

# What Is Man?

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The six short papers in this pamphlet discuss fundamental questions - The purpose of life, man's relationship to his fellow man, death, and man's final destiny. They offer answers worth serious consideration by both old and young. - Editor.

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## I - LIFE AND ITS QUALITY

A wall-calendar, designed to make us more conscious of road safety, shows, month by month, a dozen deaths by disaster. Come December, and the last demise, we are reminded that we have only one life; and it is suggested, quite bluntly, that we should not throw it away through our own folly.

It is sensible advice; and the reminder is still necessary, even though elementary road safety has entered into everyone's consciousness as a matter of day to day living.

To judge from the increasing frequency of its use by both speakers and writers, 'the quality of life' is another concept rapidly entering into the consciousness of the general public. The words, 'the quality of life', are used in discussion of (or, more frequently, assertions regarding) pollution, the preservation of the environment, abortion, the working week, night shopping, leisure and almost anything else you care to name.

Most of us would admit that to preserve one's life, since it is one's own and one's only life, and to be concerned about the quality of this one and only life which one has, is pure common sense.

### Consequences

We take care, therefore, in crossing a street; and we feel strongly about pollution of the air and sea. We give thought to what we want our life to be like in its personal and social dimensions; and we examine controversial issues such as protest and pornography in terms of the 'quality of life' of the whole nation.

So acting and so speaking with others, we do as most people do; and are considered sensible people ourselves. But if we give to those two irrefutable facts - that we have only one life and that we should be concerned with the quality of it - if we give these two things a spiritual application, then we are doing what few people do, and will be considered very, strange indeed.

### Ultimates and absolutes

By 'spiritual application' I mean concern with ultimate and, therefore, absolute realities. In discussions about the 'quality of life' things such as culture and refinement, freedom and personal relationships, and so on are often called 'spiritual'. So they are, in the sense that they cannot be weighed or measured, and in the sense that they are activities or aspirations of man at his cultural best and socially most complete - what we used to call 'the higher part of man'.

But these things are not 'spiritual' in the sense that they are concerned with ultimate and absolute realities.

He knifes his peas

For example, it does not really matter if I am so unrefined as to eat my peas with a knife, or if I fail to appreciate primitive Polynesian music. In the long run it does not really matter whether I spend my days behind bars or on the beach. For a man is something we judge, in the last analysis, quite independently of anything he does or says, likes or appreciates. Even while we take what a man does and says, likes and appreciates as giving a clue to what he is, we still know that a man is something more than everything he says and does put together.

Similarly with freedom: we have all met people chained to all sorts of duties, obligations and everything else that goes to make up a person's environment, who are very clearly and supremely free.

There's more, surely

Well and truly beyond any hallmark of civilized behaviour or the most greatly desired quality of life in any sense so far mentioned, lie ultimates and absolutes. And in the blinding light of their reality, all else pales into insignificance.

A brilliant and promising student of history in a great university dies suddenly in his prime. 'He will be a great loss to the History Department,' says one of his colleagues.

Is that all? Is that really all? Was the writing of history the ultimate purpose of that man's life? Surely every fibre of our being cries out in protest, No, no, no!, refusing to admit what the remark implies - the ultimate futility of all human endeavour. If we accept that remark (and how frighteningly common that type of remark is) as telling the whole truth, then we must agree with Bertrand Russell that all hope of human progress must be built on the firm foundation of despair.

## II - MAN TO MAN

Let us consider for a moment another problem. Our day and age give ample demonstration of what the poet calls 'man's inhumanity to man'.

Most of us feel that animals, because they have feeling, have rights; and our laws rightly prosecute and punish people who inflict unnecessary suffering on them. At the same time, we claim they exist for our good and that we may rightly harness them or kill them or make pets of them as we choose.

Now, to a terrifying extent, much the same attitude exists in regard to man - witness the ever-growing disregard for human life in our day. Because he has feelings, a vague humanism concedes that a man has rights. But the source of these rights, it is said, is the group - the community or society. The individual is only a key on the keyboard of a piano; and when 'the greatest good of the greatest number' or some other such proposition is invoked, we have already justified his possible murder. In this way, for example, we see currently justified the idea that the State must compel people to limit their children to one or two, if, indeed, they be allowed any at all.

Ultimately, a man is safe from man only when it is generally acknowledged that he is something which exists independently of any role he plays in any human enterprise; and that there is something in every man which is so free and so self-justified that it cannot be subordinated to anything less than or merely equal to itself.

## Inalienable rights

This is not to deny that a man has social obligations to the common good; it does assert that the common good is meaningless if taken to be a thing whose existence is self-justified or whose rights are superior to every individual right.

If society or the common good or the State or anything else is conceded to be self-justified, then the proposition, 'It is expedient that one man should die for the people' becomes the merest logic. And no amount of actual innocence will save that 'one man' when his very existence is his crime and constitutes his guilt.

If the inalienable rights which are said to be the property of every man are grounded in the will of society or in a sense of humanism, then they are so vulnerable as to make 'inalienable' a term of mockery. For, in that case, they are the creation of something which itself is always changing, together with its values and philosophies (that is, society); or those rights are the creation of something which itself waxes and wanes and is subject to any and every coloration (that is, a sense of humanism).

## Humanism's dilemma

Mere humanism faces insoluble dilemmas. The humanist wishes to concede to a man rights which are inalienable and grounded in the fact that a man is a man. But this places him in the position where what he is asserting (that a man is a man) is made the justification of a man's inalienable rights. In short, a man has rights because he is a man. But if a man is merely the product of the natural order and the creation of society, the proposition must read, Man has rights because nature or society gives them to him. Which is to say that man precisely as man has no rights. And the rights he has given him by society are inalienable only by the will of the society. In other words, quite alienable.

Consequently, we find the humanist implicitly (and often enough explicitly) invoking the common good, as in the question of the compulsory limitation on the number of children one may have, if one is fit to be allowed to have any at all. 'The greatest good of the greatest number' is a slogan which seemingly protects all, but in fact makes no one safe.

For one thing, there is no reason why 'the greatest number' must include every individual or any particular individual.

A mere humanist, therefore, can quite cheerfully support abortion, the sterilization of the unfit, the compulsory limitation of reproduction, euthanasia and so on - since lives are less than life - and we see him hastening to do so, in the name of the 'greatest good of the greatest number'.

In effect, the individual has no absolute and ultimate value.

Hence there is no reason whatever (apart from his personal feelings on the subject) why the mere humanist should not equally cheerfully agree to the elimination of sub-cultures, minority groups or any other manifestation of pluralism in society. A humanist, for example, can quite logically oppose pluralism in education. For him, man (as he conceives him) matters, not men.

## Let's call him man

The sort of thought regarding man we have considered above comes to this 'He is a man; therefore, let's call him man.' Or, even: 'We will call him man; therefore he is a man.' All of which says

nothing, since the speaker, in fact, claims the right to say what is a man, and may at any time change his mind or definition.

At least Shakespeare's, 'God made him; so let's call him man,' cynical though it be, really does concede to the most despised of men rights which are inalienable because God-given.

T. S. Eliot wisely writes that everything in man must be counted merely a development from below, unless there is something which comes from above. And, in the last analysis, if you take away from the word 'human' everything that a belief in the supernatural has given to man, then you are left with only a clever, adaptable and mischievous little animal.

So what?

If a man, therefore, has any ultimate value and inalienable right, it comes from something or someone more responsible for man's being and life than 'nature' itself or any society.

If a man has truly inalienable rights he has them still when he is a hopeless alcoholic and therefore of no 'use'; and he has them when he is hopelessly ill and therefore incapable of enjoying any popularly regarded 'good', let alone the 'greatest good' of the slogan; and he has them still when he is so unintelligent as to be quite incapable of anything 'spiritual' that mere culture can give him.

In short, there is outside of man a Source of his being who makes each man what he is, radically, and by whose will each man strives for a quality of life in keeping with what he individually is.

And therefore

The man who refuses to face up to the realities of road safety in a highly motorized environment we regard as acting very foolishly indeed.

Similarly, but so much the more as the issues are more serious, a man acts foolishly indeed if he does not face up to the fact of the Source of his ultimate and absolute value; and to the fact that this Source will one day be met with face to face, via death.

For the Source does not bestow ultimate and absolute value on a thing for it to be concluded in a temporary and relative setting. Whatever man is, he is certainly immortal.

The words of the ancient Hebrew poet, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'," are a distillation of wisdom, the final conclusion of a very reflective and enquiring mind.

### III - CERTAINTY AND UNCERTAINTY

There is nothing more certain than that one day I shall die. Augustine wryly remarks that the growing boy is delighted as he grows in age, not realizing that each passing year does not add to but subtracts from the total of our years.

The certainty of dying is matched by the uncertainty of its hour. As Christ says, 'Be ready, for you know not the day nor the hour... At what time you think not, the Son of Man will come, like a thief in the night.'

The uncertainty of the hour of death is not a merely temporal thing, is not merely a question of the day and the hour. The uncertainty of death refers more to our preparedness. And Christ told a parable of wise and foolish ones. The one for whom they were waiting delayed, and came suddenly at midnight. The shops were closed; there was nowhere to obtain what was necessary to be ready

for his coming. What each had in her hands was all; and the five foolish had nothing of the only thing that was needed.

It was a wise man who wrote, -

Teach me to live that I may dread The grave as little as my bed, Teach me to die.

'For this...'

This same Christ was able to make an assertion which every man wishes to be able to make: 'For this was I born, for this I came into the world..' Christ asserts; we question, 'For what was I born, for what came I into the world?'

Just as he had the answer to the question Why? regarding his own earthly existence, so Christ offers to every man an answer to the questions he asks himself.

The Swallow Speaks

One of the legends of the Christianizing of England is that of the missionary saint haranguing a chieftain in his baronial hall. As he was speaking, a swallow flew in through an open window, fluttered a while around the hall, and flew out through another opening.

The chieftain interrupted the preacher. 'That bird in flight is like the life of man. Man comes here, we know not whence. He is in the world a brief and aimless space. Then he disappears and we know not where he goes. If you can tell me whence man comes and whither he goes, I will follow your teaching.'

Obviously, the origin and end of man explain his purpose on earth; equally, what we claim man's value on earth to be implies assumptions regarding his coming hither and his going hence. Once we stop to ask, What is man? three more questions immediately arise - Whence? Why? Whither?

IV - FROM ABOVE

The man who conducted the trial of Christ blustered about the power he had to convict Jesus or to release him. To this Jesus answered, 'You would not have any power over me unless it had been given to you from above.'

Likewise, when anyone blusters about the unique value a man has, the answer is valid: He would not have any value unless it had been given to him from above. For, without God, he would have no being.

Creation

Creation is not an idea many people get enthusiastic about, possibly because that chilling designation of God as 'the divine Architect' reduces creation to some sort of manufacture. Yet creation is one of the most beautiful ideas the human mind can fold itself around.

Creation, rightly apprehended, speaks of intimate union with God, for to say 'creature' is immediately to say 'the Creator is here and is calling you'. In my creation, God gives me myself; and from him comes every breath I breathe, every moment of my time, every beat of my heart and every step I take and every thought I have and every moment of my heart's affections. Nor are these things like the ticking of a wound-up clock or the merely mechanically-following consequences of my being made at all; but each and every one is a present gift, successively given.

For 'I have my God not only as the gratuitous giver of my life, but also as its most generous provider, loving consoler, careful ruler, abundant redeemer, eternal keeper and enricher and ennobler.' (St. Bernard).

Creation has been spoken of as, 'in our poor human words, an overflow of love'. It is as if the pulsating being of God, who is Love, had to express itself in new terms. (One can see the point of platonism and of pantheism.) Edith Sitwell speaks thus of God:

He is the core of the heart of love, and he, 'cross perilous seas our ultimate shore.

Those perilous seas of creation are moved by the beat of that heart of love, and he is himself that beat. We, on this shore, are sustained in being by that love, and by it are brought across those perilous seas of life to Love himself, our ultimate shore.

### An Act of Love

Creation is an activity of Love, not the execution of a drawing board design. Of Christ's death, St. Paul says, 'He loved me, and delivered himself up for me.' It is equally true to say, 'He loved me, and therefore made me.' The only reason I exist at all is that God wants me to, because he loves me. In God, there is no caprice - only deliberate election. I am not the product merely of blind forces, of historical processes: I am a child of God whose existence is willed by him because of his great love for me.

### A Call

Creation is vocation. 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways'; from all eternity, God has a perfect conception of me, complete knowledge of me, utter love for me. He does not create and teem children, and then elect them to intimacy with himself: he gives us being because, of his certain and eternal knowledge of us, he loves us - and for our own good would have us reciprocate knowledge and love.

Far from separating, creation is a communication whereby I, who had no being, came to be, and to have my being in God. God's creating me is the 'I will' which he utters to the eternal marriage he proposes between himself and myself. 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways.'

### Incarnation

The only comparison which does justice to the idea of our creation is a comparison of it with the incarnation, the becoming man, of the eternal Son.

The Word, descending from on high, Yet leaving not the Father's side....

The Son's natural unity with his Father is not severed by his incarnation; so, when God creates us his action does not separate us from himself. We become man, remaining with him. We come from the hands of God; but we remain always in the hands that made us - for 'He is not far from anyone of us, for in him we live and move and have our being'.

Creation is not a question of distance but of nearness: God is ever near and united to me as my Creator-creating; I am ever near and united to God as his creation-being-created. Between Creator and created there is no spatial distance; between the Eternal and the things he has made in time there is no time lapse.

We are present to him from all eternity; in time, he becomes present to us when, in a 'fullness of time' as personal to each one of us as was his Son's 'fullness of time' to him, we come to take our predestined place in the stream of time and come to the knowledge and love of God.

(If, therefore, we are men of our time, we are nothing less than God wills us to be.)

Compounding love with knowledge

God knows us eternally and utterly. So the Psalmist writes:

Lord, it was you made my inmost being, wove me together in my mother's womb. Utterly complete your knowledge of me, not hidden from you the stuff I was made of when in secret I was being formed, woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes behold my every act, each is recorded in your book. The days of my life were all counted before even one of them had come to be. Before my tongue has framed a single word, lo, you know my whole utterance, Lord. My thoughts you know from afar, you see when I walk or lie down, take note of my every path. From behind and from in front you surround me; above me your hand is resting.

There is wonder, there is mystery in someone's so knowing us - but no fear, only love. Is it not, after all, every lover's aspiration to have such knowledge of the person he loves, to know that person through and through? What with men is an aspiration is with God a reality. He knows all, and therefore

You love all things, and hate nothing of what you have made.

V - THE REASON WHY

Out of his great love, we are among those things which he has made, has called and wedded to himself:

He made us; we belong to him.

One man takes pride in being his own master - Nobody owns me; another takes pride in belonging to God - 'I have said, You are my God'.

One man does well: he belongs to everyman, his brother - and is proud of it; another does better: he belongs to God, seeks first the kingdom of God - and is humbled in joy to find he is only the least of many brethren, all of whom he loves, to all of whom he belongs as they to him.

One man belongs to the highest bidder, because all he is and has he claims as his own, and so is on the open market: his time, his energies, his talents, even, perhaps, his integrity, his honesty, his truthfulness, his trustworthiness, his loyalty, his affections. He already has his reward - himself.

Another, conscious that he has nothing which he has not received, looks not for a buyer but for a Giver who will give him both Himself and himself. He looks for one who tells him, 'I am your reward exceeding great', because he wants to be enriched by no one but God.

One man, perhaps, acknowledges the measured claims others have on him by reason of their need, and gives himself most fully to the most needy. Another acknowledges the measureless and absolute claims of One who needs nothing; and, giving himself completely to God whom he has not seen, sees and serves his unseen Love in his brothers whom he can see.

One man is happy that he is of use, that he can serve, and seems to have been put into this world for a useful end.

Another is happiest, knowing that he is made for God, to whom he is of no use, of whom he is, at best, an unprofitable servant - but by whom he is supremely loved and who receives his return of love.

'Thou mastering me, God'

At the same time, God is our Master; his rights over us are absolute. We cannot bargain with God, or threaten him, or get annoyed with him. He is the sovereign Lord of all, and his majesty is unassailable; our dependence on him is complete. And a recognition of this is necessary for joy in being, for it is a necessary element of wisdom, of insight into the mystery of life.

In the Book of Judith, in the Bible, we read how the elders of Bethulia, on whom Jerusalem was relying heavily, decided that unless God sent rain within five days to renew their water supplies they would surrender their city to the Assyrian besiegers. Hearing of this, Judith sent for them and castigated them for their 'wicked words'.

Who are you that you have put God to the test this day and are setting yourself up in the place of God among the sons of men? You are putting God to the test; but you will never have any understanding!

You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart nor find out what a man is thinking; how do you expect to search out God and find out his mind or comprehend his thought?

He has power to protect us within any time he pleases; or even to destroy us in the sight of our enemies. Do not try to bind the purposes of God; for God is not like man to be threatened, or like a human being to be won over by pleading.

Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us; and he will hear our voice if it pleases him to hear us.

We must recognize that we cannot bargain with God, nor bribe him; that we cannot set limits to God, even in the way in which, out of love for us, he will order our lives or answer our prayers. We must be conscious, even as we pray to our Father who loves us and desires our eternal union with him, that we are approaching the supreme freedom and unassailable majesty and eternal wisdom of God who himself boasts,

My ways are not your ways, nor are my thoughts your thoughts. For as high as are the heavens above the earth, so are my ways above yours.

Face to Face

Such are God and I - Master and servant, Father and son. As such we will, one day soon, meet face to face; and in that day will be revealed how we have measured up as sons, as servants.

In short, there will come for each one of us a day of judgement.

## VI - JUDGEMENT

Because of its high points of Christmas, Passiontide and Easter, Ascension and Pentecost, we are possibly inclined to regard the Church's liturgical year as a re-presentation to us of the life of Christ Our Lord.

It is; but, in fact, its scope is broader. It re-presents to us the whole scope of salvation history, of God's saving action in the world from beginning to end. God himself 'reaches from end to end with

power, and gently orders all things'. This the liturgical year puts before us, from the long preparation of Advent for the 'appearing of the kindness and gentleness of God our Saviour' to the return of Christ in glory.

The last three Sundays of the year show us various aspects of Christ's return - the resurrection of man to eternal life, the Last Day, the restoration of all things in Christ.

The Last Day is primarily a manifestation of the righteousness of God. That is to say, on that day the fidelity of God to his covenant with man will be manifested. On that day we shall see how God, through all the course of human history with its, to us, inexplicable mysteries, has with power and with patience been pursuing his design for the salvation of man.

What of Man?

A covenant is between two. God is faithful; but what of man? So often faithless.

Just as the Day of Judgement will manifest God's faithfulness, so it will manifest man's unfaithfulness. On that Day of Judgement, God will be shown to be true and faithful. For each of us, the question is, will I be vindicated, on that day, as true and faithful on my part?

The Reality of Sin

Against the modern tendency to regard sin merely as a social evil or as a failure of man towards man, Vatican II teaches us to see sin primarily as an offence against God.

Now, faithfulness cannot acknowledge faithlessness as its son; love cannot acknowledge indifference as its like. In the Day of Judgement, therefore, if we do not stand vindicated as sons of God by our faithfulness to our duty as sons, if we cannot stand vindicated as friends of God by our return of love for the love he has first shown us, then we stand condemned.

If the son is self-disinherited, he cannot enter his Father's house; if one of two refuses to make a return of love, there can be no eternal union. For the faithless man there remain only exclusion from the house of God and the eternal choice of himself rather than of Another. In short, hell.

Hell

It is probably a symptom of the gross materialism of our day that the modern version of the historically recurring attacks on the idea of hell concentrates on hell fire. One gets the impression that if the fires of hell can be extinguished, we will tolerate well enough the loss of God for all eternity.

Whatever the nature of hell fire, the fact remains that fire is the nearest things the Scriptures find to describe the agony of hell. One may speculate, too, on the relation between the loss of God and the nature of that 'fire'. It is all very interesting and rather unprofitable. Beside the loss of God for all eternity, hell 'fire' is insignificant; and perhaps the pain of the senses will be something of a relief from the unspeakable pain of the loss of God forever.

Scales of Justice

In picturing the Judgement, whether in painting or in words, we tend naturally enough to see it in terms of a process at law: we the accused stand before the Judge; our deeds are examined and weighed; our accusers urge justice, our advocates plead for mercy; and finally we are sentenced or acquitted.

It can be very useful so to conceive the Judgement; after all, Christ Our Lord taught us in a similar way, speaking in parables. Moreover, it is the outcome of judgement rather than the accuracy of our metaphors describing it that matters. Besides, in these matters it is difficult to do away with the metaphors and the images and still retain a sense of the reality. Last year, for example, [1971,] Michael Simpson, S.J., in his *Death and Eternal Life*, attempted a restatement of these truths in language which would owe nothing to traditional imagery. In effect, what he did was little more than to substitute for the old a new set of metaphors, and them less vivid.

At the moment of death, one has either opted essentially for God or one has not; one is either in grace or one is not; one is either 'in Christ' or one is not, depending on how like Christ, Servant and Son, one is in one's faithful service of God, one's filial love of God.

In the instant of death, therefore, one is 'judged' and 'sentenced' by the very fact of one's condition.

God is faithful: it is only by our own failure and folly that we can be separated from him, be found to be not in Christ. Therefore, we stand self-condemned: it is we who have disinherited ourselves, repudiating our sonship of God; it is we who have refused to serve, rejecting our position as servants; it is we who have refused the proposal of eternal union which God makes to each of us.

#### One Alone

In his latest book, *Christ is Alive*, Quoist rather scorns the idea that 'I have but one soul to save'. However, to scorn an idea is by no means to invalidate it; and the fact is that I do have but one soul to save. For the individual personality that I am is what will be saved or lost forever, when 'Christ will render to each according as, when in the flesh, they did good or evil'.

No one can absolve me of responsibility for the one and only life I have and for the spiritual quality of it.

#### Death

Since we have been created by God for an eternal destiny, it is the merest common sense to take care how we live and, thereby, how we die; for it is at death that our lot in eternity is finally sealed, and almost assuredly the quality of our death will be determined by the quality of our life. We have a judgement to face which is inescapable. As the Psalmist says:

The man who takes no thought is like the beasts that perish.

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