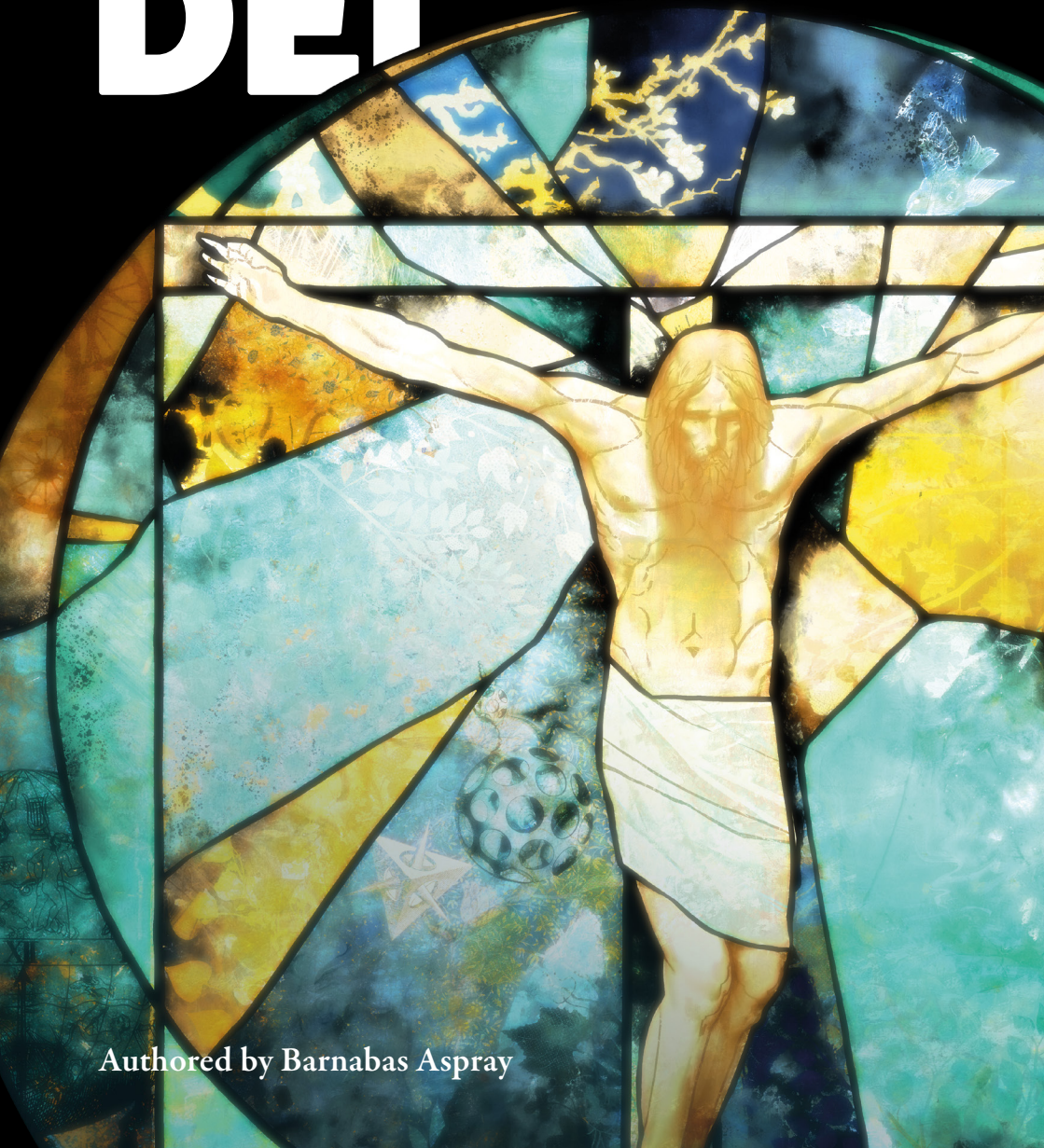
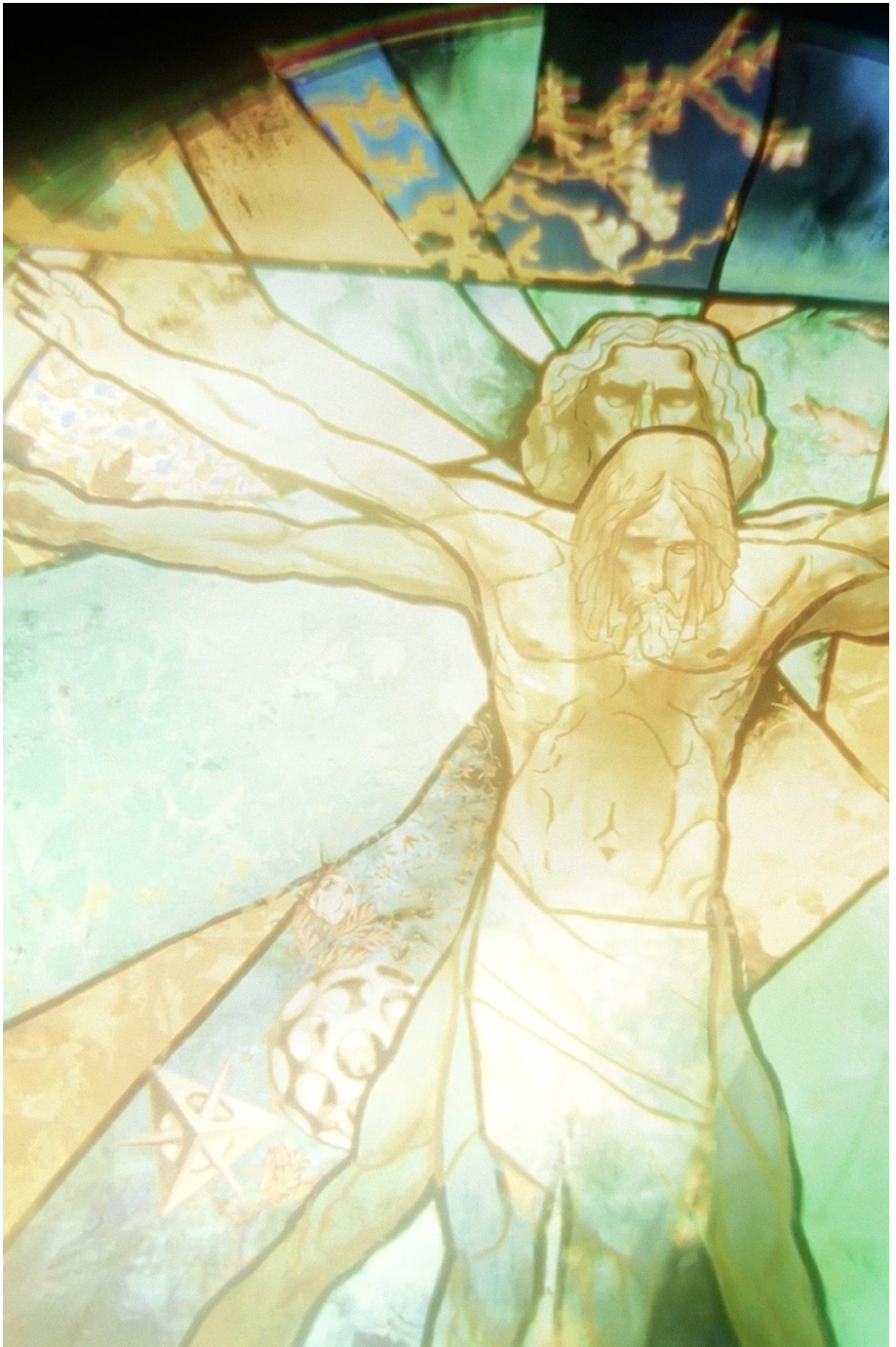


IMAGO DEI



Authored by Barnabas Aspray



AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The most common way to introduce Christian thinking on the “image of God” is to categorise it into three types of interpretation: (1) the ‘substantialist/constitutionalist’ (some aspect of human nature); (2) the ‘functional’ (a role we are called to fulfill); (3) the ‘relational’ (we image the Trinity by our relationship to God and one another).¹ This volume ignores such a division for three reasons: First they imply each other: or more precisely, the first implies the second and the latter two imply the first; thus they cannot be separated and made to compete with one another. You cannot be called to a role unless you have the ability to perform it, which is part of your nature,² nor would God create you a certain way unless he had a purpose in doing so, which is part of your calling. Similarly, to say that the image of God is expressed in relationality implies that we are relational in our being. Andrew Davison puts it this way:

Human relationality, for instance, is grounded in what we are, and vice versa: ‘constitution’ accounts of the image need to take relationality on board; ‘relation’ accounts should recognise that their insights are grounded in the nature of human creatures as human creatures. Similarly, relationality and role reinforce one another. Rarely do we accomplish anything of significance Das : human action is usually joint action.³

Secondly, many ancient and medieval theologians use more than one of these categories to talk about being made in God’s image for that very reason: because they perceive the necessary connection between them. Thirdly, the tendency in much twentieth-century literature to champion one category and reject the other two arises from an impulse to give a complete explanation that excludes other explanations. This attitude fails to grasp the mysterious heart

¹ See, e.g. Lucy Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God* (Cascade Books, 2022); J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos Press, 2005); Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturely and Divine* (Baker Academic, 2020), 84–89; Ryan S. Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation*, *Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements* (Eisenbrauns, 2016), 23–52; Ian Alexander McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Fortress Press, 2005), 2–3. Marc Cortez at least gives a fourth “multifaceted” category that incorporates elements of the other three, into which this volume would be classified. But Cortez considers the multifaceted approach untenable, essentially because he thinks the substantialist approach is wrong and thus cannot be used. See Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), Ch. 2. One book which takes the same approach as the one taken here is Claudia Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

² Richard Middleton shows awareness of this (*The Liberating Image*, 27fn39). This makes it all the more strange that he continues to reject ‘substantialist’ interpretations. But Ximian Xu has pointed out that “Having reconsidered the substantive framework, it suffices to contend that certain arguments levelled against this framework lack analytical rigour and are theoretically tenuous” (*The Imago Dei: A Holistic Account*, Cambridge Elements [Cambridge University Press, 2026], 8).

³ Andrew Davison, *Astrobiology and Christian Doctrine: Exploring the Implications of Life in the Universe* (University Press, 2023), 156.

of what it means to be God's image, which cannot be explained exhaustively precisely because it is the image of a God who cannot be fully grasped or comprehended. For this reason, this volume lays foundations early on with a crucial feature of *imago dei*: that it points to a mystery. A mystery does not put an end to thought: on the contrary, it leaves thought open for endless exploration precisely because it escapes conceptual closure and never rules out the possibility of learning something new. This makes it at least arguable, though not provable, that *all* the above ways of thinking about imaging God are valid, each one revealing a new facet of the profound truth about the connection between God and humanity.

The limited scope of this volume has meant that it cannot cover every aspect of *imago Dei* that appears in contemporary scholarship. These five in particular have been omitted: (1) Since ancient times there has been a vibrant discussion concerning whether or not our bodies are images of God. Most theologians have said "no" to this, but a few surprising examples such as Irenaeus have said "yes." Theodoret of Cyrus has a fascinating conception of the image of God as a unity of spiritual and physical, whereby our physical bodies are visual representations of our spirits which are like God (You can find this *Questions on the Octateuch* XX). (2) Since the Reformation there has been a great deal of debate over whether the image of God was lost at the Fall and is restored in Christ. We briefly mention this in the section on Francisco de Vitoria, but do not do justice to the question. John Kilner's book *Dignity and Destiny* traces the debate more fully.⁴ (3) A thread can be traced throughout the tradition which understands the image of God to refer to all of humanity taken together, rather than to each individual human being. Paul Ricœur argues for this view, basing it on his interpretation of Irenaeus, in his article, "The Image of God and the Epic of Man."⁵ (4) In the twentieth century a debate erupted concerning whether the image of God is relationality, a debate that sprung from reflection on the Trinitarian nature of God. In other words, are we images of the Trinity, or only of Christ, the second person of the Trinity? This debate was kicked off by Karl Barth and championed by Jürgen Moltmann.⁶ (5) There has been a massive debate, also launched by Barth, over the role of gender in *imago Dei* and the ways in which men and women might image God differently, along with accusations that traditional conceptions

⁴ John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Eerdmans, 2015).

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Northwestern University Press, 1965).

⁶ Mark S. Medley, *Imago Trinitatis: Toward a Relational Understanding of Becoming Human* (University Press of America, 2002); Isaiah Nenguan, *The Imago Dei as the Imago Trinitatis: Jürgen Moltmann's Doctrine of the Image of God*, American University Studies (Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2013). Kathryn Tanner suggests it is a false dichotomy: "it is by being in the image of the second person of the trinity that we come to be in the image of the trinity as a whole. A relationship with the second person brings with it relationships with the others, since, as Augustine himself maintains in earlier books, the persons of the trinity are never without one another" (Christ the Key [Cambridge University Press, 2009], 5).

prioritise masculinity.⁷ It is with great regret that these five debates have been left out of the final edit of this volume.

⁷ See e.g. Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women* (Continuum, 1996).



INTRODUCTION

In A.D. 315, the Roman Emperor Constantine sent out an edict forbidding anyone to disfigure the face of a criminal. The edict reads as follows:

If any one, on account of the crimes in which he is detected, should be condemned to the arena or the mines, by no means let him be branded in the face ... which is formed in the likeness of heavenly beauty [and] shall not be dishonored. (Edict of Constantine, March 21, A.D. 315/6.)⁸

Rarely or never had any ancient empire shown concern for how criminals were treated. As transgressors of the law, criminals had forfeited their rights and no longer deserved to be treated as human. What is striking about this edict is not only that it puts limits on how harshly criminals could be punished, but the reason it gives for doing so. This edict states that criminals, like every other human being, carry the likeness of the heavenly God. In other words, even the most despised members of society should be treated with respect because of the image of the divine in them.

The Jewish and Christian idea that every human being is an image of God has shaken the Western world like an earthquake, knocking old hierarchies and inequalities to the ground and making way for a radically new way of thinking about what it means to be human. It is an idea that brought with it massive practical consequences which have transformed society and given a new kind of dignity to every human being, male or female, black or white, old or young, rich or poor, slave or free, peasant or king. In this volume/video we will trace the impact of this idea in shaping the structure of society in all kinds of ways, from how it empowered solidarity with disabled people and unborn children to how it laid the seeds of the abolition of slavery.

The idea of humans as images of God is found in only a small number of Bible passages. But sometimes even one or two verses can be like the rudder of a great ship, turning the whole text one way or the other.⁹ The first and last chapters of a book are often the most crucial. And the first reference to the image of God appears in the very first chapter of the first book of the Bible:

⁸ Cited in Maude A. Huttman, *The Establishment of Christianity and the Proscription of Paganism* (AMSPress, 1967), 161–62.

⁹ Douglas Hall points out that even if *imago Dei* language is incredibly rare in the Bible, the idea it tries to convey is prominent everywhere else: “The Old Testament does not provide an explicit anthropology ... [but] the presupposition of its whole witness, including its description of God, is that the human creature, though undoubtedly creation’s greatest troublemaker, stands in a relationship with God and with the rest of creation that is both unique and central” (Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* [Eerdmans, 1986], 75). He is not necessarily correct that human beings are “creation’s greatest troublemaker,” however. Most likely Satan and the fallen angels are better described that way.

Genesis 1:26-27 (adapted from the NRSV)¹⁰

Then God said, 'Let us make Adam in our image [*tselem*], according to our likeness [*demut*]; and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

So God created Adam in his image [*tselem*],
in the image [*tselem*] of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

Normally this is translated "God created humankind in his image," which is not wrong. But the word it uses for humankind is Adam, which is perhaps deliberately ambiguous and could refer to the first human being or to all of humanity. A few chapters later the same insight is repeated and built upon. Genesis 5:1 states: "when God created Adam, he made him in the likeness [*demut*] of God." But then it says that Adam "begot a son in his likeness [*demut*], according to his image [*tselem*]" (Genesis 5:1-3 – adapted). What does it mean that Seth is in Adam's image just like Adam is in God's image? Is it suggesting that God begot Adam the same way an earthly father begets a son?¹¹

No. It is making the point that Adam's descendents also image God just as Adam does. The likeness to God does not stop with Adam and Eve: they pass it on to every human being who is descended from them.¹² Therefore *everyone* who has Adam and Eve as ancestors, meaning *all human beings*, not only the first two human beings, are an image of God.

A few chapters later we learn something else about being God's image. Genesis 9 states:

Genesis 9:6

Whoever sheds the blood of a human [*adam*],
by a human [*adam*] shall that person's blood be shed;
for in his own image [*tselem*]
God made humankind [*adam*].

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible © 1989 (NRSV).

¹¹ In fact the gospel of Luke ends the genealogy of Jesus with "Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:38). So there is a sense in which God is Adam's father just as Adam is Seth's father. But this is only an analogy, not a literal equivalence, since the rest of the Bible makes it clear that creating and begetting are not the same thing. For more on that distinction, check out our volume on the Trinity.

¹² "Gen 5:1-3 should be read as the transmission of humanity's divine likeness" (Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity*, 48). Carmen Imes disagrees and suggests that Genesis 5:1-3 implies Adam's kinship with God as an analogy to Seth's kinship with Adam. See Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (InterVarsity Press, 2023), 32.

Right before this verse, God had just given human beings permission to kill and eat animals (see Genesis 9:3). But here God draws the line and makes it clear that even though we're allowed to kill animals, we're not allowed to kill fellow human beings. Why? Because unlike animals, humans are images of God. In other words, the fact that we image God is the reason why murder (and maybe violence in general) is wrong.¹³

In the New Testament the emphasis changes dramatically. It is Jesus who is the true image of God (Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4), and Christians are destined to be formed into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:49). Jesus becomes the ultimate example of what it means to look like God, and Christians are called to follow that example by looking as much like Jesus as we possibly can, a task we will only achieve at the end of all time. How does this New Testament idea that Jesus is God's image fit with the Old Testament idea that every human being is God's image? How can it be true that we don't yet image God, but we will if we follow Jesus, and also true that everyone, whether Christian or not, already images God simply by being human?

In order to answer this question, we have to go on a long journey and explore how God's image has been understood by Christians throughout the centuries. We will take many surprising twists and turns before we arrive at a final answer. We will begin by exploring the idea that all human beings are images of God. But while we are doing this, we must remember in the back of our minds that for Christians the image of God is Jesus, and we will save our discussion of that until we get to the end.

¹³ "In Genesis 9:6, creation in God's image becomes a basis for punishing the evil of murder" (Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 95). On the problems accounting for the *Imago Dei* in humans as distinguished from animals, see Dylan Belton, 'Hominins, Apes, and the Imago Dei', Church Life Journal, 5 September 2024.

1. MYSTERY

Mysterious God

The first thing Christians have always insisted on is that being images of God does *not* mean God is like a human being. This might sound paradoxical but it has always been a really important point since the beginning of Christian reflection. The early Church fought hard against reversing the direction of similarity, pointing out that it does not say God is in the image of human beings. One of the main “errors they wanted to avoid,” according to Lucy Peppiatt, was “the mistake of anthropomorphizing God or bringing him down to our level,” or in other words, creating God in our image.¹⁴

In fact, the tendency to imagine God as like a human being is a constant temptation that the whole Jewish and Christian tradition has been vigilant against right since its inception. The second of the Ten Commandments forbids making any statue of God in the image or likeness [demuth] of anything, whether human or otherwise (see Exodus 20:4). Jews and Israelites took this extremely seriously, to the point that idolatry was the gravest offense you could commit against God. The prophet Isaiah thundered against not only physical images of God but also mental ones:

Isaiah 46:5

To whom will you liken me and make me equal,
and compare me, as though we were alike?

Isaiah is asking a rhetorical question on God's behalf. He does not want you to answer “ourselves, because Genesis tells us we are images of God!” He wants you to answer “nobody,” to understand that God is beyond understanding. God is not like any created thing and therefore he cannot be visualised, depicted, or imagined.

That is why the warning against idols does not apply only to physical objects. It also applies to images of God in our minds. As Bruce Ellis Benson says, “Idols are images we create” – both physical and mental images. “Even though we think they represent God, they actually represent God as we have created him.”¹⁵ Human beings have always tended to project their own image onto their idea of God, and philosophers have always criticised them for it. A philosopher from the fifth century B.C. called Xenophanes pointed out:

¹⁴ Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei*, 11. Similarly Ian McFarland writes that “the epistemological implications of our having been made in God's image do not simply provide a smoke screen for an idolatrous reversal of roles, in which we make God in ours,” McFarland, *The Divine Image*, viii.

¹⁵ Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry* (InterVarsity Press, 2002), 22.

Ethiopians say that their gods are flat-nosed and dark,
Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired.¹⁶

He said this to make fun of how the different nations around the world have gods who look very much like themselves. He then uses this point to make a more devastating critique:

If oxen and horses and lions had hands,
and were able to draw with their hands and do the same things as men,
horses would draw the shapes of gods to look like horses
and oxen to look like oxen, and each would make the gods' bodies have the same
shape as they themselves had.¹⁷

Xenophanes is mocking the “coincidence” that the human gods always look like humans. If there was a community of rational horses, they would invent a god who looked like a horse. The same for oxes, lions, or any other animal. This critique is taken up again by the great eighteenth-century philosopher, David Hume. In his treatise on religion, he writes:

The Brahmins assert, that the world arose from an infinite spider, who spun this whole complicated mass from his bowels, and annihilates afterwards the whole or any part of it, by absorbing it again, and resolving it into his own essence. Here is a species of cosmogony, which appears to us ridiculous; because a spider is a little contemptible animal, whose operations we are never likely to take for a model of the whole universe. But still here is a new species of analogy, even in our globe. And **were there a planet wholly inhabited by spiders, (which is very possible,) this inference would there appear as natural and irrefragable as that which in our planet ascribes the origin of all things to design and intelligence.**¹⁸

Hume takes the same idea as Xenophanes: if there were a planet of, their god would be a giant spider who spun the Universe into being. That would be equally as plausible to them as the idea of a human-like mind creating the Universe is to us humans.

But Xenophanes did not mean to imply there were no gods or that the gods were pure fictions. On the contrary, he wanted to get rid of all the human-imagined gods who were getting in the

¹⁶ Cited in S. Marc Cohen et al., eds, *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, 2nd ed (Hackett, 2000), 22.

¹⁷ Cited in Cohen et al., *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 22. Greek:

“Ἄλλ’ εἰ τοι χεῖρας <γ> εἶχον βόες ἢ λέοντες, ὥς γράψαι χεῖρεσσι καὶ ἔργα τελεῖν ἅπερ ἄνδρες, ἵπποι μὲν θ’ ἵπποισι, βόες δέ τε βοῦσιν ὅμοιαι, καὶ <κε> θεῶν ιδέας ἔγραφον καὶ σώματ’ ἐποίουν τοιαῦθ’ οἷον περ καὶ αὐτοὶ δέμας εἶχον ὅμοιον.”

¹⁸ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 7.

way of seeking the true God. As Henri de Lubac says, “his purpose is to recall man to the divine when he loses himself among the gods he has fashioned.”¹⁹ Xenophanes concludes by saying:

God is one, greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or thought.²⁰

The early Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, used these sayings of Xenophanes to show how similar ancient Greek philosophy is to Christianity.²¹ Both traditions want to do the same thing: demolish idols, false conceptions of God, so as to get to the true God who can be compared to nothing.

Even David Hume did not mean to suggest that belief in God is irrational or absurd, even though most people understand him that way today. He ends his treatise on religion by saying that, once we have realised how badly our reasoning can lead us astray and cause us to create gods in our own image, the only cure for it is to turn to what God has told us about himself in the Bible:

The most natural sentiment which a well-disposed mind will feel on this occasion, is a longing desire that Heaven would be pleased to dissipate this profound ignorance, by affording some more particular revelation to mankind, and making discoveries of the nature, attributes, and operations of the Divine object of our faith. A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity. **To be a philosophical Sceptic is the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.**²²

The Bible itself makes the same point in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul says that human ignorance and wickedness led to idolatry, which he describes this way:

Romans 1:22-23

Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged **the glory of the immortal God for images [eikona] resembling a mortal human being** or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

¹⁹ Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, trans. Alexander Dru and Mark Sebanc (Eerdmans, 2015), 5.

²⁰ Cited in Cohen et al., *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 22. Greek: “Εἰς θεός, ἐν τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι μείστος, οὐ τι δέμας θνητοῖσιν ὁμοίος οὐδὲ νόημα.”

²¹ St. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* V.14.109; VII.4. In fact, the only reason we have these sayings of Xenophanes is because they are preserved in this text by St. Clement.

²² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 12.

According to Paul, it is the height of foolishness to suppose that the “glory of the immortal God” can be compared to an “image resembling a mortal human being” – what two things could be more different? Yet Paul is not denying the insight in Genesis – rather, he is insisting that this insight cannot be reversed. God is not an image of humanity.

Mysterious Humanity

On the contrary, Christians throughout the ages have taken the exact opposite lesson from saying that human beings are God’s image: just as God is an inexhaustible mystery, so each individual human being is an inexhaustible mystery. It is not that we can understand God by looking at ourselves: rather, just as God cannot be understood, so human nature also cannot be understood. St. Augustine, one of the most influential theologians in the whole Christian tradition, wrote that God

made also man after His own image and likeness, in the mind: for in that is the image of God. This is the reason why the mind cannot be comprehended even by itself, because in it is the image of God.²³

Similarly the fourth-century theologian, St. Gregory of Nyssa, argued that if human nature were comprehensible, then it would not be imaging God properly:

The image is properly an image so long as it lacks nothing of what is conceived in the archetype; but where it falls from its likeness to the prototype, in that respect it is not an image. Therefore, **since one of the things contemplated regarding the divine nature is incomprehensibility of essence, it is wholly necessary that in this point also the image should have the imitation of the archetype.** For if the nature of the image were comprehended, while the prototype is above comprehension, the contrariety of the things contemplated would prove the defect of the image. But **since the nature of our intellect, which is in accordance with the image of the Creator, evades knowledge, it has an accurate likeness to the transcendent one, figuring by its own unknowability the incomprehensible nature.**²⁴

²³ St. Augustine, *On the Creed, to the Catechumens* 2. Latin: “Fecit et hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem suam in mente: ibi est enim imago Dei; ideo mens ipsa non potest comprehendi nec a se ipsa, ubi est imago Dei.” “Fecit et hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem suam in mente: ibi est enim imago Dei; ideo mens ipsa non potest comprehendi nec a se ipsa, ubi est imago Dei.”

²⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* XI.3–4. Greek: “ἡ γὰρ εἰκὼν ἕως ἂν ἐν μεθεὶν λείπῃται τῶν κατὰ τὸ ἀρχέτυπον

You might be tempted to think that this makes the whole discussion useless. If we can't understand what it means to be in God's image, then what use is the idea and what more is there to talk about? But to call human nature a mystery has important implications for all attempts to explain human behaviour through sociology, psychology, neuroscience, and other methods of inquiry that leave no room for a mystery at the core of being human.

To call the image a mystery means that Christians cannot be reductionistic about human nature. To be reductionistic is to say that a human being is "nothing other than" or "nothing more than" a set of determinate attributes. For example, a physicist might say that human beings are "nothing other than" a collection of atoms, a chemist that we are "nothing other than" a set of chemical interactions, or a neuroscientist that we are "nothing other than" a chain of neural synapses. To say this entails denying that there is any such thing as a "soul" or "spirit" as people typically understand them. It also means that free will is an illusion: we are predictable links in a long chain of cause-and-effect that started with the big bang.

For a long time in the West, this reductionistic way of thinking about ourselves has been influential. The rise of modern science has helped us understand the physical world so much better than ever before, and has given us the tools to master it. We now think of everything that exists in mathematical and geometrical ways, structured by atoms, moved by energy, and operating in three dimensions. But this great success in the natural world has also tempted us to start thinking of ourselves along the same lines. Human beings are seen as nothing more than a collection of particles in a universe that is itself a near-infinite collection of particles. Our humanity is merely part of the machinery of the material world. This leads us to picture human beings as merely computers with biological hardware. Thinking is merely information processing. When we conceive of humans as machines, it makes it easier to suppose that you could upload your brain to a hard drive, or that ChatGPT is really a sentient mind just like you. Our metaphors do this even unconsciously, when we say that we're "hard wired" or "programmed" to do something. But even when we use these metaphors we are implying that we had no freedom to do anything, no creative potential.

But when we engage in scientific observation, we must always remember that there is one huge and insurmountable difference between human beings and everything else that we could possibly observe. The difference is that we ourselves are the very thing we are trying to observe. And there's a big problem with trying to observe yourself: it's completely impossible to do it objectively and neutrally. G.K. Chesterton puts it this way:

νοουμένων, κυρίως ἐστὶν εἰκὼν· ὁ δ' ἂν διαπέση τῆς πρὸς τὸ πρωτότυπον ὁμοιότητος, κατ' ἐκεῖνο τὸ μέρος εἰκὼν οὐκ ἐστίν· οὐκοῦν ἐπειδὴ ἐν τῶν περὶ τὴν θείαν φύσιν θεωρουμένων ἐστὶ τὸ ἀκατάληπτον τῆς οὐσίας· ἀνάγκη πᾶσα καὶ τούτῳ τὴν εἰκόνα πρὸς τὸ ἀρχέτυπον ἔχειν τὴν μίμησιν.

Εἰ γὰρ ἡ μὲν τῆς εἰκόνος φύσις κατελαμβάνετο, τὸ δὲ πρωτότυπον ὑπὲρ κατάληψιν ἦν· ἡ ἐναντιότης τῶν ἐπιθεωρουμένων τὸ διημαρτημένον τῆς εἰκόνος διήλεγχε· ἐπειδὴ δὲ διαφεύγει τὴν γνῶσιν ἡ κατὰ τὸν νοῦν τὸν ἡμέτερον φύσις, ὅς ἐστι κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ Κτίσαντος, ἀκριβὴ προσ· τὸ ὑπερκείμενον ἔχει τὴν ὁμοιότητα, τῷ καθ' ἑαυτὸν ἀγνώστῳ χαρακτηρίζων τὴν ἀκατάληπτον φύσιν."

The same frigid and detached spirit which leads to success in the study of astronomy or botany leads to disaster in the study of mythology or human origins. It is necessary to cease to be a man in order to do justice to a microbe; it is not necessary to cease to be a man in order to do justice to men. That same suppression of sympathies, that same waving away of intuitions or guess-work which make a man preternaturally clever in dealing with the stomach of a spider, will make him preternaturally stupid in dealing with the heart of man. He is making himself inhuman in order to understand humanity.²⁵

Science is an excellent tool for so many things. But there are some aspects of human experience that it can never touch or help with. For example, a scientist can observe me drinking a cup of coffee: she could put my brain in an MRI scanner and observe the synapses, comparing them with how my brain operates when I'm doing other things. But no matter how many different tools she uses to observe me, none of them will ever tell her what it feels like to drink a cup of coffee. That is beyond the limits of what science can do.

That is why the human condition cannot be exhaustively or completely explained by science. From a Christian perspective there is always something surprising, deep, and unpredictable, something holy and inaccessible, about being human. Human nature can never be fully explained or captured by scientific or social-scientific analysis. These may be enormously helpful for medicine and breakthroughs in health and well-being, and they may increase our understanding of ourselves in many ways, but they never give us a complete understanding such that nothing more can be learned.

But we must not misunderstand what it means to call human nature a mystery. A mystery is not something you are forbidden to ask about or learn about. Rather, it is something you can never stop learning about. That is why when we ask what it means to be images of God, mystery is the first, but not the last, thing we can say. That is why Augustine and Gregory, after calling the image of God a mystery, go on to say many other things about it. Yet even as we unfold the many dimensions in which we image God, we must never lose sight of the fact that none of them is meant to be a complete and exclusive explanation. All of them are rooted in a prior commitment to the mystery of being a creature who is an image of the transcendent and incomprehensible God.

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (Catholic Way Publishing, 2014).



2. CREATIVITY

For example, Christians believe that one of the ways we image God is in creative expression, culture, art, and invention. But to say this does not mean that we understand what makes someone creative or how creativity works. The creative spark in humanity remains a mysterious source for works of transcendent and awe-inspiring beauty.

In this context, creativity means not only all kinds of art – painting, music, literature, poetry, theatre, architecture, film, radio – but also scientific and technological inventiveness. Human beings show the image of their Creator by using their imagination to produce things that are beautiful and useful, perhaps even things that had never been thought of before.

Why do Christians think we image God in creativity? Simply by looking at Genesis 1 in context. If you start reading the Bible from the beginning until you get to the creation of humanity in God's image, what have you learnt about God so far? The whole chapter has been about God creating; he is a God who creates!²⁶ Dorothy Sayers, a member of the famous Inklings club in Oxford, put it this way:

Had the author of Genesis anything particular in his mind when he wrote [that humanity is in God's image]? ... In the passage leading up to the statement about man, he has given no detailed information about God. ... But when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the "image" of God was modelled, we find only the single assertion, "God created." The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.²⁷

Pope St. John Paul II likewise said that "the opening page of the Bible presents God as a kind of exemplar of everyone who produces a work: the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator."²⁸ But neither Dorothy Sayers nor John Paul II were the first to have this idea. It already appears in the writings of a fifth-century bishop called Theodoret of Cyrus. In his commentary on Genesis, when he gets to Genesis 1:27 he writes:

In imitation of the Creator, man also creates houses, walls, cities, harbors, ships, dockyards, chariots, and countless other things, including likenesses of heaven,

²⁶ "The portrayal of God in Genesis 1 is crucial ... because of the clear assertion of 1:26-27 that humanity is created to be God's image and likeness. Whatever else it might mean, this suggests minimally that the human vocation is modeled on the nature and actions of the God portrayed in Genesis 1" (Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 60).

²⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (Meridian Books, 1956), 17.

²⁸ Pope Saint John Paul II, 'Letter to Artists, (April 4, 1999)', 23 April 1999, 1.

representations of the sun, moon, and stars, and images of people and brute beasts²⁹

Notice how, for Theodoret, every activity that produces culture is creative, not only the things we typically call “art.” Building a house or a ship is a creative act that mirrors God’s creative action.³⁰

Nevertheless, all these theologians are clear that human creativity is also radically unlike God’s, because only God can create from nothing. Human creations always use material and ideas that already existed.³¹ The Bible emphasises the distinction by reserving the Hebrew word “create” (*bara*) for God alone. Every single time the word *bara* appears in the Old Testament, it is God who is the agent. Theodoret puts it this way:

The difference in creating is infinite. The God of the universe creates from both the existent and the non-existent, and, without effort or lapse of time, puts his intention into effect as soon as he wills it. But a human being who sets out to make an object requires material, as well as tools, planning, consideration, time, effort, and the assistance of other trades. The builder requires a bronze smith, and the bronze smith a metallurgist and a charcoal maker, and all of these require woodcutters, while woodcutters require planters and farmers; every trade borrows what it needs from the others. Yet creating even in this fashion, the human being to some extent imitates the Creator as an image its archetype.³²

But even though human “creativity” is only a vague, shadowy image of God’s radical creativity, it is nonetheless something every human being does, not only creative artists and scientific inventors. Sayers points out:

Everybody is a “maker” in the simplest meaning of the term. We spend our lives put-

²⁹ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Questions on the Octateuch* XX. Greek: “δημιουργεῖ γὰρ καὶ ἄνθρωπος κατὰ μίμησιν τοῦ πεποιηκότος Θεοῦ καὶ οἰκίας, καὶ τέχης, καὶ πόλεις, καὶ λιμένας, καὶ ναῦς, καὶ νεώρια, καὶ ἄρματα, καὶ ἕτερα μυρία οἷον οὐρανῶν ἐκτυπώματα καὶ ἡλίου, καὶ σελήνης, καὶ ἀστέρων ἰνδαλματα, καὶ ἀνθρώπων καὶ ζώων ἄλ’ ὄντων εἰκόνας.”

³⁰ “The human calling as *imago Dei* is itself developmental and transformative and may be helpfully understood as equivalent to the labor or work of forming culture or developing civilization” (Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 89).

³¹ “There is a decisive difference between human and divine creativity: God created the whole world out of nothing in a *creatio ex nihilo*, whereas the human being can be creative only on the basis of something that is already in place” (Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image*, 214).

³² Theodoret of Cyrus, *Questions on the Octateuch* XX. Greek: “ἀλλ’ ἄπειρον τὸ τῆς δημιουργίας διάφορον, ὁ μὲν γὰρ τῶν ὅλων Θεὸς καὶ ἐξ ὄντων καὶ ἐκ μὴ ὄντων δημιουργεῖ καὶ διχα πόνου καὶ χρόνου. ἅμα γὰρ τῷ βουλευθῆναι παράγει τὸ δόξαν. ἄνθρωπος δὲ δειτταὶ μὲν ὕλης, δειτταὶ δὲ καὶ ὀργάνων, καὶ βουλῆς, καὶ ἐνθυμήσεων, καὶ χρόνου, καὶ πόνου, καὶ τεχνῶν ἐτέρων εἰς τὴν τοῦ γενομένου κατασκευὴν. ὁ γὰρ οἰκοδόμος δειτταὶ χαλκῶς, καὶ οὕτως ἐκάστη τέχνη παρὰ τῶν ἄλλων τεχνῶν τὴν οἰκείαν ἐρανίζεται χρεῖαν. ἀλλὰ καὶ οὕτω δημιουργῶν, ὁ ἄνθρωπος μιμεῖται ἀμὴ γέ τὸν ποιητὴν ὡς εἰκὼν τὸ ἀρχέτυπον.”

ting matter together in new patterns and so “creating” forms which were not there before. ... Though we cannot create matter, we continually, by rearrangement, create new and unique entities.³³

That is why the Christian tradition, by and large, is hugely enthusiastic about art and culture. We love to support anyone who wants to image God in their creative expression. Over the centuries Christians have produced countless beautiful paintings, music, architecture, and literature. From Dante’s *Divine Comedy* to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, some of the most epic literature in history is Christian-inspired. Wealthy Christians have also been patrons of the arts, putting their money behind stunning artistic projects like Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, or Leonardo da Vinci painting the Last Supper.

Yet in spite of all of this, human creativity is and will always remain a mystery. As the contemporary thinker Iain McGilchrist says, “creativity is such an elusive phenomenon that one has to be creative oneself in how to approach it, since it can’t be summoned at will, and the very act of attending to it inhibits it.”³⁴ The creative spark cannot be produced at will. You can train people in art or literature, but all that really does is refine and bring out whatever talent was already there before you started. There is no guaranteed method for producing a highly creative individual. This is also true of scientific discovery, which many people don’t realise. A new scientific invention always needs an imaginative leap at a certain stage in the process. As the biologist Peter Medawar put it, “Every discovery, every enlargement of the understanding, begins as an imaginative preconception of what the truth might be. The imaginative preconception – a ‘hypothesis’ – arises by a process as easy or as difficult to understand as any other creative act of mind; it is a brainwave, an inspired guess, a product of a blaze of insight. It comes anyway from within and cannot be achieved by the exercise of any known calculus of discovery.”³⁵

³³ Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 21–22. The ellipsis includes the sentence “In a sense, even this kind of creation is ‘creation out of nothing’” which is confusing in the context of our argument. Sayers believes in the traditional doctrine of creation ex nihilo. She is saying that we can’t literally create out of nothing, but we do something a tiny bit like it whenever we rearrange existing things into a structure that is new, whether this is painting a beautiful landscape, composing an enchanting melody, writing a moving novel or producing a cure for a terminal disease. All of these things bring newness and beauty into the world and in doing them we participate in God’s limitless creativity. As Welz writes, “Our creativity refers back to our creator’s creativity” (Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image*, 67).

³⁴ Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World. Volume I, The Ways to Truth* (Perspectiva Press, 2025), 326.

³⁵ P. B. Medawar, *Advice to a Young Scientist* (Basic Books, 2008), 84.

3. FREEDOM

If human creativity is ultimately mysterious, then human freedom is perhaps even more mysterious. When we say that human beings have free will, this does not imply that we have full comprehension of what makes us free or how our freedom relates to the physical world of cause-and-effect in which we find ourselves. With a few exceptions, the Christian tradition has held that we are not machines whose outputs would be 100% predictable if you knew the inputs. When faced with a choice of alternatives, we can really and truly choose, meaning that we could have chosen otherwise.³⁶ But we have no complete explanation of what makes free will possible. It remains mysterious how we have the freedom to choose between two or more actions in a way that is not pre-determined by those laws, even though our brains are part of our bodies and governed by the laws of physics and biology. To hold that we are free prevents us from being reductionistic: it protects the mystery rather than explaining it.

Christians believe that freedom is an image of God because God is free.³⁷ Like creativity, this is also something we learn if we look carefully at what Genesis 1 says about God. Unlike many other stories of the origin of the world in the ancient Near East, the God revealed in Genesis 1 is a God who freely chose to create the world. He did not have to create it, and he did not create it to satisfy some need or lack in himself. He created it out of his entirely free choice as a sign of his abundant overflowing life.³⁸ Now, our freedom is an imperfect image because we do not have the radical freedom that God has. God's freedom is unlimited. Human freedom is always limited and constrained by our circumstances, our needs, and our possibilities.

Freedom is the highest way that humans are images of God in the view of Tertullian, the great third-century African theologian and apologist. Tertullian writes that

Man was created by God as a free man, with power to choose, and power to act, for himself. I can think of no clearer indication in him of **God's image and likeness**

³⁶ The Catholic Church affirmed this view in the Second Vatican Council in these words: "authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man remain under the control of his own decisions, so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure" (*Gaudium et Spes* 17).

³⁷ Other important thinkers who associate free will with the *Imago Dei*: St. Thomas Aquinas (see *On Truth*, q. 24, A. 2, SC); St. John Damascene (see *The Orthodox Faith* 2.12).

³⁸ "It is no argument of the emptiness or deficiency of a fountain, that it is inclined to overflow" (Jonathan Edwards, 'Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World,' in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, A.M., with an Essay on His Genius and Writings, by Henry Rogers; and a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight, in Two Volumes. Vol. 1 Rev. and Corrected* [Ball, Arnold, and Co, 1840], 102, 2009-00217-005).

than this, the outward expression of God's own dignity.³⁹

Tertullian points out that the very idea of morality depends upon free will. It doesn't make sense to command someone to do something unless they are able to do it. One does not command a worm to walk. Nor is there any point in commanding someone to do something they were going to do anyway because they had no choice. One does not command a river to flow. A command is only reasonably given to someone with the freedom to obey or disobey.⁴⁰ Tertullian puts it this way:

No law could have been imposed upon one who had not in his own power the submission due to the law: nor again, could a threat of death be attached to transgression, unless contempt of the law could have been blamed upon the man's freedom of choice. So too could you find it in the Creator's later laws: he sets before man good and evil, life and death: for that whole course of discipline laid down in precepts, in which God warns and threatens and exhorts, assumes throughout that man is possessed of both liberty and initiative, either to submit or to despise. ... So it was necessary that **God's image and likeness** should be endowed with free choice and personal initiative, so that in it this very fact of freedom and initiative might be accounted the **image and likeness of God**: and with this in view there was given to the man that substance which should be of this dignity, namely, the breath of God, who himself is free and possesses personal initiative.⁴¹

³⁹ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* II.5. Translation modified. Latin: "Liberum et sui arbitrii et suae potestatis invenio hominem a deo institutum, nullam magis imaginem et similitudinem dei in illo animadvertens quam eius modi status formam."

⁴⁰ St. Bernard of Clairvaux makes the same point in the twelfth century: "On what basis, in fact, can one impute anything to a man, whether good or bad, if he is not known to have the free disposal of himself? Necessity excuses from both. For necessity's presence means freedom's absence; and where there is no freedom, neither is there merit, nor consequently judgment" (*On Grace and Free Choice* II.5). Latin: "Ceterum quod sui liberum non esse cognoscitur, quo pacto vel bonum ei vel malum imputatur? Excusat nempe utrumque necessitas. Porro ubi necessitas est, libertas non est; ubi libertas non est, nec meritum, ac per hoc nec iudicium." Bernard also sees freedom as the primary way we image God. He speaks of "freedom of choice, by which it was made in the image of him who created it" (*On Grace and Free Choice* VI.19). Latin: "... libertate arbitrii, in qua ad imaginem utique ipsius."

⁴¹ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* II.5-6. Latin: "Non enim poneretur lex ei qui non haberet obsequium debitum legi in sua potestate, nec rursus comminatio mortis transgressioni adscriberetur, si non et contemptus legis in arbitrii libertatem homini deputaretur. Sic et in posteris legibus creatoris invenias, proponentis ante hominem bonum et malum, vitam et mortem, sed nec alias totum ordinem disciplinae per praecepta dispositum, avocante deo et minante et exhortante, nisi et ad obsequium et ad contemptum libero et voluntario homine. Oportebat igitur imaginem et similitudinem dei liberi arbitrii et suae potestatis institui in qua hoc ipsum imago et similitudo dei deputaretur, arbitrii scilicet libertas et potestas, in quam rem ei substantia homini accommodata est quae huius status esset, afflatus dei utique liberi et suae potestatis."

The same line of reasoning appears in St. Ephrem the Syrian, the great fourth-century mystical theologian and hymn writer. Ephrem gives his own interpretation of the Bible passage like this:

And God said: Let us make man in our image: that is to say, endowed with authority to the point that if it seems good to him he will obey us.⁴²

For when God created him, He ... gave him freewill so that he might govern according to his will.⁴³

For Ephrem, the freedom to obey or disobey God is one of the most precious and yet most dangerous gifts God could have given us, because it makes us more like God than anything that is not free. He wrote a prayer that begins, "Lord, you have magnified the small [human] body above all other created things by endowing it with free will."⁴⁴

Why is freedom more Godlike than anything else? Because only freedom gives you the ability to love, and love is not only the greatest virtue in the Bible (see e.g. 1 Corinthians 13; Colossians 3:14; Matthew 22:37-40), but also God himself is love (1 John 4:7-12). Thus freedom is the necessary basis of the great drama of the human story and the risk that God took in creating humanity. God created us so that he might live forever with him in a union of perfect love. As St. Anselm prays in the eleventh century: "you have created in me this image of you so that I may remember you, think of you, and love you."⁴⁵ Love that is forced is no love at all, so in order that we might truly love, God created us free: free to return God's love or to reject it.⁴⁶ Ephrem writes that God "could have forced us to please him without any trouble to himself, but instead he toiled by every means so that we might act pleasingly to him of our own free will."⁴⁷

The image of God cannot be erased in any human being and is shared by all human beings alike.⁴⁸ Since freedom is one of the ways we are images of God, it follows that every human being

⁴² St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis* II.29. Translation by Robert Murray in "The Ephremic Tradition and the Theology of the Environment," *Hugoye* 2, no. 1 (2010): 70.

⁴³ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Sermons on Faith* 3.31-34. Translation by Joseph Alencherri in "Man as the Image of God in the Exegesis of Ephrem the Syrian," *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 25, no. 1/2 (2021): 12.

⁴⁴ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns against Heresies* 11. Translation by Sebastian Brock in Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (Cistercian Publications, 1992), 34.

⁴⁵ St. Anselm, *Proslogion* 1. Latin: "creasti in me hanc imaginem tuam, ut tui memor te cogitem, te amem."

⁴⁶ "Man is the image of God through his capacity to love and know God. And he realizes his potential as a man to the extent that he realizes this capacity" (Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, *Man, the Image of God: The Creation of Man as Good News* [Ignatius Press, 2011], 52). "We image God in loving" (Hall, *Imaging God*, 132).

⁴⁷ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith* 31.5. Translation by Sebastian Brock in Brock, *The Luminous Eye*, 35.

⁴⁸ "The first characteristic of the divine image is its universality, and this universality is explained in its turn by the fact that we have to do here with no mere accidental character superadded to human nature, but with human nature itself

has free will and cannot lose it no matter what they do. Ephrem writes that “The nature of our free will is the same in everyone.”⁴⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux puts it this way:

Freedom ... belongs alike to God and to every rational creature, good or bad. Neither by sin nor by suffering is it lost or lessened; nor is it greater in the just man than in the sinner, nor fuller in the angel than in the man. ... Freedom of will thus continues to exist, even where the mind is captive, as full in the bad as in the good ... ; and as complete in its own way in the creature as in the Creator, yet more powerfully in the Creator.⁵⁰

In other words, your freedom may be severely constrained – by imprisonment, slavery, or addiction – but even then, your will is still free because nobody can control what you want, what you think, and how you choose to respond.

Slavery

If freedom is core to who we are and if every human being is equally free, it follows that to deprive someone of their freedom is to refuse to acknowledge their humanity. And if freedom is what makes us in God’s image, then to deny someone’s freedom is to blaspheme God. Gregory of Nyssa concluded from this that all forms of slavery are a violation of the image of God and an abomination. This was a groundbreaking insight in a time when slavery was so much a part of life that it was almost impossible to imagine society without it. Even the great philosopher Aristotle believed that some people were “natural slaves” – born to be owned and used by others who were “naturally free.”⁵¹ But the revolution in ideas brought about by the Christian concept of human nature slowly and gradually changed that. Addressing an imaginary owner of slaves, Gregory

taken in its constitutive essence” (Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes [University of Notre Dame Press, 1991], 210). He then lists a number of places where this is taught in the Christian tradition: St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and John Duns Scotus.

⁴⁹ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Sermons on Church* 2.18. Translation by Sebastian Brock in *The Luminous Eye*, 35.

⁵⁰ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Grace and Free Choice* IV.9. Latin: “Libertas ... aequè et indifferenter Deo universae quae tam malae quam bonae, rationali convenit creaturae Nec peccato, nec miseria amittitur vel minuitur; nec maior in iusto est quam in peccatore, nec plenior in angelo quam in homine. ... Manet ergo libertas voluntatis, ubi etiam sit captivitas mentis, tam plena quidem in malis quam et in bonis ... tam integra quoque pro suo modo in creatura quam in Creatore, sed in illo potentior.”

⁵¹ See Pierre Pellegrin, ‘Natural Slavery,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Politics*, ed. Marguerite Deslauriers and Pierre Destrée, trans. E. Zoli Filotas (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

sternly denounced the idea that anyone should be owned, bought or sold by someone else.

But why? What are Gregory's reasons for being so strongly opposed to slavery? They are based on what it means to be an image of God: freedom first and foremost. Gregory says that to deny anyone their freedom is to violate God's law for human nature:

You condemn man to slavery, when **his nature is free (*eleuthera*) and possesses free will (*autexousios*)**, and you legislate in competition with God, overturning his law for the human species.⁵²

Here Gregory uses two Greek words for freedom: *eleuthera* means *political* and social freedom, not being a slave, and *autexousios* means internal freedom, not being ruled by animal impulses.⁵³ Gregory sees the connection between these two ideas: to deprive someone of *eleuthera* (external freedom) by enslaving them is to refuse to acknowledge their God-given *autexousios* (internal freedom) by which they image their Creator. And because it is an image of the Creator, it cannot be bought and sold because it is beyond price. Thus Gregory rails against anyone who claims to have bought or sold a human slave:

What price did you put on rationality? How many obols did you reckon the equivalent of the **likeness [εἰκόνα] of God?** How many staters did you get for selling the being shaped by God? God said, *let us make man in our own image [εἰκόνα] and likeness [ὁμοίωσιν]* (Gen 1,26). If he is in the **likeness [ὁμοιότητα]** of God, and rules the whole earth, and has been granted authority over everything on earth from God, who is his buyer, tell me? who is his seller? To God alone belongs this power. ... God would not therefore reduce the human race to slavery, since he himself, when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom. But if God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God's?⁵⁴

⁵² St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* 4.335.5-11. Greek: "δουλεία καταδικάζεις τὸν ἄνθρωπον, οὐ ἐλευθέρα ἢ φύσις καὶ αὐτεξούσιος, καὶ ἀντινομοθετεῖς τῷ θεῷ, ἀνατρέπων αὐτοῦ τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ φύσει νόμον."

⁵³ See Maria Mercedes Bergadá, 'La condamnation de l'esclavage dans l'Homélie IV', in *Gregory of Nyssa 'Homilies on Ecclesiastes': an English version with supporting studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall, with International colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (de Gruyter, 1993), 191.

⁵⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* 4.336.8-20. Greek: "πόσου κέρματος ἐτιμήσω τὸν λόγον; πόσοις ὀβολοῖς τὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ θεοῦ ἀντεστάβησας; πόσων στατηρῶν τὴν θεόπλαστον φύσιν ἀπενεπόλησας; Εἶπεν ὁ θεός ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ ὁμοίωσιν. τὸν καθ' ὁμοιότητα τοῦ θεοῦ ὄντα καὶ πάσης ἄρχοντα τῆς γῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τὴν ἐξουσίαν παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ κληρωσάμενον τίς ὁ ἀπεμπολὼν, εἰπέ, τίς ὁ ὠνούμενος; μόνου θεοῦ τὸ δυνήθηναί τοῦτο, μᾶλλον δὲ οὐδὲ αὐτοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ. Ἀμεταμέλητα γὰρ αὐτοῦ, φησί, τὰ χαρίσματα. οὐκ ἂν οὖν ὁ θεὸς τὴν φύσιν καταδουλώσειεν, ὅς γε καὶ αὐθαιρέτως ἡμᾶς τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ δουλωθέντας εἰς ἐλευθερίαν ἀνεκαλέσατο. εἰ δὲ ὁ θεὸς οὐ δουλοὶ τὸ ἐλεύθερον, τίς ὁ ὑπερτιθεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ δυναστείαν;"

But has the scrap of paper, and the written contract, and the counting out of obols deceived you into thinking yourself the master of the **image [εἰκόνας] of God?** What folly!⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Greek: “ἀλλὰ τὸ βραχὺ βιβλίδιον καὶ ἡ ἐγγεγραμμένη συνθήκη καὶ ἡ τῶν ὀβολῶν ἀπαρίθμησις δεσπότην σε τῆς εἰκόνας τοῦ θεοῦ εἶναι ἡπάτησεν; ὦ τῆς ἀνοίας” (337.13-15).

4. UNIVERSALITY

But Gregory does something else too in the above passage. He uses the image of God to show that what people have in common is more important than what divides them. The slave and the master are no different really: they both eat, drink, digest, enjoy, suffer, breathe, see — all these things the same. He gets this idea from Colossians 3:19-21 which says:

Colossians 3:9-11⁵⁶

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge **according to the image [εἰκὼν]** of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

This passage is dynamite. The Gospel restores God's image in us – Paul calls it renewal – and this is how the image of God is perfected in us. A renewed and perfected image of God is what every Christian has in common regardless of race, religion, social standing, or (Paul adds in Galatians 3:28) gender. Gregory uses this idea to tear apart the idea that there is any real inequality between slave and master. Everyone, whether slave or free, has a share in the common human condition. Every human being eats, sleeps, suffers, has dreams, longings, hopes, disappointments, trials.

What does this power [to own slaves] contribute to you as a person? – not longevity, nor beauty, nor good health, nor superiority in virtue. Your origin is from the same ancestors, your life is of the same kind, sufferings of soul and body prevail alike over you who own him and over the one who is subject to your ownership – pains and pleasures, merriment and distress, sorrows and delights, rages and terrors, sickness and death. Is there any difference in these things between the slave and his owner? Do they not draw in the same air as they breathe? Do they not see the sun in the same way? Do they not alike sustain their being by consuming food? Is not the arrangement of their guts the same? Are not the two one dust after death? Is there not one judgment for them? – a common Kingdom, and a common Gehenna?⁵⁷

⁵⁶ All Bible quotations (except those embedded in another quotation) are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁵⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* 4.337.16-338.14 Greek: “ποῦ σοι τὰ τῆς δεσποτείας ἐφόδια; οὐδὲν γὰρ ὁρῶ πλέον παρὰ τὸν υποχείριον ἐκ τοῦ ὀνόματός σοι προσγενόμενον πλὴν τοῦ ὀνόματος, τί γὰρ τῇ σῇ φύσει ἡ ἐξουσία προσέθηκεν; οὐ χρόνον, οὐ κάλλος, οὐκ εὐεξίαν, οὐ τὰ κατ’ ἀρετὴν προτερήματα. ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν σοι ἡ γένεσις, ὁμοίότροπος ἡ ζωή, κατὰ τὸ ἴσον ἐπικρατεῖ τὰ τε τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ τὰ τοῦ σώματος πάθη σοῦ τε τοῦ κυριεύοντος κακείνου τοῦ ὑπεξευγμένου τῇ κυριότητι, ὀδύνη καὶ εὐθυμία, εὐφροσύνη καὶ ἀδημονία, λύπαι καὶ ἡδοναί, θυμοὶ καὶ φόβοι, νόσοι καὶ θάνατοι. μή τις ἐν τούτοις διαφορά πρὸς

Those common human experiences, and not social status, are what really matters, says Gregory. In other words, the image of God which we share is the most important thing about us - more important than any of our distinctive traits. In fact, if we compare Genesis 1 to other ancient Near Eastern texts which talk about the “image of the gods,” then we find that this universality is one of the main points that Genesis 1:27 was trying to get across to its original readers, over against those other texts in which only the king bears God’s image.

One of the simplest and most effective ways to understand a word or phrase in the Bible better is to see what that word or phrase meant in other societies and religions at the time the Bible was written. The Bible is not the only ancient text that uses the phrase “image of God.” It turns out that many ancient Near Eastern nations used the phrase. But what is striking is that they used it only of their kings. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, only the king had the dignity of being an image of God. This elevated the king far above his subjects and gave him a different status. Only the king was the authorized representative of the gods; only the king was a true delegate who could wield political power. This meant that the king was a natural superior who deserved the loyalty of his subjects – this was simply part of the natural created order, for Mesopotamian religion and politics. If you wanted to be on the good side of the gods, you ought to serve the one who represents them, the one who is their image.⁵⁸

Contrast this with the Genesis story and you see the point clearly and starkly. It implicitly denies that the king has any natural superiority to anyone else; it denies that the king is the only one with power and authority to rule. All of a sudden, it is all human beings without exception, men and women alike, who are images and thus delegates of God.⁵⁹ The king is not on a different plane to the rest of humanity: he is just a normal human being in God’s eyes, like you and me.⁶⁰ That is why one scholar says that “In the history of interpretation Genesis 1 came to be

τὸν δούλον τῷ κυριεύοντι; οὐ τὸν αὐτὸν ἔλκουσιν αἶρα διὰ τοῦ ἁσθηματος; οὐχ ὡσαύτως ὁρώσι τὸν ἥλιον; οὐχ ὁμοίως τῇ τῆς τροφῆς προσθήκῃ συντηροῦσι τὴν φύσιν; οὐχ αἱ αὐταὶ τῶν σπλάγχχνων διασκευαί; οὐ μία κόνις οἱ δύο μετὰ τὸν θάνατον; οὐχ ἓν τὸ κριτήριον; οὐ κοινὴ βασιλεία καὶ γέεννα κοινή;

⁵⁸ “This privileged function of the king in Mesopotamian royal ideology (which is behind the image of god texts), together with the purpose of humanity as articulated in Mesopotamian creation myths, would have provided vigorous legitimization of the social hierarchy of ancient Babylon and Assyria. If the purpose of the mass of humanity is to serve the gods and if the king represents those gods as their son and image, then the gods are served precisely by serving the king, who wills the present social order” (Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 173).

⁵⁹ “No longer is the image of God or its associated royal language (‘rule’ or ‘subdue’) applied to only some privileged elite. Rather, all human beings, male and female, are created as God’s royal stewards in the world, entrusted with the privileged task of ruling on God’s behalf... In the Genesis vision, it is ordinary humans (and not some elite class) who are understood to be significant historical actors in the arena of earthly life” (Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 204).

⁶⁰ J. Richard Middleton talks about the “democratization” of the *imago dei* vis-a-vis the Mesopotamian context in which only the king was an image of God. He writes that the author of Genesis 1 “was acquainted ... with the Mesopotamian notion of the king as image of a god ... [and] intentionally challenged this notion with the claim that all humanity was made in God’s image” (*The Liberating Image*, 145).

understood by scriptural readers as genuinely universal in intent and thus functioned as a basis for human equality.”⁶¹

That is why Christians have always seen the image of God as a way of proclaiming the fundamental equality of all people. All human beings are equally images of God simply by virtue of being human, regardless of their social status, gender, ethnicity, or any other marker.

But it is not only the universality of the image of God that is important here. Human beings have things in common that are not so profound, like getting drowsy or having an itch. The image of God is also the most profound thing about humanity, the deepest imprint of our identity as human. It does not only transcend all differences due to race, ethnicity, gender etc. – it also is more important than them. When I am facing a human being, the simple fact that they are an image of God is the most important thing about them – more important than their skin colour, age, sex, nationality, or anything else.

And because the image of God is the most important thing about anyone, it is the reason we have a duty to respect, honour, and love every human being. It is the reason it is wrong to do harm to others. The fourth-century theologian Lactantius, who became an advisor to Emperor Constantine, expressed it powerfully and beautifully:

I have spoken about what is due to God; now I shall speak about what is due to other people, although what is due to people still equally relates to God, since humanity is the image of God [*homo dei simulacrum est*]. ... The strongest bond which unites us is humanity. Anyone who breaks it is a criminal and a parricide. Now it was from the one human being that God created us all, so that we are all of the same blood, with the result that the greatest crime is to hate humanity or do them harm. That is why we are forbidden to develop or to encourage hatred. So if we are the work of the same God, what else are we but brothers and sisters? The bond which unites our souls is therefore stronger than that which unites our bodies. ... We must therefore show humanity if we want to deserve the name of human beings. And showing humanity means loving our fellow human beings because they are human beings, just as we are ourselves.⁶²

⁶¹ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 206.

⁶² Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* VI.10. Latin: “Dixi, quid debeatur Deo: dicam nunc, quid homini tribuendum sit; quanquam id ipsum quod homini tribueris, Deo tribuitur, quia homo Dei simulacrum est. ... Summum igitur inter se hominum vinculum est humanitas: quod qui dirupit, nefarius et parricida existimandus est. Nam si ab uno homine, quem Deus finxit, omnes orimur, certe consanguinei sumus; et ideo maximum scelus putandum est, odisse hominem, vel nocentem. Propterea Deus praecepit inimicitias per nos nunquam faciendas, semper esse tollendas; scilicet ut eos, qui sint nobis inimici, necessitudinis admonitos mitigemus. Item si ab uno Deo inspirati omnes et animati sumus, quid aliud quam fratres sumus? Et quidem conjunctiores, quod animis, quam quod corporibus. ... Conservanda est igitur humanitas, si homines recte dici velimus. Id autem ipsum conservare humanitatem, quid aliud est, quam diligere hominem, quia

Colonialism

The universality of the image of God in every human being was the impetus for some of the earliest criticisms of colonialism.

In the late fifteenth century, when the Kingdom of Spain began its conquest of the Americas, they initially enslaved and exploited the natives they found there.⁶³ A whole host of theologians rose up to denounce this practice as immoral and un-Christian. In 1511 Dominican friar, Antón Montesino, gave a sermon to Spanish merchants who had crossed the Atlantic drawn by the lure of wealth, a wealth obtained by enslaving the natives and using them like beasts of burden. In what must have been a gripping and dramatic scene, Montesino shouted at them:

You are all in mortal sin and ... you will live and die in it for the cruelty and tyranny with which you use these innocent people. Tell me, with what *right*, with what *justice* do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery? *Are they not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves? Don't you understand this?*⁶⁴

Although Montesino's sermon does not mention the image of God, he calls them "rational souls" which as we will see later is one of the most common ways humanity images God according to most Christians. For Montesino, the Spanish colonialist practices were detestably wicked and perverse. Why? Simply because they were enslaving human beings. It didn't matter if they were another ethnicity, another religion, and spoke another language. Their common humanity was far more important than anything that made them different to the Spanish colonists.

But there were other interpretations of the image of God that the colonists used to justify their enslavement of the natives. One of these was that the image of God was lost when Adam and Eve sinned, and is only restored when someone is baptised into the Church. Therefore the natives are not in the image of God because they are not Christians.

These arguments were refuted by another Dominican friar and progenitor of human rights was a man called Francisco de Vitoria, at the time the most respected and influential Catholic theologian in Europe.⁶⁵ Steeped in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, in 1537 he wrote a treatise refuting all the arguments justifying the despicable way the natives were being treated. Vitoria said that the image of God is something innate in all human beings, not restricted to Christians:

homo sit, et idem quod nos sumus?"

⁶³ David Hollenbach, SJ, *Humanity in Crisis: Ethical and Religious Response to Refugees* (Georgetown University Press, 2019), 27.

⁶⁴ Translated by Roger Ruston in *Human Rights and the Image of God* (SCM Press, 2004), 67.

⁶⁵ Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 70.

“man is the image of God by his inborn nature, that is by his rational powers. Hence he cannot lose his dominion by mortal sin.”⁶⁶ Therefore they have the right to freedom and to govern themselves, not to be oppressed by a foreign government even if that government is Christian.⁶⁷

The biggest impact, however, was from the efforts of a third Dominican Friar, Bartolomé de Las Casas. He had not always been opposed to colonialism. At the age of eighteen he had moved to a Caribbean island to farm a plot of land using native Americans as slaves. When he was thirty years old in 1514, he was reading the Bible when he came across a passage in the book of Sirach (a book only found in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, not most Protestant ones):

Sirach 34:25-27

The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a murderer. To take away a neighbour's living is to commit murder; to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood.

All of a sudden he saw the entire Spanish conquest of the Americas in a new light. The enslavement of peoples and seizing of their natural resources were “an abomination in God's eyes and must be stopped at all cost.”⁶⁸ He dedicated the rest of his life to fighting to end the corrupt and despicable system and defending the rights of the natives on the basis of their humanity. He took many approaches to this. He insisted that everything that had been taken from the native Americans – land, possessions, and liberty – should be returned to them. It was part of their “dominion” which they had been given as images of God, and they had a right to it: “all of it has been robbed, unjustly usurped and perversely seized and, in consequence, the Spaniards have committed a huge theft that was, and is now, subject to restitution.”⁶⁹ He also violently opposed the Spanish practice of using coercive force to convert native Americans to Christianity, because this violated their free will by which they were images of God. Instead, the only valid method of evangelism is gentle persuasion:

God has most special providence and care for men, **formed in his image and likeness**, and whom he made so free and masters of their acts and of themselves, endowing them with free choice and a **most free will which cannot be compelled by any force – belief is an act of the will**. ... And therefore to give the faith by force

⁶⁶ Francisco de Vitoria, *Vitoria: Political Writings*, ed. Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrance, trans. Jeremy Lawrence, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 242.

⁶⁷ See Nigel Biggar, *What's Wrong with Rights?* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 39; Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 83, 87.

⁶⁸ Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 123.

⁶⁹ Translated in Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 121.

or do violence is contrary to the meaning of justice, which gives uprightness to the will, as St. Thomas says.⁷⁰

And if non-Christians should not be forced to convert, it follows logically that they should be left free to practice their own religion, concluded Las Casas.⁷¹ In this way he reasoned his way from freedom as the image of God to religious freedom as a human right.

Few reasoning processes have been more influential in the modern world. But Las Casas did not have to wait long to see that influence start. In 1536 he attended a council of Dominicans and Franciscans in Mexico to put together a case for the emancipation of all the colonial slaves. A year later, the proceedings of the council were being read in Rome by Pope Paul III. In response, the Pope issued a Papal Encyclical, *Sublimis Deus*, condemning and banning all slavery as an inhuman practice that violates the freedom given to all as images of God. In contrast to the “vicious rumours” spread by “Satan’s minions” that native Americans do not have the capacity to receive the gospel, and thus should be treated on the same level as animals, the Pope wrote:

Desiring to provide ample remedy for these evils, We define and declare ... that, ... the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved.⁷²

Together with this encyclical, the Pope issued a pastoral letter to the Archbishop of Toledo enforcing this emancipation. That pastoral letter was later quoted in later centuries by Pope after Pope to condemn new forms of slavery in Africa and other parts of the Americas, and eventually found its way into the standard collection of Catholic magisterial texts that form the permanent body of the Church’s teaching.⁷³

⁷⁰ Translated in Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 127.

⁷¹ Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 147.

⁷² Pope Paul III, *Sublimis Deus*, 29 May 1537.

⁷³ Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 131. See Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 43rd edn, ed. Peter Hünermann (Ignatius Press, 2012), 367–68.

Immigration

Today the claim that the image of God is universal, in every human being, is used everywhere by Christians working with refugees, immigrants, and national immigration policies. In 1992, two dicasteries of the Catholic Church's Roman Curia jointly produced an instruction titled "Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity." Near the beginning it states its core foundation: "The Church offers her love and assistance to all refugees without distinction as to religion or race, respecting in each of them the inalienable dignity of the human person created in the image of God."⁷⁴ Similarly Refugee Education UK, a charitable organisation that works to enable access to education for young refugees, defines its reasons for what it does in its "ethos statement." Among other things, the ethos statement says: "We believe each person we encounter, whatever their faith, is precious and carries the image of God."⁷⁵

Many theologians agree that all our thinking about immigration should start by recognising the image of God in immigrants. The Catholic theologian Daniel Groody says that "defining the migrant and refugee first and foremost in terms of *imago Dei* roots such persons in the world very differently than if they are principally defined as social and political problems or as illegal aliens."⁷⁶ The Evangelical Daniel Carroll agrees: "The creation of all persons in the image of God must be the most basic conviction for Christians as they approach the challenges of immigration today. Immigration should not be argued in the abstract because it is fundamentally about immigrants. Immigrants are humans, and as such they are made in God's image. ... Because immigrants are made in the divine image, they have an essential value."⁷⁷

When Donald Trump won the 2024 US election, he began carrying out his promise to enact the biggest deportation in American history. The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) began performing surprise raids on schools, workplaces, churches, and courthouses, seizing people suspected of being undocumented, and locking them up in detention centres without enough beds or food.⁷⁸ Some people even with legal status were arrested and detained

⁷⁴ Pontifical Council 'Cor Unum' and Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 'Refugees: A Challenge to Solidarity,' 1992, 25.

⁷⁵ The ethos statement is no longer publicly available on their website, but you can learn more about REUK by visiting <https://www.reuk.org/>.

⁷⁶ Daniel G. Groody, 'Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees,' *Theological Studies* (London, England) 70, no. 3 (2009): 645.

⁷⁷ M. Daniel Carroll R., *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God's Word on Immigration* (Brazos Press, 2020), 13.

⁷⁸ Lauren FitzPatrick and Adriana Cardona-Maguigad, 'ICE's Broadview Facility Has Become a de Facto Detention Center, Minus the Rules and Oversight,' Immigration, WBEZ, 1 October 2025; *Supreme Court Lifts Limits on Sweeping ICE Raids in Los Angeles*, 8 September 2025.

if they had publicly written or spoken against some policy of the current US Government.⁷⁹ These actions prompted a response from the US Catholic bishops, who wrote a letter strongly criticising the new regime's immigration policy and practice. The letter considered these practices dehumanising in the face of the Christian idea of what it means to be human: "we uphold the belief that all people are conceived with inherent dignity, reflecting the image of God. Through our parishes, shelters, hospitals, schools, and other Church institutions, we recognize that this dignity is not dependent on a person's citizenship or immigration status."⁸⁰ Many Catholics have seen the US Government's stance on immigration as fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed to the Catholic faith.⁸¹

When we forget that all human beings are equally images of God, we can slide into a tendency to exaggerate the things that make us different from each other rather than what makes us the same. Foreigners, people of different skin colour or ethnicity, or people who speak a different language become defined by their difference rather than by what unites us to them. It is out of this attitude that hostile immigration policies arise, policies that lead to dehumanising treatment of immigrants. Keeping the image of God as the most important thing about any human individual has been the hallmark of all Christian organisations committed to support, care, protection, and welcome of immigrants.

⁷⁹ Adrian Florido, 'Tufts Student Rümeysa Öztürk Freed from Immigration Detention', *Immigration*, *NPR*, 9 May 2025.

⁸⁰ Bishop Mark J. Seitz, "Human Dignity Is Not Dependent on a Person's Citizenship or Immigration Status" | USCCB, accessed 13 November 2025.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Bruenig, 'The Catholic Church and the Trump Administration Are Not Getting Along', *Ideas*, *The Atlantic*, 6 November 2025.

5. REASON

Traditional Consensus

You may have noticed that freedom was not the only way human beings image God according to those Christians contending against slavery, racism, and colonialism. They also mentioned “reason” or “rationality” as part of what it means to image God. For example, in the middle of Gregory of Nyssa’s tirade against slavery, he said “What price did you put on rationality [*logos*] ... the image [*eikon*] of God”?⁸² In his text *On the Making of Man* he uses the Greek word *logos* alongside *nous*, which is usually translated “mind.” Similarly Francisco de Vitoria, when he was explaining why native Americans should not be enslaved, wrote “man is the image of God by his inborn nature, that is by his rational powers.”⁸³ Gregory and Vitoria are following the majority of Christian theologians who have said that our mind is how we image God. This is not different to saying that we image God by our freedom.⁸⁴ How could we make decisions unless we could think about what decision to make? To be free means not to be driven by animal instinct and desire so that you have no choice about what you do. You are not free if you can only follow your bodily impulses at every moment, if you can’t stop and reflect in order to decide whether you want to do so or not.

Why did the early Christians think that we image God by our rational mind? Like creativity and freedom, the context of Genesis 1 suggests this. God creates sea, sky, land, stars, planets, fish, birds, and all the other animals, but only when it gets to human beings does it say that God created them as his image. The obvious question, then, is: what makes human beings different from non-human animals and inanimate objects? St. Augustine’s answer was our rational mind, which God clearly has in Genesis 1 but which neither animals nor lifeless objects have. For Augustine, the image of God is our “rational soul” and the “spark of reason”⁸⁵ and he connects it to Genesis 2 where God breathes his spirit into the first human being:

The image of God ... refers to the rational soul—the thing that God put into man,

⁸² St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* 4.336.8-20. Greek: “πόσου κέρματος ἐτιμήσω τὸν λόγον ... εἰκόνα τοῦ θεοῦ;”

⁸³ Vitoria, *Vitoria*, 242.

⁸⁴ “It is ... quite natural that this particular quality [i.e. free will] is often cited along with rationality, for thought and decision are, of course, inextricably interwoven. In fact, I have not discovered instances in which willing was regarded as an alternative to reasoning in this connection. For it would be difficult to move toward an act of the will apart from cognition; and all thought, though it does not always issue in discernible acts, seems to involve decision making. Thus Irenaeus, the first major theologian to exegete the *imago* concept, names both rationality and freedom of the will as constituting the image of God in human beings” (Hall, *Imaging God*, 94).

⁸⁵ “the spark of reason with which he was made in the image of God” (St. Augustine, *City of God* XXII.24). Latin: “scintilla rationis, in qua factus est ad imaginem Dei.”

that is, into the body of man, by blowing into him or, if the term is more convenient, by breathing into him.⁸⁶

Now since ... man was made in the image of God, assuredly he is nearer to God, who is his superior, by virtue of the part of himself whereby he rises above his baser parts that he has in common with the beasts as well.⁸⁷

God therefore fashioned man in his own image. That is, he endowed him with a soul that enabled him through reason and intelligence to surpass all other animals that move on land or swim or fly, since they had no mind of this sort.⁸⁸

St. Athanasius agrees with Augustine, but he adds that our mind makes us like God because it makes us like the Word of God, Jesus Christ, his Son. He gets this idea from John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The English “Word” is a translation of the Greek *logos* which as we saw is the word Gregory of Nyssa and Theodoret of Cyrus used. Athanasius argues that if Jesus is the *logos*, then it should be no surprise if we image God most perfectly by our *logos*, because that is how we most closely resemble God’s Son. Athanasius says this in a tightly argued passage which cannot be translated:

[God created] human beings not simply like all the **irrational** [*alogos*] animals upon the earth but making them according to his own image, giving them a share of the power of his own **Word** [*Logos*], so that having as it were shadows of the **Word** [*Logos*] and being made **rational** [*logikoi*], they might be able to abide in blessedness.⁸⁹

Athanasius’ point is that God did not become a rabbit or a stone. God, in the *logos* (i.e. Jesus), became a human being. Therefore it is our *logos* that makes us like God.

Moreover, mind and free will are bound up with a third way we image God: morality. Mora-

⁸⁶ St. Augustine, *City of God* XIII.24. Latin: “Homo ad imaginem Dei ... animam rationalem dicitur, qualem Deus insufflando vel, si commodius dicitur, inspirando indidit homini, id est hominis corpori.”

⁸⁷ St. Augustine, *City of God* XI.2. Latin: “Cum enim homo rectissime intellegatur vel, si hoc non potest, saltem credatur factus ad imaginem Dei, profecto ea sui parte est propinquior superiori Deo qua superat inferiores suas, quas etiam cum pecoribus communes habet.”

⁸⁸ St. Augustine, *City of God* XII.24. Latin: “Fecit ergo Deus hominem ad imaginem suam. Talem quippe illi animam creavit qua per rationem atque intellegentiam omnibus esset praestantior animalibus terrestribus et natatilibus et volatilibus, quae mentem huius modi non haberent.”

⁸⁹ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 3. Greek: “οὐχ ἀπλῶς, ὥσπερ πάντα τὰ ἐπὶ γῆς ἄλογα ζῶα, ἔκτισε τοὺς ἀνθρώπους· ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν εἰκόνα ἐποίησεν αὐτούς, μεταδούς, αὐτοῖς καὶ τῆς τοῦ ἰδίου Λόγου δυνάμεως, ἵνα ὥσπερ σκιὰς τινὰς ἔχοντες τοῦ Λόγου καὶ γενόμενοι λογικοὶ διαμένειν ἐν μακαριότητι δυνηθῶσι, ζῶντες τὸν ἀληθινόν καὶ ὄντως τῶν ἁγίων ἐν παραδείσῳ Βίον.”

lity means the ability to both understand and choose between right and wrong.⁹⁰ You can only understand right and wrong if you have a mind, and you can only choose between them if you are free. If you do something wrong without understanding that it was wrong, then people do not blame you for it. Similarly, people do not hold you accountable for things that you had no choice about. Thus morality, freedom, and rationality are all inseparable aspects of how we image God. In the second century A.D., St. Irenaeus of Lyon put it this way: “man, being endowed with reason, and in this respect like to God, having been made free in his will, and with power over himself, is himself the cause to himself, that sometimes he becomes wheat [good], and sometimes chaff [evil].”⁹¹ For Irenaeus, we are able to choose between right and wrong because we are free, and we are free because we are able to think and discern right from wrong.

Criticisms

Now you might be wondering how rationality can be a way we image God if not everyone is rational. There are human beings who cannot reason – unborn babies and people with severe mental disabilities, to name two examples. Does this view imply that they are not images of God? Or does this view rather undermine the uniqueness of God’s image in human beings because human beings are not the only rational beings? What about aliens or angels who are rational – would that undermine the uniqueness of being in God’s image? Does this create a hierarchy with the most intelligent at the top, closest to God, and the least intelligent at the bottom? Is there a sliding scale of how much you image God based on your I.Q.? Didn’t we say earlier that ALL human beings image God simply because they are human and not because of anything about them? Is there a contradiction here? These three critiques (what about non-ra-

⁹⁰ Some people think that morality was only given to Adam and Eve after the Fall, because they were forbidden from eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17; 3:4), which implies that they did not have “knowledge of good and evil” before they ate the fruit. But this is to misunderstand the passage. Obviously Adam and Eve understood the difference between good and evil, or they couldn’t have understood that they were not allowed to take the fruit. They already had a moral decision to take, and they were blamed for taking the wrong decision. In fact, the word “knowledge” in this context has resonances with lawcourt imagery in which the judge “knows” (i.e. decides) whether the defendant is guilty or innocent. Adam and Eve were tempted to become their own *judges* of good and evil. On this, see E. Baez, ‘Tree of Knowledge,’ in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Lexham Press, 2016); Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001), 86; W. Malcolm Clark, ‘A Legal Background to the Yahwist’s Use of “Good and Evil” in Genesis 2-3,’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88, no. 3 (1969): 266–78; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Zondervan, 2014), 87; Shalom Paul, ‘Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,’ in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 2nd edn, ed. Adele Berlin (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹¹ St. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies* IV.4.3. Theodoret of Cyrus, a fifth-century bishop, says the same thing: “free will is proper to the rational being” (*Questions on the Octateuch* XXXVI). Greek: “του λογικου δε τὸ αὐτεχρῶσιον ἰδίον.”

tional humans; this undermines the uniqueness of humans; does this create a hierarchy) have led some theologians to reject the idea we image God by our rationality, in spite of the huge consensus of the tradition.⁹²

For most of history, Christians have held both (1) that every human being is equally an image of God simply by virtue of being human, and (2) that one of the ways human beings image God is by their ability to reason. They did not think that they were contradicting themselves, nor did they think that people without reason are not images of God. If we want to understand them then we need to dive a little deeper into their way of thinking which is different to ours in two fundamental ways.

First off, the words *logos* and *nous* did not mean for Augustine, Athanasius, or Gregory of Nyssa what we mean by “logic” or “reason” today. We equate “rationality” with “intelligence” and tend to think of it as an individual’s ability to think clearly - an attribute like their name or body. But for the Fathers, *logos* meant participation in God’s universal reason which is not owned by anyone and is not a matter of “thinking” but a way of being in harmony with God’s created order. In this understanding, a person’s *logos* is not only their individual ability but their participation in communities, friendships, the church, and society which reasons together about the common good.⁹³ For St. Thomas Aquinas, for example:

The perfect reason was found in God, who, by an act of love, poured it out on spiritual beings and natural beings, who appropriated it according to the degree of their perfection. Thus, in divinity, the understanding was a pure act; in angelic beings, it was in act with a certain mixture of potency, and in the human being, it was only in potency and required the intelligible to be able to carry out its operations.⁹⁴

Secondly, as the above quote also suggests, the Christian tradition did not define objects by their present existence alone, but by their purpose and intended future (even if they never realise that

⁹² For example, Claudia Welz writes that the *imago dei*’s “identification with cognitive abilities presupposes an interpretation that is far from self-evident and that in fact has dire consequences. We would then have to assume that people who have had accidents and lost these cognitive abilities because of brain damage are no longer in the image of God” (Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image*, 11). Other books that criticise the idea that rationality is one of the ways we image God: David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (Collins, 1973), 118; Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Eerdmans, 1994) especially pages 39-40; Middleton, *The Liberating Image*; Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 18–19; Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity*.

⁹³ For a full account of how this works, see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Open Court Publishing, 1999).

⁹⁴ Rogelio Jiménez Marce, ‘How Rational Thought Is Conceived in Christian Doctrine: The Case of Saint Thomas Aquinas’, in *Thinking: Bioengineering of Science and Art*, ed. Nima Rezaei and Amene Sagha-zadeh (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 551.

future). To help unpack this, let's return to Genesis 5:1-3. This passage says two things: (1) God created Adam in his likeness, and (2) Adam begot a son "in his own likeness, after his image" (Genesis 5:3). But is a new-born baby really an image of the parent? Sure, they sometimes share facial features, but apart from that they are not remotely like their parents. They are not the same size, their body parts are not in the same proportions, they can't walk or talk, they don't have the same interests or beliefs or abilities as their parents. They don't even share a common language. They are helpless and mute, in some ways – especially when it comes to intelligence – more like an animal than a human. Nevertheless, we do not treat them like an animal. Why? Because everyone knows that if all goes well, they will grow into mature adult human beings. This is because they have the potential deep within them to far exceed the intelligence of any animal. We treat them not according to what they are, but according to what they are destined for. To put it theologically, we can say that God created them with the purpose that they become mature adults. God created them for adulthood. One contemporary theologian has put it this way: Genesis 5:3 teaches us that "to be made in the image of someone else" does not mean the two are already alike. Rather, it points to "an orientation – having a model according to which one is expected to develop. ... The likeness involved in being created in God's likeness-image is about the likeness that God is intending at creation, not a descriptive statement about the way that people actually are."⁹⁵

The fancy word for this discussion is *ontology*. The word just means what makes things the kinds of things they are – what makes up a thing's identity or substance. Early Christians had a different ontology than modern Westerners do. In the modern world we tend to think of identity as belonging to the present: a thing is only what it is right now and it doesn't matter what it was or will be. But the early Christians did not think that something is defined only by the physical characteristics it happens to have in the present. They believed that everything was created with a purpose because everything in existence is created intentionally by a loving God. Thus its purpose is an inescapable part of what makes something what it is. They understood a thing's identity in light not only of the present but of the future, the purpose for which it was created, the goal of its existence and the reason God made it.⁹⁶ Not only a thing's physical makeup, but also what it is *for* are part of its being.

If this is true for everything in the Universe, it is necessarily true for those things whose identity is constituted by being an image of God. For the early Christians, it would have made no sense to define people entirely by their present state of being. That would mean when someone is sleeping they're not in God's image because while they're asleep they are not exercising their

⁹⁵ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 131.

⁹⁶ "Man is that which he will become only in the future" (Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, 75, cited in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit -- In Biblical Teaching, Through the Centuries, and Today* [Eerdmans, 2013], 105).

reason,⁹⁷ or a slave is not an image of God because a slave is not free. But the Christian tradition drew the opposite conclusion: slavery is wrong precisely because it frustrates God's purpose for human beings. In the same way, it is wrong to treat someone with limited reasoning ability as anything less than a full human being. As long as they are human, they are an image of God. God sees us not only as what we are but as what we have the potential to become if we submit to his will for our lives.

We were created with the capacity for reasoning. A baby is created for rationality in the way a rock, a tree, or a worm is not. Even if that baby does not have rationality yet, that is still part of their created purpose and for that reason already belongs to them. Unlike other plants and animals, they have the potential within them to reach high levels of rationality. The future holds no increased rationality for a rock or a worm, but it does for a human baby. Now, we live in a fallen world, and sometimes a baby's potential is frustrated in this life, either by death or by mental disability. But from a Christian perspective that is only ever temporary. In all eternity everything and everyone will become fully what it was always meant to be, and every human being will be given the full humanity they may have lacked for a short time.⁹⁸

Similarly, none of the early Christians imagined that if you are more intelligent than other people, then you are more like God. Imaging God is not on a sliding scale any more than being human is: either you're human or you're not, and either you image God or you don't.⁹⁹ God created you with reasoning powers because he created you to be free, and he created you to be free so that you could love and obey him freely. Therefore in order to fulfil the purpose for which God created you, you only need as much rational capacity as it takes to be held accountable and responsible for your actions.

Finally, the Christian tradition never believed that humans are the only rational creatures in the Universe. This is because they did not believe that the image of God is necessarily unique

⁹⁷ St. Bernard of Clairvaux makes this point. He writes: "That is why we impute nothing they do, whether good or ill, to the mentally deficient, to infants, to the sleeping, because, even as they are no longer masters of their reason, so neither do they retain the use of their own will." Latin: "Hinc est quod insanis, infantibus, item que dormientibus, nihil quod faciant, vel bonum, vel malum, imputatur, quia nimirum sicut suae non sunt compotes rationis, sic nec usum retinent propriae voluntatis" (*On Grace and Free Choice* II.5). The English translation is a little misleading in a couple of ways. First, "insanis" refers primarily in Latin, as its cognate does in English, to mental illness, not to disability. Second, the English says they are "no longer" masters of their reason, whereas the Latin simply says they are "not" masters of their reason. However, I don't think either point changes the substance of Bernard's argument.

⁹⁸ For a more detailed explanation of how the mentally disabled can image God by rationality, see Miguel J. Romero, 'Aquinas on the Corporis Infirmis: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace', in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Eerdmans, 2012); 'Profound Cognitive Impairment, the Virtues, and Life in Christ', *Church Life Journal*, 26 August 2022.

⁹⁹ "Interpreting the image of God in terms of the possession of reason does not put human beings on some kind of sliding scale by which some can be reckoned more rational than others and thus claim more rights" (Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 87).

to humanity. The very idea of an “image” holds open the possibility of other images, just like a photo of you by no means rules out the possibility of other photos of you. Genesis 1 suggests that the image of God makes us different, but only different to the other things mentioned in that chapter (animals, plants, and non-living things). As we saw, Genesis 9 underlines that point by distinguishing between animals and humans: you may kill and eat animals, but you may not kill humans because they are in God’s image (Genesis 9:1-6). But it does not follow that we are also unique in relation to things that are not mentioned in Genesis 1 or Genesis 9 – angels, for example. The rest of the Bible makes it clear that angels are both intelligent and created by God. Following this, many theologians in the Christian tradition have held that angels are also images of God.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, if intelligent alien life exists, it could also share the image of God with human beings.¹⁰¹

Abortion & Disability

But the Christian tradition has not only said that everyone is an image of God, including people without the use of their reason. It has been on the front lines of protection and support for those people. Christians have always been among the fiercest defenders of the rights of mentally disabled people and unborn babies.

One example of this is the L’Arche community. Founded in the twentieth century by a devout Catholic, L’Arche seeks to uphold the rights and dignity of mentally disabled people by establishing homes where people with and without mental disabilities can live together, mutually supporting and caring for one another.¹⁰² L’Arche communities have grown and spread so that they can now be found in many nations across the globe. They have become one of the world’s most successful and impactful organisations that minister to people with mental disabilities.

¹⁰⁰ In fact, both Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Thomas Aquinas say that angels image God *more* than human beings do. Bernard writes that “the highest angels, therefore, possess the highest grade of divine likeness, we the lowest” (*On Grace and Free Choice* IX.29). Latin: “Divinae igitur similitudinis summum gradum summi angeli tenent, nos infimum.” Aquinas likewise says “the image of God is more perfect in the angels than in man, because their intellectual nature is more perfect” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 94, a. 3, resp.). Latin: “sic imago Dei est magis in angelis quam sit in hominibus, quia intellectualis natura perfectior est in eis.” Moreover, most scholars think that the plural form God uses when he says “Let us make humankind in our image” is not a reference to the Trinity, but to the heavenly court. This would mean that angels are in fact mentioned in Genesis 1, and not only that, but mentioned as that in which, alongside God, human beings are images. See Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 55–60.

¹⁰¹ For more on this, see Davison, *Astrobiology and Christian Doctrine*, Ch. 8, ‘Uniqueness and Sharing the *Imago Dei*’.

¹⁰² To learn more about L’Arche, see Bill Clarke, *Enough Room for Joy: The Early Days of L’Arche* (Novalis, 2006).

Another example is Lyn's House in Cambridge. Founded by the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge among others, Lyn's House describes itself as a "community committed to building friendships among people with and without learning disabilities."¹⁰³ Its goal is to help people with and without mental ability touch the image of God in each other. It is "about creating a special quality of space in time to welcome and honor God's presence in our midst. It's a time when we humbly open ourselves to the mystery of God, and to the mystery of one another, and of all that is yet to come."¹⁰⁴

Similarly Christians have always believed that unborn children are full human beings with all the rights and dignities that come with an image of God, and because of that have fought to protect their rights. One of the first Christian texts written after the New Testament, called the *Didache*, goes through the ten commandments and exposit their meaning. When it gets to the commandment "you shall not murder," it adds "you shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is begotten."¹⁰⁵ The second-century apologist, St. Athenagoras, defends Christians against the gossipy accusation that they are cannibals by saying "What sense does it make to think of us as murderers when we say that women who practice abortion are murderers and will render account to God for abortion?"¹⁰⁶ Notice how much of a side-issue abortion is from his main point. He is not giving his own opinion. He expects his readers to know that Christians oppose abortion and is drawing a logical inference from that fact. This implies that not only did Christianity at the time oppose abortion, but non-Christians at the time knew it.¹⁰⁷

In the third century Tertullian spelled it out more clearly:

For us murder is once for all forbidden; so even the child in the womb, while yet the mother's blood is still being drawn on to form the human being, it is not lawful for us to destroy. To forbid birth is only quicker murder. It makes no difference whether one take away the life once born or destroy it as it comes to birth.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Deborah Hardy Ford, 'A Kind of Upside-Downness: Learning Disability, Community, and Shabbat Wisdom for the Church', *Anglican Theological Review* 102, no. 1 (2020): 97.

¹⁰⁴ Ford, 'A Kind of Upside-Downness', 102.

¹⁰⁵ *Didache* 2.2. Greek: "οὐ φονεύσεις τέκνον ἐν φθορᾷ· οὐδὲ γεννηθέντα ἀποκτενεῖς."

¹⁰⁶ St. Athenagoras, *Legatio* 35. Greek: "οἱ τὰς τοῖς ἀμβλωθριδοῖς χρωμένους ἀνδροφονεῖν τε καὶ λόγον ὑφέξειν τῆς ἐξαμβλώσεως τῷ φαμεν, κατὰ ποῖον ἀνδροφονοῦμεν λόγον;"

¹⁰⁷ "Athenagoras claims to represent the common, accepted Christian position; if it were not the accepted practice, his argument would lose all its force" (Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church: Christian, Jewish & Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* [InterVarsity Press, 1982], 54).

¹⁰⁸ Tertullian, *Apology*, 9.8. Latin: "Nobis vero semel homicidio interdicto etiam conceptum utero, dum adhuc sanguis in hominem delibatur, dissolvere non licet. Homicidii festinatio est prohibere nasci, nec refert natam quis eripiat animam an nascentem disturbet."

Then he makes the crucial statement that shows the early Christian ontology: “He is a man, who is to be a man; the fruit is always present in the seed.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, just as a seed should be counted as already a fruit because it will become one, so anything which is going to become fully human is to be counted as already human. Everything that makes someone an image of God is already there from conception.

Similar things were said by many other early theologians in the first few centuries of the church: St. Basil the Great, who was the brother of Gregory of Nyssa, St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and St. John Chrysostom.¹¹⁰ As we have already seen, many of the theologians on this list taught that human beings image God by their rationality. They saw no contradiction between that and the belief that an unborn child is an image of God.

But the early Christians did not only denounce abortion as murder, they also offered alternatives to abortion for pregnant women. In the early third century, Pope (or Bishop of Rome if you're Protestant) St. Callixtus I collected money from the worldwide church to help abandoned children, placing them in Christian homes.¹¹¹

Many more examples could be given. Throughout the long history of the Church, unborn children and people with all kinds of disabilities have been cared for, protected, and provided for, treated with the dignity that is due to a living image of God. Of course the Church does not have a perfect record of this – it is full of sinful people who sometimes let their fears and desires override their moral judgment. But the overwhelming witness of the Church is that people without the use of their reason are still images of God, because God created them to spend eternity with him in a union of love. That is why they are an image of God.

¹⁰⁹ Tertullian, *Apology*, 9.8. Latin: “Homo est et qui est futurus; etiam fructus omnis iam in semine est.”

¹¹⁰ For these references, see C. Ben Mitchell, “The Vulnerable—Abortion and Disability,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Oxford University Press, 2010), 485. More detailed discussion of these figures can be found in Gorman, *Abortion & the Early Church*, 66–73.

¹¹¹ Mitchell, “The Vulnerable—Abortion and Disability,” 485.



6. DOMINION

Kingship & Rulership

But being images of God does not only mean we have a responsibility to fellow human beings. It also entails a responsibility to everything in the world that is not human. This is because imaging God is not only something we are, it is also something we are supposed to do – not only a set of attributes, but a calling to fulfil a role in God's created order.

Let's go back to the first chapter of the Bible. After God has created land, sky, sea, plants and animals, he then says:

Genesis 1:26

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

The original Hebrew of this verse has an imperative clause "let us create humankind in our image" and a jussive clause "let them have dominion" joined by a simple waw conjunction.¹¹² Grammatically speaking, that makes the jussive a relative clause of purpose.¹¹³ Ruling over the earth is the purpose for which God created us as his image. This means the verse is more accurately translated by the NIV, which puts it like this: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule." In other words, we image God in order that we might rule over all other earthly life. We are only able to have dominion because we are images of God. Being images of God both makes it possible for us to have dominion, and calls us to the function of rulership of the earth.

What does being called to rule have to do with being an image of God? Is it because God is the ruler of the Universe, and so when we rule the earth we are like God? That has always been seen as part of it. Ephrem the Syrian, for example, says that "it is the dominion that Adam received over the earth and over all that is in it that constitutes the likeness of God who has dominion over the heavenly things and the earthly things."¹¹⁴ But it is much more profound than

¹¹² A "waw conjunction" is a typical Hebrew construct that usually has the valence of the English word "and" but sometimes, as in this case, is more precise in the relationship between the two clauses.

¹¹³ See Ian Hart, 'Genesis 1:1-2:3 as a Prologue to the Book of Genesis,' *Tyndale Bulletin* (Cambridge) 46, no. 2 (1995): 319–20; For an explanation of this grammatical construct, see Ronald James Williams and John C. Beckman, *Williams' Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd edn (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 77. See also Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 207.

¹¹⁴ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis* 1.29. See also Theodoret of Cyrus, *Questions on the Octateuch* XX. Editor's

that. In order to see why, we need to look at the context behind Genesis 1 which is explained by the fourth-century bishop, Theodore of Mopsuestia. Ancient kings would set up statues or images in every city in their kingdom to show their authority over it. Theodore puts it this way:

When a king has built a great city, ... he erects a statue in the middle of all the city's buildings, an image of the king who built it. In the same way the Creator of all creation ... last of all made human beings in his image.¹¹⁵

Human beings are God's regents, living statues whose task is to represent, on earth, the authority of the king of the Universe.¹¹⁶ This is why Gregory of Nyssa reasons that human beings should never be slaves. In his passionate speech condemning slave ownership, Gregory pointed out that to enslave someone violates their God-given status of ruler over the earth:

[One who] should be the owner of the earth, and appointed to government by the Creator — him you bring under the yoke of slavery, as though defying and fighting against the divine decree.¹¹⁷

note: "Dominion over the earth constituting the divine image was particularly characteristic of Jewish and Antiochene Christian tradition. See, for example, John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 2,8; Severus of Gabala, *On the Creation of the World*, 5); and Theodoret of Cyr, *Questions on Genesis*, 20. For summary, see M. Alexandre, *Le commencement du livre Genèse I-V* (Paris, 1988) 175-88, especially 184; and J. Barr, "The Image of God in the Book of Genesis," BJRL 51 (1968): 11-26." (*Selected Prose Works*, ed. Kathleen E. McVey, trans. Joseph P. Amar and Edward G. Mathews, The Fathers of the Church [Catholic University of America Press, 2010], 94fn98).

¹¹⁵ Theodore of Mopsuestia, quoted in Theodoret of Cyrus, *Questions on the Octateuch* XX. My translation. Greek (full): "Ὡςπερ εἴ τις βασιλεὺς πόλιν τινα μεγίστην κατασκευάσας, πολλοῖς τε αὐτὴν καὶ ποικίλοις διακοσμήσας ἔργοις, μετὰ τὴν ἀπάντων ἐκπλήρωσιν, κελεύσειεν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ γενομένην μεγίστην τινὰ καὶ εὐπρεπεστάτην, ἐν μέσῳ πάσης ἰστάναι τῆς πόλεως, εἰς ἔλεγχον τοῦ τῆς πόλεως αἰτίου, ἣν ἀνάγκη καὶ ὡς εἰκόνα τοῦ πεποιηκότος τὴν πόλιν βασιλείῳ παρὰ τῶν κατὰ τὴν πόλιν θεραπεύεσθαι πάντων, χάριν ὁμολογούντων διὰ τοῦτο τῷ κτίστῃ τῆς πόλεως, ὅτιπερ αὐτοῖς ἐνδιαίτημα δέδωκε τοιοῦτον. Οὕτω καὶ ὁ τῆς κτίσεως Δημιουργὸς πεποίηκε μὲν πάντα τὸν κόσμον, διαφόροις τε καὶ ποικίλοις καλλωπίσας τοῖς ἔργοις· τελευταῖον δὲ τὸν ἀνθρώπον ἐν τάξει παρήγαγεν εἰκόνας οἰκείας· ὡς ἂν ἅπαντα ἡ κτίσις τῇ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου χρεῖᾳ φαίνεται συνδουμένη." The only source we have for this text by Theodore is in its quotation by Theodoret. See T. Jansma, 'Investigations into the Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis', in *Studies on the Book of Genesis*, Oudtestamentische Studiën 12 (Brill, 1958), 127.

¹¹⁶ This notion is confirmed by contemporary biblical scholarship. For example, J. Richard Middleton writes that "*imago Dei* refers to the status or office of the human race as God's authorized stewards, charged with the royal-priestly vocation of representing God's rule on earth" (*The Liberating Image*, 235).

¹¹⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies On Ecclesiastes* 4.335.5-11. Greek: "τὸν γὰρ ἐπὶ τούτῳ γενόμενον, ἐφ' ᾧ τε κύριον εἶναι τῆς γῆς καὶ εἰς ἀρχὴν τεταγμένον παρὰ τοῦ πλάσαντος, τοῦτον ὑπάγεις τῷ τῆς δουλείας ζυγῷ, ὥςπερ ἀντιβαίνων τε καὶ μαχόμενος τῷ θεῷ προστάγματι." Notice also the logical connection Nyssa makes between freedom and dominion, and thus between "substantialist" and "functional" accounts of *imago Dei*, contrary to the chorus of voices in the last fifty years that have seen them as competing accounts. One must be free in order to rule. The function thus depends on a certain account of human nature.

To make someone a slave is to contradict God himself, Gregory points out, because the ruler of the earth must be free and to be free means not to be a slave to anyone.

There is no denying the immense power that human beings have been given over the earth, more than any other animal. No other animal has flattened mountains, drained lakes, erased forests and erected tall skyscrapers in their place, separated continents (like with the Panama Canal), covered millions of square metres with farmland. No other animal has had such an immense impact on the natural environment.

Climate Crisis

But even if our immense impact on nature proves Genesis 1 right, that human beings do indeed have dominion over the earth, many people worry that we have been given too much power – or rather, that Genesis 1 gives us a license to do whatever we want with the earth. In 1967 a scholar called Lynn White published an influential article titled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis.” In this article he wrote that according to the Bible,

no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And, although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image. Especially in its Western form Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.¹¹⁸

Because of the idea in Genesis 1 that human beings image God by dominating the earth, Christianity is to blame for much of the destruction of parts of the natural world in the last few decades. He blamed Western Christianity for the climate catastrophe as well as for all the pollution, extinction of species, and other environmental problems that the world is experiencing.

Lynn White’s article has been so influential that everyone who writes about Christianity and environmental care has to refer to it, and almost everyone who studies theology at University level has read it.¹¹⁹ People who have never heard of Lynn White know the accusation. They may have got the idea from David Attenborough, the world’s most popular television naturalist, who spread the idea in a 2009 television documentary. Near the beginning he says that Genesis 1:26 “made it clear that according to the Bible humanity could exploit the natural world as they

¹¹⁸ Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1205.

¹¹⁹ See e.g. Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson, eds, *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The “Lynn White Thesis” at Fifty* (Routledge, 2016).

wished.”¹²⁰ He made it even clearer in an interview about the documentary, blaming Christianity for all damage to the climate: it is the “basic notion that the world is there for us and if it doesn’t actually serve our purposes, it’s dispensable, that has produced the devastation of vast areas of the land’s surface.”¹²¹

But are these accusers right? Is Christianity (and Judaism) really at fault for global warming and plastic waste? Is the idea that human beings are images of God by “ruling over the earth” the cause of all our environmental woes?

This question could mean one of two things. On the one hand, it could mean: have people exploited the planet because they saw Genesis 1:26 as giving them a license to treat the earth however they wanted? This question would be very hard to answer. So many factors have led to climate change that it would be hard to disentangle them to figure out one decisive cause. It is only recently that humanity has had the science and technology to become a real threat to our environment. Before then it would have been impossible to know what beliefs about nature could be dangerous in the hands of those with immense power over nature. And it might still be hard to figure out. Some scholars have pointed out that civilizations without Jewish or Christian roots, such as China, have been just as destructive to the environment as soon as they had the means.¹²² It may be giving too much credit to human nature to imagine that we always behave exactly according to our beliefs about how we are supposed to behave. Much of the time, when we do bad things, it is not because of our beliefs but in spite of them. We do what we know we shouldn’t. Perhaps we would have done this much damage to the environment (probably accidentally in the pursuit of other goals) regardless of what we believed: simply because this is the first time we were able to, and the temptation was too great.

But we could answer the question in a different way by asking: is it true that Genesis 1:26 gives us license to dispose of the natural world however we please? Is that what “ruling over the earth” really means?

Most Christians in the modern day have answered that question with a clear “no.”¹²³ There

¹²⁰ *Charles Darwin and the Tree of Life*, directed by David Attenborough, BBC, 2009.

¹²¹ Steve Connor, ‘Bible to Blame for Devastation of the Planet, Says Attenborough’, *The Independent*, 31 January 2009.

¹²² Yi-Fu Tuan, ‘Discrepancies Between Environmental Attitude and Behaviour: Examples from Europe and China’, *Canadian Geographies / Géographies Canadiennes* 12, no. 3 (1968): 176–91.

¹²³ For example, in the Catholic encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis writes: “We must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. “The earth is the Lord’s” (Ps 24:1); to him belongs “the earth with all that is within it” (Dt 10:14). Thus God rejects every claim to absolute ownership: “The

is nothing, not even our own bodies, that God allows us to do “whatever we please” with. God created everything with a purpose, and he calls us to honour that purpose and join him in bringing about its fulfilment. Only when we cooperate with God in using things the way they were created can we find peace and flourishing.

Christians believe that God is the true owner of everything, even the things he gives us to use. For example, Psalm 24:1 says “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it.” Paul rhetorically asks the Corinthian church “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). The earth, like everything else, still ultimately belongs to God. God makes this even clearer to the Israelites, saying: “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Leviticus 25:23). That is why, according to biblical scholars, it would be more accurate to say that God has “entrusted” the earth to us.¹²⁴ He has given us the power and the responsibility of tenants, both to enjoy our planet and to look after it. If you think about it, this is the point of the analogy of human beings as statues of a king, which we saw was the context for calling human beings “images of God.” A statue does not have its own authority: it is meant as a reminder of the authority of the true king in whose image it has been shaped.¹²⁵ We must use what we are entrusted with in a way that God would be happy with, in a way that aligns with his purposes.¹²⁶

land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev 25:23)” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015, 67).

¹²⁴ “The verb *natan*, normally translated ‘to give,’ often has the more technical sense of ‘assign, deed, transfer, convey’ when combined with the land. ... It was not just an arbitrary and unconditional gift, but a constituent grant that formed part of the total package of their relationship henceforth. Israel’s enjoyment of the covenanted gift, therefore, demanded their reciprocal obligations to the covenanting giver. ... Israel could not treat the gift of the land as a license to abuse it, because the land was still YHWH’s land. He retained the ultimate title of ownership and therefore also the ultimate right of moral authority over how it was used” (Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* [InterVarsity Press, 2004], 93). See also Harry M. Orlinsky, “The Biblical Concept of the Land of Israel: Cornerstone of the Covenant Between God and Israel,” in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman, Studies in Judaism and Christianity in Antiquity 6 (University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

¹²⁵ Some Christians have settled on the word “stewardship” to describe the kind of dominion that human beings have as images of God. For example, Pope Francis writes: “Instead, our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 116). This gets across the idea that we have real authority, like the manager of a house or business, but that this authority is accountable to the true owner. Nevertheless, the word has received criticism from some quarters, for example, because it implies we are wiser than the ecosystem to which we belong. See the essays by James Lovelock, Clare Palmer, and Ruth Page in Robert James Berry, ed., *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives - Past and Present* (T&T Clark, 2006). Other essays in that volume defend the word against such critiques.

¹²⁶ “The world does not exist primarily for people; rather, people and the world exist primarily for God. ... As created in the image of God, humanity has a special responsibility for ensuring that this blessed state of the natural world continues” (Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 210). Similarly: “Creation in God’s image is not about giving people godlike authority but about making people accountable to God” (*Dignity and Destiny*, 208).

Moreover, we also depend on creation in order to survive and flourish. If we abuse creation, the consequence will be that it ceases to support us and keep us alive. There is a natural in-built punishment that comes with exercising dominion wrongly. The Bible expresses this by talking about God's covenant with all creation, including human beings (Genesis 9:1-17). We live in a reciprocal relationship with the world: we look after it, and in turn it looks after us. If we are in a position of dominance, that only means we have the power to destroy that reciprocal relationship in a way that would harm everyone concerned.¹²⁷

In any case, Christians have been given a model of what it means for an image of God to have dominion.¹²⁸ The New Testament calls Jesus as the true image of God (Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4), the “the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being” (Hebrews 1:3). That is why Christians are fond of saying that if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He is the true ruler of the Universe, and he has called all human rulers to follow the example that he sets. He told his disciples:

Matthew 20:25-27

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave.

According to Jesus, service is what real dominion looks like. But Jesus did not only teach this: he practised it. When the disciples had been walking all day and their feet were covered in dirt and animal dung, Jesus took upon himself the task of the lowliest household slave. He washed the disciples' feet (John 13:3-11). To make it abundantly clear that he was doing this, not in spite of, but because of his dominion over them, he explained:

John 13:13-15

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

¹²⁷ These ideas are drawn from Luke Bretherton, *A Primer on Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 101–10.

¹²⁸ “God creates humanity in God's image precisely to hold people responsible for carrying out God's agenda. It is God's purposes, not humanity's, that people are to accomplish through ruling and subduing. What this looks like is most evident ... in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God. In Christ is visible the servant-leader (e.g. Mark 10:43-44), the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep” (e.g. John 10:11)” (Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 209).

The apostle Paul makes this the most important thing that Christians should learn from Jesus' character. In a beautiful early Christian hymn, Paul tells Christians:

Philippians 2:5-7

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave.

It is true that God has given human beings authority over the earth by creating us in his image. We couldn't even change that if we wanted to. We have more power than any of the other animals to do good or harm to our planet.¹²⁹ But Christians believe we have the ultimate teacher in Jesus who both tells and shows us what it means to rule the way God wants.¹³⁰ We are not supposed to exploit the earth however it pleases us, but to serve and care for the earth with all the love that God has for everything he created.¹³¹

¹²⁹ "Stewardship (used or misused) is an inescapable condition of human existence. All humans exercise dominion over things and over people. ... The basic question is not *whether* we are stewards; the fact of dominion, and the possibility of using it for service, decides that. The question is *how* we are to exercise our stewardship" (Loren Wilkinson, *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* [Eerdmans, 1980], 224).

¹³⁰ "Once a community of faith dares to affirm that this Jesus is *Dominus* – that this one who is the very "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) is at the same time Lord – then it is obliged not only by its faith but even by ordinary logic to apply to its understanding of the *dominium* to which humanity is called the consequences of such a confession. If "lordship" is exemplified by this Lord, then such a belief ought to transform the whole idea of human dominion within the realm of nature. ... To be 'conformed to his image' (the second basic theme of the New Testament's treatment of the *imago*) would have to mean to assume, with him and in him, a role more commonly associated with service than with mastery: the role of the steward" (Hall, *Imaging God*, 185).

¹³¹ "The Christian's exemplar of this dominion is Christ ... [and] Christ's Lordship is most clearly exemplified in his stewardship. And it is a similar kind of lordship – and stewardship – as well as a similar kind of dignity and honor for which we are accountable to the Lord of the universe. This accountability is the distinctive of our dominion – and our humanity" (Wilkinson, *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources*, 227).



7. CHRIST

Image and Likeness

Hang on a minute. All along we've been saying that all human beings are images of God regardless of race, gender or religion. Now we are saying that Jesus is "the" image of God and that we only image God if we imitate Jesus. How can both these things be true at the same time?

To answer that question we have to remember when we talked earlier about how babies already image God even if they don't have all the attributes by which we image God. The early Christians all believed that a thing is what it was created to be, even if it hasn't yet become that fully.¹³² Our existence is a continual process of becoming what we are, what God intended for us to be since the beginning of the world.¹³³

This explains how it can be true that love is one of the greatest ways we image God, even for people who are not very loving. God created us so we might live forever with him in a blissful union of love. That is why he created us with the ability to love, and why we image God most perfectly in our love for God and for other people. But an unloving person is still an image of God because they still have the ability to become loving (unless they permanently and wilfully destroy that ability, which may be why the elder, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, defines hell as "the inability to love"¹³⁴). A contemporary Catholic Cardinal put it this way: "Man is the image of God through his capacity to love and know God. And he realizes his potential as a man to the extent that he realizes this capacity."¹³⁵

Early theologians made this point by distinguishing between God's *image*, which we already are, and God's *likeness*, which we are destined to become. Note that in Genesis 1:26 God says "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." Irenaeus, Origen, and Tertullian all suggest that God created Adam and Eve in his image, and when they sinned, they lost the likeness of God. According to Irenaeus, everyone already has the image of God, but we strive to attain the likeness of God in Christ. Origen explains it like this:

¹³² "The idea of likeness to God as man's destination is to be distinguished from the realization of this idea through the fact of creation. ... The freedom of man, even of empirical man, is in essential connection with the morally necessary, the divine; and by this fact ... is he potentially, i.e. by his very destination, the image of the ethical God" (Isaak August Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, vol. 2, trans. Alfred Cave and J. S. Banks [T&T Clark, 1891], 79–80).

¹³³ "The image of God "is not so much a matter of 'being' as of 'becoming'; that is, it is not something that has simply been given but something that is being given. It is not accomplished once for all, but it is in process; it is dynamic and not static" (Hall, *Imaging God*, 133).

¹³⁴ "I ponder, 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love" (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett [The Lowell Press, 2009]).

¹³⁵ Schönborn, *Man, the Image of God*, 52.

The human being obtained the dignity of the *image* in his first creation, but the perfection of the *likeness* was reserved for him at the consummation; that is, that he might acquire it for himself by the exercise of his own diligence in the imitation of God, so that while the possibility of attaining perfection was given to him in the beginning through the dignity of the *image*, he should in the end, through the accomplishment of the works, complete in himself the perfected *likeness*.¹³⁶

Similarly Tertullian says that in baptism “humanity is restored to God into ‘his likeness’ for he had originally been ‘in his image.’”¹³⁷

This distinction doesn’t quite work if we look at other Bible verses which use “image” and “likeness” interchangeably (for example, Genesis 5:1 says that God created humanity “in the likeness of God” and doesn’t use the word “image”). But even if the Bible doesn’t distinguish between “image” and “likeness” in that way, we can still accept the profound point these early Christians were making: what we already are and what we are created to become are so bound up together that one gives identity to the other.¹³⁸ A 19th century theologian put it this way:

The image of God in the first human beings was, and must have been, largely potential. Their powers were undeveloped; the glorious possibilities that lay in them, awaiting their unfolding in history, were undreamt of. But a dewdrop may reflect the sun; and man, in one sense in his childhood, may yet have reflected in a clear intellect, harmonious affections, and an uncorrupted will, the undimmed image of his Maker.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Origen, *On First Principles* III.vi.1. Latin: “*Imaginis* quidem dignitatem in prima conditione percepit, similitudinis uero ei perfectio in consummatione seruata est: scilicet ut ipse sibi eam propriae industriae studiis ex dei imitatione conscisceret, quo possibilitatem sibi perfectionis in initiis dataam per *imaginis* dignitatem, in finie demum per operum expletionem perfectam sibi ipse *similitudinem* consummaret.”

¹³⁷ Tertullian, *On Baptism* 5. Latin: “Ita restituitur homo deo ad similitudinem eius qui retro ad imaginem dei fuerat.”

¹³⁸ “Henriksen argues that creation is unfinished and that being created ‘in’ God’s image could also be translated as being created ‘to be (or become)’ God’s image (Norwegian: skapt til å være Guds bilde)” (Welz, *Humanity in God’s Image*, 8). See Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Imago Dei: Den teologiske konstruksjonen av menneskets identitet* (Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2003).

¹³⁹ James Orr, *God’s Image in Man and Its Defacement in the Light of Modern Denials*, with Princeton Theological Seminary Library (London : Hodder and Stroughton, 1905), 156.

Christ the Goal of Existence

But what we are created to become is not an abstract idea: it is a person who walked among us to show us how we can image God. Origen points us to a key Bible verse to help us understand this. In one of his letters, John the Evangelist tells the Church:

1 John 3:2

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Do you notice how John connects what we are and what we will be through the idea of being God's children? Just as children are destined to be like their parents, so we are destined to be like God by being conformed to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ, who is the perfect image of God. The apostle Paul makes this explicit by comparing the way we are images of Adam (Genesis 5:1-3) to the way we are destined to become images of Christ:

1 Corinthians 15:49

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

We are already images of the first Adam, but we are destined to become images of Christ who is the second Adam. As one scholar puts it, "only the One who is the true Image can renew humanity's being according to the image."¹⁴⁰

But many early Christians went even further than this. They pointed out that since Christ is the one who was "in the beginning with God" (John 1:2) and the one "in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created" who is "before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17), then we must have been created in the image of Christ from the start. Christ is the one true human being, the ultimate model and prototype of humanity. The apostle Paul writes that God "predestined" us "to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). From the very foundations of the world, we were created to image Christ. Jesus is both the origin and the goal of our existence, the consummation of our whole lives from beginning to end. We are images of God because we are images of Christ, the ultimate Image of God. Every human being is an image of Christ not because we are already like him, but because we were created to

¹⁴⁰ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2011), 107.

become like him, our purpose, our destiny, the goal of our existence.¹⁴¹

And that is what the image of God is really about in the end for Christians. It is not only or ultimately meant to focus our attention on ourselves. As with all Christian teachings, its purpose is to draw our gaze upwards, to find our true identity “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3), the source and summit of all meaning and purpose in this universe. To the question “what does it mean to be human?” Jesus is the only truly Christian answer.

¹⁴¹ “All people are created according to God’s image, which the New Testament identifies as Jesus Christ... From before the beginning of creation, God intended that humanity should conform to the divine image, to Christ” (Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 132).

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