



## God's Journey to Personhood

ESPECIALLY OVER the past 150 years, there have been important advances in understanding "human personhood." These advances include the growing realization that human personhood is not something that can be described in terms of animal predator or prey. For example, personhood is more than "being" with instinctual animal drives. It is not prey that submits to being possessed, filled, ingested or indwelt by another. Nor is it a predator that aggressively possesses, fills, ingests or indwells another. On one hand, human personhood is not "being" that is consciously or unconsciously conjoined to another or otherwise controls or is controlled by another. On the other hand, personhood is not autonomous (self-contained) "being," detached from all others. No, human personhood is more than the sum or product of these metaphors. As already noted, such language is inadequate because it is derived from a predator/prey perspective. It reflects mankind's animal origin, not its human destiny.<sup>1</sup>

### Man's Personhood

Having observed what human personhood is *not*, let us now examine what it *is*. Personhood preserves mankind's individuality and identity while assuring human community. It fosters human freedom as well as responsible decision and choice. Unlike the animal, which seeks either fulfillment or denial, human personhood seeks self-commitment in the spirit of faith, hope and love toward all others. Personhood grants value and meaning to human life.

Human personhood does not result from "animal" aggression and submission. Rather, it is the dynamic product of "human" relationships in history. Such relationships of one with another are always mediated — by time and space, mind and body, language and attitudes, perspectives and concepts. Irrespective of the nature of mediation, relational human presence is the foundation of personal human existence. This *relational* presence is known as "existential presence."

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Existential presence is the free, willing and committed existence of a person in relationship with God, the world, others, and one's own objective self. Because it is relational in nature, there can be no existential presence, and therefore no personhood, in isolation. There is no existential presence or personhood apart from individual, free, willing and responsible commitment to the "other." This understanding of personhood requires life. It requires other individual entities. It requires mediated relationships among these entities in time and space — that is, in history.

Because personhood is relational, there ultimately can be no personhood for man (male and female) apart from the relational presence of God in history. This leads us to a revolutionary conclusion. If the relational nature of personhood is true of mankind, it must also be true of God himself, in whose image man is created. For God, then, there can be no personhood apart from the relational presence of man in history.

## God's Personhood

"Before" the beginning (Genesis 1:1), God may well have existed autonomously — that is, apart from (external) relationship, without a universe, other life, beings or commitments. However, the evidence indicates that God determined to not exist alone. He therefore created time and space, the universe and life. Through evolution he granted life the freedom to emerge in myriad forms.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the unavoidable distinction between Creator and creature, however, there was inevitable alienation between God and his creatures.<sup>3</sup> How was God to deal with this? Attempting to resolve the alienation between Creator and creature by predatory aggression or submission would only return God to his original isolation and defeat the entire

purpose of Creation. The imposition of natural and cultural law could restrain the expression of predation. But because of its *impersonal* nature, law, however useful, could not resolve alienation or effect reconciliation between Creator and creature.<sup>4</sup>

It is increasingly clear that God therefore proposed to proceed with Creation and, at the same time, remove alienation by inaugurating mediated relationships of mutual *personhood* between Creator and creature as well as between creature and creature. This epic decision by God has led to a phenomenal process throughout history. On one hand, God has proceeded, through *kenosis*,<sup>5</sup> to condescend and commit himself to his active, living presence with the creature (Philippians 2:5-7).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, God has simultaneously proceeded to elevate the creature to relational presence with himself.<sup>7</sup> Because, as we have noted, personhood is relational, God's purpose in this historical process has been to achieve personhood for himself — and for his representative creature, mankind.

Again, personhood can only be the product of mediated relationships in time and space — in history. In the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4), therefore, God irrevocably entered this world as the incarnate Jesus. To accomplish this, God had to move from *outside* of historical time and space *into* history. For this reason the incarnation itself is

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necessarily mythical — that is, it transcends history.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, through his incarnation this Jesus became historically present. He became fully identified with a universe, world, existence and history that are both his and ours.

## The Creation of Human Personhood for God and Man

Mankind is typically regarded as being a predatory creature through a process of unassisted evolution. But the historical Jesus came to define what it means for mankind to be *human*, what it means to be a *person*. Jesus came to create personhood in himself. He came to thus grant personhood to man's race.

As the historical Jesus, Christ freely and openly demonstrated his transcendence over the forces of nature. This is illustrated by the stories of his stilling the tempest, walking on water, transforming water into wine, and multiplying the loaves and fishes (Mark 4:37-39; Matthew 14:25-32; John 2:3-10; Mark 6:38-44; 8:6-9). He also exerted his powers over life and death. Thus the stories of his healing the sick, cleansing the leper, and raising the dead (e.g., Matthew 8:2, 3; Mark 5:21-42). Christ demonstrated that he intended to supersede the territoriality, control and possession or dispossession of "animal" predator and prey. Confronting the demoniacs of Gadara, he conveyed "possession" to animals and then to oblivion (Mark 5:1-13). Confronting the claims of law, which recognizes predation but attempts to restrict it, he showed that he was beyond law. Thus, Christ forgave the sinner, ate with publicans, prostitutes and other "sinners," and exercised dominion over the sacred Temple and ecclesiastical power (Mark 2:3-12; Matthew 11:19; 12:6; John 2:13-16). At Calvary, when the Temple veil was rent from top to bottom (Mark 15:38), Christ showed that the Temple was not only void of indwelling presence, but even devoid of law. Beyond this, by his amazing life, ministry, words and actions as an itinerant Jewish peasant philosopher and healer, Christ preeminently conveyed his egalitarian (human equality) presence and commitment in relation to the world, life, all others and himself.<sup>9</sup>

The lesson of the life of the historical Jesus is *not* that he was an "animal" man who came to possess or be possessed by God. It is *not* that he came to become God, a demigod (lesser god), the Spirit, or consciousness. No, the lesson of the life of the historical Jesus is that he, as God, "came down" to adopt the creature as his own reality so that he might create relational human personhood for himself

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and for the race. By his life, death and resurrection, Jesus created and assured the reality of relational human presence and thus human personhood. Indeed, he became the first true Person. He is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of human personhood (cf. Revelation 21 :6).

## Personhood through Relational Human Presence

Animal predation could not hold Christ. By his resurrection from the dead, he is present. He is "with" us (Matthew 28:20).

We have observed that human personhood is *relational*. We therefore cannot achieve true personhood by possession or dispossession, by fight or flight, by autonomy (self-contained “independence”) or bondage. Nor can we achieve personhood by religious fervor or by any form of political, social, economic, cultural, racial or gender status and manipulation. We can only achieve human personhood through the relational presence of the risen Christ and, consequently, through our own relational presence — our free, willing and responsible commitment to him, the world, others and ourselves.

The risen Christ is himself a Person through his relational presence with the universe, the world, living creatures, man and himself. As a person, he also is mediatorially present with us.<sup>10</sup> Though unseen, he is present as the human God.<sup>11</sup> His presence is thus the ultimate reality upon which the integrity of the universe rests. Conversely, because his human personhood is necessarily relational, the presence of the universe, the world, living beings, man and himself is the ultimate reality upon which God’s own existence and integrity rest. What a marvelous assurance of our future!

We briefly noted that the nature of God’s presence with us is mediatorial.<sup>12</sup> By this we mean that the presence of the risen Christ is *not immediate*. That is, it is not our absorption of the Transcendent. It is not our being absorbed or possessed by the Transcendent. It is not the mystical merging of “God *in us*” or “us *in God*.”

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Immediacy would destroy all relationships. It would destroy true human identity and freedom. It would thus destroy human personhood. The risen Christ therefore *mediates* his presence *with us* in history. On one hand, he reaches us through the world, through others, through our unconscious self,<sup>13</sup> and through history. On the other hand, we reach him, unconsciously as well as consciously, through the world, through others (Matthew 25:34-40), and through history. This relational *human* “reaching” can only be done in faith, hope, love, commitment and responsible freedom.

Since God is present and we are committed to his presence in the person of others and of ourselves, we can be assured that the Risen One will shortly appear to fully transform our personhood and the world.<sup>14</sup> Soon the universe will finally be cleansed of all predation, of possession and dispossession, of autonomy (self-contained “independence”) and bondage. Then there will be no more self-destruction or self-fulfillment, aggression or submission, death or annihilation. There will only be self-commitment in the spirit of love toward all others.

## Summary

God’s process of Creation involved an initial distance or alienation between the Creator and the creature. God therefore determined to reconcile this alienation, on behalf of both parties, by himself becoming the creature and exalting that representative Creature to human personhood. To accomplish this, God mythically (from the transcendent, outside of history) entered history as the incarnate Christ. In his life as the historical Jesus, Christ demonstrated his power over nature, over life and death. He demonstrated his transcendence over both predatory aggression and

submission. In his egalitarian relationships (of human equality) with mankind — regardless of station, race or gender — he displayed the nature of willing, loving commitment of human persons with each other. Finally, by his death Christ carried mankind’s “animal” predation to oblivion. Moreover, by his resurrection Christ, as the Adamic “human” person in history, is relationally present with the universe, the world, mankind and himself. This presence is creative. It is the relational and mediatorial means for the creation of man’s relational presence in the face of God, the world, others and himself. Without Christ’s risen presence, man would remain a predatory animal. However, as man freely responds to Christ’s relational presence, Christ is proceeding toward the full personhood both of himself and of the human race. Then the mutual relational presence of God and man will no longer be marred by a universe continually moving toward disorder or by life filled with predation and death and ending in annihilation. Then, indeed, Christ will “make all things new” (cf. Revelation 21:5).

Given the relational presence of the Risen Christ, how can man persist in his predatory “animal” drives to possession, submission or exclusion? Thank God that mankind has therefore begun to realize the hopelessness of the present order and to embrace relational commitment to the “other”! Thank God that many are beginning to realize that God’s transcendent purpose, as the historical Jesus and the Risen Christ, is to achieve human personhood together for himself and for the race!

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## Endnotes

1. See Karl W. Luckert, *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire: Theological and Philosophical Roots of Christendom in Evolutionary Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); “Mankind Between Two Worlds,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1994.8).
2. See “The Openness of God,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1994.4).
3. See “The End of Human Alienation,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1994.7).
4. See “The Openness of Man,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1994.6).
5. God’s “making room for the other.” The Greek word for self-emptying is *kenosis*. “. . . God is considered as absolute letting-be, as self-giving, as self-spending. Kenosis [Greek, *kenosis* = self-emptying] is understood as the way God relates to the world; creation is a work of love, of self-giving.” — Lucien Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 94.
6. See “The Openness of God.”
7. See “The Openness of Man”; “The New World Order,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1994.10).
8. Thus, all incarnational stories, such as the “virgin birth,” are necessarily mythical. Particularly in a prescientific age, however, the “virgin birth” story served a useful purpose in articulating the conviction that, in the Person of Jesus, God himself had somehow entered history to be present with us (Matthew 1:23).
9. See John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

10. Rather than a nonrelational, *immediate* presence, in which we absorb the Transcendent (“God *in* us”) or are absorbed by the Transcendent (“us *in* God”), the evidence indicates that the Risen Christ *mediates* his presence *with* us in history. That is, he reaches us through our neighbors. We reach him through each other. We reach each other and our own objective selves through him. This relational “reaching” may therefore be referred to as Christ’s “intermediatorial” presence, which is defined by the gifts of faith, hope and compassionate love. See “The End of Human Alienation.”
11. See “The Unseen Presence,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1994.9).
12. See note 10.
13. See Viktor E. Frankl, *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).
14. See especially “The End of Human Alienation”; “Mankind Between Two Worlds”; “The Unseen Presence”; “The New World Order”.

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