

**Kidlington Theological Forum**  
Session 3: Humanity



*If there is one great intellectual challenge of our day, it is the pervasive sense that we are in danger of losing our sense of the human.*  
(Rowan Williams, *Being Human*, p. 25)

## **1. Theological Anthropology: *Imago Dei***

A central text for understanding human experience in relation to God is Genesis 1: 28:

Then God said, let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ...

This speaks of humanity being made in God's *image* and *likeness*, such that human beings reflect something of God's nature. Patristic interpretations of the 'image of God' focus on human reason, which mirrors the wisdom of God. Contemporary interpretations of the *Imago Dei* have focused on its relational implications: humanity has the capacity to relate to and partake in the life of God. We were created in order that we might become 'participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1: 4).

## **2. Human nature, sin and grace: The Pelagian Controversy**

The Pelagian controversy raised deep questions about human nature, sin and grace that have resurfaced at various points in history. The controversy centered upon a debate between St Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Pelagius (360-418), a British Monk who was based in Rome. They offered two radically different understandings of the relationship between God and humanity. Augustine's views prevailed, but Pelagianism has continued to be influential.

### **2.1 Human free will**

For Pelagius, human beings possess total freedom of the will, and the capacity to act morally and reach perfection without divine assistance. Augustine, on the other hand, took seriously the idea that human free will is weakened by sin, and requires divine grace to be healed and restored.

### **2.2 Human sin**

For Augustine, sin is a universal human condition that we are 'born into' and need to be liberated from. For Pelagius, there is no human predisposition to sin: sin is a willful turning away from God's law, which we have the power to control.

### **2.3 Divine grace**

Augustine views human nature as marred by sin and in need of transformation. Grace is God's generous invitation to humanity by which healing and transformation occurs. For Pelagius, grace is about enlightenment: pointing out what our moral duties are (e.g. the ten commandments) but not assisting us in our ability to fulfill them.

### **3. Contemporary understandings of human nature**

We can return to these three ideas that shaped the Pelagian controversy – human free will, human sin, divine grace – and introduce some insights from contemporary theology, discussed in Rowan Williams' *Being Human*.

#### **3.1 Free will, autonomy and dependence**

Central to Christian anthropology is the idea that human beings are *dependent* beings: we are creatures, made by God. Dependence is built into the human experience, and yet we value autonomy and self-determination. Religious faith roots humanity in a fundamental form of dependence—on divine liberty. And yet paradoxically this also becomes a source of freedom: empowering us to 'do the work of God', 'recognizing that we are here because there is an act that draws us into being and affirms our being' (p. 72).

#### **3.2 Sin and 'the passions'**

The Christian tradition offers a 'diagnosis' of the problem of sin and also a way of understanding it. Williams frames this as a distinction between 'uneducated' and 'educated' passion. Uneducated passion is a matter of unreflective, impulse driven existence; educated passion is about awareness, reflectiveness and redirecting our desires. Our ability to redirect our desires comes from our awareness that we are loved and accepted.

#### **3.3 Grace and non-reductionism**

One of Augustine's lasting theological assumptions is the view that, before we relate to anything or anyone else, we are already in relation to a non-worldly, everlasting attention and love (God). And we are capable of becoming conscious of this relational nature. This has implications for our understanding of the human person and our relationship with others. For one, it implies that human nature cannot be reduced to a set of physical phenomena: our nature is 'graced' with something sacred. For another, it grounds our dignity as human beings and places a moral demand on us to attend to one another with reverence and respect.

### **4. Contemplation and the image of God**

One way to understand the practical significance of being made in the image of God is to study the role of prayer in a religious believer's life. Prayer is an integral part of our created nature: 'a conscious union of a being with the Source of being' (Dupré, *The Deeper Life*, p.34). The distinctively Christian aspect of this anthropology is centered on the person of Christ, the one who has restored the image of God in the human being, and grounds our prayer.

#### **References:**

- Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Chadwick, OUP, 1998)
- Weil, Simone, *Gravity and Grace* (1947)
- Williams, Rowan, *Being Human: Bodies, minds, persons* (SPCK, 2018)