

Joel Clarke Gibbons, *Man and God in the World: A Treatise on Human Nature*
(Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2009)

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How can the findings of social science be reconciled with the teachings of the Catholic Church? Although the two canvas the same subject—human nature—they conceive it in different ways. The individual organism and social collective examined by science are not the human person and spiritual communion ministered to by the Church. Where the former are material facts in a natural world, the latter are spiritual facts in a supernatural world. Indeed, one can be forgiven for wondering if the phrase “Catholic social science” might not be an oxymoron.

Joel Clarke Gibbons faces this challenge with glee in this smart, engaging, and wonderfully unclassifiable book. I say this last about the book because it is not plainly one kind or another. Although it draws heavily from social science, and particularly from economics and sociology, it is not quite a work of social science. And although it draws heavily from philosophy and theology, it is not quite a philosophical or theological tract. But it is as described in its subtitle—“a treatise on human nature”—a systematic account of the subject that is us. To my mind, it is a book of the best kind—a book for everyone written by a powerful intelligence who wonders about this humanity of ours fashioned by God in the image of Jesus Christ.

Gibbons confronts social science and the Faith without pretense or compromise. He knows he has opened a door on issues that have perplexed legions before him. And he knows he can no more resolve these issues than his forbearers. His message is the paradox that gives hope to all faithful science. On the one hand, with Saint Thomas Aquinas, he confirms that faith and reason do not contradict one another, that the laws uncovered by science are those of God who created them:

There is one common thread that runs through ... our understanding of man, and that is the reality that our human nature comes to us from Jesus, who is the most human of all beings. When a physicist or chemist pursues his chosen field, he can proceed confidently in the knowledge that Jesus, the architect of the cosmos, has made it logically consistent and knowable. The social scientist has, if anything, an even more profound confidence because his science is a reflection of the being of Jesus himself (p. 8).

On the other hand Gibbons recognizes that the spirit that distinguishes man from animal cannot be reckoned in the natural terms of science. To the question of how our spirituality can be reconciled with our ordinariness, he concedes:

This is a topic that fills entire tomes and exhausts the lives of profound thinkers; we cannot propose to exhaust it here. My more modest goal, as it is throughout this book, is only to open the door to that library of evolving learning and wisdom (p. 186).

The book sets its stage with an introductory chapter that defines the human. The essence of man, Gibbons writes, is “to be begotten” and to “grow up with the capacity to own life, to make it our own” (p. 18). In this, says Gibbons, we are called to become like Jesus Christ, not in his Divinity which is beyond us (because we are not Gods), but in his perfect humanity which is before us (because we are men created in His image). And in this, says Gibbons after Aquinas, social science makes a valuable contribution as “all truth comes from the Lord God and leads to him because he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (p. 32). Set upon this stage, the book is a play in three parts (there is a fourth part, but it is a postscript and not part of the play). Part 1 deals with our spiritual nature and develops in detail the idea that God is life and that we come into the fullness of life only as we come into the fullness of God. We are called to grow into our humanity just as Jesus Christ grew into his humanity, by giving himself to his Father’s will. Part 2 deals with our life in the world which is the drama of our gift of freedom before God’s eternal judgment. Here Gibbons explores many nuances of the Decalogue, not least that its natural law is “law” both in the juridical sense of indicating how we are to live and in the existential sense of indicating who and what we are. Finally, Part 3 deals with the evolving world which Darwin described as a bio-logic of adaptation based on genetic variation and natural selection and which economics and sociology today describe as a socio-logic of adaption based on innovation and market selection. Here Gibbons traces a striking parallel between the biological and social sciences that reveals much about our lives together. But here Gibbons also notes a stark disconnection; namely, that the laws of the biological and social sciences are not, finally, superior to our God-given human nature. As to biology: “The biological account of evolution is not and could never claim to be an account of the origin of our spiritual nature” (p. 186). And as to social science: “We are not objects bandied about by the impersonal laws of economics. We have autonomous minds and wills that create and that choose” (p. 141). Thus we are returned to the truth that will not be denied; that Faith knows what science cannot say.

It would be a shame if my dry recitation of the book’s contents were allowed to obscure its many charms. Despite its clear direction the book is no straight-line march, but often a meandering walk in the park. There are enchanting side-trails with flowers to smell along the way. Often, and seemingly apropos of nothing, Gibbons will interject a startling insight, such as this one about how Christianity uniquely bridges the different notions of authority between the Western (Greek) and Arab worlds—the one abstract and impersonal, the other concrete and personal:

...it is the fusion of these ideas that gives Christianity its distinct character because we are both Westerners (Greeks) and Semites (Arabs). Jesus the person is so quintessentially Semitic, the Jesus the Good Shepherd and Jesus the Sacrificial Lamb. Yet he said of himself, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” So Socratic, so abstract, so pure (p. 155).

At the end of the day every book is personal, an intimacy between author and reader that succeeds or fails with the truth reached between them. I found in this book a glimpse of the truth of Jesus Christ who is our Word and Way; who is our involvement with God who is life. If there is to be a Catholic social science it must begin with this truth that we come to be human in Christ.