

RELATIONALITY IN THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Biologically, we are ready to respond to and interact with others long before we can articulate or even understand the value of human relationality. Not only are we born into existing relationships, but we are completely dependant on others to satisfy our basic needs from our very beginning. Developmentally, we cannot flourish as human beings without interpersonal relationships which allow for emotional and psychological growth. This relational aspect of human nature is acknowledged in the Vatican II document in *Gaudium et Spes*: “by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential.”¹ For this reason, a consideration of human relationality is essential for articulating a theological anthropology.

In *Alone in the World?*, Wentzel van Huysteen argues that “there is no single trait or characteristic that adequately captures the notion of human uniqueness but that “there is also no point in denying that we human beings do share an identifiable and peculiar set of capacities and propensities that clearly distinguish-

es us from other animals on this planet.”² In this paper, I will argue that, although it does not by itself capture what it means to be human, the relational aspect of human beings is *uniquely* human. We don’t respond instinctively to our basic or social needs and desires; we experience them as intentional responses and inform our concrete experiences with meaning and value.

We experience and relate to the world and others through the operations of embodied selves. As Bernard Lonergan attests, “an awful lot of our perceiving would not be possible without our bodies, not merely that we need our senses, but that we need the whole body.”³ Furthermore, there is a relational link between the body and the world of meaning.

Human relationality is only possible because of our ability to go beyond ourselves. Not only do we express ourselves and communicate with others through our embodied actions, but it is also our ability to transcend our physical selves, to understand, to value and to love, that distinguishes us from other animals.

¹Pope Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican: Holy See, 1965). http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

²Van Huyssteen, W., *Alone in the World?*, (Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 288.

³Lonergan, B., *Understanding and Being*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 289.

Human greatness lies with the ability to reach beyond oneself through the different levels of consciousness, culminating in the highest form of self-transcendence - the self-surrender to another in love.

Understood theologically, we are relational beings because we are created in the image of God who is inherently relational. The intention of this paper is to offer a theological understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God in light of the Christian call to fellowship with others and therefore with God.

I draw on several thinkers (Bernard Lonergan, Wentzel van Huyssteen, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Emmanuel Levinas) who address the two linking concerns which guide my paper: embodiment and self-transcendence. I will argue that together, embodiment and self-transcendence constitute the possibility for relationality and ultimately for fellowship with God, since we are in relationship with God through our relationships with others.⁴

Embodiment

There is an indissoluble connection between the body and the self, and therefore the self in relation to other selves. Traditionally, Christian anthropology has tended to focus on the mind or spirit which transcended the physical dimension of human existence. At times this resulted in a depreciation of the body. As van Huyssteen argues convincingly in *Alone in the World?*, human existence is embodied

existence. The characteristics that make us human (i.e. language, self-awareness, moral awareness and consciousness) are embodied traits. Further, he argues, whatever we say about transcendence or consciousness, it is an embodied transcendence or consciousness that exists in the world in bodily relations and activities.⁵ Even when we transcend the limitations of our animality, we must keep in mind that our ability to transcend those limitations depends in part on some of those animal characteristics.⁶

Understood in this way, our embodied existence is not an obstacle to overcome, but what makes our uniquely human characteristics possible. Van Huyssteen argues that God used the natural process for religious belief to emerge as a natural phenomenon; humans created in the image of God emerged from nature itself.⁷ For this reason, theology must take embodiment seriously in any consideration of what it means to be human. Furthermore, the theologian should not ignore scientific (and philosophical) anthropologies which can expand our understanding of human relationality.

Our embodied, characteristically human traits shape human relationships. Perhaps the most distinctive human quality which is directly related to relationality is our ability to communicate with others. In fact, communication with others constitutes the essence of the human being as a social being. Expressing oneself requires embodied communication to

⁴This idea is based on Mt 25:40 (NIV) – “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

⁵Van Huyssteen, 300.

⁶Ibid., 284.

⁷Ibid., 322.

form and maintain relationships with others. Communication is achieved through a multitude of signals originating from all parts of the body, verbal and non-verbal, or simply by one's presence. Lonergan states that "there is a sensitive basis for communication by the mere fact of the presence of another...The communication that arises on that base takes place through signs, through the human body."⁸ Intersubjectivity is realised and actualized in communication through body language, gestures, symbols, etc. It is through the physical body that we are able to communicate with one another and therefore establish relationships.

We express and nourish our capacity for relationships through bodily interaction and responsiveness to others. However, our relationships are not only formed by physical or sensible reality, but also by the realities shaped by our acts of meaning. Lonergan regards the human subject as a carrier and communicator of meaning.⁹ What someone means is communicated intersubjectively, symbolically, linguistically, and incarnately. Intersubjective meaning presupposes the interpersonal situation and is only possible because of the human subject who expresses and communicates an elemental experience with others. Lonergan illustrates the phenomenon of intersubjectivity through the way a person communicates an inward unspoken meaning to another person through a smile.¹⁰

Maurice Merleau-Ponty understood embodiment in terms of the body's practical capacity to act. According to Merleau-Ponty, we communicate with others and with the world through our body. Merleau-Ponty does not consider the physical as merely a function of the mental. In fact, it is precisely through the body that we have access to the world and that we derive knowledge of it and of others. The human body is the most fundamental form of existing-in-the-world. For this reason, he sought to rearticulate the relationship between various dualisms (i.e. body and mind, subject and object, self and world) primarily through a non-dualistic exploration of our embodied experience.

Merleau-Ponty's 'phenomenology of the flesh' also considers the human body as a carrier of meaning. Verbal and non-verbal language are presented as modes of expression that acquire meaning in relation to one another and converge in the individual person. The body, therefore becomes a focal point of meaning. "All our talk about embodiment is a way of examining the concrete, interactive relationality of the self and its world within which each co-constitutes itself and the other."¹¹ Merleau-Ponty's contribution allows us to consider embodiment in terms of the body's practical capacity to act towards others and in the world.

Alterity

Attention to the significance of the body in relation to the self, to others, and to the world, reveals that self, world and other are intertwined in important ways. Both the world and the other are capable of altering us, just as we

⁸Lonergan 1990, 89.

⁹Lonergan, B., *Method in Theology*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 57.

¹⁰ Lonergan 1971, 59.

¹¹Van Huyssteen, 276.

are capable of altering others or the world. In other words, we affect our world, and our world affects us. This mutual interaction and influence (potentially contributing to significant change, both positive and negative), attests to the responsibility we bear, whether we realize it or not, for ourselves, for others and for the world.

An understanding of responsibility in terms of alterity is expressed by Emmanuel Levinas who considered responsiveness to the other as our most human ability. According to Levinas, “the Other” calls and welcomes the subject into the ethical relation of facing. In fact, the primordial relationship *is* ethical. Because the face-to-face encounter confronts us with the ‘trace of the Infinite,’ one’s responsibility to the Other exists preconceptually, even if we are not aware of it.¹²

Loneragan also acknowledges the primordial aspect of our relationality. In the following passage, Lonergan recognizes the human solidarity present in the spontaneous help one gives another in need:

Prior to the “we” that results from the mutual love of an “I” and a “thou,” there is the earlier “we” that precedes the distinction of subjects and survives its oblivion. This prior “we” is vital and functional. Just as one spontaneously raises one’s arm to ward off a blow against one’s head, so with the same spontaneity one reaches out to save another from falling. Perception, feeling, and bodily movement are involved, but the help given another is not deliberate but spontaneous. One adverts to it not before it occurs but while it is occurring. It is as if “we” were members of one another prior to our distinctions of each from the others.¹³

The conclusion that can be drawn from a brief consideration of these thinkers is that we relate to each other through our bodies and, in part, because of our embodied human characteristics. As human beings, we are unique in the way that we communicate and perceive because of the relational link between the body and the world of meaning. Furthermore, embodied relationships present us with an ethical responsibility, whether we are aware of it or not. Becoming more aware of our interconnections increases our sensitivity to others and therefore our ability to respond to others. In the following section, I will consider responsiveness to the other in terms of self-transcendence.

Self-Transcendence

There is a broad consensus among contemporary anthropologists that self-transcendence characterizes an important aspect of human nature. In this section, I will explore self-transcendence in terms of openness to relationship with others and with God.

Socially, we become who we are through openness to relations and experiences with others. According to Pannenberg, the individual emerges from the relation to the other. “Individuals do not exist simply by themselves but are always constituted by their relation to the other, the Thou.”¹⁴ By the “Thou” Pannenberg means the person(s) to whom individuals are related in the course of their personal lives. The development of human capabilities depends on “whether the individual finds the community that permits the in-

¹²Levinas 1991, 112ff.

¹³Loneragan 1971, 57.

¹⁴Pannenberg, W., *Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 180.

dividual to awaken to his possibilities.”¹⁵ We each contribute to the development of others, whether this is transitory or deeply affecting. Therefore we should be attentive to the effect that we may have on others by our words or actions.

According to Pannenberg, all human behaviour is characterized by the tension between openness to the world and self-centeredness. Our destiny lies in openness to the world and to others through which we discover our true identity and the meaning of life. In opening oneself to relationships and in dedicating oneself to service of the human community, instead of ‘preoccupation with oneself,’ one discovers not only one’s true identity but also the meaning of life. “When human beings who are concerned about themselves think that they come closest to their own identity through...preoccupation with themselves, then they are really alienated from their true destiny and their true selves.”¹⁶

Loneragan also acknowledges that it is through our relation to the other that we come to know ourselves:

Subjects are confronted with themselves more effectively by being confronted with others than by solitary introspection...It is not by introspection but by reflecting on our living in common with others that we come to know ourselves. What is revealed? It is an original creation” for “the intimate reality of man grounds and penetrates all

that is human.”¹⁷

According to Lonergan, we transcend the solitary self and relate to the world beyond ourselves through the different levels of consciousness (attending to experience, being intelligent in one’s understanding, judging that one’s understanding is correct, and deciding to act on the resulting knowledge). Realizing self-transcendence requires that we become aware of our defence mechanisms, biases, and misperceptions which prevent us from being authentically subjective. “The root of division, opposition, controversy, denunciation, bitterness, hatred, [and] violence” results from inauthenticity.¹⁸ Further to the levels of self-transcendence, intellectual, moral and affective conversion give rise to differentiations of consciousness whereby a fuller meaning emerges from the broadening of one’s experience and horizon which promotes progress.

It is by affective conversion that a person prioritizes values and through the love of neighbour, community, and God, is able to go beyond the finite self and contribute to human progress. The highest form of self-transcendence is the self-surrender to another in love, which, according to Lonergan, is the abiding imperative of what it is to be human.

Loneragan also believes that it is through the interpersonal that we discover our purpose:

[B]eyond the moral operator that promotes us from judgments of facts to judgments of value with their retinue of decisions and actions, there

¹⁵ Pannenberg, W., *What is Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 90.

¹⁶ Pannenberg, 1985, 266.

¹⁷ Lonergan, B., *Collection*, ed. Crowe, Frederick E. and Doran, Robert M. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988) 220.

¹⁸ Lonergan 1971, 291.

is a further realm of interpersonal relations and total commitment in which human beings tend to find the immanent goal of their being and, with it, their fullest joy and deepest peace.”¹⁹

According to Lonergan, when we are authentically oriented towards the good as an objective reality, we become more human. In other words, we become more authentically human in self-transcendence. The drive towards authenticity moves us beyond ourselves. “We are our true selves when we observe the transcendental precepts because these demands authenticate our subjectivity as human subjects.”²⁰ Thus, by transcending oneself, one becomes more authentically human - one becomes oneself.

Affectivity

A person is affectively self-transcendent when the individual acts for others, and is concerned for the good of others. This is especially so when one falls in love. According to Lonergan, the highest form of self-transcendence is the self-surrender to another in love.

Affectivity is an important aspect of self-transcendence according to Pannenberg. The positive affects (sympathy, joy and hope) draw individuals out of their isolation, whereas the negative affects (fear, anxiety, arrogance sadness, envy, hate) isolate individuals within themselves:

In ‘elevated’ moods and positive affects, in which human beings are most at one with themselves, they are not preoccupied with themselves but are ‘ecstatically’ open and surrendered to the reality of their life-world and the ground that sustains it. In ‘depressed’ moods, on the other hand, and in negative affects they prove to be thrown back upon themselves.²¹

Through the positive affects which are a part of human relationships, individuals open themselves to their world and are carried out of themselves in self-surrender.²² This is not at the expense of individual differentiation, however. As we have already seen, for Pannenberg, it is through openness to others and to reality that one becomes their true self.

The Image of God

From the perspective of Christian faith, theological anthropology is not just about who we are, but who we are called to be. What is important is not just understanding our nature, but also our purpose - which involves deciding what we will do with our nature. “Human persons are not what we initially, privately and ‘inwardly’ are, but what we may (perhaps) together hope and struggle to become.”²³

Understanding who we can hope and struggle to become involves understanding what is meant by the description “created in the image of God.” This involves a broadening of horizon from materialist or idealist views of human nature to a more holistic view. But

¹⁹ Lonergan, B., “Philosophy and the Religious Phenomenon,” *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 12, 2 (Fall 1994): 134.

²⁰ Plants, N., “Decentering Inwardness.” In *In Deference to the Other*, ed. by Doorley, Mark J., ed. Kanaris, Jim (Albany: State University Press, 2004), 21.

²¹ Pannenberg, 1985, 266.

²² Pannenberg, 1985, 261.

²³ Lash, N., *Easter in Ordinary* (USA: University of Virginia Press, 1988), 86.

more importantly, it involves understanding something about God - as elusive as this may be.

According to the biblical account of creation, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). According to van Huyssteen, this implies that God is the originator of human relationality.²⁴ Not only are human relationships divinely intended, but being created in God's image and living in relationship are inseparable.

The Catholic Church maintains that "God did not create man as a solitary, for from the beginning 'male and female he created them'. Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion."²⁵ Although I do not wish to limit an understanding of human relationality to the heterosexual relationship, it is important to consider (as many contemporary theologians would contend) that the meaning of the "image of God" has shifted to describe human life in relationship with others and with God rather than as a set of faculties, possessions or endowments. Van Huyssteen, for example, argues that all humans share in the image of God as a disposition toward, or capacity for, relationship with others or with God, regardless of the degree to which they can or do exercise that capacity.²⁶

For Lonergan, our capacity to know, our abil-

ity to value and our openness to transcendence are major dimensions of what it means to be human. "He made us in his image, for our authenticity consists in being like him, in self-transcending, in being origins of value, in true love."²⁷ God is transcendent, the origin of value and love. In being open to God, the ultimate other outside ourselves, we come to know ourselves and therefore our purpose as human beings. To be like God is to be self-transcendent, to be origins of value and to be loving. In doing so, we become authentic, we become our true selves as made in the image of God.

Pannenberg understands the image of God as the "disposition toward and the capacity for self-transcendence and fellowship."²⁸ Self-transcendence is a fundamental anthropological disposition of human nature. We are naturally open to that which is outside ourselves. He refers to this intrinsic disposition as 'exocentricity' - a dynamic which orients us beyond our experience, to others and to the world, in search of meaning and fulfillment. Relationships engage us in a manner that calls us beyond ourselves. Through openness to others and to reality, we find our purpose and ultimately progresses towards our destiny.

Any *Christian* statement of what it means to be created in the image of God must consider the life of Jesus as the fullest expression of what that means²⁹ and therefore of who God intends us to be. The divine intention is that

²⁴Van Huyssteen, 137.

²⁵Pope Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican: Holy See, 1965). http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

²⁶Van Huyssteen, 141.

²⁷Lonergan 1971, 117.

²⁸Van Huyssteen, 141.

²⁹"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col 1:15)

human life is to be lived with and for others as exemplified in the life of Christ.³⁰ Relationality as a Christian call to follow Christ requires living in solidarity with all people (and especially with the poor, with sinners, the oppressed and disadvantaged). Not only are we responsible for those who are weak, but one's selfish needs are to be given up for the needs of the Other.

The biblical message is that we will not find happiness by becoming closed in within ourselves. Our humanness lies in our need, openness, and willingness to give of ourselves to others. Self-fulfillment, therefore, requires relationships and moral demands beyond the self.

Understanding the "image of God" as an orientation or disposition to that which is outside ourselves leads to the understanding that genuine humanness is something that we develop in relation to others. Being created in the image of God, we are called to live a life that is deeply relational. This relationship takes on a dimension of mutual love and reciprocal service in light of the Gospel. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a relational God who calls us to live in relationship with God through others. For as we do to others, so we do to God (Mt 25:40). The relationship with God, therefore, is realised in the love of neighbour. How we relate to one another is a personal, moral, ethical and, in the final analysis, religious issue.

Conclusion

This paper has brought several thinkers, Ber-

nard Lonergan, Wentzel van Huyssteen Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Emmanuel Levinas together in an attempt to better understand the human person which takes seriously embodiment and self-transcendence as the possibility for relating to others.

The integration of these thinkers reflects my position that as human beings, we are inherently relational and that we have a primordial responsibility to others because we are created in the image of a relational God to whom we relate through our relations to each other. Embodiment and self-transcendence have been presented as the means through which we relate to others and therefore fellowship with the ultimate Other.

As we have seen, our embodied existence makes our uniquely human characteristics possible, and therefore constitutes human relationships. It is through the physical body that we are able to communicate with others and therefore establish and maintain relationships. We have also seen that intersubjective meaning, which is carried and communicated by the human person, presupposes the interpersonal situation but also helps to shape it. Further, human relationships present us with an ethical responsibility which demands that we be responsive to the Other. The ability to respond to others increases as we become more aware of the fact that we are all connected and that we influence each other and the world, which in turn affects us.

In addition to embodiment, the role of self-transcendence in relationality was considered. By being open to relationships and in dedicating oneself to the service of others instead of remaining isolated or self-centered, one

³⁰ "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Eph 5:21)

discovers not only one's true identity but also the meaning of life. Our ability to relate to others is enhanced by becoming aware of our defence mechanisms, biases, and preconceptions which interfere with our perception and understanding of others. The role of positive affects in carrying one beyond oneself was also considered.

Self-transcendence not only opens us to the other and therefore to a greater sense of self, but ultimately to a deeper relationship with God. A consideration of the description "made in the image of God" presented an understanding of human nature in terms of a destiny towards which we move in openness to others, the world, and God. We share in God's image principally through our intersub-

jectivity, as relational, responsive beings who mature and grow from and in relationship with others.

Understood theologically, the Christian call to relationality invites us to go beyond ourselves out of love for the other and therefore for God. In so doing, we become our true selves as made in the image of God and become the means by which progress is affected in the world.

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Immanent meets Transcendent

Melanie Peralis, 2006

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