

What Is Man: From the World of Ro and Mo

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What Is Man, from Mohan Perera and Rohan Perera, is a rich exploration of the human condition from psychological and faith perspectives.

The authors, Mo and Ro, are Sri Lankan twins. They explore traditional theological questions about humanity with an emphasis on the psychological aspects of the human condition. The text's interests are consciousness, ego, the unconscious, and the interplay between them; all are explored from a Christian perspective.

The book's central argument is that as people grow up, they lose track of how to connect to their unconscious selves. With that loss, it argues, they also lose the ability to connect most fully with God. For Mo and Ro, salvation comes from turning more fully to God, who is presented simply as a being of love.

The book begins with a doxology of sorts, offering a classical take on the fall of humanity, the trinity, and the need for salvation. Writing has a call-and-response quality that is almost poetic. Each stanza begins with a short declaration, and lines alternate between theological aspirations and lived realities.

The work is then organized into chapters that delve more fully into the interplay between scriptural ideas and psychological constructions. There is a strong emphasis on a Freudian understanding of the ego, consciousness, and the unconscious. This classical take works well as a way of broadening biblical ideas.

The most insightful parts of the text explore how love can be easily misplaced. The authors examine the connections between love and sex, love and money, and love and self, using "what is man"—or what it means to be human—as a central theological question throughout. The book's focus on contemporary psychology shifts the focus slightly, from humanity to the human mind.

Arguments falter a bit when it comes to issues of gender. The book's final chapters are about "sin and sex," and present sex as healthy when it is about love, but not when the more "degenerate ego" is involved. Such passages sometimes take a chauvinistic tone, particularly when it comes to the commentary on sex work, which is without nuance.

The book's willingness to play with form and to adopt playful tones is one of its great strengths, if straightforward approaches might sometimes have been beneficial given the depth of the topics presented. Many of the individual pieces are good, but taken together the book feels a little without focus, and the text is sometimes choppy. Internet comments included near the end feel out of context.

What Is Man? is a theological work that puts the emphasis on the mind, in hopes that the heart will follow it to spiritual salvation and redemption.

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