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**Ecumenical Perspectives On Theological Anthropology:
An Introduction To The Study And Draft Report**

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Context

During the past twenty-five years, Faith and Order has achieved huge successes in furthering the important work of ecumenism. The ecumenical convergence on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, achieved at Lima, Peru, in 1982 and its wide-spread reception in the churches has forever changed the way churches relate to each other. In ecumenical dialogues, churches no longer try to identify merely those Christian beliefs and practices on which there is total unanimity but celebrate the rich diversity which each dialogue partner brings to the discussion. We no longer ask, "How much uniformity must we have before we can relate meaningfully to each other?" Instead, we now ask "How much diversity can we embrace before we reach the limits of what is tolerable and acceptable to both parties?"

Ecumenism at the Limits of Diversity

Participating in ecumenism at the limits of diversity is an exciting and rewarding enterprise. It enables us to engage, in a meaningful way, those issues which, at least for the time being, stop us embracing fully the contribution which those Christians with whom we disagree on peripheral matters make to the totality of Christian faith and practice. It also enables us to examine some theological presuppositions. While this is not always immediately apparent, these theological presuppositions often present huge stumbling blocks to enabling the important work of ecumenism to proceed to the next level of meaningful dialogue.

In the past decade, we, in Faith and Order, have learned, by practicing ecumenism at the limits of diversity, that a topic-by-topic approach to ecumenism is inadequate. It is not enough to know, for example, what the various churches believe about baptism or the Eucharist and how they practice those sacraments, even though knowing this was an important first step in reaching a convergence on the way to consensus. What we also need to know are the details of the theology, or with respect to baptism and the Eucharist, the specifics of the *Christology* and *Ecclesiology* which underlies and determines the particular understandings and practices of these sacraments. Moreover, in terms of furthering the unity of the churches on these matters, we have learned that we must engage not in "Comparative Theology" (or Christology or Ecclesiology) but in "*Ecumenical Theology*," i.e., learning to recognize the Apostolic Faith both in and beyond the particularities of denominationally formulated theologies.

Theological Anthropology

When I was a theological student in the 1960s, I studied, in addition to Christology, Ecclesiology, Pneumatology, Eschatology, and so on, a branch of theology then called "the Doctrine of Man." Seminaries have long since learned to drop this exclusive, male-oriented title from their curricula. We now call it "Theological Anthropology," i.e., the study of the human person, both male and female, from a theological perspective. Inherent in all religions is not only a particular understanding of God but also a particular understanding of humankind: i.e., the nature and meaning of being human. "*Christian Theological Anthropology*" considers and formulates what it means to be human from a Christian

theological perspective. But because of the rich diversity of Christian understandings on other dimensions of theology, it is inaccurate to assume that there is a (more or less) single Christian Theological Anthropology—yet, until recently, this assumption has not been challenged seriously in ecumenical circles.

While recognizing the need to engage in “Ecumenical Theology” in other subsets of theology, not until the 1990s did Faith and Order fully realize what a serious stumbling block to furthering the work of ecumenism existed through the lack of a major study of “Ecumenical Christian Theological Anthropology.” This, of course, does *not* mean that *no* such work had been engaged in earlier by Faith and Order. To the contrary, a great number of previous Faith and Order studies had incorporated to some (and in some cases a large) extent, aspects of Christian Theological Anthropology. What had not been done, was a study specifically devoted to Christian Theological Anthropology from an ecumenical perspective.

The Faith and Order Theological Anthropology Study

The current Faith and Order Theological Anthropology study was implemented by the Faith and Order Standing Commission in Toronto in 1999 in response to recommendations arising from the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 1993), the Plenary Commission (Moshi, Tanzania, 1996), and the WCC Eighth Assembly (Harare, Zimbabwe, 1998).

From the outset, it was clear that this study would not seek to produce a *comprehensive* “Christian Theological Anthropology” like a “Systematic Theology” textbook to be studied at seminary or university. We were not asked to produce such a text, no matter how valuable such a text might be. Rather, those of us engaged in the study were asked to choose and examine a limited sample of theological-anthropological issues which highlighted the challenges the churches face in reflecting together on the complex and, frequently, sensitive ecumenical issues related to Christian understanding of the nature and purpose of being human.

At the two planning meetings (Brighton, Massachusetts, USA: 2000; Belfast, Northern Ireland: 2001), we determined that we would approach our task by focusing on six contemporary challenges to any formulation of Christian Theological Anthropology. We also decided to examine these topics and challenges ecumenically, concentrating first on how these impacted the churches’ understanding of human beings as *created* in the “image of God” (the *imago Dei*) and then as *living* in the image of God. These two “theological lenses” formed, respectively, the themes for the two major consultations of this study (Jerusalem, Israel: 2002; Mesilla Park, New Mexico, near El Paso, Texas, USA: 2003). Each of the places where working sessions of the study were undertaken, including the drafting session in Montevideo, Uruguay (2004), were chosen carefully so that members of the study could experience, at first hand, some of the situations where the challenges to human nature and dignity have their most visible expression.

The modest aims of the study have been:

1. To identify what the churches can say together about the nature of human nature; i.e., what it truly means to be human, made as all Christians affirm, “in the image of God”;
2. To encourage churches, on the basis of a convergent, ecumenical understanding of the nature of human nature, to work together on the spiritual, ethical, and material challenges facing humanity today; and
3. To identify remaining differences in the churches’ understanding of human nature and, where these impair the churches’ common witness and service, to suggest ways of overcoming them.

“Ecumenical Perspectives on Theological Anthropology”

The document, “Ecumenical Perspectives on Theological Anthropology” which you have received, is a draft report of our work. It was written in Montevideo in March of this year and, while it draws on the reports of the Jerusalem and Mesilla Park consultations, it is a free-standing document, as are the reports of those consultations.

The Montevideo draft is presented here to the Faith and Order Plenary Commission, and we not only invite but welcome reactions and suggestions which will help us to complete our task and to produce a final document. That document, we hope, will be published in book form, along with the papers and reports from the consultations and planning meetings.

As I have explained, the current draft, and, obviously, the final document, does not (and cannot) contain everything that anyone might want to say about ecumenical perspectives on Christian Theological Anthropology. It does, however:

- Introduce and explain the scope, aim, and methodology of our study;
- Define *Christian* Theological Anthropology and its distinctiveness;
- Summarize the study’s main findings;
- Present a helpful list of ten “Affirmations on Christian Theological Anthropology,” which we believe are held in common by the churches; and, in light of these affirmations,
- Issue a “Call to the Churches.”

Contemporary Threats/Challenges/Opportunities

The draft report’s first major section (Part I) describes a number of contemporary challenges which not only threaten the dignity and worth of human beings but which also present new opportunities for greater understanding and transformation of what it means to be human beings both “created in” and “living in” the “image of God.” These challenges are divided into three subgroups. These provide graphic examples of (1) human brokenness as exemplified by violence, poverty, and HIV/AIDS; (2) radical new technologies which impact Christian Theological Anthropology through previously unimagined developments in biomedical, genetic, and artificial-intelligence research; and (3) so-called human “disability” and the way in which the “norm of perfection” challenges not only our common understanding of the limits of diversity but our very understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God. Given the fact that our study was undertaken in contexts where the threats/challenges/and opportunities were at their most visible, we have included a number of illustrative “case statements.” These are printed within separate boxes alongside the main text.

Human Persons in Community

Whereas Part I of the draft report is very descriptive, focusing on the challenges to Theological Anthropology, the second main section of the report (Part II) is more discursive, concentrating on the Christological, Soteriological, Ecclesiological, and even Eschatological dimensions of our study of Christian Theological Anthropology. Again, this section is not meant to be exhaustive or totally comprehensive. Rather it takes up from a specifically theological dimension many of the same issues raised by the contemporary challenges to Theological Anthropology described and explained in Part I. Part II utilizes scripture and Tradition (as well as tradition[s]) as its primary sources to clarify, from a Christian perspective, issues such as the true nature of humanity, the dignity and value of each human being, the relationship of humanity to God and the rest of the created order, the effect of sin and alienation on human nature, the significance of the person and reconciling work of Christ, the role of the church as the embodiment of a relational community, and the impact of eschatological hope on Christian Theological Anthropology.

This section, titled “Human Persons in Community,” has four main subdivisions: (1) Created in the Image of God; (2) The Place of Humanity within Creation as a Whole; (3) Sin and the Image of God; and (4) The New Creation in Christ. It is illustrated throughout by relevant and, frequently, poignant quotations.

ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVES

The third main section of the draft report is called “Ecumenical Perspectives.” This section also consists of four subsections titled: (1) A Common Understanding and Divergent Options; (2) Facing the Challenges Together; (3) Towards a Greater Unity in Witness and Service; and (4) Common Affirmations. The section summarizes our findings that, on the whole, there is a great deal of common understanding among the churches about Christian Theological Anthropology and that, even where differences in understanding terminology persist, such differences need not and should not prevent the churches from facing together any remaining challenges—even such potentially difficult challenges such as those related to stem cell research, cloning, gender and sexuality, ethnicity and national identity, racism, or ecology.

Call to the Churches

In light of the ten common affirmations which conclude Part III, and which I will read in a moment, and in light of the other work undertaken by the Theological Anthropology Study, Part IV of the draft report calls on the churches to do eight things. These eight include being called:

- to see the image of God in ourselves and in every person;
- to cultivate the human capacity to act justly, to be merciful, to make peace, and to create beauty;
- to be inclusive communities where diversity is affirmed and where excluded persons are welcomed and find their dignity recognised; and
- to work for the visible unity of the Church with penitence and vigour, knowing that the divisions between Christians often reflect and exacerbate the brokenness of the human community.

Common Affirmations

As a result of our study process, we offer to the Faith and Order Commission and to the churches ten affirmations on Christian Theological Anthropology which we believe all the churches can affirm as reflecting the understanding and will of the ecumenical community and which can (and, in our view, do) form the basis for the churches’ further common reflection and action in relation to the challenges facing us today:

- In Christian understanding, what it means to be human cannot be defined without reference to both the “image of God” in all of humanity and the paradigmatic expression of true humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.
- Recognising the image of God in each human person and in the whole of humanity emphasizes the essentially relational character of human nature and affirms both human dignity, potentiality, and creativity and human creatureliness, finitude, and vulnerability.
- Acknowledging the paradigmatic expression of humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians confess to be fully human as well as fully divine, is the paradigmatic expression of humanity, emphasizes that true humanity is most clearly seen in the embodiment of self-emptying (kenotic) love. Human beings are created to love and to be loved selflessly.

- The image of God is an irrevocable characteristic of true human nature, but is inevitably affected by individual and corporate sin.
- Sin is a reality which cannot be ignored nor minimized as it results in the alienation of humanity from relationship with God and in the brokenness of the world, its communities, and the individuals which make up those communities.
- Sin, however, does not have ultimate dominion over humanity and cannot, ultimately pervert, distort, or destroy what it means to be human.
- Jesus of Nazareth, the only human being truly to have lived without sin, through his life, death, and resurrection restores essential humanity, empowers life, and brings hope for the end of inhumanity, injustice, and suffering.

The Church, as the Body of Christ, is called to be the sign and foretaste of our unity with God and with each other.

- Human beings are created to be in relationship not only with God and each other but with the whole of creation. This involves co-operative responsibility for, and partnership with, the created order in the equitable use of physical resources, the natural environment, and other living creatures.
- Humanity will find its ultimate fulfillment, together with the whole created order, when God brings all things to perfection in Christ.