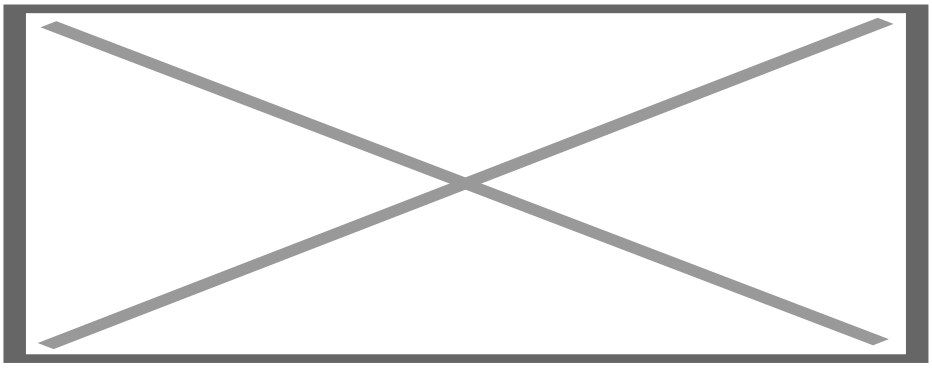
Speech bearers: The divine in the human

In John's prologue, the incarnate Word is the God of creative address.

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In what way can human beings be said to be in the divine image? Christian theologians have from early on opted for the reading that it was in virtue of their rationality that humans—or sometimes only males—were made in the image of God. This seemed an obvious place at which human beings differed from animals. But it has never been an entirely satisfactory reading. Such a move risks collapsing into a quasi-gnosticism, or at least a devaluing of the body.

Contemporary Jewish exegete Tikva Frymer-Kensky says that, as "Christianity became more Hellenized, it began to adopt the Greek mind-body dichotomy, distinguishing between the 'lower' and 'higher' aspects of human being." At its worst, Christian theology imagined a mind that reflects God's glory and a body that just trudges along. By contrast, Rabbi Hillel taught that he honored God's commandments in going to the bathhouse, for it was his obligation to the body in the image of God.

The shortcomings of the traditional emphasis on mind or rationality have become more evident in modern times as we ask new questions: What is the difference between the mind and the brain? If none, is the mind then not also the body? If rationality is the criterion for being in the image of God, cannot the inference be drawn that those who are less than rational do not fully have the *imago Dei*? This line of argument has been invoked to defend discrimination on the basis of sex, race, and disability.

While there are some Christians who hold to female subordination, few do so today on the basis of the claim that women are not fully rational. Yet that claim was classically considered the corollary of 1 Corinthians 11:7: "A man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man."

In a Genesis narrative that makes much of fecundity and variety, the imaging of the creator God in humanity seems to require more than one being. Thus, "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). It may be that each one of us is in the *imago Dei*, but only insofar as we, each one, belong to one another. This is a biological fact about human beings: each of us, even the most austere hermit, was born and sustained over early months and even years by other human beings. Human beings, we find in Genesis 5, bring forth human beings "according to their image." This is an endorsement of the physicality of the *imago*.

So too is speech. The early chapters of Genesis present God as a speaking being. God is throughout presented as summoning, calling, admonishing, commanding, and creating by his word. This imagery is recurrent in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. We might say that the Genesis image of God is of a *God of creative address*. What might it mean, then, to consider that it is as "speaking beings" that we are in the image of God?

Friedrich Schleiermacher, in interpreting Adam's naming of the animals and Eve's emergence, avoids the typical reading that emphasizes Adam's mastery over brute creation. Instead, Schleiermacher notes that Adam's naming of the animals is in fact the story of a failure. At the end of the naming, whose stated purpose was that he should not be alone, the man is still alone:

> Since the deity recognized that his world would be nothing so long as man was alone, it created for him a partner, and now, for the first time, living and spiritual tones stirred within him; now, for the first time, *the world rose before his eyes*. In the flesh and bone of his bone he discovered humanity, *and in humanity the world; from this moment on he became capable of hearing the voice of the deity and of answering it.*

Schleiermacher (surely deliberately) never identifies the partner of Adam as female. His point is not about sex but about speech. Adam, alone in the garden, does not speak, for speaking is a social possession. We do not invent speech for ourselves. We receive it from others; we are inducted into speaking by those who care for us as infants. Through speaking, we are introduced into the world. While the first chapters of Genesis are full of speaking, calling, separating, and commanding, we have no report of human conversation until Adam says, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23).

Augustine, another great theological theorist of language, was acutely aware that without other people we would not speak at all. In the prologue to *Teaching Christianity*, a work set out as rules for dealing with scripture, he tweaks those who "rejoice over their knowing the holy scriptures without human guidance; and, if that is the case, it is a genuine good they are rejoicing over, one quite out of the ordinary." He continues,

> Let them grant me that each one of us, from earliest childhood, has had to learn our own language by constantly hearing it spoken, and has acquired a knowledge of any other language, whether of Hebrew or Greek, or any of the rest, either in the same way by hearing it spoken, or from a human teacher.

Speaking, like reading and writing, is a distinctive human attribute and also a social gift—something we learn from others rather than invent ourselves.

Speaking is both a personal and collective accomplishment. While not everyone can speak at all times, and some will never speak, the human race would not be what it is without speech. While speaking is closely aligned with rationality, we tend to think of rationality as something each individual either possesses or lacks. Not so with language. As Schleiermacher and Augustine point out, we would not even speak to praise God had we not first learned to speak from other human beings. And as Ludwig Wittgenstein would demonstrate in the 20th century, there is no such thing as a private language.

Speech is a social possession and, moreover, speech involves the reciprocity of love. We see this especially when parents charm their babies into language, and when a person is old and frail and beyond speaking or unable to speak through illness or disability. These people, though voiceless, are also part of the community of speech. Here we have something that singles out our species, for while dolphins may vocalize and even sign, they do not write ballads or novels, use the future conditional, or make promises. It may be that elephants, like us, are stakeholders in environmental policy, but however intelligent they are they cannot debate legislation.

Yet as speaking creatures human beings are still entirely creaturely and material. Speaking is physical, involving the tightening of vocal chords, the expulsion of air, the creation of sound waves. Speaking is as physical as

rowing a boat, and humans as speaking beings are not at a distance from other creatures. We are indeed made of dust, but so is everything around us—all the trees, the birds, sea creatures, and land animals. The earth itself, so astrophysicists tell us, is billion-year-old stardust. But human beings are dust that can promise, plan, call, and respond—as does the biblical God.

The prologue of the Gospel of John presents God as creating by speaking. With its "in the beginning was the Word," it makes clear reference to Genesis. Yet the prologue goes on to tell of a Word incarnate who, as man, speaks our human language while at the same time summoning and calling to new creation and a second birth. This incarnate Word is also the God of creative address.

The identification of Jesus as the very visibility (and audibility) of the Creator God is not just a curiosity of John's prologue. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus repeatedly identifies himself with the "I AM" who spoke to Moses, the very God who made heaven and earth. These "I AM" sayings hearken back not only to Exodus but also to the "I AM" sayings of Isaiah, where YHWH declares that he *alone* is God, the Creator: "For thus says YHWH, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): 'I AM YHWH, and there is no other'" (Isa. 45:18, modified).

The New Testament epistles similarly invoke Christ's participation in creation, identifying him with God's Word or Wisdom. This is famously so in Corinthians: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:6). In Colossians we read:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. (Col. 1:15)

And the author of the epistle to the Hebrews brings together speaking, *imago*, and Word in painting a picture of the Son as creative agent:

> In these last days [God] *has spoken to us* by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through *whom he created* the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the *exact imprint of God's* very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful *word*." (Heb. 1:2–3, my emphasis)

Yet perhaps the most striking identification of Christ with the creative Word, the "I AM" of the Hebrew Bible, comes in the book of Revelation: "'I AM the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8, modified). In the resounding sequence of divine self-designations that follow this opening theophany, God and Christ are both named "Alpha and Omega" and "First and the Last," names that are themselves interpretative glosses on *the* Name: YHWH (Rev. 1:17; 2:8; 21:6; 22:13).

The distinctive name "First and Last" is not of New Testament coinage but appears as a divine self-designation in Isaiah, where YHWH is the one God who creates and summons all into being: "I am He; I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they stand at attention" (Isa. 48:12–13). The language is of a summoning, calling, creating, and redeeming God. The "First and Last" is the one who will redeem all things because he has created all things. So the cosmic Christology of the New Testament holds Christ to be a living, visible, and audible Word made flesh.

Genesis and the New Testament epistles share a concern with God's creative agency and human dignity and destiny, and they portray human participation in that agency in terms of speech. Creating in Genesis does not rely on images of sexual generation; God does not "father" the world. Instead, the God of the Hebrew Bible creates through his Word: summoning ("Let there be light," Gen. 1:3), separating (light from darkness), blessing,

commanding, and naming ("God called the light 'day,'" Gen. 1:5). This is a semiotic God whose very Word is the power to create. In the epistles' understanding, too, God is one who summons, speaks, and names.

This is why it is as speaking beings that we most image the God who is "living Word" in reciprocal, convivial, and truthful speech. "Speaking beings" is something we are collectively, as there is a time when each of us did not and will not speak—and some will never speak. We speak to others and, in acts of love, for others. The perfection of human beings comes not despite others but with them in loving God and neighbor. We cannot, as Augustine observed, love our neighbors if we do not love ourselves. And we cannot love ourselves if we do not know ourselves as loved by God, as the image of God and the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:17).

Augustine was deeply influenced by the story of Paul's conversion. It affected his preaching and what he did as a bishop. In particular, he was struck by the fact that the voice from heaven did not say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute my followers?" but "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" (Acts 9:4, my emphasis). Augustine came to see that his mixed, ragtag bunch of North African Christians were not just followers of Christ but the body of Christ, the body of which Paul spoke. Each one was a temple of the living God, as Jesus claimed he was, and each was a stone in that speaking, summoning temple. The living presences of Christ among us are those Christians who preach, teach, and, by works of love, are "being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

The historical emphasis on rationality as the locus of the image of God, while not entirely wrong, is sadly abbreviated. It neglects what appears to be Genesis's emphasis on the body and physicality. It individualizes what both testaments present as requiring the more-than-one. More recent attempts, including my own, to anchor the *imago Dei* in sexual difference and fecundity, while moving away from the stress on the solitary individual, run the risk of collapsing into a gendered binarism just as static as the monism it intended to replace.

The *imago Dei* resides in human beings as speaking beings. This is an entirely physical process: it is both individual and collective, and it anchors the *imago Dei* language of Genesis and Paul in the doctrine of creation. Moreover, it displays a humanity that images the one God who, now as always, speaks the world into being—calling, addressing, summoning—and, as Word incarnate, summons us into new life: a God of creative address.

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