

IMAGO DEI

Human Dignity in Ecumenical Perspective



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awareness, the grace to prepare ourselves, together, to offer this *sacrifice of unity*?

Or, as our Lord Himself prayed: "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (Jn 17:21-23, RSV).



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[1]

THE PROMISE OF THE IMAGE

JOHN BEHR

THAT human beings are important is something we take for granted, and not only because we are human beings (or so we think—more on this later). It is a theme that has provoked reflection since time immemorial, and not only for us human beings: the question of the Psalmist—"What is man that thou art mindful of him?" (Ps 8:4, 144:3; cf. Jb 7:17; Heb 2:6)—presumes that no less than God himself recognizes our worth! However, over recent decades, the subject of human dignity has become very controversial, especially as it has come to be utilized as a mainstay in arguments about bioethics. "Dignity," Harvard University's Steven Pinker argues, is a "squishy, subjective notion, hardly up to the heavyweight moral demands assigned to it." It is a vague concept employed

uncritically, he further claims, by those who wish to advance an “obstructionist bioethics” in a neutral moral language that in reality rests upon prior religious convictions. Moreover, he insists, not only does it not add anything to the discussion, but it is in fact potentially harmful, as the perception of “dignity” resides in the eye of the beholder: “Every sashed and be-medaled despot reviewing his troops from a lofty platform seeks to command respect through ostentatious displays of dignity.”¹

Now, what from a Christian perspective marks out the dignity of human beings is that, unlike the rest of creation (and even the angels), they alone are created in the image and likeness of God. This statement, of course, requires a lot of unpacking, both in respect of its content and also, and perhaps more importantly, in regard to the hermeneutic by which we can make the statement. Its content has been explicated in a variety of ways over the centuries. But it is striking that the typically twentieth-century manner of restating its content—that it is *as persons* that human beings are in the image of God—resorts to the very same point upon which Pinker and others would attempt to rest their moral arguments. As Pinker puts it, “Even when breaches of dignity lead to an identifiable harm, it’s ultimately autonomy and respect for persons that give us the grounds for condemning it.”²

“Autonomy and respect for persons.” Such language may well seem to be far less indebted to or based upon a Christian heritage: we are all “persons” regardless of our race, creed, or status. It would seem to be an eminently humanistic claim. It is the first of the “self-evident” truths proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence (1776), that “all men are created equal, that they are

1. Steven Pinker, “The Stupidity of Dignity,” *The New Republic*, May 28, 2008, 28–31.

2. *Ibid.*

endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” And it is universally applied by the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights (1948), again as the first item: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

But are these truths in fact self-evident? They are not empirically verifiable, and in fact they fly in the face of our own daily observation. Yet despite the great inequality into which human beings are born—in disparate conditions, economic, social, physical, and intellectual—we would nevertheless surely still want to say that there is something about every human being *as a person* that is absolute, equal, and irreplaceable. But because this conviction is not an empirical conclusion, nor even empirically verifiable, it is an a priori assumption, or, in other words, a statement of faith.

HUMAN NATURE AND THE “CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION”

David Bentley Hart has recently argued a spirited case that this absolute value placed upon each human being *as a person* is not, as the fashionable enemies of Christianity are wont to assume, the result of an enlightened, civilized society breaking free from the bondage of religion in the name of reason, so that if the value ascribed to the person is an a priori, it is at least one of reason. Hart argues that, quite to the contrary, the very notion of the person is in fact a result of the revolution that is Christianity. He gives the example, for instance, of Peter in the Gospels, in whom, as Erich Auerbach noted, we can see “the image of a man in the highest and deepest and most tragic sense” compared to the portraiture of the great classical writers. Yet that he is nothing but a

Galilean peasant is not only not good taste but an act of rebellion, in which “we see something beginning to emerge from darkness into full visibility, arguably for the first time in our history: the human person as such, invested with an intrinsic and inviolable dignity, and possessed of infinite value.”³ The very fact that we habitually and unthinkingly speak of all human beings as “persons” is a testimony to the impact that the Christian revolution has had, for to “have a person,” strictly speaking, was a right which Roman law bestowed only upon citizens—slaves were human beings lacking personhood (*non habens personam*).

For Christians in the ancient world, the Gospel was literally a message of liberation in a manner we can barely begin to comprehend today. Christ had triumphed over the powers of this world, all the things to which human beings had subjected themselves but which Christ had shown to be nothing: the elemental spirits of the universe; things which have no power over us, but to which we give subservience; things which are not but which hold us in thrall (such as, today, our “market forces”)—his triumph has tamed the fearful world in which humans had formerly lived. That God created the world *ex nihilo* emphasized the absolute transcendence of the Creator, who in reverse was now experienced as immanent within creation; and creation itself was understood as a gratuitous expression of divine love, a place of beauty and wonder, whose diversity reflected the multifaceted splendor of God’s own wisdom, and thus a subject worthy of our inquisitiveness. And that the drama of salvation is enacted within this world, working backward to the beginning and forward to the eschaton, gives the time of creation a meaning and an orientation.

It is within this new world created by the Christian revolution,

3. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 167.

Hart argues, that our notion of “person” emerges, particularly in the context of the debates about the person and nature of the Incarnate Son of God. As Hart writes,

The rather extraordinary inference to be drawn from this doctrine [of Chalcedon] is that personality is somehow transcendent of nature. A person is not merely a fragment of some larger cosmic or spiritual category, a more perfect or more defective expression of some abstract set of attributes, in light of which his or her value, significance, legitimacy, or proper place is to be judged. This man or that woman is not merely a specimen of the general set of the human; rather, his or her human nature is only one manifestation and one part of what he or she is or might be. And personality is an irreducible mystery, somehow prior to and more spacious than everything that would limit or define it, capable of exceeding even its own nature in order to embrace another, ever more glorious nature. This immense dignity—this infinite capacity—inheres in every person, no matter what circumstances might for now seem to limit him or her to one destiny or another. No previous Western vision of the human being remotely resembles this one, and no other so fruitfully succeeded in embracing at once the entire range of finite human nature, in all the intricacy of its inner and outer dimensions, while simultaneously affirming the transcendent possibility and strange grandeur present within each person.⁴

The result of all the intense theological reflection in the controversies that beset the church from the fourth to the eighth centuries, over matters which Edward Gibbon famously dismissed as turning upon an iota, was a “coherent concept of the human as such, endowed with infinite dignity in all its individual ‘moments,’ full of powers and mysteries to be fathomed and esteemed . . . an unimaginably exalted picture of the human person—made in the divine image and destined to partake of the divine nature—without

4. *Ibid.*, 211.

thereby diminishing or denigrating the concrete reality of human nature, spiritual, intellectual, or carnal.⁵ Something profound happened, resulting in a new, and radically different, way of looking at the world and understanding ourselves.

Hart is clear that this was not an immediate result, nor that every supposedly "Christian" society lived up to this reality. But, as he points out:

It required an extraordinary moment of awakening in a few privileged souls, and then centuries of the relentless and total immersion of culture in the Christian story, to make even the best of us conscious of (or at least able to believe in) the moral claim of all other persons upon us, the splendor and irreducible dignity of the divine humanity within them, that depth within each of them that potentially touches upon the eternal. In the light of Christianity's absolute law of charity, we came to see what we formerly could not: the autistic or Down syndrome or otherwise disabled child, for instance, for whom the world can remain a perpetual perplexity, which can too often cause pain but perhaps only vaguely and fleetingly charm or delight; the derelict or wretched or broken man or woman who has wasted his or her life away; the homeless, the utterly impoverished, the diseased, the mentally ill, the physically disabled; exiles, refugees, fugitives; even criminals and reprobates. To reject, turn away from, or kill any or all of them would be, in a very real sense, the most purely practical of impulses. To be able, however, to see in them not only something of worth but indeed something potentially godlike, to be cherished and adored, is the rarest and most ennoblingly unrealistic capacity ever bred within human souls. To look on the child whom our ancient ancestors would have seen as somehow unwholesome or as a worthless burden, and would have abandoned to fate, and to see in him or her instead a person worthy of all affection—resplendent with divine glory, ominous with an absolute demand upon our consciences, evoking our love and our reverence—is to be set free from mere elemental exist-

5. *Ibid.*, 213.

tence, and from those natural limitations that pre-Christian persons took to be the very definition of reality.⁶

This is indeed a most remarkable and inspiring vision. What especially strikes one is the way Hart focuses on examples which are weak and broken, on the instances where we would rather turn our faces (rather like the disciples at the Passion), preferring instead our idea and ideals of what constitutes human dignity and divine existence.

But a vision which reverses the terms, as it were, by a divine exchange—to see divine strength in human weakness, eternal life in death, and the very Logos of God in flesh—is always going to appear a folly and a scandal to human thought. It will necessarily be a fragile vision, one that is all too easily forgotten. And so, Hart concludes with a troubling question:

How long can our gentler ethical prejudices—many of which seem to me to be melting away with fair rapidity—persist once the faith that gave them their rationale and meaning has withered away? Love endures all things perhaps, as the apostle says, and is eternal; but as a cultural reality, even love requires a reason for its preeminence among the virtues, and the mere habit of solicitude for others will not necessarily survive when that reason is no longer found. If, as I have argued . . . the "human" as we now understand it is the positive invention of Christianity, might it not also be the case that a culture that has become truly post-Christian will also, ultimately, become posthuman?⁷

This may not necessarily be so, but there doesn't appear to be much cause for thinking otherwise. Having abandoned the notion of "dignity," even Pinker resorts to a "respect for persons," without giving any real reason for this.

Hart's typically sharp posing of the question does indeed give us pause for thought. But is it really the case that the "personal"

6. *Ibid.*, 214.

7. *Ibid.*, 215.

dimension of human existence, as we understand it today, is really the fruit of the Christian revolution? And is this indeed the best way to think of human dignity? Is being "human" to be equated with being a "person," as this has come to be understood today?

DIGNITY AS PERSONHOOD:
THEOLOGICAL RESERVATIONS

It is unquestionable that the primary category in terms of which we understand ourselves today is as "persons." And it is also clear that how we understand this—"endowed with infinite dignity in all its individual 'moments,' full of powers and mysteries to be fathomed and esteemed," as Hart puts it—differs from previous generations, betraying the fact that the term "person" has its own history and evolution: human self-understanding, the human experience of self, of being a person, has changed throughout the ages, as it changes throughout the life span of a single human being (a version of Ernst Haeckel's recapitulation theory, that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny"). As Charles Taylor notes, "There is some truth in the idea that people always are selves, that they distinguish inside from outside in all cultures." But he elaborates, "The really difficult thing is distinguishing the human universals from the historical constellations, and not eliding the second into the first so that *our particular way* seems somehow inescapable for humans as such, as we are always tempted to do."⁸

Unlike a statement of anatomy (that we have a head attached to a body, for instance), the articulation of our "personhood" is necessarily self-interpretative and self-referential, and necessarily specific, bound to a particular age—of the person concerned or the period of human history with which we are concerned—and

8. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 112.

to a particular cultural experience. And because of this, Taylor suggests, "no satisfactory general formula can be found to characterize the ubiquitous nature of a self-interpreting animal." Perhaps it is impossible by definition: the human being as a "self-interpreting animal" will be like Heraclitus's river.

It seems that our tendency to project our current understanding of ourselves as "persons" into a universal and atemporal reality has also been operative in some trends in contemporary theology. Some theologians, such as Jürgen Moltmann and Cornelius Plantinga, have argued that the term "hypostasis" as developed by the Greek Fathers provides a fundamental insight into the "personal" existence of God, and thus the grounding of all reality in the person. It is intimately connected with the divine "perichoresis": the three persons that the one God is, existing in perfect unity within one another, "a zestful wondrous community of divine light, love, joy, mutuality and verve," in which there is "no isolation, no insulation, no secretiveness, no fear of being transparent to another."⁹ This "social" model of the Trinity is then held up as the perfect model for human beings, created in the image of God, to strive to replicate on earth, overcoming our limited "individualism" to enter into community of truly personal communion. The adequacy of such claims with respect to the Greek Fathers has increasingly been called into question, as has also the methodology of this approach: it takes the concept of perichoresis, understood as that which make three to be one, fills it out with ideas borrowed from our own experience of relationships and relatedness, projects it onto God and then reflects it back onto the world as an excit-

9. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in R. J. Feenstra and C. Plantinga, Jr., eds., *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); quoted in Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 432-45, at 435.

ing previously underutilized resource of Christian theology that resolves our contemporary problem of "individualism" and gives new life to ancient, little-understood conceptual formulae.¹⁰

Other theologians, most notably Karl Rahner, have been much more circumspect regarding the term "person." He pointed out that while in antiquity the term "person" signified directly the distinct subsistence, and the rational nature of a particular being only indirectly, "the 'anthropocentric turn' of modern times requires that the spiritual-subjective element in the concept of person be understood."¹¹ Accordingly, he argued for using the phrase "mode of subsistence" rather than "person" to translate the Greek word *hypostasis*: we cannot change how people hear the word "person," and so need to use a periphrastic construction (but we can no more change a pattern of speech either!).

A further point that should be made is that the Greek Fathers of the fourth century were very reticent to speak of *three* persons or hypostasis. In fact, St. Basil says we should not use numbers at all:

When the Lord delivered [the formula of] the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he did not make arithmetic a part of this gift! He did not say, "In the first, the second and the third" or "In one, two and three." But he gave us the knowledge of the faith that leads to salvation by means of holy names. So that the faith is what saves us; numbers have been devised as symbols indicative of quantity. . . . Count if you must, but do not damage the faith by doing so. Either by silence honor the ineffable things, or piously count the holy things. There is one God and Father, one Only-Begotten Son, and one Holy Spirit. We proclaim each of the *hypostases* singly (*μοναχῶς*); and if we must use numbers, we will not let an ignorant arithmetic lead us astray to the idea of polytheism.¹²

10. Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection."

11. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1986), 108.

12. St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 18.44-45. Ed. and French trans.,

We proclaim each singly, his point is, because they are incommensurable with each other; there is nothing in their individuating properties—being the unbegotten Father, the only-begotten Son, and the Spirit who proceeds—which would enable us to count three persons. As Vladimir Lossky points out:

In speaking of three hypostases, we are already making an improper abstraction: if we wanted to generalize and make a *concept* of the "divine hypostasis," we would have to say that the only common definition possible would be the impossibility of any common definition of the three hypostases.¹³

In other words, it is not possible to specify what is common to each of the hypostases *as hypostasis*, as person—that is, what constitutes their personhood ("hypostaticity") in the abstract, before one applies the personal characteristics of Father, Son, and Spirit—because, being common to each, it would be classified as part of the *ousia*. And, Lossky further notes, although the Fathers did indeed articulate very clearly and precisely the relationship between hypostasis and *ousia*, the same cannot be said for a notion of the human person more generally: "For my part, I must admit that until now I have not found what one might call an elaborated doctrine of the human person in patristic theology, alongside its very precise teaching on divine persons or hypostases."¹⁴

If "dignity" is, as Pinker puts it, a "squishy, subjective notion," inadequate for serious moral reflection, then clearly the term "person," the term upon which even Pinker unthinkingly relies, is an even more flighty and evasive notion, a complex term with a history of continual evolution, changing throughout time and

B. Pruche, *Basile de Césarée: Sur le Saint Esprit*, rev. ed. SC 17 bis (Paris: Cerf, 2002). Eng. trans. in the series Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF) 8.

13. "The Theological Notion of the Human Person," in V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 113.

14. *Ibid.*, 112.

throughout our own lives. To claim that our notion of "person" has its roots in the transformation of thought—the understanding of God, ourselves, and all creation—achieved by the Greek Fathers as they learned to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity and the hypostatic union of natures in Christ, is, I would argue, to mistake form for content, and in a very real sense miss the point altogether. The theological debates of the fourth to seventh centuries were not about defining a clearer notion of "the person" in the abstract, but about defining ever more clearly what is to be said about a particular person, the "one Lord Jesus Christ," who is fully divine and fully human, without confusion, change, separation, or division: one Lord Jesus Christ known in two natures, with the properties of each concurring in one hypostasis or *prosopon*. It is this one, about whom we speak in this way, who is important, not the terms themselves and how they form part of a trajectory which culminates in how we now think of ourselves.

THE HUMAN: A CHRISTOLOGICAL APPROACH

If the terms "dignity" and "person" provide neither steady ground nor clear content for an attempt to answer the question of the Psalmist—"What is man that thou art mindful of him?"—perhaps we should return directly to the notion of being human. This is a more fundamental category than that of "person," and does not depend upon subscribing to particular notions of "person"; even slaves in antiquity were human even if Roman law did not ascribe to them the dignity of having a *persona*. And likewise we accept that being human does not depend upon the ability to think about oneself in a particular way, or even to exercise our human "rights" or realize our "potential."

Returning to the idea of being human also brings us back to

the notion of the image of God, for the two are directly correlated by Scripture: after making all the other creatures by his word alone, God announces his project: "Let us make *anthropos* in our image and likeness" (Gn 1:27). How this correlation between being human and being in the image of God has been understood also has a history. Over the past century, from Karl Barth onward, there has been an increasing tendency to explicate our existence as the image of God in terms of humans being relational beings, persons in relation imaging the Trinity of divine persons that is God. However, the Apostle Paul and the early Church Fathers following him were much more specific, and again focused on Christ: it is he, the apostle says, who *is* the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), in whom the fullness of divinity dwells bodily (Col 2:9), so that we cannot see God anywhere else, by some other means. As Christ *is* the image of God, Adam, being made "in" or "according to" the image and likeness (κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν) already points to Christ; Adam is, as Paul puts it, "a type of the one to come" (Rom 5:14).

Very strikingly, the first Christian theologians to reflect on this, such as Irenaeus of Lyons and Tertullian, located the "image" directly in the body. How can it be located anywhere else, Irenaeus asked, if Christ is to be the visible image of the invisible God?¹⁵ The perfect human being, according to Irenaeus, is "the commingling and the union of the soul receiving the Spirit of the Father and joined to the flesh which was molded after the image of God."¹⁶ As the image is located in the flesh, Irenaeus differentiates between the image and the likeness, that which is acquired when the human being lives, in the Spirit, directed toward God. As he puts it:

15. St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* (AH) 2.7, 19; 4.6.6; 5.6.1. Translation in Ante-Nicene Fathers 1.

16. AH 5.6.1.

For in times long past, it was said that *anthropos* was made in the image of God, but it was not shown [to be so]; for the Word was as yet invisible, after whose image *anthropos* was created; and because of this he easily lost the likeness. When, however, the God Word became flesh, he confirmed both of these: for he both showed forth the image truly, himself becoming that which was his image, and he reestablished the likeness in a sure manner, by co-assimilating *anthropos* to the invisible Father through the Word become visible.¹⁷

Tertullian also focuses our attention on the body, by combining the two accounts of the creation of the human being given in Genesis (1:26–27; 2:7):

Whatever [form] the clay expressed, in mind was Christ who was to become human (which the clay was) and the Word flesh (which the earth then was). For the Father had already said to his Son, "Let us make man unto our image and likeness; and God made man," that is the same as "fashioned" [cf. Gn 2:7], "unto the image of God made he him" [Gn 1:26–27]—it means of Christ. And the Word is also God, who "being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal to God" [Phil 2:6]. Thus that clay, already putting on the image of Christ, who was to be in the flesh, was not only the work, but also the pledge of God.¹⁸

Our body is not only the handiwork of God, being fashioned into the image and likeness of God, that is, of Christ who is to come, but also the "pledge" of God that this indeed shall come to pass.

It was no doubt partly their battle with "Gnosticism" that prompted Irenaeus and Tertullian to give such high dignity to the body in a manner unparalleled with the later tradition. Under the influence of theologians in Alexandria, the later tradition was much more likely to locate the image of God in human beings within their intellectual or noetic faculty, as that which dif-

17. *AH* 5.6.2.

18. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 6, ed. and trans. E. Evans (London: SPCK, 1960) (translation modified).

ferentiates human beings from irrational animals, but also, more importantly as that which relates us, as reasoning (*logikoi*) animals, to the Divine Logos. We were made in the image of God, St. Athanasius says, by being granted a share in the power of God's own Word, so that having "shadows" of the Word and being made *logikos*, we might be able to partake of the Word and live the life of blessedness in paradise.¹⁹ This is not to deprecate the body, but to emphasize that, even if we live *in* the body (and there is no suggestion at all that it should or could be otherwise) our true life, imaging God, does not however reside in living *for* the body. But human beings preferred that which was closer to themselves, their body, and so made the body an idol, an obstacle to their knowledge of God—not because of its materiality, but because it had become the focus of our attention. Nevertheless, this being the case, the Word took a body so that we might regain knowledge of him through the body, again, not through the materiality of the body but through the works he does in the body (we see him as a man, but then ask: what manner of man is it that does such works—healing the sick, forgiving sins, raising the dead, and paradigmatically conquering death by his own death); and in this way we become part of his body, witnesses to the resurrection.

Although it is played out in numerous ways, the predominant perspective of the Christian tradition in the first millennium, with two exceptions, was to relate the creation of the human being in the image of God to Christ as the image of God, and to place this in eschatological perspective—we are created looking forward to, in anticipation of, as a type of Christ. The first exception were the Antiochene theologians such as Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Having separated the Old Testament from the

19. See St. Athanasius the Great, *On the Incarnation*, 3. Translation in NPNF 4.

New, they tended to explain Genesis 1:27 solely within the scope of the Old Testament, as the dominion that human beings were to have over creation, and in this are echoed by modern Old Testament scholars.²⁰ The other exception is Augustine, who deploys a range of psychological imagery relating the interrelated faculties of the human being to the members of the Trinity.

However it is we define what constitutes the existence of human beings as created in the image of God, we are still confronted with the anomaly that this truth is not at all self-evident, any more than our modern claims regarding the equality of human beings. St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his treatise *On the Making of Man*, asks this question quite directly:

How then is man, this mortal, passible, short-lived being, the image of that nature which is immortal, pure, and everlasting? The true answer to this question, indeed, perhaps only the very Truth knows.... [But] neither does the word of God lie when it says that man was made in the image of God, nor is the pitiable suffering of man's nature like the blessedness of the impassible Life.²¹

Gregory goes on to suggest, "by conjectures and inferences," that the discrepancy should be understood in terms of the distinction between the statement of intent in Genesis 1:27ab—"God created *anthropos* in the image of God, in the image of God created he him"—and the actual action of God in Genesis 1:27c—"male and female created he them," which Gregory links to the second creation narrative, in which God fashions his creatures from mud.

20. Old Testament scholars frequently make the same claim, while admitting that this is based upon our knowledge of ancient Near East cultures in general, in which the king alone was understood to be the image of God, rather than anything within the Old Testament which might legitimize this interpretation. Cf. P. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them': Gen 1.27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74.2 (1981): 140.

21. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 16.4. Trans. in NPNF 5.

While God's stated intention is to make a human being in his image, what came to pass in this world is the creation of males and females, which Gregory takes as a provisional measure, enabling us to grow to our full estate, God's original intention. He suggests, in other words, much as St. Maximus will do later, that although we are now indeed males and females, we are not yet truly human.²²

In these writers, then, the truth of the human being is not found in protology, looking back to a lost golden age of perfection, but in the future stature to which we are called, the stature of humanity that Christ alone has manifested in this world: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God: when Christ who is our life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory" (Col 3:3-4). This perspective is held right through to the end of the Byzantine era. Nicholas Cabasilas, writing in the fourteenth century, also asserts that it is not Adam but Christ who is the first true human being in history:

It was for the new human being (*anthropos*) that human nature was created at the beginning, and for him mind and desire were prepared.... It was not the old Adam who was the model for the new, but the new Adam

22. In the cosmic vision of St. Maximus the Confessor, Christ's work has removed all the divisions and separations which characterize our present experience of created reality, and which have resulted from the misuse of the power given to us for the purpose of uniting all in Christ. Amongst these is the distinction between males and females: "First he united us in himself by removing the difference between male and female, and instead of men and women, in whom above all this manner of division is beheld, he showed us as properly and truly to be simply human beings (*anthropos*), thoroughly transfigured in accordance with him, and bearing his intact and completely unadulterated image." (See *Ambiguum* 41, trans. in Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor, The Early Church Fathers* [London: Routledge, 1996]). Following the Apostle Paul (cf. Gal 3:28), St. Maximus asserts that in Christ the distinction between male and female is removed. The removal of this distinction means that in Christ, and only in him, can we see both men and women as what they truly are: human beings.

for the old. . . . For those who have known him first, the old Adam is the archetype because of our fallen nature. But for him who sees all things before they exist, the first Adam is the imitation of the second. To sum it up: the Savior first and alone showed to us the true human being (*anthropos*), who is perfect on account of both character and life and in all other respects.²³

Not only is Christ the first true human being, but he is the model in whose image Adam, "a type of the one to come" (Rom 5:14), was already created.

And if it is through the Passion (understood by the opening of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread) that the disciples finally come to know who Christ is, then it is likewise in and through our own taking up the cross that we come to manifest the image of God and become fully human. When St. Irenaeus penned that beautiful, and much-quoted, line, that "the glory of God is the living human being," he did not mean, as we might today, being a person in the fullness of all our rights and inner potential, all that it is to be "alive."²⁴ Rather, for St. Irenaeus, the "living human being" is the martyr, going to death in confession of Christ:

In this way, therefore, the martyrs bear witness and despise death: not after the weakness of the flesh, but by the readiness of the Spirit. For when the weakness of the flesh is absorbed, it manifests the Spirit as powerful; and again, when the Spirit absorbs the weakness, it inherits the flesh for itself, and from both of these is made a living human being: living, indeed, because of the participation of the Spirit; and human, because of the substance of the flesh.²⁵

23. Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, 6.91–94. Ed. and French trans. M.-H. Congourdeau, SC 361 (Paris: Cerf, 1990); Eng. trans. C. J. deCatanaro (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), where it is numbered as 6.12.

24. *AH* 4.20.7.

25. *AH* 5.9.2.

The strength of God is made perfect in weakness, and so, paradoxically, it is in their death, their ultimate vulnerability, that the martyrs bear greatest witness to the strength of God. Not that they reckon death to be a thing of no importance, but that in their confession they are vivified by the Spirit, living the life of the Spirit, who absorbs the weakness of their flesh into his own strength. When the Spirit so possesses the flesh, the flesh itself adopts the quality of the Spirit and is rendered like the Word of God.²⁶ The paradigm of the living human being is Jesus Christ himself, and those who follow in his footsteps, the martyrs, broken flesh vivified by the Spirit.

We have a very graphic example of this in the "Letter from the Churches of Vienne and Lyons to their Brethren in Asia and Phrygia," almost certainly written by Irenaeus himself.²⁷ During a great and bloody persecution of Christians around Lyons in the late 170s, some Christians were taken to the arena, but they "appeared to be unprepared and untrained, as yet weak and unable to endure such a great conflict." About ten of these, the letter says, proved to be "stillborn" or "miscarried," causing great sorrow to the others and weakening the resolve of those yet to undergo their torture.²⁸ However, these stillborn Christians were encouraged through the zeal of the others, especially the slave girl Blandina, the heroine of the story (more lines are devoted to her than to any other figure, and she is named, while her mistress remains nameless). She personifies the theology of martyrdom based on Christ's words to Paul: "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Blandina is specifically described as so "weak in body" that the others were fearful lest she not be able to make the good confession; yet

26. *AH* 5.9.3.

27. The Letter is preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History (EH)* 5.1–2. Ed. and trans. K. Lake, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980 [1926]).

28. *EH* 5.1.11.

[she] was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn until dusk were weary and beaten. They themselves admitted that they were beaten . . . astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken.²⁹

Not only is she, in her weakness, filled with divine power by her confession, but she becomes fully identified with the one whose body was broken on Golgotha: when hung on a stake in the arena, she seemed to hang there in the form of a cross, and by her fervent prayer she aroused intense enthusiasm in those who were undergoing their ordeal, for in their torment with their physical eyes they saw in the person of their sister him who was crucified for them, that he might convince all who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ's sake will have eternal fellowship in the living God.³⁰

Through her suffering, Blandina becomes identified with Christ (she no longer lives, but Christ lives in her); her passage out of this world is both her birth and Christ's reentry into it. After describing her suffering, and that of another Christian called Attalus, the letter continues:

Through their continued life the dead were made alive, and the witnesses (martyrs) showed favor to those who had failed to witness. And there was great joy for the Virgin Mother in receiving back alive those who she had miscarried as dead. For through them the majority of those who had denied were again brought to birth and again conceived and again brought to life and learned to confess; and now living and strengthened, they went to the judgment seat.³¹

The Christians who turned away from making their confession are simply dead—their lack of preparation has meant that they are stillborn children of the Virgin Mother, the church; but strength-

29. *EH* 5.1.18.

31. *EH* 5.1.45–46.

30. *EH* 5.1.41.

ened by the witness of others, they also are able to go to their death, and so the Virgin Mother receives them back alive—finally giving birth to living children of God. The death of the martyrs, the letter says later on, is their “new birth,” and the death of the martyrs is celebrated as their true birthday.³²

St. Ignatius of Antioch also uses the language of birth with regard to his forthcoming martyrdom, and, even more strikingly, claims that only in this way will he become a human being. Writing to the Christians at Rome, he implores them not to interfere with his coming martyrdom:

It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for our sake. I desire him who rose for us. The pains of birth are upon me. Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die. Do not give to the world one who desires to belong to God, nor deceive him with material things. Suffer me to receive the pure light; when I shall have arrived there, I shall become a human being (*anthropos*). Suffer me to follow the example of the passion of my God.³³

Undergoing death in witness to Christ, the “perfect human being” or the “new human being,” is a birth into a new life, for St. Ignatius, to emerge as Christ himself, a fully human being.³⁴

We have yet to become human, in the stature that Christ—who is the image of God—has revealed to us within this world. Perhaps now we can hear with a renewed depth the final words of Christ from the cross in the Gospel of John: “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). He is not simply declaring that his earthly life has come to an end, but that rather the work of God is now “fulfilled” or

32. *EH* 5.1.63.

33. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans*, 6. Ed. and trans. B. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

34. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrnaeans*, 4.2; *Ephesians*, 20.1.

“completed.” The divine economy, the whole plan of creation *and* salvation, told from this perspective, culminates at this point. The work of God spoken of in Genesis, creating “the human being [*anthropos*] in our image and likeness” (Gn 1:26–27), is completed here: as Pilate said a few verses earlier, “Behold, the man [*anthropos*]” (Jn 19:5). The work of God is complete, and the Lord of creation now rests from his work in the tomb on the blessed Sabbath. By himself undergoing the Passion as a man, Jesus Christ, as Son of God and himself God, fashions us *into* the image and likeness of God, the image of God that he himself *is* (Col 1:15). As St. Irenaeus put it, “The work of God is the fashioning of the human being [*anthropos*].”³⁵

CONCLUSION

The first point I would make is that all these claims are again not part of an empirically verifiable discourse. They are statements of faith and therefore interpretative statements. That Blandina appeared in the likeness of Christ was, one can be sure, not something noticed by the Roman pagans sitting around the amphitheater: all they saw was another case of a tragically deluded figure being torn apart by the beasts. It is only those in the arena, struggling alongside her in the faith, who were able to see Christ in her. And more to the point, they saw this as an encouragement for each of them to endure all the trials that befell them, to be born to true life in the Virgin Mother. Or, to be more precise, it is Irenaeus, the author of the letter, who sees things this way, who interprets the events he witnessed in the light of Christ, who sees in Blandina a figure of Christ, and describes her as such for our benefit.

The second point I would make is that, in the light of the ob-

35. *AH* 5.15.2.

servation just made, we acknowledge the point made by St. Gregory of Nyssa, that looking around us we do not directly see “images of God” everywhere, but men and women living broken lives, suffering, falling sick, and ultimately dying. However, rather than say that despite these empirical conditions, each of them is a person and so to be respected as such, it would be better to allow our interpretation of what we see to be conditioned by the light of Christ, so that we can say that what we see are images of God being fashioned, human beings in the making. All the toils and turmoils of the sea of life provide the framework and the means by which we grow into the stature of human nature manifest in Christ himself, the broken, suffering servant. As the epistle of Barnabas puts it so pithily: “Human beings are earth that suffers” (ἄνθρωπος γὰρ γῆ ἐστὶν πάσχουσα).³⁶ It is therefore primarily in those who would previously not have been recognized—the autistic child, the mentally ill, the physically challenged, the derelict, homeless, imprisoned—that we see what it is to be human, and in so doing, and responding to them, that we become human ourselves. This is the dignity of being human, a dignity which will never stand upon itself, but will always sacrifice itself.

But, again, this is a statement of faith. And it is one that Hart rightly suggests has changed the world, inspiring a new creation. As we have yet to become human, it is not the case that a post-Christian world will be posthuman, but it may well lose its aspirations to become human.

36. Barnabas, *Ep.* 6.8. In Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*.