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Cuckoos in our Nest:
Truth and Lies about Being Human

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INTRODUCTION

“I find birdwatching so fascinating because it forces you to decide what you are looking at. I am honing my art of discernment.”¹

(Henry Norcross)

“You see, but you do not observe.”²

(Sherlock Holmes)

Throughout the history of the Christian Church there have been particular moments of significant theological crisis. In the fourth century, for example, there was a period when the full divinity of Jesus Christ became a matter of controversy, before the Athanasian party defeated the Arians and Trinitarian orthodoxy was enshrined in the Nicene Creed. In the sixteenth century the question of how sinful human beings are put right with God was widely debated. The differing answers given to this question contributed to a schism in the Western Church, with the newly emergent Protestants determined to defend a biblical version of “justification by faith.” At all such moments in history considerable numbers of churchgoers, firmly embedded in their cultural contexts and comfortable with their “norms” of thought and practice, have at least initially displayed a disturbing propensity simply to “go with the prevailing culture.” They have done so either because they have failed to understand how seriously their culture stands at odds with truly Christian faith, or because they don’t care. The defenders of the true faith “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) have often found themselves members of a minority, resisted, dismissed, and attacked by

the majority even of their fellow churchgoers, who have regarded them as “troubling Israel” for no good reason (1 Kings 18:17).³

In my judgment the Church today is in the very midst of another theological crisis. However, the pressing question now is not “Who is Jesus?” or “How can we be saved?” It is instead, “What is a human being?” In many communities that claim the name “Christian,” even among people who would be able to provide the right answers to the first two questions, we find no such clarity when it comes to the third. In fact, it seems that many church members are currently deeply *compromised* in their understanding of what a properly Christian view of the human person *is*, and what this *means*. This is true at the individual level; it’s also true of groups like denominational and pastoral leadership teams and the boards and faculties of universities and theological colleges. Whether such individuals and groups realise it or not, their views on “anthropology”—which is the technical term for this area of theology—derive (in part or even substantially), not from Christian Scripture, but from other sources. And as in past “crises,” so also in the present moment those who attempt to bring the church back to right doctrine and practice are resisted, dismissed, and attacked for their troubles. They are caricatured as mere “conservatives” who lack humility in claiming a monopoly on the truth. They allegedly find themselves “on the wrong side of history” on the anthropological question, and they must give way to more enlightened “progressives.”

This book is intended to speak into this theological crisis. I have a very particular audience in mind: I hope to help readers who are serious about following Jesus Christ to understand how they *should*, as faithful Christians, answer the question, “What is a human being?,” and how they *should* live as a result. This is what I aspire to achieve in the first three-quarters of the book. At the same time, I want to help equip these serious Christians to recognize the non-Christian roots of the powerful, competing ideas of “the human” that they encounter every day, both in

contemporary society and (unfortunately) in contemporary churches, and to have the courage to reject these unbiblical ideas. For especially when are already embedded within a Christian community, these ideas do damage to Christian faith and life. This is the focus of the final quarter of the book.

The European cuckoo provides my chosen metaphor for describing these unbiblical ideas about humanity. This cuckoo, which migrates to Europe from Africa every spring, is a “brood parasite.” It does not raise its own young, but instead sneaks into another bird’s nest and replaces an egg with one of its own. This egg looks very much like the host’s eggs, so it is difficult to spot. The host bird therefore raises the cuckoo chick believing that it is one of its own. Unfortunately the cuckoo is, from the moment of birth, an assassin. It systematically goes around pushing any other eggs or chicks out of the nest, ensuring that its own song is the only one that can be heard by its adoptive parents. Having taken over the nest in this way, it receives the adoptive parents’ sole attention, growing as a consequence growing to two or three times their size.⁴ In all of this the cuckoo is “a cunning master of misdirection.”⁵

Unbiblical anthropological ideas are like cuckoo chicks in the Christian nest. They have been smuggled into it by birds whose natural habitat is elsewhere. They can be difficult to spot, and they can therefore easily be regarded as a legitimate “part of the family.” But in reality they are foreign bodies in our Christian nest and a threat to the survival of the family. If they are not removed, they can grow to such a size that they take over the entire habitat. This is what unchallenged falsehoods about “being human,” embedded in our Christian nests, can do to our churches. They can “misdirect” us to our doom, such that the Church us no longer really the Church.

I have a particular audience in mind, then—but obviously I’m very happy also to have persons read this book who don’t currently share (at least consciously) my Christian convictions. I’d like to think that fair-minded, external readers will still be able to derive some benefit from engaging with my argument. Indeed, I’d like to think that such readers might realize, as they go along, just how far they already hold a Christian view of the human person—perhaps because they are products of a Christendom that has historically shaped their own view of the world. The question then, of course, is how they can reasonably hold those Christian views of “being human” *without* being a Christian. But this book is not mainly addressed to my neighbors who find themselves currently outside of the Church. It is primarily addressed to serious, but perhaps confused, troubled, and even beleaguered fellow-Christians.

So what exactly will you find as you read the book? It is divided into in four parts. Part I prepares the way for what follows by exploring how any person hoping to arrive at a reliable answer might sensibly approach our central question, “What is a human being?” It also outlines what specifically *Christian* enquiry uniquely brings to this search for truth. Part II proceeds to lay out the fundamentals of a Christian anthropology, and Part III develops various implications of holding to these fundamentals. Parts I to III of the book focus, therefore, on the *truth* about being human, although in doing this they highlight some of the lies as well. But it’s Part IV that *focuses* on the lies. It is here that we explicitly consider numerous important “cuckoos” seeking entry to, and perhaps even already inhabiting, our Christian nest. That is, it’s in Part IV that we look in depth at the nature and the provenance of some important, contemporary, anthropological ideas that are not Christian. So don’t go looking for explicit cuckoo language until you get to the last couple of pages of Part III.

All the chapters in the book are short, and I've written each one in what I hope is an accessible style for a broad readership. Each one is designed to make a concise argument about one aspect of a properly Christian anthropology. The idea is that you can read a single chapter at one sitting, then put the book down and think about its content before moving on. If you would like to have some specific, reflective questions to mull over, or put before a discussion group, while you think about each chapter, you can find these on my website (iainprovan.ca) on the "publications" page. All of this enables the book to be read individually, day-by-day, by the interested lay-person, or week by week in preparation for a church Bible-study group, or in those groups themselves. Each chapter, especially in Parts II and III, can also be used as the basis for a sermon, and related chapters in each of those parts can also be paired for this purpose. Readers should also be able to use the book effectively in church educational programs. It has been designed, essentially, as "catechesis," in pursuit of the recovery in all areas of our church life of a robust and truly Christian view of the human being.

Readers will not find long endnotes in this book, nor a large bibliography. This is by design, in order to keep the volume slim and straightforward. The endnotes that do exist are mainly designed to provide you with Scriptural and other, very brief (but necessary) references. Even then, I have prioritized wherever possible interesting, illustrative material that can be found easily on the Internet and does not require access to a library. I recognize that there is a downside to this decision. Since my chapters are deliberately short, they cannot do more than lay out a relatively brief (but hopefully reliable) map for traveling through the landscape of a Christian anthropology. It is inevitable, then, that various aspects of each part of my argument will raise questions in your mind, and that you will want further help in processing these questions. Fortunately, I've written numerous other books of a more traditional scholarly type that will help you further with many of

the topics covered in this volume. The Select Bibliography fully describes these other books, which *do* possess extensive notes and bibliographies that will take you even deeper into particular topics. And the endnotes will identify which ones are particularly relevant to the topic that has just been covered in a particular chapter. Also, for those interested in a video series that would work well as a supplement to this volume, I recommend the ten-session “ReFrame” series available for free download at <https://www.reframecourse.com/>.

With all of this said, we’ll begin!

Notes

¹ *Amsterdam*, directed by David O. Russell, featuring Christian Bale, Margot Robbie, and John David Washington (20th Century Studios. 2022).

² Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/32/the-adventures-of-sherlock-holmes/345/adventure-1-a-scandal-in-bohemia/>, accessed February 26, 2023.

³ See further my *1 & 2 Kings*, 136-42. In this book I’m using the English Standard Version (ESV) as my base text for biblical citations—although occasionally I shall indicate a preference for a different and better way of translating particular words. This includes, sometimes, occasions upon which the ESV refers to “man.” It used to be common English usage to refer to humanity as a whole in this way, with no intention in context of differentiating between male and female. This is a characteristic of biblical language as well, and English-language Bible translations (including the ESV) often reflect this in how they translate the original. From time to time, where I think that this may risk misleading the modern English-language reader, I’ll offer you clarifications on the correct way to interpret “man” in the biblical quotations. But I’ve tried not to be too heavy-handed in this practice, because I think that it risks being distracting (and even annoying)

⁴ Discover Wildlife, “Cuckoo guide.”

⁵ Woodland Trust, “Cuckoo.”