

Imago Dei: On the Transcendence of the Human Person

Marshall H. Lewis

The human person, by virtue of being created *imago Dei*, is an independent being, individually unique, rational, the subject of moral agency, co-creator, and inherently social. Accordingly, human persons possess intrinsic value and dignity, implying certain rights and duties with respect to the recognition and protection of the dignity of themselves and other persons. These truths about the human person's dignity are known through divine revelation, but are also discernible through reason.

According to Genesis 1:26, God created Adam "in our image, after our likeness." The Hebrew root for "image," צִלְמִי, refers to something that is cut out, as is a pattern. In the postmodern era, some have tried to weaken the impact of this phrase by proposing that this image, while a pattern that God made for us, was substantively no different from the patterns God made for other animals. However, the phrase just following -- "after our likeness" -- would seem to suggest that the human person was uniquely patterned after God. It is useful to note that the root for "likeness", דְּמִיּוֹת, is used again in Genesis 5:13, according to which Adam begot a son "in his own likeness." Taking this "likeness" as a basic truth about the nature of the human person, this essay will reflect on the central problem of postmodern society followed by one possible solution.

The central problem is that the transcendental nature of the human person has been denied. Eighteenth century philosophers believed that this denial would free society from religious oppression. With a revised understanding of Natural Law in hand, explains Alberto Piedra, faith was placed in a human society that would naturally progress toward a utopian state if artificial, external controls could be removed. These external controls were identified with religious authority and belief, which were also the proponents of the

transcendental nature of humanity. Denying this nature went hand-in-hand with denying religion.

A clear anthropology that could be applied to the situation is present in the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Samuel Gregg discusses four elements of this anthropology. The human person is characterized primarily by reason and will, and also by emotion and by an understanding of the effects of the will. Inasmuch as society is a creation of humanity, it, too, could be characterized primarily by reason and will. Within society, these characteristics may be expressed as culture and government. In the transcendental view, the purpose they serve is the search for truth and meaning.

Gregg demonstrates that once this transcendental purpose is removed from the human person and from her society, then personal beliefs that contain a transcendental aspect come to be seen as dangerous to that society. Paradoxically, such beliefs are then restrained as the price of maintaining a free society. Gregg here invokes Sir Isaiah Berlin's concept of "negative liberty," which is defined as being free from the interference of others and their troubling beliefs.

Cardinal George Pell gives some current examples of ways in which personal beliefs are restricted, such as the need for nominees to the United States Supreme Court to carefully avoid any statement that may reflect a pro-life belief. This is explicitly stated in the American media as it prepares to cover the confirmation hearings. As another example, one may note the annual Christmas debate over Christian symbols in the public square.

Many will claim to be offended by these symbols. Much will be said about the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, but little will be said about the prohibition on government to interfere with free religious exercise that it contains. Pell goes on to note that the prevailing attitude in society has become one of fear. It might be rightly imagined that human beings, divorced from any notion of a transcendent divine image, are simply dangerous predators. Indeed, it is reason and will serving no purpose beyond the survival of the individual that makes the human animal such a fearsome creature. A society of such creatures would certainly destroy itself unless individuals are restrained by a powerful government that can hold their passions for survival in check. It has become clear in our society that denying the transcendental aspect of our nature has not resulted in a natural utopia, but rather has resulted in a tyranny of philosophical correctness no less severe than the religious oppression it sought to avoid.

Lacking in transcendental nature, human reason is seen as entirely instrumental.

Instrumental reason can put a man on the moon, but it cannot tell us the meaning of this action, or whether it should be further pursued. Likewise, democracy, defined in terms of negative liberty, is seen as an end in itself. Since the human person must be protected from the beliefs of his fellow humans, he has reason to fear. Negative liberty is for him a source of security in a dangerous and meaningless world.

However, Gregg reminds us that human beings want more than to merely survive. If all their hearts' desires could be reduced to two, then most people would acknowledge that what they want is to find meaning in the things they do each day and to be at peace.

They want to truly believe that their survival is more than eating, drinking, sleeping, and dying. This belief is called hope. Without it, democracy descends into fear; virtue is vanquished.

The struggle before us is to return a sense of transcendence both to the human person and to his society. If the human person is understood to have a free, rational will, capable of choosing basic goods as defined by reason, then Berlin's positive liberty abounds.

Positive liberty is defined as the freedom to be "one's true self," whether as an individual, a member of a community, or to serve one's purpose in history. This pursuit is what Gregg calls integral liberty, or liberty as self-government. Pell refers to it as democratic personalism. Regardless of nomenclature, such a system would leave the human person and society itself truly free to pursue transcendental ends. Reason and culture could freely pursue Truth. Will and government could freely pursue Liberty. Even emotion and religion could freely pursue Peace. Democracy in such a society would have a purpose: preserving and protecting the dignity of the human person created in *imago Dei*.

Article Citations:

Gregg, Samuel, "The Drama of Human Freedom," from *On Ordered Liberty*. Lexington Books, 2003.

Pell, George, "Is There Only Secular Democracy? Imagining New Possibilities for the Third Millennium." Published online at www.action.org.

Piedra, Alberto, "Natural Law and the Age of Reason," from *Natural Law: The Foundation of an Orderly Economic System*. Lexington Books, 2004.