

## Man as Image of God and Theological Implications of that Expression\* (Thoughts on theological anthropology)

### Introduction

The subject of “Man as *imago Dei*” has long been considered *crux interpretum*. In the course of time, exegetes and dogmatists proposed quite diverse interpretations of it. At times, the subject was not even discussed at all. Today, however, the interest in this subject is on the increase, probably because theology is increasingly expected to provide answers to a number of anthropological questions.

The concept of *imago Dei* is not identical in the Old and New Testaments. However, a close relationship exists.

### Man as *Imago Dei* in the Book of Genesis

Vital elements of Old Testament theology of similarities are to be found in the Book of Genesis 1:26ff—in a fragment originating in the priestly source (P). In the younger Story of Creation (Gen 1:1—2:4a), the basis of which is the scheme of seven days (ritual rules!), on the sixth day man (Adam) is created: “God said, ‘Let us make man in our own image (*selera*), in the likeness of ourselves (*demut*), and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the ground.’ God created man in the image (*selem*) of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Gen 1:26ff).

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For understanding and capturing the theological-anthropological relevance of man's *imago Dei* an analysis of the expressions of "selem" and "demut" is not sufficient, as theories of an image can be numerous. Only by considering the context can we arrive at a viable exegesis.

a) The entire text of the Book of Genesis 1:1—2:4a is a theology of creation and attempts to provide an answer to the question of the beginning: Where does everything that exists come from? The answer is: Everything was created by the God of Israel. Because, in accordance with the priestly source, He is the God of any ritual rules and the source of religious shaping of history, therefore, in the same orderly manner He will act as the Creator of the world. Man becomes created on the sixth day as "the crowning and completion" of God's act of creation.

b) The value of the human being is reemphasised by the Creator's will to make human beings in His image (*selem*). The concept of "image" consists of a certain relationship. That human being is an image of God implies his peculiar relationship to God, a connection with Him. To avoid any erroneous interpretations, the author adds "demut," that is, "after our likeness," not the same—as man is a creature and never will be God (Gen 3).

c) "Selem" is closely associated with the task of governing. A human being, as a creature remaining in a peculiar relationship to the Creator, dominates all other creatures—the relationship to other living creatures assigned to him is to dominate them. Because this task entrusted to man is based solely on his likeness (that is his relationship to God—the Lord of all creation), he may not rule autonomously. That likeness is realised in fulfilling the role in the world.

d) Gen 1:27ff provides yet another idea related to the likeness to God: "being male and female." Dominating other creatures shall be creative and life-giving. By the same token, what is expressed in human likeness to God is God's domination and creativity—and that is what constitutes the basis of human dignity. The Book of Genesis 5:1—2 confirms conclusions of this exegesis by the same context ("he created them male and female"). The idea of *imago Dei* in man as a relationship to God, which determines the relationship to other living creatures, is what constitutes the basis of human dignity and is an obligation for respect towards human life: "...And I shall demand account of your life-blood, too. I shall demand it of every animal, and of man. Of man as regards his fellow-man, I shall demand account for human life. He who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God was man created" (Gen 9:5c—6).

Summing up, we may conclude that in the Old Testament, man's *imago Dei* is understood not as a static definition of a human being, but rather as an expression of his "significant relationships," whereby the "relationship towards God" is the primary relationship determining in turn his "relationship to the world."

## Revolution in Paul's Thinking

Excerpts from the Book of Genesis originating in the priestly source and concerning *imago Dei* were interpreted in various ways in the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and subsequently by Philo of Alexandria and Gnostics. Some of those interpretations differ from others quite significantly. The concept of *imago Dei* is continued in the New Testament in Paul's literature. It consists of so extremely diverse traditions, however, that it is virtually impossible to talk about a coherent and consistent teaching of St. Paul on *imago Dei*. Yet, clearly, for the most part the apostle develops the idea of *imago Dei* in the context of Christology and the history of salvation. And what is the result of that?

1. For Paul, it is not as much man-Adam, as Jesus Christ who is the image and likeness of God. Two excerpts shall be evoked here, namely 2Cor 4:4 and Col 1:15—as important, though, is also Heb 1:3.

a) In 2 Cor 4:4 Paul concludes with sorrow that not everyone to whom he preaches, “saw the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”. (... *ton fōtismom euagge-liou tēs doxēs tou Christou, hos estin eikōn tou Theou*); as “the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers.” The gospel is the news of the *doxa* of God and glorified Lord. The *doxa* of God himself shone in Him and manifests itself in the world as God's *eikōn*. Both concepts explain the Christological epiphany. What it means for our cognition filled with faith is: those who get to know Christ are watching, “the image of God” and “the glory of God” in Him.

b) According to Col 1:15, Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (...*eikōn tou Theou tou aoratou, prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*). In the entire hymn of Col 1:15—20 highly interesting is the accumulation of God's creative and redemptive action in Jesus Christ; He is the Cosmocra-tor and the Redeemer. God is present in Him in all His fullness (line 19). This is why the “fullness of the invisible God” is manifested in Christ, so He is for us a viable “image of God” and “as the Firstborn of all creation” holds the power over that creation. Christ represents God in the creation. The community shall realize they are not forced to rely on some cosmic powers but that God is acting (creatively and redemptively) in and by His “*eikōn*—Christ” and holds the entire world in His hand. As “the Firstborn of all creation,” Imago-Christ points to resurrection and announces new, eternal existence and life for all creation.

c) This same *eikonic* Christology is shown in Heb 1:3, although the very word *eikōn* does not appear there per se: “in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe” (line 2). The next sentence illustrates why this “Revelation in the

Son” exceeds all prophetic revelations: “The Son who is the refulgence of his glory (*apaugasma tēs doxēs*) and the very imprint of his being (*charaktēr tēs hupostaseōs*)...” The terms *charaktēr* and *apaugasma* are substantial parallels and ultimately replace *eikōn*.

Jesus Christ is the intercessor of the creative and redemptive actions of God—as is illustrated in all evoked excerpts. His gospel is viable because in Him the shining of God’s “doxa” is revealed (2Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3) and in the “image” he makes the “invisible God” (Col 1:15) visible. These Christological predicates explain the theology of Revelation. Christ reveals to us the “image” of God. This is why Christ’s “being-the-image-of-God” can be understood only as an expression of His “redemptive function”: Christ as “the image of God” remains in an personal relationship to God and this is why His relationship to the world is a redemptive intermediation.

2. Alongside the aforementioned excerpts, there are also texts pertaining to the *imago Dei* of man: Col 3:10; Rom 8:29; 1Cor 15:49.

a) According to Col 3:1, those baptized with Christ “raised from death” to a new life. The annunciation of Redemption is followed by an imperative of Col 3:1ff to live in accordance with the new redemptive situation. Man baptised in Christ became a new man who is bound by new rules of behaviour, for example: lying to one another is reprehensible, “since you have taken off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self...” (Col 3:9—10a). That new self “is being renewed, for knowledge (of God), in the image (*kat’eikona*) of its creator” (3:10b). The baptised one is renewed through Christ. A crucial difference shall be noted here, though: Christ is *eikōn tou Theou* (2Cor 4:4), whereas the baptised ones are and will be renewed *kat’eikona* (Col 3:10, also Eph 4:24). They become “an image of the image.”

b) Apart from the parenthetic-ethical context, in Paul’s literature we encounter also the eschatological context: Christ’s resurrection marks the beginning of fulfilling our salvation and grants us hope for rising from the death (1Cor 15:35ff). Naturally, we are still wearing the “image of the earthly (man),” Adam, however, we are to be granted the “image of the heavenly (man)” (1Cor 15:49). To clarify this, in the Letter to the Romans Paul adds: “For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son (*summorfus tēs eikonos tou huiou autou*), so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29).

c) Transformation into a new man occurs “as from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2Cor 3:18). Now, thanks to “turning to the Lord” the veil is removed for those who are baptised (2Cor 3:16). “All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory

to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2Cor 3:18). In “the ministry of the Spirit” (2Cor 3:8) a hope is given (2Cor 3:12), so that in the future, in the eschatological, ultimate sense, we shall “be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). Then the “image of the heavenly (man) shall definitively overshadow the image of the earthly (man)” (1Cor 15:49). The Spirit of the Lord stimulates the process of transformation into the image of Christ; the same Spirit leads to the eschatological final when in resurrection the somatic man will be transformed as well. This is the Spirit “who raised Jesus from the dead,” now dwells in us and “will give life to your mortal bodies also” (Rom 8:11; Eph 1:17–20). Which is why the body in its ideal is *sōma pneumatikon* (1Cor 15:44ff).

3. I would like to add three comments to the above insights to the New Testament: 1) What I have outlined here does not constitute a complete exegesis, rather is a summary of its most vital conclusions. 2) In this overview, first I presented a Christological and then anthropological-ethical and eschatological dimensions of the teaching on *imago*, whereas in fact they are inseparable. In particular, separating the ethical regulation from the eschatological perspective is not in accordance with Paul’s teaching on *imago Dei*. Unravelling this tangle on the exegetical grounds is impossible. 3) Both contexts, the Christological one as well as the anthropological-ethical one, are found in the young Church. Quite remarkable here is the pneumatological curiosity: the Holy Spirit, who stimulates the transformation of man “in the likeness of the image (...) of the Son” is described as “a perfect image of the perfect Son”—for the first time by St. Gregory Thaumaturgus. Later on, Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria will accept that pneumatological version of the teaching on *imago*.

### One-Sided Interpretation—Simplifications

In tradition, the *imago Dei* of man remains an important subject in theology and preaching. In particular, one should evoke here an expression from the New Testament: Christ is a true image of God and man is, or shall become, “an image of the image” of Christ. For many Church Fathers, Logos is the perfect image of God in its divinity, not as *verbum incarnatum*. Therefore, we encounter here a new anthropological concept: it is not the bodily-spiritual wholeness of man, but only the “higher man”, i.e. his *nous—mens* that is shaped in the image of Christ. *Imago Dei* radiates to the body and everything that is somehow body-related in an indirect manner at best. “Spiritualization” in the sense of “dematerializing” the *imago* in man gains an enormous influence on medieval theology. Even theologians of the modern era are not always able to face this tendency. Modern exegetes, however, tend to agree that the division of a human

being into “two static parts”—spirit and body—is not in accordance with the biblical priestly source.

In the history of theology one more one-sided interpretation was developed. In the theology of *imago* one can clearly sense a scholastic thinking in terms of “static beings and substances”. Such a line of thinking makes us face a peculiar question: Did man lose *imago Dei* through sin or did he not? This question triggered a heated discussion between protestant and catholic theologians. The scholastic theology described *imago Dei* as an “innate attribute,” unalienable and grounded in the “essence of a human being”. By contrast, protestant theologians insisted that sin erased *imago Dei* from man or left only some “remnants” of it—as *imago Dei* as a “supernatural” grace is an “addition” to the “nature” and “essence” of man. Such disputes were overly one-sided. In the course of time, the “innate-supernatural” scheme proved too static, as it did not allow for capturing the essence of the biblical expression of “man as the image of God”. The assumption made in Gen 1:26ff as well as in the Christological-historical-redemptive excerpts from the New Testament is that of man as a dynamic operator who as such remains in relationships in which he “perfects his essence and lives in conformity with it.”

### Theological Significance

Dogmatics therefore faces an interesting task. Based on the category of “relationship” and the concept of “dynamic subjectivity and personality” it is possible to develop teaching on *imago Dei* prolific for Christology and theological anthropology, as well as for other dogmatic treatises.

### Man as a “being in a relationship”

Exegetes decisively focus on the relationship between man and God. This *coram Deo* denotes a personal relationship. Wherever man is perfecting his essence as a person, he thinks, plans, acts—he does it all “in front of God”. From the point of view of the theology of creation it must therefore mean the following: man is created by God as a “partner of a dialogue”. In other words: God summons man and expects from him a reply in behaviour (Gen 1:26ff).

The theological category of “likeness to God” expresses “relational being” of man. As a creature, man is introduced into the world and defined by a dual relationship—to God and to the world. This is why a human being shall be defined

as a “being in a relationship”. If man in the philosophical manner is defined as a “static and self-contained being,” the relationship to God can only be understood as accidental. In my view, such ontology cannot be accepted in theology as it endangers the theology of creation in its very core. From the theological point of view, man is what he is primarily because of the relationship of dependence on God the Creator. As a *coram Deo* creature, he remains in a relationship to the world and in terms of this relationship he is to be understood. In other words: the tie of man to his environment is essentially linked with the dependency of man as a creature on God. The phrase “man is the image of God” refers to this inextricable unity of the relationship towards God and the world. Man “puts God as the image” to the world and in the world, as he understands his acting in the world as a task entrusted by God and this is why he adopts this relationship towards God as his criterion.

### Sin as a Negation of *imago Dei*

In fact, man commits a sin at the very moment of creating himself as an absolute subject of his relationship to the world and breaks the personal unity of his relationship to God and to the world. In result, he becomes a sinner and his action in and in relation to the world becomes a sin. Neither the creative-ontological relationship of dependence on God, nor the relationship to the world cease to exist, however an option and actions of man become contradictory to them. “The absolute subject” remains contradictory to the unity of the relationship either by negating or regulating and defining his relationship to God on his own. The premise for this absolutisation, from the theological point of view, is that of “an illusory ontology” and false understanding of oneself.

The result of the “absolutisation of oneself” is an absolute autonomy in behaviour: man sets the norms and rules of his actions all by himself. This is why he cannot relay to the world the “image and reflection of God” but only the “image and reflection of himself”. The human footprints he leaves lose the potentiality of transcendence and *imago Dei*. Sin is a permanent attempt of substituting *imago Dei* with *imago hominis*. In other words: sin is oriented at “being a human without God,” splitting what in fact is connected, namely being a human and relation to God.

From these considerations we move towards a positive conclusion: being truly a human comprises a relation to God, which means that being truly a human is “being *coram Deo*”—never its negation. Therefore, if man in action assumes such an understanding of himself, he puts the world in relation to “the image of God” and *eo ipso* to “the image of being truly man.”

### God's incarnation in Jesus Christ as the principle of *imago Dei*

Paul, aware of the contradictory with a sense effect of sin (Rom 1:18ff), does not say: man is “an image of God;” it is Christ who is His viable image (2Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). Incarnation as *intensivum* of the Revelation unites being God and being human (*unio hypostatica!*) and unites them in one *eikōn tou Theou*. As the Word incarnated and the essence of God, Jesus Christ is also the new Adam (Rom 5:15)—the man in whom “the image of God” is present in an undistorted manner and in whom the “relationship to God” became an absolute measure of being human.

Christ embodies the pre-image of God in man. Through baptism we are renewed by the grace of Christ (*indikativus*) and in a dynamic process we become related to Christ. Yes, we become the image of God as so much as we answer Christ's calling and subject ourselves to His gravity. Faith and following Christ is the process of “shaping the image of God in ourselves”—a process located in time and space guided by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, entrusted to us, however, as our everyday calling—meaning permanent “taking off the old self with its practices” and “putting on the new self” (Col 3:9).

### The Theology of *imago* as a Rationale for Ethics

The imperative for zealous imitating the *imago Dei* in Christ refers to the earthly life. In the light of the process of shaping in human that *imago*, we can justify Christian ethics—ethics that in principle excludes the ethics of achievements and successes only. Human action is seriously demanded, the aim, however, is not reached by “the success of human achievements”. A renovation and transformation into *imago Dei* is an eschatological expression and a gift from God (Rom 8:29). “As from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2Cor 3:18) we become alike to the image of God in Christ—but later we shall be transformed into existence in accordance with the image of Christ resurrected.

Hope and the eschatological perspective are for ethics—the premise of which constitutes the theology of *imago*—an integral element of the foundation of the ethics itself. A deep meaning is revealed in putting together Paul's texts on *imago* of which it is parenthetical-ethical and which is eschatological. In this way, Paul points to ethics which considers the perspective of an eschatological transformation. This is the “ethics of hope,” which by the power of the eternal meaning with all seriousness approaches the “Now” in this world.