
Pro Rege

Volume 22 | Number 3

Article 8

March 1994

Christian Perspectives on Being Human: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Integration (Book Review)

Michael Williams
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Williams, Michael (1994) "Christian Perspectives on Being Human: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Integration (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 22: No. 3, 36 - 37.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol22/iss3/8

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Christian Perspectives on Being Human: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Integration, edited by J.P. Moreland and David M. Cioocchi (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1993. 290 pages, paperback, \$15.99. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Every academic discipline works within and even teaches an anthropology (a theory or assumption about what it is to be human). This anthropology may be explicit or merely implicitly assumed, but it is there. The social scientist focuses upon human beings to the extent that they are social creatures who respond to the world about them by means of political, social, and economic organization. The theologian assumes the human being to be a faith-having and exercising creature who either conforms to or spurns the confessional norms which govern human faith-life. The musician approaches the human being as an aesthetic being, an imaginative creature able to express its experience of the world by the means of the musical and plastic arts. The biologist may think of a human being as a complex system of genetic and chemical interactions. Even those disciplines that do not take the human being as their disciplinary object work with anthropological assumptions. Botany is man's study of plant life, yet such study would not be possible outside of the assumption that the human subject is capable of engaging and interacting with the physical world in very particular ways.

Given the nature of its disciplinary foci, a college curriculum can often appear to be a maze of competing articulations of what it is to be human. And considering the centrality of anthropology to worldview, a curriculum can in fact end up offering a hodge-podge of competing and contradictory understandings of reality. Consequently, the issue of anthropology provides a college faculty with an appropriate venue for disciplinary integration, and integration is necessary if a college is to have a unified worldview. It is just such a concern that moved the faculty of Biola University to engage in this exercise in anthropological integration.

The essays cover systematic theology, philosophy, psychology, cultural anthropology, education, biblical studies, and medical ethics. While the Biola anthology is written by professors in various disciplines from the humanites and social sciences, the product is not truly integrative. The project might better be described as an exercise in Thomistic compatibilism. The agenda is simply one of baptizing the Western tradition of rationality by adding a transcendental element as a spiritual veneer to secularist anthropological analysis. The empirical findings of the social sciences are judged appropriate to human beings as constituents of the "natural order," but requiring enhancement or completion by biblical insights in regard to the "spiritual realm." Thus the various sciences and disciplines of the university examine the "natural man," and Scripture—under the aegis of the discipline of theology—provides the necessary complementary insights

into the "spiritual man" (118). The misuse of Paul's "natural man"/"spiritual man" distinction is so obvious that it broadcasts the material/spiritual ontology and Thomistic epistemology that undergirds it.

The prevailing trends in psychology, cultural anthropology, education, and so on, are considered restrictive or even reductionistic in that they fail to appreciate a dimension of human personhood beyond the merely material. As Sherwood Lingenfelter puts it: there are "spiritual competencies" that must be *added* to the other human competencies in order to construct a valid anthropological picture (136). Integration is here understood as the addition of divine revelation (specifically Christian knowledge) to empirical data adjudicated by the court of autonomous reason. Faith sanctifies or completes reason. Throughout the book, the boogie-man of naturalism is called upon to argue for a supernaturalist upper story that elevates man above the brutes.

As indicated, "spiritual competencies," the "spiritual realm," and the "spiritual man" are considered the particular bailiwick of the discipline of theology, for it alone provides us with a divine perspective on things (8). This makes theology the queen which completes the other disciplines and makes them Christian within the college curriculum. Not surprisingly, then, the first essay in the book is written by a theologian, Robert Saucy. All the other essays move out from the Christian contextualization provided by Saucy, or I should say by Saucy and J.P. Moreland, whose second essay provides the "rational" philosophical argument for Saucy's theological argument.

What is Saucy's theological anthropological contextualization (and Moreland's philosophical defense)? That a human being is made up of two constituent elements, one spiritual the other physical. That which distinguishes human beings from the animal kingdom is the existence of a metaphysical substance called a "soul" within man.

Saucy repeatedly cites Genesis 2:7 as teaching a doctrine of substance dualism. A human being is the combination of spiritual and material elements (21, 31, 39). It is open to serious question, however, whether Genesis 2:7 teaches anything like substance dualism. The NIV, which renders the Hebrew text quite well, reads:

the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

It seems to me that a dualistic anthropology must be read *into* the text before it can be found there. The most natural reading is that the "living being" (or KJV: living soul) is the resultant product of the divine act of animating the dust creature Adam. Thus, rather than Genesis 2:7 saying that man equals body plus soul, it naturally reads that

the God-breathed material of creation is now a living being. "Being" or "soul" in this text refers to the totality of the human being. It extends to Adam's toes and body hair as surely as to any allegedly "spiritual" element.

It is unfortunate that the authors see the issue of human constitution as a simple either/or equation. Either one holds to a body/soul, spiritual/material dualism, or one necessarily falls into a naturalist monism (38). Of all the Biola faculty, Moreland states the problematic most blatantly:

The issue of substance dualism, then, is not an isolated question of merely intellectual interest. A broad world view clash between scientific naturalism and Christian theism is lurking behind the scene. Thus, substance dualism is of interest to the believer because it seems to be the most natural way to understand biblical anthropology and, further, if substance dualism is true, it weakens the adequacy of scientific naturalism as a total, self-contained account of the origin, development, and nature of life, especially human life. (56)

Substance dualism is put forward as the sole bulwark against naturalist anthropology. If naturalism is monist, the only safe haven from secularist apostasy is dualism. But rejecting what is false does not guarantee that one is embracing what is right. The mirror image of error is not always truth. Truth is singular while error is plural. Naturalist monism and a matter/spirit dualism are not the only options. I would suggest that Scripture does not presuppose or describe a spiritual realm discreet from a material realm, but a spiritual dimension or directionality that pervades all reality. As Adam is soul in his totality, so he is a spiritual being in his totality. This means that everything he does is a spiritual (God related) activity. If man did not possess a soul would this then mean that he is not related and ultimately accountable to God? This seems to be the fear that haunts the Biola authors. Is a horse related to God? A tree? A rock? A comet? Who created and sustains all these things? The question finally is not "What is man?" but "What is the domain of divine authority and activity?" Biola appears to imprison God within the soul of man.

If God is not sovereign over the "natural man," what is? Biola's answer: reason. Indeed, reason is idolized as the norm which stands above even the *a priori* position Moreland assigns to theology. In his introduction Moreland defines theology as "the propositions, theories, and methodology Christians believe to be rational, true components of historical, biblical Christianity" (8).

Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church, by Douglas D. Webster (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP) 1992. 165 pages, paperback, \$9.99. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

How do you preach the gospel to a consumer-oriented, success-focused, technologically sophisticated, sex-crazed,

Theology concerns itself with ideas about that which transcends the phenomenal realm. The test of those ideas is reason. Thus, Moreland argues that substance dualism is true because it makes "life after death more reasonable" (56). I would respond that reason cannot be elevated to the status that Moreland and the Biola authors want to give it. Reason is not an absolute thing out there somewhere; it is an activity, a human activity. As such it is thoroughly human in character, that is to say, created, finite, and historical. The norm of truth is not some abstract, autonomous reason, but Jesus Christ as he is mediated to us by Scripture. And that norm, relational, covenantal, and historically mediated, is the standard not only for theology, but for psychology, sociology, physical education, and anthropology.

While I appreciate the kind of job security for the theologian within the academy that follows from Biola's exaltation of theology to a necessary mediator of "spiritual things," I find it essential to call this tactic by its true name: simple priestcraft. Neither theology (nor philosophy) can be thought of as the dispenser of divine norms for other academic disciplines. The Bible is not the theologian's property. Theology cannot be understood as the science whose task it is to discover and define all specifically Christian knowledge and perspective. Such an understanding secularizes all other areas of human endeavor. Under this view all other disciplines would have to come begging to theology in order to learn how to conduct themselves from a Christian perspective. The Bible is for all of life, for every person in every obedient walk of life, and hence, it is there for every discipline. Scripture's redeeming and sanctifying Word and normative light inform every academic discipline, every human endeavor. By the light of his inscripturated Word, we know that God is sovereign over and has set laws and norms for every aspect and realm of life. The starting point for academic and curricular integration is simply this: that all of our endeavor stands before the face of God (*coram deo*) and under the norm of Scripture (*sola scriptura*). The test of Christianity is not reason. Rather, the test of reason is Christ. There is no rationality independent of religious conviction. To follow the Biola agenda (to first ask: how does my discipline think of human being, and then to ask: is it compatible with theological findings) runs the risk of missing the radicality of the fact that the person and work of Christ concerns the whole of reality and the Word of God holds for all of life. Truly redeeming Christian academia seeks to spell out the meaning of the person and work of Christ in every realm of life. And it must begin there.

morally relativistic, entertainment-centered, and above all self-obsessed culture? Well, you might acknowledge that