THE DIFFERENCE THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY MAKES

By Kathryn Tanner

"Theology, on the basis of its understanding of God, proclaims the objective value of God's creatures, a value that must, therefore, be respected in the relations human beings establish with one another and with other kinds of beings in the world. A whole socio-political and ecological ethics can be developed from this starting point. . . ."

A THEOLOGIAN discusses human beings in relation to God. Discussion of this relation to God is the theologian's contribution to the understanding of human life, his or her pride and joy. But such a focus for discussing human life also marks the theologian's humility, signaling the limits of the theological enterprise and the dependence of the theologian upon other forms of inquiry and other contexts of investigation. I hope to offer here an account of humanity in relation to God that highlights the distinctive contribution of theological anthropology. First, however, I want to clarify, more generally, how the contribution of theology to the understanding of human life is both exalted and, at the same time, lowly.

I

Theology intends to be comprehensive. No element or aspect of the universe is really independent of a relation to God, since God is the Lord of all creation: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps. 24).[1] Thus, the theologian wishing to do justice to this relevance of God to the whole should exempt no element or aspect of the universe from theological comment. Within the purview of the eye trained on God come the stars in the sky, the trees and the oceans, wild beasts, creeping things of the earth, and certainly human beings, with whom God covenants, human beings with whom God chooses to be intimate in Jesus Christ. Because God's reach is universal, discussion about God is relevant, moreover, to more than the religious aspects of human life. God is a matter for concern not just in times of private prayer or within the walls of church, not just

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[1]Translations of the Bible in this paper follow the New Revised Standard Version.

in ritual contexts when calling upon and praising God or bringing the bread and wine to one's lips, but in every affair of human life, no matter how mundane and trivial or seemingly profane, in one's workplace, on the street, in the home.

Theology does not try to insure this comprehensiveness by generating out of its own resources all there is to say on these matters.[2] A theological discourse designed to cover the whole world is not entirely self-generated. It does not come forth from the theologian's mind in the way the world in itself comes to be from God's Word out of nothing. The theologian, as a theologian, is not an expert on plant growth, ocean tides, the molecular structure of biological compounds, human physiology and psychology, or group dynamics. Such topics, though included within the theologian's purview, are beyond theology's specific competence. The theologian does not have the resources—say, in biblical texts or church teachings—to render adequately informed judgments concerning them. The theologian depends upon other habits of inquiry and upon other disciplines for knowledge concerning such matters.

The theologian's specific concern is not so much to determine *what* is related to God—the height of the skies, the extent of the universe, the make-up of its inhabitants, their essential natures, accidental features or functionings—but *how* all things are related to God, a relation the theologian feels competent to discuss in light of the biblical witness, doctrinal pronouncements, church teachings, and the religious practices of Christians. Of course, if theology hopes to be comprehensive, the theologian's concern is not limited to this question of how God is related, bare and unadorned. Theologians make discussion of this question relevant to the whole world by taking up the best thought about the cosmos and its inhabitants and subjecting it to their particular angle of vision, by investigating how all this appears when one understands the world in its relation to the God of all.

The theologian who produces a comprehensive commentary is, therefore, not like a self-determined creator of cultural artifacts—say, a writer of a novel or a composer of a symphony. He or she is, instead, like an active reader or an orchestra conductor metaphorizing the artistic creation of others, diverting it from its intended course, transposing it into a new register or key. When producing a comprehensive commentary, the theologian does not provide his or her own place

[2]See Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1987) on the dangers of what he terms "theologism" (pp. 26–27, 36, 52, 107, 223, and elsewhere) and on his appeal to Thomas Aquinas' idea of theology's formal object (pp. 67, 75, 88–89). What makes a discussion theological is not its subject matter—theology can talk about any and everything—but its manner of treatment, its reference of all things to God. This is the sense in which I use the term formality. See also William Christian, *Doctrines of Religious Communities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) and his discussion of the way religious discourse can be occasion comprehensive without being topic comprehensive (pp. 186–192, 225–227). I am suggesting that theological discourse can also be topic comprehensive in a way William Christian does not envision. Theology can make a necessary place for what Christian would call "secular claims" (p. 73).

of habitation. The theologian engaged in such an enterprise is, instead, a perpetual renter, making do, making use of, working over the property of other disciplines, in the service of theology's own interests and purposes. The theologian producing a comprehensive commentary is, poor and incapacitated, a poacher or a parasite. Like those birds that lay their eggs only in other birds' nests, theologians bring their hope for a comprehensive commentary to fruition only by interjecting their own distinctive viewpoint within the spaces of other disciplines.[3]

Ironically, this lowly dependence on forms of knowledge not its own allows theology to intimate the way in which God's own Word is a word not simply for one time and one place, but for all. Theology has no special stake in any particular account of the natural world or of the human beings in it.[4] Theology does not become irrelevant, therefore, when its accounts of such things become obsolete. Claims made about the natural world and its inhabitants may come and go, influencing the theologian's commentary on them in this or that way. Unlike God's Word, every theological commentary on the world is transitory and fleeting; it shows its humanity by perishing, replaced by other human words for another time and place. Yet in and through this changing variety of theological production, there may continue to appear a distinctive theological *modus operandi,* particular patterns of poaching or styles of deflective transposition.

I intend to uncover a few of these patterns or styles of use in theological discussions of humanity.[5] I do not provide a full-fledged theological commentary on human life, informed as it would need to be by the best natural and physical science, sociology, and psychology of the day. Restrictions of space alone prohibit the attempt. Indeed, I try to minimize the degree of this dependence on other disciplines and sources of knowledge, focusing instead on the relation to God that is the basis for the distinctiveness of a theological viewpoint, merely indicating those places where the conclusions of other forms of knowledge might make an appropriate entrance. Even so, the account I offer is clearly influenced by a contemporary outlook on humanity—in its respect for human powers of self-determination, for example, and its sense of human life as inextricably embedded in wider worldly spheres, both ecological and socio-political. Moreover, the very stress in this account on the relation of human beings to God reflects a contemporary interest. This stress is the result of my judgment that, in an age of highly refined and well-respected sciences,

[3]See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. xxi–xxii, 29–42, on the creativity of "consumers." For further discussion of an appropriation of this for theological purposes, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theology and the Study of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, forthcoming).

[4]This is true even if some of these accounts are incompatible with a theological formality—something I am not ruling out.

[5]I make no exhaustive or exclusive claims for these. There are others and the ones I develop, primarily on biblical grounds, are certainly contestable.

theological anthropology needs to show not so much that it approves of their conclusions but that it has something of its own to say.

II

At the most fundamental level, the human being is one creature among others. The relation that human beings enjoy with God, therefore, is one they share with all God's creatures. God's creatures are related to God as the recipients of God's good gifts or blessings. "The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made" (Ps. 145:9). God holds creatures up in the palm of God's hand, bestowing upon them their existence in space and time, their living vitality and productive powers, their growth, increase, and capacities for communal fellowship in harmony with one another.[6] God acts bountifully in wonderful works; God expresses God's power in gifts of abundance: "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain. . . . You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. The pastures of the wilderness overflow, . . . the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy" (Ps. 65:9–13). God's solicitude and care extend to all God's creatures; God intends their well-being by seeing to their needs and satisfying their hungers. "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. . . . These all look to you, to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things" (Ps. 104:24–28). "Satisfying the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16), "you save humans and animals alike, O Lord" (Ps. 36:6).

Faithful to this intention to bring about the creature's good, God works to uphold "all who are falling" (Ps. 145:14), healing the sick, bringing captives out from their bondage, protecting the weak, easing the plight of the poor and the downtrodden.[7] God's blessings continue even under the disrupted conditions of sin:

> There is the beauty and utility of the natural creation, which the divine generosity has bestowed on man, for him to behold and to take into use, even though mankind has been condemned and cast out from paradise into the hardships and miseries of this life. How could any description do justice to all these blessings? . . . Think . . . of the abundant supply of food everywhere to satisfy our hunger, the variety of flavours to suit our pampered taste, lavishly distributed by the riches of nature, not produced by the skill and labour of cooks! Think, too, of all the resources for the

[6]See Claus Westermann, *Blessing* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) and Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980), pp. 515–30, for an interpretation of what material like this implies for the relation between God's action in creation and covenant.

[7]See, for example, Psalm 146.

preservation of health, or for its restoration, the welcome alternation of day and night, the soothing coolness of the breezes.[8]

Moreover, God's blessings to sinful humanity are not limited to those of the natural world: God sends God's own Word among us, to be born, to suffer, and to die for our sakes.[9] And more, Christ's coming is a prelude to even greater gifts of the kingdom: "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Rom. 8:32). "What blessings are we to receive in that Kingdom, seeing that in Christ's death for us we have already received such a pledge!" "What blessings in that life of happiness will [God] provide for those for whom in this life of wretchedness he willed that his only-begotten Son should endure such sufferings, even unto death?"[10] In some future time, Christ's compassion for the suffering, Christ's miraculous healings, Christ's feeding of the multitudes, will be brought to fulfillment in the well-being of a universal community in which the world and all its inhabitants will be reconciled for their harmony, peace, and security.[11] Enjoying in coming ages "the immeasurable riches of [God's] grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7), we humans, along with the rest of God's creatures, will suffer no wants, becoming peaceful and harmonious with one another at a table set in glorious abundance by God.[12]

Human beings should rejoice in these gifts of God, given for themselves and for others, and esteem their goodness. Whatever a good God brings forth must be good in its own being. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). This gift-giving, value-producing, creative working of God cannot be limited, moreover, to some places or some times. "My Father is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17). "God works ceaselessly in the creatures He has made. . . . This work is that by which He holds all things and by which his Wisdom 'reaches from end to end mightily and governs all graciously.' It is by this divine governance that 'we live and move and have our being in Him'."[13] Nothing of the creature's good is therefore exempt from the obligation to praise God for gifts bestowed. Everything that creatures have for the good, every precondition and means to their well-being, is to be attributed to God's giving: "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you" (Ps. 16:2).

This relationship between creatures and a gift-giving God suggests a

[8]Augustine, *City of God* (New York: Penguin, 1972), xxii.24.

[9]*Ibid.*, vii.31 and xxii.24.

[10]*Ibid.*, xxii.24.

[11]See Ephesians 1:10 and Colossians 1:15–20; also Isaiah 11, 32, 35, 41, 60, 65; Jeremiah 31; and Micah 4:3–4.

[12]See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* IV:32–7.

[13]Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 4:12.23. The biblical quotations are Wisdom 8:1 and Acts 17:28. I am indebted to Kathryn Greene-McCreight for calling my attention to this passage from Augustine.

first, rather complex formality or pattern in theology's use of the sciences. The sciences may tell us about the creatures the earth contains, about their number and differences, about their natures, powers, and interrelations, about their inclinations, tendencies, and desires, and the manner in which they may or may not be satisfied in the present course of the world's compass. The theologian tells us, on the one hand, that those creatures are to be esteemed and their well-being valued. Creatures may be praised and respected without offense to God's glory, since this world and its inhabitants are the beauty with which God's glory clothes itself.[14] Praise for creatures does not detract from praise for the Creator, since all that is to be valued in the one is the gift of the other.[15] On the other hand, the theologian admonishes us that value is not to be ascribed to creatures apart from the continuous working of God in and for them. Esteem for the creature apart from the God who makes it is idolatrous, a vain and empty esteem, since the good that is the creature's own remains dependent on God's giving. Dependent indeed, since, without God, the goods of created beings—their existence, nature, powers, perfections—cease to be.[16] Should God withhold God's gifts and "take back his spirit to himself and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together and all mortals would return to dust" (Job 34:14–15).

According to this first, complex formality, human beings must, therefore, be humble before God, even and especially for that of which they are most proud. Human achievements, for instance, come to pass only when God hears the plea that "the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands" (Ps. 90:17). "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Ps. 127:1). In adversity and opposition, it is not one's own arm alone, but one's own arm backed by the Lord's gracious giving that gives one the victory:[17] "I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I [who achieved the success], but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). Joy in one's accomplishments is appropriate, then, only to the extent one continually boasts in the Lord's gracious help. "Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. . . . For we are God's fellow workers . . . God's field" (1 Cor. 3:7,9).[18]

III

Even though the human being is one creature among others, human beings are not merely one aspect of the created world; their relation-

[14]Psalm 104.

[15]"*Quo major est creatura, eo amplius eget Deo.*" [Francis of Osuna, quoted by Henri Bremond, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France,* vol. 1, *Devout Humanism* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 11.] A favorite quotation of St. Teresa, Bremond remarks. "*Detrahere perfectioni creaturarum est detrahere perfectioni divinae virtutatis.*" [Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles,* III, 69:15.]

[16]See *City of God,* xii:26.

[17]Psalm 44:4–8.

[18]I follow the Revised Standard Version for verse 9.

ship with God is not just that of any other creature. They have some special standing as the focus of God's concern. God may covenant with all the earth and its inhabitants (Gen. 9:10–17),[19] but God makes a special covenant with a particular people and, despite their continual failings, remains faithful to them with a steadfast love. God's Word may come into the world in order to bring about the eventual consumation of all things in a loving and just community, every one with every other and with God. God's Word nevertheless takes up humanity by becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ suffers and dies, first of all, for human sin and, by his death and resurrection, exalts human beings, first of all, to a new life in God in and through the Holy Spirit.

The creation of human beings in God's image (Gen. 1:26) may sum up this distinction. The biblical narrative remains silent, however, about any qualities of human nature that might account for their special standing. Creation in God's image is not a way of saying something about human beings as such; it is a way of pointing out a special relation between them and God. Human beings gain their unique dignity not by virtue of anything they possess in and of themselves but by being God's image—by reflecting, corresponding to, following obediently after, making an appropriate response to, the God who has created them for such a relationship.[20]

To be created in the image of God means, in other words, to have a particular vocation, one of fellowship and communion with God in which one uses all one's powers to glorify God and carry out God's purposes. Human beings may be alone among God's creatures in rendering conscious praise in word and deed for God's blessings in their own lives and throughout creation.[21] Unlike other inhabitants of the earth who are merely charged with furthering their own fecundity and prosperity,[22] human beings reflect God by adopting God's own project of universal well-being. Like the shepherd kings of antiquity, they mediate God's blessings, as best they are able, to both their own kind and the rest of creation[23]—for example, replenishing the earth and helping it to body forth bountifully,[24] furthering the prospects for

[19]The Noachic covenant. See Bernhard Anderson, "Creation and Ecology," in *Creation in the Old Testament,* edited by Bernhard Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 166–169.

[20]For this account of creation in God's image, see Claus Westermann, *Creation* (London: SPCK, 1971), pp. 49–60, esp. p. 56; Claude Stewart, *Nature in Grace* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983), pp. 11–13; Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1957), pp. 114–134; Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 215–233; Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), pp. 329–364.

[21]See Moltmann, *God in Creation,* pp. 70–71.

[22]See Genesis 1:22.

[23]See Westermann, *Creation,* pp. 52–53.

[24]See Genesis 1:28 and James Barr, "Man and Nature: The Ecological Controversy and the Old Testament" in *Ecology and Religion in History,* edited by David and Eileen

human community by protecting and caring for the weak, the infirm, and the oppressed.[25]

As a second formality or pattern of use, then, the theologian takes up all that the sciences teach about human qualities and capacities in order to consider the manner and extent to which they may hinder or help human beings to fulfill their vocation of community and fellowship in relation to God. Thus, certain prerequisites might exist for that fulfillment: Human beings might need to possess intelligence and will, powers of judgment and inner determination. They might require both spiritual and bodily aspects, self-consciousness and capacities for communication. Influenced by their varying cultural milieus, theologians over the centuries have offered these and any number of other characterizations of what makes human beings the image of God.[26] Indeed, they have often simply identified one or another such characterization with that image. The biblical text, however, simply talks of human beings without any distinction of aspects;[27] God creates in God's image the whole of the human in its entirety,[28] and the special relations that hold between God and human beings bear not on some aspect of humanity but on human beings as such, in and through all that they are.

IV

This second formality specific to human life, which I have developed with reference to the creation of human beings in God's image, does not take away, however, from the first formality that concerned creatures as such. This second formality presupposes the first: Creation in God's image is just a further explication of what being created means for human beings.[29]

Bringing that first formality back into the discussion now produces a third formality: The distinction of being human, its special value and goodness, can be affirmed appropriately only against the backdrop of human unworthiness for it. Say what one will in praise of human beings—their special place in creation, their marvelous and unique qualities and capacities, the glorious nature of their partnership with God in the covenant and of their fellowship with God in Jesus Christ—none of it is appropriate apart from the affirmation of God's

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Spring (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974), pp. 61–75, for the meaning of "dominion" and "subdue" in this biblical passage.

[25]This injunction runs throughout the prophetic books (e.g., Isaiah 1:16–17; Amos 5). In the New Testament, see, for example, Matthew 25:34–45. See also Westermann, *Blessing,* pp. 94–95, on the imitation of Christ's healing and helping as part of the commission to the apostles in Matthew 10 (Luke 10).

[26]See, for example, the enormous variety of characterization even when discussion is limited to the early Eastern theologians. See Lossky, *Mystical Theology,* pp. 114–134. See also Westermann, *Creation,* pp. 56–58.

[27]Lossky, *Mystical Theology,* p. 120; Moltmann, *God in Creation,* p. 221; Westermann, *Creation,* pp. 57, 59.

[28]This can be affirmed despite the fact that a second creation story in Genesis (Gen. 2–3) permits some ambiguity.

[29]See Westermann, *Creation,* p. 60.

utter graciousness as the provider of such gifts. The general fact that the creature is not to be esteemed apart from a reference to God returns here in a new, more specific register.

First of all, the sheer extent of God's wondrous working, the universal scope of God's concern as the creator of all, puts human distinction in perspective. God's hand is behind the course of the sun, moon, and stars, behind the grass that grows on the hills and the majestic rains that nourish them, behind the wild and fierce beasts of the seas, forests, and sky.[30] "Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet [something wonderfully strange!] the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples" (Dt. 10:14–15). Considered within the context of creation as a whole, the exaltation of the human in general is an unexpected grace: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:3–4). Far from a matter of confident presumption, any special standing of humanity in relation to God requires the universal solicitude of God for its reassurance: "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. . . . Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Lk. 12:6–7).

The favors God bestows on human beings appear undeserved, in the second place, when considered in light of God's majesty. Who are human beings to be exalted by God, when, before God, "even the nations are like a drop from a bucket," "inhabitants [of the earth] are like grasshoppers" (Is. 40:15, 22), "the whole world before you is like a speck that tips the scales, and like a drop of morning dew that falls upon the ground" (Wisd. 11:22)? "Who can search out [God's] mighty deeds? Who can measure his majestic power? . . . . When human beings have finished, they are just beginning, and when they stop, they are still perplexed. What are human beings, and of what use are they?" (Ecclus. 18:4–8). The fleeting insignificance of humanity compared with God's eternity and everlasting might is the backdrop against which God's elevation of humanity is to be measured: "O Lord, what are human beings that you regard them, or mortals that you think of them? They are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow" (Ps. 144:3–4).

God's special gifts to human beings are discussed in biblical imagery of condescension.[31] Insofar as they are mere creatures of this world, human beings clearly have no capacity to storm heaven with a demand for God's favor. In bestowing blessings on human beings, "the Lord our God, who is seated on high, . . . looks far down on the heavens and

[30]See Job 34–40.

[31]See Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (Richmond: John Knox, 1961), pp. 14, 117–122.

the earth" (Ps. 113:5–6). God reaches down from the heights to care for us in the depths.[32]

Although all human beings are lowly in this way before God in the heights, it is especially for the "lowly" among human beings, those human beings with no status in the eyes of the world, that God comes down. The very ones with no claim to favor in human estimation—the sick, the despised, and the weak—receive God's special blessings. "I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me" (Ps. 40:17). The Lord who is seated on high looks down upon the earth specifically to raise the poor from the dust, the sick from death, and the needy from the ash heap (Ps. 113:5–9). Those who boast before God of their health, prosperity, might, or social standing, considering all these the secure possessions of their own hands, fail to find such favor. God scatters them and exalts, instead, those of low degree with no illusions about the ultimate source of their favor in God's gracious giving.[33] "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. . . . All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit" (Is. 66:1–2).

The special favors human beings get from God, moreover, can never be counted on as theirs by rights. God will remain faithful to God's loving intentions for us, but the gifts God bestows out of love remain just that—gifts. God is, therefore, never required to bless those that God does bless. God has, in fact, done otherwise on occasion, bringing affliction instead of blessings even to those people with whom God covenants.[34] God could yet do otherwise, tearing down in an instant the goods enjoyed by those who fail to see God as their refuge and source of strength.[35] "So if you think you are standing," Paul counsels, "watch out that you do not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12) and lose God's benefits.

Finally, the special favors granted to human beings by God are undeserved in a more strictly juridical sense: They have not been earned. No one can stand before the God who made him or her and claim to be blameless, spotless and pure (Job 4:17). But much more than this, human beings have proven their unworthiness of special favor by piling up their sins. No one, therefore, has a valid claim on God's partnership and fellowship. Human beings cannot be said to deserve the love and concern displayed by God in becoming incarnate and living among us or the intimacy with God achieved through the workings of the Holy Spirit. God's special favors to human beings are, instead, the result of God's mercy and continued faithfulness to a partnership broken by its human participants. "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift" (Rom. 3:23–4). In acts of generous, unmerited invitation, God

[32]See, for example, Psalm 18:16.
[33]See Luke 1:51–2.
[34]See, for example, Psalm 66.
[35]See Psalm 52:5–7.

spreads out God's hands all the day to a rebellious people (Isa. 65:2). God "does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103:10); though our misdeeds multiply, God still considers our distress, hears our cries (Ps. 106), and returns good for evil. Dead through our trespasses, we are nevertheless made alive with Christ and exalted through him to sit with God in the heavenly places, only because of God's rich mercy and great love for us (Eph. 2:4–6).

Our infirmity and sin prove the graciousness of God's benefits to remedy our plight. We are all like Jonah in the belly of the whale—enjoying a deliverance from God that desperate straits make an unexpected and unhoped for surprise. We should therefore "repeat that word which was uttered . . . by Jonah: 'I cried by reason of my affliction to the Lord my God and He heard me out of the belly of hell' (Jon. 2:2); . . . [so] that he [and we also] might always continue glorifying God, and giving thanks without ceasing for that salvation which he has derived from Him, 'that no flesh should glory in the Lord's presence' (1 Cor. 1:29)."[36]

V

I hope what I have said sufficiently demonstrates that a theological perspective on humanity exists that is not reducible to the conclusions of other habits of inquiry. There is something to a theological account of humanity even apart from its fleshing out by way of other modes of investigation. This kind of independence of other disciplines takes the shape of formalities or patterns for their use, and, therefore, it does not imply that a theological commentary on human life proceeds in isolation from other forms of inquiry. Theology has something of its own to say, which it does not need to prove by a procedure of that sort. A theological perspective on humanity has its distinctiveness, but it is not one that must be bought at the price of vain attempts at self-sufficient insularity. The other disciplines that discuss human beings are not foreign to a theological commentary on human life, since that commentary does not proceed independently of them. But neither does a theological commentary simply conform to those disciplines, since it does not receive its identity as a theological commentary from them.[37]

What may not yet be clear is the manner in which conclusions of other disciplines are altered when brought within a theological purview. Are they, for example, altered at all? Perhaps a theological formality merely leaves the conclusions of other disciplines alone, assimilating them as is within its own perspective. In that case, theological anthropology would assure its distinctiveness by leaving

[36]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,* edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, vol. 1, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1989), III:20.1.

[37]An application to theology of de Certeau's account of the way "the long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations." *Practice of Everyday Life,* p. 101.

most of the field of inquiry about human life to entirely secular disciplines. Other disciplines would not encroach on theology's territory, but neither would theology encroach on theirs. Theology could provide a comprehensive commentary on human life, but people with no prior theological interest in life would have no reason to listen to it. They might know something more should they view what they know under a theological formality—something about God and the nature of our relations with God. In that sense, theological anthropology might make a difference to their understanding of human life, but a theological formality could neither challenge nor correct what they thought they knew before. Theological anthropology in this respect would make very little difference indeed.

The impropriety of such conclusions is hard to show on the basis of what I have provided here—a bare bones sketch of a few theological formalities themselves. The difference theology makes to the conclusions of disciplines it incorporates would certainly be easier to see if I had incorporated many such conclusions myself in order to produce a more fully-fledged theological commentary on human life. A few rejoinders are, nevertheless, possible on the grounds of the theological formalities I have discussed.

At a minimum, one can say that the relation between theology's contribution to an understanding of human life and that of other disciplines is more than merely additive. When incorporated in a theological commentary, the conclusions of other disciplines at least undergo transposition into a religious key. We know we are not alone in the universe as self-sufficient masters of ourselves. All that we are for the good is a gracious gift, for which we should render praise and thanks to God. Such a change in register marks more than simply a change in the way one maintains or holds the conclusions of other disciplines, that is, more than a change in one's subjective disposition or attitude with respect to what one knows on other grounds to be true of human beings. Thus, the first formality of creaturehood suggests human beings are properly understood only within the widest possible purview of the universe as a whole. Isolated investigation of the human makes little sense if human beings are part of a universal society of creatures held together by God's loving intentions. The second formality of human distinction implies, moreover, that human beings are made for a destiny of which the human and natural sciences may know nothing. The clearer that destiny in relation to God, the more theological anthropology will have to say of itself about human prerequisites for it. And the closer human beings are to fulfilling such a destiny, the more the qualities human beings display may require a reference to God in order to make sense.[38] Finally, the third formality

[38]That is, such qualities may have to be considered gifts of grace in a narrow sense according to which grace is distinct from nature. In the broad sense of God's giving developed in this essay all is grace, everything the creature displays for the good is grace. But in a narrower sense of God's grace, some gifts of God—for example, communion with God through the Holy Spirit—are not natural endowments and cannot be anticipated by reasoning from such endowments.

of human unworthiness for God's favors saves scientific investigation of the human from self-interested conclusions. A theological anthropology that knows that human beings owe such favors to God's grace contests any effort by the human or natural sciences to glorify humanity by exaggerating our differences from, and superiority to, other beings within the world.[39]

The implications of theological anthropology for secular ethics are certainly material and more than merely formal. Insofar as it follows the three formalities discussed above, theological anthropology lodges an attack on both over– and under–valuations of human life, fostering instead a humble but healthy self-respect. Human life is genuinely valuable but not absolutely or unquestionably so in a way that would make all other beings of the universe mere means to human well-being. A theological contribution like this to ethics cannot be restricted, furthermore, to a counsel about proper individual attitudes, a restriction that would leave conclusions about politics and society to secular spheres. Theology, on the basis of its understanding of God, proclaims the objective value of God's creatures, a value that must, therefore, be respected in the relations human beings establish with one another and with other kinds of beings in the world. A whole socio-political and ecological ethics can be developed from this starting point, one that might differ substantially from any offered by non-theological disciplines.[40] At its most general, such an ethic would maintain that, since all human beings have been created in the image of God, the propriety of human behaviors is to be assessed within the widest possible frame of a universal human society. It would maintain, moreover, that, since the special standing of human beings is a mere modification of what it means to be a creature of God, the good of humanity cannot be furthered without attention to the good of all God's creatures—the whole world and all its inhabitants. In this way, the theological formalities I have discussed erase customary boundaries of moral concern. Even without contributing new ethical recommendations, theology, at a minimum, extends the application of those recommendations that exist so as to fall into conflict with every provincial and parochial ethic: "Sparrows and sheep and lilies belong within the network of moral relations. . . . The line cannot even be drawn at the boundaries of life; the culture of the earth as a garden of the Lord and reverence for the stars as creatures of his intelligence belong to the demands of [God's] universal will."[41]

[39]See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 126–128.

[40]For a start at such a socio-political and ecological ethics and a discussion of its differences from some forms of non-theological ethics see Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), chapters 4–7; also my "Creation, Environmental Destruction, and Ecological Justice" in *Reconstructing Theology,* edited by Rebecca Chopp and Mark Kline Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming).

[41]Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation,* p. 122. See also the still helpful essay by Robert King, "The 'Ecological Motif' in the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *JAAR,* 42/2 (June 1974), pp. 339–343.