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The Nature of the Self: Christian Anthropology Revisited

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Abstract

The word "self" comes up frequently in everyday language. We talk about "self-respect," "myself," "self-determination," "self-help," "yourself," "him/herself," and so on. All of these expressions refer to the subject of investigation of anthropology: the human person and what it means to be human. Thus, in *everyday language*when we refer to "self" or "person" or "human being," often we are referring to the same reality. What is the nature of the self that we so often mention in everyday language? This article takes a critical look from multiple perspectives at the concept of "the self" to understand its deeper meaning in everyday language use and in Christian anthropology. This article draws from (Perrin, 2007:119-148). Used with permission.

Keywords: Christian anthropology, Self-knowledge, Transcendental self, Narrative self, Body self

Introduction

Philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and sociologists, among others, have struggled over the years with questions about the nature of the self (Bourgeois, 2003; Dupré, 1976; Mischell, 1977; Modell, 1993). In a general way, we can say that the self is what makes "me" a distinct

entity, different from "you." It is the cluster of identifiable characteristics, composed of all parts of my being as a composite unity, which constitutes myself as a personal "I." This perceived identity – or, perhaps better, this perceived self-awareness – is a fundamental human experience. When asked "Who are you?" the natural response is to begin a sentence with an identifiable "I" and attach to that "I" identifiable characteristics that reveal, at least in part, an individual person with personal beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, along with a personal history.

Identification of the self refers to a unique capacity of human beings, as different from other animals, to relate the past, present, and hoped-for future into a stable and predictable awareness of "who I am." The self, therefore, refers to the acknowledgment that we are unique human beings, each with our own particular characteristics, but who also reflect common humanity different from the animal world. In Christian anthropology and spirituality, we reflect on questions of the self not as an autonomous independent being, but as a self in relationship to others, the world, and God. A number of fundamental issues provide the foundation for reflection on these relationships and give us an initial response to the question of the nature of the self (Helminiak, 1987; Mischel, 1977; Destro & Pesce, 1998). These will be described briefly to offer some understanding of human nature in general and will act as a foundation for the Christian anthropology developed in the sections that follow.

Characteristics of the Self

First, the self is understood as the whole human being. It is not exclusively the non-material expression of our humanity since it also includes our embodiment, our physical body. The self is understood to be a dynamic complex that evolves in its particular cultural, historical, political, and social contexts while engaging all levels of our humanity: feelings, desires, body, spirit, rational thought, intuition, and so on. Even though we may talk about any one of these in our everyday language to the exclusion of the others, we recognize that they all exist within a continuum that is the whole of the human being.

Second, the self is not a given, not a mere artifact to be discovered after earnest searching and exploration somewhere "within." This position causes us to reflect with some critical questioning on everyday

expressions such as "I want to be my true self," or "I want to discover the inner me," or "I just want to be who I am called to be." The "true self," the "inner me," and "who I am called to be" all need to be reflected upon critically if we hold to the basic position that the self is essentially a construction in time and space. The "true self" is more easily accepted as a metaphor of the self that is most compatible with the values we hold to be true about ourselves: either those already realized or those being nurtured that are not yet fully integrated (Lakoff, 1997, p. 98).

Third, the reflection on the self takes as its point of departure that there is a self that can be known: that there is a stable and identifiable "I" that possesses learned beliefs, attitudes, and opinions that situate the individual in a personal existence. The ability to deal responsibly with the varied and often complex issues of life requires a fair degree of personal stability. In order to engage in critical reflection with others, we need to be fairly certain of the solidity of our own values and how these values have critically shaped our perspectives.

Fourth, beyond what we know of the self as revealed through our actions, attitudes, or decisions, other aspects of the self-escape us: we can never be fully and completely present to ourselves. The self shows itself in different ways, such as what we do and the values out of which we live. However, what we have available to us concerning the self are really only representations of the self. We do not have direct access to the self and therefore cannot pin down once and for all a complete description of ourselves (or anybody else). There is a certain mystery that permeates the identity of each and every human person. Rather than seeing this point as a negative aspect of the self, we ought to see it as one of the self's greatest strengths: the self eludes absolute description; it remains flexible and malleable in the changing periods or stages of our lives.

Fifth, we are thus faced with the paradox of the self: it is both stable (we can identify an "I") and unstable (the "I" is open to change) within the changing realities of my life. An answer to the question "Who am I?" is linked to the evolving possibilities in my life. The answer to the question "Who am I?" is neither a mere résumé cobbled together from the past, nor an inventory of the present, but also includes the potentiality of the "I" in the future. Who I am now is linked to my future, inasmuch

as my imagination connects me to potential new paths in my life based on current hopes, dreams, and desires.

Sixth, the notion of the self is culturally defined. In India, for example, the idea of the self is largely defined by a transpersonal awareness – that is, my self is defined by the matrix of relationships within which I live. This matrix of relationships includes other persons, nature, and cosmos. This definition is in contrast, let's say, to the North American notion of the self, which tends to focus more on the self as a separate, private, and individual entity. Since we tend to focus on the characteristics of the self as defined within the parameters of the self per se, the notion of the self as culturally defined deserves special attention and will be explored in more detail below.

These characteristics of the nature of the self, although not uniquely Christian in character, are at the foundation of the Christian anthropology being developed in this article: human beings created in the image of God. Of particular interest is the way the self is defined within its cultural matrix. Let's take a brief historical look at how the question of relationships has profoundly defined the nature of the self in the past (Taylor, 2007). This will help us understand that the nature of the self is defined by its inherent characteristics, but it is also defined by its cultural relationships and the way society views human beings (Reiss, 2003). With the dramatic cultural changes taking place today through globalization, sensitivity to cultural shifts as contributors toward our understanding of Christian anthropology, are as important as the inherent characteristics that we can discern in the self.

The Self as Defined by Culture: The Premodern, Modern and Postmodern Self

During the premodern period – that is, roughly until the sixteenth century – being a person in the West was largely defined by factors outside the individual. From the earliest Greek times until the sixteenth century, an individual's place in the world was determined by their social role, their financial status, and their family situation. Their personal identity, then, was defined first and foremost by the external communal dimension of life.

In the sixteenth century, as the modern period took shape, a gradual shift occurred in this notion of the person. This shift was brought into sharp focus by the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596 - 1650). Descartes is credited with the launch of the idea of the "modern self." The private and independent self began to receive greater recognition in Descartes' notion of what defined the human person. With the freedom to exercise free will beyond a narrow lot of life assigned to people through their social status, they were able to move beyond what was previously recognized as their fate.

With Descartes' recognition of the autonomy of the individual, with individual rights, freedoms, aspirations, and free agency, we find ourselves moving away from the self embedded firmly in its communal moorings. The individual is hence seen with his or her *own* interiority, independent of the various external spheres of influence. Put briefly, Descartes' philosophy of the human person reflected the possibility of the self's presence to itself. His famous dictum *I think, therefore I am,* developed in his groundbreaking work *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1639), captures the core of this new way of looking at the self. During the modern period,*the capacity to think* was seen as the major characteristic of what it meant to be human, to the point that a person was often defined as a "rational animal."

In our postmodern world (generally understood as starting in the 1950s–although some would date it back to an earlier part of the twentieth century), more and more people are working to look at the self in a more holistic way. That is, there is a greater awareness that persons are not merely "rational animals" but are defined by their capacity for imagination, creativity, and feelings as well as for their capacity to think critically, analyze, and come to logical conclusions. Thus we see that the nature of the self may not have changed in itself over the centuries, but particular aspects of the nature of the self have been emphasized more or less in different time periods and cultural settings. What we perceive to the reality, whether it is absolutely true or not, influences the way we think and act. Therefore, close attention to the philosophical and cultural impact on our understanding of the self is in order. What is at stake here?

The marked changes from the understanding of the premodern self to the modern self to the postmodern self cause us to question the

tendency to apply our postmodern understanding of the self, with all of its psychological, philosophical, and moral precision, to those who lived in earlier times. The problem is this: when we study people from the past, we need to appreciate their stories from within their own self-understanding and their own cultural definition of selfhood(Neisser & Jopling, 1997). Whatever emphasis we put on the nature of the self, the self is a multifaceted reality. Different aspects of the self have come to the fore during various spans of history.

But the recognition that the self first is, a convoluted mix of body, spirit, feelings, desires, and so on, and, second, the emphasis on each aspect varies according to cultural and historical settings, does not prevent us from attempting to know as much about the self as possible. The development of self-knowledge has been recognized by many men and women as a fundamental prerequisite for spiritual and human growth. It is to this aspect of anthropology that we now turn.

The Nature of Self-Knowledge

From the inscription above the gates of the ancient Greek temple at Delphi, we receive the command: "Know thyself." This maxim, often iterated by the philosopher Socrates in the fifth-century B.C.E., has been reflected in popular wisdom down through the ages. In Christian life today, we frequently encounter the same exhortation to be self-aware, to know who we are, and to be in touch with our feelings and our hopes, our strengths and our weaknesses. Equally, we are advised to bring to consciousness our values, our personal histories, and our moments of grace as well as our moments of despair. This exhortation to self-knowledge implies that to be awareof our life histories, the values that inform them, how our lives have affected other people, and so on, is a good thing (Jopling, 2000). Why is this so?

Self-knowledge is linked to responsibility toward ourselves, others, and creation as a whole. Self-deception or self-ignorance make us vulnerable to erroneous decision-making and misjudgment since we make decisions out of a false sense of self. Therefore, a critical and honest reflection on our life history, previous decision-making, and current attitudes and values contribute to greater self-consciousness. An increase in self-consciousness opens up the possibility for our longed-for intimacy with

self, others, and God since the only self I can bring before another to genuinely love is the self I know – warts, wrinkles, and all! Intimacy and love are major goals of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is also linked to the care of others. People who are self-deceived because of the self-ignorance bear a greater risk of failing to respond appropriately to the needs of others. Not yet being aware of their own genuine needs, those who lack self-knowledge find it difficult to know the needs of others and then struggle to meet those needs in a healthy way.

The self and self-knowledge are linked inasmuch as the self is constructed through critical self-inquiry and self-evaluation during the range of experiences in life. The self is linked to self-knowledge in a dynamic interaction of discovery and insight that results in the reshaping of who I am and who I know myself to be over an entire lifetime (Taylor, 1989). With conscious awareness of how our lives have been shaped in the past and are taking shape now, we can more truthfully and helpfully shape the future of our lives as well as assist others in this task.

Teresa of Avila (1515 - 1582), a Spanish mystic and nun, often spoke to the other nuns in her charge about the need for self-knowledge. She taught that there was a close link between self-knowledge, growth in generosity toward others, and general progress in the ways of the Lord. One of her books, The Interior Castle (1577) describes growth and development in the spiritual life. She admonishes the reader to begin the spiritual journey with a critical look at one's self-knowledge: to begin with a certain humility and honesty about who we are. Teresa possessed little formal training or theological education, but she was a practical woman who, from her own experience, learned how important self-knowledge was in the spiritual journey and in everyday life.

But self-knowledge as indicated by the maxim above the temple gate at Delphi, and in the writings of Teresa of Avila, is a difficult ideal to attain. This is precisely because of the elusive nature of the self, which we have already discussed. Because the self cannot be fully identified and conceptualized, it is not possible to attain full self-transparency. However, this is not really the goal to begin with. The goal is to *strive* to overcome the tendency to be strangers to ourselves in order to assist us in our living. If we know ourselves better, we will more easily be

able to identify potential areas of growth and discover how to go about achieving that growth.

Careful attention to our experience through critical self-reflection, or careful listening to feedback from others, are important practices that nurture self-knowledge. There are many ways to enhance self-knowledge. Examples include journal keeping (the construction of the narrative of our lives) and spiritual direction (meeting regularly with another person to reflect on our faith life). These practices can contribute significantly to self-knowledge, with all of its attached history, values, and consequences.

Self-knowledge does not merely involve introspection – the isolated self looking inward for insight – for it is inextricably linked to how others know us in the crucial instances of life. Self-knowledge involves response to such fundamental human movements as love, guilt, shame, respect, and forgiveness, all of which are experienced in the context of the self in relationship to others. The self grows out of and is shaped by, a multiplicity of relationships with other-selves. In other words, the personal self finds its home in a community of persons, and cannot be understood in isolation from other persons. Desires, motivations, feelings, attitudes and other such characteristics of the self are understood only in relationship to the world outside of the self – in relationship to other persons, nature, and God.

There is no point in life when we are no longer susceptible to illusions or misunderstandings about the self or are beyond self-deception. For this reason, we need others to assist us regularly on the journey to achieve self-transparency and truthful living. Every point of arrival in our journey of self-knowledge is likewise a point of departure. There is always more depth to who I am. This is the Christian journey mapped out against the call to conversion and *metanoia* issued by Jesus during his earthly life.

Profiles of the Self

Up to this point, we have discussed specific characteristics of the self and self-knowledge. We have made some suggestions concerning the nature of being human in order to lay the foundations for specifically Christian anthropology. In this section, we will extend the use of these

characteristics by developing three profiles of the self that rely on them. These profiles are understood as specific dimensions of the self that take on particular importance in our everyday living: 1. The Transcendent Self; 2. The Narrative Self; and 3. The Body Self. Together, these three profiles help us understand how the *imago Dei* is lived out in the ordinary experiences of daily life and assist us in constructing specifically Christian anthropology.

The Transcendent Self. Are we destined to shape ourselves within the confines of human knowledge and everyday living as expressed in psychological categories, scientific terms, societal norms, or even the current values of the communities to which we belong? Can we describe the potentiality of the self by referring to aspects that surpass the self completely? The simple answer to this question is "yes." Although we accept that we exist in space and time, we also maintain that part of human nature is the capacity for transcendence. Transcendence here is understood as the capacity to appeal to that which surpasses the human condition altogether in order to shape who we are, what we are called do, and what we are to believe. Thus understood, transcendence does not refer exclusively to the sacred or to God, but is a much bigger concept that refers to human potentiality.

The capacity for transcendence is a fundamental quality of the self and a unique characteristic of human beings – it grounds knowledge and freedom (Dupré, 1976). The recognition of the transcendent quality of the self is a refusal to reduce human transcendence to the causal laws of science, the rational function of the human mind, or even the creative capacity of the imagination. The self cannot be reduced to a series of objective functions or to objective knowledge about the self. The self is inherently grounded beyond itself, which means that the self is not self-establishing. There is something inherently mysterious in the human that grounds the capacity for transcendental values such as justice, reconciliation, love, and peace. These values cannot be reduced to human pragmatism: they are the product of a call from elsewhere, however, we define or describe their point of origin.

For Christians, this call from elsewhere originates in God – the transcendent self both reflects the *imago Dei* and strives to embody it ever more closely. Created in the image of God, human beings both

reflect the image of God and participate in God's divine nature. This is the source of the transcendent self as described here. We speak of the core of this *imago Dei* as being the soul, the place of the indwelling of God in the human person. It is this indwelling of God in the human person that grounds the transcendental nature of the human self. It makes possible the actualization of transcendental values, such as self-giving love, even to the point of death. Of particular importance in this regard is the life of Christian mystics.

Christian mystics witness profoundly to the transcendental nature of the self (Perrin, 2001). The mystics have continually shown us that transcendence belongs to the nature of the truly human self. Regrettably, there has been a recent trend to de-emphasize this aspect of the human. The self is frequently reduced (whether consciously or not) to its most immediate and lowest common experiences. Failure to recognize the transcendental nature of the self is to reduce the self to less than what it is. Implicit in this reduction is the diminishment of human freedom, imagination, hope, and capacity for love. The issue of the transcendent self is a significant one today because the autonomous, independent, and privatized self emphasized in the seventeenth century is still very evident in our culture today.

The Narrative Self: The Self as a Tale Told. Most people like to tell stories. We gather after a week at work or school and tell others "what happened." During a wedding anniversary reception, individuals recount highlights from the couple's life over the years. Beyond these casual events of storytelling are more focused attempts to tell our story. Autobiography is one of these. After a lifetime of experience and reflection on that experience, someone describes the events surrounding achievements and losses, joys and disappointments, successes and failures in an autobiography. Seemingly disconnected events are knit together into a sustained narrative of happenings that tell the story of a life, even though it is still incomplete (Perrin, 2018a). Other ways our story is told is in a spiritual direction relationship, or through the notes we may keep in our personal journal or diary.

Such storytelling has profound consequences for our life. Telling our story is not merely to provide information to someone unfamiliar with our lives, or to explain how something happened and why. The narration

of stories plays a significant role in personal identity formation. Thus we can speak about the narrative self: my self as constructed, shaped and developed through narrative (storytelling) activity (Ricoeur, 1984).

At play during the various moments of telling our story is a selective process that determines which events in our life are most meaningful and important. On the surface, the process is simple: from the many experiences we have had over the years, our memories drift toward certain events that are more important to us, for whatever reason. These selected events act as points of reference against which we interpret the whole of our lives. By selecting some particular events, whether from last week or ten years ago and piecing them together into a *coherent whole*, we weave together our life story into a *meaningful whole*. The result is the development of our personal identity through the story we have told, and interpreted, concerning our own past. The pulling together of the various events into a whole also gives meaning for the present, as well as directs us into a meaningful future. Thus we speak of a narrative self, an identification of the self that is constructed on the story of our past as it relates to our present and projects us into the future (Perrin, 2018).

The construction of this narrative self also allows us to try on different identities. First, what may seem important today from the past may not seem so in the future. Or what wasn't important previously suddenly becomes key due to the new meaning we give the event or due to subsequent events that color previous events in a new way. Second, given the impossibility of the total transparency of the self to the self, it is not entirely sure that the way we have told our story is, in fact, the way our story unfolded. We employ our imagination to envision ourself in different ways. Short of a level of self-deception that involves lying, the phenomenon of shaping our story according to perceptions that may not be fully "correct" can give us the opportunity to try on different identities of the self.

We always have the possibility of telling our story in the mode of "as if" it were in fact the case. The way we see ourselves, in fiction or in fact, gives us a way of being-in-the-world in new and innovative ways. Again, this dynamic does not function if the intention is to deceive and manipulate. But we must admit that how we see ourselves is frequently how we would like to be! Slowly, over time, through self-identification

of how we would like to be, and subsequent transformation, we can grow into that person.

The fluid nature of our self allows this dynamic to take hold of us in various ways. For example, we may admire a particular historical figure, or someone currently involved in our lives. For some reason, we already identify with that person. Maybe his or her values are close to ours and that person's accomplishments shape our own goals. We may try to emulate him or her through particular spiritual practices or good works in our community or faith group. All of this leads us to integrate that person's story into our story, as well as to integrate our story into that person's story. Imitation of the other is not merely taking on external action. Rather, imitation is tied to the values and motivations that underlie that imitation. The narrative self can shift significantly as we find even more ways to construct meaning in our lives through our connections at the level of the narrative self.

The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus form the backdrop for the narrative self of every Christian. From the story of Jesus, we highlight particular events that bring his life into a meaningful whole. These same events are available to us to inform, compose, and shape our own lives. Jesus fed the hungry and visited the sick and invites us to do the same. Jesus worked to eliminate oppression and unjust structures and again invites us to do the same. The invitation, therefore, is to tell our story using the story of Jesus' own life. In this way, the story of Jesus *really becomes* our story. We thus find our self-identity in Jesus in relating in a meaningful way to how he lived his life.

In Christian spirituality, we realize that even death does not end our story in Jesus. As Jesus was raised from the dead, we too participate in that defining event of Jesus' life. More and more, our character is called to reflect the character of Jesus. More and more, our life story is taken up into the life story of Jesus, which includes the dynamics of his life: joy, peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, and so on. In all of these aspects is anticipated the event of his resurrection – and ours, too. Participating now in what is our hoped-for future is the heart of Christian spirituality and constitutes the foundation of Christian faith.

At the basis of the narrative self is the profound dynamic of love: loving and being loved. In Greek, this dynamic love is referred to as the *agape* [a-ga-PAY] of God. The primary character of God is God's self-giving love, which gives birth and shape to Christian communities. The narrative self is always an interpretation of our self-understanding in relation to God's infinite horizon of love that calls us to be in relationship withothers in a similar kind of way. Love poured out for others points to the communitarian dimension of the narrative self. Since the primary goal of Christian communities is to seek out the other in love, in reconciliation, and in peace, my story is always a shared story in the context of the life of others who participate in these same goals. Love can only operate in the context of community – relationship with others.

As a Jew, Jesus formed a community with a narrative identity based on the past events of the Jewish people. The story of the Jewish community, and God's Spirit that shaped that community became the backdrop for the story of the followers of Jesus. But we also know that Jesus transformed the meaning of significant events in the Jewish community through his own life story. In a similar way, the Christian community gives us a certain self-identity through its foundational events. However, we are also called to assist in the transformation of the Christian community in light of the reign of God, fully embracing all parts of life in the end times. The narrative self, therefore, ultimately participates in the narrative of the triune God as creator, redeemer, sustainer, and transformer of all life. The *imago Dei* of the narrative self exemplifies the life of the triune God in the story of today's world while keeping a watchful eye on the fullness of the embrace of God that comes to us from the future.

The narrative self has a social dimension that reflects the *imago Dei*. The *imago Dei* is ultimately a communitarian *imago*. The *imago Dei* is not a personal inward reality that is characterized by the privatized self with his or her personal potencies. Rather, the *imago Dei* is reflected in the communitarian dimension of living together as faithful followers of Jesus with all the consequences that flow from identifying our story with his. The autonomous self, with his or her "personal" and "private" story unrelated to the community, is a false reflection of Christian anthropology. The fallacy of the isolated self comes to light when we

understand that the Christian narrative self is integrally involved in the life story of others who also make the claim to be the disciples of Jesus.

The Body Self. The body self refers to the physical body that is identified with a "me." We say, "this is my body." We can describe this body in terms of height, weight, state of health and so on. At various points in history, different appreciations of the body have been held (Synnott, 1977). During the time of Jesus, two central or major lines of thinking influenced how people thought about the human body. Although the immediate influence during the time of Jesus was evident in the Roman perspective on the body, we also need to acknowledge the significant influence of the Greek perspective. Thus, we speak of the Greco-Roman, world in which Christianity was born, and whose thinking about the body greatly influenced Christian anthropology and spirituality in many areas. Let us briefly examine some of them.

The Greeks glorified the body. We could say that Greek culture was body-centered. This is seen, for example, in the importance given to the Olympic Games, performed in the nude in order to exalt the body, which was held every four years between 776 BCE to 394 CE. To a large extent physical training, endurance, competition, and bodily pleasures were more highly prized than mental activity and its associated pleasures. However, another Greek school of thought regarded the body as the tomb of the soul, which indicated a certain disdain of the body. Socrates (466 - 399 BCE) was an influential Greek philosopher who regarded the soul as a prisoner within the body. Thus the inferior quality of the body in relationship to the soul was emphasized. Plato (427-348 BCE), a student of Socrates and a very influential philosopher in his own right, also held that the body prevents us from being truly free since the soul was held captive in the body.

The separation of the body and soul (the soul held as superior and the body held as inferior) is known as a form of dualism. In this model, the material reality was seen as inferior to spiritual reality. This dualistic perspective was reflected in other areas of life. For example, women (identified with the affective passions and with earthly material reality) were seen as inferior to men (identified with the intellect and with the rational powers of the mind).

The Romans inherited this dualistic framework, which was called *stoicism*. Stoicism upheld the dualistic nature of the body and developed an approach to life that was largely intended to keep the body (the lower, corruptible part) in check in order to save the soul (the higher, immortal part). Stoicism exerted a strong influence over Christianity during its earliest years and, as a result, a dualistic approach can be discerned in many early Christian thinkers and even in some places in the Christian scriptures. Some early Christian writers upheld the dignity of the whole person, while others emphasized a dualistic framework of the body and held in disdain its irrational impulses, feelings, and uncontrollable behaviors. For example, on one hand, the writings of the Flemish woman Hadewijch of Antwerp, a thirteenth-century Beguine, describe a way of knowing and loving God that passionately involves the physical body. On the other hand, we have *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written in the fourteenth century by an unknown author, which tends to cast the physical body from a negative perspective.

Our continued ambivalence toward human sexuality is rooted in a negative appreciation of the body as inherently sinful. The persistence of the idea of the inherent sinfulness of the flesh continues to leave its mark in our Christian thinking, living, and practice with respect to various issues regarding human sexuality and spirituality. For example, we continue to see our bodies as something to be conquered, subdued, and put in place – in favor of the rational and cool control of the intellect. This is true especially with respect to issues of sexuality – to be out of control, that is, to let the body freely enjoy the physical pleasures of marital love, without guilt or shame, is still repulsive for some people. A positive approach to human sexuality – understood as the desire for intimacy and communion and not mere genital activity – is foundational to mature Christian anthropology that recognizes the role of passion (*eros*) as the raw material of relationships and communion with others (Williams, 1996; Ahlgren, 2005).

The fact that Jesus took on human flesh and joined together into the same self both humanity and divinity opposes a dualistic approach to the body (Timmerman, 1994). The body and soul understood as embodying the material and non-material aspects of the self, are an integrated whole. The self, as body and soul, fully participates in the life of the Spirit and is a reflection of the *imago Dei* (Grenz, 2001). It

is essential to emphasize the part of our Christian tradition that gives a positive evaluation ofthe body and sees it as the very place from which God's grace originates (Paulsell, 2002). We need to reject the idea that spirituality is disconnected from the human body or human sexuality, or that the desires of the flesh are inherently sinful.

Christian spiritualties thus need to avoid dualisms that oppose body and spirit. The spirit of God is involved in all parts of our lives. Our practical everyday life is not separate from our spiritual life. Our sexuality is not split off from our minds, feelings, and rational processes. The body is as involved in Christian spirituality in a positive way as is any other aspect of the self (Ryan, 2004). However, since the long-standing traditions within Christian spirituality are permeated with both dualistic and holistic approaches to the body, it is important to examine critically teachings on the body, keeping in mind a holistic approach. For example, Matthew 25:34-6 emphasizes the positive care we ought to extend to the body, while Matthew 18:8-9 seems to denigrate the body. Thus, the reference to scriptural texts concerning one or the other approach to the body cannot be left to stand alone. Usually they must be complemented by other scriptural texts or by further developments in the Christian traditions and practices.

Consideration of the body in Christian spirituality is also important because there is no singular approach to the body that is consistent or readily accepted throughout the Christian traditions. The body can be viewed in a positive or negative way; as a sacred or secular entity; material or spiritual; and so on. Attitudes to the body even play themselves out after death. Following physical death, the body remains the most dominant symbol of the self. We go to visit the burial sites of our loved ones. The closeness to the physical place of the internment of our loved ones brings us close to them in spirit.

Any paradigm of the body will immensely influence how the body is treated and, subsequently, how life is lived in every day (McGuire, 2003; Williams, 1996)). In essence, therefore, our views on the body play themselves out in significant ways in Christian spirituality. Issues of asceticism, contemplation, prayer and worship, mysticism, spiritual practice, and the like will all be influenced by our understanding of the body as a reflection of the *imago Dei*.

Conclusion

Reflections on Christian anthropology developed in this article ground the possibility of human agency – that is, the self-determination of the human person as well as the human person acting under the impulse of the grace of God. This perspective challenges the view that the self is the result of the passive reception of the randomness of life.

The self does not spontaneously happen but is the result of the movements of human freedom, beliefs, and values. Fundamental religious beliefs and values, such as the equality of all persons in Jesus and the sacred nature of all life, are what drive the Christian self and what ground the self. These beliefs and values involve all aspects of our being: our minds, souls, bodies, feelings, and our hopes, joys, pleasures, and fears. Thus, the expression "become who you are" needs to be carefully considered. We understand the self to be "constantly under construction," given all of these aspects of the self that shape it in a seamless continuum.

Different spiritual traditions will suggest different notions of the self, that is, will suggest different models of the self, or emphasize some characteristics over others. Thus, it is important to be conscious of the predominant model of the self that we may be living at any one time.

We need self-knowledge to establish the truthfulness of our own journey as well as take responsibility for others. Freely we are called to take responsibility for each other in Christian spirituality. Self-giving (self-transcendence) is constitutive of the self. In other words, the transcendental self is constituted in the free human movements of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation – in the context of a community of persons.

Self-transcendence involves moving beyond the narrow confines of our own lives. Often it means leaving behind the false self: our bias, oversights, and misjudgments. Generally speaking, self-transcendence refers to the capacity to leave behind our small and limiting world to be authentically interested in the world of others.

In Christian anthropology, the self is not autonomously self-constituting or self-creating but molded, shaped, and re-formed within the context of the relationships among my-self, others, the world, and God. And it

is to this "everyday self" we refer to in our "everyday language" and what it means to be human from a Christian perspective.

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