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REDEEMING THE IMAGE

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Abstract

This paper questions conventional assumptions concerning the nature and function of formal theological anthropology and its place in the doctrinal corpus. Taking the image of God as its focus, the discussion begins by interrogating the assumption that understanding of the image (and the task of theological anthropology more generally) be framed primarily within the context of a doctrine of creation, often narrowly construed. Where a static understanding of creation operates, the image becomes a tool for what is consequently regarded the primary task of theological anthropology – defining human nature, often in essentialist and universal terms. Alternative possibilities are opened through conscious connection with soteriology. Following engagement with black theology, feminist theologies and the post-9/11 discussion of torture, the argument moves towards a performative, particular and contingent understanding of the image and of theological anthropology, drawing both into much closer connection with theological ethics than is conventionally the case.

Keywords: image of God; *imago Dei*; theological anthropology; torture; dehumanisation; feminist theology; black theology

Introduction

In this paper, I focus on that central trope of Christian theological anthropology, the image of God, in order to question some of the assumptions it is tempting to adopt about theological anthropology more broadly – where (and how) it 'sits' in the ecology of Christian faith and doctrine; how we construe its basic task or function; essentially, what it is *for*, how we do it and what it is we are and should be doing when we do it. I am especially interested in asking what the consequences are of setting interpretation of the image (and theological anthropology more generally) within the doctrine of creation as its primary context. The image then tends to be rendered as an account of originally given human nature or essence (often inalienable and static). The task of theological anthropology is then correspondingly construed as one of *defining* humanity, and doing so in essentialising and universally applicable terms.

I recognise the positive contribution such an understanding of the image has made, not least to the conceptions of human dignity that arguably fund ingrained modern, Western cultural assumptions concerning human rights and mutual responsibilities. At the very least, the long tradition of interpreting the image in the direction of a universal account of both given, essential human nature and human worth allow it to function as an all-too-rare point of contact with the assumptions and interests of secular discourses and communities of practice. Notwithstanding that, however, I seek to explore here an alternative by asking what difference it might make to understand the image and to do theological anthropology explicitly conscious of redemption. Following initial consideration of the doctrinal location of theological anthropology, the discussion draws on three distinct theological literatures where I shall argue we see theological anthropology (and not simply theological ethics) being done in service of redemptive transformation: black theology; feminist theology and the post-9/11 theological

discussion of torture. My hope is that this will open up possibilities for understanding theological anthropology as a situated, performative and practical discourse.

The Habitus of Theological Anthropology

Creation?

Christian theological discussion of 'human nature' is usually located within the doctrine of creation. Asking what happens if we do theological anthropology mindful of (better, perhaps – provoked by) the doctrine (and reality) of redemption need not, however, require its relocation from one doctrinal locus to another.[1] But it does remind us to be mindful of the interrelation of creation with redemption (and eschatology). One effect of that mindfulness is resistance to a static understanding of creation and of the static understandings of God and of humanity that are associated with it. For there is a symbiotic relationship between deficient ways of understanding the doctrine of creation and of theological anthropology, where creation is construed as a one-off completed action, rather than a continuing and interactive movement of God relating to the world creatively. Correspondingly, theological anthropology's task is then construed as providing answers to the anthropological question by furnishing definitions of 'human nature'.

In this mutually reinforcing relationship, the doctrine of creation and correlate theological anthropologies become isolated from the more expansive interpretive context of God's active relating to and movement towards us – redemptively and eschatologically as well as creatively. Moreover, the strategies of biblical interpretation underpinning theological anthropology answering the anthropological question by furnishing accounts of 'human nature' are similarly truncated. Typically, the creation narratives are read in relative isolation from the rest of scripture as accounts of origins, functioning as a kind of theological fundament conveying key, foundational concepts for defining 'human nature'. (Incidentally but significantly, God also appears in rather static terms, whose relating and activity are restricted to initial, originating agency, rather than an ongoing dynamic of complex interaction with creation, not least human creatures, nor yet an internally complex dynamic relationality. The depiction of an essentially unrelated God, involved in a one-off act of creativity from which God consequently withdraws provides no barrier to rendering humanity in God's image in terms of individual, unrelated, decontextualised essence.)

This tends to make our understanding of creation backward-looking, if not static. Similarly, if theological anthropology's task is understood as definitional, it is likely to look 'back' to creation as the point where original, essential nature is given, along with key concepts through which that might be brought to expression. It will also tend to have the past as its dominant temporal mode. That does not make a relationship to redemption impossible. But it does make it likely that redemption will be construed in terms of a restoration of the one essential human nature already given and shared by all: as an undoing of the damage caused through the brokenness of concretely lived humanity, 'transformed back into what it should have been'.[2] If we construe the task of theological anthropology as one of definition, we are

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[1] In this regard at least, my proposal differs somewhat from David Kelsey's, though the intentions and consequences of his argument are in line with my own. See David H. Kelsey, "Wisdom, Theological Anthropology, and Modern Secular Interpretation of Humanity," in *God's Life in Trinity*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 2006); *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), Ch.4B.

[2] Alistair McFadyen, "Healing the Damaged," in *Essentials of Christian Community: Essays for Daniel W. Hardy*, ed. David F. Ford and Dennis L. Stamps (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996). This seems to be the earlier vision of Ruether, expressed in Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), p.93.

tempted towards an essentialist account of human nature: 'the' answer to 'the' anthropological question. And no matter whether or what the practical situation that prompts us to reach for an answer, we are likely to see ourselves as invited to respond by providing an essentialist and universally applicable definition of human nature, sourced by and located in an understanding of creation construed in narrow and static terms; to 'look back' to the point at which human nature was defined by God in creation as a one--off act of origination.

That Genesis 1-3 risks being mis-read if either isolated from the rest of the Bible or positioned in a too dominant interpretive role is a recurrent theme in scholarly discussion, and it may be helpful briefly to consider biblical scholarship in this regard.[3] A major issue, especially in more theologically interested exegesis, has been the proper contextualisation of the Genesis creation narratives in the broader dynamics of the faith of Israel: the living faith which stands behind the texts, themselves functioning as a vehicle expressing and regulating the living faith of the community in its continuing encounter with God. An immediate consequence of such concern is an entrenched theological resistance to a narrow reading of the creation theme. This has two aspects. First, a theology of creation is seen to be distributed more extensively throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. It is to be found also especially in the wisdom tradition and some Psalms, and these are considered to be at least as (and often more) authoritative for a reading of creation and of creatureliness as Gen.1-3. Second, God's relating in and through creative/generative activity is itself set in connection with God's relating with creatures in ways which it would be misleading to categorise under the rubric of creation, narrowly construed; rather, rendered primarily under covenantal, eschatological and soteriological motifs. Both aspects in fact point to a reading of Gen.1-3, and interpretation of its narrative and theological tropes, in the broader context of God's interaction with the world. Immediately, this contextualises the trope of creation in a way that leads away from static and essentialist, towards dynamic, interactive and relational – therefore also risky, open and temporalised – construals of God, humanity and the world. Precisely for this reason, God, world and humanity are to be sought through interrogative encounter that is itself part of that interactive encountering and relating in which they are what they are and will be and which is amply evidenced throughout the whole corpus of the Hebrew Scriptures. In such encounter, we find God and humanity rendered in highly specific, particular and differentiated situations. We do not therefore find humanity narrated in terms of essentialized, universal human nature – a nature abstracted equally from the relation to God as material, cultural and social conditions and contexts of existence. Instead, we find specific human beings, being-related-to-by and relating to God in the determinate particularity and situatedness of their total beings. This ambiguous, contingent, situated particularity and contingency of actual human beings is narrated in ways that does not easily lend itself to distilling in the direction of abstract, universal definitions of human nature in answer to the anthropological question. Rather, it nourishes and invites asking the anthropological question in the unrestricted range of situations in which human beings find themselves – or, better, in which they are found and related to creatively by God in all their particularity.

Redemption?

Biblically, one way in which redemption is narrated is as God's active movement towards particular human beings' 'crying out' to God for divine assistance, individually or collectively,

[3] On this and what follows, see Phyllis A. Bird, ""Male and Female He Created Them": Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *The Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 2 (1981); Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesselschaft, 1976); Gerhard Von Rad, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), pp.42-239; Walter Brueggemann, "The Loss and Recovery of 'Creation' in Old Testament Theology," *Theology Today* 53(1996).

in situations where their very humanity is somehow at risk or in serious and genuine question, beyond human intervention or remedy. Talk of redemption turns our attention towards situations and conditions of dehumanisation; situations where humanity is so severely damaged that it has collapsed or is at serious risk of collapse. What difference might it make to theological anthropology, not only to essay answers to the anthropological question in such contexts, but to seek to understand what it might mean to ask the question of the human in situations where it is in real question, where there are human cries and flourishing humanity or even humanity itself appears counterfactual possibility? If redemption might in part be understood as God's active movement towards human beings in such radical distress that they 'cry out' to God, what sort of difference does that make to our understanding of theological anthropology and its task? [4] of how to ask and answer the anthropological question theologically?[5] This can only mean wisdom as a form of embodied thinking and practice in relation to our own situatedness in ways that constantly provoke new seeking, new engagements and new questioning, stretched by the abundant reality of God to seek the fullness of humanity in response – as, indeed, that is actively sought by God, especially but not only in conditions where humanity is denigrated, damaged, denied, distorted, disoriented, limited.

In situations that are the target of God's relating redemptively in response to human 'cries', humanity is not something straightforwardly in existence. Rather is it a possibility actively being sought through engagement that resists the energies of dehumanisation, working in and through human damage and brokenness by energizing more abundant possibilities of human flourishing that are captured by the image of a return to the conditions of original creation.[6] This suggests that the task of theological anthropology cannot be to proceed as though humanity were a fixed, known or even knowable datum, a conceptual deposit retrievable from God's original act of creation awaiting more adequate description or abstraction of universal, defining properties. Rather, humanity is more a quality to be sought and worked out in the contingencies of concrete situations. If humanity is not fully realised, not unambiguously or securely in existence, then the task of anthropological discourse is not so much to describe humanity as actively to seek it; indeed, to seek it in its fullest and most extensive realisation; a seeking that follows, reflects on and instrumentally accompanies God's own seeking of full humanisation focused most intently on precisely those situations where humanity seems more an absence than it does a presence.

This begins to suggest that the task of theological anthropology set consciously in the context of redemption might not be so much definitive or taxonomic as performative; not so much defining as actively *seeking* humanity, focused on those places and those human beings where human cries report its denial, denigration, damage, disorientation or total collapse; where God is already actively seeking flourishing humanity in response.

Thinking the human in the context of God's relating to us redemptively suggests a corresponding shift in both dominant tense and grammatical mood of theological discourse about humanity: from the present and indicative to the future of the optative (combined with the interrogative, since humanity and humanisation are possibilities to be sought and worked out within the contingencies and particularities of a specific situation). That change is borne of

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[4] See David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.93ff.

[5] One answer is of course given in Ps.8, where the anthropological question is provoked by and in response to God's 'mindfulness. Here the human becomes a question and questionable, in light of God's movement towards humanity redemptively, creatively and eschatologically. And the answer given to the anthropological question is not in the form of a definition of human nature; rather, it is performative: the singing of the Psalm itself. See further, Alistair McFadyen, "Imaging God: A Theological Answer to the Anthropological Question?," *Zygon* 47, no. 4 (2012).

[6] See further "Healing the Damaged; cf. also *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ch.9-10.

the way in which redemption almost inevitably expresses or itself changes the way in which we are attentive to the present, with an eye on future transformation. For the sake of clarity, I emphasise that the 'present' that motivates talk of redemption and to which redemptive discourse is oriented, is specific and particular. Theological anthropological discourse under the rubric of creation, narrowly conceived, that understands its task as taxonomic definition has tended to work through essentialised accounts of human nature considered to be universal.

The Image of God in Theological Anthropology

Arguably, nowhere has that tendency towards taxonomy through essentializing definition been more pronounced than in relation to the central trope of Christian theological anthropology, the image of God. Despite the fact that the image came to occupy such a predominant position in Christian anthropology on Christological (and so soteriological) grounds, it has most frequently been pulled into the orbit of the doctrine of creation (often narrowly conceived) once christologically grounded soteriology has identified its key term. The image then all too easily functions as a placeholder concept to be conceptually filled in order to provide an essentialised account of human nature given at creation, a definitional answer to the anthropological question being construed as the task of theological anthropology.

Yet, at the same time, it has often been exactly those essentialiing renderings of the image in the direction of an account of universal human nature that have most frequently been operationalised in ways that have had significant consequences for practice in the cause of resisting dehumanisation. Even before the rise of dignity and human rights discourses to the centre of modern, Western culture and politics, with which it has an arguable germinal association,[7] the image of God has a long history of being deployed protectively to prevent or release human beings from dehumanising treatment.

On the face of it, then, considering the theme of this paper in relation to the image of God might both exemplify and problematise my basic position. I am going to say just a little more here about the tradition of interpreting the image, sufficient to provide a basis for further discussion.

Where the task of theological anthropology is construed as defining human nature, the assumption that we are seeking qualities uniquely held and which differentiate humans from other creatures seems only intensified by turning to the image of God as its vehicle.[8] Used as a tool for discerning and expressing human uniqueness in terms of similarity to, or the sharing of characteristics with, or having the capacity appropriately to respond to, God has tended to

[7] For both sides of the argument, see Roger Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004). Cf. the discussion of Jeremy Waldron, "The Image of God: Rights, Reason, Order," in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, ed. Jr John Witte and Frank S. Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[8] The assumption that definition focuses on distinctiveness and uniqueness to the exclusion of commonality and connection already privileges the image over creatureliness. Construing the image in terms of higher cognitive, spiritual or moral capacities of potent self-determination then pulls understanding of the image in the opposite direction from creatureliness, marked by dependence. Not least among the consequences are the interpretation of 'dominion' linked with our being in God's image; our relationship to the earth and to other creatures; our relationship to our bodies and embodiedness; the devaluing of passivity and giftedness in relation to God; the devaluing of nature and negative valorization of human beings seen as closer to or tied to nature than spirit/culture (women; indigenous peoples). The location of most discussions of the image primarily within the doctrine of creation, seems insufficient of itself to exert significant pressure to articulate the image in relation to a rich and thick understanding of creatureliness. Correspondingly, it is tempting here to construe salvation in terms of freedom from the material, the body, its dependencies but also all the particularising conditions of embodiment, which seems to be a disabling limitation inauthentically imprisoning us in a too animal life.

render the image in ways that emphasise aspects of human subjectivity.[9] Sometimes the image has been deployed without any specifiable content, more or less as an indicator that there is something sacred about each human being that confers dignity; dignity that is inalienable because conferred by God. Even without specification, however, the dignity-conferring element seems generally to be taken to reside 'within' each individual person and therefore to point to their internal, 'nonmaterial' constitution. More typically, 'higher-order' cognitive capacities such as rationality, consciousness, deliberative freedom are identified as that within each one of us that images God. The emphasis on subjectivity is a significant facilitator in the construction of accounts of human nature assumed to be universal – to apply to all human beings in all times and places. For this internal, supposedly universal, subjectivity will be instantiated in all human beings, regardless of any variations in body or embodiment.

Dignity in the Image

It is this way of understanding the image that has grounded strong currents of commitment to the idea of a natural, inalienable dignity residing within each individual human being that can be found in several overlapping strands of Christian theology and ethics. That notion has been used protectively to secure the dignity and assert the rights of some human beings in situations where they have been subject to systematically dehumanizing treatment by others – situations, in other words, where God's acting towards, and our talk of, redemption are needed. The image of God has been deployed, for instance, to resist and object to the treatment of native peoples by conquistadors; the enslavement of Africans by Europeans and white Americans. Similarly, those subject to oppressive dehumanisation have also asserted their own rights and dignity by claiming their humanity with reference to the image of God.

The enslavement of Africans and colonial treatment of indigenous peoples was legitimated in significant part by their exclusion from the circumference of humanity delineated by a definition of humanity in the image of God, centred on the possession of higher cognitive capacities. It was the perceived absence of rationality (or, at least, its presence in undeveloped, more animular forms) in non-Europeans that was used to justify their enslavement and other forms of degradation and violence: perceived either as closer to the beasts than to God, as more body than spirit (and therefore incapable of producing culture worthy of respect), or as undeveloped and 'stuck' in a childlike state (which could also then be subject of European projection and fantasy).[10] [1] Consequently, their bodies were liable to be used as beasts of burden, to be slaughtered, else converted and otherwise subject to European, Christian paternalism.

Similarly, where women have been seen as incapable of or deficient in the supposedly higher cognitive capacities or conditions of subjectivity definitive of being in the image, they

[9] The distinction between what are often called 'structural' and 'functional' understandings of the image is less relevant to my argument than might be supposed. Functional interpretations have a more dynamic intention, it is true, pointing to the utilsation of higher-order human capacities in order actively to enter relation with God. However, possession of such capacities by each individual human being tends to occupy much more attention than the purpose for which these capacities exist. The overwhelming interest in defining human nature as something that might be created for active relating to God, but actually subsists in the individual human being apart from such activation, means that – in practice and from the perspective of this paper – they share core characteristics with structural approaches, seeking to identify parallel correspondences between divine and human subjectivity. Both approaches point towards the same set of subjective capacities and both operate overwhelmingly under the auspices of the doctrine of creation, narrowly conceived. For typologies of the image's interpretation in the tradition, see, e.g., Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1986); Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2010).

[10] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), pp.38ff; Harry H. Singleton, *Black Theology and Ideology: Deideological Dimensions in the Theology of James H. Cone* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), pp.5f.

have been excluded from the possibilities of full participation in human life, especially those aspects requiring significant exercise of reason; associated with the perceived limitations of bodily identities as opposed to enjoying the freedoms of disembedded abstract reasoning.[11]

Where dehumanisation, oppression, marginalization are predicated on exclusion from (and domination[12] by those included in) the definition of humanity articulated through an interpretation of the divine image, an insistence on inclusion in the image, on the grounds that its definitional terms apply equally to the excluded group, has proved an effective (though sometimes painfully slow-burning) strategy. We find exactly this strategy in European Christian opposition to slavery,[13] and in the self assertions of black[14] and feminist[15] theologies. I do not wish to question this strategy as an effective means for visualizing and energizing possibilities of redemptive transformation in specific circumstances. At the moment, I simply make the obvious observation that such strategies not only leave the specific definition of the image intact, but leave unquestioned that the task of theological anthropology generally is definitional and the task in relation to the image of God, therefore, is to fill this conceptual placeholder with sufficient definitional content. I point this out now in order to flag the movement of my argument, which explores the possibility that both the task of theological anthropology and working out what it means to image God might have more to do with the practical consequences of *deploying* the image in resistance to slavery, oppression or marginalization than with its substantive, conceptual formulation.

In Whose Image?

A sense of exactly this possibility of re-conceiving the task of theological anthropology in performative rather than definitional terms I think can be glimpsed underlying (though often unexpressed in) some of the critiques of the dominant rendering of the image in black, feminist, contextual and liberation theologies. Here the self-assertion of humanity does not take the form of an argument to be incorporated under present definition. Rather, attention is drawn towards the material conditions of theological production that have deployed an understanding of humanity and interpretation of the image that is not an abstract universal as presented, rather reflects the experience and projects the self-understanding of those who have enjoyed the social, cultural, ecclesial and economic power to have steered the dominant tradition. Assertion of humanity on the established terms of the tradition would represent incorporation under falsely universalised norms, and consequently could not in reality be a form of self-assertion; nor, ironically, of that self-direction that the prevailing definition focused on higher cognitive capacities make definitive of human being. Feminist theologies have been especially clear and especially vocal in critiquing the emphasis on rationality[16] and an understanding of the human

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[11] See, e.g., Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, pp.93f., 109ff., 13f; *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1985), pp.70ff., 170; Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), pp.xx, 114f., 21f., 25ff; Tina Beattie, *Woman* (London: Continuum2003), p.96.

[12] Hopkins, *Down, up, and Over*, p.17; Ruether, *Women-Church*, p.107, 29; Gonzalez, *Created in God's Image*, pp.86f.

[13] David Brion Davis, *In the Image of God: Religion, Moral Values, and Our Heritage of Slavery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p.198 suggests a reciprocal relatioship between interpretations of the image (or at least its centrality) and abolitionism.

[14] See, e.g., James Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp.34, 53f; *A Black Political Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974), pp.67, 74ff., 86ff., 100.

[15] Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, pp.102ff.describing a liberal feminist position.

[16] Disability theologies have also problematised definitions that privilege and presuppose, not just rational but physical capacities, often reflecting in very subtle ways on the complexities of reinterpreting the image, redemption and eschatology. See e.g., Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Medi Ann Volpe, "Irresponsible Love:

that privileges, not just rationality, but a particular interpretation of it, that celebrates detached abstraction, withdraws rational souls from bodies and thereby all means of embodiment in social as well as material worlds, individuals from relationships.

Black and feminist theologies adopting this sort of critique of the image can be understood (and can, indeed, function) as expanding and redefining the image and the associated understanding of humanity, rather than challenging or dispensing with the assumption that the task of theological anthropology is essentially one of definition or that the image functions as a definitional device. However, in their strongest currents, as well as problematizing prevailing definition that falsely universalises a partial experience, understanding and definition of humanity, they are also questioning (sometimes only implicitly) the possibility of providing substantive, non-contextual definitions of the human; definitions that are supposedly universal, abstracted and disembedded from the particularities and contingencies of human lives and their specific material, social, cultural embodiment which both shape and mis-shape our humanity concretely. Human difference, contingency and particularity, borne by our different bodies and material, cultural and social embodiment, are part of what it means to be human.[17] And that gets pretty close to suggesting that there is no universal, context-independent human nature. That, in turn, makes the work of definition – if that is still what one thinks one is about – very different indeed. So different, perhaps, that I wonder whether what is really involved is a leap into an understanding of the task of theological anthropology as something different from the taxonomic interest in definition.[18] In situations where fully flourishing humanity is a counterfactual, feminist and black theologies articulate theological anthropology by emphasizing relationality – often, though not always, by redefining the image of God. This is quite different, it seems to me, from the turn to relationality as it sometimes appears in mainstream theological anthropology, where the image is redefined in relational terms in correspondence with the internal relationality of the triune God – where the quality of relationship intended between human beings corresponds to that within the godhead, repeating the kind of noetic, platonic parallelism that we find in structural approaches. What is missing sometimes is a connection between the human relationality that images God and the active relating of the triune God with the world creatively, redemptively and eschatologically. Despite the emphasis on relationality, the relationship between imaging of God and God is a static one, the grammatical sense and mood present indicative.[19]

Feminist, black, liberation and other contextual theologies are written, not only from the perspectives of those marginalized or excluded from the theological tradition, but out of an experience of dehumanisation and oppression; written, moreover, out of and as an active commitment towards redemptive transformation and human flourishing. The relational understanding of humanity, even when it is offered in the form of a revised definition of the image, is intended performatively. The tense is future; the mood a combination of the optative and interrogative (since the possibility of humanisation is to be sought out in the contingent uncertainties of the present through 'right relating' towards the open future). The dominant

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Rethinking Intellectual Disability, Humanity and the Church," *Modern Theology* 25, no. 3 (2009); Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability* (New York: Fordham, 2012), Ch.5; Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), esp. pp.227-38.

[17] John M. Hull, "Blindness and the Face of God: Towards a Theology of Disability," in *The Human Image of God*, ed. Hans-Georg Ziebertz, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Karen Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp.44, 163ff; Ian A. McFarland, *Difference & Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001).

[18] James Cone makes this explicit in refusing an understanding of rationality and freedom abstracted from rebellion and struggle against a racially oppressive society. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), Ch.5.

[19] Cf. Alistair McFadyen, "The Trinity and Human Individuality," *Theology* XCV, no. Jan/Feb (1992).

location of the image is redemptive or eschatological; that is, intended to serve practically in the cause of redemptive transformation. Where we have descriptions here, they are proleptic, not so much describing a humanity already firmly in place as facilitating, visualizing and energizing enacted commitment in practice towards redemptive transformation of the conditions of humanisation, often through membership of redemptive community.[20]

The Post-9/11 Torture Literature

Through the discussion so far, I have been moving towards and experimenting with the possibility that theological anthropology be understood as a performative and transformative, rather than definitional, discourse: its tense future; its mood, optative. I turn now, seeking to test and explore this possibility further, albeit briefly, to the post-9/11 English-language discussion of torture in theology and Christian ethics. Digging beneath the surface of this discussion, I believe we can see significant clues pointing towards a similarly expansive understanding of the task of theological anthropology, signing us also towards a performative understanding of imaging God as the active seeking of humanity in situations of complex and comprehensive dehumanisation.

I have chosen this literature partly because it is much smaller and more contained than the literatures I have been referring to in the discussion up to this point. In addition, it has the further advantage of being narrowly focused on a single issue. That single issue, moreover, is one where we are likely to find theological anthropology being deployed in relation to practice in a specific context. Although torture is an issue that might be considered to belong primarily to theological genres focused on practice (e.g., Christian ethics), any discussion of torture inevitably requires explicit thematisation of the human. Theological discussion therefore finds itself reaching for or assuming an underlying theological anthropology. Moreover, the post-9/11 discussion of torture is non-abstract in a further sense too. It reflects and arises from the material conditions of theological production, the embodiment and embeddedness of theology and theologians in a specific geopolitical (read often explicitly also as a theopolitical) context in relation to a specific material practice.

The literature is (almost[21]) united in judging torture so intrinsically iniquitous that it is deemed indefensible in any circumstances. What makes it indefensible is its interpretation as an attack on the very humanity of the human being. Generally speaking, the discussion operates with an understanding of torture consonant with definitions in international legal instruments, involving very severe levels of pain, injury and/or psychological, spiritual or physical harm. Consequently, the effects of torture are described as threatening – and sometimes realizing – the deconstruction or dehumanisation of its victims.[22] Almost universally, Christian resistance to and critique of torture are grounded in theological anthropology, brought into operational contact with the phenomenon by explicit allusion to the image of God. The image is deployed in resistance both to the dehumanisation that torture transacts and the demonisation of victims and potential victims that prepares for, accompanies and facilitates it. The image can serve this function of countering or resisting demonizing dehumanisation because it is presented in a way

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[20] Hopkins, *Down, up, and Over*, pp.226ff. speaks of Jesus as the spirit of liberation, which is then identified as the image of God within oppressed 'black folk' which presses towards the construction of a new society; George C. L. Cummings, "The Slave Narratives as Source of Black Theological Discourse: The Spirit and Eschatology," in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

[21] The exceptions are Nigel Biggar, "Individual Rights Versus Common Security? Christian Moral Reasoning About Torture," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27, no. 1 (2014); Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Reflection on the Problem of 'Dirty Hands'," in *Torture: A Collection*, ed. Sanford Levinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[22] Kelly Denton-Borhaug, "A Theological Reflection on *Torture and Democracy*," *Dialog* 47, no. 3 (2008): p.224; William Schweiker, "Torture and Religious Practice," ibid.: p.215.

that affirms – indeed, sacralises – the inherent dignity of the human person.[23] Torture is then represented as that which attacks and can damage (or destroy?) the God-given, dignity-conferring core of human being, presented explicitly or assumed implicitly as an assault on the image.

So far, this appears to be a very straightforward operational deployment of the image as a carrier of human dignity, functioning within the ambit of the doctrine of creation, narrowly construed, conferring natural rights in a protective way. This looks like a definitional use where humanity appears as though it were a known and fixed datum, securely in existence and to be protected. That judgement about the literature has more than a grain of truth about it. And yet I think there is something more ambiguous and more complex going on in this literature.

There is in fact very little interest shown in this literature in explicit, substantive definitions of the image. Almost universally, the image is devoid of specified content, functioning more as a vague placeholder for affirming that both the image and the dignity it confers on the individual are inalienable (because they are the gift of God).[24] It is that affirmation that protects the individual from assaults on dignity.

Except that cannot be quite correct can it? The torture literature actually assumes, and sometimes makes explicit, that the reason torture is a moral and a theological issue is precisely that it DOES have the capacity to deconstruct the human, to alienate a person from their imaging of God. The image sustains a sense of inherent dignity deserving of respect, but what makes the assertion of that respect so urgent is that circumstances pertain in which the image and the dignity it affords are being disrespected, with consequences that might be expressed in terms of serious damage to the humanity of the tortured person, or in theological terms, to the image of God. In other words, we are presented here not just with an assertion of dignity as a bulwark against affronts that have no capacity seriously to damage, disorient and disorder our humanity; rather as a measure of torture's power, not just to visit indignities on us, but actually to disrupt, deconstruct and perhaps even to destroy our humanity: to make us *un*dignified.

This element is mainly implicit in much of the literature, which after all is focused on preventing the torture of future potential victims. But it is brought to chillingly powerful expression in Diana Ortiz' testimony, where she recounts how she lives without the image of God; or, rather, she lives imaging the 'dead God', having internalised the commentary of the Guatamalen policeman who was the first to rape her: 'your God is dead'. And in place of an image of the living God she lives with a symbol of the one bit of agency she has left in relation to her torture (except of course her commitment to testify and bear witness on behalf of other Guatamalen victims and survivors) – the razor blade that was an instrument of protection but is now potentially an instrument of her own death.[25] Several other contributors to the discussion of torture post-9/11 draw attention to the way in which torture involves the exercise of absolute power over the victim rendered completely vulnerable, constructing a totalitarian, 'demonic'

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[23] David P. Gushee, "Against Torture," *Theology Today* 63(2006): pp.355f; "The Contemporary U.S. Torture Debate in Christian Historical Perspective," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39, no. 4 (2011): p.591; Diana Fritz Cates, "Experiential Narratives of Rape and Torture," ibid.38, no. 1 (2010): p.49; David P. Gushee, "Six Reasons Why Torture Is Always Wrong," in *Torture Is a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Persons of Conscience Speak Out*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Denton-Borhaug, "A Theological Reflection on *Torture and Democracy*," pp.223f; Jean Porter, "Torture and the Christian Conscience: A Response to Jeremy Waldron," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 3 (2008): pp.345ff; Jeremy Waldron, "What Can Christian Teaching Add to the Debate About Torture?," *Theology Today* 63, no. 3 (2006): pp.337f.

[24] See, e.g.,David P. Gushee, "Against Torture," ibid; "Six Reasons Why Torture Is Always Wrong; "The Contemporary U.S. Torture Debate in Christian Historical Perspective."; others seem explicitly to suggest the notion of dignity grounded in the image of God is interchangeable with secular, including Kantian, construals (so, e.g.,Denton-Borhaug, "A Theological Reflection on *Torture and Democracy*."). Porter, on the other hand, makes a clear link between the image and rationality as the power for free self-determination, which is directly attacked and damaged through torture (Porter, "Torture and the Christian Conscience," pp.348ff.).

[25] Diana Ortiz, "Theology, International Law, and Torture," *Theology Today* 63(2006): pp.345f.

framework by blocking access to transcendent frameworks of meaning as well as of assistance.[26] Ortiz' testimony evidences how that totalitarian framework can follow the survivor long after torture's active cessation. The meanings embedded in torture are internalised in the very core of one's identity and sense of oneself as a human being. In place of the image of the living God sits the image of a 'dead God' and in one's living one images (or at least believes oneself to image) that 'death'. Not the image of the crucified, which in light of the resurrection might be a redemptive and transformative presence, but the God who abandoned her who effectively died, who is present to her only as death.[27]

Both aspects of what is presented here suggest strongly that the literature implicitly operates in the context of redemption, at least as much as creation, and that its interest in deploying the image is not primarily after all definitional. Humanity is not thematised as a fixed and definite datum, securely in place. Where humanity is subject to significant harm, has collapsed, is absent – there theological discourse has to function beyond the confines of the straightforwardly moral, distinguishing between right and wrong conduct. Rather, the situation described as demonic, deconstructing the humanity of human beings, 'cries out' to be taken up into theological discourse as a means for drawing on the energies for rehumanisation made available through God's active movement to redeem.

On the whole, however, it is true that on the surface the torture literature functions mostly protectively and preventatively, more to resist future dehumanisation through torture than to offer redemptive transformation of the souls already broken and twisted through the twisting and breaking of their bodies.

That being said, though, some of this literature makes explicit what is implicit in most of the rest. In a way that parallels imprecisely what we find in the feminist and black theological discussions already referred to, the torture discussion is undertaken in the context of a commitment to a deeper and broader redemptive transformation of the rhetorical, social and political context in which torture takes place and can be discussed as a morally defensible option. This resistance is presented sometimes as countering or undoing the demonic and idolatrous framing of the relationships between some human beings and others by the practice and advocacy of torture in the USA post-9/11. Occasionally this is spelt out in ways that make it clear that resistance to the dehumanising language and totalizing narrative that accompanies torture embodies resistance to a demonic and idolatrous social ordering. By extension, it is not over-reaching to say it is a performed construction of a differently constituted sociality: a contribution towards reconstructed national and international polity.[28] Insofar as this is

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[26] David P. Gushee, "Against Torture," ibid.: pp.350f; George Hunsinger, "Torture *Is* the Ticking Bomb: Why the Necessity Defense Fails," *Dialog* 47, no. 3 (2008): p.233.

[27] The crucified God is mentioned in several other contributions to this literature, though most often in ways that do little more than gesture towards the fact that Christian faith has at its centre a tortured human being (usually it is Christ's humanity rather than divinity that is recalled), even asking a version of WWJD: 'who would Jesus torture?' See Gushee, "Against Torture," p.363; "The Contemporary U.S. Torture Debate in Christian Historical Perspective," pp.591f; William T. Cavanaugh, "Making Enemies: The Imagination of Torture in Chile and the United States," *Theology Today* 63(2006): pp.322f; Denton-Borhaug, "A Theological Reflection on *Torture and Democracy*," pp.224f; Waldron, "What Can Christian Teaching Add to the Debate About Torture?," pp.342f. Hoffmeyer offers more substantive and constructive consideration, setting the cross in context of resurrection and therefore redemption explicitly. See John F. Hoffmeyer, "Torture and Theology of the Cross," *Dialog* 47, no. 3 (2008). It would be interesting to see this theme developed more thoroughly in relation to theological discussion of torture. But the reverse move seems even more compelling – to return from the torture discussion to theological anthropology and consider anew the significance of the cross for a christological definition of the image; of the crucified Jesus as the clue to what humanity and God are.

[28] Cavanaugh, "Making Enemies," pp.248f; "Torture and Eucharist: A Regretful Update," in *Torture Is a Moral Issue: Christians. Jews, Muslims, and People of Conscience Speak Out*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Cates, "Experiential Narratives of Rape and Torture; Hoffmeyer, "Torture and Theology of the

explicitly alluded to in these texts, love[29] and sometimes justice[30] emerge variously as the active agents of or terminus for redemptive transformation. Loving or seeking justice do not function here primarily, I think, as means for the appropriate recognition of humanity or image of God already, unproblematically in place. Rather, they appear to be tools for seeking humanity where its existence and possibility are in real question; asking the anthropological question as a *real* question (and, arguably, asking it theologically). It is above all a refusal of a group of Christian theologians mostly living in the US to be conscripted into, or to overhear as bystanders, the idolatrous and totalizing demonisation offered through some of the more extreme rhetoric of the 'war on terror'.

I see here parallels with Psalm 8, which poses the anthropological question theologically but appears not to answer it. Except the psalm is itself is an answer; in singing this psalm (and the whole corpus of the psalter), there is human imaging of God. If we look more at what is going on through the production of this literature, perhaps more than at the way it uses and defines the image within the texts, do we perhaps also see a performative answer to the anthropological question? an imaging of God in practices of asking what humanity is and how it is to be sought and redemptively transformed in this situation? It might be considered itself a way of seeking the humanity of those proclaimed enemies, which the literature terms sometimes love of neighbour in the context of globalisation (the globalisation of American power, more specifically) in demonic forms. In the context of the rhetoric and practices of the 'war on terror', especially in its earliest iterations, it is potentially transformative to relate terrorist suspects as neighbours together within the same community, especially where torture happens often by rendition to areas legally constructed to be outside the constraints of either law or moral community. The balance of the literature is suspicious of the identification of enemies in a context where enmity appears rhetorically manufactured (especially under the influence of Schmitt's political theology), and so tends not to speak very much about what is perhaps the most relevant, but also the most ambiguous biblical anthropological and ethical, trope – enemies and love of enemies, respectively. Construing this literature and of the imaging of God required in our material, cultural, political situatedness as conjoining love with enmity might have more creative possibilities for those of us who acknowledge that we have enemies and seek to practise enmity towards terrorists in a way that is a form of also seeking their humanity rather than denigrating it; disciplined by love rather than a mode of hatred. But that is another paper.

Whether expressed in relation to the more obviously particularising and situated biblical anthropological trope of neighbour or enemy combined in active orientation through love, we see here the imaging of God (and the authors' understanding of what that means) evident in seeking the humanisation of damaged and damaging humanity together in new patterns of relating towards their mutual flourishing; which is to say, not only a recognition of the actual humanity of those who have been or might in the future be tortured, but the humanisation of the rest of us, damaged through all the ways in which we are implicated in the 'war on terror' and that to which terrorists believe they respond. As in feminist and black theologies, theological anthropology appears as a performative discourse enabling and bringing humanity

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Cross; Catherine Keller, "Territory, Terror and Torture: Dream-Reading the Apocalypse," *Feminist Theology* 14, no. 1 (2005).

[29] Though it has to be said, rather too often instead of substantial discussion of love (especially of enemies), we have rather vague affirmations – mainly of love of neighbour, where neighbour appears as a guise for importing generic universal love rather than thinking of specific human beings in particular forms of material proximity in specifiable political and material contexts that are the locus of God's relating to us redemptively. For the appearance of 'love' in the literature, see, e.g., Gushee, "The Contemporary U.S. Torture Debate in Christian Historical Perspective," p.591; Porter, "Torture and the Christian Conscience," p.343.

[30] Cates, "Experiential Narratives of Rape and Torture; Cavanaugh, "Making Enemies; Diana Ortiz, "Theology, International Law, and Torture," ibid.

where it is absent or at serious risk; imaging God by seeking the human as sought by God in active movement towards the redemption and eschatological consummation of specific human beings in the specific material and social conditions in which we find ourselves – or rather do not and cannot find ourselves, except as we are sought and found first by God.

Conclusion

The primary task of theological anthropology is not to give an account of universal human nature, nor to provide supposedly universal definitions of the image of God. Its task is not to *define* the image of God but *to image* God; to be commentary on and participant in God's active seeking of humanity in its full flourishing, focused on those places where humanity and its flourishing are counterfactual. This makes the image more like a verb than it is a noun; more dynamic than it is static; more performative than indicative.

One consequence of this performative approach to theological anthropology is that it closes the distance between the anthropological tropes of dogmatic and systematic theology and those of Christian ethics and practical theology. The point, I am suggesting, of theological anthropology is to not so much to describe as to facilitate performance of humanity: our seeking the full humanity of ourselves and others as we are being sought by God. Thus the key coordinates of anthropological doctrine (such as the image) I argue have formally identical function and purpose to the key anthropological tropes of Christian ethics (neighbour; enemy; stranger; brother) and the key verbs we find operationalising the creative performance of redemptive rehumanisation (love; forgiveness). All share a common purpose and function: the seeking of full humanisation in relation to God, self and others, especially where we encounter constricting realities which dehumanise, disorient or diminish our full humanity. This seeking of the human, rather than description, is, I suggest, the chief anthropological interest of Christian faith and theology.

Notwithstanding all that, however, deploying the concept of the image of God – even using it to define the human – can function as a tool for seeking the human as sought by God, imaging God, in our concrete proximate contexts. This moves us away from the notion that the image of God is something within us that we possess as a defining aspect of our nature. At the same time, it also moves us away from the idea that what is imaged is an aspect of the divine nature. Whether that be construed in terms of capacities or of relationality, traditional ways of construing the image construct a static form of parallelism between divine and human natures. Even where those natures are construed in relational, and therefore dynamic, terms, we have tended to construe our imaging of God as a static mirroring within us of what is within God. This more performative approach suggests our imaging of God represents our being caught up in the active presence and movement of God towards the world creatively, redemptively and eschatologically. We image God as that movement of God works through us, as we are caught up in it, in an active seeking of human and creaturely flourishing.

I acknowledge this performative move is ambiguous and has significant dangers that cannot be easily side-stepped. My talk of dehumanization as existential possibility, especially combined with my reluctance to affirm the possession of an abstract human essence or nature, potentially sacrifices the security of humanity as an inalienable possession. It is that, after all, that has often funded talk of dignity and rights in respect of those regarded as less than human, that secures their dignity in ways demanding recognition, despite its active denial or denigration by abusers and oppressors, whether systemic or interpersonal. Moreover, my argument is capable of being read as suggesting that our humanity is entirely in the gift of others. That the dehumaniser always achieves dehumanisation of and within the abused, tortured, defiled, denigrated, oppressed and marginalised. That, without an internally possessed, fixed and static, asocial universal human nature, there is no point of resilience or

resistance to practices of dehumanisation perpetrated by abusers, torturers, racialized or patriarchal systems of oppression and exclusion. Without an internal essential and inalienable human core, withdrawn from interaction, is our humanity at the mercy of those with the power to refuse its recognition?

I have tried to describe adverting to a notion of human nature or essence (whether secular or theological) as a tool for the recognition of human dignity in resistance to dehumanisation in performative ways. That draws attention towards their effectiveness as tools for rehumanisation, regardless of whether there is some internal essential core of humanity resistant to attacks on dignity and base humanity. That will, I am aware, be thought inadequate by some. Must there not be some *thing* there worthy of recognition? Capable at least of being the target of what I call rehumanising activity, but might be considered better expressed as a rekindling of a humanity occluded and subject to profound damage, distortion or disorientation, but still somehow there?

Whilst I acknowledge these concerns, I find myself wanting – despite the dangers – to retain the idea that our humanity – resilient though it can indeed be – really is in the hands of others (and others' in ours); that human beings can be dehumanised and not just subject to dehumanising treatment (where the word then seems just a rhetorical flourish). We really can do damage to others and be ourselves damaged. Human beings can be damaged and damaging in their humanity (in fact, that is indeed the reality, as any half-way realistic doctrine of sin brings to expression). And it is only in facing the depths of damage done to and done by us as having the possibility of radical dehumanisation that we take phenomena like torture, abuse, racism and patriarchy with the radical seriousness they demand; moreover, only so might we understand what rehumanisation entails. Risky indeed though it is, I want theological anthropology to sit a little while longer with what some victims of torture, abuse, oppression, report to be the consequences before supplying reassurance that they have not lost their humanity or sustained significant damage to it. I have met some survivors of torture – usually in circumstances where they have been subject to further revictimization; I have read too much Primo Levi; and I have met very many victims and survivors of systemic domestic and sexual abuse that makes me want to say that these can be circumstances in which the anthropological question is a REAL question. As Levi's incredible riff on The Shema Israel suggests that precedes the English translation of *If This is a Man*: the 'if' has uncertain answer.[31] The damage and dehumanization are real. Again, to avoid misunderstanding, I also think the damage is universal – these 'extreme' cases make more obvious what is the case for the rest of us as victims, perpetrators, bystanders or as mostly is the case, a mixture of all three. We are dealing here with sin in its most comprehensive and radical reality.[32]

Instead of a fixed and inalienable human nature or essence that secures dignity and identifies where we might speak of humanity, dehumanisation and rehumanisation, I suggest we do not look first towards the human as an independent existent or a universal essence. Rather, I suggest we turn our attention first to the God in active movement towards the full flourishing of humanity (full humanisation), and so towards biological human beings in their particularity as the loci of God's active movement towards us creatively, redemptively and eschatologically.

The relation of Christian talk of the human to the activity of God, eschatologically and redemptively as well as creatively, is hardly novel. It is written into the DNA of theological anthropology. A sense of that embeddedness of the human – and therefore also talk of the human – in the multi-faceted movement of God towards the world is the reason that theological anthropology took so long to constellate into a definite, individuated doctrinal locus. It is also

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[31] Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man/the Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987).
[32] See further McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*.

why Christian faith turned to the image of God as its main conceptual placeholder to understand human being as related to by God; not because it looked first to the creation narratives in search of an original essence and found the phrase there, but through a strong sense that Jesus was actively imag*ing* God in his life, death and resurrection (oriented towards those whose humanity was in doubt or at risk). Just as the creation narratives themselves were implicates of Israelite faith in God experienced as reconciling and saving the whole of the created order, so Christians looked back to those narratives out of a consciousness of the universal extensiveness of God's movement to reconcile and redeem the world, in which human responsiveness and responsibility played a significant role. So we are returned to Psalm 8's posing of the anthropological question in a way that frames anthropological questioning and questionableness in the context of specific consciousness of God's movement towards the world, creatively, redemptively and eschatologically, which incidentally begins also to suggest how we might distinguish theological from secular anthropologies – not primarily by the answers given to the anthropological question, but by the way in and the reasons for which the question is asked.

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