sources of how to increase industrial income; and political calculations of maximized loyalty and power. By all this it awakes a potentially unlimited willingness to invest money; media attention; personal, public, and political trust; and academic and technological energy into its enterprise. It thus becomes a real power in many areas of social and cultural life.

The enormous success of a reductionistic academic enterprise is not necessarily a danger in itself. As a rule, a successful reductionism of the form sketched above remains a latent paradigm and can indeed be stimulating for a while. As soon as its potential to generate new insights ceases, it can be seen as having been a reductionism, or it even proves to be stale or boring. It then has to make room for corrected, broader, and more subtle views on the topic it is

concerned with — or for other reductionisms. There is, however, the danger that a reductionism becomes so powerful that it systematically blocks and distorts other processes of research and potentials of insight. It is this danger that is feared in the current interdisciplinary discourse on issues in anthropology.

Although the humanities, philosophy, the law, theology, and religious studies are at present afraid of several "physicalist" anthropological reductionisms in particular — connected with the recent successes in research on the brain and the genome — sensitive scholars see the same danger on the "mentalist" side. Increased sensitivities in the dialogue between the natural sciences and the humanities (including religious studies and theology) to this danger of a powerful reductionism also in the humanities have led to a growing dissatisfaction with classical starting points of anthropological research and discourse within social, cultural, psychological, philosophical, and theological studies. Classical starting points in anthropology like "the human being" as a self-referential subject, as a reference-point in I-Thou-constellations,¹ or as the typical or the unique member and co-shaper of a moral community or of an environment of sociable interaction² have come into question. Deeper, more realistic and subtle forms of anthropology that would help to grasp the "koinonial" and embodied human being have been sought.³ Anthropologies that only work within a (post-)Cartesian, a (post-)transcendental approach no longer seemed able to provide such forms and frameworks.

The same seems to hold true for what is probably the most widespread model in theology, namely, the model of a dialogical encounter between God and "the human." There are simply too many anthropological insights and burning questions in social and cultural studies and in the natural sciences that cannot be hosted by this model. The challenge to offer a more complex framework in anthropological theory and research has come not only from areas other than theology. Also *within* theology, the insistence on a multidimensionality in theological anthropology within the biblical traditions has led to the questioning of frameworks and guiding principles which for a long time focused anthropological thinking and discourse. In order to

1. Cf. the contribution of Alan J. Torrance, "What Is a Person?" in *From Cells to Souls — and Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature*, ed. Malcolm Jeeves (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 199-222.

2. Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Notes on Aristotle: Nichomachean Ethics 8-9," trans. John Hoffmeyer, *Theology Today* 56 (1999): 164-68; Michael Welker, "We Live Deeper Than We Think': The Genius of Schleiermacher's Earliest Ethics," *Theology Today* 56 (1999): 169-79.

3. Cf. Torrance, "What Is a Person?" following John Zizioulas.

gain a clear perspective on the problem, it seems helpful to introduce a differentiation analogous to a basic differentiation used by economic theory and thinking: the difference between microeconomics and macroeconomics.⁴

Differentiating and Relating Micro-Anthropological and Macro-Anthropological Approaches

Microeconomics deals "primarily with the individual parts of an economy, such as individual households, firms and industries. Each of these units represents a separate market, and the behavior of these units involving specific goods and services needs to be analyzed and understood." "Macroeconomics, on the other hand, deals with the sum of these parts. . . ." "Macroeconomic models are simplified descriptions of the relationship between some collections of macroeconomic variables . . . used . . . to chart the likely course of the aggregate economy."⁵ There should, of course, be no association of "macro and micro" with "more and less important." Both approaches are crucial for a circumspect analysis.

The canon, large-scale history, multi-loci dogmatics, and ecumenical and interdisciplinary tasks challenge theological thinking to deal with macro-anthropological constellations and contents. They offer multicontextual, multisystemic, multiform locations and descriptions of human beings and affairs. In order to gain topical concentration, however, micro-anthropological approaches have to be cultivated which are monocontextual and monosystemic in nature. Such approaches permit growth in certainty and consensus and progressive academic orientation and decision-making. This invites us to test *the ability of specific micro-anthropological approaches to host macro-anthropological constellations*. Once we start working on such a task, the strengths of the post-Cartesian and post-Kantian anthropologies that center on the self-conscious "subjectivity" appear impressive. Such anthropologies have often emphasized the self's inner certainty, its ability for autonomy, its immediate relation to "the Divine," and the grounding of human freedom, equality, and dignity in this basic God-relation.

Despite the sharp criticism of this reductionistic micro-anthropological

4. I am most grateful to my Princeton colleague Leong Seow for an inspiring conversation during a Pastor-Theologian Consultation in which the idea to differentiate between micro-anthropological and macro-anthropological approaches arose. The following passages pick up, unfold, and develop further some reflections from my contribution to Jeeves, *From Cells to Souls*, pp. 223-32.

5. Frank N. Magill, ed., *International Encyclopedia of Economics*, vol. 2 (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), pp. 973 and 895.

figure of thought by other anthropological starting points mentioned above, it has to be acknowledged that the integrating power of the modernist model is considerable. Philosophical, legal, political, and religious modes of conceiving the human being were combined in this approach. Despite the obviously distortive reductionism connected with this model — a reductionism heavily lamented on many sides — its capacity to host macro-anthropological perspectives is considerable. The model sets high standards and should not be dismissed, unless a sublation, an "Aufhebung," of its potentials — in the Hegelian sense — can be achieved in a more comprehensive framework.

The question is which theological anthropological framework could incorporate and host macro-anthropological constellations and offer structures to differentiate and to relate several micro-anthropologies in illuminating ways. My proposal is to start with a large-scale *cosmological* framework — all too easily ignored in anthropological studies — and with the general religious questions raised by it.

John Polkinghorne has sketched such a large-scale framework under the title "Windows onto Reality: Light and Darkness":

The window of fundamental physical science discloses a universe whose rational transparency makes science possible and whose rational beauty rewards the scientific enquirer with a profound sense of wonder. In short, the cosmos is shot through with signs of mind and it is an attractive, though not inevitable, thought that it is indeed the mind of the creator that is partially disclosed in this way.⁶

Yet the stunning cosmic order, cosmic fruitfulness, the dawning of consciousness, and the emergence of religious awareness, which Polkinghorne names as illuminating "windows onto reality," are not the full picture. The cosmological framework also offers what he calls "moral and physical evil," thus *questioning* a divine mind behind it and involved in it. Finally, it also points to an *ultimate cosmic futility*:

Science tells us, most reliably, that the universe is going to die, through either collapse or decay, over a timespan of tens of billions of years, just as surely as we are going to die over a timespan of tens of years. Both realizations question what could be the ultimate purpose of the creator of a world of such transience.⁷

6. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, *Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 19-23.

7. Polkinghorne and Welker, *Faith in the Living God*, pp. 19 and 23.

Although the scientific discussion of most recent years has again put a question mark behind the firm conviction that the universe is going to die,⁸ the position just sketched can easily lead to the impression that the universe is of an ultimate "pointlessness."⁹

This picture stimulates high expectations toward a being who is worthy of being named "divine" or "God." A bringing forth of the universe and its sustenance for a limited time alone are not sufficient to recognize, trust, and honor such a being. The sustaining power has to be complemented by a rescuing and saving power. The saving power, however, must not be regarded only as keeping or bringing back creation onto the level of sustenance. Only the ennobling and elevating creativity of God responds to the challenge of cosmic futility and pointlessness.

Focusing on this challenge, a theological anthropology in search of a broad framework for interdisciplinary work about anthropological issues should concentrate on the threefold "relation" of — or, rather, focus on the three dimensions of — the divine activity directed toward creation and human beings — namely, God's activities of *sustaining*, *rescuing/saving*, and *elevating/ennobling* the creatures.

Thus a micro-anthropological approach (focusing on God's complex creative "relation" to human creatures) can host rich macro-anthropological constellations (a multitude of anthropological phenomena connected with the dimensions of God's sustaining, rescuing, and ennobling creativity).

This differentiated perspective gained from a religiously reflected general cosmological perspective can be complemented by a specifically Christian theological approach. This approach is based on large-scale observations in the Old Testament and New Testament traditions, on reflections on the differentiated identity of God in general, and on a study of a growing consensus in the Christian ecumene on basic issues in Holy Communion in particular.¹⁰ In the following I will first focus on the emerging ecumenical consensus.

The growing ecumenical consensus, reached in several decades of conversations of the churches on the world level, focuses on the three-dimensional working of the triune God in the Eucharist. The differentiation and connection of God's creative sustaining, rescuing and saving, and finally ennobling and elevating workings on the creatures can be observed in a careful meditation and reflection of the different steps taken in the celebration of the sacrament.

8. I owe this cautioning to my Heidelberg physicist colleague Jörg Hüfner.

9. Steven Weinberg, *The First Three Minutes: A Modern View of the Origins of the Universe* (New York: Basic, 1977), p. 149.

10. Cf. Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* trans. John Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), esp. chapter 12.

The thanksgiving to the Creator (*eucharist*), the remembrance of Christ (*memorial, anamnesis*), and the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiklesis*) are emphasized in different ways in the different churches and communities of faith. But all three dimensions have to be present in a celebration of the symbolic meal that can be regarded as Holy Communion or Eucharist.

The thanksgiving to the Creator is in the most immediate dimension related to bread and wine, the gifts of creation. It opens the eyes for the loadedness of the term "creation," which is not to be confused with "nature." Both the course of nature and human culture have to cooperate fruitfully in order to bring forth bread and wine as "gifts of creation." The fact that these gifts are in the midst of the assembled community indicates a powerful precedence and presence of divine sustenance and care. It also opens the eyes for the depth of the dimension of "creation," such as the peaceful assembly of the community, the willingness to communicate, the readiness to share and to express symbolic table-fellowship, the ability to relate to a religious tradition and to a canonic memory. All these gifts of God give ample reason to thank God the creator for his creative work.

The more we stress this dimension and the power of symbolic table-fellowship, the expression of peace on earth and love among our fellow human beings, and the spiritual communication and its strength and radiation, the more we are put in awe by the second dimension of the sacrament: the remembrance of Christ, centered on the "night of betrayal" and death on the cross. This dimension reveals the good creation in jeopardy and under self-jeopardizing powers and dynamics. Jesus is put to death in the name of the Jewish religion, in the name of Roman politics, under the Jewish and the Roman laws, and with the support of public moral opinion. Jews and Gentiles, friends and foes work together. Even his disciples do not make a difference. Jesus celebrates the Last Supper with Peter, who betrays and denies him, and with the other disciples, who deny and flee him. Not even Judas, who hands him over to those who kill him, is excluded from the table. It is against these powers, which the Bible calls "sin," that God's rescuing and saving might stands. The remembrance of Christ reveals this situation, the abyss of the night of betrayal and the forsakenness on the cross. It also reveals God's will to engage and to overcome the agony of the world.

Recent theological and interdisciplinary research has carefully explored how this rescuing and saving work is accomplished in the resurrection.¹¹ It

11. Cf. Michael Welker, "Resurrection and the Reign of God," The 1993 Frederick Neumann Symposium on the Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Hope for the Kingdom and Responsibility for the World, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Supplementary Issue, no. 3,

has problematized the idea that the merely resuscitated Jesus of the fundamentalists and the magnificently triumphant Jesus of the Isenheim altar are compatible with the witnesses to the resurrection given by the biblical traditions. It has focused on the perplexing tensions between palpable encounters and appearances, theophanies and doubt, in the biblical texts. The witnesses of the New Testament "see" the risen Christ "not with the eyes only."

They "see" him in his speaking to them, in the breaking of the bread, in the greeting of peace, in his opening the Scriptures to them, in his sending them, and in other signs. They "see" him in actual and symbolic actions which become ritual forms of the liturgy and the life of the early church and the Christian church in general.¹² Not a resuscitated Jesus, but the *whole* Jesus Christ and his life in its *fullness* become present in the resurrection "in the Spirit and in faith."

This "spiritual body" is extremely hard to grasp for a naturalistic and scientific way of thinking. Although we long for a sense of this presence of the whole fullness of a person and a life, as every story of love and every story of loss can tell us, we have great difficulty in appreciating the message of the resurrection. This explains the shallow and agonizing pro and contra of a physical reanimation in so much discourse on the resurrection. The risen Christ, however, becomes present in a way that retains the multidimensionality of his person and radiation as well as the multidimensionality of access to his person and influence. The powers and the gifts of the Spirit come with the resurrected: love; forgiveness; healing; the attention to children, to the weak, to the rejected, to the sick, and to the suffering; the search for truth and justice; and the ability to challenge political and religious "principalities and powers" are communicated with the presence of the risen Christ.¹³

ed. Daniel Migliore (Princeton, 1994), pp. 3-16; S. T. Davis, D. Kendall, and G. O'Collins, eds., *The Resurrection: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Resurrection of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Joachim Ringleben, *Wahrhaft auferstanden. Zur Begründung der Theologie des lebendigen Gottes* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1998); H.-J. Eckstein and M. Welker, eds., *Die Wirklichkeit der Auferstehung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2002; second ed. 2004); T. Peters, R. Russell, and M. Welker, eds., *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002; second ed. 2005); N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003).

12. Cf. Sarah Coakley, "The Resurrection and the 'Spiritual Senses': On Wittgenstein, Epistemology and the Risen Christ," in her *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Resurrection of Jesus and Roman Catholic Fundamental Theology," in *The Resurrection*, ed. Davis, Kendall, and O'Collins, pp. 213-48.

13. Cf. Michael Welker, "Who Is Jesus Christ for Us Today?" *Harvard Theological Review* 95, no. 2 (2002): 129-46.

The focus on cross and resurrection, on the remembrance of Christ and the witness to his eschatological presence, is not the last and ultimate dimension of God's working on the creation and on human beings. The third dimension discloses that God mediates, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the witness and the radiance of Christ to his believers and that God draws Christ's witnesses into the divine and eternal life. The Holy Spirit thus ennobles and elevates the witnesses of Christ: they become a "new creation," they become "members of the body of Christ," they become a "temple of the living God." How does this complex creative and redemptive "relation" of God to human creatures illuminate and orient a nonreductive anthropology, which deserves interdisciplinary attention beyond the realm of theology proper?

God's Sustaining, Rescuing, and Ennobling Creativity As a Basis for a Nonreductionistic Anthropology

A refined understanding of divine sustenance does more than simply disclose multifarious relations between bodily existence; social, cultural, and historical environments; the "regularities which shape all created matter . . . [determining] both the natural and social world and their interconnection";¹⁴ institutional and symbolic forms of providing common forms of memory; "analogical imaginations" (David Tracy); "security of expectation" and attuned action; and so on. Not a simple relation between points of reference, but an extremely complex localization in a body and in a mind has to be taken into account, within the smaller and the larger family, within a household, within a neighborhood, in an educational system and within medical evolution, under regional and national political conditions, within broader social and cultural settings — a location within national and global history, a location on the surface of the globe, a location in an urban or a rural environment, a location within natural and political climatic conditions, a location under a zeitgeist and within religious traditions and potentials.

A refined understanding of divine sustenance is also aware of the fact that the element of rescue is involved in every breath of creaturely existence. This is heavily blurred by the fact that many people in many parts of the world today have no immediate awareness of agricultural processes and their endangerment, that the improvements of health care and the struggles to prevent infant mortality are taken for granted, that such achievements as electric light and public security have weakened or even eradicated many sensitivities

14. Cf. Christoph Schwöbel's contribution to this volume, pp. 44-58.

for the improbability that life is a big routine. Such sensitivities, in which the biblical traditions abound, are lost.

More important, the awareness has to be cultivated again that God sustains creation for a great purpose, that human life is not just meant for a "bad infinity" (Hegel) of as many days as physically possible on this earth, that God elects the human beings as caretakers of creation and as witnesses to God's glory. The same human body that can be regarded as perishable "flesh" is destined to become the "temple of God." The same spirit that can be corrupted by the power of sin is destined to become freed and strengthened by God's creative Word and by God's Holy Spirit in order to witness to God's good intentions for creation in manifold ways.¹⁵

The Dimension of Sustenance

On this first level, the level of sustenance, the focus on human dignity, so central to the classical modern anthropological discourse, should not be given up too easily. It was an important political, legal, and moral achievement that human dignity was introduced as "Ur-Principle."¹⁶ The theological questions and complexities connected with it¹⁷ should not lead us to an underestimation of this modern interdisciplinary achievement.

Over several decades, the notion of human dignity seemed to serve well as an integrating topic of various forms of anthropological discourse. It has been a common topic of legal, political, philosophical, and theological research and conversation between the disciplines. Based on Reformation claims, modern philosophical thought, and international declarations of human rights, and loosely connected with a scriptural reference to Genesis 1, the (theologically grounded version of the) argument which tried to integrate perspectives of the different disciplines and at the same time appeal to common sense ran as follows: The personhood of the human is inseparably connected with his or her dignity. The dignity of the human is grounded in his or her being the *imago Dei*, the image of God. The image of God carries an immediate

15. Russel Botman's contribution to this volume (pp. 84-98) adopts a similar framework to coordinate distinct discourses of human dignity in contemporary South Africa.

16. This formulation was brought in by John Witte's contribution to the consultation.

17. My sensitivities were intensified by Wallace Alston's rightly skeptical comments in the beginning of our consultations and Clifton Black's contribution; cf. Michael Welker, "Menschenwürde und Gottebenbildlichkeit," in *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, vol. 15: *Würde des Menschen*, ed. B. Hamm and M. Welker (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001), pp. 247-62.

relation of every human being to God. This is the basis of a fundamental equality of all human beings and the ground of universal human rights. Such statements, which for a long time were regarded as quite convincing, have elicited a whole series of critical reflections and questions in the recent past.

To begin with, it is not clear whether the concept of the *imago Dei*, the image of God, rooted in the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, can be expected to convince and to bind human beings of other religions or those of no religion at all. Moreover, it is not very clear what the image of God according to the biblical traditions really means. Does it mean that human beings are destined to live in a dialogical connection with God and with each other?¹⁸ Does it mean that they are destined to live in compassionate sociality with all the other creatures?¹⁹ Does it mean that they are destined to exercise the *dominium terrae*, that is, to rule over the creation?²⁰ Or does it mean that they are destined to be bearers of God's revelation in a much broader sense?²¹

A clarification is necessary of what the Old and the New Testament witnesses understand by the *imago Dei* before any attempt to answer these questions can be made. To complicate matters further, not only has the image of God become a problematic concept, but also the notion of "human dignity." As the introduction to this volume notes, this notion has been questioned in and beyond the academy. On the one hand, human dignity is a central concept in political and ethical documents of great importance.²² The Charter of the United Nations, the General Declaration of Human Rights, or, for instance, the Inaugural Addresses of most American presidents, or the German Grundgesetz (Statute Law) reflect this fact. Most legal systems and most law scholars would confirm that human dignity is a fundamental anthropological

18. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), esp. pp. 206ff.; Ingolf Dalferth and Eberhard Jüngel, "Menschenwürde und Gottebenbildlichkeit," *Christlicher Glaube in moderner Gesellschaft*, vol. 24 (1981): 85f.; this "personalistic" and "dialogistic" interpretation of human dignity is also used by the influential German law-scholar Günter Düring in his interpretation of the Grundgesetz: *Gesammelte Schriften 1952-1983* (Berlin, 1984), pp. 27ff. and 127ff.

19. This interpretation became popular in response to increasing ecological worries: cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott in der Schöpfung. Ökologische Schöpfungslehre* (München: Kaiser, 1985), pp. 222ff.

20. See my references to the recent Jewish and Christian exegetical discourse, in *Creation and Reality: Theological and Biblical Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), esp. chapter 5.

21. For a christological interpretation of the concept of dignity see Peter Saladin, *Verantwortung als Staatsprinzip* (Bern: P. Haupt, 1984), pp. 198ff.

22. Cf. the Habilitationsschrift of Wolfgang Vögele, *Menschenwürde zwischen Recht und Theologie. Begründungen von Menschenrechten in der Perspektive öffentlicher Theologie* (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser/GVH, 2000), esp. pp. 201ff.

premise.²³ On the other hand, scholars have increasingly tended to regard human dignity as a mere cipher, as an "empty formula"²⁴ or even as an illusion.²⁵ They complain that the term "human dignity" is mostly addressed in religious or quasi-religious language.

The Dimension of Rescue and Saving

Although God's rescuing and saving power is already present within the realm of divine sustenance, the second dimension, in which God's creativity is fully devoted to the rescue of the creatures, is much more dramatic in scope. This becomes obvious when we juxtapose extremes of personal existence. Think of an obviously or seemingly blessed existence, localized within a complex world with good potential for choice and development: a healthy person in a loving family, in a well-organized and financially secure household, within a safe and supporting neighborhood, in a prospering educational and medical system, under law-abiding and peaceful political conditions, in an ideologically self-critical and upscale historical phase, in an area of the world not hit by climatic, ideological, and military distortions. Under these conditions a reductionism emphasizing divine sustenance easily sets in.

Then think of the other extreme: persons hit by bodily and/or mental illness and suffering, in nonsupportive families and dangerous neighborhoods, with poor educational conditions and lack of health care, under corrupted and violent political conditions, with a depressed and guilt-ridden historical and moral consciousness, even strangled by fatalism with respect to a climate that by continuous drought or flooding or earthquake endangers

23. Cf. the use of extremely weighty terms, such as (my translation) "anthropological premise": Peter Häberle, "Menschenwürde und Verfassung . . .," *Rechtstheorie*, vol. 11 (1980): 389ff., 410; "fundamental norm": Werner Maihofer, *Rechtsstaat und menschliche Würde* (Frankfurt am Main: n.p., 1968), p. 9; even "eternal fundamental norm of the constitution": Wolfgang Graf Vitzthum, "Gentechnologie und Menschenwürdeargument," *Zeitschrift für Rechtspolitik*, vol. 20 (1987): 33ff., at 33; "key term of the constitution": Albert Bleckmann, *Staatsrecht*, vol. 2: *Die Grundrechte*, third ed. (Köln: Carl Heymanns, 1989), p. 446; "structuring norm" for state and society: Peter Häberle, "Die Menschenwürde als Grundlage der staatlichen Gemeinschaft," in *Handbuch des Staatsrechts der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, vol. 1, ed. J. Isensee and P. Kirchhof (Heidelberg: C. I. Müller, 1987), pp. 815ff., 844.

24. Viktor Pöschl and Panajotis Kondylis, "Art.: Würde," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 7 (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992), pp. 637ff.

25. Franz Josef Wetz, "Die Würde des Menschen — eine Illusion," in Wetz's *Die Würde des Menschen ist antastbar. Eine Provokation* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1998), pp. 94ff.

individual and communal existence, and, finally, brought up in a religion that fosters passivity and fatalism. Here the emphasis on the first dimension of mere sustenance would be cynical.

The moralizing of modern theologies, the inability of much of modern theology to deal with the notion of sin²⁶ and God's working against it, the strong concentration on the mere co-suffering of God with God's people and with Christ in recent theologies of the cross — and various other theological shortcomings — have darkened this aspect of God's saving passion. A theology determined to deal with the rescuing and saving power of God in a christological perspective would have to acknowledge and carefully study the web of social, cultural, political, and religious conflicts in which Jesus' proclamation of the coming reign of God becomes seminal. The revelation through the cross of the "principalities and powers" dominated by sin, the unspectacular countermeasures of God's guidance in the resurrection witnesses, and the emergent coming of the reign must be unfolded.²⁷ In general, the risk-laden transformation and revolution of normative constellations and powers is the topic in this field. It is central that sensitivities to human self-endangerment and self-jeopardizing are developed by attention to the divine word and its liberation from many forms of tyranny and chaos.

Again, a careful investigation of the issues involved discloses the perichoretic overlap with the first (sustenance) and the third (ennoblement) dimensions. The sustenance of religious, political, legal, and moral forms of life requires their gradual transformation. To achieve this aim without losing normative security of expectations is one of the indispensable tasks of religion in general.²⁸

The Dimension of Ennoblement and Elevation

The third dimension is probably the most difficult to explore. With regard to the overlap with the dimensions of sustenance and rescue, one could point to the aesthetic, scientific, moral, and political capacities and ingenious achievements, from which so many profit and benefit, in which so many have a joyful

26. Cf. S. Brandt and M. Suchocki, eds., *Sünde. Ein unverstündlich gewordenes Thema* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1997).

27. Cf. Welker, "Who Is Jesus Christ for Us Today?" pp. 129-46.

28. Cf. Jan Assmann, Bernd Janowski, and Michael Welker, eds., *Gerechtigkeit. Richten und Retten in der abendländischen Tradition und ihren altorientalischen Ursprüngen* (München: Fink, 1998).

and relief-bringing share.²⁹ The main aspect of this dimension, however, is, of course, the involvement in the divine life itself, by way of being a witness, by becoming a mirror of God's purpose and glory. Here the liturgy, the power of the celebration of the sacraments, the common search for truth and justice, faith seeking understanding, the teaching, the proclamation, and the diaconal mission of the church become central, the life in discipleship and free and creative self-withdrawal in favor of co-creatures.³⁰

In these three dimensions, God's life-furthering and life-enhancing creativity offers a rich framework for macro- and micro-anthropologies. There are anthropologies that focus primarily on the physical, social, and cultural stability and continuity of human existence and life; anthropologies that center above all on the endangerment and self-endangerment of human beings and the powers that prevent and work against human viciousness and frailty; and anthropologies that first want to explore the dimensions of spiritual communication and spiritual flourishing and growth.

Very different anthropologies have to be differentiated and related to one another. An explicitly Trinitarian approach might be the only adequate ultimate framework for such an anthropological endeavor. Such an approach, however, requires a careful discussion of theological reductionisms of the past which blocked the unfolding of "the relation" of God and humanity in creation, in Christ's saving work, and in the working of the Holy Spirit.³¹ Outside of such a context, the classical modern discourse about the *imago Dei*, the model of a dialogical "encounter" of the human being with God, and the notion of human dignity based upon it, are reductionistic.

29. Cf. Polkinghorne and Welker, *Faith in the Living God*; John Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (London: SPCK, 2004), esp. chapters 3 and 5; see also Polkinghorne's contribution to this volume (pp. 89-103).

30. The concept of "free and creative self-withdrawal" is elaborated in Michael Welker, "The Reign of God," *Theology Today* 49 (1992): 500-515.

31. One example would be the reduction of the working of the Holy Spirit to divine sustenance in some twentieth-century theologies. I am grateful to Don Browning for drawing my attention to this problem.

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