

# The Christian Vision of the Person and Society

*Acton University, 2017*

*Michael Matheson Miller*

*Research Fellow, Acton Institute*

[www.michaelmathesonmiller.com](http://www.michaelmathesonmiller.com)

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

## **Introduction: The Person at the Center of Society and the Economy**

How we understand the nature and destiny of the human person shapes everything else: Politics, Economics, Society, Morality, Family, Marriage, Sexuality, Life and Death

“The primary fault of socialism is anthropological in nature”—*John Paul II*

- Genesis: Adam and Eve and the nature of the person
- If we are going to live like Christians—we must think like Christians.
- Secularism is not neutral
- Prudence vs Doctrine

## **Christian Vision of the Human Person**

- Coherent
- Reasonable
- Recognizes the Complexity of the Person (not reductionist)
- Beautiful
- Exciting

## **Approach is to Think:**

- Biblically
- Philosophically
- With the Tradition
- Phenomenologically: Lived experience, biologically, sociologically

***One of the Key Themes of this lecture: Go back to your experience***

*Many things we are told about the person are incoherent on their own terms, do not resonate with the way with live, and do not match with common sense.*

*“But common sense is unable to find itself any more in what the official interpreters of reality want us to believe. They want us to believe that we are not what we think we are. They want us to believe that what we understand truth to be does not exist and likewise what we mean by the word “love.”*

*Robert Spaemann*

## **The Human Person**

### **1. Intelligence and Reason**

This is an overarching characteristic of the person that impacts everything else

- Discursive Reasoning
- Conceptual Thought
- Self-reflection
- Intellect is Oriented to Truth, Beauty, and Goodness
- Speculative Intellect—directed to “what is”
- Practical and Moral Reasoning
  - Good is to be done and pursued and evil avoided.

#### **Primer on Reason**

- *Modern Reason limited to the Empirical is incoherent on its own terms*
- *Serious consequences for Politics*
  - *Removes justice and reduces politics to power / efficiency*
- *Serious consequences for fundamental human questions and how we understand the person*
  - *Love, justice, beauty, goodness, truth, compassion etc. all pushed outside the realm of reason*

## 2. Free

- Connected to Reason
- Moral Agent
  - Responsible
  - Capacity for self-donation sacrifice
  - Human Person vs. Animal
- Genesis: Man is designed to protect, teach, serve (sacrifice) for women and children
  - Requires Freedom
- Dominant views of Freedom
  - Determinism rejects freedom
  - Freedom is exercise of will with no end or limit
    - An irrational will is not a free will
- Freedom is for Love

## 3. Good but Fallen

- We are created in the image of God and are good, but because of original sin we are fallen
  - Capable of heroic goodness and sacrifice, but also capable of profound evil
  - Concupiscence—St. Paul: Do what I hate....
- There is a need for coercion.
- There must be limits on the rulers:
  - Augustine: “Libido dominandi”
  - “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” –Lord Acton
- In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. –James Madison, Federalist Paper #51

***Contrast with Human Perfectibility.*** Key difference between Christian and most modern visions of the person and society is over the issue of sin and human perfectibility

## 4. Social Beings

- Persons achieve human flourishing in relationships with others
- Not simply an “individual”
  - Dominant secular idea of individual in Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau are myth
  - Intentional alternative to Genesis Narrative
- **The Family** is the fundamental unit of society. The family is a natural community and pre-political unit. It is not merely a construct of society but reflects the social nature of the human person and is a reflection of the Holy Trinity.
  - State redefinition of marriage is totalitarian act

## 5. Embodied Persons

- We are not souls floating around in a body--or a soul driving our body like a person drives a car.
- We are embodied persons.
- Our soul is not a bit in our body--it is the animating principle.

### *2 Dominant Fallacies*

- **Materialist:** We are just our bodies. matter is all that matters
- **Spiritualist:** Our Bodies are distinct from our personhood

## 6. Spiritual Emotions

- We have the capacity for spiritual emotions
- Passions are not opposed to reason per se—they must be ordered and integrated by reason
  - Anger
  - Lust
    - Disordered response person
    - Unreasonable
    - Purity: Reasonable and proper response to sexual values
- Karol Wojtyla/JP II: Spiritual Emotions

- C.S. Lewis: “Reasonable Emotions”
- Dietrich von Hildebrand “Intelligible Spiritual Affectivity”
- Through the intellect and in conjunction with the will we say yes or no
- These are things like love, mercy, compassion.
  - Love is not blind, it sees clearly and is creative

## 7. Everlasting: “Eternal Destiny”

- Image and Likeness of God
- *Theosis—Deiformity*
- All our political, economic, charitable, and social decisions need to be made in the light of our eternal destiny.

### You’ve Never Met a Mere Mortal

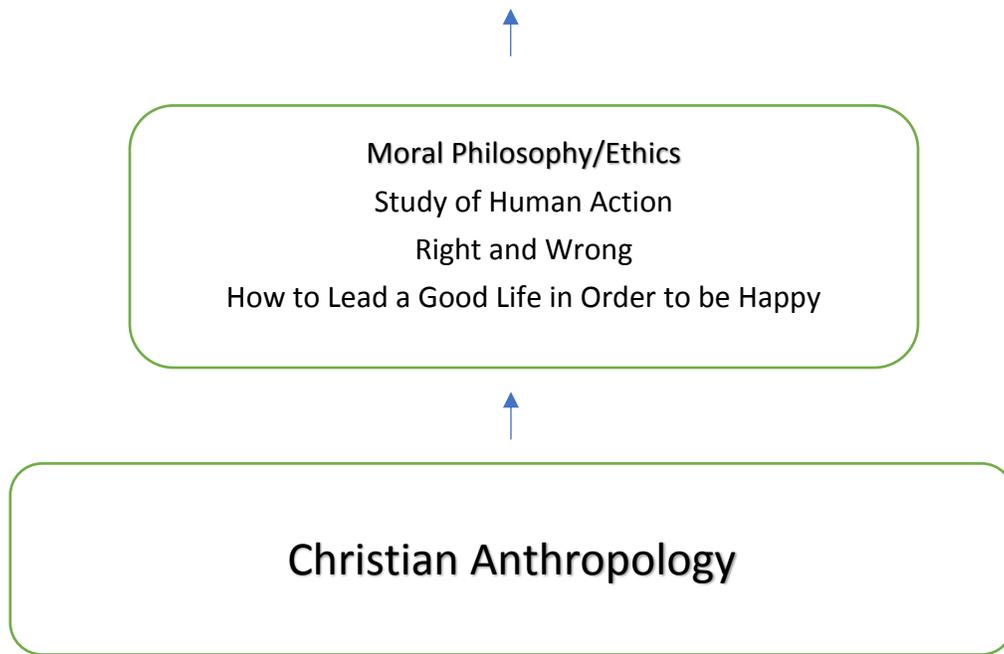
“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.” C.S. Lewis *The Weight of Glory*

### Benedict XVI

“...only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary. There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him.

### Economics in the Light of Anthropology

**Economics**  
Study of Human Action in the  
Marketplace



## Suggested Reading

*Here is suggested reading on Christian anthropology. I have more books on my website [www.michaelmathesonmiller.com](http://www.michaelmathesonmiller.com) I am also putting together a small booklet called **Essential Books for Thinking Clearly and Living Well** that you can download from my site when it is ready if you are interested.*

- C.S. Lewis
  - *The Abolition of Man* (Short)
  - *Mere Christianity* (Medium Length)
  - "The Poison of Subjectivism" (Essay)
  - *The Four Loves*
  - *Space Trilogy*
  - *Till We Have Faces*
  
- Joseph Pieper

- *The Christian Idea of Man* (Very Short)
- *The Four Cardinal Virtues*
- *Faith Hope Love*
- *Abuse of Language, Abuse of Power* (Very Short)
  
- Leon Kass: *The Beginning of Wisdom*: (philosophical reading of Genesis)
- Robert Spaemann
  - *Love and the Dignity of Human Life* (Short)
- Abraham Heschel: *Who is Man?*
- John Paul II
  - *Love and Responsibility*
  - *Veritatis Splendor* (Short)
  - *Letter to Families* (Short)
- Dietrich von Hildebrand
  - *The Heart*
  - *Nature of Love*
- Benedict XVI
  - *Regensburg Address* (Very Short)
  - *Deus Caritas Est* (Short)
  - *Spe Salvi* (Short)
  - *Values in a Time of Upheaval*—Collection of Essays
  - *Truth and Tolerance*
- Robert George and Patrick Lee: *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics*
- Ralph McInerny: *Aquinas on Human Action*
- Martin Buber: *I and Thou*
- Norris Clarke: *Person and Being*
- St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica sections on Man, Virtues, Human Action etc.