

Review of *Man and God in the World: A Treatise on Human Nature*
by Joel Clarke Gibbons

Review by Robert John Araujo, S.J.

At the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, posed the question: *quod est homo*—what is man? Dr. Joel Clarke Gibbons, an economist and mathematician well-versed in classical and scholastic philosophy, offers fresh insight that helps answer this provocative question.

The author begins as any inquiry should: who is the human person in relation to...? A sensible place for any person of faith to pursue this inquiry is an examination of the relation between the human person and God. But, as a social scientist and mathematician, the author necessarily locates his answer in the temporal world and presents the reader with an array of human environments where God's most beloved creation and the Creator engage one another. By drawing on his experience of the world of investment and financial institutions, the author ably demonstrates that the encounter between God and the human person takes place wherever the person finds one's self. In short, he offers illustration after illustration that God can be encountered anywhere for this is the essence, the nature of the human person—to be able to meet his creator wherever the person may be.

In his engaging work, Joel Clarke Gibbons weaves together philosophy, theology, the sciences, scripture, and human narrative to offer ample frameworks for investigating the basic relationship between God and man. Inevitably, the fundamental framework upon which he focuses is Jesus Christ—true God and true man. And it is through the encounter with Jesus that the human person understands more about his or her individual nature as a person and as a beloved and unique element of God's creation.

The author propels the reader through many kinds of human encounters with God and with the Son—by relying on contemporary elements of culture such as film, business dealings, family life, and educational pursuits—where the human person's earthly existence provides illustrations from which the reader can contemplate where he or she not only learns more about the self but the self in relation with the One who gave life and purpose to the self.

One particularly effective tool that the author employs with scripture is taking the Decalogue and placing its ten norms within the context of contemporary civilization. Surely these illustrations provide any reader who is interested in better understanding personal nature and relation with God with easily recognizable circumstances in which the person can identify more clearly what God asks of him or her.

In the latter part of the book, the author draws heavily on his experience from the world of financial institutions and markets to propose how the encounter of God can take

place in the most unexpected of places. Within these pages, Gibbons reveals further insight into the nature as well as the destiny of the human person—even the one who is surrounded by some of the most material things that this temporal world has to offer. After all, as the author demonstrates it is in this kind of environment where the person's free will is tested time and again. The choices the person makes can be done objectively or subjectively. If the former, human nature becomes more clear; if the latter, it does not. This is an important lesson learned by the author that he chooses to pass on to any reader whose discipleship or whose quest for God may be in a similar environment or a different one. The fundamental point of the author in these concluding pages is that the encounter between the maker and the creation can happen anywhere. And it is anywhere where the person can discover who he or she is and who this self is in relation to God.

A final point needs to be made about this fascinating chronicle. While most of the text focuses on the human-divine encounter in the world that is familiar with the western, especially the American reader, Dr. Gibbons adds a postscript that reproduces correspondence with Muslims on some of the issues discussed in the principal text. At first I wondered what the relevance of the postscript was, but then it became evident that the author is sketching out for the reader the fact that the human-divine encounter and the answer to the question “who is man?” can take place not only in the place that is familiar but also the one that is not.

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

Reviewed by Lloyd E. Sandelands, Professor of Psychology, University of Michigan

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 adaptation 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.