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SUBSTANTIVE OR RELATIONAL? THE COUNTERFEIT CHOICE IN THE *IMAGO DEI* DEBATE

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Throughout Christian theology's long history, the answer to the anthropological "What?" question has almost always been given, consciously or unconsciously, in the context of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. This term speaks to the very essence of humanity:[2] the *humanum*[3] or *vere Homo*.[4] The importance of this doctrine cannot be overemphasized; the position taken here has ramifications for every other area of Christian belief[5] and for the very meaning of humanity itself. In the words of Pope John Paul II:

> *Man has meaning in this world only as the image and likeness of God.* Otherwise, he has no meaning and we might be led to say, as some people have done, that man is nothing but "useless suffering."[6]

Not only does this doctrine speak to the very significance of humanity, but also to its value. *Imago Dei* is used with both categorical and evaluative force.[7] That is to say, those who bear the

1. Portions of this article have been previously published in Milford, *Eccentricity in Anthropology*, 7–26.
2. Hughes, *The True Image*, 4.
3. Anderson, *On Being Human*, 70.
4. Hall, *Imaging God*, 61.
5. Many theologians are in agreement here. For just some examples, see Anderson, *On Being Human*, 70; Feinberg, "Image of God," 236; Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 53.
6. Schönborn, *Man, the Image of God*, 42; John Paul II, "Homily for the Mass at Bourget," 585 (italics in original).
7. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1:288–91. Although Kelsey is speaking specifically about the term *person* the same concept can be applied to the notion of the *imago Dei*. More than this, there are those that conflate the

image are placed within a specific category of being. Beings of this category have unqualified dignity and value, and consequently certain inalienable rights. In short, our understanding of human rights and how humans are to be treated is intertwined with our understanding of the *imago Dei*.

It is no surprise, then, that this topic has been studied and restudied in endless debates. Innumerable proposals have been put forward regarding the exact meaning of the term "image of God." Suggestions range from humanity's cognitive abilities to their free will,[8] from the physical body[9] to human dominion over creation.[10] So vast is the landscape that even a summary has proved a complex and difficult task,[11] compounded not only by the sheer volume of work but by the fact that there exists no agreement at present as to how many different proposals exist and their individual historical/contextual developments.[12] Indeed, David Kelsey has noted that the linguistic/exegetical interpretations are "so problematic and controversial that the most careful and influential exegeses seem to cancel out each other."[13]

The reader will be relieved to learn that this article makes no attempt to produce this elusive definitive summary. Yet it is the task of the theologian to make sense of this doctrine, for to fail to do so would be to fail, as Pope John Paul II has suggested, to

concept of *person* with *imago Dei*; see McFarland, *Difference and Identity*, 56–57.

8. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 202.

9. See, for example, Berkouwer who calls on von Rad and Bavinick for support: Berkouwer, *Man*, 74–81.

10. This is Cline's ultimate conclusion. See Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 250.

11. An analysis of the summaries produced over the last fifty years clearly demonstrates this point. See, for example Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 202–5; Culver, *Systematic Theology*, 248–57; Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 33–65.

12. Grenz, *The Social God*, 141–42. See also Towner, "Clones of God," 71.

13. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:900. It is noted that Kelsey may be too firm on this point, nevertheless the sheer volume and scope of propositions proposed by exegetes questions the value of an exegetical approach to finding solutions to this conundrum.

find meaning and purpose for the human condition. Such a failure, in the words of Barrett, would be "an act of theological irresponsibility."[14]

With this in mind, this article addresses what are widely considered the two broad categories into which most (if not all) theological positions regarding this doctrine fall: the substantive and relational.[15] These two categories are presented as two, mutually exclusive,[16] choices[17] in response to the questions surrounding the *imago Dei*. The question this article considers is whether or not the substantive-relational debate does indeed present us with two viable yet conflicting alternatives to the anthropological "What?" question, or if in fact this debate presents a counterfeit choice between two positions which, while being approached

14. Barrett, "Theology of the Meaning of Life, " 172.

15. This categorical approach is well established. First proposed by Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 249–84, it is used by numerous theologians such as Grenz, *The Social God*, 142; Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 20; Berkouwer, *Man*, 70–71; Clines, "The Image of God in Man," 55; Hall, *Imaging God*, 88–112; Fergusson, "Humans Created According to the Imago Dei," 440–45. In recent years a third view, the functionalist view, has been proposed. Included as a third category in Erickson (which he ultimately rejects as part of the relational view), the functionalist approach connects the *imago Dei* with the notion of humanity's dominion over creation and the role humans play within the created order. Human beings image God as they perform this function/role. Hall, as with Erickson, demonstrates that the functional view is very much within the relational category: Hall, *Imaging God*, 106–7. See also Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 527–31; Erickson, *Introducing Christian Theology*, 172–78. Grenz notes that the third option is mostly viewed as the functional option. He too references Erickson's *Christian Theology* and that it is assumed in the relational. Yet he moves on to reference Hodge, who argues that the post-reformation theologians, who elevated the idea of dominion, viewed this dominion as being "founded on man's rational nature" and thereby in the substantive. Grenz, *The Social God*, 177n234. Cf. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 97. Since there is some consensus that the third/functional approach maybe included in the substantive or relational we avoid a focus on this approach during the course of this paper.

16. Hall, *Imaging God*, 105.

17. See as examples Hall, *Imaging God*, 89–108; Grenz, *The Social God*, 141–82. Berkouwer makes direct reference to this choice in Berkouwer, *Man*, 100–101, yet he urges the reader not to decide on one or the other.

from different mindsets,[18] represent the same answers in different theological garb. Let us consider each category in turn.

Category 1: The Substantive

The substantive view, held by the majority of historical thinkers,[19] is perhaps the best-known.[20] Indeed Hall argues that it is impossible to think of the *imago Dei* without referring to this view, if only subconsciously.[21] It is deeply entrenched in both Protestant Evangelical theology[22] and the Roman Catholic Church[23] and is still widely accepted.[24] The central tenet of this view is that the image of God is found within the very essence of *anthropos*. The very substance *Homo sapiens* contains, in some form or another, the image of God. Thus, *Homo sapiens* possess certain "characteristics," "qualities," "capacities," "original excellences," or "endowments."[25] Since these attributes resemble corresponding qualities that one may consider to be found in the Godhead, "their possession makes humans like God."[26]

The most widely held account puts forward human rationality as the cardinal characteristic. The genesis of this understanding may be found, not in the biblical texts, but rather in the context of early Christianity. The early church fathers grappled with the Greek philosophical tradition and, following an Aristotelian structure of defining things *per genius proximum et differentiam*,

18. Hall uses this term. See Hall, *Imaging God*, 89.
19. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:895–97; Hall, *Imaging God*, 89.
20. Grenz, *The Social God*, 142.
21. Hall, *Imaging God*, 92.
22. Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei," 624; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 532; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 442–50. Grudem does acknowledge the relational aspects, albeit very briefly.
23. Hill, *Being Human*, 204.
24. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 532; Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei," 624; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 442–50; Visala, "Imago Dei, Dualism, and Evolution," 101–20.
25. Hall, *Imaging God*, 89.
26. Grenz, *The Social God*, 142.

defined human beings as "the rational animal."[27] Human reason was considered the divine spark which was later extended to include human will and volition.[28] This approach was so widely accepted in early church history that church fathers (both in the East and the West) took for granted that the human person was just such a rational animal.[29]

According to Hill, under Augustine the structural view flourished[30] so as to became the "standard interpretation"[31] in the theology of the medieval Western church, and it was this teaching that was adapted by Aquinas, whose own views become "the most influential anthropology"[32] of the Western church. Through a recasting of the Augustinian deposit in light of Aristotle, Aquinas concluded that only intellectual creatures (specifically angels and humans) were made in God's image.[33] To Aquinas, God placed within the structure of every human being the intellectual faculty as a natural capacity.[34] As a universally present structural quality of every human being, the image of God cannot be lost or destroyed, not even by the fall.[35]

It is this aspect, the universality of the substantive position, that offers the greatest attraction for the contemporary thinker eager to affirm universal human rights. As Christians seek to assent to the concept of human rights,[36] a universal human

27. Grenz, *The Social God*, 143. For a summary of Greek influence on patristic writers who addressed the *imago Dei* see Hill, *Being Human*, 202.

28. Grenz, *The Social God*, 144.

29. Grenz, *The Social God*, 143–44.

30. Hill, *Being Human*, 143–44.

31. Grenz, *The Social God*, 157.

32. Grenz, *The Social God*, 158.

33. Grenz, *The Social God*, 156–58.

34. Grenz, *The Social God*, 161.

35. Much has been written about the relationship between the *imago Dei* and the Fall. For a good summary see Berkouwer, *Man*, 119–48. Also see Anderson, *On Being Human*, 77; Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 20–23; Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 11–19. Hoekema argues convincingly against the loss of the image of God at the Fall.

36. Some theologians have objected to the concept of human rights, with the most well-known example being Hauerwas. See Hauerwas, "The Politics of Justice," 45–68. Others maintain that the concept of human rights themselves is

attribute must be identified as the basis for this radically distinct ontology, which ascribes to human creatures rights/privileges that the rest of creation does not possess.

Since the doctrine of the *imago Dei* has acted as the "convergence of all Christian declarations about human rights,"[37] the implied universality of the substantive position is an attractive option. In affirming a universally present *imago Dei*, substantialistic thinkers are able to establish and uphold the universal dignity and value of human beings everywhere. In so doing, they seek to ascertain the foundation upon which universal, inalienable human rights are built.

Category 2: The Relational

The relational view may be considered relatively new to the debate.[38] Although some have argued that the origins of relational understandings lie in Augustine,[39] there is a general acknowledgement that the relational view took root in earnest in Reformation thinkers.[40] For example, building on what Augustine alluded to, Calvin takes the metaphor of mirror and makes it

explicitly rooted in Christian beliefs. See Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 12. See also Tergel, "Human Rights and the Churches," 309–24; Cahill, "Toward a Christian Theory of Human Rights," 277–301.

37. Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 12. Moltmann is backed up by Tergel, "Human Rights and the Churches," 309–24; Cahill, "Toward a Christian Theory of Human Rights," 277–301. See also Scorer, *Life in Our Hands*, 158. Indeed, Kelsey has pointed to the fact that Kant's secular approach verges on a doctrine of the *imago Dei*. See Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:277.

38. Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 124.

39. Hall disagrees with Ramsey who considers Augustine to be relational. See Hall, *Imaging God*, 219n4. Grenz has noted that "The concept of the *imago Dei* that emerged from Augustine's reflections was sufficiently complex and many-sided so as to set the stage both for the triumph of the structural understanding in the Middle Ages and for its demise in the Reformation," Grenz, *The Social God*, 152.

40. Hall, *Imaging God*, 81, 101. Also see Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 50. Calvin in particular is very influential in this regard. See Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*; Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 128–45.

central to his theology of the divine image.[41] Using this metaphor, Calvin builds on a dynamic ontology of existence by expounding on the divine image as the act of mirroring God.[42]

What the reformers began so many years ago has, in recent times, begun to flourish. The past century's emphasis on a social Trinitarian Theo-ontology[43] and the recent philosophical turn to relationality,[44] has contributed greatly to the modern understanding of the *imago Dei* and Christian anthropology as a whole. Against the background of this turn, theologians such as Grenz are able to claim that there is a "near consensus that *person* is a relational concept."[45] Therefore, Christian anthropology should consider the *imago Dei* relationally rather than substantively. In the West, a number of key thinkers have emerged in support of such a claim. If one considers, for example, the work of Barth,[46] Berkouwer,[47] Hall,[48] and Grenz,[49] there is ample evidence to claim that, while the substantive view has hardly disappeared, the relational view has become very popular.

Rather than seeking the answers to the questions surrounding the *imago Dei* in endowments, gifts or capacities (which some believe are means to an end rather than ends themselves)[50] relational thinkers appeal to the inclination and proclivity in the human being toward relationality, particularly the relationship between God and mankind.[51] This is, according to the relational camp, the definitive feature that separates human beings from the rest of creation:

41. Grenz, *The Social God*, 166–67. Also see Augustine, "On the Trinity," 15.8.4.

42. It should be noted that Grenz that the demonstrates reformers were unable to fully dislodge the substantive position from their understanding of the *imago Dei*. See Grenz, *The Social God*, 170–77.

43. See Grenz, *The Social God*, 3.

44. Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 2, 11–36.

45. Grenz, *The Social God*, 9.

46. Barth, *CD* III/1:184–85.

47. Berkouwer, *Man*.

48. Hall, *Imaging God*.

49. Grenz, *The Social God*.

50. Hall, *Imaging God*, 107.

51. Hall, *Imaging God*, 98; Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 106–18.

> Hence there is no point in asking in which of man's peculiar attributes and attitudes it [the image] consists. It does not consist in anything that man is . . . He [God] willed the existence of a being which in all its non-deity and therefore its differentiation can be a real partner; which is capable of action and responsibility in relation to him; to which his own divine form of life is not alien; which in a creaturely repetition, as a copy and imitation, can be a bearer of this form of life.[52]

Using Calvin's metaphor of a mirror, relational thinkers consider the image of God not as something static (gifted to the human being), but as something dynamic (the vocation of the human being).[53] Such thinkers use the word "image," not as a noun, but as a verb.[54] The image of God indicates that which happens as the human being is turned to God as a mirror is turned to an object.[55] The image of God is not what the human being is, but what the human being does and what they develop into as they turn to God (and particularly to Jesus) in a responsive relationship.[56] The ultimate fulfilling of this image awaits eschatological consummation when the human being can reflect God unimpeded.[57]

In this view, the human being may grow and develop into the image. Rather than viewing human existence from a static ontology, whereby the human being is simply gifted their essential nature, relational thinkers make use of a dynamic ontology—the

52. Barth, *CD* III/1:184–85.

53. Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 153, 189; Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 40. Toren has a more nuanced approach to the dynamic understanding, viewing it as both that which the human being is and yet is called to be in much the same way as a father is biologically a father and yet continually attempts to be a father to his child. See Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 113–17.

54. This is particularly evident in Hall. See for example Hall, *Imaging God*, 98.

55. Hall, *Imaging God*, 98–108.

56. Barth, *CD* III/1:184–206.

57. This is a central argument in Grenz's work: Grenz, *The Social God*, 224. Also see for examples Hall, *Imaging God*, 82; Berkouwer, *Man*, 111; Jewett and Shuster, *God, Creation, and Revelation*, 492; Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 24–30.

human being is a responsible counterpart to God.[58] It is argued that this dynamic ontology roots itself within Christology[59] better than a static ontology, which may make reference to the *imago Dei* with very little reference to Christology. A Christian dynamic ontology conceives of Jesus Christ as the *imago Dei par excellence*[60] and as such the perfect model to imitate in relational engagement with God.[61] It is as the human being engages in a responsible relationship with Christ (who is God) that they image God. Christ plays a dual role within this construction. As the *imago Dei par excellence* he is the perfect reflection of God and at the same time, as God, he is the object being reflected.[62]

The value of the relational view lies in its affirmation of human relationality as a central aspect of human existence. In Erickson's words, "The relational view has correctly seized upon the truth that the human alone, of all the creatures, knows and is consciously related to God."[63] Unlike a piece of art or statue that exists only to display the creator's creativity and wisdom, human beings are called to a vocation. This picture, of humanity's value lying in God's special relational vocation, is very attractive to contemporary thinkers.[64]

Mutual Criticism

While the substantive and relational camps each offer value to the debate surrounding the image of God, they are both open to mutual criticism as follows:

58. Barth, *CD* III/1:185; Hall, *Imaging God*, 98; see also Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 189–90.

59. See for example Grenz's contention that Christology is the central theological informing locus: Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei," 627–28.

60. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 73. See also Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 84.

61. Barth, *CD* III/1:135–36; Berkouwer, *Man*, 107; Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei," 619–28; Pittenger, *The Christian Understanding of Human Nature*, 31; Brunner, *Dogmatics*, 58–59; Hughes, *The True Image*, 253.

62. Barth, *CD* III/1:189.

63. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 530. It should be noted that Erickson is very much substantive: Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 532.

64. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 529–30.

1) Being baptized in contemporary culture. Relational theologians have argued that substantive positions tend to embrace values and attributes that are particular to their respective culture. Hall terms this phenomenon the "baptizing" of the *imago Dei* in "qualities lauded by the dominant culture of one's society."[65] Berkhof claims that "by studying how systematic theologies have poured meaning into Genesis 1:26, one could write a piece of Europe's cultural history."[66] Such "baptizing" is considered problematic by relational thinkers as it distorts the original meaning of the text. For example, those who speak of the rationality of the human being speak almost exclusively of Western rationality rooted in Greek philosophy. Yet it would not be difficult to demonstrate that Western rationality is far removed from anything the ancient author of Gen 1:26 could have thought.[67]

Although relational thinkers slight the substantive camp for being "baptized" in respective contemporary cultures, they unwittingly fall into the same trap. The past few centuries, and in particular the last few decades, have seen a "turn to relationality"[68] and a revival of the "social trinity."[69] It may be argued that relationality is a value held specifically by our contemporary culture. If such "baptizing," according to relational thinkers, questions the authenticity of the tenets of the substantive position, are we not forced to question the tenets of the relational camp as well?

2) *A questionable universality*. Although the intention of substantive thinkers is to establish a universality to the human condition, relational thinkers argue that the effect of the substantive position is far from universal. The tendency of substantive thinkers to focus on a limited set of attributes often questions the ontological status of a large portion of humanity. For example, if one were to say that rationality is the defining characteristic of

65. Hall, *Imaging God*, 91–92.

66. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 179. See also Hall, *Imaging God*, 91; Grenz, *The Social God*, 143.

67. Hall, *Imaging God*, 91. See also Schönborn, *Man, the Image of God*, 49.

68. See Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*.

69. See for example Grenz, *The Social God*.

the image of God, what of those who are challenged in this respect?

Furthermore, many of the features proposed by substantive thinkers arise from a long process of development; the human being does not start out as the rational creature. If human creatures fail to develop the cardinal features of the *imago Dei*, then what is it exactly we are saying about the humanity of such creatures? Put another way, if—as Christian theology has often proposed—the foundation of human dignity is the presence of the image of God,[70] then do those who fail to demonstrate such features have human dignity and the associated rights? The debates along these themes are well known.

Hall states it eloquently:

> If we look for the essence of the human in rationality, for instance, we automatically assume a hierarchical structuring of the world and must relegate all creations that do not possess the subtlety and skill of human reasoning to lower strata on the ladder of being . . . One could speculate endlessly on how much damage has been done to children, to the mentally handicapped, and to the uneducated and illiterate in Western civilization on account of this avowedly "Christian" practice of identifying the highest and best—the truly human!—with rationality.[71]

Relational thinkers such as Hall appear to make a stronger case for the universality of the image of God by appealing to relationality. Yet, on closer inspection, it becomes clear that relational thinkers are appealing to the potential of such an image rather than the image itself. Relational insistence on the developmental features of the *imago Dei* results in the very same dichotomisation of the human race that they accuse substantive thinkers of making. The image of God, within this construction, is a "privilege of believers."[72] Individuals who fail to develop the necessary relationship with God, fail to image God and as a result

70. See for example: Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 12. Also consider Tergel, "Human Rights and the Churches," 309–24; Cahill, "Toward a Christian Theory of Human Rights," 277–301.

71. Hall, *Imaging God*, 108–9.

72. Berkouwer, *Man*, 106. See also Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 530.

are dehumanised. Such individuals (and indeed communities) are referred to in relational literature as "subhuman," "inhuman,"[73] "dehuman,"[74] and in the case of Calvin, "double beasts."[75]

Both Grenz and McFarland conclude that only some human beings image God. For Grenz, it is only at the eschaton that we are fully the image of God (and presumably only those in God's heavenly presence). For McFarland, it is only those who are saved (believers) who, through relationship with Christ, image God.[76] Kelsey, speaking particularly about Grenz's eschatologically focused anthropology, finds the theological consequences of this duality "very troubling."[77] If human beings are only truly human beings at the eschaton (when the relationship between them and their creator finds absolute fulfilment) then why treat human being with respect here and now?[78]

3) A non-holistic dualism. The effect of selecting culturally relevant attributes results in the dichotomisation of the human being. The human being is treated as an object whose essential nature may be distilled to a single core feature that retains, in its own right,[79] the image of God and, with it, the *humanum*. Other

73. Horst, "Face to Face," 267.

74. Hughes, *The True Image*, 4.

75. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 73–81.

76. Grenz, *The Social God*, 139–264 (part 2 of *The Social God*); McFarland, *Difference and Identity*, 56–57. Cf. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 78. Hoekema argues that this is effectively the position of Aquinas (*Summa* 1.93.4), that sinners have only part of the image: Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 33–36. McFarland's discussion is about personhood more than the image, nevertheless the implications are congruent.

77. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:904; Kelsey, "The Human Creature," 130.

78. One may claim that we should treat all human beings with universal dignity based on their potential to develop into the image of God. However, such an argument elevates potentiality to the state of actuality with a range of inescapable consequences that are seriously problematic. Furthermore, the act of distinguishing between genuine potentiality and false potentiality is fraught with difficulties. Consider: Bechler, *Aristotle's Theory of Actuality*, 8–17; Wiess, "On the Difference between Actuality and Possibility," 165–71.

79. The insistence on rationality, for example, as the definitive attribute of the *imago Dei* has led some theologians (without biblical foundation) to

features of human existence, the by-products of this distillation, are thrown by the way-side. One can refer to this approach as negative reductionism: the distillation of the human being into a limited set of features that is abstracted from the concrete human being and taken as the basis of the image of God. Such an approach dichotomizes the human being in to two co-existent yet unequal parts.

Although there are a few voices who affirm physical attributes as part of the *imago Dei*,[80] theologians have generally emphasized the non-physical. Aquinas,[81] Calvin,[82] Eichrodt,[83] Hodge,[84] to name a few, all deny that the physical body is part of the *imago Dei*. According to Hall, if we read the historical documents of this doctrine one gets the impression that there is a concerted polemic against the entire physical side of human reality, almost as if one should be ashamed of being found in the body.[85]

Hall's contention seems to be valid, especially when one reads theologians such as Hodge who claims:

> God is Spirit, the human soul is a spirit. The essential attributes of a spirit are reason, conscience and will. A spirit is a rational, moral, and therefore also, a free agent. In making man after his own image, therefore, God endowed him with those attributes which belong to his own nature as a spirit.[86]

The ascription of the non-physical to the image of God almost always implies that the non-physical is seen as "higher," "nobler," "loftier," or "better" than the physical,[87] thereby elevating the non-physical at the expense of the physical. The consequences of such elevations are far reaching. In Christianity

claim that other creatures were created in the image of God, namely: angels. See for example Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.93.2.

80. For a discussion on those who affirm the physical body as integral to the *imago Dei* (such as von Rad and Bavinck) see Berkouwer, *Man*, 74–81.
81. Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.93.6
82. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 75.
83. See Berkouwer, *Man*, 74–75.
84. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 96.
85. Hall, *Imaging God*, 90.
86. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 97.
87. Hall, *Imaging God*, 90.

particularly, the body has, at times, been viewed with about as much respect as the cardboard packaging of cheap takeaway.

The relational camp fares no better. By appealing to the inclination toward relationality within the human being as the definitive feature of the image of God, the relational camp appeals to another non-physical attribute of human existence. At its extremes, this approach de-substanizes the human being so that it is defined by the vague connections between beings who themselves are similarly defined. This construction of reality has come under severe criticism by those who question the contemporary relational understandings of personhood.[88]

4) Against creation. It is not only the human body that suffers at the hands of such a non-holistic dichotomization, but all of physical creation is viewed as secondary to the human soul. The physical attributes of human existence are, as Hall laments, the tangible link between human essence and the rest of creation which some relational thinkers refer to as "the brutes."[89] Thus, some theologians claim that it is the *imago Dei* that "separates [the human being] from the vulgar herd."[90] White has sharply criticised Christianity (particularly Western Christianity in the post-scientific revolution era) on this point: "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen . . . [it] not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[91] Physical creation becomes nothing more than a servant to the non-physical *imago Dei*.

Although Hall may protest,[92] it can be argued that both relational and substantive theologians' appeals to the non-physical as the seat of the *imago Dei* demonstrate a polemic against nature. Even Hall has to admit that the relational character of the human

88. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood*; Hill, "Divine Persons," 148–60; Harris, "Should We Say That Personhood Is Relational," 214–34; Kelsey, "The Human Creature," 137.

89. Hall, *Imaging God*, 90.

90. So Calvin, quoted in Hall, *Imaging God*, 103.

91. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," 1205.

92. Hall, *Imaging God*, 106–7.

being bestows upon them the "special" status and "specific function" as "steward[s]" of the created order.[93]

5) A vestigium Dei. As theologians attempt to elevate the non-physical aspects of the human being to such lofty heights, and in so doing distinguish the human being from the rest of creation, they create—in the human being—a *vestigium Dei*. Barth (a strong proponent of the relational *imago Dei*), raises this as a major dispute against use of the *analogia entis*. His argument is as follows: By seeking knowledge of the human being itself, one could expound on the doctrine of God out of the created order—interpreted in its own light by the created mind—without the need for revelation or the intricate workings of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the created mind need only look to itself to come to an independent understanding of the divine essence.[94]

This offers the human being an "additional 'light' of natural reason"[95] apart from the light of revelation. The questions, however, are: Which light—revelation or natural reason—is true and primary? Is the biblical doctrine simply the confirmation of the knowledge of God, which can be gleaned independently in creation? If so, why rely on revelation at all? The result of such a *vestigium Dei* is the elevation of the human principle at the expense of revelation and the Holy Spirit.

While Barth may attempt to lay this charge against the use of the *analogia entis*, the consequence of his use of the *analogia relationis* is very similar.[96] According to Barth, human beings image God as they analogously imitate the relationality of the three counterparts of the Trinity. They do this by engaging in responsible counter-relationality with each other, epitomised by

93. Such is the central theme of Hall's work. See especially Hall, *Imaging God*, 106–8.

94. Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 125.

95. Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 125.

96. Kelsey has demonstrated that Barth's relationality as it pertains to the bisexuality of humanity is, in some respects, structuralist and in this sense establishes human beings as a *vestigium Dei*. See Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:927.

the relationship between male and female.[97] Kelsey summarises this as follows:

> [Barth's] focus on human bisexuality can be read as a focus on a relational feature of human life that is one heuristically useful analogue (possibly one of many) for the I-thou relationality of covenant fellowship between God and humankind.[98]

If this is the case, then is it not possible to look to the relationships that exists among humans (most especially between men and women), and gain knowledge of the interior life of the Trinity? As a relational community, is humanity not a *vestigium Dei*?

One Question, One Answer

Why is it that these two positions, approaching the topic of the *imago Dei* from different "mindsets,"[99] both develop conceptual constructions that are open to similar criticism? Is it possible that these two positions are not as different as they claim to be?

If we look closely at the underlying structures of these positions, it becomes apparent that their respective approaches are akin. In their attempt to answer the primary question: "What is the *imago Dei*?" both substantive and relational thinkers seek an answer that is shaped by (a) a limited set of features (rationality or relationality), (b) rooted in the human being (as part of their essence or their inclination toward relationality), and (c) sets the human being apart from the rest of creation. This is partly what David Clough calls "not-animal" methodologies.[100] To achieve an answer of this shape, both camps pose a secondary question that is similarly shaped: "What single feature in the human being

97. Barth, *CD* III/1:186. See also Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 100–103.
98. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:927.
99. Hall, *Imaging God*, 98.
100. Clough's argument is that such methodologies invariably fail to consider the context of humanity as an animal creature and in so doing elevate certain attributes at the expense of others. The consequence is the marginalisation of those humans who do not exhibit these features, and at the same time this methodology enables human beings to exploit seemingly lesser creatures. See Clough, "Not a Not-Animal," 4–5.

sets humanity apart from the rest of creation?" This "shaping" forces both views to seek an answer that inevitably leads to the appeal for a non-physical property that sets humanity apart from the rest of physical creation.

It may be argued that the instinctive desire to elevate the human being above the "brutes" of creation has led to this non-physical dichotomy. According to Hall, it can be shown that "the whole enterprise of defining the *imago Dei* in our Christian conventions centers on the apparent need to show that human beings are different from all other creatures."[101] The result of this desire is the unhealthy emphasis of the non-physical. Take for example Baker's approach:

> The view that identifies the image as an internal quality, such as psychological make-up, reason, some spiritual quality, personality, or moral awareness has prevailed for most of Christian history . . . since the thing that makes humanity truly unique and different from the animal realm—and Genesis 1 and 2 seem to be stressing this point—is its spiritual, rational, and moral capability, the view that equates the image of God with the inner quality of humanity is most likely.[102]

The elevation of the non-physical leads to a range of dichotomisations rooted in the construction of a categorical hierarchy of being. That which is non-physical is considered categorically a better way of being than that which is physical. Human experience is constructed as a contradistinction, set against itself and nature. It is set against itself on two accounts. First, the human being is dichotomized into the non-physical (soul) and physical (body). Humanity becomes a self-opposing creature; one part of the human being has unqualified dignity while the quotidian body is debased. The spirit becomes all that is worth preserving while the body is seen as the servant of the spirit, to be used and abused as the spirit sees fit. Church history has shown the error of this thinking.

Second, as we have shown above, the human community is dichotomised into those who image God and those who do not.

101. Hall, *Imaging God*, 90.
102. Baker, *In the Image of God*, 36–38.

The few human beings who are able to display or develop, to a greater or lesser extent, the non-physical attributes associated with each camp (rationality or relationality) image God to a greater or lesser extent. Individual human beings may thus be placed on a spectrum. At one end, the image of God is fully developed and at the other end they fail to develop either the substantive attributes or the required relationality to have any trace of the *imago Dei*. Most human beings find themselves somewhere along this spectrum. This is problematic on a number of grounds, not least of which is the question of human unqualified dignity and value.[103]

At the same time, the human being is set against the rest of quotidian creation. Being fundamentally non-physical in its true essence, humanity cannot be on par with the physical creation into which it is placed. The human being becomes the *dominus* of creation. Even in Hall's attempted ecologically friendly construction, the created order needs a steward. While at first glance the move away from "dominion" to "stewardship" in recent theology appears to nuance theology in eco-friendly ways, on closer inspection it soon becomes apparent that creation is no less debased. It is subjected to the whims of its human regent, particularly those who image God. It cannot look after itself. Like a helpless child, creation needs the assistance of a wiser parent who knows what is best for it.

With such lofty elevations for the privileged and lucky few who are able to image God, comes the inevitable creation of the human being (or at least parts of the human being) as a *vestigium Dei*. Looking to these few human beings who are able (in themselves) to image God, provides a second route apart from revelation into the inner nature of the Godhead.

When all this is considered, is it fair to say that the substantive-relational debate presents us with a viable choice? Is it not, on closer inspection, a counterfeit choice? Are we not presented

103. This is Kelsey's explicit criticism of Grenz's eschatological construction but it applies equally to McFarland's position. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:901–4.

with the same approach wrapped up in different theological garb?

A Possible Way Forward

The above discussion serves to demonstrate that the approach to finding a limited set of characteristics—intrinsic to the human being—which definitely separates humanity from the rest of creation has been fraught with difficulties. Substantive, relational, even functional propositions are invariably open to limitations. These limitations can have serious consequences; often excluding entire portions of humanity from inclusion into the category of *imago Dei* and consequently questioning their value.

Recognizing these limitations within different camps, there are those who attempt to counter the unfortunate consequences of one camp by arguing for a hybridized solution.[104] Doner, for example, attempts to join the substantive and relational views together by claiming that the *imago Dei* ought "to be viewed partly as original endowment, partly as destination."[105] However, he goes on to say that "capacities are not God's actual image, but merely its possibility."[106] In like fashion, Bridger (who is very relational in his thinking) claims that while the relational understanding of the image of God should be primary, the substantive understanding can be linked to this "provided that the language of attributes is cast within a relational framework."[107] Yet Marshall claims that Bridger has the balance wrong. According to Marshall, it seems "the fact that humanity has a nature which is capable of relationships [is] much more important."[108]

Hall, on the other hand, claims that it is impossible to have an act of will (vital to relationship) without some cognition.[109] He states that "there are obvious points of overlap between the two

104. Toren is one such example: Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 113–17.
105. Cited in Grenz, *The Social God*, 181.
106. Cited in Grenz, *The Social God*, 181.
107. Marshall, "Being Human," 54.
108. Marshall, "Being Human," 54.
109. Hall, *Imaging God*, 94.

conceptions of the *imago*" but immediately goes on to say that, in his opinion, "[the two views] are so fundamentally different that communication between theological schools influenced by them becomes virtually impossible."[110]

These hybridized arguments are very much in vogue. A recent work by Visala attempts to defend the substantive position in light of recent scientific advances, such as those made in evolutionary theory. He attempts to counter some of the challenges alluded to above. In the process, Visala argues for a modified substantive position that incorporates relational features such as the importance of relationality and the developmental aspect of human beings. Nevertheless, in his appeal to a substantively conceived soul—perceived here as the non-physical seat of mental capacities which is physically dependent—he relies on a limited set of distinctive features distilled from the human being as a whole, thus distinguishing humans from the rest of creation. As such he too makes use of negative reductionism and ultimately firmly establishes himself in one camp: the substantive.[111]

When all is considered, it is no wonder some have questioned the value of the *imago Dei* altogether. Fergusson, for example, has highlighted the issues with both the substantive and relational categories. As a consequence, he argues, "What the *imago* concept does not enable is some shortcut to identifying a single property or function that differentiates us from the other animals and which may be considered godlike in some privileged sense."[112] If we want "to understand its meaning" we must focus on "a more holistic description that includes functional, relational, and practical elements."[113]

While at first appearing to support a hybridised solution, Fergusson is wary of "overloading"[114] the image of God which might struggle under the theological weight it has traditionally carried. His ultimate conclusion is that the image of God

110. Hall, *Imaging God*, 105.
111. Visala, "Imago Dei, Dualism, and Evolution," 101–20.
112. Fergusson, "Humans Created According to the Imago Dei," 449.
113. Fergusson, "Humans Created According to the Imago Dei," 440.
114. Fergusson, "Humans Created According to the Imago Dei," 449.

designates the "name" of the human being rather than some innate quality. *Imago Dei* "names us as God's creatures," and does so "as a signifier of the human condition before God rather than the specification of some elusive ontological or ethical ingredient."[115] The result of Fergusson's analysis is his undertaking of "some repair work,"[116] patching up the meaning of the *imago Dei* so that it ultimately loses its theological significance.

Taking up Ferguson's call to diminish—or even Cunningham's argument that we dismiss—the *imago Dei*,[117] is simply not an option. While recognizing the problems associated with so many competing views, both Jews and Christians have long held to the central role of this doctrine. That human beings are made in God's image speaks to a fundamental tenant of these religions. "Indeed," argues Moritz, "one could hardly overstate the unanimity of the entire Christian theological tradition when it comes to this point."[118] We simply cannot dismiss this doctrine. A satisfactory answer to the questions surrounding the image of God must be found.

To do this we need to re-evaluate, not only our answers, but the questions themselves and consequently, our fundamental approach to human uniqueness. This requires us to challenge the underlying premise: that there is a universal, fundamental, inherent set of characteristics that definitively distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation. It is doubtful that such a universal foundation is either identifiable or desirable. When one considers the myriad interpretive interests[119]—human uniqueness, fidelity to the biblical witness, the modern secular interpretation of humanity, recent scientific discoveries, moral and ethical dilemmas etc.—it is most likely that numerous answers are required, even if these appear, *prima facia,* contradictory.

We need to move away from foundational, negative reductionist methodologies. That is to say: we should not think of the

115. Fergusson, "Humans Created According to the Imago Dei," 451–52.

116. Fergusson, "Humans Created According to the Imago Dei," 451.

117. So Cunningham, quoted in Moritz, "Evolution," 319. Cf. Moritz, "Does Jesus Save the Neanderthals?" 55–57.

118. Moritz, "Evolution," 318.

119. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:133–35.

imago Dei rooted in a pre-existing universally applicable distinguishing foundation. Reductive doctrinal methodologies seek a limited, unshakable, universal foundation upon which to build a doctrine. According to this methodology, the veracity of a doctrine is a measure of its adherence to this foundation. For example, in substantive "rational animal" approaches, the fundamental distinctive nature of humanity is built on a specific conception of God as a rational being. God is the paradigmatic "rational being" upon which all other rationality is predictably predicated. In this construction, to be God's image, is to possess a version of rationality that is on some level reflective of the accepted divine rationality.

Yet, this approach is highly questionable. We have already questioned the reductive process itself, demonstrating the impossibility of establishing a single, universally present characteristic (in this case, rationality) of *homo Sapiens*. However, importantly, the rationality (foundational characteristic) implied by such an approach is, more often than not, a rationality understood in terms of Classical Western human rationality—epitomized by such philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. In recent years—with the much-needed rise of alternate, non-western theological traditions—the very notion of a single universally applicable rationality has been challenged.[120] We now know of, and respect, contextual/alternate approaches to rational discourse. Thus, the very foundational claim to the "rational animal" argument—divine rationality—is dictated by the interpretive aims of diverse theologians. There is no single, universally accepted, definition of divine rationality. Consequently, there is no universally accepted understanding of what it means to be a "rational animal" that reflects divine rationality.

Similar arguments can be used to question the universality of other approaches which are based on reductivist, foundational methodologies. This includes relational approaches as well as functional approaches. Wherever our substance/relationality/function is analogically defined by a specific understanding of divine substance/relationality/function its universal application is

120. Hall, *Imaging God*, 92.

open to serious question. It is impossible to identify and define a single divine foundation upon which all of humanity can be universally predicated. The reason for this is twofold: not only can we never fully understand the divine nature, but our own cultural biases and interpretive interests color our understanding of any divine foundation and, subsequently, our understanding of humanity.

If we are to progress in this debate without falling prey to the same traps of past approaches, we need to take a different path. We need to get off the tracks of negative foundational reductivism and seek alternate methodologies that open the debate in non-contrastive ways.

An Anti-Foundationalist Approach

It is more than likely that there are many alternate paths available to us. However, as way of example, let us consider an anti-foundationalist methodology. Anti-foundationalism is widespread throughout post-modern/post-secular society. In theological traditions this is most exemplified in postliberal theology and it is here that we may find a basis—one of many—upon which multiple answers to the questions surrounding the *imago Dei* may be built.[121] The astute reader, familiar with post-modernism, will invariably balk at a post-modern approach to such an important Christian doctrine. After all, did we not just refer to the "unanimity of the entire Christian theological tradition" on the centrality of the *imago Dei*? The only thing unanimous about post-modernists is their aversion to unanimity. Surely postliberal theology cannot provide a way out of the trenches of the substantive-relational debate?

It is true that postliberal theology is actively averse to foundational, universal, truth claims. Consequently, there are those who arduously critique it for its relativistic epistemology. Henry, for example, speaking specifically about Kelsey's postliberal approach, contends:

121. For more on post-liberalism see Lindbeck, "Toward a Postliberal Theology," 153–56; Michener, *Postliberal Theology*.

> The epistemological relativity underlying this notion not only dissolves any fixed meaning for Kelsey's own proposals about "normativity," "authority" and "scripture," but also whatever fixed meaning he would attach to meaning itself under any and all circumstances. It therefore reduces theology to an intricate exercise in futility and nonsense . . . [122]

At first one has sympathy with Henry's critique. It seems self-evident that the divine reality is the foundation upon which all subsequent reality is built. Accordingly, if God is the absolute rational/relational being, and human beings (as *imago Dei*) reflect this in some way, then the challenge is not in the foundational claim itself but in our methodological approach to this foundation: one of our conceptions (substantive, relational, functional) must be more accurate than the rest. We simply need to identify which one.

I would argue, however, that Henry's critique is based on a misunderstanding of how postliberal theology understands not only the role of truth, but also its location. Let me expand.

Postliberal theologians actively deny that their approach is relativistic. Lindbeck, for example, in his discussion on the distinction between intrasystematic and ontological truth demonstrates that the postliberal does not deny the existence of truth or of a universal foundation; they simply question its location.[123] Within postliberalism, truth is located in the lived experience of the Christian community (primary theology) as they engage with God, each other and their contexts. In the course of this engagement, questions arise as to the accuracy and veracity of the community's experience and practice. These questions are subsequently debated in secondary theological discussions.[124] Whatever objective reality might exist, it is one that is experienced or practiced by the Christian community, not something

122. Henry, "Theology and Biblical Authority," 323. Moor and Phillips lay a similar claim against Lindbeck: Moor, *Realism and Christian Faith*, 95; Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, 202–5, 214.

123. Lindbeck, "The Search for Habitable Texts," 154.

124. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 48; Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 12–45 (chapter 1b of *Eccentric Existence*); Lindbeck, "Toward a Postliberal Theology," 84.

debated in academic lecture halls. In a very real sense, truth is not a foundational claim, it is the lived experience of Jesus Christ. Hence Jesus' statement 'I am the truth and the life' (John 14:6).

Critical discussions on the *imago Dei*, or more appropriately, critical reflections on the adequacy and appropriateness of the community's response to its experience of the *imago Dei*, are discussions in secondary theology. Within this context the interpretive aims of the theological dialogue partners set the paradigm within which answers to the questions surrounding the image of God may be proposed. Here, the veracity of a doctrine is not a measure of its congruence to an objective external rule. Rather, it is a measure of its suitability and function within a particular second-order discussion.[125]

The distinction between first and second order theology can help to move doctrines of the *imago Dei* away from protracted contrastive propositions. Doctrines are not definitions to which a proposition either does or does not adhere. A doctrine is a description—one of many—that describes a community's experience and response to ultimate reality.[126]

From this vantage point, the theologian may not only challenge and change the answers given by a doctrine, but the questions themselves. For example, the question: "What is the *imago Dei*?" may be shaped by the particular interpretive aims of a theologian. If a theologian is interested in the community's experience of (and response to) the manner God interacts with human beings as unique creatures, she may ask the question: "what limited set of intrinsic characteristics distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation?" In this context, answers may be given in the form of descriptions of human being as the image of God that are similar to substantive positions. She may reference a range of characteristics such as rationality, morality, tool making, bipedalism, etc.

On the other hand, if a theologian is interested in the community's experience of (and response to) the manner God relates to

125. For more see Moor, *Realism and Christian Faith*, 94–98.
126. Moor, *Realism and Christian Faith*, 94–98.

humanity, she may pose the question: "What does the *imago Dei* tell us about human-divine relationality?" She may then propose descriptions of human beings as the image of God that are similar to relational positions. It is not that one of these models is accurate and the other less so. Rather, the veracity of each description is a measure of their suitability to the particular interpretive aim of the specific secondary theological discussion.

Taking such an approach not only avoids the conflict between apparent contrastive positions which we have alluded to above, but it makes possible truly constructive discussions between dialogue partners. Space prohibits us from delving into an in-depth discussion on a practical example. However, a brief case study may serve to make the point. Let us take Grenz's 2001 work *The Social God and the Relational Self*. Grenz's work is a prime example of a typical approach to the *imago Dei*: first discussing the substantive-relational approaches, then proposing an alternative approach and finally moving on to its practical implications.[127] Let us trace this route very briefly.

Having given an "archaeology of the self,"[128] in Part One, Grenz proceeds in Part Two to discuss a social trinitarian perspective of the *imago Dei*. In Chapter 4 he gives an in-depth discussion of the substantive-relational debate, and contrasts this with an alternate view: that of the *imago Dei* as a goal to which human beings are destined. Beginning in Chapter 5, Grenz uses this third approach as a springboard for the rest of his discussions which focus on a biblically informed interpretation of the doctrine of the social Trinity. His exegesis concludes that Christ is the glorious image of God into which human beings are designed to be transformed. The *imago Dei* speaks to our eschatological hope of a new humanity that, through Jesus Christ, reflects the relationality epitomized in the doctrine of the social Trinity. In this way, the *imago Dei* is not a characteristic of the human being, but an ongoing task (Chapter 6). In Part Three, Grenz discusses the application of his theory, in particular as it relates to the human desire for wholeness—the desire to be in

127. Consider, for example Hall, *Imaging God*, 89–108.
128. Grenz, *The Social God*, 58–97 (chapter 2 of *The Social God*).

relation to others (epitomized in human sexuality)—and, consequently, the reconstruction of the self in community. A reconstruction that is only fully complete in the eschatological community.[129]

Grenz contrasts his position with substantive positions and seeks to go beyond relational thinkers to incorporate a goal-oriented interpretation of the *imago Dei*. However, it is possible to avoid such a contradistinctive approach between substantive, relational, and goal-oriented positions by using the postliberal methodology proposed in this paper. In order to achieve this, we need to turn Grenz's construction somewhat on its head. By focusing first on the human experience of community (epitomised by human sexuality), one can draw out our experience of wholeness in community. That is to say; when humans are with others, especially in human sexuality, we experience a wholeness of being that points to our final destiny: non-subversive incorporation into the divine community. This is our lived experience and is particularly vivid in human sexuality. It is also epitomised in our experience of being incorporated "in Christ" (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:17 etc.), for example at Christian baptism (where we take part vicariously in Christ's death, burial and resurrection) or in the Eucharist (where we bring Christ into our very being, symbolized by the eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood).

In these lived practices, the Christian briefly experiences the reality of being transformed into the image of the triune God. Such glimpses point to a fuller, more permanent transformation to be experienced at the eschaton. They consequently raise questions about their relation to the biblical witness, and the suitability of our responses. These questions are taken up by secondary theology's discussions on the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Here the interpretive aims of this particular secondary theology (to reflect on the experience of wholeness in community through baptism/communion/human sexuality in light of the *imago Dei*) drive the discussion and ultimately the final descriptive doctrine.

129. Grenz is not alone in proposing an eschatologically conceived *imago Dei*. See Berkouwer, *Man*, 101–17.

As secondary theology seeks to critically reflect on this primary theological experience of wholeness, it produces a range of descriptive doctrines. One such description is of the *imago Dei* as the eschatological reality of being incorporated into the divine community. That is to say, our ultimate destiny is to reflect the social trinity.

We need not interpret this goal-oriented, eschatological construction of the *imago Dei* as diametrically opposed to either substantive or relational constructions. The image of God does not speak to one reality, or to a single aspect of human experience. We are not forced into taking one position over another. Precisely because we are made in God's image, we have myriad experiences of God. These experiences coexist alongside each other and are the basis for multiple descriptions of human beings as the images of God. As the Christian community continues to experience God in new and unique ways, it falls to secondary theologians to continue to provide new and unique descriptions of humanity as God's image.

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