What is a person? How do we decide when it is appropriate to call a particular being „a person“? Medical-ethical discussion of Persistent Vegetative State (PVS), generated particularly when cases hit the headlines, compels us to keep thinking about the notion of the „person“. Of course there is a strong theological stake in the matter. It is not that a theological perspective on personhood leads to a clear prescription in every specific case about how we should act. We may ask whether there are distinctions between ordinary and extraordinary treatments. And we may say that our answers to these questions help us to decide what to do in a given instance. A theological perspective on personhood, at least at the basic level on which I shall be operating, does not direct us to all the answers here. But it is a crucial perspective all the same, even as we address matters of detail. From the principle of the sanctity of marriage one could not deduce on every single occasion whether or not we should morally countenance divorce. We might sorrowfully recognize some cases where divorce could be countenanced. But clearly views about the sanctity of marriage would affect our attitudes to every single case and determine our conclusions immediately in a great number of them. So it is in the very different matter of personhood and its application, for example, to treatment of PVS patients.

The Christian notion of personhood is rich and what aspects of it require emphasis depends on the situation in which one is reflecting. One might emphasize different aspects of it according to whether one was discussing, e.g., Christianity and Buddhism or the question of evolution or issues of human sexuality. Yet despite the fact that the following discussion is undertaken in the context of a wider discussion of PVS, there are certain things about the human person that come to the fore in any survey on the biblical and traditional discussions about the nature of men and women. Foremost is the notion of the person as creature.
That is obvious. But to call the person a creature is to say from the beginning that a person can only be understood in terms of a relationship. The relationship to God which is essential to personhood is distinct from that enjoyed by nonhuman animals. Nor is relationship to God something superadded on the notion of the person. It is not a possibility or an option. It is of the essence.

The phrase which has captured the attention of the Christian tradition working on its biblical basis is: the „image of God“. This is a rather tantalizing example of a phrase that seems important in Scripture but it is not defined on the surface. There have been rival interpretations throughout history and it is impossible to go into their detail. But one is sure to be struck by the reference in Genesis to Adam, at the age of one hundred and thirty, siring a „son in his own likeness, in his own image“ (5:3) and Luke’s description of Adam as the „son of God“ (3:38). There is implied an intimate, filial relationship of creature to Creator. While Scripture does not typically use the term „sonship“ to describe the relation of all human creatures to God, it is clear that creaturehood, in the image of God, designates a relationship of special intimacy with God and something close to sonship seems appropriate on the basis of the texts I have quoted.43

Two things follow. The first is that there is a connection between the rights of a person and the very being of a person, the very kind of being which the human being is. Judicial retribution in the form of capital punishment is first instituted precisely because man, as male and female, is made in the image of God (Genesis 9:6). The right not to be killed follows from the nature of one’s humanity. While we may debate whether such an ordinance as capital punishment is permanent, the principle, connecting human kind and human right, is important to keep in mind. But there is a second consequence. Relationship with God does not depend on the stage or the state of the human being. It depends just on the fact of humanity. This takes us in the direction of discussions relevant to PVS, so let us dwell on it.

According to one tradition of interpretation, the image of God in the human person is identified with what we may broadly term rationality or spirituality. (I keep the terms loose because in the Christian tradition there can be variety of terms with overlapping or sometimes identical content: spirit, soul, mind, even

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43 Though it is brief, Thomas Torrance’s essay on „The Soul and Person in Theological Perspective“ may be helpful here. See S. Sutherland and T. Robert’s (eds.), Religion, Reason and the Self (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989). A good treatment of the notion of the image of God is found in Henri Blocher’s work, In the Beginning (IVP, 1984).
reason. Distinctions here are sometimes very important both in the tradition and in the present theological reflection, but I shall not be distinguishing or defining tightly.) If one thinks thus of the image of God, it is very tempting to identify the essence of the person with mind or spirit or consciousness. This happened very influentially with Descartes who concluded that the essence is to be a thinking being. This train of reasoning has led in its time to one curious conclusion, for it has been objected that if you equate human essence with thought, a person ceases to exist in the course of a dreamless sleep. The late Professor Hywel D. Lewis, Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion at King's College, London, accepted this conclusion but said that it did not worry him, for all one would be missing would be a few minutes of low-grade experience! This is what is described in philosophy as deeply counter-intuitive. In reaction to Descartes, subsequent philosophy went in an opposite direction. The question was asked at the end of the seventeenth century whether God could attach to matter the power of thought. In time, humans became regarded as purely material entities, determined in a more or less mechanical fashion. Interestingly enough, in contemporary discussion of bioethics, the language of Descartes is returning in a remarkable way. Hence there is talk on the body „housing“ of the person and in a well-publicised case in the United Kingdom, some years ago, we heard from Judge Sir Stephen Brown of the spirit of the... (Tony Bland) „leaving his body“. When theologians use such language, they are accused of harbouring an outdated notion of the soul!

There is quite a broad theological consensus that one should talk of the human person as a unity of soul and body. This has been given different descriptions: „embodied soul“ or even „ensouled body“. The human person is the unity of body and soul, the whole being subject to the possession and lordship to the divine spirit. The element of truth in the equation of „image“ with „soul“ is that it reminds us of an important distinction between body and soul. A person is related to God in a special way through the soul or spirit. No one denies the distinctive place of soul or spirit here. But that is not the same as equating the person with soul or spirit. It is just to assign the human spirit its special place. There is every reason for keeping up our theological insistence that the person is the whole person, body and soul.

We need to do this in order to get a proper perspective on the crucial notion of consciousness. Peter Singer, for example, has argued that we must accept the absence of personhood in the absence of a functional brain and that what we
claim for persons at the end of their lives we must claim for persons at the beginning. Hence the embryo prior to brain formation is not to be treated as a person. Of course, PVS is not the total absence of a functional brain. Nevertheless, considerations of consciousness are important in all spheres of bioethical discussion. Now one might quarrel with Singer on his own terms and evaluate differently the distinction between lack of functional brain in the case of brain death and lack of functional brain prior to brain formation. But theologically there is a deeper issue. Of course, humans are designed for communion with God through their conscious spirit. That is the destiny for which, as humans, they are created. But that is not to make personhood dependent on the human ability to realise such purposes. God has established a relation with human persons which constitutes them as persons; human kind is so constituted by that relationship. And such relationship holds between God and the embodied creature irrespective of consciousness. It is not dependent on reciprocity. Since their relation to God makes persons what they are, we are bound to treat them in that light. So when we say that persons are unities of soul and body, we do not mean that one must be at a certain conscious stage of life to count as a person. We are describing the human kind, which is there from the beginning. God is related to such beings in a personal relation to persons and is so related even when reciprocity is not possible.

It is worth indicating further two rather wider aspects of personhood which we need to get right so that we promote a certain ethos and a set of attitudes in our discussions of persons. The first is in relation to what has been termed the „self-defining subject“. Even those who hold to a strongly deterministic account of the human person face the fact that there are choices humans make; there is the making of decisions and so at any rate the appearance of freedom. The modern self-defining subject probably originates with late Renaissance society. He or she as an individual defines and determinates what to believe and what to

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45 There are those who deny that „person“ and „human being“ are to be treated as equivalent terms. My own conviction is that these terms are substitutable in some contexts but not in others and can be interchanged in the present case. In regard to the question of persons and relationships, it is one thing to hold that persons are created to be in a dialogal relationship with God, quite another to hold that if they lack that actual relationship they are not related to God as persons. The second proposition does not follow from the first and it is theologically important to deny that second proposition.
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do in life. Anyone who imposes a law destroys self-definition. Hence God must
go. There is now freedom. And this is jealously protected in the talk and affirma-
tion of individual rights.

From a theological point of view, the bid for freedom comes up against at
least two obstacles from the outset. Firstly, whatever people may be free to do,
they are not free to define themselves out of existence as creatures of God. The
project of self-definition in its most radical form is therefore plain impossible.
Secondly, as will be admitted by secularists, action breeds habit and habit breeds
character so that the character that does the choosing is in fact moulded by
previous choices. And there may be little freedom to change character. But quite
apart from these two factors, the dignity of freedom is misunderstood if people
just celebrate the dignity of freedom in itself. Humans may be free in some ways
and this may contribute to the dignity of humanity. But what truly dignifies
humans is the use to which they can put any freedom they have. Goodness, not
freedom, gives their dignity to human persons and if there is freedom it is digni-
fied as a means to that goodness. It is what we do with our freedom that glorifies
God.

The second aspect has to do with our relation to others. The self-defining
subject goes his or her own way, tied to others in a social and political order,
bound perhaps by some broad moral agreement, but not destined for some
common end. At least that is the tendency of self-definition by its nature. The
Christian understanding of personhood is quite different. When Christ was asked
by a lawyer to identify the neighbour he was called to love, he answered in the
parable of the Good Samaritan that the Samaritan was neighbour to the
wounded. The neighbour is not the other but me. I am the neighbour, so I am not
an individual that happens to be related to others but I am in my created essence
a neighbour, a related and relational being. This reflects the being of God, who is
not an isolated individual but exists in relationship from eternity as Father, Son
and Spirit.

This does not tell me all I need to know about the treatment of the PVS
patient. But it tells me that I begin my very thinking about others by seeking to
help them toward God and the good just I need them to help me toward God
and the good. And the neighbour (because even if I am the neighbour I can still
sensibly talk about others as my neighbours) is discerned according to bodily
presence and need. The neighbour is body as well as soul. As I indicated earlier, it
is not my brief to enter into discussion of particular cases. But what may seem
like a purely theological treatment with no immediate ethical application turns out obviously to have decisive relevance. Vital issues arise in bioethics over the relation of nutritional to medical treatment, the basis of rights and patient autonomy. But if we insist on personhood as a matter of relationship and on the unity of soul and body, there are options that are immediately cut out. They exclude the identification of person with spirit or with consciousness as a basis of legal adjudication. In law, it is not just decision but its grounds which are vital. A properly theological notion of the person, itself the ground of ethical decision, will establish sound grounds and disestablish false grounds for adjudication in a way that places righteousness at the very heart of law. Neither God nor neighbour is properly honoured or loved if we fail to strive for that.  

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