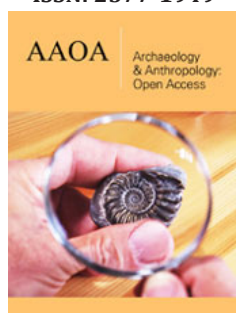


# Theology an Age of Alzheimer's: Asking God's First Question Today

D Lyle Dabney\*

Marquette University, USA

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\*Corresponding author: D Lyle Dabney,  
Marquette University, USA

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## Abstract

Let me begin with a proposal concerning Christian theology: Christianity is a missional movement, and when rightly pursued its theology is missional theologizing. Now when I say that Christianity is a missional movement, I mean that it is an historical and socially embodied movement that— in accordance with its own normative narrative—has been called into being, taken into, and defined by the mission of God in the world as depicted in the testimony of Christian scripture. There the *missio dei* unfolds in the context of a story arc that moves from chaos to community, from the seven day event of the creation of the “heavens and the earth” “in the beginning” (Gen 1:1-2:3) to the appearance of “a new heaven and a new earth” at the end (Rev 21-22). That new creation is pictured as the descent of a “New Jerusalem” from heaven to a world in which all things are made new and God comes to inhabit what God has created. God comes to dwell thereby with and among and in the human community. Thus, of central importance to that story arc is the creation and new creation of the creature of the sixth day, the herald of the coming of the seventh, the human community made up of male and female that is taken into God’s creating and called to be God’s own “image and likeness” in that act (Gen 1:26ff). That creature whose “dominion” in and over creation is to reflect God’s own “dominion” as it appears in the center of that narrative in Christ Jesus on the cross and comes to final realization as that “Lamb of God” assumes the throne in the New Jerusalem to rule over all things, as pictured in Rev 22. God’s mission in the world, therefore, is the actualization of God’s call to the human community to act as the *imago dei* in God’s creating as God brings all things to God’s good ends. It is, for this reason, no accident that the first question asked in the biblical narrative occurs when God comes seeking the man and the woman who have inexplicably proven faithless and, in their shame, have tried to hide themselves from their Creator. “Where are you?” God calls (Gen 3:9). That is by no means a geographical question, and GPS co-ordinates do not by any means constitute its answer. It is, rather, the question of what has become of the creature that God has called to be God’s own “image and likeness” in God’s creating. It is this question, I suggest, that forms and informs God’s mission in the world, as depicted in the testimony of the remainder of the biblical narrative- a narrative that has at its center God’s declaration concerning Christ Jesus: “This is [the one] with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17).

Christianity is a movement created in and by this *missio dei*. As an expression of God’s mission, Christianity enters into new cultural and social worlds and into the discourses of each age in which it finds itself, taking up the words and the works of those worlds and ages in order to transfigure them into a testimony concerning God’s promissory Word and Work in Jesus Christ. Christian theology is a servant of that on-going mission of God. It is a missional theologizing that speaks of God’s universal promise in the particularity of the moment, and thus addresses itself to the particular expressions of humanity’s universal faithlessness in a given age, faithlessness to God, to their fellow creatures, and to God’s creating. For the question that theology begins with is always When are we? And just as God’s first question cannot be answered by simply reporting GPS co-ordinates, so theology’s first question defies simply turning to a date on a calendar. For the answer to the question is not simply a day or a month or a year but rather an historical and social condition, a particular moment in the on-going conversation that is a culture.

My argument in the following is that we are living at the end of one age and at the beginning of another and thus it is time to learn to “act our age” once again. The future of missional theologizing will emerge as we enter into that time of transition and serve God’s mission anew today. In the twenty-first century we live in a time of profound cultural and social change. A modern age that once boasted of its knowledge and power is passing, while another, an age of forgetting, an age of consequent uncertainty and insecurity and paranoia, an age of the loss of a sense of self and the dissolution of the bonds of commonality with others that is rooted in the memory of a shared history that encompasses and defines us, is rapidly arising to take its place. We live, that is to say, in an “age of Alzheimer’s.”

Alzheimer's disease was first diagnosed in 1906 by the German psychiatrist and neurologist Alois Alzheimer, when he noticed unusual characteristics in the brain of a fifty-year-old female patient who had died after having suffered for years from memory loss, disorientation, paranoia, and unpredictable behavior. From the first the disease was understood to be associated with aging. And since that time, as life expectancy has continued to lengthen through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the number of those who suffer from the ailment has exploded. Studies suggest that it is a decidedly modern disease that is caused by a combination of genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors. A chronic neurodegenerative illness that occurs when nerve cells in the brain die, it usually starts slowly and gradually worsens as the sufferer grows older. In the United States, it is now the cause of sixty to seventy per cent of the cases of dementia. Moreover, the National Council on Aging estimates that over five hundred thousand deaths were caused by Alzheimer's in 2010 alone, more than thirteen hundred sixty-nine people a day. And another American develops the disease every sixty-five seconds. Indeed, more than three million new cases are diagnosed every year in America alone. A recent study ranks Alzheimer's as the third leading cause of death in the United States, after heart disease and cancer. But, unlike those other two—and this holds for the other eight most common causes of death—there is no known cure for Alzheimer's. To this point, palliative care is our only recourse. This has led some in the medical and health care professions today to speak of Alzheimer's as the crisis of our age, as a plague that is and will blight our time much as the bubonic plague blighted an earlier moment in western history.

Alzheimer's, therefore, is a disease that affects self-consciousness, attacking areas of the brain dedicated to memory, problem solving, abstract thinking, learning capabilities, personality, and awareness. Its sufferers experience a loss of identity; they literally "forget themselves," lose themselves bit by bit in and to the disease. Even as they become aware that their defining self is slipping away, they are helpless to stem the tide, leading to angry desperation and despair. This, I suggest, is an apt metaphor for what is occurring in western society today. The consternation, uncertainty, and grief brought about by the loss of self that is caused by that kind of disease now defines the social world of the age in which we live, replacing our culture's earlier boast with a whine of insecurity and the rise of a haunting fear of an imminent apocalypse that can be seen in everything from our philosophy to our economics to our politics to our elite and popular art. Once, western societies had strong and confident accounts of human identity, but collectively and individually, we have now forgotten who we are—and we are bedeviled by that forgetting. As Christianity learns to understand and take seriously that cultural illness, we will learn to act our age once again. Thus we will learn to serve God's mission in the world anew, as we take up the words and works of this emergent age to speak of God's Word and Work as we ask God's first question to this and every age: Where are you? And as we learn to articulate that question in the words and works of this new age, we will learn how to properly proclaim in word and deed that the answer to that question ultimately is found in Jesus Christ.

## Introduction

Whether in the form of the Classical exhortation to "know thyself" or the query that the ancient Psalmist posed to God "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" or the Modern assertion of the self as the "thinking thing," the question of the identity of the human has always been a fundamental concern of the western cultural tradition and of Christian theology. The early twentieth century clash between the Protestants Barth [1] and Rudolf Bultmann over Barth's protest that modern theology since Schleiermacher had become utterly "anthropocentric" (expressed most vehemently, of course, in *Der Römerbrief*, 1922) and the Roman Catholic affirmation of the pursuit of modern anthropology in Vatican II (*Gaudium et Spes*) are only the latest illustrations of that fact. But the question of the human has now entered a new and critical phase in the theological debates of western Christianity.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Christian theology finds itself, and can only find itself, in the midst of a crisis—and that's precisely as it should be. The crisis is not that of the modern challenge to the plausibility and relevance of traditional Christian belief and practice. It is rather the crisis that modernity itself is experiencing, what Charles Taylor and others have called "the crisis of the self," what I am defining here as a kind of cultural Alzheimer's. We live in a time in which the optimism and certainty of modern humanism has passed, and with it the assurance that we know who or what we are as human beings has faded as well [1-15]. Instead of the enlightened, rational self, the benevolent individual of self-conscious good will, contemporary culture has come to suspect that the human is a problematic construct, a matter of profoundly conflicted unconscious and irrational drives, of social discourses that conceal power-seeking and power-justification, and of related strategies of manipulation, delusion, and deceit and that not just of others but of ourselves as well. "Who am I?" our contemporaries

ask in anger and despair, and, "How does my 'self' relate to the human community of 'selves' of which I am a part, a community that is itself marked even in its best by exploitation, collusion, and lies?" "What is a human being, and thus what is a humane society?" we ask. As Matt Damon, playing the role of Carroll Shelby in last year's movie *Ford v Ferrari*, remarked at the beginning and end of the film, today "it's the only question that matters."

Christian theology is not immune to this crisis, nor to these questions. The same developments that produced this dilemma in western culture at large have long been at work in Christian communities of worship and service and thought. Christian theology is missional theology, disciplined thought in service to God's redemptive mission in the world. The history of Christian theology is the story of how it has entered again and again into the discourses of the cultures in which it finds itself and seeks to make of those broken words and deeds a witness to God's Word and God's deed. The mission of Christian theology in the twenty-first century, therefore, is to enter into contemporary culture's crisis of the self and give account of the human, bringing healing in the name of Christ to the disease that is ravaging our society. For at the center of that account must be found what stands at the center of Christian faith and practice: Jesus of Nazareth. Christian theology has always confessed that Jesus Christ was more than just a human being. Our task now is to give an account of what it means to say that the Son of God is indeed a human being, and what God's humanity means for our understanding and practice of our own.

## The two narratives of final quest in the western tradition

If we would understand the character of the contemporary crisis of the self in this age of Alzheimer's we must see it for what it is, the loss of long-assumed narratives that served to depict human identity, and we must understand that loss in the context of the

history of the western cultural tradition. The West has defined the human person in terms of two successive narratives that depict what might be called two “final quests” that were said to result in human fulfillment. The first was a narrative of a metaphysical quest that answered the question of the human ontologically, and the second was a narrative of an historical quest that defined the self in terms of epistemology. Each of these narratives of final quest along with their attendant definitions of human being has in turn come to grief and been forgotten. The consequence is the contemporary crisis of the self.

### The narrative of the metaphysical quest

The metaphysical quest has deep roots in the western philosophical tradition, and from the beginning its point of departure for speaking of the human was the specter of death. The oldest surviving philosophical text in the western tradition, a fragment of a lost work by the Ionian philosopher, Anaximander (c. 610 546 BC), bewails the passibility, the mortality, of all that lives (Diels, 1951). Thus, in the face of death the ancients posed the question that would dominate western discourse for better than two thousand years: What is real and unchanging in a world constantly coming into being, undergoing change, and passing away? What does not suffer change, the ultimate expression of which is death? And how is the human individual related—or how can the individual be related—to such impassibility? This was what Cicero meant when he declared that “the entirety of the philosophical life is a commentary on death” (Tusc. Disp., I,74).

Cicero was referring above all to the most famous philosophical life and death in the literature of the classical world: that of Socrates, for the high culture of the ancients commonly defined life with reference to the example of his death. Drawing on earlier Greek traditions, Socrates— as depicted in Plato’s dialogues— had taught a dualistic anthropology in which the human was made up of body (σῶμα) and soul (ψυχή). The soul had originally existed in the realm of the eternal and had concerned itself only for the contemplation of the impassible forms, but for some obscure reason souls had “fallen” into the temporal realm and were imprisoned in sensible and passible bodies, condemned to the buffeting of time and change which constantly misdirected the intelligent soul to the sensible world. The intelligent soul was therefore the essential self, the immortal aspect of the human that by its very nature was driven to seek to ascend to the knowledge of that to which it was akin, the intelligible and impassible ideals. The body on the other hand was the non-essential, the sensible and passible (and thus the mortal) aspect of the self, which represented a hindrance to the fulfillment of the soul’s striving for the eternal. This anthropology came to stark expression in Plato’s account of the death of Socrates in the *Phaedo*. There we find the classic platonic definition of death as the “separation of the soul from the body,” λύσις καὶ χωρισμός ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος (67,d), by which Plato’s Socrates meant the liberation of that which is immortal in a human being from slavery to the impure and passible body. “Only then,” explains Plato’s master, “will we come into possession of that for which we strive, that which we truly love, knowledge of the eternal; only then when we die, for it remains hidden to the living” (66, d.e). The soul, therefore, that

which is the essence of human identity, has nothing to fear from death, because death cannot touch that which is truly the self. Indeed, only after death does the individual attain its fulfillment through returning to its first estate in eternity and its true concern in the contemplation of the forms. Thus, Cicero, to cite him once again, neatly sums up the classical tradition in this matter when he quotes the ancient inscription on the temple at Delphi, Γνωθι σεαυτόν, and comments: “When Apollo says, ‘Know yourself,’ he is saying, ‘Know your soul’” (Tusc. Disp., I,xxii.52). For the true self in the classical tradition was the immortal soul, and the realization of one’s self was attained through the metaphysical quest of turning from the sensible and the temporal and the bodily to the contemplation of the intelligible and eternal and impassible.

Christian theology is a missional enterprise. It is thus entirely appropriate that this metaphysical quest both formed the background for, and was integrated into, the two forms of theology that have dominated the western tradition, the Scholastic theology of the Medieval period and the Reformation theology that protested against it. Scholasticism built on the rhetorical claim expounded by the Apologists in the Patristic period that classical wisdom was in divine providence a *praeparatio evangelium*, and integrated the classical understanding of the self into its account of the Christian faith according to the schema expressed in Thomas Aquinas’ phrase, *gratia non destruit naturam sed perficit*, “nature is not destroyed but rather fulfilled by grace,” (Summa, 1a.1). The definitive representative of the Patristic period for the Scholastics was, of course, the fifth-century Bishop of Hippo, Augustine. In his writings, Augustine had repeatedly framed his driving concern in terms of a rhetorical question, “What do you wish to know?” and had just as repeatedly responded: “God and the Soul...that is all,” (See Sol. I, ii, 7; Conf. V, iv, 7; and De civ. dei XXII, xxix). The reason, as he declared in the *Confessions*, was quite simply that, “Through my soul I will ascend to [God]” (Conf. X, vii, 11). Scholasticism followed Augustine’s lead even as it reinterpreted his Neoplatonism, making the capacities of created human nature its point of departure, and depicting salvation as the soul’s ascent to the knowledge of God the Creator. A certain amount of tension between that anthropology and the creedal confession of the resurrection of the body is often observable. Thus, even when Aquinas sought to follow Aristotle in *De Anima* by insisting that the human person is the whole of both body and soul, he is clearly swimming against the current of the dominate assumptions of the tradition—and having a hard time of it [2]. This is discernible, moreover, not only in his *Summa*, where he discusses how we are to think of the passible body become impassible in resurrection—which is akin to discussing how we are to think of circles as squares—but in his commentary on I Corinthians 15, where his emphatic declaration, “anima mea non est ego,” “I am not my soul,” cannot alter the fact that the platonic doctrine of the soul as the enduring self plays a definite and decisive role in his explication of the Apostle’s argument [6]. For the soul was central to this tradition as that which was central to the self. As part of its created nature, the Scholastics— in dependence on their interpretation of Aristotle— insisted that the soul possesses an innate capacity for God, an openness for or a drive to ascend to the fulfillment of its nature in union with its eternal Creator. And while

that yearning was for that to which human nature cannot of itself attain, due to sin, it could be fulfilled through the infusion of grace mediated by the church through the sacraments beginning with baptism and ending with last rites. Thus, the classical narrative of the metaphysical quest was reinterpreted in terms of an account of the Christian Gospel—and that quest in turn reinterpreted the Gospel.

The Protestant Reformation neither changed nor challenged that reinterpretation. While the protest of the Reformers against Scholastic theology went to the root of Scholasticism's claim that human nature was fulfilled by grace, it never sought to alter the notion that the soul was the essential self or that human fulfillment was attained in eternity. The contradiction between nature and grace that the Reformation framed in the categories of law and gospel simply meant that the soul was denied any intrinsic drive toward God. Thus, Luther declared in his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* of 1517: "On the part of man however nothing precedes grace except ill will and even rebellion against grace" [9,10]. Continuing in that vein, Calvin argued that all that is good in the human soul was from God alone; "Nothing is ours," he maintained, "but sin" (*Inst.*, II, iii, 27). The tale of the soul was therefore retold in terms of the descent of God in Jesus Christ to the sinful human state, and the world was seen as the stage (*Luther's theatrum mundi*, Calvin's *theatrum gloriae dei*) upon which the drama of God and the soul was played out; a drama whose final act occurred in eternity.

### The narrative of the historical quest

The second way in which the western tradition has defined the self is in terms of the modern narrative of an historical quest and the epistemology that was fundamental to it. Whereas the ontological quest was concerned with the issue of death and saw the fulfillment of the person in the soul's ascent to the contemplation of the eternal and intelligible forms, the narrative of the historical quest turned away from death and concentrated its attention solely on life, depicting the fulfillment of human existence as occurring through informed choice in time. The Catholic philosopher, Charles Taylor, has remarked that with the Reformation western society turned from an emphasis on what he calls "extraordinary life" as the human ideal—the martyr or the saint, for instance, whose existence is wholly devoted to otherworldly pursuits—to a new appreciation of "ordinary life" as the human good; and ordinary life is human existence determined by the "ordinary" activities of family, civil society, and work [15]. His point is well taken and is exemplified by the lives of Luther and Calvin and a host of others who came after. Yet the turn to ordinary life that began with the Reformation—as Taylor well knows—only came to full expression with the emergence of the modern age. With the Enlightenment's turn from the medieval agenda of cosmology and theology, ordinary human life and its rational capacities became central in its own right. And thus, modernity set about to systematically dismantle the ontology that underlay the metaphysical quest and to propose a new vision of human life as an "historical quest." The old quest sought to attain to the fulfillment in eternity of a human nature determined by its divine Creator; but the new quest had as its project the realization

in time of a self-determining subject through the exercise of its own reason and will.

We can witness what is perhaps the most telling illustration of that development not in the theology but in the art of the sixteenth century. In the 1530s Michelangelo sculpted a set of figures that were to have adorned the tomb of Pope Julius II. For reasons not entirely clear they were never delivered, and they now line the gallery in Florence's Accademia de Belii Arti that leads to the rotunda where Michelangelo's statue of David stands. The figures are called the "Awakening Captives," and they depict human beings emerging out of blocks of stone into the light of day. We can see in these forms ripping themselves out of the rock a graphic depiction of what is perhaps the deepest concern of Renaissance and of Modern anthropology as well: the escape of the individual from the givenness of nature and nature's God. Previously the human person had been assumed to be an expression of a divinely ordained nature: defined though a hierarchy of being, divine decrees, orders of creation, familial and ecclesiastical hierarchy, the divine right of kings, and the immortal soul's intrinsic drive to strive toward the source of its being in its eternal Creator. But with the advent of the modern, humanity would assert its own definition of itself, and it would do so in the pursuit of "ordinary life" in the course of human history.

The key to that transition in the definition of the self was a shift in what is sometimes referred to as "first philosophy," i.e., the fundamental question that is asked in a tradition of philosophical inquiry. From the classical age to the Reformation, the West had asked the ontological question in the face of death, "What is real?," i.e., "What does not suffer change or pass away?," and pursued an understanding of the self accordingly. With the Enlightenment, however, the "first philosophy" of the West underwent a profound change: now the question was not What is real? but rather How can I know what is real (in the pursuit of ordinary life)? The emphasis in that question is not just on the verb, "to know," but perhaps even more so on the pronoun, "I." For with the birth of modernity there is a Copernican shift of perspective with regard to our conception of the human self. René Descartes is the representative figure here. He argued that the self as *res cogitans* (the "thinking thing") was to be understood as the autonomous individual subject in the act of coming to know the world as object, the *res extensa*, as he called it, the "thing extended in space and time" (see Descartes, 1975). As such, the individual human subject gained mastery over the object of knowledge—the object became merely a thing to be bent to the subject's will and with that mastery came the ability to turn that object to the service of the human good, the ultimate expression of which was the realization of human freedom. The self is thus no longer viewed as embedded in the givenness of nature and determined by nature's God. Rather, the self asserts itself as the subject of knowledge, and therefore as the subject of progressive control over the natural world, and therefore as the subject of its own history. Thus, the modern self is the individual that stands as the knowing and willing subject over and against the object of the world of nature, and as such is that which defines itself in the course of what it makes of its self and its world in its history. This notion of



a self-defining and thereby self-fulfilling subject is nicely illustrated by a passage concerning free will found in Descartes' well-known letter of 1647 written to Christina of Sweden:

Now freewill is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects; and its rightful use is the greatest of all the goods we possess, and further there is nothing that is more our own or that matters more to us. From all this it follows that nothing but freewill can produce our greatest contentments [4,5].

Thus, as the metaphysical quest defined the self as the soul and sought its end in the soul's ascent to the eternal, so the historical quest defined the self as the subject and declared that subject's end to be self-realization (i.e., in producing its 'contentments' through reason and will) in ordinary life in time.

Just as the western church had earlier pursued its theological mission in conversation with Classical notions of the self, so the historical quest in its turn came to form the general background for the theology of its age, and therefore the historical quest and its conception of the self-as-subject became part of all genuinely modern forms of theology. Epistemological and thus methodological issues came to the fore in theology, taking the form of claims about innate "God-consciousness" or "religious intuition" or "self-transcendence" on the one hand, and divine revelation (with God now conceived of not as *esse* but as a self-revealing subject) and the authority of scripture or the papal see on the other. The account of the self took shape accordingly, either as the subject of religious knowledge or the object of divine self-revelation. Moreover, temporal life became central and thus history became paramount: western civilization was declared on the one hand to be on the way to the realization of the kingdom of God in history, or on the other hand time was depicted as "godless" and "god-forsaken" while humanity was castigated as descending into a new paganism that could only end in an apocalypse.

### The contemporary crisis of the self

That now brings us to the contemporary crisis of the self that has emerged in recent decades as the enchantment that the Enlightenment cast upon the western world better than three hundred years ago has slowly dissipated. The cultural history of the West can be told as the story of the coexistence, cooperation, and conflict of these two narratives and their depictions of the human quest. But by the beginning of the twenty-first century much has changed for proponents of both the metaphysical and the historical quest—and much has changed for our understanding of the human as well. Ironically, as the narrative of human nature seeking the salvation of the soul in eternity was abandoned in the course of the reductionist and rationalistic process central to the modern age, the Enlightenment project and its narrative of the subject's realization of its self in time has faltered as well. If the light of modernity blazed brightly from the eighteenth to the twentieth century as it played the role of the "reasonable" secular critic seeking to liberate humanity from an oppressive "dogmatic" cultural and religious tradition, then by the twenty-first century its flame has burned low and flickers. The reason is found in the very

process of modernity itself: "its incandescence," as Michael Polanyi has explained, "fed on the combustion of the Christian heritage in the oxygen of Greek rationalism, and when this fuel was exhausted the critical framework itself burnt away" [12]. The Enlightenment and the modern age it engendered always lived off the dynamic of its critical reaction to traditions rooted in the past. But as these "enlightened" traditions found themselves in the twentieth century in a situation in which the social and cultural world dominated by those earlier accounts of our humanity was rapidly passing away, and they could no longer continue to simply function as critic. Instead, their representatives increasingly had to step forward and take up the task of producing a better alternative not just in theory but in reality. The results of this change in the role played by the Enlightenment traditions have been disappointing, to say the least. As that disappointment has grown, it has been transmuted by figures like the "masters of suspicion"—Marx, Nietzsche and Freud—and those who have followed after them into a profound mistrust both of all the ways that human identity is formed in the western world—society, culture, family, church—as well as all the forms of human identity they produce. And having once been discredited, they began to be forgotten.

Thus, the central themes of the modern human narrative—the self-realization of the subject through informed choice in time—have become problematic. The epistemological foundations of modern humanism are now eroded: modern psychology dispelled the illusion of the priority of rationality, neurobiology has reduced the 'mind' to the 'brain,' and our conception of 'reason' has gone from a universal human faculty to a pluriform cultural product shaped by language, race, gender, social location, and experience. Anything but self-transcendent, now "rationality itself," as Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, "whether theoretical or practical, is a concept with a history" [11].

The notion of human history as the story of progressive self-realization has itself become a problem today. *Sapere aude!* ("Dare to know!"), exhorted Kant in *What is the Enlightenment?* Knowledge, he claimed in the name of *Aufklärung*, would result in our control over the natural world, and that control would be turned to the betterment of the human condition. History, therefore, was to become the story of human progress. Yet we have discovered that the technology that is the product of our reason can serve not just as the boon but the bane of humanity and of the earth itself; and bitter experience has taught us that our 'enlightened' ideologies do not just advance those values we would privilege, they also marginalize and oppress individuals and peoples as well. Revulsion at the uses to which we have put scientific knowledge and fear as to what horrors that knowledge might allow us to perpetrate next, social resentment at continuing—even exacerbated—divisions and inequities, political frustration at the limited achievements of public policy as expressions of enlightened reason and will, cultural disappointment at the fecklessness of optimistic humanism, as well as a disconcerting personal dissatisfaction with the fulfillment promised by consumerism, have produced a social world of frustration and incipient despair concerning the question of our humanity. While we must note that these developments are

complex and on-going, their consequence is not: the failures of these claims of reason and progress to sustain themselves means that the modern narrative of the self-realization of the human through the historical quest has become increasingly problematic and increasingly easy to forget.

Today, therefore, we live not in possession but in want of self; and as a consequence, our identity has become not just a question that intrigues but a crisis that bedevils us. In the eighteenth-century Alexander Pope, articulating a theme that ran through the Enlightenment, famously declaimed:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of Mankind is Man [13].

Yet that study has come to no good end. Our claims to be beings defined by self-transcendent reason engaged in the progress of history have given way to nihilism. The “self” has become not our boast but our despair. Manifest throughout our culture, this has become one of the most distinctive characteristics of our age. Two examples will suffice. The literary critic Glicksberg [7] made precisely this point some thirty years ago, when, while summarizing the marks of twentieth century literature, he noted that, Plagued by the widening split in human consciousness [sc. between “scientific” claims about “fact” and humanistic claims about “value”], the modern writer is faced with the baffling problem of picturing a self that seems to have lost its reality. Dwelling in a universe that he looks upon as alien and hostile, man today retreats within the fastness of the self, only to discover that he does not know himself [7].

And the philosopher Roger Trigg, commenting on issues of social justice, echoes this concern when he notes that “it is one of the paradoxes of the current age that there is much agitation in favor of human rights...yet at the same time...the idea of the ‘human’ is hotly contested, and [thus] the notion of rights seems to have no grounding, in rationality or anything else.” For, as he summarizes the point: “...any conception of human rights without any conception of human beings is incoherent” [14]. The question of the human itself, therefore, has become critical. One and all, we now sit by the waters like Narcissus of ancient myth, and stare into the ocean of images of the human with which the media constantly inundates us, desperately seeking to discover our self. But as Christopher Lasch has noted, today this kind of narcissism is an expression of self-loss rather than self-love, because unlike Narcissus of old, we stare into the waters not to recognize and revel in our beauty, but rather in a vain attempt to identify and lay claim to our humanity [8]. Today we are become truly “selfless”: not as those who think only of others, but as those who no longer know what to think of ourselves.

### Asking God’s first question today

It is in this context that Christian theology now finds itself—and must find itself, if it is to find itself at all. To put it bluntly: “their” problem is now “our” problem; this crisis is not just that of contemporary secular society, it is the crisis of contemporary Christian theology as well. From the Patristic to the Medieval to the Reformation era, the classical ontological anthropology that

was taken up by Christendom shaped the accounts of the self as different yet similar as those of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. In one form or another they are all representatives of the narrative of the metaphysical quest. From the rise of modernity with the Enlightenment turn to the rational subject in figures such as Descartes, Locke and Kant, modern theology has conceived of the human in the categories of epistemology, as we see in the varied accounts of Schleiermacher and Hegel in the nineteenth century, and Barth, Rahner, Tillich and Pannenberg in the twentieth century. Each is in this sense a variation on the theme of the narrative of the historical quest. But now both of these final quests are in crisis—and thus, so is Christian theology. It is precisely in the midst of that crisis that we can and must ask the question of the human once again.

Where do we start? I suggest that it is time that we turn from the narratives of the final quests that have dominated our accounts of the self to a theology of God’s first question. The first question that God is depicted as asking in the biblical narrative is uttered in the garden as God comes to seek Adam and Eve in the “cool of the evening breeze.” “Where are you?” God calls (Genesis 3:9), a question not of human location but of identity that echoes down through the whole of the narrative of the Bible. To that question we must now attend—in a very real sense for the very first time in our history. Christian theology has borrowed from and tinkered with and traded on the anthropology of the ancients and the moderns; but now we must undertake the task of theological anthropology ourselves—for the sake of the mission of Christian theology itself. In the twenty-first century we must turn from the Classical question of What? (What is real?) and the Enlightenment question of How? (How do I know?) to the contemporary question of Who? For all those who call themselves Christian theologians and understand that as a call to serve God’s mission in the world must finally come to understand that it is not only we who are searching for our humanity, God is searching as well.

The focus for such a contemporary theological anthropology is God’s humanity in the world, Jesus the Christ. One of the most disconcerting aspects of the history of Christian theology is how little attention has really been paid to the fact that at the center of Christian discourse about God there stands a human being. Jesus has always been more but never less than fully human for Christianity, yet we have devoted very little thought to the fact that the heart of the Gospel is the proclamation of God’s humanity in the world. The challenge to early Christianity as it emerged from the Jewish subculture in the Roman Empire into the Hellenistic culture that dominated the second century concerned the Christian insistence that in Jesus Christ we have to do with God. The earliest non-canonical Christian sermon, the earliest Christian baptismal formula, the earliest Christian hymn—indeed, the earliest pagan description of Christian worship, all express that claim. Aside from occasional reflections fairly early in the period on the significance of Christ’s resurrection for anthropology, and the concern to hold together yet differentiate between Christ’s divine and human natures late in the period, little or no thought was spared for the fact that, in the words of John 1:14, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Gospel is about God becoming flesh! Not

about how humans come to be like God, but about how God came to be human and to make it possible for us to become human as well! Or, better said, how God has come in Jesus Christ to become what we have not and of ourselves cannot but through the gift of new creation in God's Spirit will yet become: God's image and likeness in God's creating. Little has changed in the theological tradition since the Patristic period in this regard. Yet no significant advance in theological anthropology can be made that does not reckon in a new way with the humanity of God that is Jesus of Nazareth. The work of the 'later' Karl Barth, not the post-World War I biblical commentator who declared that God was ganz anders than the world or human consciousness, but the post-World War II theologian who underwent a *Hinwendung zur Welt* and thus wrote the essay entitled *The Humanity of God* after giving an account of theological anthropology in *Church Dogmatics III/2*, points the way. These texts are an initial sign that this unhappy state of affairs might yet change for the better, for in that latter text he clearly states what must become the starting point for all future Christian anthropology:

We first go back to the source of understanding which alone can be authentic and normative for the theological doctrine of man's nature. We find our bearings and our instruction as we look to the constitution of the humanity of Jesus. With the clarity and certainty that we gain here, we can then set out the propositions in which the Christian understanding of the constitution of all men generally may be expressed and comprehended (CD III/2, 227).

With those words, Barth [1] begins- only begins but really begins- the task of a theology that asks God's first question- and seeks to answer it as does the biblical narrative: in terms of God's humanity in the world, Jesus the Christ. It is now incumbent upon the Christian theologians of the twenty-first century that we take up that unfinished task- for God's sake and for our sake and for the sake of all creation. In doing so, we must bring healing to an age suffering from the cultural equivalent of Alzheimer's disease. An age that has forgotten the long history of the western wrestling

with the question of human identity, an age that has forgotten what that tradition never quite learned, that in Jesus Christ God defines what God calls humanity to be to know and to do.

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