

# *Human Nature in Theistic Perspective*

with Celia Deane-Drummond and Paul Wason, "Becoming Human in Theistic Perspective"; John H. Walton, "Human Origins and the Bible"; Mikael Stenmark, "Is There a Human Nature?"; Alan J. Torrance, "Is There a Distinctive Human Nature? Approaching the Question from a Christian Epistemic Base"; Alistair McFadyen, "Imaging God: A Theological Answer to the Anthropological Question?"; Celia Deane-Drummond, "God's Image and Likeness in Humans and Other Animals: Performative Soul-making and Graced Nature"; and John Schneider, "The Fall of 'Augustinian Adam': Original Fragility and Supralapsarian Purpose"

## IMAGING GOD: A THEOLOGICAL ANSWER TO THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL QUESTION?

by *Alistair McFadyen*

*Abstract.* Traditionally the central trope in Christian theological anthropology, "the image of God" tends to function more as a noun than a verb. While that has grounded significant interplay between specific Christian formulations and the concepts of nontheological disciplines and cultural constructs, it facilitates the withdrawal of the image and of theological anthropology more broadly from the context of active relation with God. Rather than a static rendering of the image a more interactionist, dynamic, and relational view of "imaging God" is commended as a key anthropological term. Engaging with Psalm 8 suggests that, biblically, asking the anthropological question "What is humanity?" is tied to the answer to the theological question: who is God? This locates theological anthropology securely within the interactive context of being related to by God and suggests that theological anthropology might be a matter of performance rather than definition: actively imaging God.

*Keywords:* human nature; human uniqueness; *imago Dei*; praise; Psalm 8; theological anthropology

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### ON NOT QUITE WRITING ABOUT THE IMAGE

Having been invited to contribute a paper on "the image of God," I find myself surprised by my reticence to embark on a straightforward discussion of this central trope in Christian theological anthropology. My caution in

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part reflects resistance to the tendency within theological tradition to take the image to have an essentially nominal character—to function more like a noun than a verb. Hence, it indicates something definite, fixed, and stable: *something*, usually *within* each individual, which constitutes us as human and characterizes substantial, essential humanity. In this way, theological anthropology becomes the task of fully articulating this static human substance or capacity. The image is then a theological idiom for human nature or essence: that within us which is most “like” God turns out to be what constitutes our distinctive humanity (that is, distinguishes us from other creatures). Such views tend toward accounts of the human that are more static than they are dynamic. Resistance to static renderings of the image explains my reticence in writing a more straightforward paper offering some specific conceptualization of the image that might either be taken up or informed by interdisciplinary conversation seeking anthropological definition.

My worry is not as such about interdisciplinarity in theological anthropology more broadly, nor in interpreting the image more specifically (see, e.g., McFadyen 1990). My concern relates only to the theological dangers inherent in our speaking of *the* image of God in ways that are static rather than dynamic, interactionist, and relational. Rather than some definable capacity or attribute internal to our being, I propose we understand our being in the image in terms of our being in interactive relation with God. Hence, we should think and speak of the image as functioning more like a verb than a noun: not so much as some internal structure or capacity we possess and that seeks definition, but as a way of speaking comprehensively about being in a relation with God that is definitive of what it means to be human. This does not make the image redundant or decenter it from theological anthropology, but it does place the image and theological anthropology more broadly in a more expansive doctrinal context. By the same token, if we allow the thought of our active *imagining* of God to shape discursive use of the image, we are more likely to be reminded to preserve to it some definite *theological* function and reference. It is surprising how speedily functioning and active reference to God can effectively be evacuated even from a term that includes explicit verbal inflexion referring to God. That is accelerated where the image is interpreted as an internal possession in virtue of which we resemble in creaturely form God’s supposed (projected?) internal attributes and capacities.

This way of thinking about the image also fosters the notion that the core task of theological anthropology is one of definition. This suggests that theological anthropology is primarily descriptive, oriented toward a reality already set unproblematically in place (which might therefore equally be approached through empirical as well as more speculative nontheological disciplines). It assumes that to ask the anthropological question (“What is *‘humanity?’*”) theologically is formally (and maybe also materially) identical

to nontheological ways of asking and that the (biblically undefined) “image” functions in a formally (and maybe also materially) identical way to the concepts and tropes of nontheological discourses.

Rather than write a more straightforward paper on the image, focused on Genesis, I take Psalm 8 as a departure point for better understanding “imaging God” in ways that are more interactive, dynamic, and therefore also intrinsically and unavoidably theological. I believe this honors, rather than undermines, the fundamental Christian impulse to lend a central place in theological anthropology to an understanding of what it means to *image* God. Direct focus on the term itself can easily give rise to the misimpression that its centrality is derived from a reading of Genesis as a text of origins, functioning as a kind of theological fundament conveying key, foundational concepts (or, in this case, a conceptual placeholder to be filled with variable content), including those regarding the essential nature of humanity (and everything else). It was a Christian reading of Genesis through a Christological lens that raised the image to a central position in Christian theological anthropology—a position it did not and does not enjoy in Hebrew and Jewish thought. At the very least, this should indicate to us that neither the image nor a Christocentric anthropology belongs to an understanding of creation as an essentialist account of original nature, read independently of soteriological and eschatological interests. In this regard at least, Christian theological understanding of Genesis simply mirrors the place of Genesis within the far broader theology of creation, intertwined with the narrative arcs of salvation and eschatology, within the Hebrew Bible itself (Barth 1958, 42–239; Brueggemann 1996; Von Rad 2001; Westermann 1976). (David Kelsey is led by similar considerations to withdraw theological anthropology from the orbit of Genesis altogether Kelsey 2006, 2009, Ch. 4B).

Despite this, however, Christian theological anthropology generally has most frequently been pulled into the orbit of the doctrine of creation once Christologically grounded soteriology has identified its key term. This relative isolation of creation and the image from the future-oriented dynamics of salvation and eschatology reduces creation to an account of origins and a giving of essentialist concepts. In part, the rootedness of the image of God in the creation narratives of Genesis has strongly encouraged this association and use once the term has risen to primacy on soteriological grounds. Where thinking about creation is conducted without reference to the horizons of both soteriology and eschatology, there are consequences for both the grammatical mood and tense of anthropological discourse: the present and the indicative predominate. This includes the interpretation of its key theological anthropological trope and largely explains the tendency to think of the image in static rather than dynamic categories. Thus, the task of theological anthropology is primarily descriptive: to define and to classify. And the image of God becomes a tool for definition by

differentiation and distinctiveness. Consequently the tendency has been marked to use the image to identify natural human capacities or attributes that “reflect” the Divine and at the same time thereby distinguish us from other creatures and inanimate creation. For an interpretation grounded primarily in a rendering of the doctrine of creation, the tendency is ironic to render the image in ways that so spiritualize, moralize, or otherwise etherealize it that the material base of our creatureliness and therefore our dependence on and commonality with the rest of creation are thereby threatened. (Such danger is also attendant on unplugging the image from creation altogether or from allowing creatureliness to recede into the background of approaches that emphasize the eschatological or soteriological.)

Despite my disinclination to adopt such an interpretation of the image, an essential capacities/attributes approach has proved immensely powerful, not least (but not only) in modern Western cultural contexts, where the term commonly operates as a “middle axiom,” mediating between traditional Christian faith and thought and the foundational anthropological assumptions of modern, secular culture which fund its characteristic concern with and definition of human dignity and human rights. Its use in discussion of dignity and rights has, I think, encouraged an interpretation that identifies the image in ways that are centered on the internality and subjectivity of the human, and that are consequently prone to individualistic interpretations.

Moreover, Christian anthropological terms, such as the image, which may enter or engage with secular discourses around central cultural projects such as human rights, are subject to very powerful, shaping forces of secularization. Theological anthropology in the modern period is permanently prone to collapse into anthropology, an effective and comprehensive loss of God in turning to the human. This is no less true, but especially poignant, in relation to the image, where the term often functions as little more than a theological or spiritualizing gloss on constructions arrived at independently by secular, atheistic, or agnostic humanist accounts describing the human in ways epistemologically (because ontologically) self-enclosed.

This either displaces God entirely or removes God to the margins of discursive anthropological reference—the anonymous origin of concepts of humanity, reference to whom may now be removed without any substantive effect on the conceptuality. The discursive shift, of course, accompanies a significant shift in the frame of reference within which theological anthropology and its key terms actually operate, representing displacement of theological anthropology from the comprehensive, framing ecology of Christian faith. Thus it becomes possible to designate the human as “the image of God,” meaning little more than the container of residual marks of originating relationship. Absent altogether is any reference to the human

as caught up in, constituted, and defined by the comprehensive dynamics of being related to by God. Roughly until the modern era and its turn to the subject, theological anthropology was distributed across almost the whole map of Christian doctrine. We now appear to have arrived at a point where that turn has become exclusively anthropocentric and where reference to God, if it comes at all, turns God into little more than an optional adjunct or gloss to an anthropology derived independently of any consideration of God. With the possible exception of Trinitarian-funded construals of the image in terms of relationality (which often turn out to be problematic on other grounds; see McFadyen 1992), this is no less true—though it is more clearly ironic—where “image of God” is the controlling anthropological concept. It explains why many modern discussions of the “image of God” pay scant attention to the way in which the Christian God might be characterized, much less how and why relation to God might be an internal, constitutive element of human being and identity.

Hence, I seek readers’ indulgence while I try to explore an approach that may resist not the use of the image as the key trope in theological anthropology but this theological deracination of theological anthropology, including its central trope of “the image of God.” What I am seeking is a way of asking the anthropological question that begins with God (the God in movement for and toward us in the economy of creation, salvation and final consummation), in which the human remains a question, something to be sought rather than a fixed reality already set in existence so that it may be an object of straightforward experience or description. In turning to Psalm 8 as a point of departure, I am not so much turning away from the central anthropological trope of imaging God but rather approaching it indirectly.

#### THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL QUESTION IN PSALM 8

O LORD [Yahweh], our Lord [adon], how majestic is thy name in all the earth! Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted<sup>2</sup> by the mouth of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.<sup>3</sup> When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established;<sup>4</sup> what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?<sup>5</sup> Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor.<sup>6</sup> Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet,<sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,<sup>8</sup> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea.<sup>9</sup> O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! (RSV)

Psalm 8 is the biblical *locus classicus* of the anthropological question, which I propose might effectively sign us toward a broad horizon and context of theological interpretation of the image. I hope here to avoid an

unrelated risk, not inevitably realized, that, in turning to Genesis 1–3 as the starting point in theological anthropology, one regards it as a settled deposit of answers to the anthropological question and then expects those answers in an essentialist form. Succumbing to such temptation will already incline toward a static rendering of the image of God in terms of the possession of capacities or attributes and will tend to be correlated with readings of creation in static rather than dynamic, interactional terms and as a one-off act of origination in which all reality is given its essential nature.

Explicit articulation of the anthropological question is rare within the scriptures. Without doubt, that fact should be considered as nonaccidental. That is bound to invite suspicions that interest in humanity is eclipsed where interest in and the presence of God predominate. The explanation, I would contend, is rather that scripture is not absent interest in humanity, but this interest is expressed in ways that lack the anticipated markers of a genuinely human and humanizing interest (in other words, that redefine the form, content, and context of human and humanizing interest). Specifically, humanity is neither the center nor the primary focus of scripture; therefore, interest in the human as a theme is derivative and secondary. Consequently, the anthropological question and anthropological deliberation more generally are not generated by a form of human introspection or independent, reflexive self-awareness; nor, indeed, do we find the human becoming a question to itself and then on that basis looking for an answer by subsequently relating what we have independently found about the human to God. Biblically, humanity and the human question both appear as always already set in the context of God's relating. In that dynamic context, the human is neither passive nor insignificant. Yet human action, autonomy and significance are consequences of—and in that sense secondary to—God's active relating. This prioritization of God does not have the dehumanizing sequel that might be anticipated according to prevailing cultural assumptions. Why? Because God's relating—and therefore God—is already oriented toward the human—indeed, oriented and seeking the human in its fullest realization. Psalm 8 has a shorthand code whereby it rolls up the whole history and future directedness of God's relating in its orientation toward human well-being, flourishing, and consummation: God's mindfulness (v. 4). And it is in the context of wondering acknowledgment of the status that affords human beings that it articulates the anthropological question in a specifically and definite theological register.

Even if we take this verse in isolation from the rest of the psalm, the phrasing of the question itself should be sufficient to indicate that here the anthropological question is not only being raised in a theological *context* but is being raised *as a theological question*.<sup>1</sup> Should that claim require demonstration, consider how profoundly different the impression would be were the question mark to be placed after “man” and the sentence end

there. What makes the anthropological here a theological question is not only that the question is not complete without the second part of the sentence, but that this second part is no mere addendum that might be dispensed with; rather, the mindfulness of God represents the point of departure, the *telos* of the question and not merely an after thought tacked on to the end of a thought already in independent movement. Here we have our first intimation of what it might mean to ask the anthropological question theologically, and it involves the question forming out of an antecedent response to the sense of being caught up in the beneficent reality of God's relating. The implication is immediately obvious. Here, the anthropological question is a response to and asked in the context of God's relating. More positively, the anthropological question is set firmly within the context of the answer given to the *theological* question. If we turn to consider the full text of the psalm, the sense is immediately strengthened that priority should be given not only to God's relating but to the identity of God in God's relating: the God who is "mindful" of the whole of humanity.

Reading the anthropological question in the context of the whole psalm, we can see that everything that is said about humanity is in fact focused on God—indeed, it is framed by and occasion for praise of God. Even through the verses where humanity is the subject under consideration, the focus is in fact on God's mindful relating and the role occupied by humanity within it. The human appears as the object of God's mindfulness, and all that might be said about human honor, dignity—glory, even—is set in the context of the glorification of God already under way.

One way of putting this is to say that Psalm 8's way of *asking* the anthropological question presupposes an *answer* to the *theological* question: Who is God? The immediate suggestion is that no *theological anthropology* can advance from any other point of departure than a prior understanding of God—an answer to the theological question.

#### WHO IS GOD? PSALM 8'S ASSUMED ANSWER TO THE THEOLOGICAL QUESTION

*God in God's Relating.* The psalm's answer to the theological question is not given by listing a set of abstract, divine attributes together constituting the divine essence but through reference to something rather more concrete: God's "mindfulness." While God's transcendent majesty is acknowledged, the psalm identifies ("indexes") God only in the context of God's concrete history of action, interaction and self-manifestation. It is this to which the term *mindfulness* is condensed and coded reference. For, despite its brevity, the text of Psalm 8 is pregnant with allusions to a number of key biblical texts (e.g., vv. 5ff. resonates with Genesis 2; the whole resonates with Israel's liturgical and wisdom traditions [not least with Job]). Thus would it be clear to singers of the psalm that they are being actively incorporated into the

comprehensive dynamics of God's relating: the interrelated grand narratives of creation, salvation, and promised eschatological consummation. For here God is identified as the creative agent responsible for the whole of reality, who has bestowed on humankind a specific role (God's viceroy, or suzerain, which the psalm invests directly with a notion of human dignity), mediating divine authority and "rule" by exercising "dominion." Biblically, God's rule is nothing other than God's Kingdom of justice and peace, in which the whole of reality enjoys fulfillment together with God. All this together suggests a unified directionality to God's relating in its multiple dimensions (creation, salvation, eschatology): the full realization of God's rule, which enjoins the blessing and full flourishing of all creatures, understood to involve both responsible human agency and divine action in concrete history; action that is not only generative but also regenerative, constantly reengaging, redirecting, and reenergizing human capacities where they are headed in variant directions or exhaust themselves. The whole of Israel's salvation history is in view here and, with it, the salvation and eschatological fulfillment of all humanity and the consummation of all creation. Ultimately, it is this interactive context of God's relating, its directedness toward the full flourishing of the whole of creation, and of the special place and role of humankind in it (and of Israelite humanity within it) that is signed by the phrase "God's mindfulness." Here humanity appears not as something defined but as a reality set into a particular form of interaction with God and mediating those dynamics toward other human beings and the rest of creation, oriented toward the comprehensive and fullest realization of the whole of reality. Humanity itself is constantly sought by God, not as a fixed and static entity, but in a way that stretches, challenges, and—most importantly—reenergizes the possibility of our being fully human where it is most constricted or most comprehensively disoriented. In short, God constantly seeks humanity in and through this interaction, stretching us and resourcing us toward its full realization in the Kingdom anticipated here and now, against its counterfactual present reality. Here the dominant grammatical moods are the vocative and interrogative, the subjunctive and the optative.

All of that rich context of relating may be read off the body of the text, which is to say that it is into this context of God's mindfulness that the singer of the psalm self-consciously is inserted. That is so. Yet it is also true that, for the faithful singer, immersion in the dynamics of God's mindful relating would not have to wait that long. It would be both more immediate and, indeed, of a different form than has been suggested by our turning initially to discuss the main body of the text of the psalm. We need to backtrack, lest we fail to notice the significance of the psalm opening, not just with an invocation of God, but an invocation by name. Both facts are significant for gaining a sense sufficiently rich of the psalm's comprehension of who God is in God's relating.



In its opening address to God, the psalm suggests an implicit answer to the question “who is God?” God is One who may be directly addressed. This is not an answer molded into a proposition formulated in response to a question posed. It is an answer confidently assumed and relied upon in active relating. We are very far here from the indicatives of definition and classification of a divine essence. As we read these words, we find God not in the indicative but in the vocative—which is to say, we find ourselves not reading a set of propositions *about* God; we find ourselves addressing God!

*In the Name of God.* More than that! We find ourselves addressing God by name: “O Yahweh (LORD), our Lord.” And it is use of the divine Name that presses us to move beyond the accurate, in itself amazing, yet at the same time inadequate, observation that God is available to be directly addressed by human beings. Why inadequate? Again, the clue is to be found in the opening verse as it moves from invocation to an explicit note of praise—a note reiterated in the closing verse, so that it could be said to envelop the whole Psalm (and therefore to provide the context within which the anthropological question is raised, and raised as a question of God’s mindfulness). Significantly, the psalm both opens and closes with explicit praise, not only of God, *using* the Holy Name, Yahweh; the holiness of that Name is itself praised: “How majestic is your name in all the earth!” (vv. 1, 9).

Why is the Name to be praised? Primarily, because the Name is not something applied to God by humans. One might perhaps say that it represents, not Israel’s human answer to the question of God but is God’s self-identification. Hence, the psalm’s answer to the theological question, antecedent to the asking of the anthropological one, is given by God, and it is given by God not for the purposes of propositional classification but for use in the vocative and interrogative of responsive encounter. It is a phenomenon of divine self-manifestation, in which God retains initiative and is sovereign and elicits imaging human response; it is not the fruit of human seeking, reflection, or experience. That is why the Name was understood to be a vector of divine presence and agency at the same time as being a vehicle for active human engagement with and invocation of God. Here we arrive at an initial sense that the holy and mysterious self-manifestation of God does not exclude, but radically includes, assumes and intends a place for the human. And this is not only as a passive recipient but as an active agent: the human being as actively imaging the movement of God who seeks full human flourishing, whose energies are most focused on the places resistant to humanization; against the powers of dehumanization that distort and disorient human imaging of God.

Yet we must not advance too quickly to human agency, to imaging God, since that is set squarely in the prevenient context of divine action.

Acknowledging the place of human agency comes second in the movement of praise that sets it firmly in a context whereby God's holiness, majesty, and sovereignty are overtly acknowledged. Indeed, the holy, sovereign majesty of God is carried in that Name itself, which attracted such reverence as a vehicle of self-disclosing transcendent divine sovereignty that by convention its utterance or inscription was generally proscribed in the postexilic community, and the prohibition against taking it "in vain" (Deuteronomy 5<sup>11</sup>; Exodus 20<sup>7</sup>) registered earlier than that: "For the Name itself is here revelatory" (LaCocque 1998, 311).

God's "name" and God's "majesty" . . . are poetically synonymous, for the majesty of both God's person and creation are revealed to mankind in the divine name and all that it implies. The majestic name of God both permeates the earth and transcends the heavens, thus evoking the words of mortal praise. (Craigie 1983, 107)

Holy reticence around use of the Name is one of the most significant manifestations of resistance to idolatry. Significantly for the interests of this paper, this includes also the proscription against making any other images of God than the human being's own active imaging. Hence, even in our using that Name, God remains subject (as the giver of the Name), Holy, and transcendent, precisely in being available and addressable, unrepresentable and imageless (hence the shock in the Hebrew context of humans being declared to image God), while yet now nameable (cf. LaCocque 1998, 318). We are set here in the context of an interaction between God and humanity, in which God's relating is performatively acknowledged to be primary and prevenient: God is sovereign, even in our addressing and invoking God. For all these reasons, the majesty of the Name is itself praised (Craigie 1983, 107; Eaton 1967, 44).

For that reason also, use of the divine Name places the singer immediately in the concrete, historical context of divine agency, summed up in shorthand as God's "mindfulness," and for two interrelated reasons. First, the giving of the Name represents a self-giving condescension in which this majestic and sovereign Lord renders Himself available to human beings as a subject who may be addressed, invoked, and engaged with in an extensive range of interactions. Therefore, the giving of the Name represents also the self-identification of God as the Holy and transcendent Lord who determines to be God by being *for* human beings, and *for* us in such a way that makes Godself available for, while seeking and eliciting imaging human response. Second, use of the Name recalls the event in which the Name was given—at once seen both as pivotal in and representative of the whole history of "mindfulness" between Yahweh and His people (LaCocque 1998, 307ff.).

In its opening invocation of the Holy Name, therefore, this hymn of praise might be said to draw the singer immediately into the most expansive

context of God's mindful relating. Where that history might be focused in the history of God's relating with Israel, raising the anthropological question in the context of what is arguably a hymn of creation sets that history in a context that is literally universally expansive: God's dealings with all humanity and with the world. The allusions to the contingent events in Israel's history are suggested thereby to have universal scope and significance. In addressing Yahweh by name, the psalm signs us (sings us, even!) toward and invokes the narrative within which that Name was given—which is to say, the story of God's saving relating, focused first on Israel and then all humankind, acting toward the establishment of God's rule throughout the whole of creation.

It is not without significance that this history is made present, neither simply as completed occurrence nor as narration of past events. Both God's action and its narration and recalling in the community (including in liturgical recitation and allusion) are oriented toward the present and future. Of course, there is an interest in and serious attentiveness to the past, but here the past is not dead. It is examined as locus of the Living Lord whose fidelity grounds confident faith in the concrete present looking toward a new future. Being incorporated by the recitation of the psalm into God's concrete history of mindfulness is to be set into the present and future in ways that look toward God's active presence here and now and toward the horizons of both future redemption and final fulfillment and consummation. Such incorporation looks, moreover, to enacting appropriate forms of human imaging response to God's relating in creation, salvation and consummation, the first form of which is enacted here: singing thanks and praise to God's majesty. For it is that vision which is the proper theological context for responding and responsible human being and agency: human imaging of God's relating. It is this universal context of God's relating in and to the whole of creation to which God's giving and human use of the divine Name—and, hence, this psalm itself—belongs. It is this interactive context that answers the theological question and in which the psalm raises the anthropological question. It is this context, therefore, in which the anthropological question is to be addressed (and the "image of God" is to be understood) if it is to be raised and approached as a theological question (and a theological trope).

#### IMAGING AS PERFORMED HUMAN RESPONSE: PRAISE

Here humanity is defined not in reference to a set of internal, "natural" attributes but as "placed" and constituted in the context of God's relating—more specifically, as recipients of the divine Name and concomitant revelation of the divine majesty. Yet this already sounds too static, abstract and ahistorical unless we bear in mind that the giving of the Name had a context of interaction that was highly specific and determinate and aimed

at eliciting active human response. Humanity is what it is (and becomes a question to itself and for God) as it is caught up in the dynamics of God's relating, is addressed by, and responds to God's call and question: imaging God.

Again, within the tenor of the psalm as a whole, it is probably better to speak here in terms of human response being utilized by God, drawn into the dynamics of God's relating, than it is to speak of human beings placing themselves within these dynamics through their praise. Yet the inference is here to be drawn that knowledge and recitation of the divine Name involves a sharing in the realities of God's relating, the exercise of divine power, and not just knowledge and awareness that God is sovereign.

Thus, v. 2 sets up the expectation that we move to through v. 3, which counters any expectation or claim that the role afforded human beings in the exercise of divine power in God's relating is ours by right, or by virtue of our nature, or may be claimed independent of (and therefore, as it would be, in opposition to) the direction and order of the dynamics of God's relating. Imaging God is an active dynamic that has an orientation. In particular, human beings are called to a specific mode of imaging responsibility within the world and in relation to the rest of creation: dominion, or responsible care in the context and in the service of God's relating, subordinated to and representative of God's majesty and rule. Only as mediators of that movement of God to the rest of creation do we image God, and only in that dynamic orientation might "dominion" be appropriately performed and understood. In this, God has made insignificant humanity "a little lower than the angels." There are resonances in the tropes and imagery used in the psalm, not only with the language of Genesis 1 (Gerstenberger 1988, 69) and with the understanding of kingship distributed across the Hebrew Scriptures but also with notions of kingship in the Near East more generally (Eaton 2003, 81). Elsewhere in the psalms, the "glory" that is given humanity is associated with (divine and human) kingship (Davidson 1998 39; Mays 1993, 518). Together, all this suggests that the dignified status of humanity in exercising power and responsibility in creation is one of mediation and is derived from God. Properly, it is divine grace: undeserved, without rationale or foundation, except in God's free gift (Childs 1969, 22ff.; Eaton 1967, 45). Hence, the position of humanity in creation as God's viceroy tells us more first about God, and only on that basis might we move to say something about humanity, derivatively, from the fact of this divine grace in the ordering of creation after and toward God's rule: the election to this role of an otherwise apparently insignificant humanity. Both the power (perhaps better, responsibility) and the glory given to humanity therefore remain properly Yahweh's (Coetzee 2006, 1131ff.), and the psalm performs the appropriate orientation of returning the gift in its hymn to God and the divine Name itself (tracing the image back to source).

Human beings here are God's viceroys, stewards or representatives, and whatever dominion is taken to mean (I am not getting into that discussion here) it is subject to, shaped, and directed by the dynamics of God's relating. It is not, then, self-validating rule by independent human standards but is accountable and subject to the values of the divine Kingdom and indeed of the Creator-King. Human agency is exercised and is responsible "before God" (Bayer 2004, 282; Zimmerli 1978, 36ff.). Humanity is glorified, but the glory is ours only in the context of God's relating; the immediate context for the expression (and hence also the evaluation) of human dignity is the Kingdom of God (Mays 2006, 33).

In the end (v. 9), as in the opening of this psalm, it is not human dignity, but God's Name that is praised:

The structure of the psalm is worth observing closely. At its center is an affirmation of human power and authority. At its boundaries are affirmations of praise to God. The center (v. 5) and the boundaries (vv. 1, 9) must be read together; either taken alone will miss the point. Human power is always bounded and surrounded by divine praise. Doxology gives dominion its context and legitimacy. The two must be held together. Praise of God without human authority is abdication and "leaving it all to God," which this psalm does not urge. But to use human power without the context of praise of God is to profane human regency over creation and so usurp more than has been granted (Brueggemann 1984, 37ff.)

The inference is clear that human power or agency that is not responsive and responsible to God, that curves in on itself in self-praise, does not participate in this glory of humanity. Rather, it "sells the pass" so that the bulwark protecting the proper ordering of creation is undermined and the forces of chaos are admitted. Notwithstanding, however, that "dominion" is received from God in the mode of creatureliness and is to be exercised in subordination to God, this is an exercise of human agency. And it is precisely in this exercise of agential creaturely, power-in-dependence that the glory and honor of humanity consists: in being called into imaging God. Moreover, it is in "glad and submissive doxology" whereby "human power [is] shaped and qualified by doxology" whereby God's relating in and through creation's proper orientation and order is received, confirmed (Brueggemann 1984, 38), and redoubled.

So the humanity sought in Psalm 8 when the psalmist asks, "What is humanity?" is sought as a dynamic counterpart to the majesty of Yahweh, itself construed as in active movement toward humanity. This movement is received not in strict passivity but is imaged in the active dynamics of praise—praise as the comprehensive context wherein human beings marvel that they are sought and called by God into fully flourishing humanity. It is in this context that the anthropological question emerges and in which humanity remains a question.

In a strong sense, I am suggesting that what we learn from Psalm 8 is more how to *ask* the anthropological question—and to do so theologically.

What we do not find is an answer; if, that is to say, we are looking for an answer in definitional terms. The psalm is a piece of liturgy. Unusually for a psalm (Eaton 2003, 80), it is addressed directly to God. The vocative is dominant. What we have therefore is not the communication of information about God and humanity, of human worth in the context of God's relating. What we have, rather, is liturgical *performance*. And if there is a sense in which we might say the anthropological question is not only asked but answered in the psalm, it is not by the communication of facts about essential human nature. Rather, the psalm *is* its own answer to the question. That is to say, in singing the psalm and praising God, in asking the anthropological question, we are performing an answer to it: actively imaging God by seeking our humanity as sought and called by God. The psalm becomes a kind of performative utterance, drawing the singer into the dynamics of imaging relationality of which it speaks through direct invocation of the power of the divine Name through direct address.

#### CONCLUSION

One fairly immediate consequence (a benefit, in my judgment) of this performative approach to theological anthropology is that it closes the distance between the anthropological tropes of dogmatic and systematic theology and those of Christian ethics and practical theology. The point, I am suggesting, of theological anthropology is to not so much to describe as to facilitate performance of humanity: our seeking the full humanity of ourselves and others as we are being sought by God. Thus, the key coordinates of anthropological doctrine (such as the image), I argue, have formally identical function and purpose to the key anthropological tropes of Christian ethics (neighbor, enemy, stranger, brother) and the key "operators" (love; forgiveness). All share a common purpose and function: the seeking of full humanization in relation to God, self, and others, especially where we encounter constricting realities that dehumanize, disorient, or diminish our full humanity. This *seeking* of the human, rather than description, is, I suggest, the chief anthropological interest of Christian faith and theology.

In many ways, the Christological foundation for the centrality of the image in the traditions of theological anthropology should work as a permanent flag toward this sort of understanding (the NT precedent for using Psalm 8 Christologically is further warrant for my approach). In making Christology foundational for Christian anthropology, in looking at Christ with the anthropological question in mind, what do we find? We find God in movement toward human beings and a human being perfectly imaging God. Imaging, how? Not in the sense of possession of a set of fixed capacities or attributes, but by virtue of this human being's active

orientation toward the humanity of others as an aspect of his imaging orientation on God. What we see in Christ, therefore, is both God and a human actively seeking the full humanity of human beings.

I commend this approach to theological anthropology partly as a way of maintaining theological integrity, and I am conscious that it is not clear whether and how such an approach might either be informed by or inform the findings of other disciplines, characterized by a genuine interest in anthropological definition.

#### NOTE

1. That this *should* be sufficient does not necessarily make it the case, however, and alternative readings are possible, especially in a context where secular assumptions too frequently have sufficient power to dislocate an original theological register. One inviting de-theologizing relocation begins with reading Psalm 8 as a creation psalm. This begins a slide into seeing the anthropological question as provoked by reflection on the wonders and vastness of creation, which prods a sense of human insignificance. However, under the pressure of secularizing meaning, “creation” is likely to be read non theologically simply as “nature.” The category shift completes a move in which both the natural order and contemplation of it (and therefore the tropes under which both are thematized) are taken to be independent of and outside God’s relating. Thus, nature in and of itself, rather than God, is both beginning and terminus of the sensations of awe and wonder. Such a reading isolates these verses from the rest of the psalm, which lends no support to the notion that either the anthropological question or consciousness of God or praise of God is evoked by an independent contemplation of the beauty or vastness of nature (as seems at the time assumed by Mays 1993, 513ff.; 514ff.; but see also Mays 1994, 65). The focus of the psalm is on God and on God’s active relating. Where nature is in focus, it is always as God’s creation—the product and arena of divine action and of human vocation. And that awareness is not derived from an independent contemplation of nature, but out of the self-manifestation of God. (Despite his contextualizing remarks, this is also the view of Davidson (1998, 38). What is articulated in praise here is *not* a universally accessible “natural” human experience of nature, despite the fact that the anthropology proposed is definitely universal in scope. Notwithstanding that the psalm conveys a characterization of the anthropological condition that is universal, knowledge of it is predicated on being consciously situated within the context of God’s self-revealing history with Israel, in which God gives Godself to be known (answers the theological question) and Israel’s praising response (which “answers” the anthropological question). The experience of the world as creation is made possible only by looking at the world through the lenses of a prior affirming consciousness of the reality of God in God’s relating with the people of God—a consciousness evoked by God’s initiating agency, prototypically in self-naming. The world as God’s creation is a category amenable only within the responding and responsive narration of the self-presence of God in relating to the world. In no way is there a suggestion here of natural sensitivity to the beauty of nature that provokes consciousness of God or of the world’s relation with God. The relationship between the two is the other way around. It is prior knowledge of God, an answer to the question “Who is God?” given in the divine Name with which the psalm begins, that enables a theologically sensitized awareness of the depths of the beauty of nature, now narrated within the dynamics of praise of the amazing fecund plenitude of God’s sovereign majesty and Lordship.

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