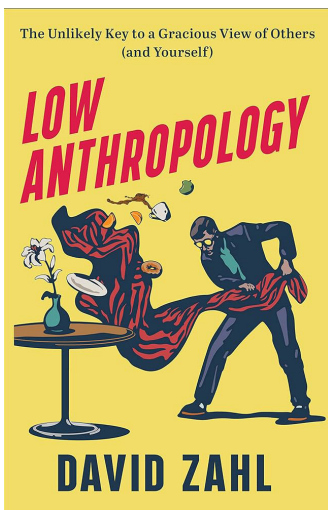


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Low Anthropology

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction

We all go through life with powerful, often unspoken ideas about what human beings are like. For example, we believe that “people can always change” or that “some people can never change.” We believe that “pressure produces results” or that “pressure produces paralysis.” More generally, though, what would we say humans are good at? Not so good at? What principles govern our behavior and make us distinctly human?

Theologians and philosophers call how we answer these questions our anthropology. For our purposes, we can define anthropology as our operative theory of human nature.

Whether we realize it or not, our personal anthropology funds expectations in our relationships, jobs, marriages, and politics. Its bearing on our worldview—and, therefore, our happiness—cannot be overstated. For example, some anthropologies lead to serious disappointment, anger and cynicism. Other anthropologies can be energizing and life-giving.

This is not to suggest that things are always clear cut. Conceptions of human nature can be carefully constructed and spelled out, or they can be open-ended and unconscious. They can arise mainly from experience, or mainly from gut, or from learning, or from some combination thereof. What they can't be is nonexistent. Everybody has an anthropology.

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Seeing people as they truly are, as opposed to how we would have them be, is a crucial ingredient in generating authentic compassion and lasting love. An accurate anthropology opens us up to all sorts of unexpected vistas of hope—not a flimsy hope but one that endures.

Anthropologies can be charted on a continuum from high to low. Think of it as a barometer of human potential. The “higher” we get, the more optimistic the assumptions. For example, any characterization of human beings as basically good belongs on this end. On the “low” end of the spectrum sit the more sober estimations. We find understandings of the human spirit as something that veers, by default, in a malign direction and, as a result, cannot flourish without assistance or constraint. This lower end does not discount our noble and good impulses but suggests that we are underdogs in the struggle to heed them. Our humanity contains an ineluctable dark side, whatever we say to the contrary. This does not mean we’re incapable of sacrificial love and charity. It just means that the moments we demonstrate those ideals are the exception, not the rule.

A high anthropology views people as defined by their best days and greatest achievements, their dreams and their aspirations. A low anthropology assumes a through line of heartache and self-doubt, that the bulk of our mental energy is focused on subjects that would be embarrassing or even shameful if broadcast, and our ability to do the right thing in any given situation is hampered by all sorts of unseen factors.

Not that we’re always consistent. Maybe we say we expect people to be generally self-absorbed, yet when they act that way toward us, we are shocked. Or possibly we are scandalized by a neighbor’s altruism and insist on locating a sinister motive behind every act of kindness.

I’ve found that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, makes very little sense in the context of high anthropology. Words like sin and salvation are scarcely intelligible to a person persuaded of their own virtuousness. If anything, ascribing blanket moral limitations to one’s fellow humans (or oneself) is considered judgmental at best, dangerous at worst.

Low anthropology, especially from a religious point of view, sometimes provides a rationale for shame or self-loathing. Likely this has to do with how one of the major antecedents of low anthropology—original sin—has been misused. But self-loathing is usually born out of a high anthropology rather than a low one. That is, people are more likely to be ashamed of themselves if they are working with inflated notions of what they are capable of. The better you expect yourself to be, the more crushed you will be when you fall short—and the more fuel you’ll have for negative self-regard.

A low anthropology gives us permission to look at ourselves clearly without hiding behind a scaffolding of self-flattery. It frees us from the tyranny of expectation, which fuels resentment of others. The reality is that low anthropology paves a way for real growth and momentum. It does this because it shifts a person’s hopes from their own internal resources (willpower, discipline, natural energy level) to external possibilities. It opens a person to the outside world, to the possibility of love and the surprise of grace. If you think your only hope for happiness or betterment lies within you, then you’ll give up when your limitations are revealed—or when your capacities expire with age. If, on the other hand, you accept your fallibilities, well, everything else is gravy. The world is your playground, and setbacks are nothing more than par for the course.

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1. The Problem of High Anthropology

Once upon a time, our deepest divisions had to do with religion and nationality. Today, our chief antagonisms fall along political or ideological lines: progressive versus conservative, Republican versus Democrat, mainstream versus independent, Gen Z versus, well, everyone. The fervor runs hot on each side, with rhetoric occasionally erupting into in-person fisticuffs. Each camp paints the other not as misguided so much as nefarious, even evil.

This sort of division cannot take root without a high anthropology. After all, high anthropology allows people to hold their convictions—about the world, about themselves, about others—with an ironclad certainty unavailable to those who embrace a thoroughgoing fallibility in human affairs. Such certainty, whether from the left or the right, is rooted in a rational view of other people and ourselves. We are so convinced that different information will change people’s minds that when they don’t agree with our carefully crafted Twitter rant, we assume they must be willfully idiotic.

A high anthropology attributes to human beings a baseline of prudence in our decision-making and goodwill in our relationships. Give people reliable information and ample opportunity, and all things being equal, they’ll do the right thing. When things are going well, this is an easy view to hold. But when other people refuse to act in such a way as we believe they should (i.e., like us), that’s when real problems begin.

A low anthropologist seeks an alternative explanation beneath the antipathy. They are curious about other people’s views and attributes beyond willpower and conscious thought. Then they turn the interrogation upon themselves, recognizing how the same process is at work in the eye of the beholder. Thus, those with a low anthropology can be 99 percent sure that something is right and true, but never 100 percent—which is sometimes the difference between taking up arms or not. That is to say, a low anthropology injects even our most heartfelt conclusions with humility.

Low anthropology rests on three pillars: limitation, doubleness, and self-centeredness.

PART 1: THE SHAPE OF LOW ANTHROPOLOGY

2. Limitation: Or, Modesty Really Is the Best Policy

Limitation means that we are bound by time and biology and history and all sorts of other factors that change our behavior. We can stay awake only so long and can be in just one place at a time, and so on.

A low anthropology begins from the standpoint that full optimization is not and never will be within reach. No matter how hard we try, or which people we know, or how much money we have, the threshold of self-sufficiency does not exist where finite beings are concerned. There is not moral dimension here—no right or wrong—just bald-faced reality.

Although we know we are limited, in practice we have a hard time believing it. Yet there is real liberation in recognizing that we are creatures with limited capacities and that we can only ever know and experience the world in a partial way. Part of the liberation comes from the simple fact that, whether we like it or not, this pillar

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of low anthropology is *true*. When we see things as they actually are, we expend far less time and energy hitting our heads against the walls of human limitation or being surprised when we careen into them.

Accepting limitation also works a strange alchemy: it frees us to have compassion on ourselves and others and to see how much we all need each other. Once you accept the (high anthropology) expectation that you can improve yourself, you have only yourself to blame if you don't.

When love and status are reserved for those who are becoming more efficient and productive, what actually happens is that they remain just out of reach for all involved (and our attention remains focused on ourselves rather than our neighbors). Life twists from hopeful aspiration into a continual reinforcement of “not-enoughness.” We want to avoid exposing ourselves to the people around us who appear to have it all together. Put another way, a high anthropology isolates and breeds loneliness, resentment, jealousy, shame, and judgmentalism.

A culture of self-improvement seeks first and foremost to refine the individual: *my* journey, *my* growth, *my* self-realization—never *ours*. If we always possess the power to become our best selves, other people may be a help or a comfort, but they are not necessary. In many cases, they are what's holding us back! A high anthropology undergirds hyper-individualism. A low anthropologist knows that everyone has a blind spot that another person may be able to fill. This is where collaboration and teamwork can be effective. We need other people.

3. Doubleness: Or, Can't Stop Won't Stop

Like limitation, *doubleness* is a term that I have found to be useful for making sense of our lives as we actually experience them. For the purposes of this book, doubleness refers to the competing forces, or voices, that drive our behavior. It seeks to capture the complicated nature of human motivation and to give a label to the experience. Of being at odds with yourself. It describes the baffling divergence between what we think we want and what we actually do.

Sometimes we give these different tendencies labels. For instance, our *mind* says we should close the computer in order to get some rest. But our *imagination* is curious about what happens next. And our *heart* is so invested in the narrative that it desires resolution. Meanwhile, our *body* is saying it's tired and needs shut-eye. Our *conscience* worries that we've been neglecting something more important while we've been glued to the screen. And so on. Which voice will win out? Motivation is hardly ever cut and dried.

By mapping the contours of doubleness, I hope to show that human motivation is a mysterious affair, rarely running smoothly along the rails of logic and best interest. Whether it is not being able to stop eating the bag of potato chips when we know we will feel bad about it later or the recovering alcoholic hearing the siren song of the bottle, we all know what it is like to encounter doubleness.

A low anthropologist recognizes doubleness and does not minimize or explain it away. This runs against the grain of a high anthropology, which maintains that we need merely to discern the right course of action, and we can (usually) execute. Barring some obstacle, we each serve as captain of our own ship.

A low anthropology understands that people change only when their desires do, for example, when one addiction or emotion is supplanted by a different one. That is to say, a high anthropologist looks at problematic

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behavior and sees a lack of information or awareness. A low anthropologist looks at the same issue and sees a lack of agency or power. What desire is holding this person back? A low anthropologist does not expect fresh facts to change convictions or to alter deeply rooted patterns in our lives.

4. Self-Centeredness: Or, Control Freaks Anonymous

Self-centered is a loaded term. The determining factor in human affairs isn't simply that we are limited in our knowledge and capacities or that we are subject to conflicting and overpowering desires. The issue is that those desires too often veer toward the self, such that what we want comes at a cost to other people. That is the subject of this chapter: What about when our desires are not benign but destructive? It is an uncomfortable question but a necessary one if we are to live with anything resembling ease or grace.

Low anthropology proceeds from the foundational insight that human beings are egocentric and—crucially—that this is not a neutral trait. Self-centeredness blocks sympathy and cooperation—to say nothing of love—far beyond dessert time. The fallout of this third pillar is as immense as it is painful.

A low anthropologist approaches divisions with skepticism, always looking for connection rather than disconnection, confident in the knowledge that we will at least have some shortcomings in common. There is no “them,” you might say. There's only “us.”

At its best, a low anthropology does not undermine righteousness itself so much as *self*-righteousness. It provides a check on the sort of demonization that escalates conflicts, a hedge between a person's point of view and the person themselves. Meaning, I can disagree with you—vehemently—but that doesn't mean we aren't still cut from the same cloth and prone to the same blindness. The resulting humility constitutes a vital step toward cultivating the unity, compassion, and hope required to confront the darkness our self-centeredness generates. The person to be most leery of in life is the one who insists they don't have a dark side. The great villains of history were all convinced of their own righteousness, after all.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has a word to capture our default self-centeredness, a word that makes its moral weight explicit. The word is *sin*, and there are few more loaded terms in the English language. As I see it, *sin* is a word for describing the predisposition against flourishing that appears to be encoded in human DNA. It captures our propensity for doing the wrong thing, the hurtful thing, the one thing that will get us in trouble—for no other reason than we *want* to do that thing. From the beginning, the Bible associates sin with the human desire for control—specifically the desire to usurp God's role as creator and sustainer. In practice, sin often looks like addiction to personal control.

How, then, do we come to terms with self-centeredness and sin? Limitations can presumably be empathized with, expectations recalibrated, and ideas about our capabilities reframed. Our inner conflict can be overcome by some stronger emotion, usually love. But where does hope for the self-centered lie? It lies not in avoidance or in minimization but in forgiveness. Sin cries out for reconciliation and forgiveness. I often wish there was an easier, less costly way.

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PART 2: THE MECHANICS OF LOW ANTHROPOLOGY

5. How We Avoid Low Anthropology

The “if only” route locates the obstacles to one’s happiness or fulfillment “out there.” Instead of looking within for the roots of our issues, we blame our circumstances: the town we live in, the place where we work, the person we live with, the car we drive.

This is not to suggest that a new house wouldn’t work wonders for many of us. A low anthropology does not dismiss the impact that a change can have on our well-being, both positively and negatively. Some problems *do* have solutions like these. A low anthropology merely acknowledges that a bigger closet cannot make a person love someone they don’t. It cannot make an impatient person more accepting, or an angry person more serene, or a lonely person more able to connect. The money might be better spent on therapy, the time searching Zillow better spent in prayer.

In my experience, the most energetic routes of avoidance of low anthropology operate at a deep level: they almost always derive from pain. All too often they stem from the wounds incurred by damaging or decadent forms of low anthropology. High anthropology is seldom a conscious exercise in lying to ourselves or being Pollyanna. Far more often, it is an attempt to correct something that wounded us. This is a good and salutary impulse, and the last thing I want to do is undermine it or amplify the voices of not-enough-ness. The goal instead is to point out, with compassion, where these impulses turn into overreactions that drive other types of shame and pain.

One such method of avoiding low anthropology, perhaps the most popular, is projection. To avoid feeling bad, we actively ascribe attributes to ourselves and others that are not there. We ignore experiences that might confirm negative feelings or conclusions. This practice falls under the banner of bolstering self-esteem. Avoiding a low anthropology fosters the sense that we are alone in our condition, that everyone else has us beat, that we are abnormal and therefore unlovable. The embrace of a low anthropology tends to accomplish the opposite.

Another method of avoiding low anthropology is what we might call time travel. This is the temptation to retreat to the past or punt to the future in lieu of confronting the present. We tend to sidestep who we are today by focusing on who we were back then or who we believe we will be one day.

One irony of religious life is that faith is often used as a way to avoid low anthropology rather than as a reliable means to cope with it. The mere talk of brokenness and sin, no matter the tone, is perceived as an obstacle and something to be avoided. But the patient still has cancer even if they aren’t willing to go to the doctor. God’s love is made *more* beautiful, rather than less, in light of our inadequacies.

6. The Fruit of Low Anthropology

Low anthropology is often cast as a wellspring of judgment and shame, a view of the world that involves an upfront negative judgment. “You are broken!” “You do not have what it takes!” And so on. It sounds defeating at first. Yet the content of that judgment has a surprising implication. If you and I are finite beings, then we are incapable of making watertight judgments of others. There is always a piece of evidence that might be missing.

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A high anthropology entertains the possibility of mastery and comprehensive understanding. It can therefore be highly judgmental in practice. A low anthropology, however, fosters curiosity. Acceptance of one's limited frame of reference breeds hope rather than shame.

You may have 95 percent of the facts about a certain conflict in your life, but you do not have them all. Which means before you conclude once and for all that a struggling situation is beyond repair, consider the possibility, however remote, that what's missing could mitigate things. Ask that one last question.

A low anthropology keeps us open to the wonder of life without turning a blind eye toward our limitations. *Humility* is the right word here. To the extent that low anthropology bears good fruit in people's lives, it has to do with the humility it engenders.

Humility is the first fruit of low anthropology. A few others are unity, community, courtesy, humor and compassion. God has given everyone different gifts and abilities, yet similar weaknesses. Since a low anthropology allows for hypocrisy and contradiction and frailty, even expects it, it allows for love.

Nowhere does our anthropology inform our perceptions more than when it comes to misbehavior and sin. Consider your response to headlines about the mistreatment of women or minorities or children. A high anthropologist tends to distance themselves from the wrongdoer. They insist that the guilty party is a fundamentally different kind of person than they are, sorting people into categories: the sick versus the healthy, the sane versus the crazed, the caring versus the callous, the privileged versus the oppressed, the good versus the bad. This allows us to judge and move on.

A low anthropologist, however, begins from the uncomfortable position of potential solidarity with the wrongdoer. They, like the rest of us, have likely absorbed the weight of other's finitude, doubleness, and self-centeredness. They too are the product of a difficult personal history. Whatever the case, a low anthropology resists categories. To be clear, this does not excuse anyone's actions, nor does it dismiss the damage we do to others (and has been done to us). It merely helps explain these things.

Perhaps faith is the ultimate fruit of low anthropology: the willingness to admit we do not possess all the facts, not when it comes to other people, not when it comes to ourselves, not when it comes to something as metaphysical as God. Instead, what we see as bad and final may not be, and vice versa. Indeed, the painful experience of our limitation, doubleness, and self-centeredness opens a gate through which we discover so much goodness and light, connection and compassion and hope.

PART 3: THE LIFE OF LOW ANTHROPOLOGY

7. Low Anthropology and the Self

Authenticity is a harsh mistress for limited, doubled, and self-centered human beings. One can never be "authentic" enough; there's always someone more "real" than you. The quest for the authentic self, in other words, can lead to alienation from our actual selves.

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Ironically, the kind of authenticity evinced by social media influencers and self-help gurus is not authenticity at all. We may post a picture of our messy hallway with a caption about getting real, but no one is streaming videos of themselves snapping at their children. This approach is more accurately described as *calculated authenticity* or *curated vulnerability*. It is simply the smartest way to sell yourself—namely, by appearing not to.

A low anthropology helps insulate us from anxiety about the authentic. It does this because it understands that very few people can be boiled down to a single set of attributes. Or if they can today, things may shift tomorrow. Are any of us purely one thing and not another? You might say that a low anthropology is skeptical about the existence of a coherent authentic self. We may edit our past to construct a consistent narrative about ourselves, but that doesn't make any one-dimensional story more truthful.

Instead, a low anthropology approaches questions of human identity with a dose of what we might call *healthy self-suspicion*. I am not suggesting that we reject the personalities we've been given, but merely acknowledge that the self isn't immutable. It can be shaped by circumstance and outside forces. We become different depending on where we are. Who we are is malleable to externalities in ways that are both embarrassing and glorious. Thus, a low anthropologist adopts a lighthearted hesitancy about absolute statements when it comes to the self.

A high anthropology not only posits an authentic or true self but also views the uncovering and expressing of that self as one if not *the* primary goal of existence. It can do this only because it believes, on some level, that the true self is categorically good—rather than some mixture of different strands. There is something hyper-individualistic about this pursuit, something that encourages whatever narcissistic tendencies we may already harbor. Alas, narcissism tends to breed loneliness and the sense that no one may ever grasp my innermost self. A high anthropology makes lousy soil for love to blossom in.

A low anthropology, however, binds us together in our confusion. It holds out the possibility that our authentic self, to the extent it exists at any given moment, may not be our best self. Perhaps you've heard some version of the saying that you really learn who someone is in a time of crisis. In moments of extreme stress, instinct takes over in ways that are revealing.

Any kind of label has limited utility at best and can be actively harmful at worst. In this way, a low anthropology tills the soil for true self-acceptance. When I no longer expect myself or others to be consistent or consistently admirable, I might stop resenting them for failing to be so. A low anthropology knows you cannot be more than you already are.

8. Low Anthropology in Relationships

Love cannot gain a foothold without vulnerability. Loving relationships require monumental risk, not the minimization of it. Love necessitates those things that we leave out of text messages: the sounds, the smells, the awkwardness of another human being, including our bumbling physicality. But without that risk, that exposure, intimacy withers.

A high anthropology approach to relationships flows from the conviction that a person will love us for our strengths, accomplishments, and positive attributes. To the extent that is the case, we will strive to maintain those strongpoints and veil our shortcomings. This process is both exhausting and, in the long term, isolating.

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Relationships informed by a low anthropology, however, may include our finest moments, but they are forged in our worst ones. Of course, it can be intoxicating for an idealized version of yourself to be adored. That dynamic usually encapsulates the first few weeks of most dating relationships. But those sorts of relationships do not last because the people involved don't actually exist.

Low anthropology relationships begin with realistic expectations, of both the other person and oneself. A low anthropologist knows better than to look for another human being to complete or save them or really even solve their problems. Instead, they seek a hand to hold in the midst of setbacks and storms, an ear that will listen, and possibly arms that will help carry the load when life gets too heavy. They look for someone to love just as much as (if not more than) to be loved by. Someone above all who will show up and whom they can show up for.

A low anthropology takes for granted that whomever we marry will be profoundly flawed in ways that may not be perceptible at first. What matters most in a successful relationship is how we interpret those failings (and they ours). A low anthropology understands that we are all, to some extent, beholden to our histories and subject to relational patterns beyond our choosing. Our loved one's alienating behavior suddenly stands a chance of being received with generosity instead of accusation.

Even though human beings tend not to respond well to criticism, there are a number of reasons why we might criticize the person we live with. But the critical person in a relationship is living under the (high anthropology) illusion that if you tell someone what they are doing wrong, they will stop. The critic believes, either consciously or unconsciously, that the principle problem with bad behavior is a deficit of information. Yet when there are deeply rooted patterns that extend beyond self-awareness, criticism may instead foster defensiveness, distance, and an even more tense environment.

A low anthropologist treads with caution around anything that resembles guidelines or imperatives when it comes to love. Love is, after all, an area of human operation almost impervious to reason and rationality, as rife with doubleness as any corner of human experience. Fortunately, the inability to take our own advice and metabolize the necessary wisdom doesn't necessarily sentence us to a lack of love.

9. Low Anthropology in Politics

Political outlooks are always shaped by an implicit anthropology. For example, when it comes to what makes people the way they are, conservatives and progressives generally begin from different baselines. How much of who we are is determined by context, how much by DNA? Are we more of a product of nature or nurture? Conservatives tend to err on the nature side of the axis, progressives on nurture. Which means that both recognize that certain factors in life cannot be transcended by willpower: the right identifies those factors as primarily personal, whereas the left sees them as primarily social. This may be why progressives are comfortable talking about limitation in collective terms, whereas conservatives conceive of it primarily in individual terms.

As a result, conservatives tend to put a premium on personal autonomy and responsibility, seeking to place more rather than less power in the hands of individuals. Progressives, because they see people as fundamentally embedded in and subject to all sorts of social and economic limitations, seek to place more

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power in the hands of a collective than can help them. They both operate from the assumption that with the right systems and set of laws, human beings can more or less cure what ails them.

Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are the party of low anthropology. So what might a politics of low anthropology look like?

First, a politics of low anthropology takes as a given that limited, doubled, and self-centered people will build systems of government that are limited, doubled, and self-centered. This means that no system, just like no humans, will be perfect. A politics of low anthropology is therefore highly aware of the limits of political action—what it can and cannot accomplish. It seeks to keep expectations modest.

A politics of low anthropology also says we are primarily emotional rather than intellectual creatures. That means that our political adversaries—*those* people—have emotional motivations for their opposition to our position, as we do vis-a-vis theirs. Just because you can't discern that reason from where you are sitting doesn't mean it's not there. A low anthropology takes a somewhat dim view of personal freedom, important though such freedom is in theory, knowing that what we want to do and what we should do are seldom identical. Merely guaranteeing personal freedom is not a surefire recipe for sound decision-making. We don't always act in our own best interest.

Where a high anthropologist embraces tribalism, groupthink, and scapegoating, a low anthropologist celebrates collaboration as a key virtue. This may at times open them up to accusations of wishy-washiness, but low anthropologists know we are more likely to be wrong than we think—and the people with whom we disagree more likely to have something to teach us than we assume.

Finally, a politics of low anthropology presses for a system that distributes power as widely as possible, over both population and time. A low anthropologist seeks this dispersal because they know that power corrupts and that the powerful are unlikely to realize they are corrupt.

Since everyone has a different starting point in the so-called rat race of life, a politics of low anthropology largely eschews any pretense of meritocracy. We have to rely on others for knowledge of what it is like to grow up as part of a different race or gender or nationality or sexuality or religion. Others see things we don't and feel things we don't. A politics of low anthropology will therefore seek to be as representative as possible. It will include excessive checks and balances to avoid the whiplash of action-reaction to which all human beings are subject.

10. Low Anthropology in Religion

I have heard too many sad and enraging testimonies of people who have been wounded by a high anthropology approach to religion. The body count increases every day.

High anthropology is the tie that binds together nearly every account of religious burnout and disillusionment. It is the foundation of legalistic and oppressive forms of religion, without which they cannot find oxygen. A high anthropology approach to religion devastates. Anytime you hear someone refer to a former religious observance with some form of "I just couldn't keep it up any more," you are in the vicinity of high anthropology. Dramatic tales of deconversion and denouncement are the most egregious examples of this phenomenon.

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In a religion of high anthropology, faith begins to feel like a project rather a refuge. In some groups, Christians are meant to play by a different set of rules than non-Christians. For the unbeliever, God is merciful and forgiving. For the believer, however, God expects a bit more: more devotion, more charity, more accountability, more faith. Before they know it, faith has turned into a new ladder to climb, a spiritual extension of meritocracy. This time, though, the approval of God Almighty hangs in the balance.

In low anthropology, the Holy Spirit plays more of a leading role than a supporting one; you and I are what the Bible calls *vesse/s*—that is, when it comes to driving the plot of goodness and grace forward in a person's life, we take a back seat to the Spirit, in terms of both initiative and credit. A low anthropologist would therefore caution believers about miscasting the Spirit as an extra dose of motivation grafted onto the human will.

What does a religion of low anthropology look like? First, it holds a nosebleed-high view of God. To the extent that we are small, God is large. A high anthropologist looks to God as helper and guiding force but in the long run has a hard time remembering that he is savior. A religion of low anthropology understands that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves: he forgives, he saves, and he resurrects. More than being someone to emulate, Jesus delivers those who fail to emulate him with any consistency.

A low anthropology is therefore not shy about the word salvation: the lower your anthropology, the higher your Christology will be. But a religion of low anthropology is not shy about sanctification either. It simply puts the onus on God to do the growing. He is the gardener who cultivates the soil of our hearts and makes the rain fall. You might say a low anthropologist holds God to his promises rather than attempts to usurp the reins. As such, a religion of low anthropology ultimately boasts a more optimistic and hopeful view of change than its alternatives.

Jesus knows that *telling* people to have faith doesn't do all that much. He knows that only when we have exhausted our own capacities will we look in faith toward the horizon. Only when we have been unburdened of our illusions about what we feel we "deserve" will we appreciate what we have been given. Faith in God begins where faith in oneself ends.

This is why a religion of low anthropology tends to resonate with those who find themselves defeated by life rather than folks on the upward swing. Those whom life has forcibly divested of illusion and idealism relish the sympathy they hear in a message that takes into account the shipwrecks of life. They naturally gravitate away from messages about participation and partnership and toward ones about absolution, reconciliation, and resurrection.

So a religion of low anthropology resists the urge to move past the human need for forgiveness and mercy, confident that, on some level, everyone always requires as much. It sings the same song of God's grace over and over again. Regardless of how privileged or together we may appear, a low anthropology maintains that we are all in some kind of pain and desperate for the same amount of love, which is 100 percent.

Conclusion

In the world of high anthropology, we get what we deserve, nothing more, nothing less. Reciprocity reigns. Fail to meet reasonable expectations, and it's game over. In a world of low anthropology, grace upends the predictable economy of cause and effect.

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A world of low anthropology is a world of surprise. It is a world where, despite our limitations, our doubleness, and our self-centeredness, good things happen with alarming frequency. Not always, mind you, but not never.

A low anthropologist does not pat themselves on the back when love and approval come their way unbidden. Instead, they gaze in awe and wonder at such moments of grace, basking in these glimmers of divinity in motion. A low anthropology sets the stage for a life of receptivity and gratitude rather than disappointment and bitterness.

Yet a low anthropology is more than beneficial; it is inescapably true. Life makes all of us into low anthropologists eventually. It may not happen until we're lying on our deathbed, but our humbling cannot be evaded forever.

And because it is true, low anthropology lights a pathway of sustaining faith. After all, news about God is of little interest to those who feel they don't need God. The gospel message rings hollow to ears muffled by seductive myths about human perfectibility and potential.

But to those who have a hard time loving themselves, who feel acutely their own failures and shortcomings, and whose personal narratives seem impervious to spin—which is to say, all of us in our unguarded moments—to a person steeped in low anthropology, the announcement that God not only is real but also loves you in full view of your personal reality—to a sacrificial extent—comes as the sort of shock that transforms despair into hope.

Ultimately, low anthropology carries an unparalleled urgency because it forms the gateway to God, the source of love and life. This threshold of hope does not require anything of us. No credential, manual, or finely tuned apology can prop its pillars up higher. Disaster only flings these doors open wider, beckoning us through when we are most broken down—into gratitude and freedom and the arms of the Good Shepherd.