

WHAT IS HUMAN?

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All religions have an anthropology, that is, an understanding of what it means to be a human being. This understanding is expressed in different ways depending on the culture in which a particular religion was first articulated. The easiest way to see how a particular religion expresses its anthropology would be to ask: "What is a human being, or man?" Or, "Who am I?"

Zen Master Dae Kwang has just given us the traditional Buddhist anthropology. The Judeo-Christian tradition has its own way of expressing its understanding of what it means to be a human being. It is not expressed in the way that a modern anthropology defines itself. It does not use a special terminology. Just the opposite. It differs also in that it uses personalistic words, such as you, me, I, thou. It uses words that anyone, even a child, can understand, expressed in story. In modern scholarship the term for stories such as these is myth. In this context "myth" does not mean that we have a work of fiction; rather, it is an insight into a reality that can not be proven scientifically, nor historically, but rather it embodies a truth that has the experience of the ages supporting it. Even we moderns tend to think and express ourselves in this manner.

Take, for example, the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. The possibility that young George actually chopped down that cherry sapling is pretty remote. For one thing, the first evidence that we have for such an incident is recorded about forty or fifty years after the death of our first President. Yet a goodly number of books have been written trying to prove or disprove the historicity of that act. The purpose of this particular story or myth is not to record a particular action of young George, but to teach us that honesty is the best policy.

So the Judeo-Christian tradition speaks to us in stories, or myths, because we humans tend to think that way; we pass on truths to following generations in such a way that they are easy to remember. And stories are very easy to remember. The first anthropology that the Judeo-Christian tradition teaches us is found in the very first book of the Scriptures, the Book of Genesis. It is a story that we are all familiar with, even if one is not Jewish or Christian. It is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Most of us, when we read or hear the story of Adam and Eve, we assume that it is simply the story of the first sin and its punishment. Yet the early Christian monastics found in it truths that were far more reaching than just sin and punishment.

We must realize that the first Christian monastics were men and women of their time and culture. Their understanding of this episode in the Garden was a part of their culture's understanding of what it means to be human. The monastics might have reflected on this history more deeply than many of their contemporaries because of their lifestyle and their goal, but the fundamental understanding would have been part of the general Christian culture.

Adam and Eve were created from the dust of the earth. They were placed in the Garden of Eden as the culmination of that creation. Creation was seen as complete and peaceful. In Genesis, chapter 3, we have the story of the Fall. The early Christians accepted the fact of the existence of evil in the world. They had to, it was all around them. What struck them in this chapter was not so much the story of the Fall (verse 1 to 7), but what occurs in the next verse (verse 8). Remember that Adam and Eve ate the fruit, then realized that they were naked. So they made loin cloths of fig leaves, but hid among the bushes when they heard God walking in the Garden in the cool of the evening. The early Christians loved to listen to and reflect on the words of Scripture. So they asked themselves: "What was God doing walking in the Garden in the cool part of the day?" The answer that their tradition gave them can be found in a "gloss" that became part of some traditions of the Scriptures. (A gloss in Scripture studies is a remark that was written between the lines or on the margin of the verses of the Scripture. Over a period of time they

sometimes were introduced into the text. Remember that these were handwritten texts and, not infrequently, a scribe would realize that he had left out some words, and would go back and put them in between the lines, or make a comment and put it in the same space between the lines or in the margin. Subsequent readers often could not distinguish between words that were simply comments or words that had been left out. Then, frequently, the left-out words and comments were simply included when a new copy of the text was made, thus becoming part of the text.)

This particular gloss went something like this: God was walking in the Garden in the cool of the day, "for He often conversed with Adam and Eve." The early Christians, especially the monastics, understood that Adam and Eve were made to "converse with God." To be human means that we are God-converse(ers). Remember that one of the definitions of prayer and meditation in the Christian tradition is "to talk, or converse, with God." The early Christians, especially the monastics, concluded that to be really human is to be a God-talker. We have a tendency to think that to converse means to chat. Yet, we have all experienced that form of conversation where no words are spoken. Look at two lovers who walk hand in hand and not a word is spoken. Yet, what a conversation is taking place! Or, see a mother looking at her new-born baby. The baby looks at the mother and the mother looks at the baby, nothing is said. So "conversing" with God does not necessarily mean or need words. "To converse" is to



get to know someone, so this conversation leads to knowing God. This knowing is not a knowing of words or concepts. Actually, the type of knowing that the early Christians meant was a knowing beyond concepts or words.

When the early Christians spoke of returning to the "paradise" state, or returning to the Garden; or, when monastics spoke of the monastery as a garden, or the way of prayer as paradisaic; they were pointing to this innate capacity of the human to be with God. Also when one runs across terms like "innocence" or "angelic" in such a context, the early Christians are not indicating that someone is naive or lacking in sophistication. The paradisaic life is not thought of as lying in some dream like a drug high, or running around naked in some nudist colony. It means that one is being as perfectly human as can be arrived at in this life. It is a return, as near as is possible, to being like Adam and Eve when they walked with God in the cool of the evening.

This return is not automatic in this life. It takes effort and practice. We must find our way. Nor is intellectual understanding and conceptualizing enough. The early Christian monastics felt the way that the Buddhist monastics do about ideas and concepts when it comes to the Absolute. Ideas just aren't enough. It was not enough, they thought, to have a notional concept; one had to make it a real, effective part of one's being. There are some stories of the early Christian monastics that have come down to us, something like Zen kong-ans. The collection of these stories is called the "Apophthegmata Patrum" (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers). In this collection, there is the episode of a famous Abba (Father) Evagrius of Pontus. Evagrius was the first real intellectual among the early hermits of the Egyptian desert. He had studied at the most famous universities of the age at Athens and Antioch, the equivalent of our Harvard and Yale. When Evagrius was still fairly new in the desert, there was a discussion, probably on some point of prayer or Scripture. Evagrius held forth, but one of the other monks (these men were, in the majority, uneducated) interrupted him, saying: "Abba, we know that if you were still living in your own country, you would probably be a bishop or great teacher, but you sit here as a junior." Evagrius was filled with compunction.

It is not enough to simply have an idea that we humans are made to be united to God, the Absolute. It is necessary to make that idea or concept real and personal. So we have to practice prayer and meditation, and practice again and again. Prayer and meditation must become part of who we are. The fact that we are here today is a manifestation of our innate desire to be what we were created to be... meditators. Today you will be learning some basics that will help you achieve that goal. But these basics can not just be left here. Learn them, and take them with you. It takes effort, work. One does not have to appear to be a winner, but one must try. Remember that the more you grow in prayer and meditation, the more you will realize your true self. ☸