

## IN SEARCH OF THE IMAGE OF GOD: THEOLOGY OF A LOST PARADIGM?<sup>1</sup>

### **Paul Wells**

Paul Wells is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Faculté libre de Théologie réformée, at Aix-en-Provence and editor of *La Revue réformée*. This article originally published in *Hokhma*, 2002, no.80 was translated by Fiona Steward and revised by the author.

Is human nature a lost paradigm?<sup>2</sup> The rapid advance of science has exposed the fragility of a host of generally accepted ideas. At present, it seems easier to say what humanity isn't than to walk on the thin ice of bold definitions<sup>3</sup>. Did not M. Foucault suggest that the notion of 'man' itself is fluid? As a concept of modernity it is destined to disappear, swept away by the waves of time like a sandcastle on the beach<sup>4</sup>.

The subject requires a pinch of humility, for it is difficult to define precisely what constitutes the image of God in man. Older and more recent discussions, even the most rigorous attempts, seem to run aground on a multitude of qualifications.

In spite of the desire to have a clear vision of the image, a photographic image, it must be admitted we have nothing of the sort, even if the expression 'image of God' is often taken to be self evident. H. Bavinck for instance felt able to affirm in his *Dogmatics* at the beginning of the last century that «the essence of human nature is its being (created in) the image of God»<sup>5</sup>. But can we go further and define what this essence is? Such is a hazardous venture!

Why do we experience such difficulty today concerning the image? Straightforward definitions, inherited from classical theologies and philosophies, seem to belong to periods of social stability characterised by clearly defined roles. Such is the case with the question of the male/female human duality in relation to the image of God, a question that was scarcely approached until recently. No demonstrations were necessary; the support of some biblical texts or tradition sufficed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Published in *Themelios*, 30 (2004:1), 23-3

<sup>2</sup> As E. Morin suggests in his *Le paradigme perdu. La nature humaine*, Paris, Seuil, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. P. Wells, 'Covenant, Humanity and Scripture', *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (1986:1), pp. 17-45.

<sup>4</sup> M. Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 398. Recently however, J.-C. Guillebaud, with reference to Lacan, encourages his readers to resist the tyranny of biotechnology, arguing that the person transcends biological structures, *Le principe d'humanité*, Paris, Seuil, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> H. Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1999, p. 159.

However, self-evident definitions of the image and humanity were eroded by the human tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>. The theological result has been a transition from a definition of man upheld by a certain amount of ontology, to more functional constructs. The influence of M. Buber, E. Brunner, K. Barth or K. Rahner has not been negligible in a shift to a new approach to the image<sup>7</sup>. The end of the road has been reached with theories that deconstruct of the notion of humanity as such<sup>8</sup>. Such pessimism is only too understandable after the most barbaric century in history. Oriental ideas have impacted the West through the influence of D.T. Suzuki and more recently the Dalai Lama. In this perspective, if there is nothing substantial to human nature as such, the individual is called to self-realisation<sup>9</sup>.

What then can be said, henceforth, about man, humanity and the image of God? If the predicament is obvious, perhaps we ought not to be greatly disconcerted. As J. Frame has indicated, nowhere does Scripture offer a *definition* of the image of God<sup>10</sup>. This fact itself can foster salutary scepticism towards sweeping definitions, which were accepted in the past as evidence in theological systems where frontiers were clear-cut. Prudence can sometimes be a virtue...

The evolution of the notion of humanity raises vital and relevant questions: as Christians, do we have vision of man as human that applies to our world? Islam most certainly has! But how does the Christian view of man distinguish itself from the Scylla of pervading relativism and scepticism and the Charybis of integrism?

Our discussion primarily concerns the fact that *to speak about the image of God is to try and explain what constitutes humanity as such*. A review of the following points is proposed:

- The image of God: some different approaches;
- The image of God: the historical heritage;
- Some propositions for theological construction;
- A theological perspective with some general pointers.

### **The image of God: some different approaches**

---

<sup>6</sup> Novels by Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel and Milan Kundera are particularly popular and also the debated theses of F. Fukuyama on the future of man. Commentaries on the scientific problem in F. Lurçat, *L'autorité de la Science*, Paris, Cerf, 1995 and *La Science suicidaire*, Paris, F.-X. de Guibert, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of exegetical approaches see G. Bray, 'The Significance of God's Image in Man', *Tyndale Bulletin* 1991 (42.2) pp. 194-225. Before Bray, D. Clines published a programmatic article on the subject, 'The Image of God in Man', *Tyndale Bulletin* (19) 1968, pp. 53-103.

<sup>8</sup> For example: W. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985 or G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1984. As with other deconstructionists, these authors reject the idea of «commun human nature/experience» but maintain that experience can give rise to a certain form of collective knowledge. Cf. T.M. Kelly, *Theology at the Void. The Retrieval of Experience*, (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Ricard and J.-F. Revel, *Le moine et le philosophe*, Paris, Nil, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> J. Frame, 'Men and Women in the Image of God' in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1991, p. 506 n1.

From the first chapter, the Scriptures tell us that man is created in the *image of God*. It is possible that today we are really not able to comprehend fully just how amazing this affirmation is, placed in its historical and cultural context.

What does this expression mean? Evidently, it is a *metaphorical* usage, because man does not resemble a reproduction of God in miniature, like that of Caesar on Roman coins<sup>11</sup>.

One conceivable interpretation is that man is the reflection of God or the substantial representation of His Being, of His essence. At first glance, this notion does not allow for an explanation of how the corporality of man can be associated with a resemblance to God. Another proposition is that the image is not a *duplicate*, a copy of God, but a correspondence of the divine reality in the created realm. So, for example, man, in his freedom, determines and transcends himself to resemble the image of the celestial archetype. Another possibility is that the image is a visible representation of an invisible reality. M.G. Kline has shown the place of cultic statues as representations of the power of the suzerain in ancient Middle East<sup>12</sup>. Thus, as the image of God, man is endowed with the function of representation in creation as prophet, priest and king. Here, the emphasis falls on the *vocation* with which man is invested<sup>13</sup>. In this respect Frame says: «the image of God embraces everything that is human.»<sup>14</sup>

If a choice had to be made, the latter interpretation seems the most tempting as it fits in contextually with the cultural milieu of Genesis. It is precisely because man himself is the 'cultic statue' of God in creation, that making a graven image is forbidden in the Torah. This is coherent and shows in advance that the man who betrays his image becomes an idol himself.

The idea of the image relating to man's vocation departs, undoubtedly, from traditional interpretations that define the image as something *in* man, belonging to his essential nature. A brief survey of the historical development follows.

### **The image of God: the historical heritage**

---

<sup>11</sup> H. Kühli, 'eikôn' in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, H. Balz et G. Schneider, eds., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990, I, pp. 388ff, which includes a useful bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> M.G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1980, pp. 26ff. Also 'Investiture with the Image of God', *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1977:1) pp. 39-62. Concerning the image as representation see also G.C. Berkouwer, *Man: the Image of God*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1962, pp. 114ff.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Stuttgart, Ehrenfried Klotz Verlag, 1964, II, ch. XVI, ii; D.J. Hall, *Imaging God. Dominion as Stewardship*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> J. Frame, art. cit., p. 231.

The following comments are limited to some of the ideas of the image in the historical tradition of Christianity<sup>15</sup>.

### 1. *Eastern Orthodoxy*

J. Barr has shown that, according to the rules of Hebraic parallelism, and contrary to the distinctions within the theology of the Oriental Church, the words *tselem* and *demuth*, image and resemblance, are synonyms<sup>16</sup>. But from the time of Irenaeus and through to Athanasius, the Greek Fathers tended to use this distinction to say that man, created in the image, must also attain to the likeness of the divinity. This was achieved the Incarnate One<sup>17</sup>. If the foundations of Orthodox anthropology are open to linguistic criticism, it does have the advantage of making the incarnation central and showing that an eschatology was introduced with the creation, a theme recurring in the covenant theology of Protestantism<sup>18</sup>. Christ resembled God, in His life and in His death.

### 2. *Roman Catholicism*

The position of onto-theology became, through the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, the Roman Catholic position. Here, the notion of image concerns the nature of man in creation, endowed with special gifts (*donum superadditum naturae*) that allow created man to accomplish his task<sup>19</sup>. The image is supernatural. Man having become 'natural' after the Fall lost supernatural qualities. With these gifts removed, man returns to a natural situation; the *struggle of concupiscence*, in which the flesh is opposed to the spirit<sup>20</sup>. The sacraments restore the gifts of holiness in man through grace.

This position has the disadvantages of favouring an opposition between flesh and spirit, nature and grace, and of interpreting image and humanity in the light of the Aristotelian philosophy of Being. J. Maritain affirmed:

---

<sup>15</sup> Short presentations are A.A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986, ch. 4 and J. Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1977, II, pp. 41-46. For more detailed discussions see, J. Orr, *God's Image in Man and its Defacement*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1948 (1905), D. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, London, Collins (Fontana Library), 1973(2) and H.D. Macdonald, *The Christian View of Man*, London, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981.

<sup>16</sup> J. Barr, 'The Image of God in the Book of Genesis – a Study of Terminology', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 51 (1968), pp. 11-26. Cf. G. Bray, 'The Fall', *Evangel* 3 (1985:1), p. 13, who says that it is not possible to say that with the Fall man lost the likeness but kept the image.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, New York, St Vladimir's Press 1989, ch. 6, 7 and J. Popovitch, *L'homme et le Dieu-Homme*, Lausanne, L'Age d'Homme, 1989, *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> G. Vos, 'The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology' in R.B. Gaffin ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980, pp. 234-270.

<sup>19</sup> The expression comes from Alexander of Hales (☞1245). Thomas calls these gifts «*gratia gratum faciens*».

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, qq. 76, 90, 93, II-1, qq. 82, 83. For Thomas, the image remains after the Fall as the essence of humanity, including rationality: «*naturalia remanent integra*».

«metaphysics rises above agnosticism and rationalism; ascending from experience to the uncreated Being, re-establishing in human being the proper hierarchy of speculative values and restoring in man the order of wisdom»<sup>21</sup>.

The advantage of this position on the other hand, is to make the notion of natural law central with regard to creation and to reveal the normative nature of law for creation<sup>22</sup>.

### 3. *The Classical Reformation*

The magisterial Reformation generally defined the image in man in the light of a notion of *conformity* to God<sup>23</sup>. This conformity is neither natural nor supernatural, but ethical. The image is seen in what was lost and what is restored in Christ: justice, holiness and truth (Col. 3,10, Eph. 4,24).

At creation, the fact man is created in the image of God means that he is created with spiritual endowments, but in the eschatological situation of *posse peccare*<sup>24</sup>. Therefore the image of God has three fundamental aspects: formal (the spiritual essence of the human soul), material (human faculties – the original holiness in justice, knowledge and love) and consequently, in a functional sense, the *dominium* of Adam. At the Fall, the image became corrupted almost to the point of obliteration – as J. Calvin went so far as to affirm<sup>25</sup> – in a total way, including man's vocation to serve God as His mediatorial representative in creation<sup>26</sup>. Calvin specifies:

«Even though we confess that God's image was not entirely annihilated and effaced in man, however it was so corrupted that whatever remains is a horrible deformity...»<sup>27</sup>

Man remains, by nature, man in the image of God. This distinction may already be criticised as 'scholastic', for it is difficult in the case of man, a psychosomatic unity, to say where the formal aspect of the image ends and the material begins.

The advantage of this position lies in affirming that man remains in the image of God, with the dignity that involves, in the sanctity of human life, for example, even after the Fall<sup>28</sup>. The downside is that the distinction between formal and material, nature and person is difficult to describe in terms of content. Its critics, such as G.C.

---

<sup>21</sup> J. Maritain, *Le Docteur angélique*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1930, p. 53. See also E. Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence*, Paris, Vrin, 1972.

<sup>22</sup> For this reason certain «reconstructionists» in the theonomy movement can be well disposed to thomism.

<sup>23</sup> H. Heppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelische-reformierten Kirche*, Neukirchener Verlag, 1958, pp. 185-186.

<sup>24</sup> *posse peccare*, literally, the possibility of sinning, which indicates man's capacity to fall.

<sup>25</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentaries* on Genesis 1.26, 3.1, Ephesiens 4.24, 2 Corinthiens 3.18. *Sermons* on Job 14.16-17, 32.4-5. Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, London, Lutterworth, 1949, pp. 77-78.

<sup>26</sup> Heppe, ad loc.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institution chrétienne*, I.xv.4, cf., II.ii.17, Aix-en-Provence, Ed. Kerygma, 1978.

<sup>28</sup> R.W. Wilson, C.L. Blomberg, 'The Image of God in Humanity: a Biblical-Psychological Perspective', *Themelios* 18 (1993:3) pp. 8-15 – man alone has a unique spiritual capacity with relation to God.

Berkouwer, have had a field day exposing the weaknesses of the position without necessarily being able to come up with anything more coherent themselves<sup>29</sup>.

#### 4. *A theological turning point*

The 20<sup>th</sup> century presents new approaches to the question with the arrival of existentialism and phenomenology in philosophy and theology. They could be called, rather simplistically, ‘functional’ perspectives. In seeking to define the image of God they are less preoccupied with nature and more with the functions of humanity. E. Brunner, with his works *Natur und Gnade* (1934), *Der Mensch im Widerspruch* (1937) and his *Dogmatics* provides a link between what has gone before and what is to come. K. Barth further opened the breach and others followed. Four cases can be highlighted by way of illustration:

1. *Brunner*, in his *Dogmatics*, sought to maintain the classical distinction between the undefiled image and what remains of it<sup>30</sup>. In this respect his position is broadly Augustinian like that of the Reformers. However, he affirms that creation is supra-historical and that the Fall is an historical experience – which implies that there is no original justice or natural law for creation. The experience of each man begins with sin... S. Kierkegaard’s influence is evident in this formulation.

2. *Barth* introduced a different emphasis in his construction of the doctrine and, as elsewhere, shows the originality of his thought. His innovations subsequently become inescapable in the discussion<sup>31</sup>. A few inadequate brush strokes can hardly do justice to the complexity of Barth’s propositions! The human sexual differentiation, contrary to the androgenous humanity of the Greeks, is rooted in the *imago Dei*<sup>32</sup>. Genesis 1,27c is a commentary of 1,27a,b. The image of God is, from the outset, mutuality and reciprocity. God exists as a Being in relation, as the classical category of the *opera ad intra* portrays it; the same is true for man. God’s primal decision is to make humanity dual because He himself is a plural God. Hence, there is an analogy (*analogia relationis*) between the trinitarian God and man, male and female. So human existence consists in the relation and the differentiation of man and woman. Barth maintains the reality of an analogy between God, in his trinitarian relationships, one and many, and created man. Therefore male and female together constitute the form of the image of God<sup>33</sup>.

Barth’s commentators unveil a debateable issue. According to the analogy of equal trinitarian Persons, there is also an order in the divine nature, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which recognises the primacy of the Father. If man is created in the image of God, this implies a relationship of equals in which primacy and functional

---

<sup>29</sup> Berkouwer, *op.cit.*, pp. 38-55, on the image in the broad and narrow senses, criticises H. Bavinck for ‘mechanical’ dualism, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> E. Brunner, *Dogmatique*, II, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1965, pp. 67-74.

<sup>31</sup> In their discussion about natural theology, Brunner states that for Barth, the image in man is effaced, which Barth denied, although he seems to have redefined his position later. Cf. Berkouwer, *op. cit.*, pp. 51ss and *General Revelation*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1955, ch. III.

<sup>32</sup> Brunner comments briefly on sexual bipolarity in his *Dogmatique*, pp. 77ff.

<sup>33</sup> K. Barth, *Dogmatique*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1960, III/1, §41. 2, 3.

subordination exist between man and woman. The analogy can be understood as follows:

- God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equal in nature;
- God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different in their functions,

which implies concerning the image of God in man:

- Man and woman are equal as to their created nature;
- and different in the order of their functions<sup>34</sup>.

The consequence is a functional subordination of woman in relation to man, because in economical and personal terms, the Son is subordinate to the Father. Post-barthians try to make some modifications, including theologians on the evangelical side. P.K. Jewett affirms that there is no hierarchy in Genesis 1 and 2 and that there are no superior and inferior roles in creation. The woman is not subordinate, but different<sup>35</sup>. Barth's proposition is open to the criticism of *bourgeoiserie* and of presenting a traditional view of male/female relations that reduces to monogamous marriage.

Even if Barth's proposition – that the image of God is the relationship between a man and woman in the image of the Trinity – has the credit of bringing into view the sexual relationship in debates on the image of God, it is not without unacceptable flaws, as subsequent feminist theologies claim. This proposition is too narrow and reduces the masculine and feminine roles to marriage, a man and a woman.

3. *J. Moltmann* profited from Barth's discussion, but redefined the image of God in man as the image of the *social* Trinity. Moltmann builds on Barth's viewpoint while at the same time criticising 'monarchy' theologies with an absolute Subject<sup>36</sup>. The Trinity is a community. In their joint work *God, Man and Woman*, E. et J. Moltmann affirm that, contrary to the equivalence between monotheism and the sovereignty of God, it must be understood that, in the Trinity, God lives in social communion with Himself. The doctrine of the Trinity becomes a model of communitarianism in Moltmann's subsequent books<sup>37</sup>. The barthian model is taxed with patriarchy. Man is always above, the woman below. Jewett in his *Man as male and female*, reaches a similar conclusion. To really appreciate the image of God, one must go beyond the models that perpetuate the structure of subordination characterised by a functional superior and an inferior as advocated by Barth and Brunner.

4. If for Barth the image of God includes man and woman, and if for Moltmann, it is about real community, the contribution of *C.E. Gunton* seeks to

---

<sup>34</sup> This formulation is close to classic calvinism, A. Biéler, *L'homme et la femme dans la morale calviniste*, Genève, Labor & Fides, 1963, p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> P.K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975, pp. 82-86, 112. See also his *Who we are: our Dignity as Human*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, ch. IV.

<sup>36</sup> J. Moltmann, *Trinité et royaume de Dieu*, Paris, Cerf, 1984, ch. 1. Another example of social anthropology at the time is W. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1985. *Contra* the monarchical model feminist critics have been the most outspoken. Cf. S. McFague, *Models of God*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987, pp. 59ff.

<sup>37</sup> E. and J. Moltmann, *Dieu, homme et femme*, Paris, Cerf, 1984, ch. 6, which completes and corrects his preceding work *L'homme. Essai d'anthropologie chrétienne*, Paris, Cerf-Mame, 1974. Cf. the discussion in *Dieu dans la création*, Paris, Cerf, 1988, ch. ix.

broaden perspectives further. Gunton expresses a concern for speaking about the image of God in relation to redemption, but also in a creational and ecological context<sup>38</sup>. The way in which Gunton broadens Barth's functional model, so that it becomes a fully relational construct including creation, is stimulating. He uses the words *related*, *relatedness*, without hesitation. The image of God in man is in his 'relatedness' to everything that exists. A social and ecological relationship is in view above and beyond male-female communion. Gunton seeks to define humanity in relation to everything that exists, including the relationship with oneself and with the world. This enlargement of the notion of the image to the global relationships of man within whole of life contexts, including ecology, provides an attempt to respond to the real concerns of our contemporaries.

\*\*\*

The strength of functional viewpoints resides in their desire to reformulate the notion of the image of God in a present day context. It is however important not to confuse the different points of view which have been presented. Their diversity is a reflection of theological pluralism and it is difficult to find a common denominator.

The weaknesses of Barth and of his particular functional approach, on an exegetical and theological level, have been pointed out by several authors, in particular:

1. *M.G. Kline*, in his *Images of the Spirit*, provides a critique of the barthian position on Genesis 1,27. Kline says that the masculine/feminine reference cannot relate to the essence of the image of God for the following reasons:

i) the sexual duality is not mentioned in the statement of divine intention in verse 26;

ii) Phrases a) and b) of verse 27 provide a synonymous parallelism, which does not necessarily include 27c. 27c is not a supplementary parallel, but a further description that states *how* man is created in the image of God. The image extends to man and woman, as in Genesis 5,1ff;

iii) According to Kline, 27c and Genesis 5,2a refer to the subsequent context of verses 28 and 5,2b, which present the divine blessing as the culmination of the divine intention in creation<sup>39</sup>.

2. *P.E. Hughes*, in an original work, *The True Image*, adds two criticisms of a theological order concerning barthian theology. In lapidary fashion he states that «interpersonal relationship within the Godhead is in no sense a sexual relationship». Moreover, «the interpersonal relationship in human society, while it is most intimately expressed in the sexual union of male and female, to which a special sanctity is attached, is not dependent on sexuality.»<sup>40</sup>

These criticisms are not intended to infer that the views introduced by Barth, Moltmann or Gunton are not useful in the reformulation of the doctrine of the image of God today. On the contrary, they are thought provoking and it is important to know how to evaluate them. But if onto-theology, with its distinctions, deviated from the

---

<sup>38</sup> C.E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1992.

<sup>39</sup> M.G. Kline, *op cit.*, p. 33. Cf., Frame's comments, art. cit., p. 228f.

<sup>40</sup> P.E. Hughes, *The True Image. The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989, pp. 18,19.



biblical message relating to the image of God, then ‘social’ doctrines, in spite of their attractiveness, might be equally problematic regarding the content of the Scriptures, if the Scriptures do not actually speak in this way. This is open for discussion...

### 3. Some propositions for a theological construction of the *imago Dei*

Some statements can be formulated, a few theses, in the light of preceding considerations, concerning elements that might contribute to a 21<sup>st</sup> century reconstruction of a doctrine of the *imago Dei*.

#### 1. *The question of individuality*

However attractive the positions of Barth, Moltmann, Jewett and the ‘social doctrines of the image’ might be, it seems difficult to ignore the fact that the image concerns *the human being in her individuality*. As C. Seerveld has stated:

«To be created means to be an individual reality, ordained in a cosmic fashion, with an irreducible difference, an entity which is identifiable and re-identifiable among other comparable entities... This individualising structure is an ontic given of the creation.»<sup>41</sup>

This is an important affirmation, not simply on an anthropological plane, but also for christological reasons. It is man who is in the image of God as an individual, and each man and woman is in the image of God as an entity. According to Seerveld, this entity has a rooting in the life, breath, body of man as well as in concrete realities in the functional sense. The person as a unity is a being with direction, *coram Deo*, the heart constituting the bearing of the individual.

#### 2. *Nature and person*

The creation establishes man as a being with multiple functions, a human nature, but also as a person. Recently P.E. Hughes, A.A. Hoekema and G. Bray have distinguished between man’s nature as a creature and man as a person. J. Frame also makes a distinction between the image as resemblance and the image as representation<sup>42</sup>. The resemblance of the image concerns human nature and its structure, and includes: the human being as such, moral excellence, ethical capacity, and the body with its sexual differentiation. Concerning representation however, in the area of the function of man in God’s image, a human being has a triple action in creation as prophet, priest and king<sup>43</sup>.

Such distinctions provide a differentiation between man’s nature and his destiny. Man is still man after the Fall, but his destiny had a change of course which is alien to his nature in creation. Bray distinguishes between the human nature,

---

<sup>41</sup> C. Seerveld, ‘A Christian Tin-can Theory of Man’, *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, June 1981, p. 75. Cf. H. Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, Nutley, NJ., Craig Press, 1960, ch. VIII, on which Seerveld draws.

<sup>42</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 5, Hoekema, *op. cit.*, p. 7, Frame, *art. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> With, according to Frame, the correlates of control, authority and presence, *art. cit.*, p. 230f.

*humanitas*, which survived, in spite of sin, and man's person that suffers corruption and death<sup>44</sup>.

In other words, through sin as tragic destiny, the personal functions in the domain 'I-thou-world' are affected by man's alienation with regard to God and the neighbour. Man has not lost humanity, but integrity. This situation is often illustrated by the fact that after the Fall, humans did not become animals, even if man often proves himself to be «a wolf for man». Calvin, for example, does not hesitate to write: «the likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all kinds of living creatures.»<sup>45</sup>

### 3. *The true Image of God*

The image of God, as has already been stated, is to be interpreted as *metaphorical* and not a literal reality. Thus, we come to the interesting suggestion made by P.E. Hughes in his book on Christ and the image of God. For Hughes, the true and only image, correctly speaking, is *Jesus-Christ Himself*. It is because the Son is the eternal Word that He is the true image of the divinity<sup>46</sup>.

This christological affirmation seeks conformity with the NT data, where, as H. Ridderbos affirms, the resurrected One is revealed as the eternal Son of God, as the One who alone is the true image-bearer of the divinity<sup>47</sup>. Hughes raises the question as to whether it is possible to affirm, with H. Bavinck or G.C. Berkouwer, that man *is* the image of God, since man and image are not identical. Man is only, in creation and in the renewal of creation, *in the image of the Image*. The true image is the eternal Logos, the true revelation, the God-Man incarnate. Man is in the image of God in an indirect way with Christ interposed. Only the Incarnate Son presents Himself *as* the true image and likeness of the divinity<sup>48</sup>.

The significance of this suggestion is its christocentric focus and conformity to NT language; it also lies in the fact that it avoids getting involved in a plethora of scholastic disputes on the content of the image, its remainder and its ontological nature. This enables Hughes to talk about the aspects of the *image*: man's spirituality, morality, rationality, authority and creativity as *image of the Image*, which are only complete in Christ as a personal hypostasis.

### 4. *Desexualising the image?*

---

<sup>44</sup> Bray, 'The Fall', p. 14, «If we picture sin as part of human nature, then either Christ sinned or he did not have a human nature – an impossible dilemma!» Cf. his article, 'The Significance of God's Image in Man', where he refers approvingly to Hughes: «when man sinned, his relationship with God was altered from one of obedience to one of disobedience, but there is no ontological change in man himself», p. 224.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, I.xv.3.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, ch. 1, 2.

<sup>47</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of his Theology*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1975, pp. 69-78.

<sup>48</sup> This formulation is not far from Barth's notion of Word of God; this minefield must be negotiated with caution!

Is it not without justification, in the light of what has been previously stated, to attempt to *desexualise* the notion of the image of God, even though it is impossible to avoid the inevitable question of sexual differentiation? Where should sexuality be placed in relation to the image? Frame suggests the sexual differentiation exists on the level of man's nature as image and likeness of God. In response to the question 'Is sexual differentiation an aspect of the image of God?' he affirms:

«Yes, for everything we are images God. The point is not that God is male, female, or both. To say that our eyes image God is not to say that God has eyes; it is rather to say that our eyes picture something divine. Similarly, our sexuality pictures God's attributes and capacities.»<sup>49</sup>

The question arises, however, as to whether sexual duality should not be considered as the presence of the image in its vocational, functional and personal aspects, rather than in that of the (ontological) nature of man. Individualisation in human beings makes them men or women, masculine or feminine people.

In this respect the critique of the barthian position must be reconsidered. The relationship between a man and a woman in the image of the Trinity implies some form of order, even if, in this same image, there is equality in nature. The image inevitably slides, in the mind of Brunner and Barth, to the husband/wife relationship. Jewett, on the other hand, affirms that the NT texts which refer to subordination concern the second account of creation rather than Genesis 1. He states however, that in its context, Genesis 2 is not speaking about the inferiority of woman, but about her relationship to man. The issue is not the subordination of woman, but her 'being-with' man. Is it not desirable to limit the damage done by the cultural context of patriarchy? Paul drew the right conclusions and went beyond it in Galatians 3,28 with its egalitarian overtones. In a different situation, that of today, it is possible to discern with greater freedom what is really implied in Genesis 2 and Galatians 3: full equality between men and women as the image of God. It is only in true partnership that humanity, man and woman, is really complete<sup>50</sup>.

Coming back to the text, Genesis 1.27,28 seems to speak primarily in generic fashion. It deals with *Mensch, Man*, humanity, including the fundamental differentiation between man and woman<sup>51</sup>. As J. Dumbrell states:

«The notion of the image of God in Genesis 1 is primarily to be understood in terms of function as referring to the whole man. By creation man is the visible representation in the created world of the invisible God.»<sup>52</sup>

Genesis 2, on the other hand, supplies further precision not about nature or structure, but about function and task. The notion of different functions, which do not in principle exclude hierarchy, is not contrary to the notion of the image of God, nor that

---

<sup>49</sup> Frame, art. cit., p. 229, who indicates among these attributes: creativeness, love, dominion and divine condescension. See also W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994, ch. 22 and P. Wells, 'God and Gender', *Christianity and Society*, 10 (2000:2), 22-26.

<sup>50</sup> Jewett, *op. cit.*, p. 171. Cf. F. de Coninck, 'A propos du ministère féminin', *Hokhma* 44 (1990) pp. 45-58.

<sup>51</sup> J. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1981, pp. 171ff, written before the major debates on this question got under way. Cf. H. Blocher, *Révélation des origines*, Lausanne, P.B.U., 1979, pp. 91, 99 and S.T. Foh, *Women and the Word of God*, Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979, pp. 51ff., 100ff.

<sup>52</sup> J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, Exeter, Paternoster, 1994, p. 34.

of a diversity in creation. After all, in the NT, the notions of parent-child/man-woman/master-servant, imply a structured diversity among those who, at creation, are all made in the image of God.

1 Corinthians 11.7 raises a related problem concerning sexual bipolarity and the image, which is difficult to avoid: man is said to be the image and glory (*eikôn kai doxa*) of God; but the woman is the glory (*doxa*) of man. How difficult it is to unpack this text! Some interpreters seem to believe that aspects of local culture are raised to the level of normativity and that the apostle defends his view with an incorrect rabbinical exegesis... Genesis itself would not allow the apostle to argue as he does. But does Paul refer to Genesis 1.26-28 in this passage? In what respect?

J. Hurley has given one plausible account of this complicated passage in his *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*. He affirms that Genesis 1 is not about hierarchy within the species but about the dominion of God as creator and the fact that the human image has dominion with regard to the other species. Suggestions of *intra-human* equality or subordination do not figure in this text. Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 11,7 Paul does not discuss the question of the nature of human dignity as such, but refers to questions of order. Hence, Genesis 1.26ss is not a proof-text to support male primacy; the theme of the first chapter of Genesis serves to establish the notion of divine dominion in creation, exercised by God and through man.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the apostle replaces the word *homoiôsis* in the Greek text of Genesis (LXX, Gen. 1,26) with *doxa*, and so he does not use exactly the same expressions as in Genesis<sup>54</sup>. He does show, however, that man reflects the image of God because of his role as 'head'. Glory is a relational concept and to speak of the glory of such and such a thing indicates a relationship to its source, and to the honour that one person brings to another<sup>55</sup>. Man is the glory of God in relation to him, and the woman, on the other hand, is the glory of man in his relationship to her. As the image of God, comments Bray, a woman reflects the glory of the male, not the glory of God directly, adding that «within creation *doxa* bears witness to order and hierarchy, but not to inequality or enforced submission.» Hurley infers that «the woman is not called to image God or Christ *in the relation which she sustains to her husband*. She images instead the response of the church to God and Christ by willing, loving self-subjection.»<sup>56</sup>

In Ephesians 5 (22,23) and 6, this diversity is placed in a christological context and can also exist, for example, in the different areas of ministry in the church. We should think long and hard before affirming that the apostle exegetes Genesis incorrectly. Here, as elsewhere, Paul is not speaking about the nature of man and woman, but about their functions and stations.

---

<sup>53</sup> Hurley, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>54</sup> Bray argues, contrary to exegetical assumptions, that *eikôn* and *doxa* are not synonymous, but remain 'stubbornly different', art. cit., pp. 219f. Cf. C.K. Barrett who says that in this context Paul only values the term image as leading to glory, *A Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, New York, Harper and Row, 1968, p. 252.

<sup>55</sup> Frame, art. cit., p. 228.

<sup>56</sup> Bray, art. cit., p. 221 and Hurley, *op.cit.*, p. 173. Italics Hurley's.

Of course, this does not constitute a proposition that might elucidate in what precise respect the primacy of man as ‘head’ is exercised in relation to woman<sup>57</sup>. Recent works that try to elucidate this relational mystery often leave us unsatisfied. For example, the collection edited by the French Catholic scholar X. Lacroix<sup>58</sup>, *Homme et femme. L’insaisissable différence*, has an appropriate title. In spite of the many approaches presented in this collection of articles, the nature of the male-female relationship remains mysterious. Lacroix quotes L. Beirnaert: «The difference between the sexes means that any anthropology which seeks to close the circle in a definition fails.» He adds that when an attempt to divide values and virtues between masculine and feminine is made, it ends up by «eliminating the particularity of masculine and feminine qualities.»<sup>59</sup> The more specification is attempted, the more the values are seen as being not male or female, but simply human. Therefore,

«As a mystery the difference (of male/female) is not just limiting of rationality, it is also the locus of revelation. It bears the mark of transcendence beyond knowledge, and is the sign of otherness, the difference of the other first of all, the ‘thou’ perceived in hidden depth, which always escapes our knowledge. In a religious perspective, alterity becomes itself a revelation of a more radical difference, that of the absolute Third, *Ille*, of whom the trace is found in every relation worthy of the name.»<sup>60</sup>

Lacroix concludes with a little ludic diversion:

«The first thing said of Adam is dual: male and female. And the Talmud states: ‘Man without woman diminishes the image of God in the world’. The two letters in Hebrew that distinguish *iyeh* from *ichah*, *yod* and *he*, together make the beginning of the divine name, *yh*. It is as though the opposite sex were for each person the revelation of the hidden face of the divine.»

Described in such terms the mystery is truly unfathomable!

Precisely for this reason, it does not seem superfluous to «desexualise» the debate on the image of God, as Hughes has suggested:

«Contrary to Karl Barth, we conclude that male and female duality does not provide the key to the understanding of the divine image in which man was formed. Man’s person-to-Person relationship with his Maker, itself undoubtedly an indicator of that “image”, is not determined by the fact of human sexuality. It exists independently of sexuality. Of this the perfect paradigm is the unclouded interpersonal harmony that informed the relationship between the incarnate Son and the heavenly Father, for in his incarnation the Son, who is himself the Image of God, expressed the fullness of life in that image, that is to say, as our fellow man, in a manner that was not in any way dictated by the issue of sexual duality.»<sup>61</sup>

## 5. *Dynamic functionalism*

---

<sup>57</sup> I have not had access to the work by the Catholic théologienne M.T.P. Santiso, *La femme espace de salut*, Paris, Cerf, 1999.

<sup>58</sup> X. Lacroix, ed., *Homme et femme. L’insaisissable différence*, Paris, Cerf, 1999. Lacroix’ formulations give the impression that nature is completed by grace and that where the rational ends, non-rational mystery begins.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 145, 147.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, ad. loc., referring to E. Lévinas, *Humanisme de l’autre homme* (1972).

<sup>61</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

M.G. Kline and C.E. Gunton have revived the debate on the image of God by detaching themselves from former problematic categories, from fixation on the problem of sexual duality, and by introducing new exegetical or theological perspectives. Kline considers the image of God as man's appointment to rule over the earth, under the leading of God's Spirit. God reveals Himself in creation by the Spirit as the Alpha and Omega: «God created man in the likeness of the Glory to be a spirit-temple of God in the Spirit.»<sup>62</sup> Kline speaks of a 'primal *parousia*' and a prophetic model of the image of God: «The Glory theophany, in which God was present as Logos-Wisdom and Spirit-Power, stood as archetype at the creation of man as God's image.»<sup>63</sup> The language is at times difficult to fathom and may be considered as a stimulating form of *midrash* striving for clearer understanding. The important point is that Kline considers the image of God as the expression of the *appointment* of man, his anointing as prophet, priest and king in creation. This functional notion of the image invites further development.

Gunton encourages reflection in his lectures on *Christ and Creation* by proposing a dynamic model of the image in man stimulated by an ethic of *sacrifice*. Using Romans 12.1,2, he proposes that Christian service focuses on sacrifice and that the image of Christ is thereby realised. Man's relationship with God, through Christ, is restored by an ethic that involves what we do with our persons and what we do in and with the world as creation. It is «offering to God that creation which he has placed in our hands... a vision of what it is to be in the image of God and a consideration of how we should seek to embody it in our communities of worship and life.»<sup>64</sup>

+++

The dynamic nature of man should be a prime consideration in reformulating the definition of the image of God. The image can be considered as:

- *personal*: man is a personal individual before God and others;
- *non-dualistic*: man is characterised by unity of being which is not divided into 'flesh and spirit';
- *christocentric*: Christ, through his incarnation, is the only true image of God;
- *dynamic*: man is called, ethically, to fulfil his destiny as a creature according to his Christ-likeness: towards God, himself, his neighbour and the creation.

#### **4. A theological perspective on the themes of Creation, Fall and Redemption**

---

<sup>62</sup> Kline, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>64</sup> Gunton, *op.cit.*, pp.117, 119.

If we leave to one side the prodigious work of J. Moltmann<sup>65</sup> in his books on the Trinity, the kingdom of God and the creation, the recent thinker who incites the most reflection on the image of God is undoubtedly C.E. Gunton, who has the credit of taking on the challenge of considering the complementarity of creation, christology and redemption.

Gunton gives the impression he finds Barth's doctrine of the image rather restricted as a portrayal of the wholeness of human relationships. The Trinity is an expression of 'relatedness in otherness' in God and in man. Being in the image of God implies personal and non-personal dynamics that characterise humanity as a whole. «Relation constitutes who and what we are.»<sup>66</sup> Relationships are both vertical and horizontal: «relatedness takes shape in a double orientation.»<sup>67</sup> Gunton's definition of the image is as follows: «*To be in the image of God is to be called to represent God to the creation and the creation to God*, so enabling it to reach its perfection.»<sup>68</sup> W. Pannenberg has also summed up this insight concisely:

«Because God wills fellowship with us, namely our participation in the fellowship of the Son with the Father by the Spirit in the life of the Trinity, and therefore also our fellowship with one another, he wills too that we should recognise each other, in our distinctiveness, in order that we may all find in others a supplementing of our own lives and our own selves as members in a living fellowship.»<sup>69</sup>

After the Fall, restoration is only made possible through Christ and the 'reordering' accomplished in His person. Distortion of the image affects the relationship between a person and God, between people and between persons and the world. The image restored through Christ's sacrifice is freedom from deformed relationships. Thus man becomes capable once again of mirroring the image of God in relation to the Creator, to others and to the world. In the Biblical message there is a whole dynamic of restoration centred on Christ and driven by Him with respect to God, to ourselves, to others and the world. The reestablishment of the image is global, even if incomplete, in this world before the coming of Christ.

We are surely indebted to Gunton for having suggested a view of the image in the perspective of Christian eschatology in which a christological focus and an ecological application come into play.

So what of the relationship between Adam and Christ, between creation, christology and redemption? A perennial question raises its ugly head: Is Christ in the image of Adam, or is Adam in the image of Christ? Andreas Osiander, a Lutheran theologian, published two speculative treatises in 1550, entitled: *Whether the Son of God would have had to be incarnated, if sin had not entered the world* and *What the image of God is*. Calvin was not impressed and rejected the debate on these terms as

---

<sup>65</sup> R. Bauckham, *God Crucified. Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1988. Cf. H. Goudineau and J.-L. Souletie, *Jürgen Moltmann*, Paris, Cerf, 2002. In a new edition of his *Christologie*, (Vaux-sur-Seine, Edifac, 2002), H. Blocher presents a concise and important discussion of Moltmann's thought.

<sup>66</sup> C.E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1998, p. 206.

<sup>67</sup> C.E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1991, p. 116.

<sup>68</sup> C.E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, p. 102s. Italics Gunton's. See also. C. Schwöbel and C.E. Gunton, eds., *Persons, Divine and Human*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1991.

<sup>69</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, III, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991-1998, p. 582f.

being 'trivial'. It is not a helpful question; he refuses to enter into the logic that Christ would have become incarnate even had Adam not sinned<sup>70</sup>.

Is Adam in the image of Christ or is Christ in the image of Adam? In the Scriptures, the question of the relationship between anthropology, christology and redemption receives no formal or precise theological response. Their relationship is a limited theological model developed, on the basis of 'good and necessary consequence', into a comprehensive synthesis using elements of a biblico-theological nature.

Even in the NT, the data do not present an overview of the composite human being, *humanity*, considered to be the image of God. Rather we find a presentation that deals essentially with Adam and Christ, the two heads of humanity<sup>71</sup>. The recently renewed interest for post-Reformation covenant theology might permit the cobwebs to be brushed off certain useful theological categories. According to covenant theology, a covenant of works, creation or life exists between God and humanity<sup>72</sup>, which provides the conditions for renewing the covenant of grace. The notion of federal headship enables conceiving the restoration of the image of God in the context of the historical covenants. These dealings of God with man find their substantial unity in the eternal plan of God, the 'covenant of redemption', in which Christ figures as the true image of God and mediator between God and man. It is precisely because of this supra-historical plan that human beings are man-images of God in space-time, Christ having accepted to be the Mediator of redemption. He is thus the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world.<sup>73</sup>

The Son's acceptance, from all eternity, to become incarnate as historical Mediator and Saviour, is the way in which our humanity as creatures is validated. As a *Memorial* prayer beautifully states, Christ «didst most wonderfully and humbly choose to be made man, as never to be unmade more, and to take our nature, as never more to lay it off...» Human beings in the image of God, have a destiny intimately associated with the second Adam. Men in the generic sense, fallen in Adam are renewed in Christ, because He who is 'the image of the invisible God' bound himself to become man to save us, according to the eternal plan of God (Col 1,15, 2 Co 4,4). These texts make «no difference between the image and the essence of the invisible God. In Christ we see God. By participating in Christ, man regains the image of God that was intended to be.»<sup>74</sup>

Apart from isolated texts in the NT, such as James 3.9, which speak in a general way about man as an image of God, the image and its restoration are

---

<sup>70</sup> A. Osiander (1498-1565) also wrote an anonymous preface to the first edition of Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium*. Cf. Calvin, *Institution chrétienne*, I.xv.3. W. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, London, Lutterworth, 1956, pp. 126, 133ff.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Bray, art.cit., pp. 209ss. On federal theology and sin see H. Blocher, *Original Sin. Illuminating the Riddle*, Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press (Apollos), 1997.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. L.D. Bierma, 'Law and Grace in Ursinus' Doctrine of the Natural Covenant' in C.R. Trueman and R.S. Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1999, pp. 96-110, J. Murray, *op. cit.*, ch. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Ap 13.8, He 4.3, 9.26, etc.

<sup>74</sup> O. Flender, 'Eikôn' in *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, II, C. Brown ed., Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976, 288, J. Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-41.



invariably associated with Christ and the new community he introduces<sup>75</sup>. All is resumed in the *en Christo*. Christology and the work of redemption do not introduce a new human structure, nor create another image *ex nihilo*. The redemption in Christ, by His incarnate humanity, is only the renewal of that which exists in creation, with the eschatological promise of a new humanity in a new creation.

There are therefore two heads of humanity, Adam and Christ. In Adam, we are destined for perdition; in Christ, through His appointment as prophet, priest and king, as representative of the true image of God, creation finds its renewal in His body, of which the believer becomes a member. As man, Jesus Christ is the true image, the perfect resemblance of God, in His active and passive obedience (Ps. 8.5.6, Heb. 2.5-9). Thus everything, past, present and future is recapitulated in Christ.

### **A provisional conclusion**

The human image of God exists within a relationship: either in Adam or in Christ, and within them, there is relationship with God, one's neighbour, and other creatures. In the NT, the image refers essentially to the new community in Christ. Therein exist men and women recreated by the Spirit in the image of the Image, in an eschatological dynamic of progress and of hope. The dynamic structures of creation thus participate in the renewal of the former things without obliterating them. As O. O'Donovan states:

«The triumph of the Son of man prepares the way for the future triumph of his 'brethren', mankind as a whole. But this eschatological triumph of mankind is not an innovative order that has nothing to do with the primal ordering of man as creature to his Creator. It fulfils and vindicates the primal order in a way that was always implied, but which could not be realised in the fallen state of man and the universe.»<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Cf., F.W. Eltester, *Eikôn im Neuen Testament*, Berlin, Töpelmann, 1958, passim.

<sup>76</sup> O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Leicester, IVP (Apollos), 1994, p. 54. Cf. J. Moltmann, *La venue de Dieu*, Paris, Cerf, 2000, ch. IV.