



The Crab and the Oyster

Patristic *imago Dei* in the created world

Introduction and Outcomes

- The purpose of this lecture is two-fold:
 - First, to consider what it means, in the context of Patristic thought – that is to say, late antique, from about 200-700AD – for Christian theology to describe humanity as created in the image of God
 - Second, to consider what it means to exist as such an image in a world that is not so made. One that is, largely, populated by other created things that are not like you, and how your responsibilities to them differ from either other images or that of which they are an image

The Sixth Day

Gen 1:26-31 NETS –

1:26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind according to our image and according to likeness and let them rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and the cattle and all the earth and all the creeping things that creep upon the earth”

1:27 And God made humankind; according to divine image he made it; male and female he made them;

1:28 And God blessed them, saying, “Increase, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all the cattle and all the earth and all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.” 1:29 And God said, “See, I have given to you any herbage, sowable, seeding seed, which is over all the earth, and any tree that has in itself fruit of sowable seed – to you it shall be for food – 1:30 and all the wild animals of the earth and to all the birds of the sky and to every creeping thing that creeps on the earth that has in itself the animating force of life, – and all green herbage for food.” And it became so. 1:31 And God saw all the things that he had made, and see, they were exceedingly good. And it came to be evening, and it came to be morning, a sixth day.

The Last Day in the Garden

- Gen 3:21-24 NETS –
- 3:21 And the Lord God made leather tunics for Adam and his wife and clothed them.
3:22 Then God said, “See, Adam has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now perhaps he might reach out his hand and take of the tree of life and eat, and he will live forever.” 3:23 And the Lord God sent him forth from the orchard of delight to till the earth from which he was taken. 3:24 And he drove Adam out and caused him to dwell opposite the orchard of delight, and he stationed cheroubim and the flaming sword that turns, to guard the way to the tree of life.



Christ as the Image

- 2 Cor 4:4 NRSV–
- In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

imago Dei: Early distinctions

- Before turning to our three exemplars, two early thinkers and their distinctions are important to have in sight
 - Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202AD)
 - Distinction between image and likeness: Inalienable image, with likeness lost in the fall and gradually recovered
 - Inconsistently maintained (and sometimes rejected) elsewhere Patristic literature
 - Origen of Alexandria (185-253AD)
 - Originates what older scholarship refers to as the 'Alexandrian' understanding of the image as applying to the soul and mind, and not the body
 - Image obfuscated or lost by fall into bodies, with likeness achieved in eschaton

imago Dei: Exemplars

- What does it mean for humanity to be made in the image of God?
- The exemplars we'll consider:
 - Hilary of Poitiers (310-367AD)
 - Gregory of Nyssa (335-395AD)
 - Augustine of Hippo (354-430AD)
- Focus will be on Gregory of Nyssa, by way of Basil of Caesarea



Hilary of Poitiers (1)

“For the words our image – not our images – prove that there is one nature possessed by both. But an argument from words is an insufficient proof, unless its result be confirmed by the evidence of facts; and accordingly it is written, ‘And God made man; after the image of God made He him’. If the words He spoke, I ask, were the soliloquy of an isolated God, what meaning shall we assign to this last statement? For in it I see a triple allusion, to the Maker, to the being made, and to the image. The being made is man; God made him, and made him in the image of God. If Genesis were speaking of an isolated God, it would certainly have been ‘And made him after His own image’. But since the book was foreshowing the mystery of the Gospel, it spoke not of two Gods, but of God and God, for it speaks of man made through God in the image of God.” –Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, IV.18

Hilary of Poitiers (2)

- Deep concern to use image theology to demonstrate the divinity of the Son in the face of the Arian controversies in, particularly, the East to where he was exiled
- Some evidence in the Psalm commentaries of a loss of the image, *a la* Origen
- A more enduring focus on the Son as the perfect image of the essence of the Father but humanity as enduringly the created image



Augustine of Hippo

- “But we should take God’s words in another sense and realize that they were spoken in the plural, not the singular: humans were made in the image not of just the Father, or just the Son, or just the Holy Spirit, but of the Trinity itself. The Trinity is formed in such a way that it is one God; and the one God is formed in a way so as to be Trinity.” –Augustine, *On the literal reading of Genesis*, XVI.61
- The ‘inner man’ or *mens*/mind is in the image of God, operating on a tripartite faculty of reason – worked out most notably in *De Trinitate*

Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa



- A revised 'Origenistic' account?
- Instead, evidence of an attempt to treat the entire human person as the image of God
- Note: You'll also find Gregory of Nyssa's 'On the Human Image of God' under the Latin title 'On the Making of Man'

Being a crab: In whose image?

“Now see what tricks, what cunning, are to be found in a weak animal, and learn not to imitate wicked doers. The crab loves the flesh of the oyster; but, sheltered by its shell, a solid rampart with which nature has furnished its soft and delicate flesh, it is a difficult prey to seize. Thus they call the oyster sherd-hide. Thanks to the two shells with which it is enveloped, and which adapt themselves perfectly the one to the other, the claws of the crab are quite powerless. What does he do? When he sees it, sheltered from the wind, warming itself with pleasure, and half opening its shells to the sun, he secretly throws in a pebble, prevents them from closing, and takes by cunning what force had lost. Such is the malice of these animals, deprived as they are of reason and of speech. **But I would that you should at once rival the crab in cunning and industry, and abstain from harming your neighbour; this animal is the image of him who craftily approaches his brother, takes advantage of his neighbour's misfortunes, and finds his delight in other men's troubles. O copy not the damned! Content yourself with your own lot.** Poverty, with what is necessary, is of more value in the eyes of the wise than all pleasures.” –Basil of Caesarea, *Hexameron*, Homily VII.3

Being a crab: Imitation

“When we consider the natural and innate care that these creatures without reason take of their lives we shall be induced to watch over ourselves and to think of the salvation of our souls; or rather we shall be the more condemned when we are found falling short even of the imitation of brutes. The bear, which often gets severely wounded, cares for himself and cleverly fills the wounds with mullein, a plant whose nature is very astringent. You will also see the fox heal his wounds with droppings from the pine tree; the tortoise, gorged with the flesh of the viper, finds in the virtue of marjoram a specific against this venomous animal and the serpent heals sore eyes by eating fennel.” –Basil of Caesarea, *Hexameron*, Homily IX.3

Being a crab: The Spirit and the fish

“I myself have seen these marvels, and I have admired the wisdom of God in all things. If beings deprived of reason are capable of thinking and of providing for their own preservation; if a fish knows what it ought to seek and what to shun, what shall we say, who are honoured with reason, instructed by law, encouraged by the promises, made wise by the Spirit, and are nevertheless less reasonable about our own affairs than the fish?” –Basil of Caesarea, *Hexameron*, Homily VII.5



Being a crab: Thoughts on Basil

- Basil takes his audience through the creation, including of terrestrial and aquatic creatures
- A recurrent theme here is what that creation means for the audience
- There is some naturalistic interest but that turns constantly back to how it relates to the life of the believer

Being a human: Gregory takes up the story

- Gregory of Nyssa goes on to complete Basil of Caesarea's unfinished *Hexameron* with the sixth day of creation
- Several of the same themes will be carried forward and find their culmination

Being a human: Spoken (1)

"O marvellous! A sun is made, and no counsel precedes; a heaven likewise; and to these no single thing in creation is equal. So great a wonder is formed by a word alone, and the saying indicates neither when, nor how, nor any such detail. So too in all particular cases, the æther, the stars, the intermediate air, the sea, the earth, the animals, the plants — all are brought into being with a word, while only to the making of man does the Maker of all draw near with circumspection, so as to prepare beforehand for him material for his formation, and to liken his form to an archetypal beauty, and, setting before him a mark for which he is to come into being, to make for him a nature appropriate and allied to the operations, and suitable for the object in hand. — Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* III.3

Being a human: Spoken (2)

“But it is right that we should not leave this point without consideration, that while the world, great as it is, and its parts, are laid as an elemental foundation for the formation of the universe, the creation is, so to say, made offhand by the divine power, existing at once on His command, while counsel precedes the making of man; and that which is to be is foreshown by the Maker in verbal description, and of what kind it is fitting that it should be, and to what archetype it is fitting that it should bear a likeness, and for what it shall be made, and what its operation shall be when it is made, and of what it shall be the ruler — all these things the saying examines beforehand, so that he has a rank assigned him before his genesis, and possesses rule over the things that are before his coming into being; **for it says, God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and the beasts of the earth, and the fowls of the heaven, and the cattle, and all the earth.’**” —Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* III.2



Royal from the first

“For as in our own life artificers fashion a tool in the way suitable to its use, so the best artificer made our nature as it were a formation fit for the exercise of royalty, preparing it at once by superior advantages of soul, and by the very form of the body, to be such as to be adapted for royalty: for the soul immediately shows its royal and exalted character, far removed as it is from the lowliness of private station, in that it owns no lord, and is self-governed, swayed autocratically by its own will; for to whom else does this belong than to a king? **And further, besides these facts, the fact that it is the image of that Nature which rules over all means nothing else than this, that our nature was created to be royal from the first.** For as, in men's ordinary use, those who make images of princes both mould the figure of their form, and represent along with this the royal rank by the vesture of purple, and even the likeness is commonly spoken of as a king, so the human nature also, as it was made to rule the rest, was, by its likeness to the King of all, made as it were a living image, partaking with the archetype both in rank and in name, not vested in purple, nor giving indication of its rank by sceptre and diadem (for the archetype itself is not arrayed with these), but instead of the purple robe, clothed in virtue, which is in truth the most royal of all raiment, and in place of the sceptre, leaning on the bliss of immortality, and instead of the royal diadem, decked with the crown of righteousness; so that it is shown to be perfectly like to the beauty of its archetype in all that belongs to the dignity of royalty.” –Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* III.4

The span

“I think that by these words, Holy Scripture conveys to us a certain great and lofty doctrine; and the doctrine is this. While two [elements] – the divine and incorporeal nature, and the irrational and animal life – are separated from each other as extremes, humankind is the span. For there is to be beheld in the human compound a share of each of those mentioned – of the divine, the rational and intelligent, which does not admit the distinction of male and female; of the irrational, the bodily formation and construction, divided into male and female – for each of them is certainly in all that partakes of human life. But the intellectual takes precedence, as we have learnt from one who gives in detail an ordered account of the origin of the human being; participation and kinship with the irrational is concomitant to being human, for he first says that ‘God made the human being in accordance with the image’ of God, showing by what was said, just as the Apostle says, that in such a being ‘there is no male and female’, then he adds the particularities of human nature that ‘male and female he made them’.” –Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* XVI.9

In whose image

“Thus, the love of pleasure had its beginning from the likeness to the irrational animal, but was increased by human transgressions, begetting such varieties of sinning for pleasure as is not to be found among the irrational animals. Thus, the rising of anger is indeed akin to the impulse of the irrational animals, but it grows by the alliance of the calculating faculty. For thence come malignity, envy, deceit, treachery, hypocrisy: all these are the result of the evil husbandry of the intellect. For if the passion were stripped of the alliance with calculating thoughts, the anger that is left behind is short-lived and weak, like a bubble, bursting as soon as it comes into being. **Thus, the greediness of pigs introduces covetousness, and the high spirit of the horse becomes the origin of pride;** and all the particular forms originating from the irrationality of the animals become vices by the evil use of the intellect. So also, therefore, on the contrary, if the calculating faculty instead assumes control over these movements, each of them is transposed to a form of virtue. For anger produces courage, cowardice caution, fear obedience, hatred aversion from vice, the faculty of love the desire of the truly beautiful; high spirit in character raises thought above the passions and guards it from bondage to evil. The great Apostle also praises such a form of elevation, urging us always to think about those things that are above.³⁷ And so one finds that every such movement, when elevated by the loftiness of mind, is conformed to the beauty of the divine image. But since the tendency to sin is heavy and bears downward, the opposite more often happens. For the governing principle of the soul is dragged downwards by the weight of the irrational nature much more than is the heavy and earthy element raised up by the loftiness of mind. **Therefore, our wretchedness often causes the divine gift to be unknown, spreading the passions of the flesh, like some ugly mask, over the beauty of the image.**” —Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* XVIII.4-6

Conclusions

- Gregory of Nyssa, by way of completing Basil of Caesarea's *Hexameron*, provides a robust theology of the image of God
- It accounts for embodied humanity and provides a robust reading of the text of Genesis
- Crucially, it provides an account of humanity as created in the image of God, and located within a created world
- It locates humanity as the bridge between divine and human natures: It opens up created non-human nature to draw our reflection inexorably back to the divine

Further Reading

- Basil of Caesarea's *Hexameron*:
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3201.htm>
- John Behr, ed. and trans. *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*. 2023. Oxford University Press.
- Gerald Boersma. *Augustine's Early Theology of the Image*. 2016. Oxford University Press.
- Isabella Image. *The Human Condition in Hilary of Poitiers*. 2016. Oxford University Press.
- Gabriel Thomas. *The Image of God in Gregory of Nazianzus*. 2019. Cambridge University Press.
- Kallistos Ware. "In the Image and Likeness': The Uniqueness of the Human Person" in *Theological Anthropology, 500 Years after Martin Luther*. 48-64.