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Beyond the “Image of God” Conundrum: A Relational View of Human Dignity

Ron Highfield

When Christians attempt to defend human dignity, our instinctive reaction is to assert that human beings are created in the “image of God.” The term “image of God” is found only six times in the Bible, three times in reference to human beings (Gen 1:26,27 and 9:6) and three times in reference to Christ (Col 1:15; 3:10; and 2 Cor 4:4). Genesis 1:27 asserts that human beings were created in the image of God but does not draw any explicit implications for human dignity. Implicitly, however, humans are differentiated from the other creatures by their special status and mission. Genesis 9:6 declares explicitly the connection between respect for human life and the image of God. Murder must be punished harshly because “God made man in his image.”

Though Genesis is clear that human beings possess special dignity because they are created in the image of God, the Bible never explains what it means to be the image of God. However, there is a tendency in the history of Christian thought to locate the image of God in certain qualities that differentiate humanity from the animals and that enable human beings to rule over the rest of creation: specifically, reason and free will. As far as I can tell, most writers lost sight of the relational character of the image of God. An image in a mirror exists only in relation to the original, in a dynamic relationship to the thing of which it is the image.

The problem I want to address in this essay is this: when we lose sight of the relational character of human dignity and instead focus on the inherent

attributes of reason and free will, we make ourselves vulnerable to two critiques. The first is that human dignity rests in inherent properties that remain the same whether God exists or not. So, being in relation to God has nothing to do with human dignity. This is a theological disaster. Second, if human dignity rests in qualities that can be quantified, it becomes thinkable that some human beings possess more dignity than others, which is a moral catastrophe. Sadly, our contemporary moral culture is determined by these two calamities.

The Contemporary View of Human Dignity

A new understanding of human dignity began to gain dominance in Western thought during the Renaissance.¹ Typical of this shift is Pico Mirandola's essay, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Whereas Mirandola still thinks of humanity as a divine creation and uses the incarnation as proof of human dignity, he prepares the way for those who would assert human dignity independently of a theological foundation. Mirandola speaks of human beings "as the most fortunate of creatures and as a result worthy of highest admiration." Putting words into the mouth of the creator, Mirandola praises human beings:

We have given thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits for thyself. . . . Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, are the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine.

¹ See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, vol. 1 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995), 179–199. In these pages Trinkaus surveys patristic and medieval thinkers' views on human dignity. While thinkers of these periods were aware of the "misery" of humanity, they extolled the dignity bestowed on humanity by the Creator.

O great liberality of God the Father! O great and wonderful happiness of man! It is given him to have that which he chooses and be that which he wills.²

Moving into the enlightenment era, we hear a thoroughly modern understanding of dignity. For Descartes, freedom is the power to rule oneself as one chooses:

Now freewill is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects; and so its rightful use is the greatest of all goods we possess, and further there is nothing that is more our own or that matters more to us. From all this it follows that nothing but freewill can produce our greatest contentment.³

Even in his romantic rebellion against the cold rationalism of the enlightenment Rousseau maintained the modern view of human dignity:

Conscience! Conscience! Divine instinct, immortal voice from heaven; sure guide for a creature ignorant and finite indeed, yet intelligent and free; infallible judge of good and evil, making man like to God! In thee consists the excellence of man’s nature and the morality of his actions.⁴

Perhaps the most influential proponent of autonomy-based dignity is the champion of enlightenment, Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, “autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational creature.”⁵ Kant reverses the classic relationship between God and dignity. We do not have dignity *because* of our relationship to God; to the contrary, God must judge us worthy because of our inherent dignity. With an explicit rejection of the relational view of dignity, Kant pronounces: “The essence of things is not

² *Pico Della Mirandola: On the Dignity of Man and Other Essays*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis et. al. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 4f. For a thorough study of Mirandola in the context of Italian humanism, see Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, vol. 2 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 505–526.

³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 147; quoted from a letter of Descartes.

⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 358.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981), 41.

altered by their external relations; and whatever without reference to such relations alone constitutes the absolute worth of man is also what he must be judged by, whoever the judge may be, even the Supreme Being.”⁶

Contemporary secular discussions of human dignity—for example, *The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)* and *The Charter of Fundamental Rights of The European Union (2000)*—omit reference to a transcendent ground and hence give the impression of mere assertions without foundation. Most of our contemporaries understand their dignity as rooted in qualities intrinsic to their persons, in their autonomy or feelings of self-worth or unique individuality. They cannot conceive of their dignity as rooted in something extrinsic, even in God.

Dignity in the Church Fathers and Medieval Theology

The church fathers and medieval theologians reflect extensively on the dignity and misery of humanity. They understand human dignity in three distinct but related ways: as excellence of nature, as moral excellence and as belovedness. The excellent qualities of human beings set them above all other earthly creatures. Such excellence bestows power and authority to rule other creatures. In a fallen world, however, humanity does not live up to its noble birth. It misuses its excellent qualities to engage in degrading behavior. But with the aid of divine grace human beings can regain some moral excellence in their lives. Human beings cannot take credit for their excellent qualities and actions; rather, these are gracious gifts of God their creator. Humanity’s status of greater dignity in relation to other creatures is derivative of the love and favor with which God relates to them. Hence the relationship of being loved and favored by God is the more fundamental basis of human dignity. Excellence of nature, though in a sense inherent in humanity, is measured in comparison with other creatures. Belovedness, in contrast, is not a quality inherent in humanity but a relationship with God, eccentric to our being.

⁶ Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 44. I shall argue the opposite.

In his commentary on Gen 1:26, concerning the creation of humanity in the “image and likeness of God,” Augustine finds humanity’s highest dignity in the reasoning function of the soul. Reason enables human beings to rule over the earth as God rules over all things and enables humanity to contemplate God. The capacity to contemplate God is outwardly symbolized by man’s erect posture.⁷ Though Augustine was the most influential theologian in the West, others also wrote on the dignity of humanity. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–395) wrote *On the Creation of Man* in which he extolled the excellences of humanity. According to Gregory, it is clear that God made humankind for the exercise of kingly rule; 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?”⁸ The greatness of humanity consists not in being an image of the world but “in his being in the image of the nature of the creator.”⁹ Since God is the good beyond all good we can conceive, Gregory argues that being in the image of God indicates we are created to participate in all the best things:

Thus there is in us the principle of all excellence, all virtue and wisdom, and every higher thing that we conceive: but pre-eminent among all is the fact that we are free from necessity, and not in bondage to any natural power, but have decision in our own power as we please; for virtue is a voluntary thing, subject to no dominion: that which is the result of compulsion and cannot be virtue.¹⁰

The apologetic writer Lactantius (ca. 250–325) wrote *On the Workmanship of God or the Formation of Man* as an attempt to prove the existence of

⁷ Augustine, *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees*, 17 and *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, 16; See *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 84, trans and ed. Roland J. Teske, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 74–76 and 182–188

⁸ *On the Making of Man*, 4.1; *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (NPNF) 2, vol 5, Philip Schaff, Henry Wace, et al., eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 50.

⁹ *On the Making of Man*, 16.2; NPNF 2 vol. 5, 63.

¹⁰ *On the Making of Man*, 16.111; NPNF 2 vol. 5, 64.

God by showing the greatness of his human creation. Critics charge that the weakness and vulnerability of humanity in comparison to the other animals counts against divine providence. Lactantius replies that God gave man reason and wisdom, excellences that show “that we are descended from Him, because he himself is intelligence.”¹¹ Reason gives humanity the power to rule the animals and provide for itself far better than the animals. The beauty of his body is enhanced by the absence of fur and sharp teeth and claws.

One other patristic writer deserves mention, Nemesius of Emesa (ca. 390), who wrote *On Human Nature*. He writes, “When we consider these facts about man, how can we exaggerate the dignity of his place in the creation?” Humankind’s greatness is inexpressible:

Who, then, can fully express the pre-eminence of so singular a creature? Man crosses the mighty deep, contemplates the range of the heavens, notes the motion, position, and size of the stars, and reaps a harvest both from land and sea, scorning the rage of wild beasts and the might of whales. He learns all kinds of knowledge, gains skill in arts, and pursues scientific inquiry. By writing, he addresses himself to whom he will, however far away, unhindered by bodily location. He foretells the future, rules everything, subdues everything, enjoys everything. He converses with angels and with God himself. He gives orders to creation. Devils are subject to him. He explores the nature of every kind of being. He busies himself with the knowing of God, and is God’s house and temple. And all these privileges he is able to purchase at the cost of virtue and godliness.¹²

Theologians of the middle ages inherited the ideas of Augustine, Gregory, Nemesius and others. Among other things, they reflected on the question of whether human beings possess more or less dignity than angels. The conclusion was that human beings possessed less. In this era there were many more treatises written on the misery of humanity than on its dignity. But near the end of the Middle Ages, at the beginning of the Renaissance,

¹¹ *On the Workmanship of God*, 2, William Fletcher trans. and ed.; *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF), vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 282.

¹² William Telfer, ed., *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 254f.

Petrarch (1304–1374) wrote about the dignity of the human condition. Remaining solidly within the Christian tradition on the subject, he anticipates later humanists’ positive estimation of human nature and condition:

And what surpasses all dignity, not only human but angelic, humanity itself is so conjoined to divinity that He who was God is become man . . . so that He makes man God . . . But what, I pray, can man, I do not say hope, but choose, but think that is higher than that he should become God? Behold, now he is God. What now remains, I ask, toward which your prayers aspire? Nothing greater is left to be found or even imagined . . . He assumed nothing other, although he was able, than a human body and a human soul, nor did He wish to be ascribed to the angelic species but the human so that you might know and rejoice at how much your Lord loved you.¹³

As I adumbrated at the beginning of this section, traditional Christian thinkers understood human dignity as excellence of nature or moral excellence or belovedness. As this summary shows, humanity’s excellence of being, though it can inspire awe, is finite. We can conceive of more excellent beings. The issue of moral excellence (or its lack) offers for most writers merely an opportunity to lament the sin and misery and degeneracy of fallen humanity. Dignity of this sort is in short supply. However, the dignity of belovedness offers some exciting possibilities, which were hinted at in Petrarch. Being loved by God bestows a dignity on us that far surpasses the excellence of our nature or of our moral performance.¹⁴ It is potentially infinite. I will develop this possibility below.

¹³ Quoted in Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, 191.

¹⁴ Christoph Schöbel argues that the church should “criticize all views of what it means to be human . . . which define human dignity on the basis of observable attributes based on the capacities of human nature that humans may possess to a greater or lesser degree.” [“Recovering Human Dignity,” in *God and Human Dignity*, R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 57]. While I share Schöbel’s concern with defending the human dignity of the aged, the preborn, and other “unproductive” people, it is also important to recognize the dignity of human nature itself and of moral character. But the church fathers and medieval theologians include excellence of nature and moral excellence among the marks of human dignity for important reasons. Consider for example how human

Dignity and Belovedness

The English word “dignity” still retains overtones of the Latin words *dignus* (worthy) or *dignitas* (merit or worth).¹⁵ It is important to remember that dignity is the measure of our worth and is therefore a relative term. Worth is a kind of relation. Something is “worth” something because it is worth something to someone. We can prize gold because of its purchasing power or for its beauty, as a means or as an end. It should be clear that a means is always subordinate to its end. Indeed, the value of a means is totally wrapped up in the value of its end: hammers are valuable because houses are more valuable. We are given a higher dignity if we are valued as ends than if we are valued as means to other ends. But to be valued as an end is to be *loved*. Hence, the highest dignity we can bestow on another person is love.

Human love cannot serve as a secure foundation for human dignity, however, for human love is unreliable and far from universal. We cannot be satisfied with a human dignity that rises and falls with others’ feelings about us.¹⁶ Thus it does not make sense to think we *bestow* dignity on one another by loving each other. Rather, we must understand human dignity as a quality in others that should be *recognized*, not merely bestowed or withheld. Dignity must thus be, in a sense not yet defined, *inherent* in human beings. But the concept of “inherent” dignity—the idea that humans have “worth” apart from relationships in which they are valued—is plagued with conceptual problems. Dignity is a relationship, and you cannot possess a relationship alone.

dignity is distinguished from that of “lower” animals. Perhaps God loves all living things. Does this mean that squirrels possess a dignity equal to humans? Human beings possess qualities that mark them as superior to other animals, and these superior qualities are at least signs of a higher dignity before God.

¹⁵ In Greek the idea of dignity is expressed by *to axiōma* (worth, dignity or weight) and *hē timē* (honor, respect, recognition).

¹⁶ Unless we understand dignity as conferred by God “then dignity becomes something that is conferred or withheld by other finite entities . . . If it is constituted in this way, however, it can also be denied and destroyed in this way” [Christoph Schöbel, “Recovering Human Dignity,” 53].

Human dignity needs a foundation that is unchanging, universal, *and* relational. This foundation can be secured only in God’s love for us.¹⁷

Human Dignity as a Relation to God. God’s very being is relational, for God *is* Father, Son, and Spirit. The love among the three is eternal, constant, and total. By loving, each bestows on the other infinite dignity. God’s dignity, therefore, is both inherent and relational. It is inherent because it is an essential aspect of God’s eternal nature. God *is* love! The love among the Trinity is a feature of what it means to be God. It is relational because God has been esteemed worthy from all eternity. God (as Trinity) is the foundation and origin for his own dignity—and hence for the dignity of all other things. God does not love his dear children because of their inherent dignity or moral excellence. He *bestows* dignity on them by loving them, the dignity of belovedness.

Does our dignity-relation to God impose obligations on human beings to recognize each other’s dignity? Most certainly it does. Consider the parallel between our existence and our dignity. We exist because God loves us and wills our existence. Existence, too, is a relation to our creator. Yet because we exist before God, we exist also before each other—as an objective fact. Other people don’t exist because we want them to exist. In the same way, even though our dignity is a relation to God, it is also a reality for all human beings. God’s love for his dear children creates a *real* dignity-relation. We must recognize human dignity as relationally inherent in our fellow human beings; that is, each and every human being exists and possesses a dignity

¹⁷ “Only God the creator can crown with glory and honour; creatures are not competent to ascribe dignity to themselves or to other creatures . . . And because it is rooted in God’s free favour alone, creaturely dignity is secure” (John Webster, “The Dignity of Creatures,” in Paul Middleton, ed., *The God of Love and Human Dignity: Festschrift for George Newlands* [New York: T & T Clark, 2007], 24). In this fine essay, though he expresses himself in different terms, Webster clearly works with what I call the relational view of dignity or belovedness. He speaks of dignity in terms of divine “blessing” (21), “loving act of God” (22), “gift of God” (23), “divine gift” (23), God’s “acknowledging and approving” (24), God’s “free favour” (24), “fellowship” with God (25), and a “relation” to God (25).

bestowed by God. They are worthy of our love because God loves them. Their worth precedes our love because God's love precedes their worth.

How Great a Dignity? We've established that our dignity derives from God's love for us. Now we can ask about the quality of this dignity. If dignity is a relation of being loved, and God's love for us is the only constant and universal love, then our God-bestowed dignity is the highest dignity possible for us. Further, since God is the greatest possible being and his love is the greatest possible love, *the dignity it bestows is the greatest possible dignity*. Paul prays that we "may have power . . . to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18,19). John directly connects God's great love of us to our dignity: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1). Clearly John thinks there is no greater dignity possible for us than to be given the status of God's dear children.

So, God bestows on us the highest dignity possible for us creatures. But I want to push this even further to argue that God's love for us gives us a dignity higher than we can imagine or conceive. As we approach this issue it is very important to keep in mind the three different ways human beings are said to possess dignity: as excellence of nature, as moral excellence and as belovedness. Clearly, God's nature and moral life are infinitely more excellent than our nature and moral lives. It is impossible to equal God in the dignity of attributes or powers. As the word *excel*-ence indicates, excellence in nature or life is measured comparatively. And in comparison with God we are nothing. Hence, as long as we think of dignity as the quality of our nature or life, we must think of our worth as less than God's worth. But this issue does not arise when we think of our dignity as our belovedness. Developing this third understanding of human dignity, I want to suggest a radical idea: God bestows on us the same dignity that he bestows on himself, for God loves us no less than he loves himself. The Father loves us with the *very*

same love with which he loves his beloved Son. No higher dignity can be imagined or conceived. Making this suggestion credible will require some explanation.

As I showed above, our dignity is founded on God’s love for us.¹⁸ Our dignity and God’s dignity thus have the same ground: the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit. But someone may say, surely the Father does not love us as *much* as he loves his Son, or the Son his Father. On the contrary, the central thrust of the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and atonement is precisely that the Father loves us exactly as much as he loves his Son. Becoming incarnate, he became one of us and took up our nature. This one man *is* God’s eternal Son, and the Father loves him with an eternal love. Hence, the Father bestows on this human being the same dignity in time that the Father, Son, and Spirit bestow on each other eternally.

The doctrine of the atonement makes clear that the divine dignity bestowed on Jesus is a possibility for all human beings. Paul places this truth at the center of his gospel: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). The Son of God “loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1,2). In doing this, he counted us worthy of his love. The principle of the atonement is: what the one does all do or what happens to the one happens to all or what the one is all become. The Father relates to us as he relates to his own dear Son, and that is why we are his dear children.

We know that God loves us no less than he loves himself, because he does not love us for what we are. His love for us is grounded in his own life,

¹⁸ For a similar view, see Brunner, *Christianity and Civilization*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 94: “The dignity of human personality is not grounded in an abstract, general element in all men, namely reason, but individual personality as such is the object of this appreciation because it is deemed worthy of being called by God. Only the personal God can fundamentally establish truly personal existence and responsibility . . . The love of the personal God does not create an abstract, impersonal humanity; it calls the individual to the most personal responsibility.” Quoted in Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why it Is Tempting to Live as if God Doesn’t Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 176.

in the Father's love for the Son in the Spirit. The Father does not love his human children less because they are not his equal. God loves us just like, and just as much, as he loves himself. Even though we were by nature nothing, by deeds sinners, and by affections enemies, God loved us. There is and can be no higher dignity. It is beyond our wildest imagination, transcending all our conceptual powers.

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