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# A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF HUMAN PERSONALITY

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## What Does It Mean to Have Been Created "In the Image of God"?

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Owen L. Hughes

**W**hen I tell my wife that I love her, what do I really mean? Am I revealing simply that my blood chemistry has changed, or — as some have proposed — that somewhere deep within my psyche there is a desire to commit my genes into safe keeping by adding to the next generation? Or am I expressing a dimension of human personality that reflects an essential element of the image of God—the capacity to relate to another?

When I choose to remain in the library rather than head for the sport field, are my actions determined entirely by environmental pressures or may it be that, on some occasions at least, my decision is based on a genuine capacity to choose? But if I accept that I have freedom to choose, I must also believe that at least some aspects of human behavior do not follow the natural law of cause and effect. My choice then was not inevitable—it was taken without or in spite of external or internal pressures. By recognizing a measure of responsibility for my actions, therefore, I place some aspects of my conduct outside of the parameters acceptable to most current students of human behavior.

As thinking Christians, then, it is important that we have as clear a picture as possible of the way in which our faith impacts upon our understanding of human personality. In discussing what it means to be human, most Chris-

tian thinkers build upon the biblical assertion that both man and woman were created "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:26).

The model I will propose in this article draws heavily on a broad range of Christian scholarship and attempts to synthesize the common elements into a framework that serves as a bridge to academic psychology. This model does not attempt to address those areas of difference between persons, but looks rather at elements of personality that are shared by all of us.

Let us proceed to explore some of the areas of contact between human personality and the Christian understanding of the image of God.

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### A Variety of Views

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From the time of the early church fathers, scholars have wrestled with the meaning of the biblical expression "the image of God." There has been some agreement, but also a considerable amount of disagreement. For example, some scholars suggest that the image of God is defined by certain spiritual qualities such as self-consciousness, self-determination or the capacity for rational thought. Others identify the image of God with the responsibility to exercise dominion over the earth. Several propose that the essence of the concept is to be found in the human capacity to relate to the Creator and to fellow humans. Some have even identified the

supposed similarity between the human physical form and that of God as the essence of the image.<sup>1</sup>

With such a spectrum of opinion, how is one to understand the concept of the image of God in human beings? While scholarly opinion may differ as to the precise meaning of the term, Christianity commonly applies it to various aspects of human personality. The views presented in this article are within that context.

By drawing together the common elements of a number of views, a broader picture of human personality begins to emerge. And as we integrate the various views, we can design a model consisting of eight categories or levels, in an ascending order of complexity. We propose that some aspects of the image of God are reflected at each of the levels, but that the total concept is more fully described by all taken as a whole. (See Figure 1.)

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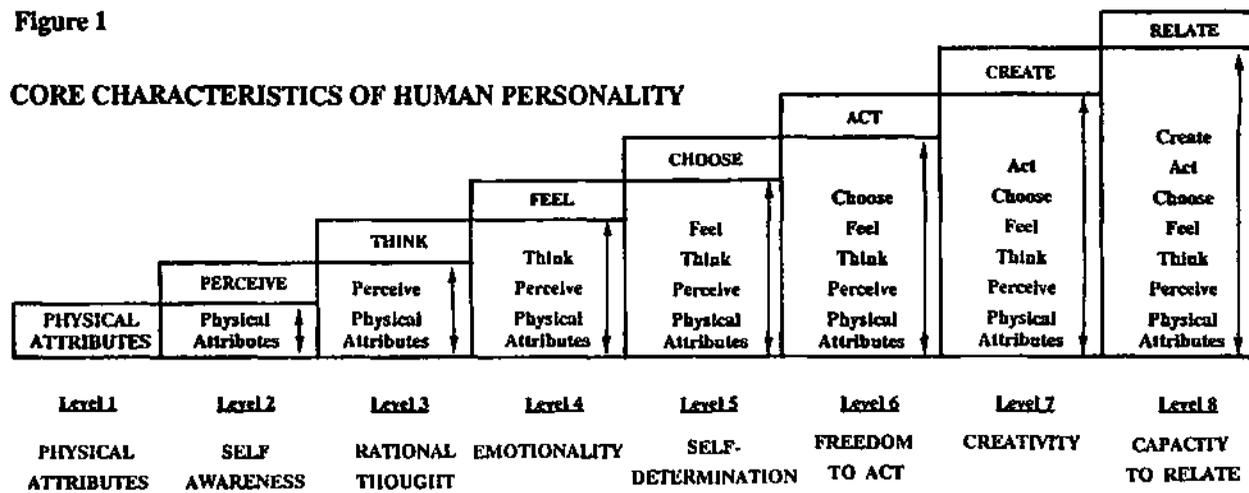
### Toward a Model

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Two related concepts are embodied at **Level One**—firstly that of the upright human form that distinguishes human from beast and secondly that of a corporal body. Human personality is a psychosomatic unity through which all of the psychological dimensions of human existence are expressed. This biblical concept contrasts with the common view, which portrays humans as possessing a body and a soul.

Figure 1

CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN PERSONALITY



This cumulative, hierarchical model integrates Christian views derived from the biblical assertion that humans were created "in the image of God."

Level Two refers to the human capacity to perceive the richness of color, sound, smell, taste, and touch. This implies self-awareness to experience not only the perceptual richness of the world but also a sense of the self that is a part of and at the same time distinct from that which is perceived. In academic psychology, this dimension of human personality involves the study of consciousness, sensation and perception—how it is that the world of matter and energy is translated into the entirely new dimension of conscious experience.

Level Three highlights the human capacity to manipulate the data of consciousness in a variety of ways. This area of human personality represents those abilities concerned with learning, memory, logical thought and its application to problem solving—our capacity to think.

An initial survey of the literature does not reveal any sources that directly include emotionality in relation to the image of God. However, the inclusion of emotionally loaded terms such as "love," "relationship," and "sexuality" in a later category would suggest the emotional component of personality to be a valid inclusion. Emotion is generated as

individuals perceive the elements of a situation, and reflect upon it. As such, emotion is qualitatively different from perceiving and thinking, and represents a new dimension of personality. Level Four refers, then, to the human capacity to experience emotion.

In the study of perception, intelligence, and emotion, Christian scholars find several commonalities between the currently held understanding of human personality and the biblical view. However, the situation changes dramatically with Level Five. A naturalistic world view that excludes the supernatural and affirms that "the cosmos exists as a uniformity of cause and effect in a closed system"<sup>2</sup> comes into direct conflict with the biblical view of human nature, which affirms that humans have the capacity to choose and to determine the direction of their lives. If we are nothing more than complicated machines or smart animals, then it is reasonable to assume that human behavior is determined entirely by biological influences and social reinforcements.

A Christian view of human personality, however, accepts that Godlike characteristic that allows us, at least under some cir-

cumstances, to break free from external and internal influences and to make a choice that is not entirely determined by either. The capacity to express love at the level of principle and the capacity to be responsible for our actions are dependent on the capacity to choose. While our perceptions of a situation, our rational thought about the situation, and our emotional response to those thoughts may influence a choice, it is possible to use the freedom of self-determining will to make a choice that is independent of any or all of those factors. Level Five refers then to the human capacity to choose.

Some scholars suggest that the primary meaning of the image of God is to be found in our responsibility to exercise dominion over the creation, and in so doing, to act as God's representatives on earth. Level Six of the model relates to this view. The human capacity to act responsibly involves the interaction of the perceiving, thinking, feeling, and choosing that preceded it.

Level Seven refers to the dimension of personality that reflects both the capacity for and appreciation of creative expression. The modalities of creative expression include, but are not

limited to, language, music, and the visual arts. We propose that human creativity is qualitatively different from each of the dimensions of personality discussed so far. Its expression, however, depends on the active involvement of each of these dimensions—perception, thought, emotion, choice, and action.

Level Eight is concerned with relationships between fellow humans and with the Creator. It is expressed in the image-of-God literature as the dualism of male and female, in sociability, sexuality, and gregariousness. It is also expressed in our relationship with our Maker through an understanding of the eternal, true, and good relationship between humanity and God, and freedom to love and obey God.

It is clear that behavior at this level is qualitatively different from each of the elements described in Levels Two to Seven. It is clear also on reflection that each of the characteristics described in those levels, separately or in combination, are intimately related to the capacity to relate to fellow humans or to our Creator. Relating to others may involve the full richness of language in all of its creative forms including everyday communication, humor, poetry, and literature. It includes also the special relationships of family and friends, and the intimate relationships of the marriage union. Relationship to God includes coming into fellowship with him through his created works, the development of a growing communion in a life of faith as well as the experience of private and public worship.

### Implications

The Christian student or scholar who approaches the study of psychology as an academic discipline is soon struck by the broad

spectrum of personality theories that derive from various psychological traditions. Salvatore R. Maddi has developed a useful framework that integrates these diverse theories into a single model.<sup>3</sup> Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen in turn has used Maddi's structure to provide a bridge between Christian and secular views of human personality.<sup>4</sup>

In Figure 1 we have schematically represented the core characteristics of human personality as derived from the previous discussion. They appear in an ascending order of complexity, each as a function of the whole person. Just as succeeding layers of an onion encapsulate all smaller layers within it, we suggest that each new dimension of personality embodies all of those characteristics that precede it.

Each of the less complex core characteristics affect the more complex ones. For example, changes to perceptions or emotions can affect actions or relationships. The converse is also true. For example, changes to actions or relationships can also affect perceptions or emotions. These reciprocal relationships are represented in the chart by two-way arrows.

Taken as a whole, these characteristics of human personality help us to better understand what the Bible means when it states in its first pages that we have been created in God's image. However, this profound concept finds its fullest expression in our capacity to relate to our fellow humans and to the Creator.

It is not likely that there will be complete agreement among personality theorists for some time to come. Del Ratzsch observes that "one's expectations, mind-set, conceptual framework and in some cases, specific beliefs, have some effect on one's perception" and that "perception is an active

process, and not . . . the passive process of having things outside of ourselves imprint objective information on our minds through the neutral medium of our senses."<sup>5</sup> Thus any conclusions reached on the nature of human personality inevitably will be tainted by previously held beliefs. For this reason, it is most unlikely that personality theorists would ever arrive at an adequate view of human personality without the aid of divine revelation.

### Significance for Christians

What does it mean then to be created in the image of God? It means for me that I can stand tall as I realize that the attributes that define human personality emanate from the Creator. I can take a high view of human nature and confidently assert that rational thought is rational because the Creator has made it so; that I do indeed have the capacity to choose and that not all of my actions are determined by forces outside of my control—that I can bear a measure of responsibility for my actions; that when I tell my wife that I love her, she can have confidence that I care for her rather than merely for myself.

It also means that I have a responsibility to grow. Humans were created perfect in every respect, but through the Fall, the image of God has been defaced. The human capacities to perceive, to think, to experience emotion, to choose, to act, to create and to relate have been weakened and distorted. The challenge facing all Christians is the restoration of the image of their Maker within their own personalities. This involves not just the restoration of a right relationship with God, but touches on all of those areas by which the image is defined—human relationships, sexuality, conscience,

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good Adventist presence and to find suitable accommodations.

We are aware that much still needs to be done in providing adequate support for our students as they leave their home and church to attend a secular college or university. But leaders at the division and in each of the unions are committed to finding better ways of ministering to their special needs and to involve them in reaching out to the millions who, in our countries, are looking for a message of hope and reconciliation.

Jim Huzzey

### Esther as Literature

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7. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), vol. 5, p. 450.

8. Robert Alter, "Introduction to the Old Testament," *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 15.

9. Wilma McClarty, "Why Teach the Bible as Literature?" *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 51:4 (April-May 1989), p. 23.

10. Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), p. 30.

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*Wilma McClarty (Ed.D., University of Montana) teaches literature, composition, and speech at the Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists in Collegedale, Tennessee, U.S.A. This article is a summary of a larger essay on this topic prepared by the author during a seminar sponsored by the Institute for Christian Teaching. (See p. 35 of this issue.)*

### DISCUSSION Esther as Literature

1. Are you satisfied with the argument advanced by the author? Is there a risk of losing the spiritual message of the Word of God by approaching it as literature? Why?
2. In what sense can a literary approach enrich and deepen your understanding of the Bible? Can you give some examples from other books or passages of Scripture?
3. How would you describe psychologically the characters in the book of Esther? Do they seem real to you? Can they serve as models of Christian behavior? To what degree does their conduct reflect their cultural context? Do we now have a better understanding of God's ideal of human behavior than in Esther's time? Why?

### Human Personality

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creativity, and the various core characteristics upon which they are built. My personal testimony is that a clearer understanding of the image of God has brought to me a new sense of the value, dignity, and purpose of life. What more could I ask!

#### NOTES

1. D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19. (London: Tyndale Press, 1968).

2. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 62.

3. See his book, *Personality Theories: A Comparative Analysis*. (Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1972).

4. See her book, *The Person in Psychology* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1985).

5. Del Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

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*Owen L. Hughes (Ph.D., University of Newcastle) is the head of the School of Teacher Education at Avondale College, Australia, where he lectures in Psychology. This is a summary of a larger essay on this topic prepared by the author during a seminar sponsored by the Institute for Christian Teaching. (See p. 35 of this issue.)*

#### DISCUSSION Human Personality

1. What does it mean, for you, to have been created "in the image of God"? Since the Bible is not explicit on the meaning of this expression, should we speculate about it? Which are the strong and the weak points in the model proposed by the author? Would you add anything to it?

2. Are human beings truly free to make moral choices? What arguments would you use to support your view? What role do home, church, school, and society at large play in conveying values and in influencing our choices? Can we do anything about those influences? Does the Bible shed any light on this topic? If we are not really free, what are the implications for our self-understanding, our concept of God, and our view of human destiny?

3. The author states that "human personality is a psychosomatic unity through which all of the psychological dimensions of human existence are expressed." Do you agree? Why? Do the Scriptures support this view? In what way has Ellen White enriched our understanding of the mutual influence between mind and body?