

In His Image: Relational God, Relational Humanity

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Abstract

One of the classic tools in Christian theological anthropology for dealing with the intricacies of human identity is the Imago Dei concept. Approaching the concept holistically, by exploring the structural, behavioral, teleological, communal, and hospitality perspectives, this article asserts that at the very core of Imago Dei is a relational design that the Creator God had in mind for humanity – his opera Magna. Theological insights drawn from the relational doctrine of Trinity, as revealed in the comprehension of J. Moltmann, W. Pannenberg, J. Zizioulas, M. Volf, and D. Augustine, are applied to the anthropological dimension of existence, unveiling what it means to be a human being made in the image of God. In the end, Imago Dei is perceived to have not only a developmental but also a fundamentally transformative function.

Keywords: Imago Dei, Trinity, resemblance, actualization, community, relationship, development, ontological transformation

Introduction

The contemporary post-postmodern pluralistic contexts nurture an anxious, fragile individual. This individual lives and acts in an amalgam of value-relativization were arbitrarily chosen, and self-fulfilling preferences are definitive for one's ethics, morality, and selfhood, entangled in a continuous process of becoming. It is not surprising that such a self-referential person has laid the foundation for the emergence of an egocentric sense of self, that has a fragmented personal identity.

Moreover, the instability of the self is aggravated by the new technologies and the multiplicity of contradictory virtual options, between which the individual swings to define oneself and overcome isolation (Abramson 2015). By doing so, the self becomes even more confused and fluid (Grenz 2001, 133–137), easily deceived, with as many identities as the referential individuals or groups to which one relates. An insightful assertion given by the theologian and philosopher Colin Gunton (1993, 118) points out the final dissipation of such an oscillating, self-centered, and highly imaginative self: “When individual self-contemplation becomes the basis of self, rather than the *relation* to the *divine and human others*, on which our reality depends, the self begins to disappear.”

Warning against the dangers of individualism, isolation, deceit by surrogate relationships, and final self-dissipation, numerous voices of social scientists, philosophers, and theologians alike have called for reconsideration of the critical role the community of (bodily vs. virtual) others plays in the process of the development of the human being. To this end, Christian scholars have particularly signaled that without a clear biblical – doctrinal, practical, and teleological balance, and a sustainable community of worship and devotion, the post-postmodern self is doomed to perpetual existential frustration. To (re)state the origins and purpose of the human being, they have appealed to the classic concept of *Imago Dei*, considered to be one of the most relevant tools for existentially anchoring one’s selfhood and identity in the relational certainty of the Trinitarian Judeo-Christian God.

When referring to the concept of *Imago Dei*, biblical scholars highlight that besides the *structural* approach to understanding the human being, Christian tradition also acknowledges the *relational* approach. Although the relevance of both perspectives is undeniable, the primacy of regarding the human being as ontologically relational offers a solid starting point for reassembling the scattered pieces of the contemporary self and reconnecting it to its intrinsic, divinely given origins. According to the relational approach, the comprehension of the human person is to be drawn from the inherently relational and dynamic Trinitarian God, whose divine *hypostases* gain their identity through inter-relationality. By anchoring the human self and identity in Trinitarian theology, this paper will present the understanding of *Imago Dei* in terms of social reality (Grenz 2001, 15), disclosing what it means to be created as a human being that exists and develops in the image of God.

Although the doctrine of the Trinity has its roots in the patristic era, many commentators ascribe the contemporary reawakening of interest in Trinitarian theology to Karl Barth (Grenz 2001, 33, 37). As a counter-reaction to Barth’s linking of the God’s personhood to a divine substance (*ousia*) rather than to divine persons (*hypostases*) (Barth 1957, 297), several theologians have marked the development of theological thought with a relational understanding of the Trin-

ity. Nonetheless, it was the revival of the patristic social model of the Trinity that stirred up the rethinking of the idea of divine persons. This model conceived the Trinity, in Cornelius Plantinga's words, as subsisting of three "distinct centers of love, will, knowledge and purposeful action" (Grenz 2001, 4; Plantinga 1986) that are in a relationship, similar to how three human beings relate. Drawing on this conception, the term person has started to be conceived as being connected to the community of others, within which selfhood and identity are shaped, rather than being an entity that springs up in the vagueness of isolation. With this specific connotation, the term has been applied to the understanding of the Trinity.

1. Person, Self, and Soul

Before proceeding with the presentation of the accounts of the Trinity concept, let's just briefly turn towards another facet of the problem, namely, the rapport between *selfhood* and *soul*. According to many theologians, the self is comprised of the soul. Yet, this issue that has been an element of discussion for many centuries (Balswick, King, and Reimer 2005, 22–24) has resulted in various positions regarding the problem. Among them, there is a *radical dualism* that understands human beings as made of body and soul and defines the soul as a nonmaterial entity, separated from the body. Similarly, *holistic dualism* sees the person as a composite of body and soul, but the two elements are perceived as functioning unitarily. *Reductive materialism* understands the person as a physical organism exclusively, whose higher cognitive, emotional, moral, and religious experiences can be reduced to physical functions. There is, however, another position that comprehends the human person as *soulish*. In this last view, named *nonreductive physicalism*, a human being is a soul that, as a whole physical, personal and spiritual being, is created to be in relationship with God and with the other. This concept perceives the soul as emerging, being formed, and developing in relationships.

Since each human being exists as an "embodied personal being" (Anderson 1992, 72) the person represents the *whole physical, personal and spiritual being* that is created in relationship, and to be in relationship with fellow humans and with God.

2. *Imago Dei* – "Encounter in Relationship," "Differentiation in Unity," and "Being in Communion"

Following in the steps of Eastern Fathers' understanding of the primacy of the Trinitarian persons (*hypostases*) in Godhood, as opposed to the Catholic priority given to divine essence (*ousia*) from which the three persons originate (Papan-

ikolau 2003, 360–361), Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg are recognized as the pioneers of the modern concept of the Trinitarian *relational unity*. To underline the primacy of the divine Threeness within Godhood, Moltmann looks at the divine work (divine activity) of each Trinitarian person in the history of salvation that culminates with the *cross event* (Moltmann 1993). He explains how the basis of the Trinity is found in the “separation-in-unity” that Godhood experienced at the cross. It was in the suffering of the forsaken Son, Moltmann states, that the Father experienced the pain of being separated from the Son, while in the same event both “entered into new unity in the Spirit” (Moltmann 1993, 42–43). Also, at the cross, God concomitantly provided salvation for humankind, and “constituted” himself as the Triune One. Consequently, Moltmann’s God is both a participative and a self-defining, differentiating God, whose “immutability” seems to include God being affected by the world, and particularly by the humankind which he saves.

To affirm that Father, Son, and Spirit exist as three distinct Persons within Godhood, Moltmann goes a step further. He reasserts the patristic belief that the Three possess one divine nature, but each one’s distinct personal specificity is defined while encountering the other two in a relationship. In Moltmann’s view, to be a person signifies existing in a relationship with the other (1981). However, the three persons of Godhood are not separated, but form the unity of one God through participating in and “intimately indwelling” one another, by the virtue of eternal love. In this mutual interrelationship, each person gives and receives the fullness of life and glory from the other one, thus each one perceiving oneself in the encounter with one another. This is the unity of “fellowship, equality and interdependence” (Grenz 2001, 44, 45) of the Trinitarian God into which humanity and the entire creation are called to participate, through a “cosmic *perichoresis*.”

The idea of reciprocal relational trinitarianism was further developed by Wolfhart Pannenberg (1977, 181–183, 340). For Pannenberg, the *source of the personhood* is in the very *essence* of God, since the divine essence is relational. Father, Son, and Spirit relate to each other through self-differentiation while continuously and mutually giving oneself to the other. In Pannenberg’s understanding, self-differentiation in Godhood starts from Jesus’ relationship to the Father and the Spirit, for Jesus is God’s clearest self-revelation. In other words, the identity of the three divine persons is most clearly seen in the way they relate to each other in the revelation event of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Moreover, the self-differentiation of the Father is fundamentally “dependent to the other,”¹ because the ministering of the Son and the Spirit are facilitating the coming of the Kingdom of the Father in the world. The same inter-dependency is true for the Son and the Spirit concerning the other two persons of Godhood. According to Pannenberg,

1 Term “dependence” in this paper should be perceived as interconnection, not as addiction.

then, *differentiation in a dependent unity* is what finally sustains the formation of the personal identity of the Trinitarian God (Grenz 2001, 48).

For John Zizioulas (1985) the *source of the personhood* is in the *communion*. Under the beliefs of the Greek Fathers, Zizioulas asserts that the mystery of the Church, the ecclesial being that exists as a community, is deeply connected to the very being of God. As such, God cannot be conceived outside of the relational language of communion. Therefore, God is the communion of Three persons, which is the consequence of the Father's freely willing to initiate this communion by "begetting the Son and bringing forth the Spirit" (Grenz 2001, 48).

Zizioulas perceives personhood (*hypostasis*) as characterized by *freedom* and intentional *movement towards communion*. As such, personhood shares a dual desire to transcend one's boundaries in the direction of moving towards communion, and, at the same time, to remain an integrated unity. While Zizioulas believes that "there is no true being without communion" (Grenz 2001, 52–53), he also acknowledges that there is no true communion if it does not originate from a free person and if it doesn't enhance the full expression of each person. It is only in communion that the uniqueness and indispensability of each person are established, as a part of that relational existence.

3. In His Image

What then does it mean to be created according to the image or in the likeness of God? One of the most cited texts that speak about the image of God as composing the essential humanity is Genesis 1:26-27:

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

Several things emerge from this text. First of all, it can be observed that the image of God imprinted in the human beings at the creation was intended to be a reflection of the Creator God (Erickson 1998, 47–72). While the meaning of the *tzelem (image)* generally refers to a "duplicate that resembles the original," the word *demuth (likeness)* has the meaning of "appearance," "similarity" and "analogy," or even "the copy" of the original (von Rad 1972, 57–58). God's statement "*let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness*" (Gen 1:26) is placed in the context of the divine intention that humanity might be "the means through which he will manifest his presence in creation," by pouring in them his Holy

Spirit (Cortez 2016, 392).² It also points to the deliberately taken initiative of a sovereign divine will and intelligent ability of God to imagine and mold the human being, primarily *referring to his existence*. Consequently, the Creator intended to endow human beings with abilities like his own, so the *structural aspects of the personality* such as free will, reason, emotions, imagination, behavior, etc., would become intrinsic dimensions of God's image in humanity which, *animated by the Holy Spirit, would mediate his divine presence*.

Second, the image of the Creator is seen in the human bearer not only *structurally*, but also *behaviorally*. In this context, it presupposes a mandate, a duty – a responsibility given to Adam to manage and administer the whole creation (“let him have dominion... over the whole earth,” Gen 1:26). Moreover, God crowns the human being with dignity and honor when he invites Adam to not only supervise and govern his opera, but to also participate in its completion (“The Lord God made... all the beasts of the field and brought all the birds of the air to man to see what he would call them” (Gen 2:19). It was not only *stewardship* and *responsibility*, but also *freedom and creativity* which was imparted to humanity, and it was met with God's satisfaction and contentment – “God saw that they were good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

However, the divine creative action is much more than the endowment of man with structural and behavioral capacities, it is, above everything else, *ontologically relational*. Tracing the sculptural trajectory of the human being from the divine plurality (“in *Our* image”) towards the dual existence of humanity (“male and female he created them,” Gen 1:27), the divine intention concerning the human race reveals a relational design, whose purpose is not only to reflect the relations within Trinity in human interpersonal relationships but first of all, to facilitate human's relationship with God Himself. And, although each individual has the freedom to choose to be responsible or irresponsible towards God, he cannot, under any circumstances, dissolve the tie of connectedness with God, ontologically engraved in his being. By creating the human person as a relational being, God called humanity to *relational personhood*, that would freely and willingly relate to his Creator in thankfulness and love because it resembles God and belongs to the Creator (McFadyen 1990, 21–22).

2 A theological perspective on interpreting *Imago Dei*, even if only implicit here, is that of the “royal representative.” This perspective explains the meaning of the image and likeness in the light of the broader context of the ancient Babylonian and Egyptian cultures which regarded their kings and Pharaohs as god's representatives on earth, a view considered relevant for interpreting the Genesis 1 and conveying the meaning that human beings bear the royal status and divine representative function (McDowell 2016, 34). However, the biblical meaning of the *Imago Dei* cannot be separated from Yahweh's Spirit creative presence that animates human beings and mediates God's presence through them, because they are the bearers of the image of God. In this sense, *Imago Dei* can be also understood as a pneumatological concept (Cortez 2016, 393–394).

This being said, the subsequent paragraphs will proceed to closer clarify how the *relational model of Trinity*, as revealed above in the comprehension of J. Moltmann, W. Pannenberg, and J. Zizioulas, applies to the anthropological dimension of existence. In other words, it will unveil how does it look like to be a personal, embodied, social human being created in the image of a relational God.

The relational doctrine of the Trinity discloses a Trinitarian God that exists as a *relational unity of three divine persons*: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three persons of Godhood have one divine nature but exist as three distinct, particular persons. The specificities of each Trinitarian person, i.e., each one's identity are defined in the mutual relationships with one another. The identity of the Triune divine being is molded by "*separation in unity*," "*self-differentiation in co-dependence*," and "*communion*" with one another. Unity between the three persons in Godhood is acquired through the "intimate indwelling" of each one into the other (*perichoresis*) by the virtue of mutual, self-giving love. The mutual "intimate indwelling" means interdependence and reciprocity, where, by making space in oneself for the other, the uniqueness of each person is preserved, while absorption into one another or slipping into hierarchical inequality is successfully avoided. In this unity, where each person of the Trinity contributes to the establishment, affirmation, and flourishing of the other (Volf 1996, 189), humanity is invited as a fellowship partner.

The Trinitarian pattern of relationship reveals that being a human being created in the image of God means living as a unique individual in a relationship with others. It proposes mutuality, interdependence, and self-giving love as a model for the bearers of the divine image. The kind of relationship this model acknowledges sustains the particularity of each person, realized in encountering the other (human fellow and God) in a relationship, through identification with the other by mutual participation, self-differentiation, and self-definition. This approach affirms the critical role the community of others plays in the process of developing of human being's identity.

The relational Trinitarian pattern of mutuality is an expression of freely entering into a relationship with the other and deliberately desiring to make space in one's self for the other, out of self-giving love. This is why the pattern does not assume intrusion, the replacement of the other's self with one's own, or losing one's self in the other. On the contrary, by mutually encountering the other, the self is enabled to most fully know oneself, and to see "who and what he is in the other" (Anderson 1992, 74) so that as one faces his/her relational counterpart, the self is always enhanced and never lost. And because simultaneously giving and receiving while mutually indwelling each other, the self is at the same time *participative* and *differentiating*, and thus *self-defining*.

Moreover, the reciprocal-indwelling type of relationship assumes a dynamic and "dialogical" identity, which may be symbolically perceived as an entity that

goes and travels over time and changes as it encounters the other. Being far from an “impenetrable wall,” such self-identity is co-dependent and open in its formation because it includes both the self and the other in mutual, “interactional negotiation” of their identities (Volf 1996, 64, 108). Only in the process of dialogically facing the other, the dynamics between one’s particularity and mutual similitude can be negotiated, and such an identity is the result of “being in communion” (Volf 1996, 66).

4. *Imago Dei* – Developmental or Transformational Entity?

Another way of interpreting *Imago Dei* assumes that being created in the image of God has a teleological meaning, as it represents the *destiny* of humankind (Grenz 2001, 177–182). Rooted in Irenaeus’s perception of the *embryonic Imago Dei* (a potential for becoming) instilled in Adam at creation, this perspective describes the image of God as “the goal which lies in the eschatological future and towards which humans are directed” (Grenz 2001, 177). The basic insights provided by the teleological approach to *Imago Dei* are progressivism and self-appropriation, for it advocates that in the movement towards achieving its destiny, humanity “gradually establishes” the *Imago Dei* in itself, through a “progressive, creative realization that includes personal appropriation” to the final “morally necessary ideal” (Grenz 2001, 181). As such, *Imago Dei* is understood as a *developmental* entity.

Daniela C. Augustine (2016, 173–188), goes a step further and perceives the *teleological self-actualization* of the *Imago Dei* in the Eastern Orthodox term of *theosis*. Her perception of the *Imago Dei* acknowledges the Eastern Fathers’ distinction between the *image* and the *likeness*, according to which every human being is created in the image of God, the image one strives to actualize by attaining likeness to the Creator God. As such, the image is perceived to be “the full God-given potentiality for attaining likeness,” which is further achieved in “*theosis*, (a) culminating union with God,” the final and highest destiny of human existence (Augustine 2016, 173). The transformative spiritual journey towards the attainment of the likeness (*theosis*) is made possible by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, who transfigures the human seeker to be more Godlike, and makes him/her a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Since Christ is the visible form of the invisible God, to be more Godlike is to become Christ-like. In this sense, Daniela Augustine argues that the actualization of the *Imago Dei* is the growth in Christlikeness, and it presupposes an *ontological renewal* of the human being, a *transfiguration through sanctification* that occurs by *the work of the Spirit*.

One last intriguing aspect of *Imago Dei* that Daniela Augustine underlines, describes the growth in Christlikeness not only while seeking union with God but also in a relationship with the community of believers. She asserts that *Imago Dei* is most fully seen when seeking the face of God in the other, whereby to

welcome and include the other, Christians engage in radical and sacrificial *hospitality by self-fasting and self-sharing*, as an act of *askesis* and *kenosis* (Augustine 2016, 180–181). It is the kind of self-renunciation and welcoming openness that seems to most fully reflect the communal dimension the Creator God intended for humanity.

In conclusion, it could be stated that while perceiving the image of God from a developmental perspective does justice to the appropriation of the self in its attempt to reach the morally necessary ideal, development without transformation does not address the need for ontological renewal. Transfiguration, Godlikeness, and union with God, however, can only be achieved through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Humanity, as God's creation, is designed to fundamentally and intrinsically resemble its Creator. To be a bearer of *Imago Dei* as a personal, embodied, free, responsible, and relational human being necessitates more than a structural-behaviorist anthropological approach. It requires the Spirit's ontological renewal and sanctifying work, that in the transformational relationship of humanity with God, within the community of believers, appropriates the image of God into a resemblance to Christ, the Son of God. The eschatological appropriation of the *Imago Dei* is, therefore, the present reality of the continuously transfigured *ekklesia*, while waiting eagerly for the final, complete, and glorious union with God.

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Lidija Ušurel

Na njegovu sliku: relacijski Bog, relacijsko čovječanstvo

Sažetak

Jedno od klasičnih pomagala u kršćanskoj teološkoj antropologiji pri bavljenju složenošću ljudskog identiteta koncept je *Imago Dei*. Pristupajući konceptu holistički, istražujući strukturalne, biheviorističke, teleološke, zajedničke i gostoljubive perspektive, članak tvrdi da se u središtu koncepta *Imago Dei* nalazi relacijski dizajn koji je Bog Stvoritelj nakanio za čovječanstvo – njegova remek-djela. Teološki uvidi izvučeni iz relacijskog nauka o Trojstvu, kako ih vidimo u shvaćanju J. Moltmanna, W. Pannenberg, J. Zizioulasa, M. Volfa i D. Augustine, primjenjuju se na antropološku dimenziju postojanja, otkrivajući što znači biti ljudsko biće stvoreno na Božju sliku. Na kraju, koncept *Imago Dei* shvaća se kao nešto što nema samo razvojnu, nego također suštinski transformacijsku funkciju.