

## Sacred Images of Man

Abraham Joshua Heschel

**M**AN is the measure of all things. This naturalist principle has been shattered more than ever in our own age by the question, "What is the measure of man?" Post-modern man is more deeply perplexed about the nature of man than his ancestors. He is on the verge of spiritual insanity. He does not know who he is. Having lost sense for what he is, he fails to grasp the meaning of his fellow-man.

What is human about a human being? What do I see when I see man? We know that man is more similar to an ape than an ape is to a toad. We are told that "man has not only developed from the realm of animals; he *was, is, and shall always* remain an animal." But is this the whole truth about man? Is this an answer to the question, "What do I see when I see a man?"

Perhaps this is the central issue in religious education: to become aware of the sacred image of man. Man is our chief problem. His physical and mental reality is beyond dispute; his meaning, his spiritual relevance, is a question that cries for an answer.

There are three aspects of human existence which seem to be basic to the Bible.

1. Man is created in the image of God.
2. Man is dust.
3. Man is an object of Divine concern.

Nothing is more alien to the spirit of Judaism than the veneration of images and symbols. The Third Commandment, "You shall not make yourself a graven image," implies the rejection not only of images fashioned by man but also of "any likeness, of anything that is in Heaven above, or that is in the Earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." It would even be alien to the spirit of the Bible to assert that the world is a symbol of God.

And yet there is something in the world that the Bible does regard as a symbol of God. It is not a temple nor a tree, it is not a statue nor a star. The one symbol of God is *man, every man*. God Himself created man in His image, or to use the biblical terms, in His *tselem* and *demuth*. How significant is the fact that the term, *tselem*, which is frequently used in a damnatory sense for a man-made image of God, as well as the term, *demuth* — of which Isaiah claims (40:18) no *demuth* can be applied to God — are employed in denoting man as an image and likeness of God!

Not that the Bible was unaware of man's frailty and wickedness. With supreme frankness the failures and shortcomings of kings and prophets, of men such as Moses and David, are recorded. And yet, Jewish tradition insisted that not only man's soul but also his body is symbolic of God. This is why even the body of a criminal condemned to death must be treated with reverence, according to the book of Deuteronomy (21:23). He who sheds the blood of a human being, "it is accounted to him as though he diminished (or destroyed) the Divine image." Hillel characterized the body as an "icon" of God, as it were, and considered keeping clean one's own body as an act of reverence for its Creator.

As not one man or one particular nation but all men and all nations are endowed with the likeness of God, there is no danger of ever worshipping man, because only that which is extraordinary and different may become an object of worship. But the Divine likeness is something all men share.

This is a conception of far reaching importance to Biblical piety. What it implies can hardly be summarized. Reverence for God is shown in our reverence for man. The fear you must feel of offending or hurting a human being must be as ultimate as your fear of God. An act of violence is an act of desecration. To be arrogant toward man is to be blasphemous toward God.

He who oppresses the poor blasphemes his  
Maker,

He who is gracious to the needy honors Him.  
(Proverbs 14:31)

And what is more, Biblical piety may be expressed in the form of a supreme imperative: Treat yourself as a symbol of God. In the light of this imperative we can understand the meaning of that astounding commandment: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2).

*Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return* (Genesis 3:19). These words with which the Lord addressed Adam after he sinned convey a basic part of the Biblical understanding of man. The fact of man having been created "in the image and likeness of God" is mentioned as a Divine secret and uttered in a Divine monologue, while the fact of man being dust is conveyed to man in a dialogue with man. Nowhere in the Bible does man, standing before God, say, "I am Thy image and likeness." Abraham, pleading with God to save the city of Sodom, knows: "Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, who am but *dust and ashes*" (Genesis 18:27). Job prays: "Remember, I beseech Thee, that Thou hast fashioned me as clay" (10:9). And his last words are: "I abhor my words, and repent, seeing I am dust and ashes" (42:6 see 30:19). In this spirit, the Psalmist describes men as beings "that go down to the dust." (Psalms 22:30). This miserable fact, however, is also a comfort to him who discovers his failures, his spiritual feebleness. The Psalmist is consoled in the knowledge that God understands our nature; He remembers that we are dust (Psalms 103:14).

Man, then, is involved in a polarity of a divine image and worthless dust. He is a duality of mysterious grandeur and pompous aridity, a vision of God and a mountain of dust. It is because of his being dust that his iniquities may be forgiven, and it is because of his being an image that his righteousness is expected.

What saved the prophets from despair was their messianic vision and the idea of man's capacity for repentance. That vision and that idea affected their understanding of history.

History is not a blind alley, and guilt is not an abyss. There is always a way that leads out of guilt: repentance or turning to God. The prophet is a person who living in dismay has the power to transcend his dismay. Over all the darkness of experience hovers the vision of a different day.

The idea of God as the father of man expresses not merely man's creaturely dependence on God or his personal affinity to God. It expresses the idea that man's ultimate confrontation is not with the world but with God; not only with a Divine law but with a *Divine concern*; not only with His wisdom and power, but also with His love and care.

Man is man because something Divine is at stake in his existence. He is not an innocent bystander in the cosmic drama. There is in us more kinship with the Divine than we are able to believe. The souls of men are candles of the Lord, lit on the cosmic way, rather than fireworks produced by the combustion of nature's explosive compositions, and every soul is indispensable to Him. Man is needed, he is a *need of God*.

Life is a *partnership* of God and man; God is not detached from or indifferent to our joys and griefs. Authentic vital needs of man's body and soul are a divine concern. This is why human life is holy. God is a partner and a partisan in man's struggle for justice, peace and holiness, and it is because of His being in need of man that He entered a *covenant* with him for all time, a mutual bond embracing God and man, a relationship to which God, not only man, is committed.

After having eaten the forbidden fruit, the Lord sent forth man from Paradise, to till the ground from which he was taken. But man who is more subtle than any other creature that God has made, what did he do? He undertook to build a Paradise by his own might and is driving out God from his Paradise. For generations all looked well. But now we have discovered that our Paradise is built upon the top of a volcano. The Paradise we have built may turn out to be a vast camp for the extermination of man.

This is a time to cry out. One is ashamed to be human. One is embarrassed to be called religious in the face of religion's failure to keep alive the image of God in the face of man. We see the writing on the wall but are too illiterate to understand what it says. There are no easy solutions to grave problems. All we can honestly preach is a *theology of dismay*. We have imprisoned God in our temples and slogans, and now the word of God is dying on our lips. We have ceased to be symbols. There