

Summary of *The Importance of Being Human*

E. L. Mascall

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How does the human being relate to the Christian God? How does the human being relate to the universe and the spiritual realm? These are some of the questions that Fr. Mascall addressed in a series of lectures that were collected into a small volume.

Fr. Mascall begins by assessing humanity's unique position in the universe. He looks specifically at whether the scientific discoveries of recent centuries truly invalidate the Christian view of man. At chapter's end, he concludes that all is well and that Christianity is still valid.

Along the way, Fr. Mascall veers into territory more often visited by readers of speculative fiction. He looks at the vastness of the universe and speculates about whether the human race on planet Earth is the only sentient race in God's realm. He seems to believe (*pg. 3*) that humanity is not alone; he does not speculate on whether we will ever contact such other beings.

Fr. Mascall also looks at the question of what shape such an alien being would assume. He agrees with the conclusions of other writers like Julius Huxley and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin that such a being is likely to look much like a human being. All of this speculation assumes that we are discussing carbon-based life forms. This does not have to be true, as was seen in the television series *Babylon 5* in which the space station had an entire wing for life forms whose chemistry was not based on carbon.

Darwin and evolution must be addressed. What if all of this just happened? (This is more the position of Darwin's followers than of Darwin himself.) Fr. Mascall would respond that even if evolution was the tool, it did not just happen. God made it happen.

The second lecture looks at the human soul and how it can and cannot function separately from the human body. Is the soul simply a product of man's larger brain? Even if it has stopped growing in physical size, it may already be sufficiently advanced to direct its future evolution. (*pg. 21*) If so, humanity could change itself into a greater species. But where does God fit into all of this? Aquinas believed that God created all essential natures by His thought. (*pg. 23*) Fr. Mascall finally asserts (*pg. 24*) that whatever man may do to himself, God was and still is the ultimate creator.

This lecture next discusses the immortality of the soul. Although we believe this today, Fr. Mascall quotes Etienne Gilson (*pg. 26*) that some of the early Church Fathers did not believe that the soul survived death; this was also believed by most Jewish thinkers. They believed that the soul would be resurrected with the body at

the appropriate time.

Fr. Mascall finally holds that Christian doctrine calls for a human being to be both body and soul. This calls for the rejection of all heresies which claim that man is spirit only and the body's disposition matters little if at all. (*pg. 29*) What you do with the body does matter, so you are not justified in abusing it or using it to commit sin.

The third lecture looks at man's relationship to other humans. The main points here are that man is created to act both as an individual and in relation to other humans, (*pg. 38*) that marriage must be a lifelong commitment because it involves "the totality of his being," (*pg. 45*) and that while the husband and wife join together to form a family, "The normal result of their union will be the procreation of children...." (*pg. 47*)

Lecture Four deals with whether man can ever reach past his natural level to a supernatural or deified state. The Christian doctrine on nature holds that living beings have a nature because the idea of a specific creature exists in the mind of God, who thinks of a creature and thus creates it. God gives a nature and "can always give more." (*pg. 56*)

This act of giving more becomes a form of *deification*, of being brought by God to a state of understanding of Him that we cannot obtain without his action. Fr. Mascall claims that all of this is possible, despite many objections from theologians, because "The fundamental openness of man's being to God's sensitivity is thus the metaphysical basis of the Catholic doctrine of the elevation of man's nature to the level of supernature by grace." (*pg. 61*)

The next lecture looks at various aspects of the subject of sin. Fr. Mascall points to how the Victorians saw man as perfectible given enough education and time. Taken to an extreme, this attitude helped spawn some of the most evil totalitarian governments of the 20th century. He cares about the political failures of rationalism because he believes this is the expected result of the Christian belief of sin, namely that sin is an "accident." (*pg. 76*) In other words, it was an unintended consequence of Satan's rebellion. This rebellion led to evil being introduced into the world of mankind, which has suffered from it ever since.

Fr. Mascall then looks at the theology of the fall of man. While other theologians deny any special significance to Adam's original sin, Fr. Mascall thinks it was enormously important because it was the first sin. It led to the "process of disintegration and corruption" (*pg. 83*) that has afflicted humanity ever since. It also caused a "breaking of unity" with God, with other beings, and within ourselves (*pg. 83*).

Fortunately, Fr. Mascall believes that man can be delivered from original sin. He closes the chapter by arguing that the need to deliver or convert man from sin does not eliminate the need to work for social justice. Even a conservative like Fr. Mascall had accepted the liberal belief that social justice is one of the major goals of life.

In the last lecture, Fr. Mascall deals with issues related to the Incarnation and man's redemption from his sinful condition. He holds, "The covenanted and public vehicle of grace is the human nature taken by God the Son...." (pg. 93) It was an honor to man, but the more important purpose was to "perfect and elevate and heal." (pg. 94) Or as the Nicene Creed puts it, "For us men and our salvation." (pg. 95)

Through His Incarnation, Jesus also re-established the unity that had been broken by original sin. But it went past that to allowing man to become "sons of God by adoption" (pg. 98) or "a partaker in the divine nature" as described in II Peter 1:4. (pg. 99)

But can all of this theological theorizing be applied to modern civilization in all its secular glory and terror? Fr. Mascall believes that if total conversion is not possible, much can be achieved by living our Christian lives in the world. No non-Christian can do this.

Fr. Mascall closes his lectures by quoting Dom Gregory Dix's *The Shape of the Liturgy* to glorify man as he participates in the Eucharistic rite which allows him to "Eat and drink at the table of God and be a king." (pg. 107) This is the ultimate purpose of man and the most glorious.

These lectures can best be summarized as an attempt to discuss many, if not all, of the aspects of mankind's relationship to God. If we had no relationship, there would have been no reason for Him to create us. Fr. Mascall uses these pages to offer his interpretations and analysis of many of the theological problems pertaining to man and God that have been argued over the centuries.

The writing style is academic but more accessible than many other writers. There are no bullet lists, but the presentation of the arguments shows evidence of following a defined outline. Fr. Mascall is more courteous to his listeners/readers than some authors who throw Latin and Greek around like birdseed at the pond.

What does this work have to do with apologetics? The relationship is not immediately obvious. But it can be seen fairly quickly. Questions like the ones discussed here often come up when inquirers ask us about our faith. We need to have given some consideration to the questions. Whether we agree or disagree with these answers, reading this book will prompt us to think about the problems and feel our way towards finding our own answers.

