

Made in God's Image!—What Does It Mean?: Science and Religion in Conversation

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“What is man?,” the psalmist asks in the 8th Psalm, 4th verse. And in our time, we might ask as well, “What is so special about humans, and what is our place and role in the rest of the natural world?”

A traditional theological approach to these questions leads one to the first chapter of Genesis, where “man” is the species made “in the image of God”—

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness .

. . .” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27, NRSV)

In this Genesis 1 account, no other species is created “in the image of God.” So, in this special act of God, humans are created last as the summation and apex of creation, placed “apart from” nature, to enjoy kingship over all other things. Here nature is made for man, and therefore humanity’s role in the natural world, and our relationship to it, is to dominate and conquer [vss. 26, 28, 27].

Historically, some very prominent theologians have interpreted the “image of God” in ways that underscored this separateness and superiority of humankind:

For instance, Paul Tillich said being made in God’s image meant that human beings uniquely had the capacity to reason. Critical thinking and abstract thought were what made *Homo sapiens* special, and these capabilities reflected God, because God had created the universe with rational structures, thus allowing knowledge to be gained from it by humans who were rational. God was rational; so was the species made in God’s image.

Joining Tillich, Karl Barth asserted being made in God's image meant that human beings were "rational animals." Barth indicated that humans, in contrast to all other living things, were endowed with the capacity to think and to know. But he added that this, by itself, was not enough to distinguish humankind sufficiently from other species.

So Barth also posited that being made in God's image meant human beings were free to choose and therefore were responsible for their actions. Moral action and moral responsibility were what made *Homo sapiens* special and separate, and these reflected God, because God was independent and not coerced in God's actions. God was free; so was the species made in God's image.ⁱ

Similarly, Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof indicated that being made in God's image meant humans were created to have *dominion* over creation. In fact, "dominion" also occurs in Genesis 1:26 and adjacent verses as well. Berkhof proclaimed that having lordship over the rest of the created order was what made *Homo sapiens* special and distinct, and this reflected God, because God was Lord over God's whole creation. God was sovereign over all; so was the species made in God's image.ⁱⁱ

Regardless of the particular differences among them, these thinkers come together in their affirmation that "human beings made in God's image" grants human beings a unique ontological status which separates them from, and sets them over, the rest of the created order. Thus positioned, and then instructed to "dominate and subdue," that is exactly what human beings have done. And so,

Acid rain is falling down, and garbage dumps are filling up.

The ozone layer is thinning, and pollution is thickening.

Human populations are burgeoning, and endangered species
are going extinct.

Global temperatures are expanding, and the rain forest is shrinking.

Oil spills are spreading everywhere, and toxic waste is headed anywhere that will take
it!

By contrast, science clearly points out that biologically and genetically humans are “kin” to other species. At one point in his notes, Charles Darwin writes, “we are all netted together . . .” and at another juncture, “[It’s] more humble and I believe true to see us created from animals.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This scientific emphasis on the connectedness of humans with other creatures can inform us and enable us to adjust our understanding of human beings and their role in the natural world. It also could encourage us to take into consideration the “humbler, more modest” account of the creation of man in Genesis 2.

The commonality with other creatures which Darwin noted and detailed, and which science proclaims, is echoed in the *second* chapter of Genesis: In *its* account of creation, *adam* is made from the dust of the earth, just like all the non-human living species (in the original Hebrew, ‘*adam*’ from ‘*adamah*’, “man” from the “dust”). Here man’s kinship is emphasized over man’s kingship.

Several thinkers reflect this “alternative” imagery for human identity and function:

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann said that being made in God’s image meant that humans were created to rule over creation *in the way that **God** ruled over creation*. Creatively using power to invite, evoke, and permit was what made *Homo sapiens* special and a reflection

of God, because this is the way that God exercised God's power. God ruled as a servant-king, but not as a dictator-tyrant; so should the species made in God's image.^{iv}

Physicist/theologian Ian Barbour suggested that being made in God's image meant that humans were created to be responsible for creation in the way that God was responsible for creation. Having created the earth, God now takes care of it. So, being entrusted with responsibility for the creation and caring for it well was what made *Homo sapiens* special and a reflection of God, because that is what God does. God was responsible for what God made; so should be the species made in God's image.^v

Process theologian Marjorie Suchocki asserted that being made in God's image meant that humans were created in interrelationship with all living things, just as God exists in relationship with all that is. Being consciously in relationship with all life on earth—human and non-human—was what made *Homo sapiens* special and a reflection of God, because God intentionally and intimately relates to all that God has made. God exists in loving relationship with all living things in the creation; so should the species made in God's image.^{vi}

But, of course, Genesis 1 underscores a distinctiveness, a specialness, for human beings. So, in light of science and in light of Genesis 2, and in response to the insights of Brueggemann, Barbour, and Suchocki, what might it mean for human beings to have been created in the image of God of Genesis 1? What might it mean for humans to have been uniquely created in God's image? What is special and distinctive about *Homo sapiens*?—

It is not *long life*—the tortoise lives far longer; it is not *strength*—a chimpanzee is eight-to-ten times as strong as a human; it is not *sight*—the eagle recognizes things from a much greater distance away; it is not the *ability to reason*—other mammals (such as the great apes, killer

whales, and dolphins) have been shown to think and be reflective and solve problems by a process that cannot be distinguished from rationality; it is not *smell*—a dog can pick-up odors that humans cannot discern; it is not *speed*—a Thompson’s gazelle or a cheetah runs at a much faster velocity; it is not *hearing*—a bat can hear sounds that humans fail to detect; it is not *language*—recent studies have shown that chimpanzees communicate using something akin to language, and whales communicate with one another over hundreds of miles; it is not *technology*—other species use “tools,” such as the finch that uses twigs to extricate ants from a hole in the ground or insects from a tree, and other primates that use sticks and branches and stones to accomplish tasks and achieve goals, and bats and dolphins that use sonar or echolocation (and these are “built-in” or “hard-wired” technologies!). What, then, is special—distinctive—about human beings?

In short, humans are made uniquely in the image of God for a special *function*, a vast *responsibility*, and not for a superior *status*. That is, human beings are God’s representatives on earth, charged with caring-for and looking-out for the entirety of planetary life. In Genesis 2:15 human beings are charged to serve and to preserve the Garden. This notion of serving and preserving provides a creative tension, a counterbalance, and a restraint for Genesis 1:28 where human beings are to have dominion over and subdue the natural world. Given what science has illustrated about the intimate connection between humans and the rest of life on earth, this must be interpreted as using the power of the position to care-for and serve, to protect and preserve.

If we inform our understanding of Genesis 1’s “image of God” with science and Genesis 2, then only humans are in a position to formulate a biocentric ethic (a life-centered ethic that takes into consideration the situations and rights of all living things—human and non-human). As a result, only *humans* sin by not living-up to the moral demands of such an ethic. As

environmental theologian Jay McDaniel has put it, “To be made in God’s image is not to leave our earthiness behind; rather it is to become fully human by realizing our potential for wisdom and compassion.”^{vii} This wisdom and compassion are not to be reserved for our relations with fellow humans, but are to be properly extended to the whole of life. As a result, humans have a responsibility for the rest of creation and are held accountable by God for how this responsibility is discharged—humans are morally blameworthy or morally praiseworthy depending on how they fulfill this obligation.

Concerning this notion of the image of God, Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall has written perceptively and persuasively: The image of God, he declares, is not something which humankind *has*, but rather something which humankind *does*. “Humans made in the image of God,” then, does not refer to one particular trait or one set of characteristics which humans possess, but instead refers to something which humans act-out. The image of God is not “substantial” (a part of humans’ essence or being or *ontology*), but “relational” (a part of humans’ behavior or actions).^{viii}

Being made in God’s image, then, lays an ethical responsibility on humans based on kinship—a connectional model emphasized by science and Genesis 2—rather than on arrogance based on kingship—a monarchical model. The “image of God” is more a verb than a noun, a function not a status. Intrinsic to this is the affirmation that humans are a part of, not apart from, nature. Man was made for nature; nature was not made for man. Nature is not a commodity to own; nature is a community to serve.

In light of Genesis 2 and science, one metaphor that strikes me as a model of this interpretation of humans made in God’s image is “the housesitter.” A housesitter is secured

when the owner of the home must be away on business or vacation and therefore cannot continue to take care of the house himself/herself. Though the housesitter does not own the house, she or he *is* responsible for its upkeep, welfare, and safety. The housesitter acts in the owner's behalf and tries to imitate how the owner has taken care of the home.

Ultimately, the housesitter is accountable to the owner of the house, and when that owner returns, there will undoubtedly be an inspection and an evaluation of the housesitter's performance of his/her responsibilities. The *good* housesitter is one who cared about, and cared for, the house; looked-after, and looked-out for, the house and its living and non-living contents; and served as a guardian or protector of the house—just as the owner would ¹have done, and just as the owner expected. In other words, the housesitter is the owner's representative, or steward, or servant; in this way, the housesitter reflects the “image of the owner.”^{ix}

Informed by science and Genesis 2's emphasis on connectedness and service, humans made in the image of God are not to clutch nature as a possession (from which we are apart and to which we are *superior*), but rather to tend nature as a community (of which we are a part and to which we are a *servant*).

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936-1961), Vol. III.2, 76, 77, 83, 323-324.

2. Hendrikus Berkhof, “God in Nature and History,” *New Directions in Faith and Order* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1968), 18.

3. “Evolution and Wonder: Understanding Charles Darwin,” interview of James Moore by Krista Tippet on National Public Radio's *Speaking of Faith*, February 5th, 2009;

<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/Darwin/transcript.shtml>, 8.

4. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 32. Steven Bouma-Prediger agrees with Brueggemann's claim that humans are called to rule creation the way God rules creation—lovingly. Therefore, human beings are morally accountable for their rule, the only species to be so [*For the Beauty of the Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 123.]
 5. Ian Barbour, *Earth Might Be Fair* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Publishing Co., 1972), 149.
 6. Marjorie Suchocki, Public Lecture, Franklin College, Franklin, Indiana (May, 1989).
 7. Jay B. McDaniel, "Red Grace and Green Grace," in *Roots and Wings*, 57.
 8. Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 111f.
 9. Clifford Chalmers Cain, "Turning the Church Green," *American Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (March, 1996), 58-59; cf. Clifford Chalmers Cain, *An Ecological Theology* (Lewiston, NY and Lampeter, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 121-123. Although not a perfect metaphor, the notion of "housesitter" moves humans away from an anthropocentric interpretation of *imago Dei* conferring status, to a biocentric interpretation of *imago Dei* requiring responsibility.
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