

Ivana Noble, Zdenko Širka (eds.), *Kdo je člověk – Teologická antropologie ekumenicky* [Who Is the Human Being in Relation to God – Theological Anthropology Ecumenically], Praha: Karolinum, 2021, 344 pages, ISBN: 978-80-246-4779-1.

DANIELA BRŮHOVÁ

The central theme of the book is the human being in relation to God, and at the same time to other people; it deals with the topics of gender and gender identity, ethics, human freedom and responsibility, but also spirituality, culture and society, religious tradition, the church and the times in which we live, and the relationship to the landscape. The book and its authors ‘do not talk about a man just to talk about God’ (p. 15); they focus on ‘man’s place in the world, but they do not replace theological anthropology with either cosmology or political theology’ (p. 15).

The themes are treated from a Christian perspective, which is strengthened and broadened by an ecumenical perspective since the eighteen contributors to the book come from different Christian confessions. Their approach to the subject is interdisciplinary, and they include biblical scholars, religious scholars, systematic and practical theologians, religious philosophers, and specialists who deal with spirituality, political theology, ethics, and ritual. The authors ‘deliberately go beyond theological concepts that assume a kind of protective “epistemological safety” for theological science’ (p. 12), thereby encouraging the reader to think more deeply about the issues at hand.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which is subtitled: ‘We Are Born into the Life That Was Here before Us’. In five chapters, it seeks answers to questions about human communication, both horizontal and vertical, and how to understand human communication properly. The second part is subtitled: ‘We Are Who We Are Becoming’. In nine chapters, it seeks answers to why man is here, what he was created to do, and when a person is a person. Theological anthropology, as the book’s authors conceive it, ‘distinguishes between the image of God that we are and the image of God that we grow into or that we disobey’ (p. 13).

Central to the methodology employed is hermeneutics, which is treated here in a broad sense as a theology of understanding that ‘includes a participation in a tradition of understanding that asks for the truth about the human being as an “inclusion” of themes and insights that must appear in any good interpretation’ (p. 30). The use of the hermeneutic method, as opposed to the epistemological method, asks questions of the reader and draws the reader into

a discussion of the themes of the book. Theologians of various denominations were invited to collaborate by Ivana Noble, the theologian and head of the Ecumenical Institute of the Protestant Theological Faculty (PTF) of Charles University in Prague, who also served as co-editor of the book with Zdenko Širka.

The selection of topics follows a classical structure but brings new modern perspectives and insights. The book offers a wide range of perspectives on anthropological issues from the perspective of theology, and the authors, although coming from different Christian confessions, manage to find a common language. They tell the story of the human person from the perspective of the founding relationship that, in the theological tradition, determines everything else. This is not done in a dogmatic or fundamentalist way, but it points to the emphasis that we are not here alone, that we have not given our lives to each other, that we are in the same boat with each other, that no one is an isolated island. It is in these emphases that theology has something to give to the other scientific disciplines, for it is indispensable in speaking of God, of the relationship to man, to the creation and to nature. As Aristotle Papanikolaou characterises it in his preface, speaking of humanity as a microcosm that is reflected in our relationships with other human beings and that transforms us (p. 10). It is a transformation in which the division between a person's past and future is abolished; both are infused into the eternal presence of God's life (p. 10), he continues.

Part I: 'We Are Born into the Life That Was Here before Us' brings a new perspective on how to think and talk about human beings. It is interested in 'how the human creature understands the life into which he is thrust, which was there before him and out of which he is woven' (p. 40), and observes that 'understanding happens through relationship, in the case of relationship to God, through an asymmetrical relationship' (p. 40). Methodologically, this part of the book works with existential hermeneutics. The first part consists of five chapters that deal with the human being grounded in what is home, living in relationships, stories, speech, symbols, and rituals.

In the first chapter, 'Man as a Relational Creature', Tim Noble critically reflects on the modern notion of autonomy, 'that man is always necessarily shaped by relationships' (p. 51). He is born into relationships in which he is dependent on others and needs the other to know himself (p. 51). Thus he is born to freedom and responsibility in relationships because there is no freedom without relationships, nor relationships without freedom (p. 55). 'Yet relationships themselves are not yet 'God' or the goal – they are the path we take to God' (p. 56).

In Chapter Two: 'Man and Speech', Zdenko Širka deals with how speech becomes home to man. 'From a theological - anthropological point of view, it is interesting for us that Heidegger does not assign speech to man, but directly to being' (p. 60). He reflects that, through speech, man also expresses existential questions and formulates questions about God.

In the next chapter: 'People Living in Stories', the authors Pavel Hošek and Pavol Bargár move from speech to stories. They address the fact that human identity is a narrative identity and humans are creatures living in stories, noting that embracing a particular cultural or religious tradition is sometimes referred to as 'entering a story' (p. 76). From the perspective of theological anthropology, they address the question of 'how the human story relates to the story of God' (p. 78) and show what truly following Jesus Christ can mean for a person. For them, 'the way of following is meant to be a way of being for others' (p. 86), and Christian identity becomes an embodied story (p. 86).

In Chapter Four: 'Man and Ritual', Tabita Landová and Michaela Vlčková speak of ritual as the mother tongue of religion, for 'in ritual action people express their relationship to God and at the same time expect the revival, affirmation, and renewal of their faith' (p. 103). They identify baptism as a key Christian rite of passage (p. 97), using it and other sacraments to show that 'in ritual, people experience and manifest God's story together' (p. 106), into which they are drawn, shaped, and transformed.

The final chapter of Part One called 'Being and Understanding in the Symbolic Key' focuses on the symbol that story and ritual establish and shows a person 'who is able to exist symbolically, to understand reality, and to create' (p. 107), for when one 'dreams, creates, and encounters the transcendent, the symbol comes into play' (p. 108). Symbolic being and understanding includes a corporeal and material component, 'the body, corporeality, and rootedness in the immanent world are prerequisites for the emergence of the symbol' (p. 108). At the same time, the author Kateřina Kočandrlé-Bauer points out the difference between a symbol and an idol and the thin line between these concepts.

In Part II: 'We Are Who We Are Becoming', the various authors return to the content of what different theological traditions have said about the man and what is still meaningful today, addressing what needs to be grasped in a new way and how to deal with questions that are new to us and to which neither the Bible nor the Christian tradition provides clear and unambiguous answers. They try to relate the old and the new to each other in a new way. This part of the book works methodologically with a hermeneutical ontology.

In chapter six, entitled 'The Image and Likeness of God', Ivana Noble shows through the creation stories that humans 'mirror God in two ways: as God's image, i.e., gift, givenness' (p. 124), and also as God's likeness, which is a calling and invitation to grow into God's likeness. She says that 'pointing people toward God carries within it a life that fulfills and transforms all human relationships' (p. 133). She also discusses the difference between 'when people are icons of God and when they are idols' (p. 134). She reflects on 'where evil is taken up again and again in human life and why it carries death, and where good is taken up and why it carries life' (p. 137), and what role sin plays in this and what God's help is, for 'through God's grace man has the possibility of transcending himself' (p. 143). The biblical reflection on man's place

in the world is continued by Mireia Ryšková in the chapter ‘Man Alienated and Redeemed’. She focuses on biblical texts that show a renewed creation through Jesus Christ, who ‘is the “prototype” of the new man, the fulfillment of man’s original purpose as created in the image of God’ (p. 147). This is also manifested through the Church. ‘All that matters in the Christian community is the realisation of its being as a new creation’ (p. 160), the author says.

Denisa Červenková writes about the discernment between good and evil and between other forces acting in man that bring him closer to the fulfillment of the values of humanity (p. 162) in the chapter ‘Man Able to Discern’. To discern, according to her, means ‘to examine how human and divine reality meet at the level of inner experience’ (p. 183). She goes on to show how the Christian tradition ‘speaks of the search for and discernment of God’s will’ (p. 165), the basis of which remains the discernment of biblical experience with God’s positive action toward man (p. 169), which opens up a relational and social dimension ‘on the way to the experience of freedom and a healthy relationship to oneself and to the whole of reality’ (p. 186).

The human ability to reflect on what is right and desirable in relation to human behaviour is described in Chapter 9 ‘Ethics, Freedom and Responsibility’ by Ondřej Fischer and Libor Ovečka. They reflect on the role of authority in human life, both external and internal, as well as on moral values, which are ‘characteristics of human action, or will, understood as deliberation about desired action’ (p. 199).

The tenth chapter, by Ivana Noble and Kateřina Kočandrle-Bauer, touches on a topic that is highly important in today’s society, offering a theological perspective on the issue of gender. They deal with questions of gender identities and roles, but also ‘on what theological grounds one distinguishes which relationships and unions are considered acceptable’ (p. 209). They show that part of the theological heritage contributes to the problems that different societies have in this area today. The chapter does not shy away from all the complicated issues related to and connected with the theme of gender. It is not only about the relationship between man and woman, but also about the conceptions when sexuality involves only two sexes, when the identity of gender is not as clear and stable as assumed. It seeks to unpack what the theological tradition has to say about this and also when it has said more than it should have in the past, or when, on the contrary, it has not said something substantial. Despite touching on controversial issues, the chapter is measured in tone. The authors attempt to convey to the reader the arguments of the various backgrounds that enter into this debate.

In Chapter Eleven ‘The Human Being as a Creature Inhabiting the Landscape’, František Štěch focuses on three ways of inhabiting space by man: dwelling in the landscape of this world, cohabitation in community, and cohabitation realised in the community of believers, i.e. from the perspective of religious practice. He sees the landscape as a witness to ‘human and divine action in the world’ (p. 243), bearing witness to this coexistence.

The political dimensions of man from the perspective of theology are discussed by Petr Jandejsek in the chapter 'Man and the Polis', offering theological accounts of how the polis is one of the places in which 'God's creative action is actualised in free human action' (p. 257), both positive and negative, which he analyses as 'sins against the polis' (p. 257). He discusses their impact on society, but also the dynamics of faith where 'the effort to create an earthly community draws its hope from the coming gift of the heavenly community' (p. 265).

Chapter Thirteen 'Man in Time' finds Ondřej Kolář and Martin Vaňáč writing about a man living in linear time and the tension between the present transient time and God's eternity, which allows man to recognise his limitations, but at the same time, gives direction to human endeavour and invites him to overcome his own limits (p. 268).

In the final chapter 'Church and Eternity', Viorel Coman discusses the basic characteristics of ecclesial anthropology in light of four fundamental ecclesiological concepts: communion, mystery, theosis, and meditation. He explains who a man is as a 'priest of creation' (p. 302), that 'man as microcosm shares in all levels of the reality of the universe' (p. 303), and that the priestly vocation and mediating role is fully manifested in the Eucharistic liturgy' (p. 303). At the end of the book, we find a short summary, a rich bibliography, and medallions of the authors.

The comprehensive book *Who is a Man* looks at anthropological themes through contemporary theological knowledge. A beneficial aspect of the book is the ecumenical perspective, where the individual authors, although coming from different Christian confessions with their own linguistic and theological perceptions, manage to find a common language without their text losing its distinctiveness. The whole book thus offers a multiplicity of authors who are well matched and together are able to look at the human being from different perspectives and contexts and to see together, ecumenically, 'who the human being is'.

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