



The *Imago Dei* Concept as a Symbol of Human Dignity? A Critical Examination. An Outline

Koncepcja *Imago Dei* jako symbol ludzkiej godności? Krytyczna ewaluacja. Zarys

Key words: *Imago Dei*, image of God, biblical anthropology, Moltmann, Habermas, post-religious society, human dignity

Ślówka kluczowe: *Imago Dei*, obraz Boga, antropologia biblijna, Moltmann, Habermas, społeczeństwo post-religijne, godność człowieka

Abstract

The article examines the religious concept of the image of God – *Imago Dei*, as a foundational symbol of human dignity. It analyses three main perspectives: the ontological, relational, and functional. The ontological interpretation concerns each human, or a particular aspect of each human, as a reflection/image of God. The relational view emphasizes the interconnection of humankind and the connection between humans and God. The functional understanding of *imago Dei* perceives humanity as a representative of God on earth, responsible for stewardship of the rest of creation. Yet, the article raises questions about the potential negative implications of the concept and its traditional understanding. The promotion of exclusivism, patriarchy, and anthropocentrism may serve as a few examples underlining that interpretations of *imago Dei* have, at times, justified social inequalities and environmental exploitation. Contemporary theologians, like Jürgen Moltmann, propose an understanding of *imago Dei* that integrates universal human rights and ecological responsibility. Yet, various challenges remain,

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especially about such issues as the situation of people with disabilities, refugee crises, and technological developments. The article points out that the future relevance of *imago Dei* depends on humanity's ability to embrace its principles inclusively, i.e., respecting the dignity of all individuals and the significance of the earth, the home of all humankind.

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje temat koncepcji obrazu Boga – *Imago Dei* – rozumianej jako podstawowy symbol godności człowieka. Analizowane są trzy główne sposoby jej interpretacji: ontologiczny, relacyjny i funkcjonalny. Ujęcie ontologiczne postrzega każdego człowieka lub pewien aspekt człowieczeństwa jako odzwierciedlenie/obraz Boga. Perspektywa relacyjna podkreśla wzajemne powiązania między ludźmi oraz relację człowieka z Bogiem. Z kolei interpretacja funkcjonalna postrzega człowieka jako przedstawiciela-regenta Boga na ziemi, odpowiedzialnego za troskę o stworzenie. Artykuł zwraca uwagę, że tradycyjne rozumienie *imago Dei* było niejednokrotnie źródłem problemów, takich jak ekskluzywizm, patriarchalizm czy antropocentryzm, które niekiedy usprawiedliwiały nierówności społeczne i degradację środowiska. Współcześni teologowie, m.in. Jürgen Moltmann, proponują nową interpretację, łączącą ideę *imago Dei* z uniwersalnymi prawami człowieka i odpowiedzialnością ekologiczną. Mimo to pozostają otwarte pytania dotyczące sytuacji osób z niepełnosprawnościami, kryzysów uchodźczych czy wpływu technologii na rozumienie człowieczeństwa. Autor podkreśla, że przyszłe znaczenie *imago Dei* zależy od tego, czy ludzkość potrafi ująć jego przesłanie w sposób inkuzywny, z poszanowaniem godności każdego człowieka i odpowiedzialnością za ziemię jako wspólny dom całej ludzkości.

1. *Imago Dei* and human dignity

The religious concept of *imago Dei* is derived from the theological interpretation of the first chapters of the Book of Genesis (e.g., Gen 1:26-7; 5: 1-3; 9:6). It highlights the significance of the human being as the pinnacle of creation, the only entity created in/as the image of God (Szczerba 2020, 13-36; Clines 1968, 70-78)². The concept has been

² For the purposes of this article, I give a brief sketch of the biblical concept of

perceived – in Christian theological tradition – from several perspectives, or several aspects of it have been emphasized over the centuries (Middleton 2005, 17-30; Peterson 2016, 23-52).

Firstly, the ontological/substantial/structural aspect of *imago Dei* may be underlined. Each individual serves as a reflection of God in the created world. God reveals Himself in and through humans, assigning them a special ontological status and unique role. This applies to every human being or precisely to the core aspect of every human being, e.g., the rational soul in the post-Platonic reading of the first book of the Bible (Schäfer 2020, 62-64; e.g., AH {180}; Augustine 1991 {11, 1-11}; ST {I, 93, 3-9}). Regardless of gender, age, race, origin, or social standing, every human being ontologically or structurally reflects the Creator. This universal status of humans differentiates the biblical account from the other ancient Middle Eastern creation myths, assigning the status of the image of God to selected people, e.g., various types of rulers, kings, or pharaohs (Sarna 2001, 12).

Secondly, the relational aspect of *imago Dei* emphasizes the interdependence of and between people. This relational dimension has both a vertical aspect between God and humanity and a horizontal one among humans. For example, the Trinitarian dimension of God's image, developed within orthodox Christian thought, may underline that from a theological standpoint, the concept of *imago Dei* is less about individualism and more about collective and relational dynamics. Theologically speaking, humanity—expanding Paul's vision of the church (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:27)—may be seen as an interconnected organism. For example, Gregory of Nyssa interprets humankind in this sense as interrelated

the image of God, limiting myself only to the protology presented in the Bible. I treat image (hebr. *tselem*, gr. *eikon*) and likeness (hebr. *demut*, gr. *homoiosis*) synonymously as a particular representation of God in the order of creation. My publication on the subject – Szczerba 2020. I develop the problem dialectically here with the premise that different initial assumptions and different methodologies lead to different readings of the concept.

physis tou anthropou – human nature (PG 44, 204D {*De hominis opificio* 22}; PG 44, 185D {*De hominis opificio* 16}; GNO {*Ad Graecos* 3, 1, 25}).

Thirdly, from a functional perspective, *imago Dei* underscores humanity's role within the created order, where human beings are representatives or regents of God. Just as God creates and cares for all of creation in a metaphysical sense, humans are, in a way, royal ambassadors of the Creator in the earthly, physical order. Their task is to care for the earth and oversee creation on behalf of God and for God, who is the ultimate owner of all things and transcendent-metaphysical sovereign (Wilson 2017, 265-67; Garr 2003, 219-21).

From this perspective, *imago Dei* describes not only the ontological status of individuals, communities, or humanity as a whole but also sets a challenge for individuals, societies, and humankind to fulfill their assigned function within the created order. This normative aspect, stemming from the theological concept of *imago Dei*, was highlighted, e.g., by the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann as early as 1970, in a human rights declaration prepared for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (McCord & Miller 1977, 7-8; Moltmann 1975, 268-274; Moltmann 1976, 58-72). In his argument, rooted in a theology of hope, Moltmann views humanity positively as being in the process of restoring the original image of God, which was obscured by the fall of man. Following the anthropological model set by Irenaeus of Lyon already in the 2nd century A.D., he believes that humanity is maturing over the centuries and gradually approaching the ideal set by the Creator. Moltmann expresses hope that the culmination of the history of salvation will be a universal restoration of humankind, *apokatastasis ton panton*. *Imago Dei* is developed through *imago Christi* and will culminate in *gloria Dei* (Moltmann 1985, 225-228).

In outlining the nature and dynamics of the development of the global human community, Moltmann argues that human rights should have a universal dimension so that all people, regardless of their beliefs, can best function as God's representatives in the world. According

to the biblical account and the theological interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis, every person is created as an image of God—not only selected rulers, pharaohs, kings, or high priests. Based on this universal model of *imago Dei*, Moltmann asserts that a proper understanding of human rights should include, among other things, democratic relationships that regulate the exercise of power within state communities, cooperation and solidarity between societies, human collaboration in caring for the environment in which people live, and responsibility for future generations who bear the image of God just as much as the present ones (Moltmann 1995, 374).

The concept of *imago Dei* functions in contemporary theological Christian or, more broadly, biblical thought as an essential indicator of human dignity³. Theologians and philosophers of religion often highlight, at least as a postulate, a special relationship between humanity and God, the responsibility of humans toward other creatures, and the communal dimension of the concept of the image of God, which characterizes the entirety of humankind. Even some secular thinkers, such as Jürgen Habermas, express hope that *imago Dei*, as a religious truth still anchored in the consciousness of post-religious societies, can, if adequately reinforced and translated into secular language, lead to the further development and integration of humanity (Habermas 2008, 17-29).

2. *Imago Dei* and human oppression

The positive interpretation of *imago Dei* creates an inspiring and moving picture. Nevertheless, in analyzing the issue, one must ask whether this is the only possible reading of the *doctrine* of God's image, especially in light of the historical evolution of interpretations of *imago*

³ I accept here the perspective sketched by Immanuel Kant and post-Kantian tradition, according to which all people *en bloc*, and each person individually possesses a dignity deriving from the very fact of being a human being, from the ontic status of human beings. Kant 1903/11, 6: 412-445; Hill 2015, 215-221.

Dei, the world's current condition, and the challenges facing humanity in the 21st century. Could the concept of the image of God also have a negative potential, which may have influenced not only the development of inclusive cultures and civil societies but also oppressive and exclusionary attitudes throughout history? In other words, isn't the interpretation of such concepts as *imago Dei* too optimistic when deciphered as a sign or symbol of universal human dignity? In the context of geopolitical tensions, economic inequalities, migration crises, or the social patriarchy still prevailing in many cultures, perhaps it is naïve to assign too much actual and positive significance to the theological doctrine of the image of God.

In his analysis of the concept, Jürgen Moltmann points out the dangers arising from too strict an adherence to the substantial/ontological interpretation of *imago Dei* (Moltmann 1995, 395-402). Suppose the *imago Dei* is located in the human body or structure as a distinct ontological aspect of human nature, as understood for centuries in the Christian tradition. In that case, it naturally creates a division between this sanctified element of human essence and the rest of human *physis*, which becomes degraded. If the image of God is placed – as it has been the case in post-Platonic Christian currents of theology – in human reason or the rational soul, questions arise about the significance and value of the body. Does human physicality, then, not become merely a vessel containing a divine spark? And is not the goal of human life, in that case, to liberate this unique element from imperfect, sinful corporeality? This perspective was already reflected in the ancient Pythagorean and early Platonic anthropology, stemming from, i.a., the Orphic myth of Dionysus Zagreus (Edmonds 1999, 35-73; Kerenyi 1996, XXIII-XXXV; Guthrie 1993, 25-68). However, it is also, or even more so, reflected in many strands of the orthodox Christian tradition, which often devalues the body and human sexuality, as articulated by numerous Church Fathers and in later Christian theology (Brown 2008).

On the other hand, reading the biblical account of creation through the lens of its second description (Gen 2:5-7) could lead to the conclusion that it is the man/male who is created in the image of God, and the woman, at most, is made in the image of man. The patriarchal culture within which the Bible took shape in its canonical form may suggest such an interpretation of gender relations and the power structure that defines the man-woman order. Does not the Apostle Paul suggest this very perspective in his letter to the Corinthians, when he emphasizes that “the man [...] is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man” (1 Cor 11:7)? Feminist thought points to this danger and highlights the patriarchal reading of *imago Dei* throughout the history of theology (Hilkert 2002, 2-7; 11-12; Sarna 1989, 18-9). A similar risk accompanies the ethnic and national interpretation of the concept of God’s image in the Bible, based, e.g., on the premise that biblical Adam symbolizes ancient Israel as a chosen nation (Postell 2011, 75-169), which can lead to theologically justified subjugation of races and nationalities. The World Council of Churches addressed this issue during the consultation entitled *Theological Anthropology: Towards a Theology of Human Wholeness* in 1980: “We have discovered that the almost exclusively male image of God in the Christian tradition has contributed to the affirmation of male, white, Western superiority and led to a sense of inferiority among women and people from non-Western cultures” (EPS 1981, 77).

The functional interpretation of the *imago Dei*, which links the phrase “in the image and likeness” (Gen 1:26a) with “let them rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the livestock, the whole earth, and all the creatures that move along the ground,” (Gen 1:27b) highlights, on the one hand, the role of humans as ambassadors or regents of God in the earthly order. However, on the other hand, such an understanding of God’s image can lead — and indeed has led throughout history — to the justification of an attitude in which humans exploit the earth

and the living creation for their own purposes (Pope Francis 2015, No. 2, 65-67). In its functional interpretation, the concept of *imago Dei* may lie at the root of contemporary anthropocentrism in the Abrahamic religions and the belief that humans have a biblical mandate to “subdue the earth” with all creatures. “Let them fear and dread you” (Gen 9:2) points God to the survivors of the Flood in the act of symbolic recreation of humanity and the new social order (Gen 9:1-17; White 1967, 1203-7; Deane-Drummond 2014, 61-75). Humans of the first part of the Book of Genesis (Gen 1-9) rule the earth, subjugate animals, and finally consume their meat and use their skins. Does not then the biblical Adam, created in God’s image, symbolize the anthropocentric structure of biblical creation and possible exploitation of the earth?

On the other hand, the relational interpretation of the concept of *imago Dei* may support religious exclusivism if it is grounded in beliefs that arise from the particular doctrines of specific religions. For instance, the Christian Trinity might serve well in defining human relationships by reflecting divine relations. The closest possible relationship within the Godhead between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (*opera ad intra*) is somehow reflected in the assumed relationships between created (*opera ad extra*) human beings within their various social circles (Tarus 2016, 20-2; Cairns 1953, 134-5). Yet, the doctrine itself is not translatable into the frameworks of Judaism, Islam, or secular thought. To put it simply, the doctrine of the Trinity is an outcome of a particular stream of Christian theology.

Similarly, the concept of God’s covenant with the people of Israel, as developed in the Bible (e.g., Gen 12; Ex 19-34; Jer 29) and contemporarily invoked, e.g., by Jewish theologian David Novak, emphasizes the unique role of Israel in the history of salvation (Novak 2001, 43-55; Curtin 2014, 105-132). It portrays Israel as the nation to which God addresses Himself in a distinctive manner and the nation that directly responds to God (Novak 2000, 40-44; 56-60; 117-119). How can one incorporate other religious traditions, ethnicities, and cultures—or humanity

as a whole—into this scenario (Novak 1983)? Even if this is possible, e.g., in reading the biblical Israel as a symbol of the whole of humanity, does not such an understanding of *imago Dei* again overly elevate humankind as the sole being within the order of creation capable of responding to God's call?

Moreover, one must ask whether the traditionally understood concept of *imago Dei* – usually from the ontological perspective – does not excessively support modern Western individualism, where the individual's rights supersede the community's rights (e.g., Pope Leo XIII 1891, No. 7). How can the doctrine of the image of God be applied to people with disabilities, the sick, or individuals with limited cognitive abilities? (Maliszewska 2019, 1-10; Ibrahim 2023, 62-109; Service 2015. 50-60) To what extent does it find application in the contemporary world, where the boundaries between humans and machines are increasingly blurred? In what way does the concept of the image of God — which speaks to the dignity and significance of human life — pertain, in practical terms, to those living in refugee camps, attempting to cross the waters of the Mediterranean Sea in hopes of reaching the promised lands of the West, or struggling to survive in occupied territories such as Gaza, Syria, or Ukraine?

In the context of the new arms race that encompasses not only the Earth but also outer space, does the concept of *imago Dei* still hold any relevance? Hasn't it become a symbol of anachronistic cultures, patriarchal hierarchies, or oppressive ecclesial power systems?

3. *Imago Dei* – conclusion

The concept of *imago Dei*, introduced in the early chapters of Genesis, is often understood as representing humanity's unique place as the highest part of creation and a key marker of human dignity. Scholars in theology and religious philosophy usually highlight a unique relationship between humans and God, humans' duty towards other creatures, and the shared aspect of *imago Dei* that applies to all humankind. However,

it is also essential to recognize some potential adverse effects of this concept and its traditional interpretations. For example, *imago Dei* has sometimes been used to justify exclusivism, patriarchy, and human-centered thinking, which have led to social inequalities and environmental harm. Various issues remain, especially concerning people with disabilities, refugee crises, and technological changes.

In her article “*Imago Dei*: Does the Symbol Have a Future?”, Mary Catherine Hilkert O.P. refers to the issue by pointing out that the present and future relevance of *imago Dei* depends on humanity’s ability to embrace its principles inclusively, i.e., respecting the dignity of all individuals, the significance of the rest of creation and the importance of earth, the home of all humankind. In her words: “Ultimately, it seems that the answer depends on us. Human beings and human communities—including ecclesial communities—are capable of denying and, in a sense, ‘erasing’ the image of God in those whom we consider ‘others.’ However, in doing so, do we not also erase our own participation in the image of God, whose love knows no boundaries?” (Hilkert 2002, 18).

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