

The Divine Design— The Human Distortion

Reviewed by Karla Krampert Walters

V. Norskov Olsen, *Man, the Image of God: The Divine Design—The Human Distortion*. Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1988. P4.99 paperback. 192 pages.

A former president of Loma Linda University who holds several doctorates from American and European universities, V. Norskov Olsen has written an eminently readable yet scholarly book. In *Man, the Image of God*, Olsen explores human potential and salvation in the context of a long-standing Christian tradition that regards the separation between God and humanity as an unnatural consequence of sin. This book is unusual for its focus on human potential while discussing theological issues. It would be easy to deal with the subject of man in the image of God by dwelling on the shortcomings of human beings in comparison to the excellencies of God. By refusing to focus simply on human decrepitude, and by grounding his analysis in the divine ideal, Olsen avoids trivializing his subject or humiliating his audience.

In addition to citing many relevant passages of Scripture, Olsen conveys a strong sense of a continuum of Christian thinkers and scholars who have wrestled with defining humanity in the image of God: St. Paul, Martin Luther, John

Calvin, John Wesley, Reinhold Niebuhr, Emil Brunner, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In addition, he quotes Paul Tillich, John Stuart Mill, and even William Shakespeare and Thomas Paine, whose cogitations on human limitation and potential add considerable color to Olsen's analysis. The quotation Olsen uses from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* sets his tone: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!" Olsen rarely shifts from the Renaissance view, which is actually the Reformation view, that human beings can act both "divinely" and "beastly," and that salvation is needed to remedy this dichotomy.

Olsen employs interesting similes and analogies. For example, when he presents the idea of "man in God's image," the *imago Dei*, he compares the *imago* to a reflection in a mirror: "A mirror can reflect an image only if the object is in front of it. In this analogy, emphasis is placed on the *imago* as existing in relationship with God, without which the *imago* is lost. As the moon has no light in itself but can reflect the light of the sun, so man, when face to face with God in Jesus Christ, gives back an image of God" (p. 28). Similarly, in discussing individuality, Olsen writes, "A person is not a thing to be bought and sold, exploited and tossed aside like a squeezed orange. The central teaching of the divine preciousness of individuality is a fundamental test of any civilization" (p. 52).

My favorite simile was the mathematical one Olsen used to describe the relationship of the Christian to the first and second advents: "The biblical hope with its many facets does not move around the first advent or the second advent of Christ as two circles, each with its own center. Rather, it moves around both Advents inseparably as an ellipse with two foci. Unfortunately, church history tells us that to a large degree Christian doctrines and practices have been focused either upon the First Advent or the Second Advent. The former has been the inclination of established churches, the latter, of apocalyptic movements. Each Advent is distinct, but the message or truths of each should be seen in totality both in the doctrinal teaching and in the pragmatic life of the individual and the church" (p. 137).

Olsen structures his chapters around nine central human qualities: dignity, freedom, individuality, creativity, moral sense, religious sense, relationships, history, and wholeness. The chapter on freedom is noteworthy for its emphasis on responsibility as an element of freedom. The chapter on creativity describes human overreaching as a type of Babylonian egotism, and he links this to the three angels' messages of Revelation. This was, I felt, a creative and meaningful approach to a familiar scripture. The chapter, "Man, a Relational Being" includes human control of natural resources and ecology, as well as family, church, and community. Here, I felt the discussion suffered from the absence of topical examples, which might otherwise date the book, but which surely would be appropriate in discussing family and community relationships.

The most scholarly discussion in the book is the chapter on history. Olsen neatly contrasts the cyclical view of human existence that pre-

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ailed in ancient Greece to the goal-centered teleological view of history that Christianity offers. He then concisely describes various "progressivist" movements since the Renaissance—Deism, Darwinism, Freudianism, Marxism, and Existentialism—and clearly argues that people should not be naively optimistic. This chapter makes the book potentially useful as a text in college courses dealing with the ideas that have shaped Western civilization.

Although Olsen quotes on occasion from Ellen G. White, he exercises judicious restraint, primarily using her *Ministry of Healing* to emphasize disease prevention as part of human wholeness. My chief complaint about the book is that it has altogether too many quotes. It is, indeed, an example of old-fashioned scholarship in this respect. One wishes that Olsen had employed more summary and paraphrase, and that he had used more of his own arguments, par-

ticularly his insightful similes and analogies.

The biggest drawback is the continual reference to human beings as "man." As a woman, I was annoyed by this terribly old-fashioned insistence that *man* was supposed to refer to human beings of either sex. References to people, to men and women, and to the human race could easily have substituted for the masculine man and would have given the book a more inclusive tone.