

“THE IMAGE (*SELEM*) AND LIKENESS (*DEMUT*) OF GOD”

“These two concepts [i.e., image and likeness of God] characterize [the pure dialogue-relationship between man and his Creator] prior to all action whatsoever” (p. 317).

The two concepts of “image of God” and “likeness to God” played a central role in Patristic and Medieval theology, but in the works of more modern dogmatic theologians, it has scarcely played any part.¹ Why? “Several elements of tension transform the discussion of these two terms into a kind of battlefield” (p. 317).

Outline of the structure of the article:

1. **Part 1 (pages 316-319):** Balthasar starts the article by responding to the main objections that prevent him from going back to the view of “image and likeness” held by the Fathers of the Church. The three are: (a) those who, on the basis of the apparent lack of influence of those concepts in the Old Testament, certain exegetes play down the importance of these essential categories and stigmatize using those categories as an erroneous theological byway taken by the Fathers; (b) the objection of the exegetes: “image” (*selem*) is thought to refer primarily to the (bodily) form; and (c) the objection of the Protestant dogmatic theologians: they fear that, under the guise of ‘spirit,’ Greek thought is being insinuated into the Bible.
2. **Part 2 (pages 320-327):** Balthasar develops his basic view of “image of God” based on the New Testament and Irenaeus of Lyon, who he sees as anticipating the structure and viewpoint of the Christian theological tradition. *[In this lecture, we will focus on this part of the reading].*
3. **Part 3 (pages 327-334):** showing that the concept of image and likeness developed in part 2 underlies the various Church Fathers, when one interprets each Church father within his own philosophical framework. Thus, he goes through Tertullian, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Bernard, Scotus Erigena, Staudenmaier, Drey, M. Deutinger.

[Brief summary of his responses to the objections in part 1]

Reply to (a): “In reply it must be said that the express formulation in Genesis 1:26f. is only the summary of a fundamental truth that is always presupposed in the whole biblical drama involving God and man. Theology has explicitly to devote attention to this truth, and it can do this most simply by expounding the Genesis formula” (p. 318).

Reply to (b): “the author of the Priestly Codex (i.e., that part of the text) cannot be credited with crude anthropomorphisms.” (p. 319).

Reply to (c): several places (his treatment of philosophical aspect, analogia entis, etc.)

¹ Here he lists Staudenmaier, E. Brunner, and Karl Barth as the exceptions, i.e. people in the modern period for whom “image and likeness” remained central concepts.

Main Point 2: So, then, how should we understand the *Image and Likeness of God*? What is the common and underlying point that the Fathers of the Church were trying to get at?

Point 1: Defining “Image of God” and “Likeness to God”

1.1 “Image of God”

‘Image of God’ remains, therefore, an attribute of man: he is created different from the other beings and is placed in a particular “relation” to God, just as he is, that is, as a whole, living, body-soul being. Psalm 8 speaks of the entire human being, saying that God has ‘made him a little less than the divine beings and crowned him with glory and honor’—where *kabod*, ‘glory,’ is a distinctive divine predicate and *hadar*, ‘honor,’ at least includes the physical—‘thou hast put all things under his feet...’ ‘Thus man is characterized as a creature whose being does not come from below; because of his origin, his being points toward the upper region.’ The fact that God has laid his hand on him is shown by the commandment forbidding him to shed human blood; Genesis 9:6 traces this back to the fact that God has created man in his own image. ‘Human life, of all other life, is closest to the divine; it mirrors the latter, and so no one may presume to interfere with it, let alone distinguish it.’ This is an indication of man’s mysterious nobility. Does this not imply that, just as the original, God, cannot be defined, neither can the copy, the ‘image’ whose distinctiveness comes precisely from the fact that it represents, in worldly and created terms, this non-definable divine reality? Epiphanius (*Haer.* 70) felt obliged to draw the conclusion that no one should attempt a closer definition of what constitutes the divine image in man, since it is known only to God.”

God and the divine image in man “are essentially ordered to each other; this can be expressed by the word *analogia* (which also implies a mysterious, irreducible ‘similarity in dissimilarity’). Since Genesis 1:26ff. is concerned with man’s distinctive *essence*, all exegetes today ... agree that man’s ‘image’-quality—even after he has fallen from God—cannot be lost” (p. 320). “Created man’s likeness to the uncreated God implies the *analogia entis*” (p. 321).

1.2. “Likeness to God”

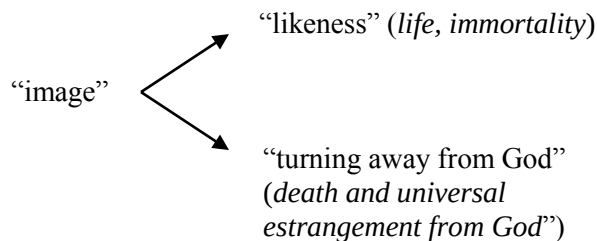
“In what does this ‘likeness’ consist, which, by contrast with the animals and other being in the world, man possesses? In the first place, obviously, we think of man’s nature as spirit and person; we can emphasize man’s reason or man’s freedom (which are two aspects of the same thing), resulting in man’s dominant position over the rest of creation, as we find stressed in Genesis” (p. 322).

Point 2. Interpreting "image" and "likeness" within the unity of Scripture

2.1. "image" and "likeness" in light of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature

"In part, the Fathers took up the two terms found in Genesis, "image" (*selem*) and "likeness" (*demut*), and reflected upon the Bible's implicit distinction between man's imperishable nature and his turning away from God; this turning brought about God's punishment, namely, partial withdrawal of his dominant position in nature, death (Wis 2:23, cf. 6:19), and a universal estrangement from God. Accordingly, they introduced a theological distinction between two elements or phases of the image which, while it undoubtedly cannot be read from the literal text, was in itself both justified and unavoidable" (p. 324).

Stage/ phase 1 -----> Stage/phase 2



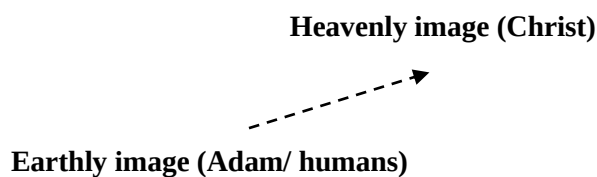
[Wisdom 6: 17-20: "For the first step toward Wisdom is an earnest desire for discipline; then, care for discipline is love of her; love means the keeping of her laws; To observe her laws is the basis for incorruptibility; and incorruptibility makes one close to God; thus the desire for Wisdom leads to a kingdom."]

[Wisdom 2:23-4: "For God formed us to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made us. But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are allied with him experience it."]

Summed up in the tension between "image and likeness"

2.2. "image" and "likeness" in light of Christ

"This is the distinction between the Old Testament 'image,' which applies to man in general and the New Testament 'image,' which—and this is something totally new—is Christ alone. For he is the express 'likeness of God' (2 Cor 4:4), 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15). So we must be 'conformed' to his image (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18); 'Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust (Adam), we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven' (1 Cor 15:49).



[2 Cor 4:3-4: "And even though our gospel is veiled, it is veiled for those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they may not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."]

[Col 1:15: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation"]

[Rom 8:29: "For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."]

[2 Cor 3:18: "All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit."]

1 Cor 15:49: Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one."]

[aspect 1: inchoate → fully unveiled = shows us what it means to be human/ in the image of God; our purpose]

[aspect 2: ground/source of image → the Image of which we are an image = non-heteronomous]

Summed up in the tension between "earthly and heavenly image."

Point 3. Combination of these two tensions to form complex fugues in the Church Fathers

If the two tensions are combined (“image-likeness” and “earthly and heavenly image”), a complex fugues result; the two can be treated in relative isolation, but they can also be fused in such a way that the first motif is rooted in the second right from the start.” (p. 324).

3.1. Irenaeus:

“For in Christ, man is perfected according to the image and likeness of God. The truth of this was manifest when the Word of God became man, assimilating himself to man and mankind so that man, becoming like the Son should become precious in the in the Father’s eyes. In earlier times it was said that man was created in the image of God, but it was not a manifest truth, for the Word according to whose image man was created was invisible, and so the likeness was easily lost. But the Word, becoming flesh, firmly established both: it demonstrated the truth of the image by becoming precisely what its image was and restored the likeness by assimilating man to the invisible Father through the mediation of the now visible Word” (*Adv. Haer.* V, 16, 2).

Irenaeus can also express this clear, fundamental idea in a different way without distinguishing the terms. He can also make it more precise, saying that, through sin, man, who consists of body, soul and (Holy) Spirit loses the Spirit and hence his ‘likeness’ to God; he has only managed to hold on to the ‘image.’

Thus, we end up with a more nuanced theology of the image, in which we can distinguish the following essential elements:

1. “Body-soul” unity as an essential ingredient of human nature; it is the initially hidden image of the Logos, and cannot be lost, even in sin. This essential constituent of our nature is distinguished from the *gift* of the Pneuma (grace), which “gives man a true likeness to God and which *can* be lost” (p. 325).
2. Distinction between an “inchoate image” (Adam) and the fully unveiled image (Christ). The first Adam, involving a totally appropriate difference between his essential being and its active fulfillment through choices in accordance with God’s will, and an image that is fully unveiled only in Christ, the second Adam. This second image not only restores the first but causes it to transcend itself and attain a totally unexpected likeness to God.
3. Third, this makes it possible to express the same basic structure (depending on the perspective) in the most varied ways. This often happens in the same writer; the context is seen to justify the use of a particular turn of phrase.

3.2. Key Summary of “Image and Likeness”

“Here the possibility emerges, most importantly, of defining “image” of God in man as finite freedom (which is naturally only conceivable in a rational nature²) and locating it in the essence of this freedom; it must act as such, that is, it must decide to move toward God—and thus realize the ‘likeness’ it already possesses—or away from God, so losing this likeness” (p. 326-7).

² NB: For von B, Thomas’ “rational nature”/ “reason” is convertible with his “finite freedom,” since, he argues, one cannot exist without the other. Thus, he sees the ability to transpose between frameworks as something rather undaunting.

3.3. Expounding what this means about what it means to be a human being. [Discussion]