

1 | Human nature

What light might be thrown on the well-worn idea that humans are created in the image of God, if Christ were the key to understanding it? Theological treatments of the topic often concentrate on human nature in and of itself, in the effort to specify some set of well defined and neatly bounded characteristics that both make humans like God and clearly distinguish them from other creatures. Humans are created in the image of God, as the Genesis verses say, because unlike other creatures they have reason, free will, or the ability to rule over others as God does. In contrast to these theological tendencies, I show that a Christ-centered treatment of our creation in the image of God turns attention initially away from the human altogether; and when attention returns to the human what is of theological interest about it is its lack of given definition, malleability through outside influences, unbounded character, and general openness to radical transformation. A whole Christ-centered account of humanity, from creation to salvation, we shall see, might be fruitfully developed on this basis.

What humans are thought to image – God, the trinity, or the Word – determines in great part whether theologians focus primarily on human nature in and of itself as the image of God. When human beings are thought to image God generally, without, that is, the need for any further trinitarian specification of who or what God is, general human characteristics tend to be identified with the image of God. Humans are higher on the ontological scale of created beings by possessing certain faculties such as intelligence and will; their rationality, freedom from necessity, and capacity for self-determination make them like God.

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This need not mean God is at the top of a single ontological scale that includes creatures: the most immaterial and intelligent being among others, for example. The difference between God and creatures is usually not understood to be a mere difference in kind of the sort that holds within the created order. These theologians are merely saying that when the absolute fullness, beyond kinds, of God's own perfection is communicated to creatures it takes the form of a ranked order of different created perfections. Humans are more like God than other creatures, then, simply by being among the more perfect of them.

Given the same general identification of God with what humans image, theologians can buck this focus on human nature in and of itself by considering "image" a mere designation of relationship.¹ When the Genesis verses (1:27 and 5:1) say that human beings are created in the image of God that means, not that human beings have something in them that images God, but simply that they were made for a relationship with God, one perfected in Christ. Emphasis can be placed on God's decision to have a special relationship with humans rather than on the character of human nature that warrants it. It is simply the special relationship that God chooses to have with them that singles them out from other creatures. Moreover, since the whole human being is made for such a relationship, little interest need be expressed in particular characteristics or dimensions of their nature that distinguish humans from other creatures.

Nonetheless, relationality is often isolated as the human characteristic that forms the presupposition for fellowship with God.² Human beings are made for fellowship with God by being made

¹ See, for example, Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Harper San Francisco, 1991), pp. 216–25; and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 3/1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), pp. 183–7, 191–200, 289–95; and *Church Dogmatics 3/2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), pp. 323–4.

² See Moltmann, *God in Creation*, pp. 222–3; Barth, *Church Dogmatics 3/1*, pp. 185–7, 194–6, 289–90; and *Church Dogmatics 3/2*, p. 324.

for fellowship with one another. This essential sociability makes them the image of God in the usual way. The reference to male and female in Genesis 1:27, considered alongside the Adam and Eve story, suggests that human beings are the image of God by being social beings, through their need for human companionship, by their not being made to be alone. The trinity enters the picture rather late at this point to show, once again, that something about human nature considered in itself images God. The essentially social character of human persons is an analogue for the essentially relational character of persons within the trinity.

The simple identification of what humans image with the trinity need not, then, fundamentally interrupt isolated theological attention to humans in and of themselves, attention that seeks to locate the image of God *in* them, in the form of some set of peculiarly human properties and capacities. What Augustine attempts in Books 8–11 of *De trinitate* would be a prime case in point – at least if one considers the influence those particular books have had on thinking about the image of God in the West.³

Augustine tries to support the intelligibility of rules for trinitarian speech – for example, the rule that persons of the trinity are really distinct in virtue of their relations with one another but one and equal in their divinity – by finding analogues for those rules in the more familiar character and dynamics of the human mind and heart. The effect of this in these books is often to make human nature seem a self-contained image of God in and of itself. Human consciousness, it appears, can be an image of God in isolation from anything else, apart from relations with anything not itself, whether above the human (God) or below it (sense objects). Only the internal dynamics of human consciousness – the self's relations with itself – can mimic, for example, the perfect equality and union of distinct things which

³ “On the Trinity,” trans. Arthur West Haddan and William Shedd, in Philip Shaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1956), Books 8–11, pp. 115–55.

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is the rule for the trinity; in relations with anything else there is, if not distance or disunity, then at the very least a marked lack of equivalence among the things related. For these reasons, Augustine goes so far as to suggest that the mind is a *better* image of God when knowing itself rather than God.⁴ The strong impression from such discussion is that human consciousness is the image of God all by itself, in an ideally self-enclosed self-sufficiency – for example, when knowing, loving, or remembering only its own pure productions.

In subsequent books of *De trinitate* Augustine dispels this impression by affirming that the soul's relations to itself become the image of God in the strongest sense only when informed by an actual relationship with God: "The true honor of man is the image and likeness of God, which is not preserved except in relation to him by whom it is impressed."⁵ Humans are the image of God, properly speaking, only when actually contemplating God face to face in heaven. "The likeness of God will then be perfect in this image, when the sight of God shall be perfected."⁶ Considered apart from such a relationship, humans would image God in only a secondary, less proper way in virtue of the characteristics that are the prerequisite for such relationship (for example, in virtue of the cognitive capacities that God's grace might expand to enable contemplation of God). Thus, "it is made after the image of God in respect to this, that it is able to use reason and intellect in order to understand and behold God."⁷

Another sort of trinitarian reading of the Genesis verses, the dominant one I believe in the early church, produces, however, a much more radical deflection from preoccupation with human nature itself. Whatever its merits as biblical exegesis, its theological import holds great promise. On this way of reading those verses, the second person of the trinity is what human beings are created to

⁴ "On the Trinity," Book 9, chapter 11, section 16, p. 132.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Book 12, chapter 11, section 16, p. 161.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Book 14, chapter 17, section 23, p. 196. ⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter 5, section 6, p. 186.

image. Indeed, that divine person, rather than human nature, is the very image the Genesis verses are discussing. Humans are not simply said to be the image in Genesis 1:27 but to be made “in” or “after” or “according to” it, because the image primarily being referred to here is a divine one and not a human one at all. The kind of relationship that human beings have to that divine image is not specified by the passages; at best it would seem to involve being a secondary image of this other image.

For theological reasons, Augustine in *De trinitate* rejects this way of understanding the verses.⁸ The plural terms in “let *us* make man in *our* image” refer to all three persons of the trinity taken as a whole. Since the second person of the trinity images the first person and not the whole of the trinity, these verses must mean man, and not the second person of the trinity, when they talk about the image of that whole.

Augustine seems to fear that if humans are in the image of only the second person of the trinity and not of all the others as well, the second person of the trinity will appear to be something less than the others.⁹ But the premise of such a worry is strongly disputed by most theologians who identify the image with the Word: 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.

Unlike Augustine, these early church theologians read the Genesis passages through New Testament ones, in which Christ is talked about in frequently cosmic terms as the image of God.¹⁰ The image of

⁸ *Ibid.*, Book 7, chapter 6, section 12, pp. 113–14; and Book 12, chapter 6, sections 6–8, pp. 157–8; and Book 14, chapter 19, section 25, p. 197. See also his “The Literal Meaning of Genesis,” trans. Edmund Hill, in John E. Rotelle (ed.), *On Genesis, The Works of Saint Augustine*, Part I, vol. XIII (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2002), Book Three, section 29, p. 234.

⁹ “On the Trinity,” Book 12, chapter 6, section 7, p. 157.

¹⁰ See, for example, Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 4:4; and Col 1:15. Most are from the Pauline epistles.

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God consequently takes on for them a primarily intra-trinitarian sense. Christ is said to be the image of God in these New Testament passages, because, it is thought, the divinity with which he is identified – the second person of the trinity – is itself the image of the first person of the trinity. The image most properly speaking – the express or perfect image of God (Heb 1:3) – just is the second person of the trinity, the perfect manifestation of all that the first person is. When the Genesis verses talk about the image of God they are not, then, referring in the first place to human beings but to an imaging relationship that occurs within the trinity itself.

Because these theologians worry that Christ will be confused with a creature by Arians, they stress that the second person of the trinity, incarnate in Christ, images God in a way human beings themselves cannot match. A perfect image of God can be only a divine image. To be perfect, that image must be the equal of its archetype, reproducing it from top to bottom, in every dimension inclusive of its very nature. Such an image must, in other words, share or participate wholly in what its archetype is – not in part.¹¹ For this reason perfect imaging requires a community of nature.¹² Creatures by definition do not share the divine nature; and consequently human beings simply cannot be images of God in this way.

In virtue of having a shared nature, the second person of the trinity, one could say, is a natural image of the first in the way a natural son is the spitting image of his father, or the way the radiance surrounding a source of light manifests the light-filled nature of its source. The second person is therefore nothing like an image

¹¹ Athanasius, “Four Discourses against the Arians,” trans. John Henry Newman and Archibald Robertson, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, Second Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1957), Discourse 1, chapter 5, section 16, pp. 315–16.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” trans. H. C. Ogle, William Moore, and Henry Austin Wilson, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. V, Second Series (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), Book 2, section 12, p. 123.

produced in a foreign medium – for example, nothing like the portrait of a flesh and blood person painted on a canvas.¹³ But that is all that human beings who are not divine can be – images of God produced in a medium of a radically different, indeed inferior, sort.

Because the divine image is all that its archetype is, it is not an image by participation at all, if participation means sharing in something that one is not.¹⁴ Rather than being something other than what it images, the second person of the trinity simply is it. Its imaging of another does not therefore involve its being a composite of what it properly is by nature and something extra, foreign and external to it, received from without in order to make it an image. Being the image of the first person of the trinity is not an accidental acquired quality, added to the second person; the simplicity of the divine nature rules that out. Unlike other images, the second person of the trinity does not acquire the capacity to image something by, say, being impressed by it; nor, as a merely acquired property, can that image be lost.

The second person of the trinity does not in any sense borrow from the first what it does not have of itself. One cannot say that the second person of the trinity “is made illustrious by the mere addition to himself of features that were not originally his own, so that he shines as it were by reflected light from glories bestowed upon him, and not by his own natural luster.”¹⁵ Instead, whatever the second person gets from the first is properly its own by nature. The second person of the trinity is divine in and of itself and not simply in virtue of being the image of the first person. As Cyril of Alexandria points out: what is “the very image and likeness and effulgence” of the

¹³ *Ibid.*; and Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans.

P. E. Pusey (Oxford: James Parker, 1874), Book 2, chapter 8, pp. 265–6 (John 5:23); and Book 3, chapter 5, pp. 348–50 (John 6:27).

¹⁴ See Athanasius, “Against the Heathen,” trans. Archibald Robertson, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, Second Series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 29. See also his “Four Discourses,” Discourse 3, chapter 23, section 1, p. 394; section 6, p. 396; and chapter 25, section 15, p. 402.

¹⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Book 9, chapter 14, p. 255 (John 14:9).

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Father must be “bearing innate within himself the proper characteristics of his Father’s essence, and possessing in all their beauty the attributes that are naturally the Father’s.”¹⁶

Contrary to what has just been said about the second person of the trinity, human beings image God only by participating in what they are not – God. Because they are not God, they come to image God only by receiving what is not their own. In virtue of being received in something not itself divine, what humans have from God does not exist in them in the way it does in God, in perfect or divine fashion – fully, unchangeably, and without susceptibility of loss.

This idea that humans image God through participation can mean, however, two very different things. In a first quite weak sense, participating in God means nothing more than being a creature of God. Not just human beings, but everything in the world gets all that it is – inclusive of its existence, good qualities and capacities, and well-performed acts, over the whole of its existence – from what it is not – God. This is simply what it means to be a creature. Creatures participate in God by leading a derived life in that sense, a life derived from a God who does not derive from another as they do. What creatures are and have for their own they neither are nor have of themselves but through another who, unlike themselves, is and has all that it is through itself. God is, for example, life itself in virtue of having life through itself, while everything else receives its life from God, without simply being it in and of itself. Any creature therefore has life in some degree or fashion and can lose it.

Expressing much the same thing in explicitly Thomistic fashion, one can say God does not participate in being but *is* it: to be *God* just is to *be*. In God there is no distinction between what God is – God’s essence – and God’s existence. To participate in being is, by definition, not to be it, if participation means participating in what one is

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Book 2, chapter 6, p. 246–7 (John 5:19), where Cyril is discussing Christ, but the point remains the same.

not; and therefore with participation arises a distinction between essence and existence, the very composite character that constitutes created things.¹⁷

What creatures get from God pre-exists in God in exemplary, perfect fashion, and therefore when they participate in God in virtue of their creation creatures also image God. This is a Christian version of a basically Platonic understanding of participation: all that derives from a perfect exemplar for that reason approximates it. On a Platonic understanding of participation, imperfectly round things within the world, for example, would owe what they are to that paradigm of the absolutely round they all strive to approach in being themselves.¹⁸ According to the Christian version, God in creating things other than God is trying to give them the good of God's own life, and therefore God contains in perfect fashion all that creatures become. Creatures form created approximations of God's own goodness, following (for example) the principle that a cause contains its effects in a superior fashion. Creatures image God in that God as their cause contains in a super-eminent divine fashion what they are.¹⁹

This imaging of God in virtue of creation involves an imaging of the second person of the trinity in particular. The paradigms for created things exist in the second person, God's own Word or Wisdom. That Word or Wisdom holds the idea or plan for all that God creates. In that Word or Wisdom God knows, one might say, all the different ways that God's own goodness can be imitated by what is not divine, and chooses, out of love for what is not God, to bring those things into existence. God therefore creates in and through this Word or Wisdom of God, which establishes the pattern for the

¹⁷ See Cornelio Fabro, *Participation et causalité selon S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Beatrice-Nauwelaerts, 1961), pp. 468, 610.

¹⁸ See R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 68, 71–2.

¹⁹ See Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), chapters 7 and 9.

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world.²⁰ The whole of creation becomes an image of the second person of the trinity in this way: “That what came into being might not only be, but be good, it pleased God that his own Wisdom should condescend to the creatures, so as to introduce an impress and semblance of its image on all in common and on each, that what was made might be manifestly wise works and worthy of God.”²¹

Creatures themselves – their own existence, characteristics and capacities – become the focus here; what they are in themselves forms an image of the second person of the trinity. But equally focal is the fact that they are not such independently of God. This, indeed, is just the point of saying creatures image God through participation. This imaging is not an accidental mirroring of God, by chance or happenstance in virtue of what a creature has become independently of God, on its own steam apart from any relation to God, the way a pumpkin might by chance or happenstance have grown of itself into the image of a human face. Something images God because it comes from God. Indeed, it images God only by participating in God, that is, by continuing to receive what it has from God. To be a creature just means to lead an insufficient life of oneself, to lead a continually borrowed life.

Different creatures can be more or less the image of God in virtue of their particular created characteristics. Human beings in virtue of their rationality, for example, might naturally be better images of God’s own Word and Wisdom than creatures without intelligence. Not only can they reflect the divine idea of themselves in the Word or Mind of God in virtue of what they are; they also have the capacity, at least in principle, of knowing what that idea for themselves and everything else is. “For as the Son of God, considered as the Word, our word is an image, so of the same Son considered as

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* [*Theologiae*], trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1948), vol. 1, Q44 a2, p. 230; see also Q34 a3, pp. 180–1.

²¹ Athanasius, “Four Discourses,” Discourse 2, chapter 22, section 78, p. 390. See also sections 79–82, pp. 391–3.