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Imago Dei: Does the Symbol Have a Future

Mary Catherine Hilbert O.P.

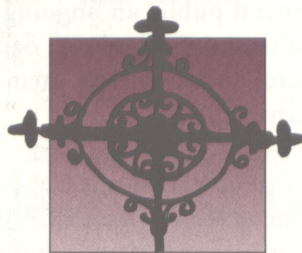
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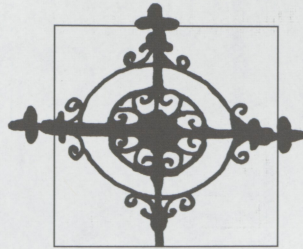
*“Imago Dei:
Does the Symbol Have a Future”*

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Imago Dei: Does the Symbol Have a Future?

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Not only the tragic events of September 11, but the rise in terrorism around the globe along with the corresponding “war on terrorism,” the escalation of violence and suicide bombings in the Middle East, U.S. proposals to reconsider the development of “limited nuclear weapons,” and the ongoing lack of attention to the consequences of our rate of consumption and lifestyle on the rest of the world and the Earth itself, have prompted me to reconsider the title for this lecture. It seems clear that the real question is not whether the religious symbol of human persons as “created in the image of God” has a future, but rather whether humankind and creation as we have known it have a future. But precisely because religious symbols form our imagination and focus our ethical vision, the future of the symbol and our own future are deeply related.

Almost four decades ago, the Second Vatican Council issued its final document, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). That document grounds both the church’s mission in the world and its social teaching in theological anthropology—an understanding of the human person as a mystery inseparable from the mystery of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. *Gaudium et Spes* begins with the church’s pledge of solidarity with the whole human family:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father’s kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history (GS, #1).¹

But three decades later, Walter Kasper remarked that in theological anthropology, as in so many other areas of theology and church life, the reception of Vatican II still lies before us. Specifically, he called for “the systematic development of a christologically grounded and defined anthropology and the fully articulated formulation of corresponding individual and social ethics” as “an urgent *desideratum*.”²

Some argue that this means that Christian anthropology should not begin (as *Gaudium et Spes* did) with the symbol of *imago Dei*, specifically with an analysis of the human situation and the challenges facing humankind today. Rather, they call for an exposition of the Christian doctrines of incarnation and trinity as determining specifically Christian views of human life. My wager tonight is that the symbol of *imago Dei* can function anew to shed fresh light on human life in solidarity with all of creation, particularly when it is interpreted with attention to the suffering and violation of that image and read through the lens of a Wisdom christology that remains grounded in the life and ministry of Jesus. Before turning to an interpretation of the symbol of *imago Dei*, I’d like to consider recent challenges to its retrieval that come from feminist and ecological perspectives. In light of those challenges, the question arises as to whether we should bother with a symbol that has proved so problematic, and if so, why. In part two, I argue that it is important to do so precisely because this religious symbol has the power to name both human persons and the Earth itself as sacred and in doing so, the symbol can function to establish greater gender justice and ecological justice. Towards that end, the final section of the lecture will propose two resources for a renewed theology of the *imago Dei* symbol: Edward Schillebeeckx’s notion of “negative contrast experience,” and the contribution of Wisdom christology as a lens through which to interpret not only humankind, but all of creation as “in the image of God.”

Ecological and Feminist Challenges to the Use of the *Imago Dei* Symbol

Questions about the wisdom of embracing the symbol of “*imago Dei*” as the starting point for theological anthropology were raised at the time of the Second Vatican Council.³ But other concerns have been raised since that time from quite different sectors, notably from ecological and feminist theologians. Whether the symbol can recover from the history of human domination it has served to foster remains to be seen, but however far we are from its realization, human solidarity is at least the expressed ideal in the conciliar document. The broader notion of humankind’s solidarity

and interdependence with the rest of creation, however, was largely overlooked in that document from the mid 1960s. Instead the text proclaims that “sacred scripture teaches that women and men were created ‘in the image of God,’ able to know and love their creator and set by him over all earthly creatures that they might rule them, and make use of them, while glorifying God” (GS #12). Stressing human effort and ingenuity, the pastoral constitution remarked that “nowadays [humanity] has extended and continues to extend its mastery over nearly all spheres of nature with the help of science and technology” (GS #33). Non-inclusive translations of the original document make the connections between androcentric and anthropocentric worldviews all the more evident: “Through his labors and his native endowments man has ceaselessly striven to better his life. Today, however, especially with the help of science and technology, he has extended his mastery over nearly the whole of nature and continues to do so” (GS, #33).⁴

Reflecting on that “sign of the times” in light of revelation, the pastoral constitution turns to the first chapter of Genesis:

Men and women were created in God’s image and were commanded to conquer the earth with all it contains and to rule the world in justice and holiness: they were to acknowledge God as maker of all things and refer themselves and the totality of creation to him, so that with all things subject to God, the divine name would be glorified through all the earth (GS #34).

There is a subsequent reminder that humanity cannot treat the rest of creation “as if it had no relation to its creator” (#36), but the anthropocentric focus of the document is clear. The proposed goal is to “make life more humane and conquer the earth for this purpose” (#38). The constitution proclaims that all of creation will share in the consummation of redemption of Jesus Christ, but once again we are reminded, that “all of creation, *which God made for humanity*, will be set free from its bondage to decay” (#39, emphasis added).

Awareness of the extent of the ecological crisis and corresponding ethical responsibility has developed significantly since that time. In 1990 Pope John Paul II’s New Year’s message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace identified the ecological crisis as a moral problem and called Christians to realize “their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator [as] an essential part of their faith.”⁵

Nevertheless, in numerous other reflections on Genesis 1, he continues to affirm that

What makes man like God is the fact that—unlike the whole world of other living creatures, including those endowed with senses (*animalia*)—man is also a rational being (*animalia rationale*). Thanks to this property, man and woman are able to “dominate” the other creatures of the visible world (cf. Gn. 1:28)⁶

Two years after the promulgation of *Gaudium et Spes*, Lynn White published an article in *Science* magazine in which he identified this Christian instrumentalist view of nature—the conviction that nature exists for human use and is not willed as a good for its own sake—as a primary source of the Western arrogance toward nature which has resulted in the ecological crisis that has only grown more serious since that time.⁷ In the years since, theologians have questioned whether the claim that human persons are “created in the image of God” with its close connection to the mandate to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gn. 1: 28) points to an inherently deficient symbol that cannot serve to foster a view of humankind in right relation with the rest of creation.⁸

In addition to ecological concerns, the use of the *imago Dei* symbol to foster the subordination of women to men as “divinely-intended” has been so widely recognized that in the early 1980s a consultation of the World Council of Churches concluded that “[t]he doctrine of God’s image (*imago Dei*) has by tradition been a source of oppression and discrimination against women.”⁹ The history of the transmission of that doctrine with its claims that women are not in the image of God, less equally in the image of God, most fully in the image of God when in union with a man, or in the image of God in her spiritual soul but not in her carnal body, is by now not only well-documented, but officially disavowed as official teaching.

Among other resources that helped to undo that false representation of the authentic biblical and Christian tradition was the application of critical biblical scholarship to the two versions of creation found in Genesis 1 and 2. A traditional interpretation of Genesis 2 had cited Eve’s creation from the side of Adam to support the claim that female subordination was part of God’s will for creation from the beginning. But, as Phyllis Trible’s rhetorical analysis of the second and third chapters of Genesis has demonstrated, that version of the creation myth subverts, rather than

legitimates, the notion that structures of domination and oppression are part of God's divinely intended "plan." It is sin, rather than the created order, that establishes relations of domination. Reflecting on the consequences of sin as portrayed in Genesis 3, Trible remarks:

This sin vitiates all relationships: between animals and human beings (3:15), mothers and children (3:16), husbands and wives (3:16), people and the soil (3:17-18), humanity and its work (3:19)....The Yahwist narrative tells us who we are (creatures of equality and mutuality); it tells us who we have become (creatures of oppression); and so it opens possibilities for change, for a return to our true liberation under God. In other words, the story calls female and male to repent."¹⁰

While falling short of a call for repentance, Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter "*Mulieris Dignitatem*" ("On the Dignity and Vocation of Women") echoes Trible's claim: male domination and female subordination are not the divinely-intended proper created roles of women and men, but rather the manifestation of sin which violates the equality "which is both a gift and right deriving from God the Creator."¹¹ Numerous papal and ecclesial documents now condemn exploitation of women, violation of women's human dignity or rights, or any form of discrimination based on sex, even if ecclesial practice or policies often fail to give structural support or concrete witness to that stance.

Despite significant gains in Catholic teaching and ethics, the question of whether the symbol of creation in the image of God can function to foster the full equality and dignity of women within the theology of complementarity promoted by the pope and the Vatican persists precisely because it is integral to that theological vision to argue that women do not and should not image God in the same way that men do. In the words of *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

The personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: They are merely different....Hence a woman...must understand her 'fulfillment' as a person, her dignity and vocation on the basis of these resources, according to the richness of the femininity which she received on the day of creation and which she inherits as an expression of the 'image and likeness of God' that is specifically hers.¹²

The claim that difference need not mean inequality becomes particularly questionable when the further link is made between the maleness of Jesus—who is the very image of God incarnate—and God's eternal plan. This emphasis on the male sex of Jesus as integral to God's plan of salvation is found primarily in documents forged in response to the call for discussion of the ordination of women within the Catholic Church. Presenting the male sex of Jesus as integral to the economy of salvation, *Inter Insigniores*, the document on the non-admissibility of women to the ministerial priesthood issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1976, asserted that

[T]he incarnation of the Word took place according to the male sex; this is indeed a question of fact, and this fact, while not implying an alleged superiority of man over woman, cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation. It is, indeed, in harmony with the entirety of God's plan as God himself as revealed it.¹³

Yet in early Christian disputes about the full humanity of Jesus, his male sex was never the point of dispute. Rather, the orthodox position consistently argued that the Logos (Word) had taken on every aspect of what it means to be human—including human sexuality—since "what has not been assumed, has not been saved."¹⁴ For that very reason, twentieth century claims that male gender is integral to God's plan as revealed in the incarnation have, in the judgment of many, come dangerously close to calling into question the salvation of women or at least of female sexuality.¹⁵

The emphasis of Vatican documents on the significance of sexual differences in God's "revelatory plan" recurs in John Paul II's christological-trinitarian reading of the Book of Genesis in *Mulieris Dignitatem* where he refers to "the revealed truth concerning man as the image and likeness of God," and "the immutable basis of Christian anthropology."¹⁶ The pope cites St Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* V, 6, 1; V, 16, 2-3; *Christian Sources* 153, 72-81 and 216-221; St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De Hom. Op.* 16: PG 44, 180; *In Cant Cant Hom.* 2: PG 44, 805-808; St. Augustine, *In Ps. 4, 8: Collected Works of Christian Writers* (Latin Series) 38, 17. While the pope does not deny traditional (and characteristically modern) assertions that creation in the image of God refers to each individual person as created as a rational and free, the papal trinitarian anthropology stresses a more relational interpretation of the symbol. Drawing on an interpretation of scripture that relies on an "analogy of faith" by which selected biblical passages are used to interpret one another, the pope recommends reading

the second creation account in Genesis 2:18–25 in light of Genesis 1:26–27 and both accounts in light of the later revelation of the mystery of the Trinity. In this version of a trinitarian reading of the Genesis creation myths, human persons are created to be persons in communion. Although this call to exist for others applies equally to both sexes, the pope's discussion of the dignity and vocation of women proposes to explore "the Creator's decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man"¹⁷ He further cites heterosexual marriage as the paradigm of his relational anthropology and interprets the call of human persons to live as a communion of persons. In that framework "the spousal character of the relationship between persons" in which both men and women are called to the "receptive role of the bride" as members of the church, but only men have the capacity to represent Christ in the active role of "bridegroom."

That spousal character serves in turn as the basis for the pope's subsequent development of the two dimensions of the vocation of women—the call to motherhood or to virginity (a form of spiritual motherhood) rooted in the psychophysical structure of women which provides a special openness to others and to life. Hence, women's ways of living as persons in communion—women's ways of imaging God—can be discerned from the revelation inscribed on female bodies, and women's divinely intended vocations are described in terms of the exercise of sexuality, even when that is interpreted in spiritual terms.

This theology of complementarity that attributes specific roles and vocations to women based on biological sexual differences, with no parallel limits on the vocation of men, explicitly denies any inequality in dignity or value between the two sexes. Nevertheless, it continues to function in a way that not only limits women's exercise of diverse baptismal charisms, but also fosters culturally-derived stereotypical understandings of women's personalities, gifts, potential, and responsibilities. Since the theology of complementarity cites as its authority the biblical revelation that God created humankind in the divine image as male and female, the viability of the symbol of *imago Dei* to foster gender justice, to promote appreciation of the multiple dimensions of human diversity, and to engender the flourishing of women's spirituality continues to be questioned.

Retrieving a Threatened Symbol

So why bother to retrieve a symbol when its history of interpretation has

proved so problematic? First of all, precisely because the symbol has functioned to foster anthropocentrism, the subordination of women, and the denial of full human dignity to others such as disabled persons, gay and lesbian persons, or indigenous peoples in the past. The power of religious symbols and religious naming has been recognized by many beyond the realms of theology or religious studies. In 1990 scientists appealed to religious leaders to become actively involved in preventing the impending "Crimes against Creation," and to become active in efforts to preserve the environment of the Earth. They explicitly noted that "religious teaching, example, and leadership are powerfully able to influence personal conduct and commitment" and that "what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred."¹⁸

Likewise, a symbol that holds the power to define human identity as sacred cannot simply be dismissed; nor can it be assumed. At a time when violence against gays and lesbians is on the rise, when homosexuality has been identified by some with a propensity towards sexual violation of children and teenagers, and when some Vatican spokespersons and Catholic bishops have stated publicly that homosexual persons should not be ordained, the importance of emphasizing that persons and their vocations are not determined by their sexuality or sexual orientation, a position clearly articulated in other Vatican statements, becomes all the more urgent.

While the affirmation that women are created equally in the image of God is explicitly affirmed in the Catholic tradition today, the ability of women to image the divine is implicitly denied not only in liturgical leadership, but also in liturgical speech. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, for example, the pope recognizes that biblical passages attribute to God both "masculine" and "feminine" qualities, thus providing confirmation of the truth that both man and woman were created in the divine image. He cites multiple passages from the psalms and the prophets that image God as mother as well as father. He further recalls that all religious language remains strictly analogical since God utterly transcends human experience, categories, and speech. Thus "even 'fatherhood' in God is completely divine and free of the 'masculine' bodily characteristics proper to human fatherhood."¹⁹ However, on christological grounds the pope argues that Jesus's naming of God as "Abba-Father" (Mk 14:36) provides the norm for Christian prayer in spite of the alternate biblical images of God as female.

The importance of reclaiming women's capacity to image the divine becomes all the more necessary at a point in the tradition when the incarnation as well as the words and deeds of Jesus are regularly interpreted in gender-exclusive fashion. The assertion that the incarnation of Jesus according to the male sex "is in harmony with the divine plan," coupled with claims that Jesus chose only male apostles and named God definitively as Abba-Father, effectively rules out women's capacity to image the divine in the realm of liturgy or prayer. But these are the very realms we hold to be most central in forming Christian imagination and discipleship. The insistence that only male imaging of the divine is appropriate in Christian speech and prayer functions not only to distort the imaginations and spirituality of the Christian community and particularly of women, but also undercuts the more fundamental claims that God remains beyond gender and that all human names and images fail to adequately express the mystery of the incomprehensible God.²⁰

An even more basic reason to revitalize the symbol comes from the arena of fundamental human rights. The religious symbol of the human person as "created in the image of God" has traditionally functioned as a root metaphor for the Christian understanding of the human person, the religious way of grounding the inviolability of human dignity, and the basis for defending the human rights of all persons. Thus the 1979 United States Catholic bishops' pastoral letter "Brothers and Sisters to Us," for example, condemns racism precisely because it divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father....God's word in Genesis announces that all men and women are created in God's image; not just some races and racial types, but all bear the imprint of the Creator and are enlivened by the breath of his one Spirit.²¹

Mercy Amba Oduyoye notes the importance of the symbol for women around the world, especially in situations of violence and dehumanization:

[M]any women have claimed the biblical affirmation of our being created "in the Image of God" both for the protection of women's self-worth and self-esteem and to protest dehumanization by others. Granted, this seems to be wearing thin, but without it the whole edifice of human relations seems to crumble and fall.²²

While philosophical debate ensues about the precise meaning of personhood, the need for protection of human rights grows more urgent. Postmodern theorists argue that any attempt to define the human person or to universalize human experience is doomed because of the historical and cultural conditioning of all experience and the power relations that are inevitably operative when any person or group claims to speak for all. Yet ethicists repeatedly remind us that to abandon the ability to make claims about the dignity and rights of human persons only allows repressive power structures to operate without critique, which is to say, at the expense of the most vulnerable.

The postmodern challenge offers a necessary reminder that we can't know or define what it means to be fully human as well as a critique of any universalizing theory of what it means to speak of human persons as "created in the image and likeness of God." But it does not follow that we can say nothing about human persons and their dignity. On the contrary, around the world there is a recurring call for some sort of international recognition of human rights and accountability. In search of a global ethic that can provide a basis for a vision of peoples living peacefully together, the second Parliament of the World's Religions took as the starting point for its "Initial Document Towards a Global Ethic" the fundamental demand that "every human being must be treated humanely."²³

Feminist ethicists who recognize the need for postmodern cautions about any attempt to universalize human experience or gloss over radical differences such as class, race, sex, or sexual orientation, nevertheless argue that it is possible to identify enough commonality in human experience to condemn what is unjust and inhumane. Margaret Farley, for example, has proposed that:

Whatever the differences in human lives, however minimal the actuality of world community, however unique the social arrangements of diverse peoples, it is nonetheless possible for human persons to weep over commonly felt tragedies, laugh over commonly perceived incongruities, yearn for common hopes. And across time and place, it is possible to condemn recognized injustices and act for commonly desired goals.²⁴

While we may not be able to identify fully what it means to be human and thus, from a Christian standpoint, all the dimensions of what it means to be created in the image of God, we are far more likely to reach

agreement on what distorts that image or violates human dignity. In that vein, Edward Schillebeeckx's discussion of "negative contrast experience" provides a helpful way of retrieving the symbol of the human person as "image of God" which takes account of contemporary philosophical pluralism and the cultural conditionedness of any system of values and yet maintains the importance of the symbol for Christian ethics.

The Image of God Reflected in Negative Contrast Experience

Borrowing from the writings of critical theorist Theodor Adorno, Schillebeeckx adopted the term "contrast experience" to describe those human experiences of negativity (on both personal and social levels) which evoke indignation and protest: "No. It can't go on like this; we won't stand for it any longer!"²⁵ While we may not know or agree upon the full dimensions of human flourishing, Schillebeeckx argues that we know what is *not* humane—the concentration camp, genocide, racial discrimination, homelessness, abuse of children, domestic violence, an economic system in which some face starvation and utter poverty while a small minority controls the wealth and resources of a country. In other words, the image of God that is available in the concrete contours of a history laced with evil and suffering, is first and foremost, the threatened image of God. If Jesus Christ is the one in whom we recognize the face of God, the image of God is to be found in the crucified peoples of today.

But just as the early disciples wrestled with the question of where the God of life was to be found in the scandal of the crucifixion of Jesus, so the question faces us today: where is the Creator God to be seen in the violation of God's creatures?²⁶ Schillebeeckx argues that the mystery of God's creative and sustaining presence in human life is hidden in the creation which remains vulnerable to the finitude and mortality of nature as well as to the possibility of the abuse of human freedom. It is precisely the lament and protest over loss and violence—the claim that "this should not be" and the ethical action which it motivates—that signal awareness that something of value is being sacrificed. Hidden in experiences of negativity and/or injustice is an implicit awareness of deeply held values that begin to emerge in various forms of protest and resistance. The absence of "what ought to be" leads to dissatisfaction and action for change which leads in turn to a deeper awareness of what was only intuitively grasped in the initial ethical response: an awareness that human beings are indeed "created in the image of God" and of inestimable value. In Schillebeeckx's words:

If the fundamental symbol of God is the living human being—the image of God—then the place where human beings are humiliated, tortured, and forgotten, as individuals or as a community, by persons or violent structures, is at the same time, the privileged place where religious experience...becomes possible...precisely *in and through* a human action which seeks to give form to this symbol of God, the human being; [human action which] seeks to raise people up and give them a voice. Only then do we come home to the liberating communion of our creator and thus the depths of ourselves.²⁷

This trust in the ultimate meaning of human life which remains open to as yet unknown possibilities for human life and flourishing is nurtured and sustained by the fragmentary, but real, experiences of meaning, happiness, and well-being that also constitute some portion of human life.²⁸ Only when we have experienced a glimpse of what it means for persons to live in communion, when we have had some experience of what just and mutual relationships look like, when we have seen the triumph of the human spirit in spite of the violation or denials of others, can we recognize situations of dehumanization or the denial of human dignity as "blotting out the image of God in others." Without positive glimpses of what constitutes human dignity, happiness and fulfillment, the negativity of evil and suffering would lead to the conclusion that life is absurd and unjust and that there is no inherent dignity in human persons. Without images and memories of what it means for human life and creation to flourish, the suffering human "other" and the devastation of the earth would witness only to the tragic nature of existence.

Viewing the *imago Dei* symbol through the lens of negative contrast experience, suggests that human beings image God when we speak and act on behalf of life, whether that cry comes from the protest of the violated or the action of those who hold the power to change situations and structures that dehumanize or degrade. Here we can return to the question of the responsibility that human beings hold within the evolutionary process and ecological web. If human action and voice on behalf of the violated "other" are ways that human persons image the God of life, a rethinking of the meaning of that vocation today requires human beings to see our connections with the Earth entrusted to us as a call to lament and repentance, rather than a license for exploitation. At this point in evolutionary history when the very survival of complex forms of life and beauty are threatened by human decision and action, the *imago Dei* symbol can

function both to remind us of our responsibility in relation to the rest of creation and to call us to image the God who proclaimed all of creation as good. Human beings are those within the evolutionary process who can recognize and protest “ecological experiences of contrast” as well as forms of human suffering and to see the connections between the two. But that protest, too, occurs against the backdrop of the perception of the natural world precisely as “creation” that has its own integrity and value and that has its own capacity to manifest the glory of God. It also calls for a recognition of our dependence on the rest of creation for our very survival.

Considered in relation to one another, negative experiences of contrast and positive experiences of meaning (both human “fragments of salvation” and what Thomas Berry has identified as “cosmological moments of grace”) gradually disclose what is possible for the human community and for all of creation. Here the question of the relationship between anthropology and christology reemerges because the Christian vision of human flourishing is none other than the reign of God that Jesus preached in his liberating life-style as well as in his message of good news. That vision of God’s reign extended beyond human well-being to encompass all creatures in “a new heaven and a new earth” as reflected in the many images of nature in Jesus’ preaching and parables. The post-resurrection faith of the early church culminated in the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation, the proclamation that in Jesus, God became one not only with humanity, but also with matter. Attending to that doctrine and its roots in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, a christological reading of the human situation yields even fuller meaning in the light of contemporary disputes about gender and ecological justice when the story of Jesus is retold as the story of Wisdom incarnate.

Jesus the Wisdom of God as *Imago Dei* and the Community of Creation

Disputes at the time of Vatican II, and since, have often centered around the assertion that Colossians 1:15 which describes Christ as the firstborn of all of creation, rather than Genesis 1:28 with its emphasis on creation in the image of God, offers the appropriate starting point for a truly Christian anthropology. But using Colossians’ image of Christ as “first-born of all creation” as a lens for interpreting the anthropological claim that humankind is created in the image of God does not define the content of either claim, nor indicate that one of the two is the necessary starting point for theological anthropology.²⁹ Reading the creation and new creation texts in relation to one another can offer significant possibil-

ities for theological anthropology in an ecological worldview. But as multiple classic readings of those texts have demonstrated in the history of the tradition, the primary focus need not be on the discontinuity between Jesus and the rest of humanity and creation, nor on sin as having radically distorted or even destroyed the image of God in humanity. Likewise, a trinitarian reading of the Colossians text does not require an interpretation of Christ’s obedience (and hence of the appropriate stance for the church, Christian anthropology, and particularly³⁰ for women) as giving primacy to “receptivity,” as some have argued.

Further, those who argue for the primacy of Colossians 1 as the hermeneutical key to Christian anthropology rarely, if ever, attend to the fact that the hymn is derived from the Wisdom imagery of the late Old Testament and intertestamental literature, where *Sophia* is consistently referred to as female.³¹ Neither is the language of “Father” or “Son” used in the Colossians hymn; rather Wisdom is said to be the image of “the unseen God” (Col 1:15). Further, the emphasis in this passage is on Wisdom as the firstborn of all creation, not only as an incarnate human being, much less an incarnate male. Connections between the Colossians hymn and earlier Wisdom traditions suggest that if the Colossians text is to serve as a christological lens for viewing what it means to be “created in the image of God,” recent proposals for a Wisdom christology can help to focus that lens.

As we have observed, the dependence of Colossians 1:15 on the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, specifically the Book of Wisdom, Proverbs, and Sirach, has been noted by many.³² Yet what often went unnoticed or at least unemphasized was that the figure of Wisdom (*Sophia* in Greek and *Hokmah* in Hebrew) in the Old Testament and intertestamental literature was female. Hence the hymn in Colossians 1: 15–20, which in that context is applied to Christ, can be translated in a way that demonstrates its derivation from earlier tributes to Wisdom:

She is the image of the unseen God (Gen 1:26–27; Wis 7:26),
firstborn of all creation (Prov 8:22, Sir 24:9)
in/by her was created everything
in the heavens and on earth (Wis 7:22; 9:2–4; Prov 3:19–20;
8:22–30),
seen and unseen:
whether thrones or principalities, rules or authorities.
All things were created through her and for her,

And she is before all and the all subsists through her....³³

If this passage holds a key to a proper Christian understanding of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God as *Gaudium et Spes* suggested, retrieval of the symbol of *imago Dei* may indeed hold far richer possibilities for gender relations and ecological interdependence than either its interpreters or its critics have envisioned. Biblical scholars who were writing at the same time as the promulgation of *Gaudium et Spes* began to recognize that in Christian hymns such as this one, in the Pauline epistles (1 Cor 8:6) and the Letter to the Hebrews (1:3), and in the Gospels of Matthew and John, Jesus is portrayed as, and at times explicitly identified with, the Jewish figure of personified Wisdom.³⁴ But the feminist critical appropriation of Wisdom as specifically a female personification of the divine, and more recent work in ecological theology have opened up new dimensions of meaning in that tradition.

Thanks to the creative theological work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, Denis Edwards, and others, Wisdom christology has emerged as a fully orthodox way of speaking of Jesus the Christ which fosters, rather than restricts women's baptismal roles and identities, and which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all of creation, rather than a human commission to "dominate" the earth.³⁵ Retelling the story of Jesus as Sophia incarnate, Johnson recalls how Jesus enfleshes Sophia as she is portrayed in the Old Testament and the intertestamental literature in her prophetic street preaching, her public calls for justice, her befriending of the outcast, her promise to offer rest to the heavily burdened, her gathering of friends and strangers for an abundant feast, her healing ministry, and her initiation of disciples into friendship with God. Throughout his ministry and in a final and definitive way in his death, Jesus embodies Sophia's compassion for, and solidarity with, the lost and the least.

The impact of this reading of christology is to shift the scandal of particularity away from Jesus' maleness, and toward the scandal of the reign of God he preaches and embodies. Yet a further scandal that emerges as we reflect on the anthropological significance of Wisdom christology is the realization that the reign of God is discovered among and entrusted to human persons and communities despite all of our limits. In the person of Jesus, the image of God that marks human beings and can be traced throughout creation comes into clear focus. Elizabeth Johnson has identified some of the anthropological and ministerial implications of reading the incarnation through the metaphor of Sophia rather than the Logos:

Jesus in his human, historical specificity is confessed as Sophia incarnate, revelatory of the liberating graciousness of God imaged as female; women as friends of Jesus-Sophia, share equally with men in his saving mission throughout time and can fully represent Christ, being themselves, in the Spirit, other Christs. This has profound implications for reshaping ecclesial theory and practice in the direction of a community of the discipleship and ministry of equals.³⁶

The cognitive dissonance caused by describing the male Jesus as incarnation of the divine Sophia traditionally imaged as female, is not unlike the conversion of imagination that is required to recognize faithful female disciples throughout the centuries as "other Christs."

Further, if Wisdom is the first-born of all creation and all was created through her and for her, not only human persons, but all creatures and all of creation, are marked with the image of God. The sacredness of all of creation from the beginning is confirmed and transformed in the incarnation when Wisdom pitches her tent among us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The union of the divine, not only with human nature, but with the material world, is sealed definitively in the resurrection. As Karl Rahner has remarked in his homily on "Easter: The Future of the Earth":

[Christ] rose not to show that he was leaving the tomb of the earth once and for all, but in order to demonstrate that precisely that tomb of the dead—the body and the earth—has finally changed into the glorious, immeasurable house of the living God and of the God-filled soul of the Son. He did not go forth from the dwelling place of earth by rising from the dead. For he still possesses, of course, definitively and transfigured, his body, which is a piece of the earth, a piece which still belongs to it as a part of its reality and destiny... Already from the heart of the world into which he descended in death, the new forces of a transfigured earth are at work"³⁷

Denis Edwards draws a similar conclusion in his ecological reading of the Colossians hymn, "[t]he rest of creation cannot be seen merely as the stage on which the drama of human redemption is played out. The Colossians hymn insists that the whole universe is caught up in the Christ event."³⁸

Reading the creation story in light of Wisdom's delight in all of creation

and her role of connecting what is different and mending broken relationships, returns us to the ethical issue of human responsibility for ecological justice. Taking Wisdom christology as the key for anthropology leads to a new appreciation of the wisdom required of those to whom God has entrusted the care of the earth—human creatures who have the capacity for moral choice and action. Seeking a retrieval of the *imago Dei* symbol that moves beyond a view of stewardship which falls short of respecting the interdependence of humans with the rest of creation, Anne Clifford has proposed an ecofeminist theology of solidarity. She remarks that solidarity does not erase difference, “be that the differences among peoples of different cultures, races and classes, or the differences between humans and other life forms,” but seeks the common good of all—“a healthy planet on which all life forms can flourish.”³⁹ This perspective does not deny the complexity within creation, but rather celebrates those very differences as reflections of the God who treasures diversity. From the beginning those differences have been a source of delight to Wisdom who fashioned all things (Wis 7:22, Prov 8:30).

That same diversity of God’s many beloved creatures is also reflected in differences among human creatures. Sexual difference is highlighted in both creation stories in Genesis, but the question remains: What is the revelatory significance of that difference? One aspect of that revelation is clear: embodiment and sexuality are integral to the blessing of creation. One aspect of what it means for human persons to image God that received little emphasis—or was downright denied—in traditional attempts to locate the image of God in some aspect of the human person, was that mortal human bodies could be revelatory of the immortal God or that human sexual relationships could reflect the intimate love of the Trinity. If the incarnation remains the key to interpreting anthropology, then with Irenaeus we are called to oppose any gnostic versions of holiness or spirituality that deny the sacredness of the body or material creation and recall that we are created in the image of the incarnate Word, or as we have been stressing here, *incarnate* Wisdom.⁴⁰

But one can prize sexuality and sexual difference without identifying human bodies as divinely inscribed for distinctly different roles and vocations. One can hold to the pope’s primary anthropological emphasis—human persons are created as persons in relation, as destined for communion with one another—without identifying heterosexual marriage as the ultimate paradigm for persons in communion. If one were to turn to the Wisdom christology of John’s Gospel, for example, for the para-

digm of mutual love and relationship, the model of friendship would emerge instead. Specifically, the kind of friendship that Jesus invites his disciples into is found in a community of disciples gathered with all their differences—around a single table. Read through that lens, sexual difference does indeed mark human persons both as different and as radically relational. But revelatory significance is to be found not in divinely prescribed gender roles or the mandate to procreate, but rather in the human vocation to embrace the other who remains nevertheless “other” and in the call to participate in and foster Sophia’s hospitality towards all of her beloved creatures.

Wisdom christology needs to remain rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus if we are to flesh out the concrete contours of Christian anthropology.⁴¹ But a Wisdom christology “from below” leads finally to a trinitarian understanding of the God we are called to image—the mystery we describe as diverse and equal persons in a mutual communion of love. Drawn into that communion by the power of the Spirit, human persons and human communities are given an identity and a vocation. In terms of fundamental identity, the image of God stamped in diverse ways on all creatures can be violated, but never erased. The further invitation to human persons as conscious creation to embrace that identity as God’s beloved and to grow in communion with God and all of creation is a vocation that we are free to embrace or reject. But embracing that vocation in a world of sin will involve for us—as it did for the one in whose image we are formed—the way of the cross. Imaging the God of friendship of John’s gospel will mean following Wisdom Incarnate in being willing to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (Jn 15:13).

Does the symbol *imago Dei* have a future in a world of violence, exclusion, and ecological devastation? In the end, it appears that the answer is up to us. Human beings and human communities—including ecclesial communities—hold the power to deny, and in that sense, to “blot out” the image of God in those we consider to be “other.” In doing so, however, we blot out our own participation in the image of the God whose love has no bounds. The sacramental vision of John’s gospel suggests that an even more incredible power is entrusted to us as well. Because Wisdom has pitched her tent among us and sent her Advocate to seal us in the truth, we have the power to en flesh the communion that is our final destiny—if only in fragmentary ways.

The image of God continues to take flesh where Wisdom’s children

delight in creation and learn to live within limits that respect the common good of the whole community of the living. Human communities, and specifically ecclesial communities, reflect God's image when footwashing, forgiveness, and a common table open possibilities for relationships and reconciliations beyond our power or imagining. By naming one another and fragile human and ecological communities as capable of imaging God—if only in fragments—we hold open our imaginations to how different our future could be.

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Notes

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to *Gaudium et Spes* are cited from "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," *Vatican Council II, A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 163–282.
- ² Walter Kasper, "The Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*," *Communio* 23 (1996), 129–140, at 140.
- ³ See Kasper, "The Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*," and Joseph Ratzinger, "The Dignity of the Human Person," [Commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*, Introductory Article and Chapter I], in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 115–163, at 119–123, and 159–163.
- ⁴ Cited from "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter J. Abbott, S.J. (New York: The America Press, 1966), 199–308, at 231.
- ⁵ John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," Message for the Celebration of World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, in *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*, ed. Drew Christiansen and Walter Grazer (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 215–222 at 222.
- ⁶ John Paul II, "Mulieris Dignitatem," Apostolic Letter "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women," *Origins*, Vol. 18., No. 17(October 6, 1988), #6, pp. 265–266, and #10, p. 268.
- ⁷ Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155(1967), 1206. For alternative interpretations of Genesis 1 in view of the ecological crisis, see Anne Clifford, "When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll:Orbis, 1995), 173–189; and Richard J. Clifford, "Genesis 1–3: Permission to Exploit Nature?" *Bible Today* (1988), 135; Sallie McFague, "Human Beings, Embodiment, and Our Home the Earth," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 141–169.
- ⁸ See, for example, Kathryn Tanner's critique of the *imago Dei* symbol in "Creation, Environmentalism, and Ecological Justice," in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, 99–123.
- ⁹ Quoted in *The Ecumenical Review* 33(1981), 77.
- ¹⁰ Phyllis Trible, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread," in *Womanspirit*

Rising, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 74–83, at 80.

¹¹ “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” #10, p. 269.

¹² *Ibid.* Note also the caution that concern about “women’s rights” and a rightful opposition of women to male domination “must not under any condition lead to the ‘masculinization’ of women....women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine ‘originality’....[lest they] “deform and lose what constitutes their essential richness.”

¹³ “*Inter Insigniores*,” “Vatican Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood,” *Origins*, Vol. 6, No.33 (February 3, 1977), #5, p. 522. In his own apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (“Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women”), John Paul II cites Paul VI: “the real reason [for reserving priestly ordination to men] is that, in giving the church her fundamental constitution, her theological anthropology—thereafter always followed by the church’s tradition—Christ established things in this way.”. “*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,” *Origins*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (June 9, 1994), #2, pp. 49–52 at 51.

¹⁴ The phrase, “What has not been assumed has not been healed,” is found in Gregory Nazianzen’s Letter 101 (To Cleodnius I, 32), but the basic theological view was shared by a number of the Greek early Christian theologians.

¹⁵ See Sandra Schneiders, *Women and the Word* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 55; Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminist Theology and Spirituality,” in *Christian Feminism: Visions of a New Humanity*, ed. Judith Weidman (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 21; Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 90; Elizabeth A. Johnson, *SHE WHO IS: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 166–167.

¹⁶ “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” #6, p. 265. In the note that follows this citation, the

¹⁷ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, #1, p. 263.

¹⁸ “Preserving and Cherishing the Earth: An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion,” in *Billions and Billions*, ed. Carl Sagan (New York: Random House, 1997), 143–146 at 145.

¹⁹ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, #8, p. 267.

²⁰ On this point see Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female,” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 441–465; *idem*, *SHE WHO IS: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); and Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word* (New York: Paulist, 1986).

²¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Brothers and Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism, November 14, 1979,” in *Quest for Justice: A Compendium of Statements of the United States Catholic Bishops on the Political and Social Order 1966–1980* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1981), 375, 378.

²² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction,” in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life* (New York: Orbis, 1996), 161–171 at 170. Oduyoye also notes there: “If one is in the image of God, then one is expected to practice the hospitality, compassion, and justice that characterize God. The Akan say, ‘All human beings are the children of God.’ What this calls for is mutuality in our relationships, seeking ‘one earth community,’ one household of the God of life.”

²³ *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions*, with commentaries by Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel (New York: Continuum, 1998), 21.

²⁴ Margaret A. Farley, “Feminism and Universal Morality,” in *Prospects for a Common Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reide, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 170–190 at 178.

²⁵ See Edward Schillebeeckx, “Church, Sacrament of Dialogue,” in *God the Future of Man*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 136. For more development of the notion of negative contrast experience, see Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York; Seabury, 1980), 817–819, and 897, n. 158; *idem*, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 5–6. For another approach to the positive role of indignation giving rise to ethical activity see Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* XXXVI (1981), 41–57.

²⁶ For further discussion of Schillebeeckx’s interpretation of the crucifixion as negative contrast experience, see Mary Catherine Hilker, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 112–116; and Janet M. O’Meara, “Salvation: Living Communion with God” in *The Praxis of the Reign of God*, ed. Mary Catherine Hilker and Robert J. Schreiter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 111–113. In the same volume, see also John Galvin, “The Story of Jesus as the Story of God,” 79–95.

²⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, “The Other Face of the Church,” in *For the Sake of the Gospel*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 164. See also *Christ*, 837.

²⁸ *Church: The Human Story of God*, 6.

²⁹ See Ratzinger, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” for concerns at the

time of the Council, and David L. Schindler, "Christology and the *Imago Dei*: Interpreting *Gaudium et Spes*, *Communio* 23 (1996) 156-184, for one version of subsequent concerns. Schindler criticizes the treatment of the *imago Dei* symbol in *Gaudium et Spes* as insufficiently defined in terms of Christological content, a problem which has enabled, in his judgment, an unfortunate assumption of a basic harmony between (Anglo-American) liberalism and conciliar Catholicism on the matter of "rightful human creativity and autonomy." In place of this "merely theistic" anthropology, Schindler proposes a version of a "trinitarian-christological" reading of anthropology, but that reading reflects its own set of assumptions about anthropology, politics, and gender.

³⁰ According to Schindler, "What it means to be created in Christ, the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation (Col 1:15), is to be called, in Christ, to become "sons in the Son"....To be created in Christ therefore means first to be *from*, hence receptive in the face of the Other." Schindler draws on Balthasar's version of trinitarian-christocentric anthropology in which human activity images the creativity of the Father only by way of the mediating receptivity not only of Christ, but of Mary's obedient love summed up in her *Fiat*. See Schindler, "Christology and the *Imago Dei*," 176-183.

³¹ Eduard Schweizer has commented that "there is no passage in the New Testament, apart from the prologue to the Fourth Gospel and Heb 1:3, whose roots can be traced so clearly to Jewish Wisdom Literature as the hymn in Col. 1:15-20. *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 246.

³² See, for example, Joseph A. Grassi, "The Letter to the Colossians," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1968, 334-340, at 335-336. For a brief discussion of the debated origins of the hymn, see Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Colossians," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, Vol. 2, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 313-324, at 317-318.

³³ Translation by Mary Rose D'Angelo, in "Colossians," 318.

³⁴ In his commentary published in 1966, Raymond E. Brown noted that in the Gospel of John, "Jesus is personified Wisdom." See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), cxxv and 521-523. Shortly after, M. Jack Suggs, referred to Jesus in Matthew's Gospel as "Sophia incarnate," in *Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 58. For thorough discussion of the biblical

sources for Wisdom christology, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for Non-Androcentric Christology," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensis* LXI, 4 (Dec. 1985) 261-293.

³⁵ See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 130-140; idem, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 131-162; Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Wisdom of God"; idem, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 115-137; idem, "Wisdom Was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist, 1993) 95-117; idem, *SHE WHO IS*, 86-100, 150-169; Denis Edwards, *Jesus, the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995). See also Schneiders, *Women and the Word*, 50-54; and Ellen M. Leonard, "Women and Christ: Toward Inclusive Christologies," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 6/2 (1990), 266-285.

³⁶ Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 131.

³⁷ Karl Rahner, "Easter: A Faith that Loves the Earth," in *The Great Church Year* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 192-97, at 195.

³⁸ Edwards, *Jesus: The Wisdom of God*, 82.

³⁹ Clifford, "When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly," 185.

⁴⁰ See Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 5.16.2

⁴¹ On this point, see Elizabeth Johnson's response to Roger Haight's critique of Wisdom christology as a christology "from above," in *Things New and Old: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson*, ed. Phyllis Zagano and Terrence W. Tilley (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 104-107.