

Fallen Image and Redeemed Dust: Being Human in God's Creation

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Introduction

This paper seeks to consider, through a theological lens, what it means to be human and to do so in an ecologically mindful way. The usual starting point for such an endeavour is with the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, and the place and role of humanity in creation. In these stories, human beings are related to the earth, to the rest of creation and to God, and it is from these primary and constitutive relations that humanity finds its place and is given its role. There is a certain glory in humanity that, of all creation, we were made in the image and likeness of God, and given dominion over all the earth. There may of course be a certain bias towards humanity by the humans who wrote these texts, but Christian theology holds the Bible to be authoritative and these texts speak of humanity at its best, as we were meant to be.

Another perspective is brought into this picture from the story of what has become known as the Fall, in Genesis 3. These original relations have become distorted and human life now falls short of that glory, of what we could be. Human life, and our relations with the rest of the earth and with God, is much more ambiguous and not as clearly 'good' as it was declared to be at creation. For an ecological theology, how 'sin' is understood and judged is significant, for it must incorporate our relation to the earth and all that is in it, not just our relations with each other and with God. That we have failed adequately to carry out our mandate to exercise dominion, in terms of care and enabling the flourishing of life, is a central focal point in naming sin in an ecological perspective.

The next point at which an ecological view of humanity seeks wisdom and insight is in the gospel, more specifically in Christ's incarnation and redeeming work. More will be said later about the difference Christ makes to understanding humanity. At this point I am drawing attention to the usual pattern: creation, fall, redemption, and I have no real argument with that. In fact it is better to note that there is an overall trajectory rather than to launch in and attend to only one part without seeing how it relates to the whole. It is just that, in a single essay, one cannot develop a whole and comprehensive theological and ecological view of being human, from creation to eschatology. What I do want to establish, though, is that the creation, fall, redemption model is not necessarily and only to be read in a linear manner, as an unfolding history. Rather, this model can be viewed as a revelation of our human condition within creation for which each of these moments holds a truth about humanity (including our relation to the earth and other creatures) and without which that truth would be distorted.

In saying this I am influenced by the work of Paul Ricoeur and his attention to symbolic language as a first-level language.¹ For Ricoeur, it is through metaphors and symbols, the language of poetry and dreams, that our experience is first expressed. Such language requires interpretation if we are to understand its meaning. This is the case also for religious language, full of symbols, which gives rise to conceptual thought – all the written theology that weighs down our library shelves. But the symbols are where the life is, the energy and primary insight. Their truth is not verifiable by scientific means. We cannot prove in a laboratory that humanity is made

in the image and likeness of God. Rather, poetic works ‘aim at a reality more real than appearances’.² They are not limited by the empirical world, the world as it is. Symbolic language opens up possibilities for thinking and being which allow for *more* than the world as it is. It brings together the world as it is and as it should or could be. In Ricoeur’s words, it ‘brings being as actuality and as potentiality into play’.³ The truth of such talk is like the truth of poetry – it convicts and makes sense on another (non-scientific) level, and it is verified as such by the community of readers and believers who take it to heart and pass it on.

One more point needs to be made before we see how this approach will be fruitful for an ecotheological view of humanity. Ricoeur allowed a critical stage in his theory of interpretation. He sided with those who are suspicious of the way people tend to make things say what they want them to say, and to carry their distorted beliefs and ideologies with them, even (God forbid) in their theology. Not all symbols are good and edifying, and we are all prone to putting too much weight on our favourites without taking into account other equally valid symbolic language carried by a tradition. So, Ricoeur’s second point is this. When seeking the truth about humanity within, say, the Christian tradition, we must allow for a variety of symbols to speak concurrently, even if they seem contradictory. That very clash may itself be an important truth:

The world of symbols is not a tranquil and reconciled world; every symbol is iconoclastic in comparison with some other symbol, just as every symbol, left to itself, tends to thicken, to become solidified in an idolatry.⁴

This paper seeks to retrieve four basic clusters of symbols within the Christian tradition each expressing a truth of our being human: that we are image, dust, fallen and redeemed. They point towards a truth more true than that which the empirical world could yield of its own. They speak of our relation to God and to the rest of the created order – our place and our role as well as our being.

How we understand ourselves makes a difference to the kinds of ethics we will develop and advocate, in our case around our mandate to exercise dominion. Behind any particular ethics, ‘thou shalt’, lies a particular view of humanity, so ethics is not the starting point for understanding humanity. As Graeme Garrett says, ‘beyond the “thou shalt” in relationship with God lies a deeper word – “thou art”. Life is gift before it is demand’.⁵ But who exactly are we?

Image, dust, fallen and redeemed

This section considers who we are, the ‘deeper word – “thou art”’, through a theological view of humanity, that takes its clues from the rich store of symbolic language within Scripture and developed in Christian theology. Each of these symbols expresses a truth about being human, and is iconoclastic in relation to the others. They need to be kept in tension with each other so that the fuller truth of being human is held and not distorted. Each of these symbols is a part in relation to the whole truth carried within Christian theology. Before considering each in turn, a word is needed on the whole and the parts.

What we are embarking on is a way of interpreting humanity. It has parallels with interpreting the Bible, in that in biblical interpretation it is important to keep in mind the whole and the parts. The meaning of any particular verse or text needs to be interpreted as a part in a larger whole: a chapter, a book of the Bible, a Testament, the whole canon of Scripture. Without this, the relation of any particular text to the general thrust and message of Scripture could not be discerned. Is it in tension with the whole message or adding an integral part? On the other hand, we cannot get to what the whole message is about without adding this up from the different parts of Scripture, the different voices and views within their contexts. Without a careful relation of the whole and the parts, meaning becomes distorted.

This is also true when interpreting humanity. The symbols carried within Christian theology about being human are each parts in a larger whole of theological anthropology. Further, humanity is itself only a part in a much larger story of God's creative and redeeming work, and as important as we may think we are, we need to be de-centred from this larger story if the meaning of human life is not to be distorted. The whole story is not all about us. That would not be *theology*. Rather, the larger story – or better still, the largest possible story – is about God. Good theology is God-centred, not human-centred. This is an important point for an ecological view of humanity within theology.

So we need to focus on the human (as this is our subject) while placing humanity as a part within a larger whole of God's work of creation and its redemption or fulfilment. And our 'part' refers both to story or history, as well as to space or geography (we are one small part in the network of relationships that make up the ecological system of earth).

Image

This symbol expresses the highest, most significant view of humanity – that we were created in the image ('eikon' in the Greek) and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-7).⁶ What this means was not developed in Scripture, but has been fleshed out in later Christian theology. Being in God's image gives humanity an honour, significance and worth compared with other creatures, while at the same time putting limits on these, that is, putting us in our place. It does this in a number of ways.

First, this expression of humanity's worth is a part within a larger creation story. Whatever else it means, human life is created by God, along with all other life on earth. We are creatures, brothers and sisters with all other creatures, as part of God's wider family.

Second, since we are creatures we cannot consider ourselves self-made. We did not make ourselves and we cannot re-make ourselves, as St Augustine noted.⁷ We are images, not the original, and an image in a mirror only has life from the original standing in front of it. So while we have a certain glory according to our status as images of God, it is a reflected glory.

Third, imaging implies both reflection and likeness. We cannot assume that we are God-like creatures if we don't also accept our derivative status. As Augustine argued,

Every image is like that of which it is an image, but not everything which is like something is also its image. Thus, because in a mirror or in a picture there are images, they are also like. But if the one does not have its origin from the other, it is not said to be in the image of the other. For it is an image only when it is derived from the other thing.⁸

In making this same point in another text, Augustine gives the example of two identical eggs, alike and equal, but ‘there is no image, because neither one is a copy of the other’.⁹ This raises questions when applied to creation theology, for is not all creation derived from God? How then is humanity in a special relation to God, created to God’s image and likeness, which is not said of any other creature? Augustine deals with this by saying that all creation was made *through* the image, but humanity was made *according to* the image. In the rest of creation there are ‘vestiges’ of God, in humanity is the image of God.¹⁰ All of creation reflects God to some extent, but humanity is more God-like than other creatures in its capacity to participate in Wisdom.¹¹

Fourth, although humanity as image of God implies reflected glory and derivation, does this also apply to Christ, the true image of God, who ‘reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature’ (Heb 1:3)? Again, Augustine comes to our aid, suggesting that in a mirror, the image is not of the same substance. However, where a child is the image of its parent, you have a likeness and the same substance. In that sense, humanity is more like the image in the mirror, Christ more like that of a Son to his Father.¹²

In what has been said so far, humanity has been placed in relation to the rest of creation, to Christ as the true image and to God as the original from whom our being is derived and given as gift. Our glory and honour as humans, our original blessing, is situated in this web of relationships, and finds its fulfilment in right relations within this network. Further, to know ourselves as images of God is to move away from narcissism. Rather than become self-absorbed, we realise precisely that we are images and we see through ourselves to the original, just as an Orthodox icon invites the viewer, not to look at it, but beyond it and through it to God.

Dust

While being an image speaks of our significance, dust speaks of our insignificance. It relates us to the ground from which all other creatures were brought forth (Gen 1:24), and from which we were also made (Gen 2:7).¹³ That in itself ‘earths’ us and prevents us from thinking that we are somehow above it all. However, dust also symbolises our mortality, of which we are reminded in funeral services (‘from dust you have come and to dust you shall return’, Eccl 3:20), marked also by Ash Wednesday. No matter how important or sexy we think we are, in the end we are ‘turned back’ to dust (Psalm 90:3). Even if we work within the largest possible story offered by science – the universe story – whereby our significance is that we are stardust become conscious of itself, it is still the case that to stardust we shall return.¹⁴

Our insignificant and fleeting lives are also compared with grass that withers and dies. It is there one day, gone the next (Ps 90:5-6). That ‘all flesh is like grass’ is contrasted to the word of the Lord that endures forever (Ps 103:15-16; Isa 40:6-8; 1 Pet 1:24). Who we are as human beings includes our mortality, our returning to dust, our

insignificant existences being tossed around in a tsunami or buried under rubble after an earthquake. This is a sobering counterpoint to being in the image of God. Yet neither symbol rules out the other. Both bear a truth about who we are.

Fallen

Not only are dust and grass contrasting symbols in relation to being images of God, so too is being 'fallen'. Genesis 3 is the story referred to as 'the fall', a fall from what was meant to be, expressed more generally in Rom 3:23 as a human condition: 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'. There is a whole cluster of symbols around this central expression of being fallen: humanity is corrupt (Gen 6:11-13; Jer 17:9); stained or blemished (Ps 51:2,7), lost or strayed (Ps 119:176; Isa 53:6), burdened or heavy-laden (Matt 11:28), hard-hearted (Ezek 3:7; Mark 3:5), captive or servile (Rom 7:23; Gal 5:1), dead (Eph 2:1,5; Col 2:13), and blind (Luke 4:18; John 9:40-1). All these imply a deficient or distorted identity and resultant behaviour compared with what was originally given. We are less than what we could or should be.

This fallen state is often referred to in the Christian tradition as 'original sin'. This can be somewhat misleading, since our creation as images of God is more original than original sin. We could not be thought of as 'fallen' if there were not some standard or expectation from which we have descended. Even psychotherapies and spiritual practices aimed at healing, integrity and wholeness, assume that there is an original goodness that can be recovered. Past the hurt and damage one has suffered, and past one's hard-hearted and hurtful behaviour that has caused damage to others, 'healing' means taking responsibility for one's past and one's behaviour, and being integrated and at peace with oneself. We would expect that after such therapies, a person would be less violent and hurtful, more peaceful and compassionate. Even when we fall below society's standards, the assumption is that that is not our true or better self. A more original and good self is trying to come out. In Christian theology, this is understood as the image being marred but not lost after the fall (Gen 9:6, Jam 3:9).

Knowing ourselves as fallen alerts us to our true selves, from which our hearts and actions have been corrupted. It sets us on a search for healing, in relation to other people, to the wider earth community and to God. And this path leads to a realisation of an ever-expanding horizon of relationships of which we are a part. Knowing ourselves to be interrelated in this way is a key insight of ecological theology. Overcoming our blindness to being interrelated is part of its mission. However, it is not sufficient merely to know that we are interrelated. The quality and care of those relationships, in line with God's heart, will and mission, also matters if we are not to fall short of the glory of God.¹⁵

The value of a theological view of the human person is that it does name us as fallen and offers insights into what we have fallen from and how we may be saved or redeemed. This is what makes theological anthropology distinctive compared with humanistic or scientific views that do not see us in any way as fallen.

Redeemed

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the symbolic language associated with redemption is related to that of being fallen, though this time the fault is healed. God's work of redemption has been done for all and offered to all, hence it is a condition of being

human in a theological view. Those who know God's redemption express it as an experience of being risen (living out of resurrection life: Eph 5:14; Col 2:12;), washed or cleansed (through baptism: Acts 22:16; 1 Cor 6:11), sought out and brought home (Luke 15:3-7, John 10:7-18; 1 Peter 2:25; 1 Cor 6:20), forgiven (Matt 9:2; Luke 23:34; Acts 2:38; Col 2:13) liberated (Rom 8:21; Gal 5:1,13), healed (Matt 8:16; 12:15; 14:14; 1 Pet 2:24), made alive (Eph 2:1, 5; Rom 6:11, 8:10), given sight/shown the light (Matt 11:5; Luke 1:79; 4:18). It is the work of an ecological theology to understand these symbols within the widest possible context of all our relations. Our primary relation is to God, our creator and redeemer, who so loved the world that we will have fallen short as images of God if we fail to do likewise.

I have been arguing that the question of who we are as human beings needs to incorporate a number of basic symbols carried within the Christian tradition, each a part of a larger picture that makes up a *theological* anthropology: that we are an image, we are dust, fallen and redeemed. There is tension between them, but that is a creative tension that stops any one symbol taking over, to become the absolute word. Knowing who we are includes knowing that we are (very) small parts in a much larger world and universe, both in space and time.

For an ecological theology, the approach I have taken works against self-absorption and anthropocentrism, because even at our most significant we are images, not originals, and at our most insignificant we are still related to the earth as the womb from which we (along with all life on earth) emerged and the grave that will receive us back again. And within these symbols there is a dynamism. Although I have argued that they are all true all of the time, they are not static. Rather, we are pushed from behind by creation theology to live up to the glory conferred on us, we are pulled towards the future to grow into the glory of Christ, the true image of God, and in between we are called to be transformed, reformed, renewed, to put on a new self, to become a new creation (Rom 7:4-6, 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18, 5:17; Eph 4:22-24).

So, for the sake of the earth, let us live up to being true reflections of God, loving the world; and love the dust from which, according to both faith and science, human life came into being; and let the knowledge of our fallenness convict us of who we are meant to be; and love God whose costly love redeemed the world. It is from this ground of who we are that we then begin to think about what we should do, in an ethic of care.

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¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, Trans. E. Buchanan, Beacon Press, Boston, 1967, p. 9.

² Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Texas University Press, Fort Worth, 1976, p. 67.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, Trans. R. Czerny, Routledge, London, 1978, p. 307.

⁴ Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, p. 354.

⁵ Graeme Garrett, *God Matters*, The Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1999, p. 173. See also the essay by Sarah Bachelard based on Garrett's work: 'Beyond Thou Shalt Lies a Deeper Word: The Theologian as Ethicist', in *Embracing Grace: The Theologian's Task*, edited by Heather Thomson, Barton Books, Canberra, 2009, pp. 103-118.

⁶ That this is reiterated in Gen 5:1 and 9:6, after the Fall, and implied in Ps 8, means that being images of God is not obliterated by also being fallen.

⁷ St Augustine, 'Exposition of Psalm 45: Verse 11' in J. E. Rotelle (ed.), *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century. Vol. III/16: Expositions of the Psalms*, New City Press, New York, 200, p. 322.

⁸ Saint Augustine, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: Unfinished*, 16. 57.

⁹ Saint Augustine, 'Eighty Three Different Questions', trans. D. L. Mosher, in H. Dressler, *et. al.* (eds.), *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, Vol 70, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 1982, p. 74.

¹⁰ For a summary of Augustine's creation theology and its relation to Plotinus, see J. E. Sullivan, *The Image of God: The Doctrine of St Augustine and Its Influence*, The Priory Press, Iowa, 1963, pp. 18–22.

¹¹ Saint Augustine, 'On Genesis' trans. R. J. Teske, in T. P. Halton *et. al.* (eds.), *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* Vol. 84, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 1991, pp. 59–60.

¹² Saint Augustine, *Sermons*, IX. 8, cited in Sullivan, p. 15.

¹³ On the relation between the Hebrew *adam* (humanity) and *adamah* (ground, from which humanity and all living creatures were shaped or formed) see Marilyn Clark, 'Caring for and Protecting the Earth', in *Into the World you Love: Encountering God in Everyday Life*, edited by Graeme Garrett, ATF Press, Adelaide, 2007, pp. 3–16.

¹⁴ Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era--A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, Harper, San Francisco, 1992.

¹⁵ Ernst Conradie, *An Ecological Christian Anthropology: At Home on Earth?*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, pp. 36, 93.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is it like to think of yourself as an image of God – an image, not the original?
2. How does this make a difference to your relationship with other people, the earth and all its inhabitants?
3. In what ways do the biblical views of humanity as dust, fallen and redeemed relate us more closely with the earth?