

Chapter Ten

Imago Dei on the Psychological Plane

Into an October 2015 column in the *International New York Times*, David Brooks dropped this provocative comment: “We are the only animals who are naturally unfinished. We have to bring ourselves to integration and to coherence.” Human beings—all of us—are works in progress. This seems to be truer of us than of other animals, which seem to find their final form quickly and live it faithfully—piously, as Jung said—without further ado. Humans, on the other hand, being unfinished and in possession of a certain amount of freedom to choose their direction and destiny, need a model to aim for and a goal to pursue. Cultures, religious traditions, and philosophies offer images for guidance and so, too, I will argue, does Jungian psychology. Jung speaks often of the Anthropos and the mandala as symbols of human wholeness, and this can be linked to the biblical idea that humans are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*).

The notion of the human as *imago Dei* is what I would like to discuss in this essay from a psychological perspective. The question is this: can modern secular human beings be potentially oriented by a notion of development that is equivalent to the high nobility of the biblical teaching that humankind is created in the image of God, as *imago Dei*? This image would definitely include what Brooks terms integration and coherence, but it would also imply much more. And for moderns, it would require that the notion of *imago Dei* be translated into a language suitable to the times and somewhat altered and redefined given our present state of psychological understanding and modern values.

Humans as Created in the Image of God (*Imago Dei*)

There is the clear perception on the part of human beings universally that some quality or combination of attributes makes *Homo sapiens* importantly different from other creatures on the planet. But what is it, precisely, that makes us different? Is it only that, as David Brooks says, we are unfinished creatures who need actively to pursue integration and coherence? And is our perception that we are significantly different from other animals exaggerated by a narcissistically driven bias?

For traditional Western culture, there is a classical answer. Biblical myth holds that humankind was created in the image of God whereas other creatures were not. The Bible draws a sharp distinction. Humans are special among all the creatures of the earth because they mirror God, which invests their whole being with an aura of Divinity that other created beings do not have. The notion of human beings as made in the image of the biblical Divinity has been an orienting guide for Judeo-Christian people through the centuries, although in modern secular times this idea has faded into a humanistic and, some would say a watered down, version and has lost the strong sense of a sacred soul constituting the essence of the human being.

Implicit in this biblical doctrine of creation is the profound psychological insight that creators fashion creations after their own image. God is seen as no exception. There is a kind of transference relationship (that is, a “twinning” relation) between the divine artist and the created object such that the object reflects back an essential feature of the artist. This is the justification for reading biographical psychological meaning into the works of artists. Jung would speak of *participation mystique* when describing this sort of hidden but defining identity between psyche and object.

This is the perception of the biblical author. When God makes the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry lands, day and night, and all the plants and creatures that exist in this created world, God expresses something about Divinity itself. And when He gets to the sixth day, He puts the crowning touch on His creation, and here especially He creates his most intimate and self-revealing work, portraying Himself in the object of His creation.¹

In Adam and Eve, Yahweh paints a self-portrait. While the whole of creation reflects His glory, it is especially in Adam that He is most perfectly portrayed; God gives himself to His creation in the figures of Adam and Eve. They are stamped with Divinity.

***Imago Dei* in Theology**

The roots of the biblical *imago Dei* doctrine are found in Genesis 1:26–27:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind [Heb *adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

One oddity of this passage that has been noted by many commentators is the plural form of the pronouns. In using the pronoun “we” doesn’t this imply other creators? Both Creator and Created are designated as plural, and since the human part is male and female and mirrors the Creator, the Creator too must show this feature. For some commentators, the plural verb form

suggests a group of gods, the *Elohim*; for others, this form is an affirmation of the primacy of relationship in the myth of *imago Dei*, as though it takes two, a heterosexual couple, to comprise the biblical God image. The implication of this for psychology would be that singularity is not sufficient, and one could take this either in an extroverted sense—the couple as self image—or in the introverted sense, with ego and anima/us as the expression of the self. In any case, the myth of creation tells us something about who we are as human beings. Duality or multiplicity would be a defining quality of this doctrine of human being. This is quite in line with the notion that the human psyche is constituted as a multiplicity of factors and not simple and singular.

We can infer from this biblical account of creation that the relation between human beings and the Divinity is embedded in human nature itself. It is innate, and it is, potentially at least, close, reflexive, and intensely intimate. There is a mirroring relationship; one hears a loving tone in the words of the biblical writer. The relationship between Creator and Created is at first very positive, like that of loving parents toward their newborns. As we now know, too, from neuroscience, the mirroring neurons are present from early in life, and their activation in the infant is essential for future healthy social and psychological development. In the Christian tradition of theological reflection, there have been several different opinions of how to interpret the *imago Dei* myth. I will be brief here in outlining some of them. The “likeness” between God and humankind has been regarded as

- a) Physical: Adam, a perfect physical specimen, and the human body a mirror in some way of the divine spiritual “body” to be kept pure and holy (Paul, Irenaeus)
- b) Mental: the human mind, especially its rationality, as the representation of Divinity in humankind and that which separates us from the other animals

(St. Thomas Aquinas)

- c) The basis for communion with God: a kind of shared interpersonal potential for spiritual dialogue and exchange (Karl Barth 1958)
- d) Lordship over the world: dominion over the earth's other creatures, thus mirroring God's dominion over creation
- e) The potential for profound mutuality and love in human relationship, mirroring the internal love relations within the Holy Trinity (Karl Barth)

From these various interpretations of the image, we can see that there are many aspects to consider in this mirroring relationship. Considered together in a psychological sense, they represent the full potential of the future human being as *imago Dei*, the destiny of the Created as reflected in the Creator. According to myth, the first humans were perfect and whole, and so they represent the ideal prospect of human potential.

Biblical theology, especially in its classical Christian renditions, created a severe problem for itself in the centuries following the Christ event, when dogma defined God as pure Love and nothing but and nothing short of the Greatest Good (*Summum Bonum*). Humanly speaking, all definitions become problematic at some point because they inevitably exclude some essential features of the thing they are trying to pin down. Life and experience exceed the defining mind. Aside from this epistemological limitation, however, the *Summum Bonum* doctrine attempts to come to terms with the problem of evil in relation to the Divine. But the lived experience of the transcendent Presence in history as recorded in the biblical record was severely limited by this definition because it excluded the darker and more problematic aspects of the God events and revelations that were embedded in the tradition. A logical puzzle ensued: if God is all good and pure love, and humankind is created in the image of

God, why are humans so radically different? There all light, and here so much darkness!

Why? Obviously the *imago Dei* revelation has failed as an accurate depiction of humankind, or perhaps it has been misinterpreted. Human history shows plenty of evidence of selfishness and sin alongside the virtues associated with love and goodness. Humans have a shadow side and struggle with the problem of evil, and God apparently does not. So what happened to the *imago Dei*, our divine inheritance? Perfect God, imperfect humans—it doesn't add up if the *imago Dei* doctrine is taken as valid.

From the biblical account, we learn that something went awry in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve exerted their freedom of choice, ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and thereby disobeyed a command of the Creator. For this, they were expelled from Paradise, and humanity inherited from the original parents the stigma of original sin. The Bible does not say that this blemished their features in such a way as to remove the intrinsic *imago Dei*. It does say that their expulsion began the story of human history with all of its ambiguities and struggles. Life became difficult, and growth and development became a challenge. Perfection was no more a given, and yet their fundamental being remained intact.

In order to solve the logical problem posed by the new definition of God as all love and *Summum Bonum* and the stark contrast with humanity who, although created in the image of God, does not show these features, it becomes necessary to state that humans fell radically away from the *imago Dei* through the act of disobedience in Eden. The curse of original sin became intensified such that even obedience to the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai was not seen as sufficient. St. Paul argues that original sin disfigured the *imago Dei* in humanity to the degree that humanity on its own is incapable of living its true image even with the help of the Law. The great Protestant theologian, John Calvin, argued that the mirror, that is, the

imago Dei in humankind, was utterly shattered by the fall. It was only restored to its pristine perfection in the incarnation of the God-man, Jesus Christ. In his life of obedience and self-sacrificial love, Jesus Christ reflected the transcendent God image perfectly and made it immanent in human flesh and blood, so that in Him, according to Calvin, we can see the true image of the Divinity and also are able to realize how far short we fall from that image of perfection. For Christians, Jesus Christ becomes the new representation of *imago Dei*, replacing the first humans, Adam and Eve. Christ is the new Adam. Myth has become material reality in the historical life and death of Jesus. In Christ, the Creator acted once again to establish His image in the world of creation, this time with a major emphasis on the quality of love. This was an incarnation of “God is love.”

Humans may fall far short of this kind of perfection, but they do have the capacity to receive grace, to be “saved.” This would become the theologians’ answer to the problem posed by the contradiction between human reality and the *imago Dei* doctrine. The act of divine grace brings about the possibility for redemption of the original *imago Dei* as seen in the primal parents, Adam and Eve, before the Fall, but now cast in the new version of *imago Dei* as shown in the Christ figure. Grace assigns the perfection of Christ to the human recipient, who then becomes identified with Christ in the eyes of God. God now sees the human being as though he or she were Christ. The redeemed person is granted the benefit of the original *imago Dei*, even though in reality, as we perceive it in time and space, this may not be evident. On a practical level, this should make a difference in a person’s behavior and attitudes as they take on the project of mirroring Christ. This became the *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ) project of the redeemed person. Blessed with grace and through identification with Christ, the mirror is restored in a second iteration, the first one having been shattered in the original fall from grace. In this state of restored perfection, the *imago*

Dei now again becomes operative, and the attributes embedded in the human creature through its mirror relationship to the Divinity become activated in the community of the redeemed, the Church. The Church is the restored mirror image of the Divine. It may not appear so empirically to outside human observers, but as viewed by God through Christ, it enjoys this transferred image. Thus the Church as the restored “people of God” is a third iteration of *imago Dei* in humanity.

However, according to traditional Christian theology, this state of redemption does not apply for many people on the planet. Given the omnipotence of God, this is a paradox and humanly inexplicable. Either the unredeemed are beyond the geographical areas in which the Gospel is available and so remain in a state of original sin for that reason, or they do not for some other reason receive the benefits of divine grace. As a collective, humanity remains badly mired in sin and continues to suffer from corruption and the influence of evil. For the majority of people on earth, the *imago Dei* does not operate as it should, and the fall into sin continues to dominate human history. For theology, the reason for this state of affairs in humanity remains a mystery hidden in the inscrutable mind of God. The answers will be revealed only on the Day of Judgment.

What Analytical Psychology Has to Say about the *Imago Dei*

Throughout Jung’s writings, we find extensive reflections on the psychological meaning of the God image in relation to the archetype of the self, including the reformation of the *imago Dei* in Christ, Christ as a symbol of the self, and the one-sidedness of Christ’s perfection and the doctrine of God as *Summum Bonum*. While Jung insisted repeatedly that we could say nothing about the Divine as archetype per se, we can look to the images expressing the

archetype to surmise something about the pattern-maker behind the image. Jung identified the *imago Dei* as the self, thereby interpreting it as a fundamental psychological factor: “For psychology the self is an *imago Dei* and cannot be distinguished from it empirically” (Jung 1952/1970, ¶612). It is of absolutely critical importance to recognize that Jung identifies the *imago Dei* with the self, not with the ego. The ego is a stand-in for the self in consciousness but has to develop its capacities in the course of the individuation process. Here, we would agree with David Brooks that humans are unfinished creatures; they must develop, integrate pieces of self, and create some semblance of coherence within. An individual’s identity is not a given. It is a construction. The self, however, is a given from the beginning of life, like the *imago Dei* that is planted by the Divinity in human nature. Significantly, then, there is a three-part structure: implanter (archetype per se), implanted (archetypal image), and secondary representative (image made manifest in consciousness and lived life). This is a psychological delineation of the theological concept: God the Creator, *imago Dei* in the creature, fallen humankind struggling for integration and coherence.

The story of the ego’s development corresponds to the story of Adam and Eve falling out of a state of original grace, being cut off from the Paradise into which they were born, and having to find a way to reconnect to the *imago Dei* within through a lengthy process of psychological development. In the biblical narrative, this account of reconnection takes place in the subsequent books of the Bible, in which prophets such as Moses have direct contact once again with the Divinity and mirror the Godhead to a certain extent, and eventually, in the New Testament, when the *imago Dei* becomes brilliantly manifested in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Jung explicitly links individuation to the notion of *imitatio Christi*, but in the sense of pursuing one’s own path to wholeness by taking similar risks and obeying an inner voice of the self.

Jung proposes a model of human psychological and spiritual development that goes far beyond anything advocated by thinkers of the secular age in the West, except perhaps for Nietzsche. Jung brings the *imago Dei* back as a goal of human development for people in general, but this is quite different from Nietzsche's vision of a future superman, which proved catastrophic personally for him and culturally for a nation because it encouraged a vast ego inflation.²

In his mature years, Jung deepened his version of the self as *imago Dei* through his extensive alchemical research and writings. The alchemists, as he discovered, were intent on recovering the *imago Dei* in its immanent expression hidden in the depths of matter. In probing the darkness of the material world, using their imagination actively, and informed by a pre-Christian hermetic tradition that stretched back to ancient Egypt, they discovered the *imago Dei* in the symbol of the Anthropos. Jung argued that the Anthropos symbol covers the representations in all dogmatic statements, including the Christian one of Christ as the second Adam: "The alchemical Anthropos showed itself to be independent of any dogma" (Jung 1955/1970, ¶492). He would, of course, argue that what they had discovered was the self in the depths of the unconscious, and it was a greater and more authentic representation of the *imago Dei* than that represented in any religious tradition. In fact, it was the archetype of them all.

The Anthropos doctrine was a favorite of Jung's, and he reflected on it extensively in his last major work, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (1970, CW 14, Chap. V). The project of alchemy, as Jung found, is to recover this image of the Anthropos, which resides within the *prima materia*, an increatum and as such equivalent to Deity. In other words, this image of wholeness is embedded in the depths of the unconscious and needs to be made manifest in

the course of the opus of individuation. It is a story of recovery of original wholeness, lost in the course of human psychological (ego) development, but not permanently unavailable.

The *imago Dei* as Emergent in Human History

In his depth psychology, as I have shown, Jung proposed a modern version of the notion of humankind as *imago Dei* in his theory of the self. Stepping out of the biblical myth into modernity, however, requires one to take evolutionary history into account. We now know that the species *Homo sapiens* did not suddenly spring up on earth without a long previous history of evolutionary preparation; the archeological record is immense. And the history of modern consciousness also has a long history, as delineated by Erich Neumann in his massive work *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (1954). Jung looked backward to alchemy and Gnosticism, to mythology and ancient religious and philosophical traditions, to trace the notion of *imago Dei*, and Erich Neumann took it back even further, into the evolutionary history of the human species and earlier, to trace the origins and emergence of the *imago Dei*. It is now possible to ask: how did the *imago Dei*, or in our psychological terminology, the archetype of the self, enter into human nature, and when did humans become aware of it? These are two different questions, but they are related. Following this line of inquiry will offer the notion of humanity as *imago Dei* in a modern rendition, no longer anchored exclusively or even primarily in the biblical account but also not discontinuous with it. This is a new and more inclusive myth of emergence of the archetype of humanity. The importance of looking at humanity in this way is that it lends distinctive value to the presence of humanity in the universe. It lays the groundwork for a new humanism based on archetypal foundations and recognizes the sanctity of the human soul as part of the *unus mundus* with a unique role to play.

To give an impression of the time periods involved in these developments, I cite an article by Professor Curtis Marean (2015) in *Scientific American* titled, “How We Conquered the Planet.” According to recent paleoanthropological research, he writes, *Homo sapiens* came into existence in South Africa some 200,000 years ago and then began to expand across the planet about 70,000 years ago. An interval of 130,000 years elapsed, therefore, in which our species “incubated,” so to speak, before it emerged in its full form and with its exceptional powers. Equipped with two unique gifts, *Homo sapiens* proceeded to conquer and eventually to take dominion over the entire planet as the biblical God intended, as written in the Book of Genesis “over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth.” What were these two unique gifts that *Homo sapiens* possessed, according to Prof. Marean? They were “a genetically determined propensity for cooperation with unrelated individuals and advanced projectile weapons” (14). Broad sociability and instrumental rationality would be the two essential features that distinguished *Homo sapiens* from other creatures on our planet and gave our species the edge needed to expand and dominate the others. Is this a piece of early evidence of the emergence of *imago Dei* in humans? Some theologies might argue this case: our species shows an exceptional ability for relationship (see theologies of *imago Dei* as relational capacity) as well as advanced mental capacities (theologies that emphasize *imago Dei* as mind and rationality).

We think today, however, of a process of emergence when we consider archetypes and their appearance in the human psyche. This dovetails with the theory of evolution of species.

Archetypal structures emerge gradually and spontaneously from the depths of the collective unconscious, even from the depths of the cosmos underlying our psychic nature, and even from a deeper energetic and potentially structuring background with ontological standing; and

they consolidate their impact over many millennia. Even more slowly do humans become conscious of the emergence of archetypal patterns and images in our cultures and in our personal lives. The self archetype (*imago Dei*) is no exception. Ages of preparation were needed for it to emerge and configure its present form in the human creature.

The coming into consciousness of the sense of humankind as an *imago Dei* can also be read in the unfolding stories of ancient mythologies and religions, not only the biblical. This process of coming into consciousness, as distinguished from the process of emergence of *imago Dei* as an active but totally unconscious agency within the species, coincides with what we know as historical time, that is, the last five thousand years or so. We will allow ourselves to speculate that the archetype per se was there from the very beginning of creation, perhaps even inherent in the Big Bang, and certainly long before the beginning of our particular species, but it remained in an unconscious position and could not be reflected in the consciousness of sentient beings until humans had been prepared as a species by the evolutionary process when it became manifested first in the form of myth and symbol. After that, there was a migration of “Gods out there,” whether in animal or human form but in the far distance and above the human level of being, in the beyond and more or less detached from the human, to the human interior, to a sense of the human soul as being itself made in the image of God. Now human beings found themselves in a special mirror relationship to the Divinity, in other words enjoying participation in the Divine and in the Deity’s creative project in the universe. This link to the Divine must have dawned gradually upon the human race, at first as the special endowment of priestesses, priests, and kings who represented the Godhead to others and then as a big step forward in a sort of revelation, in a flash of brilliant insight that God made us all in his image. Later the *imago Dei* became democratized in the course of history until, in the period of modernity, it disappeared as a concept and was

replaced by so-called rational and objective scientific accounts of human capacities and functions.

With the advent of Jungian psychology, we perhaps witness a new possibility for consciousness of the *imago Dei* in humankind. This realization of a transpersonal archetypal self is now on the psychological plane and not on the mythic, religious, or philosophical. In other words, it is empirical and based on evidence; it is experienced personally and individually, democratically, and grounded in a modern worldview; and it recognizes the depths and numinous quality of this psychological factor. The notion of the self as archetypally grounded gives enormous stature and meaning to humanity, far beyond what it would have if we recognized only the ruthless intelligence and sociability of *Homo sapiens* and their success in conquering the earth. We also recognize the shadow, which is so graphically inscribed in the modern ego, as an aspect of the self. This willful, free, potentially disobedient ego also belongs to the whole in which it must find its proper place. With this elevation of human status to the sacred also comes special ethical responsibility for the whole of creation, as co-creator with the Deity of the *anima mundi*. The self, an *imago Dei*, is archetypal, and so it links us to the cosmos as a profound reflective mirror and partner of the creative itself.

Note

References to *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* are cited in the text as CW, volume number, and paragraph number. *The Collected Works* are published in English by Routledge (UK) and Princeton University Press (USA).<NOTE>

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ENDNOTES

¹ “In this article, I use gendered language out of respect for the traditional language of the Bible that images God in masculine language.

² For a full and exhaustive discussion of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, see Jung's *Nietzsche's Zarathustra: Notes of the Seminar given in 1934–1939* (1988).