

Dr. Jean Zurcher



According to Dr. Jean Zurcher, a Christian philosopher, biblical anthropology finds itself more and more confirmed by scientific progress.

S *Shabbat Shalom**: Who most influenced you in your philosophy of the human person?

Zurcher: As far as the biblical knowledge of man is concerned, I would name my theology teachers, especially Alfred Vaucher; in the domain of philosophy, professor Charles Werner of the University of Geneva in his courses “Existen-

tialist Philosophy” and “The Problem of the Soul in the History of Philosophy.” Likewise, the conferences presented by Professor Henri Baruk at the University of Geneva in 1951 on the problem of the personality. Professor Baruk has never stopped explaining his conception of man based on the revelations of the Hebrew Bible. This is what he wrote me after reading my dissertation, published by Delachaux et Niestlé in 1953: “Your work has made quite an impression on me because it emphasizes the essential and only too often neglected problem of the union of the body and

the soul. You had the courage to tackle the problem without eluding it and to decipher in depth all of its subtleties. You had the guts to tell the truth without any dissimulations. This is of great merit, and places your book among the key works of philosophy.”

Shabbat Shalom. As a Christian and a philosopher, what is your conception of man?

Zurcher: Believing in the inspiration of the Bible, I have tried to understand man rationally, taking into consideration biblical anthropology as well as today’s scientific knowledge. The fundamental biblical affirmation, of which we can perceive the echoes in the whole Bible, is that man was created by God in His image (Genesis 1:27). What Paul reminds the Athenian philosophers is that “from Him we have life, movement, and being” (Acts 17:28). A second declaration in Genesis then informs us of man’s nature, more directly: “The Lord then formed man from the dust of the earth, He blew in his nostrils and man became a living soul”

Dr. Jean Zurcher was born at Cerlier, Switzerland. His education includes degrees in theology and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Geneva.

Dr. Zurcher has published numerous books and articles in French and English. His work on biblical anthropology has received widespread acclaim from the critics. He continues to be active in teaching, research, and publishing.

Dr. Zurcher has had a distinguished teaching career on three continents and is a recognized international authority in education, theology, and philosophy. Retired since 1985, he is still teaching part-time biblical anthropology and other subjects in the Theological Seminary at Collonges, France.

(Genesis 2:7). According to these brief lines, man appears as the synthesis of terrestrial matter, *adama*, and of the principle of life given by God to all living beings. The result of this creative synthesis is man as a living soul. Therefore, according to the text, man did not *receive* a soul but *became* a living soul, that is, a living being. Otherwise said, according to biblical anthropology, man does not possess an immortal soul, preexistent before his creation. This soul is not of immaterial substance, separate from the body, as is taught today by the dualistic anthropologies. On the contrary, according to the teachings of the Bible, the soul is simply the result of the creative action of God and designates man in his totality and in the unity of his person. In biblical jargon, one, therefore, does not say that man has a soul but that he is a soul, that is, a being in constant becoming.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Does this conception of man insert itself well into our twentieth-century era?**

Zurcher: Yes and no. Evidently, the affirmation that man is the result of divine action of the Creator of the universe is in radical opposition with the diverse evolutionary theories of today. In this, biblical anthropology does not fit in well with the philosophical beliefs of our time. However, as far as its conception of man is concerned, biblical anthropology finds itself more and more confirmed by scientific progress. Only too often, the tendency has been to oppose the rationalism of the Greek philosophers to the irrationalism of the biblical writers. Certainly, we are dealing with two incompatible metaphysical structures. However, contrary to general belief, it is not the biblical conception which is mythical but much more likely the dualist anthropologies which still maintain today a powerful grip on thinking habits, such as the duality of

the body and soul, and the immortality of the soul.

***Shabbat Shalom:* Is a good comprehension of the nature of man important as far as happiness is concerned?**

Zurcher: It is essential. Research in anthropology has established that at the basis of all civilization, as of all social organization as primitive as it may be, there is always a certain conception of man. The history of each people rests on its respective comprehension of man. Each epoch has even its own image of man, often unconsciously, but which permeates the customs, religious beliefs, and the established set of rules. Even the political mind-set of a nation is linked to a certain definition of man. And finally, each person, individually, consciously or unconsciously, shapes his/her life according to his/her own idea of man, or of what man should be. Now this image of man which one creates and seeks to imitate is made up from representations, traditions, and prejudices, based undoubtedly on religious, philosophical, or political conceptions of man. Hence, the importance of a good comprehension of man which corresponds as much as possible to the true image of man. For it has rightly been said: "To be wrong about man is consequently to be wrong about everything."

***Shabbat Shalom:* As for Judeo-Christian dialogue, could you tell us where Judaism and Christianity differ in their conception of man?**

Zurcher: It is generally recognized by contemporary theologians that ever since the first centuries of Christianity the biblical image of man has been marred by a theology of Platonic inspiration. The tradition of the church has often explained biblical anthropology on the basis of classical concepts of Platonic philosophy. In so doing,

the church distanced itself, even opposed itself, from the synagogue. Today contemporary exegetes unanimously recognize that the biblical conception of man opposes itself radically to Platonic and Cartesian anthropology. In this, one can consider the possibility of a Judeo-Christian dialogue. However, there remains, deeply enrooted in the mind of our contemporaries, the old forms of thought process which are very likely to hinder any fruitful dialogue. We need the courage to recognize this. This radical opposition between biblical and Platonic anthropology, the latter being adopted by the church, has certainly played a role in the secular attitude of the Christians toward the Jews. I am convinced that a return to the truly biblical conception of man would facilitate the Judeo-Christian dialogue.

***Shabbat Shalom:* What is the contribution of Seventh-day Adventists on this subject?**

Zurcher: By its return to the biblical sources, Seventh-day Adventism has rediscovered the biblical image of man. This conception of man is, in fact, an essential point in the Seventh-day Adventist doctrine, and has infiltrated itself into the most practical aspects of the Seventh-day Adventist's life, both on a physical and spiritual level through respect of the laws enunciated in the Bible. For the Seventh-day Adventist, the teachings of the Bible are essentially of normative value. For them, the central problem of our society gravitates around the human person.

The moral crisis which poses as a threat to humanity is not unrelated to false conceptions of man upon which the occidental society has built itself.

*This interview was conducted by Dr. Bernard Sauvagnat, New Testament scholar in Paris.