CONTOURS OF A WORLD VIEW

by

ARTHUR F. HOLMES

Copyright © 1983 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Inter-Varsity Press
38 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GP, England
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company
255 Jefferson S E., Grand Rapids, MI 49503

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of Inter-Varsity Press.

First Published 1983
Reprinted 1985

ISBN 0 85110 719 2

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data:

Holmes, Arthur Frank, 1924-
Contours of a world view
(Studies in a Christian world view, v. 1)
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Civilisation, Christian. I. Title. II. Series.
BR 115.C5 H56 1983 230 82-21096

Inter-Varsity Press is the publishing division of the Universities and Colleges
Christian Fellowship (formerly the Inter-Varsity Fellowship), a student move-
ment linking Christian Unions in universities and colleges throughout the British
Isles, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical
Students. For information about local and national activities in Britain write to
UCCF, 38 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GP.
CHAPTER 7
PERSONS IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The contrast between naturalistic and Christian views of the person focuses on two essentials: whether our unique freedom is to be understood most basically in relation to nature or to God, and how we can be held responsible for our failures. This chapter will enlarge on these two points from a Christian perspective, presenting a way of speaking about human persons that is both biblical and pertinent to the humanities and behavioral science.

We must bear in mind that the Bible speaks about humankind both in explicit assertions and in its history and its realistic portrayal of individuals. Moreover, it presents Jesus Christ as the Ideal Man, Son of Man as well as Son of God, both fully human and fully divine. In him we see what the Creator intended us to be like. Humankind was made in God’s image, but, among all the daughters and sons of Adam, only Jesus Christ fully embodies the image of the living God. A Christian view of the human person should therefore be explicitly Christocentric.

First we shall look at persons as relational beings, then as responsible beings, and finally at the effect of sin and grace on both relationships and responsibilities. It is a three-layered approach, the second layer being an overlay on the first, and the third an overlay on the other two.

PERSONS ARE RELATIONAL BEINGS

Human beings exist within a vast and complex system of interrelationships. No individual, nor all of us together, can exist in iso-
lation, for both individually and collectively we originate and draw sustenance from outside ourselves. Physically, psychologically, and in every way, we depend on the whole scheme of things in which we participate. No man is a self-contained island, nor can I alone ever master my own fate or captivate my own soul.

In a day informed by the sciences and with an increasing awareness of ecology and environmental matters, this is a truism. The secular humanist readily admits its truth, and moderates his optimism accordingly. But the theist did not have to wait for recent knowledge and recent shortages to convince him of human dependency and finiteness, for it is explicit biblically, even supposing it has not always been plain in everyday experience. Creatureliness means dependency, so we are relational beings. Theism goes further in this regard than naturalism. I am dependent not only on nature and on other persons but also on God, directly so as his creature, and indirectly so because the world of things and people on which I depend is created, too. Unavoidably I exist in relationship to God, to nature, and to other persons, as well as to myself.

(1) Most basically we exist in relation to God the Creator. From him we draw our very existence, our livelihood, our abilities and resources, every good quality of our existence, our purpose, meaning, and hope—all this the doctrine of creation implies. In him we live and move and have our being, and to him we remain accountable. It is the overarching theme of the Bible, and it is central in both Christian theology and a Christian world view. We exist before God in all we are and do. Whether we recognize it or not, if God is Creator of all, then we are always and in everything dependent on him.

But this relationship includes more than dependency, for human beings are made in the image of God. Persons in God’s image have their focus and meaning outside themselves, their uniqueness consists in a theocentric existence, and they therefore cannot be viewed in naturalistic fashion. The Bible does not point to one unique part or aspect of the person as God’s image, but takes a more wholistic view. As entire beings combining spiritual and physical existence in personal and historical activity, humans reflect the God who is personal and who also acts historically. One writer, following an ancient usage whereby the king was an image of the gods, their representative on earth, suggests that God’s image in us means that we represent him who is spiritually present but physically unseen.

We symbolize his presence in the way we combine the spiritual with the physical in this earthly life.¹

The New Testament points in a similar direction, for there it is the Son of Man who is the image of the invisible God. He is the eternal spirit incarnated and active physically, fully God and fully man, reaffirming thereby not only the value of creation in general but also that of human persons in particular. The value of being human is thus ultimately in bearing God’s image in this world, an astounding calling indeed.²

Some theologians have been more specific. Origen and Clement of Alexandria took the image to be humanity’s distinguishing characteristic, and in Greek fashion called it reason. Thomas Aquinas and many of the Scholastics agreed, distinguishing it from Adam’s likeness to God, which they identified as an original righteousness that sin destroyed. The Reformers, on the other hand, viewed original righteousness as part of the image, all of which is now terribly marred by sin. So the Westminster Shorter Catechism says “God created man male and female, after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.” Luther, however, confined the image to human power over other creatures. More recently Karl Barth has maintained that God’s image is in the male and female relationship itself (Gen. 1:27).

Whichever way one goes in these specifics, however, a human being’s relationship to God, seen both in dependency on God and in bearing God’s image in this world, makes us all at heart religious beings. Our highest end, our all-inclusive supreme good, is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. As Dooyeweerd has emphasized, this religious heart of the matter lies at the root of both human action and theoretical thought: out of the heart are all the issues of life. As dependent, we must seek God in all we are and do. As responsible image-bearers, we represent the Creator in all of it, too.


2. E.g., Gen. 9:6; James 3:5; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; Heb. 11:1–3.
CONTOURS OF A WORLD VIEW

This makes religion far more basic and inclusive than it sometimes appears. Civil religion is a fringe benefit that blesses the political status quo without either grounding or challenging it. Mystical religion can remove us from involvement in this world. Much popular religion is a romanticized experience of peace with ourselves, and too much piety is compartmentalized from “secular” life. But if in the very essence of our humanity and its every expression we depend on God and represent him, too, then no compartmentalization of life is possible, and religion is far more foundational than any veneer or heartwarming experience. Human persons are by nature God-seekers created to worship and serve the living God with their whole being. This is first and basic in what it means to be a human person.

(2) We therefore do not exist in relation to God apart from but rather within our other relationships. We exist before God in relation to nature, for we are made of the dust of the earth, our origin and potentialities rooted in the physical, and our present duties there. Generic identity established at conception, is physical. The nourishment necessary, if not sufficient, for bodily and emotional and mental development is physical. The work of our hands and mind take and deploy the physical. Arts and crafts give it pleasing and enriching form. Science and technology explore and employ it. Even our eternal destiny involves a resurrected body. Implicit in this relation to nature, we find a mandate for physical and behavioral science, for work and play and art.

We are both dependent on nature and responsible for it, and some have taken the image of God to refer specifically to this responsibility (Gen. 1:26–30). Adam’s sin, like ours, disrupted nature’s balance (Gen. 3:17–19). Yet Isaiah’s hope for redemption includes nature’s restoration; and Jesus reminds us of God’s concern even for lilies and sparrows. C. F. D. Moule accordingly speaks of “a Biblical ecology” in which we play a part.3

We can be both dependent on nature and responsible, for while we are physical beings, in us spirit is present and active, too. This is evident in biblical terminology, which lacks the Greek dichotomy we often superimpose on it. “Soul” (OT nēphesh, NT psyche) is used of a living being, not of an immaterial, eternal entity imprisoned in a body, despite the fact that we have a destiny beyond death. “Spirit” (OT nāšāh, NT pneuma) conveys the idea of life-giving breath, God-given, but it also comes to refer to the religious life of a person and to the living God himself, the unseen but life-giving Spirit. The human spirit also is active, life-directing, not at all reducible to physical energy. Both soul and spirit, however, refer primarily to phenomena in human life as a whole. Biblical language is prephilosophical, without the metaphysical distinctions that Greek philosophy introduced.

Sometimes “spirit” contrasts with “flesh” (sarx). The latter term is used in two different senses: it may simply refer to the physical body, or it may speak of the person as a sinner. Corporeality is not sin, and our tie to nature is not the cause of evil: if it were, the purpose of human existence in terms of spiritual activity within the physical would be denied. Human responsibility would dwindle, asceticism would result, and a disembodied state would be our only salvation.

A Christian understanding allows no such other-worldliness, whether Manichean or Platonic. Manichean dualism took matter to be eternal and our bodies to be the cause of evil. Plato thought matter by itself to be chaotic, a handicap to ordered existence, rational understanding, and moral virtue. But at the creation God called our participation in nature “good.” The Old Testament writers rejoice in physical beauty and are awed by its grandeur. They delight in food, drink, sight, sound, sexuality. In Christ, moreover, God incarnated himself in the physical, and the Ideal Man dearly enjoyed the world of nature and readily took his place in it. He even became a craftsman, an artist.

But a Christian view also cannot harbor this-worldliness, because it would reduce humankind to a mere part and product of nature, and deny humanity’s spiritual nature. Naturalism is disallowed because, while we are indeed a part and product of this world, we are not just that, and our being cannot be wholly explained by causal laws alone. To be sure, we can be studied biologically and behaviorally, as objects of scientific inquiry, but there is more to us than natural objects. We are subjects, too, with an inwardness that transcends the world around us in relationship not only to God but to other persons as well.

The contrast with the naturalisms of the last chapter is plain. In the Christian view, persons are subject to the physical influences


110
to which naturalism points, but they are more than that alone allows. Human hopes, values, and ideas, our frustrations, our freedom, and our foolishness—subjects of much literature and art—say something important too. We formulate theories and criticize them; we even come up with mistaken views and judge them to be right or wrong. In pursuit of values, we rise above the predictable. If naturalism has problems accounting for all this, it is because of the claim that freedom and hope and worth and rationality all depend on our place in nature alone.

At the other extreme, when our relationship to nature is ignored, people are taken to be more free and more fully responsible than in fact they are. When environmental limitations are not seriously regarded, the victim and the criminal are told they can do and be anything they choose. But even the American frontier individualist faced the stark facts of barren deserts, impassible mountains, and psychological limitations. We are not completely free. Genetic conditions afford the ground and establish parameters for what we become. Environment provides both possibilities and limitations. In these regards, biological and behavioral science do illuminate the humane scene.

(3) In a natural world devoid of other persons, a man or woman would be alone, with no fitting life-helper; but "it is not good for man to be alone," said the Creator. This again underscores the uniqueness of humankind: the person is qualitatively different to such an extent that he has none but his own kind to identify with. More than herd instinct is involved, for what persons need is friends, both to give and to receive love. A person is no Robinson Crusoe, alone on an island with his goats and his God. The kind of individualism Descartes's Enlightenment philosophy portrays, which sees human relationships as something added to what a rational being already is by nature, is alien to the essential nature of persons and unknown in Scripture. I am what I am, I gain self-awareness and identity, I discover my own inwardness in relationship and not in isolation. A woman bore me, parents named and nurtured me, family and friends filled my early years with experiences that shaped me, teachers and employers played their part, and for many years now my own wife and family and associates have contributed to what I have become. I exist, necessarily, in relation to other persons.

No one is completely independent, but complete and unilateral dependence is not the picture, either. Rather, interdependence pre-

vails. The male-female relationship, biblically and experientially, is the paradigm case. God made each to complement the other, interdependent individuals in a fully personal relationship with each other. Marriage expresses a kind of biological, psychological, economic, moral, and religious unity that is possible only between persons.

Existential thinkers have seen the difference that a personal quality to relationships can make. If I relate to my wife as to an object, I to it, then I dominate her and use and repress her, and remain closed to what she could be to herself. But if we relate to each other as persons, subject to subject with trust and openness and mutuality, then communication develops, as does friendship. This is egalitarian, equal persons equally respected and equally responsible. It evokes love, not the eros that desires for oneself, often selfishly, but the agapé that gives of oneself in serving the other. Such relationships to other persons are the matrix where freedom and responsibility come alive. I become my brother's keeper, and he becomes mine.

Relations with other persons, like relationships to God and to nature, reveal both dependence and responsibility. The life of Jesus, the Ideal Man, also reveals biological dependency, for he, too, was conceived and nurtured by a woman. Like any child, he depended for years, physically and economically, on others. He chose disciples to share his life and work; he called them friends. In his dying he depended on others for a sop and a grave. In his living and dying alike, then, the dependence was plain. But he also accepted responsibility for family and friends, for the sick, sad, hungry, and guilt-ridden. Where marriage was formerly the paradigm for relationships between persons, the life and death of Jesus now became the prime example of love.

Pure religion and undefiled, said James, is like that. By the time James wrote, the church had become a visible image on earth, born and nurtured by God's love, composed of interdependent people serving one another responsibly in love. And we shall see later that this informs the Christian ethic.

Much of this interpersonal emphasis is evident in other than Christian thought. This is to be expected if interpersonal dependency is indeed rooted in human nature; although the Christian is likely to ascribe to divine providence its resurgence in a world struggling with dehumanization. It is also to be expected in view of the
which supplied my genetic materials and much of my environment. Other persons and the society of which I am a part shape me, too. Together, all of these relationships provide possibilities and parameters for what as an individual I can become. To that extent I am a product of relationships; my freedom is limited; I cannot do or be whatever I might want.

Yet I am not a product of these relationships alone. I am what I am, the individual I am, by virtue of the possibilities I have actualized out of many that existed. It depends on how by the grace of God I have put it all together, interiorizing experiences, accepting, rejecting, sifting, reshaping. Human individuality is real, because God's image in man makes it possible for spirit to shape a life, and so I am in measure under God my own doing.

The key to individuality, in biblical terminology, is the "heart." This is not the seat of emotion as in common English parlance, but rather the integrating core of a person's life and character. Out of the heart are the issues of life; as a man thinks in his heart so he is, and with the heart he believes or not. While the terms "soul" and "spirit" are extended biblically at times to animals, though with somewhat different associations, the term "heart" is so used only once in my knowledge, and then in a markedly different sense. The human individual has self-conscious inwardness, with intentions, attitudes, and values of his own, and as such he has distinctive possibilities and responsibility, too. He stands back, he thinks and chooses, he examines his own life, and then he examines that self-examination. By reflecting on his life he transcends it, and by evaluating that reflection he transcends it again. He transcends in thought and purpose what he already is, and in acting on that purpose he becomes different. By virtue of this inner freedom of the human spirit, God has given us the possibility of shaping our individuality as well as our societies. Individuality is then to be appreciated. I can accept my individual possibilities and limitations as God's good gift, or I can resent what is given and either try to be what I cannot or should not, or else listlessly drift.

Naturalistic world views, however, lack this standpoint, and according to Reinhold Niebuhr, they destroy individuality. Any monism, where everything is of one sort and subject to one kind of


causal process, struggles to make room for individuality. But without
the vitality of the human spirit with its self-transcendence and free-
dom, physical processes alone cannot give rise to freedom and mean-
ingful individuality. For Marx, therefore, the individual is
subordinated to the socioeconomic conditions of history. For
Nietzsche, even the difference between strong and weak wills is
biologically grounded. The result for naturalism is that individuals
too easily become objects, replaceable, and not valued for them-
selves. Sexual partners become interchangeable commodities with-
out distinctively individual worth. In extreme individualism and
collectivism alike, workers (and customers, too) become replaceable
parts in an economic machine, rather than remaining human indi-
viduals of worth in themselves and valued as such by others. A
Christian view of persons, mediating between extremes, leads to an
ethic of love that is far different from this.

Another aspect of the person's relationship to self concerns
temporality. I am the individual I am through past, present, and
future. Identity continues, though its character changes. As Shakes-
ppeare said, one man in his time plays many parts; yet to be human
embraces them all—their foibles, anxieties, triumphs, and fail-
ures—and I must live with all this in relating to myself. To accept
this self may not be easy: guilt cannot always be repressed; self-
worth inflates and the self can suffer.

The realization of “being unto death,” in Heidegger's words,
adds to life's anxieties. It grows with advancing years and is under-
scored by an annoying litany in biblical genealogies: he lived so
many years, “and he died.” This realization affects my present,
and how I interiorize it contributes to making me the individual I am.
Death shapes life, and my view of death shapes my view of myself.
Here the contrast with naturalistic humanism could not be greater.
Is this life terminal or not? And what does that say of my value?

A Christian view of persons deals realistically with each aspect
of temporality. It knows no escapist solutions, but it encourages
acceptance of youth, old age, and even dying, not a fatalistic ac-
ceptance but one filled with hope and purpose because of God's
providence and grace. Christ's relationships with people reveal the
value he placed on them at all stages in life. His own life and death
reveal purpose, too. He died young. But he extended to others the
purpose and hope he knew in living and in dying. He knew that
what matters most in being human is not temporary but everlasting.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God, nothing time can
ever bring, for that relationship endures. Moreover, the Christian
anticipates the resurrection of the dead with its continued relation-
ship to the physical, and the eternal kingdom with its relationships
to other persons. Personal identity in these relationships will last,
and I can accept myself and live this present life with joy and
responsibility as a result.

PERSONS ARE RESPONSIBLE BEINGS

If the relational character of the human person is one dominant
theme that confronts us in Scripture, a second and equally dominant
theme is that God holds us responsible. This fact of being obligated
and answerable to God is overwhelmingly clear, and distinguishes
humans from other earthlings. We are responsible for imaging God's
activity in the physical world. Our vocation is summed up in the
creation mandate to be responsible for filling the earth and exer-
cising dominion. We are here by divine appointment.

The scope of human responsibility includes the entire range of
relationships we have just considered. We are obligated and an-
swerable first and foremost and in everything to God, responsible
for a relationship to him that is marked by creaturely worship and
loving obedience, responsible therefore for how we think about God
as well as how we act. We are responsible to him in our relationship
to nature, for respecting our physical being and the natural resources
with which we are entrusted, for using and conserving them wisely
for economic and aesthetic and other ends, not with self-indulgent
exploitation or abuse but with a grateful enjoyment that celebrates
and responds to God's goodness. Responsible art and science, a
responsible economy and technology, responsible bodily care and
physical enjoyment—all this is implied. We are responsible, too,
for other persons: I am always my brother's keeper. Social morality
arises from respect for others, because their worth and dignity de-
pends on their being God's creatures in God's image, too. But re-
spect for persons extends equally to myself as to others: I am
responsible for how I treat myself and how I handle my present and
future possibilities. Self-respect and personal development are mat-
ers of Christian stewardship.

To be responsible in any of these regards implies that I can do
something that will make the relationship different. Freedom and
responsibility are inseparable, for as creatures of God we are never completely autonomous or independent, never absolutely or unqualifiedly free. We exist always in relation to God, with God-given freedom and with responsibility to him.

Responsibility is unique to persons. Persons act intentionally, with purpose and thought. Natural events are not intentional and self-conscious, but are caused. Persons can often act otherwise than they do, but things have no choice in the matter. Events simply occur, but actions are performed. Not everything a person "does" is an action in this sense, deliberate and with reasons, for man is a biological and emotional being, too, outwardly as well as inwardly oriented, a creature of habit responding to stimuli as well as a creature of choice initiating actions. Yet act we do, rather than remaining spectators or going with the tide of events. How we act makes a difference, and in a world of relationships we are properly responsible to people other than ourselves alone.6

Responsible action requires conscious thought and moral decision. As a responsible agent, a person is then both a reflective and a valuing being. The old label "rational being," at least as sometimes understood, is too narrow. To many, it connotes the Greek or Enlightenment rule of reason that we declined to endorse before, and the incessant demand for logically certain knowledge. But "reflection" includes various sorts of mental activity with reference to myself, my relationships, and my responsibilities. It may include belief as well as knowledge, passionate involvement as well as detached inquiry, practical concerns as well as theoretical contemplation. Creative imagination is present, too, in the artist, the planner, the thinker who explores possibilities he has sensed but not known. Weighing of ends and means, the choice of words and materials, pondering problems, evaluating options, perceiving, intending, arguing, interpreting, reminiscing, questioning the meaning of life—all of this and more I include in reflection. The human person is in this broad sense a reflective being.

Yet it is not reflective capacity alone, any more than it was the old-style "reason" alone, that makes the person a responsible agent.


For we reflect not only on things that happened once or happen now when we decide on a responsible action but we reflect also on what we want to happen in the future, on why we want it, and what we value most. We are valuing beings, too.

To value is to prize, to idealize a goal or end. What we value therefore guides what we do. How we value it affects the intensity and determination with which we do it. How responsibly we act depends significantly on our values. The Bible speaks of this when it speaks of what and how we ought to love, for to value is to love. We are not to love ourselves more highly than we ought, not to love the things of this world in certain ways, not to love the praise of men, but to love God, to love justice, to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

We love a vast array of things and all sorts of possibilities, sometimes less and sometimes more of them than we should. Some are more valued than others and some less, and it is possible to be lured in a variety of conflicting directions by conflicting values. What we need to give life order, unity, and overall direction is a unifying end that we value most of all and regard as the very highest. For if values shape actions, then one's highest value or supreme good will shape the other values themselves and doubly shape the actions. Free and responsible action requires not just values but the right values, rightly ordered to enhance the highest good.

If as responsible beings we are responsible for our actions, then as reflective beings we are responsible for our thoughts and imaginations, and as valuing beings we are responsible for our values. This goes against the humanistic tendency to blame behavior and values on social or genetic factors, yet the tenth commandment speaks to the sin of covetousness that combines thoughts with mistaken values into wrong desires and intentions. Jesus held the person guilty who committed adultery or murder "in his heart," and Paul clearly and repeatedly advised his readers where to set their affections. We are held responsible for loving both what and as we ought.

What we have just said about persons as free and responsible agents raises metaphysical questions that lurk barely below the surface of this whole discussion about human beings. What in our makeup is different from other creatures? What makes possible the kind and degree of freedom we seem to possess, as well as other distinctively personal properties? What in us survives death? Is there indeed a free and immaterial soul as has often been supposed?
A variety of philosophical alternatives has been used in articulating a Christian point of view on these matters. A Platonic sort of position influential in the early church was that the soul is an immaterial entity, physically indestructible and therefore immortal. But physical indestructibility merely shows the possibility of surviving bodily destruction, not complete indestructibility for whatever cause: every created thing, the soul included, remains contingent on God's creative power and is therefore destructible still. Descartes' view, which has held attention now for several centuries, is that body and soul are two separate entities with different properties, each causing events to occur in the other, but the soul is endowed with free will. His problem was twofold: to explain how two so qualitatively different things could interact, and to account for the essential unity of a personality. The preferable view here was the Aristotelian, that soul and body are organically united, each being essential now to the proper functioning and development of the other, while the soul actualizes in this life the capacity both for national deliberation and free decision. Some have preferred idealist solutions, such as the gradualist proposal that everything in existence is a manifestation of underlying spiritual reality, of which the human soul emerges as the fullest actualization we know in this world. Some even suggest a naturalistic view of the human person (though not of God) and think our distinctively human functions are entirely supported by highly complex physical processes, yet allow for a future life simply by virtue of a resurrected body.

The biblical components for an acceptable view of persons are relatively simple, if we remember that the scriptural notions of "soul" and "spirit" are not metaphysical concepts but more descriptive of functions. Our creaturely dependence on God for every aspect of our existence is the first. The uniqueness of persons in God's image is also crucial, along with the fact that we are ourselves agents whom God holds responsible for character and choices, thoughts and actions. Human beings, too, are capable of a kind of community that is unique in creation. As far as a future life is concerned, relatively little is said in Scripture about disembodied existence (between death and resurrection) beyond Paul's statement that absence from the body means being in the presence of God. The larger emphases and fuller statements refer to a fully resurrebted life following the resurrection of the dead. In this, an essential unity of personality, functionally at least, is clear.

Within these parameters are various alternatives. Some options may appear better suited than others if we think, for example, that Platonic and naturalistic solutions squeeze the biblical components out of their most natural shape. Some may appear more adaptable to our knowledge of cybernetics or the like. My own preference is for a body-soul dualism in close organic unity, so that we function in many if not all regards as holistic beings rather than having separate body functions and soul functions. But this preference must stop short of claiming that no other kind of view will do. We simply do not know enough to make so strong a claim.

RELATIONSHIPS AND RESPONSIBILITIES ARE RADICALLY AFFECED BY BOTH SIN AND GRACE

Psychologist Karl Menninger tells of a stern-faced, plainly dressed man on a street corner in the Chicago Loop, pointing an accusing finger at people and intoning one word: "Guilty!" Embarrassed, wondering how he ever knew, his victims hastily passed him by. Menninger was introducing the subject of his book Whatever Happened to Sin? which underscores the lack of a sense of responsibility in society, and claims that socially unacceptable behavior is a symptom of social or emotional conflicts, or the result of bad social conditioning, as if nobody is really to blame. President Carter once stunned and amused government employees by chiding those who were "living in sin." In a day of shifting mores, "sin" was supposedly too old-fashioned to name in such a way. Even Menninger was arguing for no more than that society should accept responsibility for doing something to offset its bad influence on individuals.

Undoubtedly society is much to blame, and changing mores do leave moral confusion. But this cannot detract, if there is any individual freedom, from individual responsibility for one's own values, intentions, thoughts, and deeds. The scientific humanist, tied to evolutionary concepts, tends rather to stress the effects of social and psychological problems that arise in a rapidly changing world still marked by conflict. The Romanticist tends to exonerate nature, human nature in general as well as one's own, and to criticize the institutions of our culture. The existentialist for his part finds an underlying cause in the dehumanization and emptiness of existence, and the Marxist points to class conflicts and counterrevolutionary
CONTOURS OF A WORLD VIEW

conduct. Naturalists who see a human person as wholly a part and product of nature thus do not hold an inner subject individually responsible, but have to turn instead to other influences which they claim make a person what he or she is.

In church circles, too, the starkness of sin is quite often attenuated, and individual and societal failings are blamed on a new morality, or just on “the times”—citing them environmental conditions, as if “environment” sufficiently explains our sin. The emphasis often turns to finding fulfillment and “happiness in Jesus,” as if complete fulfillment and unqualified happiness is achievable by sinful or even finite people in a limited span of time in a bent and twisted world. The church is not a community of fulfilled, perfectly adjusted people living harmoniously together, but rather another kind of new society: a community of confessed sinners forgiving one another as Christ has forgiven them; a community of hope and love.

Humanity’s biggest and most basic problem is not the environment, nor is it dependency relationships, nor finiteness, nor being unfulfilled. Our biggest and most basic problem is what the Bible calls sin. Denials of sin are related to denials of a theistic world view, and superficial views of sin relate to a superficiality there. One kind of misdirection comes from the Greek legacy about reason and emotion. If we are rightly ruled by reason, then the sin that replaces reason’s rule is really the influence of emotions stirred by bodily needs. Asceticism then becomes salvation. Or if we are rightly ruled by reason then reason must be guided aright, and sin is due to the guidance of bad examples. Good examples become our salvation. Again, if we are ruled by reason, then it is wrong thinking that produces sins in word and deed, and sin consists only of these particulars. The Pelagian heresy in the early church thought along these lines.

The biblical view differs from these because it sees the human person as far more (not less) than a rational being, with more depth and unity and individuality to his personal being and to his sin. It is legalism that talks of sin just in terms of particulars. We must look further than that.

In the first place sin, like the sinner, must be viewed within the God-creation distinction and relation. At the heart of a person is a creature’s relation to God, and the heart of sin is a refusal of creatureliness. Paul, in Romans 1, relates sin to loving the creature rather than the Creator; and as we read in Genesis, the tempter first offered to Adam the prospect of being as God. Among recent theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr has turned attention to this heart of sin as the refusal to take a creaturely position, to accept our dependency and finiteness, to recognize that the center of our existence is outside ourselves, in God the Creator. Sin makes creatures the center of our being, so that a person does not worship and serve the Creator but serves herself or other finite things instead. Pride and power are her concern, the pride and power of race or sex or profession. Niebuhr suggests that sin refuses even to settle for the union of nature and spirit that makes us distinctively in God’s image. Either sin exalts the physical and turns to naturalism, or it exalts the human spirit, turning optimistically to rationalistic and idealist extremes. In either case human ends replace the divine purpose, self-satisfaction displaces pleasing God, and personal fulfillment overrides the love that sacrifices as it serves. The result of life off-center is loss of virtue, meaning, inner liberty, and hope.

In the second place, then, sin cannot be confined to some segment of life but extends throughout its relationships. Our relation to God is at its heart, if sin is revolt against God. But alienated from God, we exploit nature for ill-conceived ends with imprudent means, and suffer the effects on ourselves. The Genesis story of man’s fall significantly talks of thorns and thistles that turn work into toil, and of expulsion from the garden. The Romanticist forgets this alienation from nature, yet nature’s forces are not altogether benign, nor is man’s domination of nature. Consider the havoc we wreak all about us!

Our relations to other persons suffer from alienation as well. We alienate our fellow human beings, thereby tearing the fabric of society and polluting the refinements of culture. We suffer from self-indulgence and from the overindulgence of others, for people are all askew. Even my relationship to myself is affected, for if my identity lies in relationships that are now distorted or destroyed, then my identity suffers, too. My self-image is deflated by isolation, or else it inflates to compensate. I mistake life’s meaning in trying to relate to nature and people apart from God. My efforts fail and I find it hard to forgive myself; or I lose touch with who I am at heart. All of life suffers.

Sin, thirdly, is a pervasive condition of the inner life as well as the outer. Contrary to Pelagian and legalistic conceptions and
to the naturalistic view, it extends beyond the particulars of thought and deed to the inner core of our being. The heart, in biblical terminology, is deceitful and desperately wicked. The phenomenon of self-deception, of role-playing and wearing masks, is well known to psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers. We mask not only particular things about us, but also the evil in our hearts, perhaps by deeds that outwardly are beyond reproach. But responsible beings are responsible also for the intents of the heart, for the possibilities they imagine and the values they love but would never confess.

God, we are told, desires truth in the inward parts.

This pervasiveness of sin deprives us of the ability always to think and do and intend and speak aright. It infects every area of life. It traps us in horrible moral dilemmas in which no altogether good option is possible. Life becomes a tangled mess, riddled with helplessness and guilt.

Pervasive as it is inwardly, sin is equally pervasive outwardly. It can no more be confined to individuals than to particulars; it is not just the condition of individuals, but the pervasive condition of society as well. Since relationships between people give rise to the institutions of society, relationships pervaded by sin produce institutions pervaded by sin. David’s adultery with Bathsheba is a case in point. He corrupted the institutions of marriage and government, multiplied abuses of political power, and trapped servants and soldiers by implicating them, until only the word of God could awaken his conscience. But nothing could correct the social corruption and personal harm that had been done forever.

Since an institution assumes a life of its own apart from the private functions of individuals, its structures and purposes are affected by sin, along with its day-to-day operations. Sin is a social reality, not just a private affair. The Old Testament therefore recognizes corporate as well as individual responsibility. A family, a tribe, a nation can be accountable, their corporate sin judged.

This account of human sin, it should be remembered, presupposes the doctrine of creation. A law-governed creation has a moral order that is independent of human wish and historical variation. The sin that perverts relationships is a violation of that law, inwardly in the human heart, outwardly in word and deed, and societally too, for God’s law also extends to institutions that arise. In refusing the creaturely position, sin is lawlessness.

Two comments are needed here. First, the idea of an objective moral order often (but not in all cases) goes against the humanist vein. Some forms of naturalism allow no objective basis for morality, but relativize it to changes in time and place, sometimes even making it wholly subjective. In Chapter Ten, therefore, we shall explore further the claim to a theistic basis for values that underlies the concepts of sin and moral responsibility.

Second, sin’s broad extent does not mean that no good deeds are done. The Creator remains the living God, active in the world in spite of sin, and pursuing good purposes still. Christians speak of common grace, the goodness of God that causes the deeds of wretched men to praise him, so that human relationships, society, and culture are in measure beneficent yet. Governments and workers, artists and teachers, parents and friends, sinful as they be, may continue to serve God’s purposes whether they acknowledge it or not. Creational tasks continue.

This is not the place to elaborate the Christian doctrine of salvation, but a view of human persons would be incomplete without some comment about God’s grace. Christians hold that God forgives sinners and that the new life in Christ is as pervasive as, and more powerful than, sin. This is quite coherent with what we have seen, for the basic point is that the living God acts creatively in dealing with our sin. The moral law sin violates is God’s law in all its parts, so it is ultimately his prerogative to forgive. And if sin extends to every human relationship, grace can, too. Reconciliation to God is followed by reconciliation to other persons in a life of love. Barriers come down—racial barriers (neither Jew nor Greek), sexual prejudice (neither male nor female), socioeconomic aloofness (neither slave nor freeman)—for all are united in Christ. The new life in Christ, like sin, has societal dimensions in the kingdom he preached and brought. The work of grace, like that of sin, begins inwardly in the human heart and its relationship to God, but extends outwardly into every other relationship and responsibility as well.

A Christian conception of liberty now emerges. It is not the liberty of the individual who accepts no responsibility to others except to respect their equal rights. John Stuart Mill’s libertarianism, with its basic principle that liberty can be restricted only to
CONTOURS OF A WORLD VIEW

avoid harm to others, falls short of the kingdom of God. The rule of self-interest, from a Christian point of view, is bondage. Christian liberty is freedom from that, a freedom to obey the law of God from the heart and to serve others sacrificially in love. It is liberty limited by what creatureliness implies of interdependency and interrelatedness, and captivated by God's purposes. It renewes the person, restores relationships, and gives a present taste of what the kingdom of God was at creation intended to be, and what it will yet become.