Remarks on *An Introduction to Christian Theology,* chapter 7 (Image of God, Sin)

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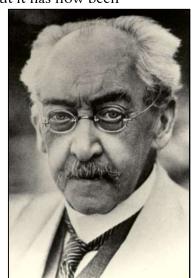Fuller Theological Seminary HT502

This chapter of the textbook requires some correction regarding historical figures and the history of Christian thought.

1. *Irenaeus*

The textbook makes this critical comment regarding Irenaeus: "he remains rather indebted to the assumptions of Greek philosophy in his anthropology. For Irenaeus, a human being consists of an immortal soul united with a mortal body" (186); "This Greek-influenced interpretation of the image as the rational soul set the tone for the subsequent Christian tradition" (187). The problems with this perspective are numerous.

First, it presumes what is called the "Hellenization thesis" (try googling it), which argues that the earliest Christianity was purely Hebraic in its thinking, but was quickly polluted by the importation of foreign, Greek ideas. The theory was popularized by the German church historian Adolf von Harnack in the late 19ᵗʰ century, but it has now been discredited by patristics scholars. One such scholar writes: "The notion that the development of early Christian thought represented a hellenization of Christianity has outlived its usefulness. The time has come to bid a fond farewell to the ideas of Adolf von Harnack, the nineteenth-century historian of dogma whose thinking has influenced the interpretation of early Christian thought for more than a century. It will become clear in the course of this book that a more apt expression would be the Christianization of Hellenism, though that phrase does not capture the originality of Christian thought nor the debt owed to Jewish ways of thinking and to the Jewish Bible. Neither does it acknowledge the good and right qualities of Hellenic thinking that Christians recognized as valuable, for example, moral life understood in terms of the virtues. At the same time, one observes again and again that Christian thinking, while working within patterns of thought and conceptions rooted in Greco-Roman c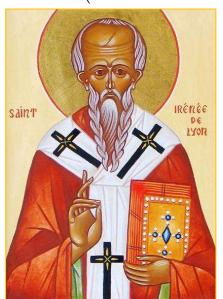ulture, transformed them so profoundly that in the end something quite new came into being."[1] Think about it: what other perspective would Irenaeus have, given that he was an ancient person living in the Hellenistic world? And consider the fact that Irenaeus is separated from the Apostle John by a mere generation, through Polycarp. The worldview of Irenaeus (†202) is closer in time and geography to the Christ and the apostles than that of a 19ᵗʰ century German scholar, who was strongly influenced by idealist philosophy. (It's ironic that those who accuse church figures of being overly influenced by one philosophy or another usually are influenced by one philosophy or another.

Moreover, the idea that the Hebrews were anthropological monists, that is, that they did not believe in the soul's existence apart from the body, has also been disproven. John Cooper writes: "The prophecy of the resurrection in Isaiah 26 and Daniel 12 adumbrates the

Adolf von Harnack

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[1] Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xvi-xvii.

traditional doctrine of the intermediate state: a sequence of death, nonfleshly existence in Sheol, and final bodily resurrection. This view of the afterlife was developed a great deal in intertestamentary Judaism, the literature of which regularly refers to the deceased as 'souls' or 'spirits' and elaborates the ideas of Paradise and heaven as well as Gehenna and hell. These beliefs, with their implicitly dualistic anthropology, provide the background for New Testament teachings about death, continuing fellowship with Christ, and final resurrection. This suggests that dualism is in fact not the bastard child of Christian and Greek philosophy but is rather inherently Hebrew and biblical."[2] Simply because one speaks of the soul is insufficient proof of foreign Greek influence. Was Jesus influenced by Plato? After all, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Irenaeus' perspective on the soul is biblical, not Platonic.

Further, the textbook interprets Irenaeus to say that the fall does not affect human reasoning. This is quite incorrect. For Irenaeus, the *capacity* to reason remains; but reasoning rightly and in a manner consonant with the Creator's truth is certainly affected by the Fall. Irenaeus (sometimes but not always[3]) distinguishes image and likeness (a distinction that one

can certainly dispute); but his teaching is *not* that the fall has minimal effects on the image. He can even say the image is in some sense lost (*Against Heresies*, 3.18.1), but this loss probably means a loss of the image's potential. The loss of the *likeness*, which for Irenaeus is the πνεύμα (spirit or Spirit), means the loss of humanity's spiritual connection to the Creator, and to the Holy Spirit.[4] Does he get this from the Greeks? No; he gets it from Paul. I Cor. 2:14: "The person without the πνεύμα (Spirit) does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit."

Ironically, it is precisely the radical, dualism of the Gnostics, in which the created world is considered inferior, that Irenaeus is attacking. Irenaeus emphasizes the original *goodness* of creation. And, in fact, it is the πνεύμα of God, the Holy Spirit, who gives the soul life; thus the soul is not immortal in the same way that Plato would contend, contrary to the textbook. Irenaeus does not follow "the blueprint of Greek philosophy" and does not merely identify the image of God with human reason and freedom (187).

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[2] John W. Cooper, "The Identity of Resurrected Persons: Fatal Flaw of Monistic Anthropology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23/1 (1988): 19-36, here 20. See also his *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

[3] See Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 213: "Where image and likeness are synonymous, as they are in the original biblical text (Gen. 1 :26), the image-and-likeness was lost by Adam's fall and regained in Christ ([Irenaeus, *Against Heresies,*] 3.18.1)."

[4] See Matthew C. Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).
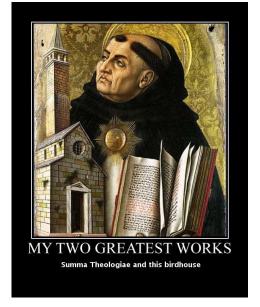
Irenaeus scholar Eric Osborn observes that "…Irenaeus understands original sin at least in the limited sense of *inherited guilt."* Children "need baptism for regeneration (3.17.1)." Nor is it the case that Adam and Eve were created with perfect reason. Rather, they were like children, with undeveloped intellectual powers, contrary to the supposition of the textbook. "Perfection for Irenaeus lies at the end, not at the beginning, of man's education by God, a process which takes account of the fall from the beginning."[5] In addition, he notes that Irenaeus often relates human rationality to the *spirit* (πνεῦμα), rather than the *image*. "The activity of the spirit is the clue to man's unity. God's spirit gives to man the breath of life and the gift of rationality (5.1.3). The spirit gives existence and life to man as an animate and rational being (5.3.2)."[6] The authors of the textbook are very wary of identifying the image of God with human reason; but certainly this is one aspect of what makes humanity unique among God's creatures, and the ability to reason is also a factor in the ability to love, to make moral choices, and to be creative.

Most of the time, Irenaeus does not claim that humanity completely loses the image of God in the fall, nor should he (see James 3:9). If sinners had entirely lost the image of God, Christians would not have to treat unbelievers with respect. The image of God in humanity is the basis for a Christian perspective on universal human rights and the respect of all persons, Christian or not. Most Christian theologians (with some notable exceptions) teach that the image of God in humanity is distorted, rather than completely lost.

2. *Thomas Aquinas*

On Thomas Aquinas, the textbook sends mixed messages. The authors seem to fault Aquinas for being an intellectualist, but they appear to be quite mistaken about what this means. Being an *intellectualist* as opposed to a *voluntarist* does not mean that one is *rationalist.* Aquinas' view of humanity is one that places the intellect logically prior to the will. An intellectualist believes that one must be able to *know* something before one can will it. It says nothing about the role of reason in theology or one's view of the functioning of reason after the fall. The authors claim that Aquinas' theology "is clearly informed not only by the assumptions of Greek philosophy (as was Irenaeus') but also by Augustine's psychological analogy for the Trinity…" (a view of the Trinity which they do not approve[7]). It is true that Aquinas locates the image of God in the intellectual soul, in the human mind; but one should understand this as more than simply the ability to perform symbolic logic. It is the human capacity to know, to make genuine decisions (as opposed to an animal, which acts out of instinct), to will, and to love. Moreover, one cannot assume that this is the result of Thomas being improperly

MY TWO GREATEST WORKS
Summa Theologiae and this birdhouse

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[5] Osborn, *Irenaeus,* 218-219.

[6] Osborn, *Irenaeus,* 221.

[7] For a critique of "the modern attack on Augustine" in terms of his Trinitarian theology, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 365-383.

influenced by Greek philosophy, since he bases it on Colossians 3:10 (*…and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge* [ἐπίγνωσις] *in the image* [εἰκών] *of its Creator*). We have already discussed the myth of Christian theology being over-determined by philosophical assumptions; but suffice it to add that the theology of the textbook authors, namely a largely Moltmannian theology, is deeply influenced by modern German philosophy, perhaps even more so than that of Aquinas. However, the textbook does conclude quite rightly, and well: "All persons thus bear the image of God to some degree, even after the fall into sin, although believers, and especially those in heaven, image God more purely. Aquinas thus recognizes that the residual image in sinful humanity stands in need of restoration" (187).

3. *Modern Theologians*

The textbook goes on to fault John Calvin as well for holding to an allegedly unbiblical dualism of body and soul. While pre-modern theologians suffer from focusing on the image as the rational soul, so the textbook claims, moderns like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer focus on the image of God as gendered (male and female), and thus emphasize a "more social and relational theological anthropology" (188). The image of God should be communal, not individualistic, they contend. We can agree, to a point. It is certainly true that the *imago Dei* can be viewed too individualistically. Human beings were made for community and relationship. However, there is nothing in the biblical text to indicate that the image consists in the duality of male and female; and the fact that the animals are created with this duality makes it clear that this feature is *not* how human beings uniquely image the Creator.

Moreover, this viewpoint is also derived from a particular philosophical perspective rather than just reading scripture. It comes from the existentialism of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who emphasized the I-Thou relationship. There may be truth in that perspective, but one should take the claim that the textbook's theology is biblical, while earlier theologians were polluted with philosophy, with more than a grain of salt. Theologians have always used philosophical ideas in their theological formulations.

4. *Social Trinitarianism*

Also looming large in the background of this discussion is the assumption of the superiority of social trinitarianism, which in the twentieth century became quite fashionable, but is now coming under intense scrutiny, and for good reason. God is a social being, even in the godhead, it is claimed; thus the text puts forth this thesis: "The image of God *(imago Dei),* therefore, is none other than the image of the Trinity *(imago Trinitatis)."* Again, there are a number of problems here.

While it is perfectly legitimate to say that the image of God in humanity is a reflection not only of the unity of God, but also of the Trinity, one should be very cautious about speculation here. The textbook does not mention that Augustine and Thomas Aquinas say that the image of God in humanity reflects the Trinity (e.g. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia q93 art. 5), probably because it does not fit with the narrative that western Trinitarian doctrine was defective until its recovery by modern German theologians, in the form of social trinitarianism. But while social trinitarianism often appeals to the fourth-century Cappadocian church fathers (Basil the Great, his little brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus), in fact these fathers employed a variety of different analogies for the Trinity—the

point being that they were *analogies*, none of which fully encompass the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity.[8] In addition, modern social trinitarianism would fall outside the bounds of Christian orthodoxy as defined by these fathers. The Cappadocians did not teach anything like modern social trinitarianism.[9]

Why does this matter? Because it is not legitimate to use a theory of the Trinity, especially one of doubtful orthodoxy, as a model for understanding the image of God in humanity. A notable example is this: I have seen persons use the doctrine of the Trinity to defend the *subordination* of women, and to defend the *ordination* of women. Neither argument is legitimate. The Trinity simply becomes a screen on which one projects their own preferred views. Fred Sanders, of the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University, is an expert on the doctrine of the Trinity. He writes on the blog Scriptorium Daily:

> "**Imitating the Trinity as Trinity is not a biblical way of talking.** We are told to imitate God the Father in his relationship to humanity; to be imitators of God as beloved children; to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (sending his rain on the just and the unjust). But most of the equipment of trinitarian theology points to ways in which God differs from us, not ways in which God is like us. And if we undertake to imitate God as Trinity, we seem to face a wide open field of applications: sexual, social, financial, governmental, ecclesiastical, and so on. All of these have been offered. The footnotes are wearisome."

And further:
> "**Friends don't let friends settle for social trinitarianism.** At least not the kind of hard social trinitarianism that trades on separate centers of consciousness filled with distinct knowledge sets, separate wills that must be harmonized by agreement, and separate roles to play in a shared enterprise called the life of God. There is a kind of social trinitarianism that comes from an impressionistic reading of the New Testament undisciplined by the massive Old Testament insistence on divine singularity and simplicity. By failing metaphysically to suggest monotheism, it is fruitful of many errors. It is most dangerous where it is most commonsensical. Unless social trinitarian impulses are carefully aligned with God's utter

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[8] Michael Allen writes of the modern failure to appreciate analogy in the tradition, "…medievals and their descendants will take to speaking of theological language and the doctrine of analogy (as in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.13.5). Even in the fourth and fifth centuries, the distinction of theology (*theologia*) and economy (*oikonomia*) will be employed to help expound not only God's being and action but the availability of such for knowledge by humans. And there is a long, sad story to be told of the loss of analogy—especially in many facets of modern, purportedly conservative American evangelicalism (oftentimes in an unfortunate over-reaction to the ills of neo-orthodoxy, which ironically allowed a modern movement to set the terms of debate rather than returning to the productive categories bequeathed us by the catholic and classical Reformed traditions)—and the myriad ways in which theological epistemology has been modified. Both open theism and social trinitarianism (and its diverse applications to gender ethics) depend upon such a loss of analogy and of divine ineffability and of the theology/economy distinction to even be a discussion point, much less a convincing position." "Entries and Ineffability (Part 2)," in *Pro-Nicene Theology*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 12.

[9] See Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, esp. ch. 14: "On Not Three Gods: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology."

oneness, disputes about eternal functional subordination are the least of the problems we should expect to arise."[10]

5. *Humanity in the Image of God and the Disfigurement of Sin*

The textbook continues to build a tower on its rickety theses when it makes this assertion: "Indeed, in the western tradition, the notion of 'having dominion,' when coupled with an interpretation of the image as primarily the rational soul, has conspired to reinforce an attitude toward nature of rational domination and technical manipulation (also see pp. 163-5)." The authors cite no evidence for this shocking claim. In fact, the gift of rationality and the gift of technical ability, when redeemed and sanctified, can and have been put to use to foster respect for creation and care for the earth and the environment. There is absolutely no connection between a Moltmann-inspired theology of humanity and creation care. The authors' caricature of the western theological tradition as fostering the abuse and exploitation of creation is unfounded and inaccurate.

Not only that, but the authors claim that all things "bear some trace resemblance to God." But given their predilections, this radiates the distinctive odor of *panentheism* (which they hint at, in pp. 176ff., under the rubric of a "strong doctrine of creation"—which, despite the claims of the authors, the Christian traditional already has). "All of life is sacramental in this sense, pointing beyond itself to its source in God" (193). Panentheism is not Christian orthodoxy, and evangelicals should be vary wary of this teaching.

Finally, the all-controlling theme of social models moves the authors to eschew Augustine's doctrine original sin. While I would agree that Augustine does tie original sin too closely to human procreation, with the result that he devalues human sexuality, the alternative proposed in the textbook, that of Friedrich Schleiermacher, is a curious choice, especially because he never defines the content of the image of God, except to remark that the phrase "indisputably denotes the superiority of human nature over the other creatures described" in the Creation account, though he may imply that the image is "the living presence of the God-consciousness," which is "a being of God within us, which seems to be something much greater than a resemblance to God, yet this living presence of the God-consciousness is something different." Schleiermacher worries about the term "image of God," and criticizes theologians who, "like the Socinians, connected the divine image with man's formative and governing relation to external nature rather than with his own inner being." Here, at least, Schleiermacher says nothing about the image of God as a way of being related to others in a social way, but explains it in terms of a person's "own inner being"—a rather individualistic view of the image, and not a surprising one, given Schleiermacher's background in German Reformed pietism.[11] A few pages later, Schleiermacher refers to the opinion that the image of God refers to the state of original

Friedrich Schleiermacher

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[10] Fred Sanders, "18 Theses on the Father and the Son" http://scriptoriumdaily.com/18-theses-on-the-father-and-the-son/

[11] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (London: T&T Clark, [1928] 1999), 252-253.

righteousness, a viewpoint to which he can assent, if understood properly.[12] It seems that Schleiermacher's concept of the feeling of absolute dependence *(Abhängigkeitsgefühl)*, the human religious God-consciousness, that separates humanity from the animals, would come close to what he understands as the image of God. In any case, Schleiermacher is probably not the best source for a biblically-grounded and well-balanced understanding of the doctrine.

Instead, the image of God should include human reason, without excluding persons with intellectual challenges. It should include the human affective (emotional) life, and the ability to love, as God loves. It should include the power to create, if it is in fact the image of the Creator. And yes, it should include the capacity of human beings for communion and relationship, as the textbook emphasizes (but perhaps too exclusively). Above all it should incorporate the qualities of Jesus Christ, who is the visible image (icon) of the invisible God (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, Colossians 1:15).

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[12] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith,* 255.