



In His Own Image . . .

Male and Female He Created Them

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Palavras-chave

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In this article I seek to re-read the creation story in the light of the totality of revelation (Old and New), what we have learnt today from other sciences and every day common sense. I return to Scripture if for no reason than that it is the common ground for our faith and has been used and misused in the course of history. The reformation slogan, *sola scriptura* — i.e., the scriptures alone — reminds us of the primacy of place scripture has in Judaeo-Christian circles. Article VI of Ecclesia Anglicana's Articles of Religion reads: "Holy Scripture contained all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation." This, however, is not an argument for biblicism or fundamentalism. For we know that God's self-disclosure is always to human beings as they are and therefore, necessarily has cultural additives. The word of God is in Scripture but is not equal to Scripture. We are now more acutely aware that we read the Bible through each one's particular spectacles of race,¹ culture, circumstances. The fact that feminist theologians have come up with new insights on specific biblical texts on which men have for centuries worked from their men's cultural perspective, is evidence that we read the word of God through the spectacles of culture and experience. In any case, it is not the claim that God's self-disclosure stopped with the last book of Scripture. God does continue to reveal Himself in the universe, in science and technology, in psychology, in biology, etc. A return to the Bible which is part of the tradition of the church and its identity is to seek to return to the institutions and customs for the forbearers to seek nourishing spirituality.

Let me return to the point made earlier that our circumstances and who we are influence our perception of the Word of God. Ever since the Fall, anthropomorphic language (i.e., as a human being) of the Bible has been revised as andromorphic language (i.e., as male) and with that the domination of the

¹ Editors' note: Professor Pobee was a man of his time, using the language of his time. This journal, however, recognizes that the idea of *race* is a myth, both unscientific and unbiblical, as well as anti-Christian. Ethnocultural distinctions exist and matter, and generally should be celebrated, but they do not exist at an ontological level. *Race* only exists as a sociological construct. As a sociological construct, it has real effects on real people in real communities, as it provides the theoretical framework which justifies racism, including systemic racism. But both scientifically, as demonstrated by modern genetics, and biblically, there is only one single human race. — JRB, editor

woman by the man has unfortunately become the norm. Thus sometimes if not often and always, in the name of the Bible women have been marginalized and oppressed. That is concrete reality and background for the discussion here.

The title of this chapter is an illustration of the point being made. All too often those who wish to uphold the domination of woman by the man hear all too well the first part: “God created man in his own image.” But they often conveniently forget the last part of it: “male and female he created them.” In the Hebrew text five words are to be distinguished: *’adam*, *’ish*, *’ishah*, *zakhar*, and *neqebhah*. *’Adam* is a generic word for humankind or in older British English ‘man’: “Let us make man in our own image” (Genesis 1:26). *Adam*, as the very next verse demonstrates, is male and female. It is only after the fall that *Adam* becomes a proper name and man gives the name Eve to the woman. But the fact of the generic use of *Adam* is evidence of ancient Israelite universalism.²

Zakhar (‘male’) and *neqebhah* (‘female’) (Gen 1:27) denote a person’s sex, albeit within the one humanity. Male and female bear the same *imago Dei*, whatever that means. Woman decidedly is affirmed as bearing that image of God which the male also has. Both are creatures of flesh, soul and spirit, pointing to their total dependence on God the Creator and to be distinguished both from God and from other creation like the animals. To that sexual distinction we shall return in a little while.

The other words, *’ish* and *’ishah*, are used of man and woman and at other times of husband and wife who are in a covenant relationship. In this context we need to address the “myth” of the creation of women. It is said that God created man *min-hadamah*, i.e., from the ground or soil and created women *me’ish* from Adam’s side (Gen 2:23b). Here a distinction is intended to be made. “By using the expression *’ishshah me’ish* which calls attention to the striking similarity between the Hebrew words for ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ the narrator seems to want to emphasize the identity of the nature of, and the ‘equality’ of man and woman.”³ The fact of the woman being created from Adam’s side need not imply and any ideas of inferiority of the former to the latter. Rather it asserts that the woman is of the same order of being as the man and also that she is equal to the man. As scripture puts it in the mouth of Adam, “this (i.e., woman) is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). *’Ish* and *’Ishah*, point to differentiation within humanity (Gen 2:23). Each one needs the other to have a proper sense of their peculiarity and positions in creation but in mutual relationship. Scripture also gives a reason for the differentiation in humanity: “It is not good for man to be alone.” The distinction between man and woman has the aim of overcoming human loneliness and to make for completeness for life-together, for love, for companionship, for enjoyment together as well as for

² Fritz Maass, “אָדָם *’ādām*,” 83.

³ N. P. Bratsiotis, “אִישׁ *’ish*; אִשָּׁה *’ishshah*,” 226–227.

laughter together. A psychologist comes at this point in the following way: “repressing sexual polarity amounts to denying the evidence of our senses, of body differences, and of the reception of the psychological significance of those differences. To repress this knowledge requires huge expenditures of energy that builds up enormous tension in the unconscious.”⁴

The Biblical differentiation in humanity excludes androgyny, i.e., the attempt to obliterate the different existence of the woman and to ignore or not to take seriously the symbols of the feminine. The ‘*ish-’ishshah*’ language should also warn us against the tendency to reduce women to stereotypes of wife, mother or their surrogates; for that amounts to a denial that there is anything special or particular about woman’s existence. Man and woman are expressions of the modalities of the human. The distinction should, however, always be put in the context of complementarity and of dynamic, reciprocal relationship.

Here let me draw attention to two dangers that may be misread as throwing bricks around. To affirm differentiation in humanity is not the same thing as being sexist. Language is an index to the attitudes of people to themselves and to the world and I see the point of the stress on gender in God-talk. However, I still wish to argue that perhaps grammar change is not always an adequate response to the exclusion of women and men and the feminine consciousness as a new unfolding reality.⁵ On the other hand, we must be conscious of the danger of being caught in the undertow towards repression, regression and group identification; for there goes with it the danger that one may be left helpless in the grip of anger. Sometimes the condemnation of the system of patriarchal culture as the cause of injustice lures people away from the concrete earth of their actual psychic life and from persons and issues which constitute their actual situations.

To speak of a human being as bearing the *imago Dei* is to affirm his/her unique position. This point is made in different ways.

- a) It is only at the creation of Adam that God breathes in him/her to make him/her a living being (Gen 2: 7). In other words, there is something of the transcendent in Adam, which demands the respect accordable to God.
- b) It is only Adam who has authority to name animals.
- c) It is to Adam alone that prohibition regarding the eating of the fruit of a particular tree is given (Gen 2:17). This distinguishes Adam from the rest of creation and makes Adam more accountable to God.
- d) The earth is subjected to Adam (Gen 1:26–28; Psalms 8).

⁴ Ann Belford Ulanov, *Receiving Women: Studies in the Psychology and Theory of the Feminine*, 40.

⁵ Ulanov, *Receiving Women*, 15.

Thus in different ways we are told that humanity is unique of all God's creation and may this be deemed to bear the *imago Dei*.

The Greek word *eikon* in its classical use means a work of art, a picture, a figure, a pattern. But in the LXX it came to mean a statue, image. As used in the Bible it speaks of the connection between two things in terms of essences. "The constitutive element is not the form (that is, the similarity), but the substantiality."⁶ The face like the head constitutes in a special way the archetype or image.

One of the frustrations with the Bible is that it does not in so many words define what the image and likeness of God consists of. So we have to read back into the text what we know of God. It cannot mean that god is like a male because the woman is also said to bear the *imago Dei*. To pursue its meaning through physical qualities is to hand a notion of God who is too small. But the first inference to be made is that if woman and man alike bear the image of God, then they must be revered, given the respect that is accorded God, though not worshipped. For worship properly is due to God alone. Woman like man is to be accorded the dignity that is consistent with the bearer of God's image.

Second, according to the Biblical text, God is love. Already in the prophet Hosea's writings this love is neither passion nor romanticism; rather it is sacrificial, the selfless and self-giving devotion to others. The climatic example of that love of God is the death of Jesus Christ. Julian of Norwich who wrote in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries captures this idea of love as follows:

I saw the red blood trickle down from under the garland, hot and fresh and plentiful, as it did at the time of his Passion when the crown of thorns was pressed into his blessed head — who was both God and man and who suffered for me . . . In all this I was greatly stirred in love for all my fellow-Christians, for I wanted them to know and see what I saw so that it would comfort them. For this sight was shown for all the world. As I see it, God is all that is good, has made all that is made, and loves all he has made. So he who loves all his fellow-Christians for God's sake, loves all that is made.⁷

To affirm that woman like man is in God's image is to call on her, just as on him, to love their neighbour as themselves and to call others to love her. One more point — justice, to give all their dues, is a fruit of love. Basic rights like adequate food, housing, education, training, health care, and provision for work are her

⁶ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 183; Jacob Jervall, *Imago Dei: Genesis 1:26f, im Spätjudentum in der Gnosis und in den paulinischen Briefen* [German: 'Imago Dei: Genesis 1:26ff in late Judaism in Gnosticism and in the Pauline Letters'], 303.

⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter 4. Editors' note: The original publication did not provide a citation; we are not sure which edition of Julian that Professor Pobee used.

rights as well as her protection against discrimination for reasons of sex. Because love and justice are instruments for community building, it is fair to argue that bearing the image and likeness of God is a call to live in community.

Third, since God is revealed as Creator, humanity — i.e., man and woman — are called to be creators with God. Both man and woman co-operate to make babies; she is no incubator — she contributes to the making of children and shares in the raising of the children. To affirm the *imago Dei* in woman also is to give substance to the co-responsibility of woman to create families, to bring them up in godly fear and nurture. And the attainments of women in the arts as in the sciences are evidence that women like men are co-creators with God.

Fourth, in dealing with the quality of love, reference was made to community. As a christian re-reading the Genesis creation myth, one is struck by the fact that with the exception of Adam's creation, each one begins with a fiat: "Let there be" But it is only in the case of Adam that God says "Let us make Adam in our image" Of course, it is possible to read 'we' as the royal we. But when one in Genesis reads it with New Testament spectacles, we may argue it to be a reference to the triune God: God the Father the Logos who is the agent of creation and who becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ the Lord and the Spirit which at the beginning of creation "was brooding over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2). The deduction can be made that for humanity to bear that *imago Dei* of the triune God is to be created for community and unity. But community by its very nature implies differentiation, multiplicity and variety. Uniformity is not a necessary part of living in community. A woman then may not be able to go into the image of the man, for there is room in the community that bears that *imago Dei* is made up by the richness, abundance and variety of humanness. Let me put it in another way: in the *imago Dei* there is place for feminine and masculine images because images are means by which we think about fundamental matters of sexuality, gender, and role formation and every relationship between the sexes. To affirm the community dimension of the *imago Dei* is to affirm mutual dependence and unity of the genders and a rejection of patronage of man over woman. It means a search for a community-forming structures and rejection of false models of assistance.

Let me recall another dimension of this variety on community. Feminine image is not all Caucasian image; alongside it stands African, Asian, etc., images. There is diversity in the one genre of male or female image that must be recognized in the community of human beings in the image of God.

Be that as it may, sexual differentiation has social character: God said, "it is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen 2:18).⁸

⁸ Editors' note: In ordinary English, a 'helper' is typically subordinate to the one who is being helped. But the Hebrew word here — עֵזֶר ('ezer or ezer) — lacks that connotation. Indeed, God is referred to as the Ezer ('Helper') of Israel. Is God

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Partnership is the language of the biblical faith. Women and men are partners whose nature is the same essentially: they are fellow creatures, body, soul and spirit and equally in the image and likeness of God. Humanity in the *imago Dei* is *homo socialis* — i.e., a social being. She has integrity of her own in the community; she has rights to be protected by just laws of the land, she has freedom of legitimate and authentic self-expression and space.

To read that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created Him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27) is to bear witness that woman like man is, of all creation, in special relation to God, with some transcendent responses and orientation and therefore, created for love, dignity, rationality, and community. As the Lima Liturgy puts it, “You made human beings in your image to share life and reflect your glory.”⁹ But how have you come to this sorrowful situation of the marginalization of woman by man, which our cultures are full of?

The most simple answer is human sinfulness. This is not the place for an exposition of sin. For our purposes it should suffice to draw attention to the link between partnership and primacy. We have said enough about partnership that is part of being community of women and men. Inside that is to be set the story of the creation of Eve out of the side (Hebrew: *tsela* ‘; Gen 2:25) of Adam. That myth speaks of the kinship between men and woman, but also in the process speaks of the primacy of men over women. The primacy, however, is one of age and says nothing about a natural or ethical superiority of men over women. Primacy by itself is not bad or sinful; for it is a necessary tool of some sort of order in society. But it becomes sinful if foreign qualitative notions are imported into it. This is where cultures have not helped or have helped to interpret primacy as superiority.

subordinate to Israel? Or does God help Israel because God has strength and ability that Israel lacks? So it is in calling Woman the *ezer* of Man: The woman is not subordinate to the man. See, e.g., Michael L. Rosenzweig, “A Helper Equal to Him;” and Mimi Haddad, “Women’s Calling as Ezer.” — JRB, editor

⁹ “The eucharistic liturgy of Lima.” Editors’ note: The WCC page for this liturgy notes that “The Lima Liturgy is a Eucharistic (Holy Communion) service expressing, in one possible liturgical form, the ecclesiological convergence on the eucharist reached in the Faith and Order text Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM). It is so named because it was first used at the Faith and Order Plenary Commission meeting in Lima, Peru in 1982 — the meeting which approved BEM for transmission to the churches for official response.”

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¹⁰ Editors’ note: In the revised second edition of TDOT (1977 and 1997 reprint), this article appears on pp. 222–235.

¹¹ Editors’ note: An HTML version is available at
<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/presidents-message-womens-calling-ezer/>

¹² Editors’ note: This title is available on the Internet Archive at
<https://archive.org/details/imagodeigen126fi0000jerv/>

¹³ Editors’ note: In the revised second edition of TDOT (1977 and 1997 reprint), this article appears on pp. 75–87; the original version of this article did not provide the pagination for this article the first edition of TDOT.