Preface

This work is an attempt to look at humanity from God’s perspective. This is a contribution to the discussion about humanity’s relationship to the triune God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This study proposes some perspectives in this regard from the context of a post-apartheid South Africa.


I would like to thank my father, Prof. P.F. Theron for his life-long contribution to my theological development and my mother for her unending support and love, without the both of whom this work would not have been possible.
A special word of thanks to my promoter, Prof.dr. Abraham van de Beek, who painstakingly guided me in this search for knowledge of God and of ourselves, even amidst all the technical and stylistic issues.

I would like to thank my wife, Hanlé, and my son, Francois, who paid the price to enable me complete this study.
Introduction

**Motivation**

“If he exalts himself, I humble him; if he humbles himself, I exalt him; and I continually contradict him, until he comes to understand that he is an incomprehensible monster.”

Blaise Pascal

This study asks the question “what is humankind?” It proposes a critical anthropology, which opposes the optimistic anthropology prevalent in Western society. In the general media (especially the advertisements) a positive anthropology is promoted, which works its way into every area of life, even into church. In his *Diary of a Writer*, the Russian author, Fyodor Dostoyevski referred to this Western anthropology by illustrating how the Russian people, who were not yet influenced by the liberal West, would comment on criminals walking past them to Siberia. They would say, “... you have sinned, suffer, we are not better than you, we too are sinful ...” and hand out pennies to them. In contrast, the liberal humaneness of the West would lessen the offence by pointing out the environmental conditioning and thereby taking away the responsibility and humanity of the perpetrator. Dostoyevski refers to Jn 8 where Jesus said, “go sin no more” to illustrate that He still

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1 “S’il se vante, je l’abaisse; s’il s’abaisse, je le vante et le contredis toujours jusqu’à ce qu’il comprenne qu’il est un monstre incompréhensible.” Pascal, B. *Pensées I*. Édité par M Le Guern (Lyon: Gallimard, 1977a), 111. Hunter J. Thompson further points to man’s incomprehensible nature:“He who brings himself to act like a beast, rids himself of the pain of being a man”. English man of letters (1709-1784), quoted in Shapiro, F R. *The Yale Book of Quotations.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 405.

2 This is illustrated in a certain string of advertisements for cosmetic products, which all end with the phrase: “’cause you’re worth it”.

called sin, sin. He did not condone, but forgave. Evil should be called evil, not heroic, despite its seeming humaneness.³

This positive Western view of humankind, which presupposes that a crime-free utopia could be attained if all poverty and illiteracy could be eradicated in the name of human rights, is critically opposed by looking at humankind from the perspective of Scripture. Looking at humanity from the perspective of our broken relationship with God and thus of our sinfulness, provides a realistic anthropology that does not shy away from the most disturbing elements of our humanity, but provides some perspectives even on the most contradictory and destructive elements in us. Sin reaches deeper than the current anthropology can fathom. The Bible reveals the destructive forces even behind the call to moral rearmament, as will be illustrated in the life of Judas and the temptations.

Dostoyevski speaks of humankind as a mystery. The Dutch theologian, Oepke Noordmans says that human life can only be comprehended from the mystery of the trinity, whereby humankind is viewed from different angles and from eternity. It is the contention of this study that the incomprehensible mystery of humankind can be described only approximately and only by pointing to Christ on he cross - “Ecce homo” (Jn 19:5).

Method

In Scripture one does not find an independent anthropology. Humankind is always seen from its relationship to God. Having the ungraspable nature of humankind in relation to the mystery of the trinity as a topic, provides serious methodological problems.

Noordmans himself pointed out some of these difficulties to Miskotte, who wanted to do his dissertation on the anthropology of Dostoyevski. He wondered how one could systematically deal with

such a complex of concepts beyond the boundaries and not lose something essential in trying to bring it back across the boundaries.\textsuperscript{4} This is not a study about the anthropology of Dostoyevski, although it is to a great extent related to it. His anthropology forms a counterpoint to Noordmans’ theology, which opposes any substantialistic view on humanity and speaks of humankind only in relation to the trinity.

The content of this topic, therefore, precludes a mere scientific method of dissection, which would be hard to do, because where would one find humankind to dissect. If one were able to research a dissected humankind one would only end up inspecting a corpse. From a Biblical perspective, researching humankind entails being dissected by the double-edged Sword of the Word and Spirit of Truth (Heb 4:12, Jn 15:26; Jn 16:13). In this way the Word provides a ‘living dissection’ of humankind which is made possible by the Spirit taking from the Son of Man (who died and rose again) what is his and declare it to humankind (Jn 16:14,15).

Scripture, therefore, does not only indicate humankind’s situation, but also address the reader. This kerugmatic quality of Scripture would necessarily be an element in the discussion on humankind in relation to the trinity, otherwise the Scriptures would not be read in accordance with its intention. Pascal has already used this method in his Pensées when he writes: “Vanity is so firmly anchored in man’s heart that a soldier, a rough, a cook or a porter will boast and expect admirers, and even philosophers want them; those who write against them want to enjoy the prestige of having written well, those who read them want the prestige of having read them, and perhaps I who write this want the same thing, perhaps my readers …”\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{4} Noordmans, O. \textit{Verzamelde Werken Deel 9A}. Editor: J M Hasselaar et.al. (Kampen: Kok, 1999a), 358.

\textsuperscript{5} “La vanité est si ancrée dans le coeur de l’homme qu’un soldat, un goujat, un cuisinier, un crocheteur se vante et veut avoir ses admirateurs. Et les philosophes mêmes en veulent, et ceux qui écrivent contre veulent avoir la gloire d’avoir bien
The literature of Dostoyevski also has this ability although it is somewhat secondary. The Grand Inquisitor addresses the reader to the extent that one identifies with the character of Alyosha. Maybe that is why literature is in general more true to life and more accessible to people than theology. This would also explain Hauerwas’ theology by way of stories in his works *A better Hope* and *In Good Company*. Thompson says about him: “His thought appears as that of a maverick rather than a systematic thinker, a preacher as much as an academic.” This method engages with the reader and in doing so, attempts to stay true to real life.

Therefore, this study provides Biblical theological perspectives on the mystery of humankind in relation to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It focuses on a selection of Biblical texts and systematises them in conversation with Oepke Noordmans, Fyodor Dostoyevski and others, without providing a final systematic and complete anthropology.

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écrit, et ceux qui les lisent veulent avoir la gloire de les avoir lus, et moi qui écris ceci ai peut-être cette envie, et peut-être que ceux qui le liront ... ,” Pascal, B. *Pensées II*. Édité par M Le Guern (Lyon: Gallimard, 1977b), 123.


Section I, *Theological Perspectives on Anthropology*, consists of two chapters providing some general theological perspectives on a critical anthropology. The first chapter, *Trinitarian Anthropology*, critically appraises the search for a possible point of contact between God and humankind, pointing out the pitfalls in trying to build an anthropology directly from the doctrine of creation, the human nature of Christ or the work of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 2, *The Mystery of Humankind*, develops this theme further by comparing the critical theology of Noordmans with the critical anthropology of Dostoyevski.


The third section sets out *Pneumatological Perspectives on Anthropology*. Chapter 6, *Rizpah: The Church coram Deo*, develops the idea of collective guilt by looking at the vigil of

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9 This study consists of eight articles (seven of which has already been published in accredited journals). These eight articles centred around the problem of a critical anthropology and has been adapted slightly to form one work with a over-arching structure. Its eclectic nature fits in well with the attempt to provide only perspectives on the nature of humankind living before the face of God. Noordmans and Dostoyevski, who are taken on as dialogue partners both work in a similar way. Noordmans is known for his meditations and Dostoyevski wrote novels.
Rizpah. In Chapter 7, Betrayal, not collective guilt, but personal

guilt as represented in the person of Judas comes under scrutiny.

The final chapter, The Psychology of the Spirit and Oepke

Noordmans, attempts to provide some criticism of a general

anthropology by pointing out man’s spiritual, psychological and

physical need.

The trinitarian structure must not be over-emphasised to the
detriment of the theological formula opera ad extra sunt indivisa.

To isolate one of the three (Theological, Christological or
Pneumatological) perspectives would detract from the living reality
of God’s interaction with humankind as expressed in Scripture.

It would be better to view the trinitarian structure of this study in
relation to the Apostolic Creed. The theological perspectives and its

trinitarian aspect relates to the three articles of the Creed. The

Mystery of humankind before God, the Creator, fits in well with
the first article of the confession (belief in God the Father
Almighty, the Creator). The Christological perspectives in turn

focus on the Word becoming flesh (conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary), the temptations as part of his suffering
(suffered under Pontius Pilate) and the atonement done by Christ as
the Suffering Servant (was crucified died and was buried, he
descended to the dead, on the third day he rose again). The
Pneumatological perspectives follow the third article of the creed
where the belief in the Holy Spirit points to the church living
before the face of God (belief in the holy, catholic church and the
communion of the saints), the high treason of our Judas-like
betrayal (forgiveness of sins) and the re-creative work whereby
humankind as spirit, body and soul, becomes a new creation
(resurrection of the body, and the life eternal) through the judgment
and comfort of the Spirit.