
Image of God – A Resident Alien

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“The kingdom of God is so close and nearby that we might have overstepped it in our amusement in the playgrounds of promise.”
–Vitor Westhelle¹

Any individual in a foreign land is identified as a resident alien. There might be different terminologies for each country, but still, the idea and concept are the same. Jesus Christ as a Savior, with divine representation around the world, is never a resident alien to those who know him as Savior. Yet, when encountered outside his human homeland of Jewish Palestine, the person of Jesus Christ is always a resident alien within any political system because it is difficult to understand someone from another time and/or culture. Jesus Christ, within the time of his historical and human life, believed and followed an entirely expansive idea of belongingness. During his days Jesus Christ might not have traveled to a different country, but expanding his family beyond his blood relations in itself is going beyond the horizons. The verses from Matthew’s Gospel 12:48-49: “Who is my mother and who are my brothers?” and pointing to his disciples, his statement: “Here are my mother and my brothers!” is one example in the ministry of Jesus Christ of this ever-extended family. In this sense, Jesus was moving beyond cultural assumptions of the meaning of family relationships in his own time and culture.

What is the common element that Jesus found among the individuals around him? The words of Jesus to Philip “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) and also the words from the parable “Truly I tell you, just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:34–40) are the clear words of Jesus Christ that draw out the commonality: the commonality between God and human beings and between human beings among each other is that of the image of an extended family. One of the purposes of this crossing of boundaries may have been to place in a different perspective our understanding of the *imago dei* in human beings and creation. This may lead us to the assumption that talking about commonality, or equality, leads us to the concept of the image of God in

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Christian theology. In light of the above verses, the commonality, or equality, Jesus found in everyone is affirmatively grounded in the image of God. Can anyone see the image of God? Every creation illuminates the image of God. Often this image is quite evident, and yet at times, it is very difficult for an individual to experience the image of God within a holistic dimension of co-creation.

The context in which we are living out our day-to-day lives confuses us, leaving us unable to define ourselves. Either we will be blinded, in a biblical sense, unable to recognize the image of God, or we will be driven into such chaos that we forget that we bear that image. In the real world, we are often unable to recognize the image of God in creation, or in the “other.” Therefore, the very thought of the term “resident alien” breeds further separation leading toward the sinful attitude of selfishness in all areas of life. Unless we stay strong, we will be compelled to take several forms of physical, emotional, or mental reaction against that resident alien which in fact is our neighbor or an extended expression of creation bearing God’s image, which may result in hurt and prejudice. Spending more time to recognize and contemplate the image of God (*Imago Dei*) in others and the all creation will give more insight to understanding and experiencing the presence and ongoing navigation of the image of God, which, in turn, may guide us toward a peaceful co-existence with one another and creation as a whole.

1. Vitor Westhelle, *Eschatology and Space: The Lost Dimension in Theology Past and Present*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 79.

Imago Dei²

That human beings are created in the image of God³ is a common Christian understanding in theological anthropology. Through the development within the theological discourse of the attributes of God, the image of God is defined from a divine perspective. This has narrowed the image of God to a particular definition leaving out the “other,” in the sense of specific human and divine creation, as the distorted image: distorted, and deficient from the attributes of God. The following paragraphs are an attempt to read the image of God from philosophical, creation, and scientific perspectives for a better understanding.

Irenaeus and the Imago Dei

The understandings of the human being in classical paganism⁴ and Gnosticism⁵ encouraged Irenaeus, the second-century early church father, to undertake a thorough study on human beings.⁶ Irenaeus asserted that we are images of God holistically—in body and soul—and are created by God. He claims that this truth is found only in the Jewish-Christian tradition (Gen. 1:27) and it is the revelation of God. It is not only our spirit, but every aspect of our humanity that reflects the image of God and God’s likeness in us.⁷ For him, the whole creation is the work of one supreme and all-good God, and God is equally glorified in creation.⁸ The creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God involves all three persons of the Trinity.⁹ In understanding theological anthropology, Irenaeus provides a promising model of a multi-faceted mosaic of the evolution of human capacities, “the state of

2. Due to scope and limitations the research of *Imago Dei* in this essay is limited to Christian perspectives.

3. The Image of God or *Imago Dei* implies that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. In discussing the Image of God, Dwight N. Hopkins takes Rosemary Radford Ruether’s understanding that God’s image means a kind of democratic participation, promoting everyone’s equal value and equal axis to all the best created by human culture with harmonious interweaving of ecological and human systems. For Hopkins, the theological notion of *Imago Dei* in Christianity becomes the practical imitation of Jesus. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 34–35. The contribution of these two contemporary theologians seem to be in line with the one that Vitor Westhelle tries to convey in his various works.

4. Gods were modeled in the image and likeness of human beings, which brought the image of God down to the image of men and women with all the foibles and weakness they possess. Such interpretation reduced the image of gods to ridicule and mockery. Thomas G. Weinandy, “St. Irenaeus and the *Imago Dei*: The Importance of Being Human,” *Logos* 6 (2003): 16.

5. One of the many threads of Gnosticism believes that in human beings there is a constant conflict between the evil matter of body and the divine being of soul. Gnostics believed that the material world was the work of lesser, mischievous, or some misguided, deity. Thomas G. Weinandy, “St. Irenaeus and the *Imago Dei*: The Importance of Being Human,” *Logos* 6 (2003): 16–17.

6. Thomas G. Weinandy, “St. Irenaeus and the *Imago Dei*: The Importance of Being Human,” *Logos* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 15–17.

7. Weinandy, 17.

8. Weinandy, 17–18.

9. Weinandy, 18–20.

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immaturity and innocence.”¹⁰ This approach, coincidentally, was also used by scientific scholars to understand the image of God in the process of evolution and development.

Creation and the Imago Dei

Prioritizing between nature and human beings is a constant struggle in creation theology. From the creation narrative, creation of nature came first, followed by the creation of a human being. But the reasoning capacity of human beings is often used to claim the upper hand of humanity over creation. Thomas Aquinas asserts that by virtue of possessing a rational soul, human beings alone bear the image of God.¹¹ That exclusionary quest for defining the *Imago Dei* is further developed in the Christo-centric claim that Christ is the true image (eikon) of God.¹² David Fergusson, in contrast to these approaches, moves beyond limiting the image of God to Christ. Instead, Fergusson points to contextual reality and proposes “...to retain it [*Imago Dei*] in the context of describing human existence everywhere and not only in Christo.”¹³ He also agrees with David H. Kelsey’s understanding that “Our imaging of God in everyday existence is not confined to some religious province of life but is expressed in a multitude of human practices, institutions, and forms of life.”¹⁴ In the concluding remarks of his article “Humans Created According to the *Imago Dei*: An Alternative Proposal,” Fergusson proposes human beings as God’s creatures of flesh and blood, different but related to other creatures of the earth.¹⁵ It is appropriate to appreciate David Fergusson’s attempt to relate *Imago Dei* close to the contextual realities moving beyond the traditional anthropocentric approach.

10. John De Smedt and Helen De Cruz, “The *Imago Dei* as a Work in Progress: A Perspective from Paleoanthropology,” *Zygon* 49, no. 1 (March 2014): 149.

11. David Fergusson, “Humans Created According to the *Imago Dei*: An Alternative Proposal,” *Zygon* 48, no. 2 (June 2013): 440.

12. Fergusson, 447.

13. Fergusson, 449.

14. Fergusson, 450.

15. Fergusson, 451.

To go beyond the attempt of Fergusson, the concept of “Deep Ecology”¹⁶ serves as the best milestone for claiming that human beings are no greater than the rest of the creation: we are part of the created order. Human beings cannot survive without nature, but nature can survive on its own. We who have benefitted from a world system that has isolated and insulated itself from closeness to the natural world, have in fact destroyed nature. Now some of us are trying hard to protect and build nature, because we are awakening to the reality that our existence is at stake due to the imbalanced natural order. In this process, we claim that we are the caretakers and co-creators¹⁷ of God’s creation.

Science and the Imago Dei

Through the ages, science and religion have traveled on parallel tracks alongside each other, despite various attempts to bridge these two disciplines. Science always looks for reason and proof whereas religions pillar themselves on faith. But the developments of science and technology in studying creation have attracted religion and tradition, not to deny, but to accept, some of the truth in scientific inventions. One of the best recent examples is a belief in evolution theory interpreted by the Roman Catholic Pontiff, Pope Francis.¹⁸ The contextual developments in theology have brought reasoning to the forefront to question and answer the scientific realities from a faith perspective. The paleoanthropological studies of Imago Dei believe that “phylogenetic, behavioral, and anatomical continuities between humans and other species have prompted some empirically informed theologians to deny this anthropocentric notion of Imago Dei.”¹⁹ This brings out that the universal understanding of the image of God is not restricted to humans alone. In fact, other theologians have developed these insights already. One of these theologians, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,²⁰ believed that the image of God is present in the whole

16. Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer, first introduced the phrase “deep ecology” to environmental literature in 1973. According to Deep Ecology human beings are equal with the rest of creation. David R. Keller, “Deep Ecology,” in *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, July 18, 2008, 206, <http://www.uky.edu/OtherOrgs/AppalFor/Readings/240%20-%20Reading%20-%20Deep%20Ecology.pdf>.

17. Human beings are God’s created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom, to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us- the nature that is not only our own genetic heritage, but also the entire human community and the evolutionary and ecological reality in which and which we belong. Exercising this agency is said to be God’s will for humans. Philip J. Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 27.

18. <https://www.facebook.com/ishaantharoor>, “Pope Francis Says Evolution Is Real and God Is No Wizard,” *Washington Post*, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/10/28/pope-francis-backs-theory-of-evolution-says-god-is-no-wizard/>.

19. Smedt and Cruz, “The *Imago Dei* as a Work in Progress: A Perspective from Paleoanthropology,” 137.

20. Juana Ramírez de Asbaje known as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was born in 1648 or 1651 at the hacienda of San Miguel Nepantla near Mexico City. There are two records for Sor Juana’s date of birth,

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creation. The following section provides a glimpse of Sor Juana’s understanding of the image of God.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Imago Dei

Due to her interweaving of the image of God with different characters, Sor Juana’s articulation makes her a unique theologian of her times in seventeenth century Mexico. Sor Juana’s understanding of the image of God is drawn in the light of her writings²¹ from Divine Narcissus.

Divine Narcissus

Divine Narcissus is an excellent literary play of Sor Juana’s composition. It creates continuous anxiety in its readers (Christian) because of the intertwining of biblical narratives and Ovid’s myth from the classical era.²² Sor Juana brings out an eco-friendly, more humanistic version of biblical narratives. This play is a rich work, providing the scope of her knowledge of geography, astrology, biology, theology, etc. The play illuminates several themes such as obedience, purpose, the image of God, the wrath of God, worship, death, etc. However, the image of God is one of the important and interesting themes that runs from the beginning to the end of the play. Human Nature, who is a protagonist in the play, is represented by two aspects, Synagogue and Paganism, who are

one from the baptismal record dated December 2, 1648, and another November 12, 1651, from the convent when she entered the convent in 1668. (Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell, eds., *The Answer / La Respuesta*, trans. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell, Second. New York: The Feminist Press, 2018, 2-4). She was a natural child to Pedro Manuel de Asbaje and Isabel Ramírez. Pedro Ramírez was her grandfather whose library was a solace for Sor Juana’s intellectual quest. She started to write poems at the age of eight (Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Poems, Protest, and a Dream: Selected Writings*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden. New York: Penguin Books, 1997, xxii–xxiv). At that time, women were not able to enter into higher education, so she decided to join a convent. The convent was equipped with a library and a peaceful learning space. Her literary contributions favourably compared her to the greatest poets of Spain. In the year 1695, Sor Juana became the victim of an epidemic and died (Arenal and Powell, 14–16).

21. Due to scope and limitations, the study of image of God in this section is confined only to *Divine Narcissus*.

22. Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 68.

like teachers for Human Nature. Human nature alarms both Synagogue and Paganism by saying that at some point in time they will exchange their places with each other.²³ This is a very strong assertion that at some point in time Paganism contributes to knowledge and Synagogue will be unknowing at that time. Sor Juana does not see Paganism as evil, but rather believes that there is knowledge in Paganism that contributes to genuine theological understanding. In other words, Sor Juana's vision is inclusive of pagan cultures. This idea opens doors for the universal attribution of the image of God in the whole creation.

In Sor Juana's play, the image of God in Human Nature becomes the basic quality for God's forgiveness²⁴ and essence that enables Narcissus (as Christ) to identify his love. Because of the deception of Echo, Human Nature is thrown into the muddy waters of sin. Because of these muddy waters,²⁵ her image is distorted in such a way that Narcissus can not identify his own image and likeness in Human Nature. Throughout the play, Narcissus continues to search for his love and his image/likeness. At the same time, Human Nature searches for the Fountain to clean the muddy waters so that Narcissus can identify her. "She is made in his image"²⁶ can be Sor Juana's theological assertion that women are created in the image of God, using her play as a hermeneutical tool. The whole concentration of Echo/evil, the play's antagonist, is to somehow distort the image of God in humans.²⁷ The strong belief in Sor Juana's use of biblical verses is related to the context she lived in. The words, "See though I am black, I am beautiful, since your marvelous image I resemble,"²⁸ might be the words of expansivity²⁹ to see the image of God in Black people of her context. Sor Juana's identifying God's image in herself and in Black people is her adventurous intellectual intuition of God's revelation around her. Divine Narcissus is a great love story of Narcissus who died searching for his image and likeness that is not clearly seen. Narcissus, after death, going to the abyss, seeking his image is an adorable interpretation of the creedal confession to portray the resurrected Christ's visit to the abyss.³⁰ Toward the end of the play, Grace reveals that the revelation of the resurrected God through nature gives courage to humanity to encounter Echo/evil and protect the image and likeness of God in humanity in its diversity.³¹ In

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Divine Narcissus, Sor Juana introduces the infinite revelations of the image of God. Sor Juana's understanding of the image of God is not limited to a specific group of people or part of creation. For her, the image of God is present in the whole creation.

Taking insights from Irenaeus' theological anthropology, Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz view the *Imago Dei* as a work in progress, not a finished product.³² Though Irenaeus in his time understood different stages and forms of humanity progressing toward the perfection of *Imago Dei*, this attempt is more expansive than simply progress, but also understands and looks at the image of God in a context of diversity. Sor Juana's understanding of the expansivity of the image of God opens avenues to seeing the image of God in varieties of creation and in the people of diverse claimed orientations. The *Imago Dei* as a work in progress rather than a finished product, gives us hope that the expansivity of *Imago Dei* continues to accommodate creation that is realized and yet to be realized.

The image of God present in the whole creation becomes a foundation and basic common factor propelling us toward co-existence with love, hope, equality, and justice. Though the political categories may claim or label the identity of a resident alien, still, the image of God in us will help us to overcome this given identity and see each other as equals created by God in the image of God. A resident alien is taught the ideology of differentiation. In reality, the whole creation including human beings are equal and need each other for survival. Our immediate sight may show us the differences in the way we look, we believe, we understand, but there is always a need to go beyond in search of our common identity in the *Imago Dei* that holds us close together and for each other, and not yet finished: we are *Imago Dei* together and on the way.

23. Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz: Selected Writings*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 92.

24. Juana Inés de la Cruz, 97.

25. Juana Inés de la Cruz, 98.

26. Juana Inés de la Cruz, 105.

27. Juana Inés de la Cruz, 110.

28. Juana Inés de la Cruz, 121.

29. Originally used "inclusivity" but Nancy E. Bedford proposed "expansivity." Inclusivity is an already determined or defined and every alternative goes and merges into it. Whereas "expansivity" is not definite, rather continues to grow accommodating alternatives adding new definitions. Nancy E. Bedford, "Final Paper Discussion" (Course Seminar, Theology Topics: Theology of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (THEO 850 B), Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, May 8, 2019).

30. Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*, 158.

31. Juana Inés de la Cruz, 165.

32. Smedt and Cruz, "The *Imago Dei* as a Work in Progress: A Perspective from Paleoanthropology," 149.