

On Animals: Responses to David Clough's Systematic Theology

with David Fergusson, "God, Christ, and Animals"; Margaret B. Adam, "The Particularity of Animals and of Jesus Christ"; Christopher Carter, "The Imago Dei as the Mind of Jesus Christ"; Stephen H. Webb, "Toward a Weak Anthropocentrism"; and David Clough, "On Thinking Theologically about Animals: A Response."

THE *IMAGO DEI* AS THE MIND OF JESUS CHRIST

by Christopher Carter

Abstract. In this essay I examine David Clough's interpretation of the *imago Dei* and his use of "creaturely" language in his book *On Animals: Volume 1, Systematic Theology*. Contrary to Clough, I argue that the *imago Dei* should be interpreted as being uniquely human. Using a neuroscientific approach, I elaborate on my claim that while Jesus is the image of God perfected, the *imago Dei* is best understood as having the mind of Christ. In regards to language, I make the case that using terms such as "creature" when referring to nonhuman animals is problematic in that it can serve to alienate human beings from their capacity to image God. In addition I argue that "creaturely" language raises concerns for the African American community given Western Christianity's history as it relates to their valuation of black bodies and human enslavement.

Keywords: African American; animal theology; human uniqueness; *imago Dei*; mindfulness; neuroscience; race; systematic theology

In his book *On Animals: Volume 1, Christian Theology* David Clough begins by laying out the aim and scope of his project. Christian theology, he argues, has "come to rely on ill-considered renditions of the distinction between human beings and other animals that are implausible, unbiblical, theologically problematic, and ethically misleading" (2012, xii). What follows is a serious reconsideration of the place of other animals in systematic theology to preserve the coherence of Christian theology itself.

In regard to Christian doctrine, Clough does an excellent job at exposing theological missteps that have prevented or limited the inclusion of nonhuman animals in serious theological discussion. In particular, I found

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his analysis on creaturely difference, the *imago Dei*, and the danger of human uniqueness especially striking. These concepts appear to have played a prominent role in shaping human animal and nonhuman animal relationships among Christians. Clough argues that an accurate understanding of the *imago Dei* shows us that Jesus Christ is the *true* image of God, and the unique revelation of the unseen God. Further, he argues “if this is the case, our understanding of the *imago Dei* in Genesis must be revised. For it is not the humanness of Christ as such that images God; otherwise God would be equally well revealed in any other human being” (2012, 101). Ultimately for Clough, the New Testament texts reveal that it is problematic to argue that humanness as such—as distinct from other forms of creatureliness—“reveals God in a unique way or that human beings have a superior standing in relation to other creatures because they represent or even resemble God” (2012, 102).

There are two points where I would like to push Clough regarding his definition of the *imago Dei* and the language he uses to describe it. First, I argue that there is another—and better—way to interpret the *imago Dei* that holds the Hebrew Bible and New Testament insights in better tension. My argument is simple: if we believe in the doctrine of Incarnation as defined by the Council of Chalcedon, that Christ Jesus is recognized in two natures, fully human and fully Divine without division or separation, then we must also believe that there is some part of us, the human part, that is capable of bearing the *imago Dei* as well (Bettenson & Maunder 1999). Indeed, it is because of the *humanness* of Jesus Christ that we humans are made aware that we have the capacity to image God in such a profound way. As such, while the *imago Dei* was conferred upon human beings in creation, it was fully revealed to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In this sense, human beings have the capacity to reveal God in a unique way. Second, I will argue that maintaining the language of “creature” when referring to human animals is problematic given my interpretation of the *imago Dei* and the legacy of “creature” language within the African American community.

THE GENESIS ACCOUNT AND INTERPRETIVE TYPOLOGIES OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

Throughout Christian (and Jewish) history, the key biblical passage for examining human uniqueness in light of other animals has been the creation narrative found in Genesis 1:26–28. This text suggests that human beings are unique among God’s creatures in that they bear the “image and likeness” of their Creator. In addition, the text also suggests that as bearers of this image human beings have a unique responsibility in regards to God’s creation.

In his book, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, professor of theology and science at Princeton Theological Seminary, explores the notion of human uniqueness among other animals. Van Huyssteen outlines three interpretive typologies regarding the *imago Dei* that are useful for distinguishing between claims: substantive, functional, and relational (2006, 126). A substantive interpretation of the *imago Dei* “is seen as an individually held property or capacity that is part of our human nature, and it is most often directly associated with reason, rationality, and intellect” (126). In contrast, a functional (or vocational) interpretation stresses the role of human action in dynamic relationship with God; in other words, what we as God’s representatives are called to do on earth (134). Lastly, the relational (or existential) interpretation is most notable in the work of Karl Barth. For Barth, the image of God does not consist of anything that humans substantively are or what they functionally do; rather it is about our unique ability to relate to God (Van Huyssteen, 2006, 136).

When considering the Genesis passage in light of these typologies, J. Richard Middleton in his book *The Liberating Image* claims that Hebrew bible scholars have come to a virtual consensus on the functional interpretation of the *imago Dei*. This consensus is based on a combination of two factors: the literary context of Genesis 1:1–2:3, and attention to the ancient Near Eastern background of the *imago Dei*. According to this consensus, we humans “image” God in the ways that we have been called and authorized to “share in God’s rule or administration of the earth’s resources and creatures” (2005, 27).

IMAGO DEI AS THE “MIND” OF CHRIST

To be sure, the meaning of the *imago Dei* for Christians shouldn’t be established by the Hebrew Bible alone, particularly when there are *eight* passages in the New Testament that reference the image of God. There are two texts that state Christ Jesus is the image of God (Col. 1:15, 2 Cor. 4:4; NRSV), two others where human beings (specifically men in the 1 Cor. passage) bear the image of God (1 Cor. 11:7, Jas. 3:9), and four others where the image of God pertains to our relationship with God; either something that will be conferred upon human beings during the resurrection or something that has been conferred upon us in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:29, 1 Cor. 15:49, 2 Cor. 3:18, Col. 3:10).

Taking the Hebrew Bible and New Testament passages into consideration, Clough defines the *imago Dei* as being revealed in Christ Jesus, the unique revelation of the unseen God. Further, he acknowledges that there is no difficulty applying both functional and relational interpretations of the *imago Dei* to human beings (2012, 101). Where Clough and I disagree is that I believe including a substantive interpretation of the *imago Dei* is

possible, and favorable, over an interpretation that denies human beings ability to image God uniquely through their humanity.

The difficulty Christians encounter by limiting our interpretation of the *imago Dei* to merely functional and relational typologies is that we lose the theological claim that we are even capable of accomplishing the “functions” and possessing the “relationality” that would have necessarily been endowed upon us by our Creator. Including a substantive interpretation of the *imago Dei* allows Christians to claim that human animals not only have a unique earthly vocation and relationship with the Divine, but that we are also uniquely equipped to accomplish these Divinely appointed goals. If you argue, as Clough does, that Christ Jesus is the true *imago Dei*, then what are Christians to do with the several additional passages that claim human beings also image God? This question is not sufficiently answered in *On Animals*.

Taking both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament passages into consideration, I argue that a better interpretation of the *imago Dei* in relationship to Jesus would be to view Jesus as the image of God perfected, and view human animals as having the ability to reflect the image of God only in as much we model ourselves after the perfected image of Christ Jesus. In this way, in modeling our lives after the life of Jesus, we are working toward actualizing the potential of the *imago Dei* as it has been revealed to us, in its perfected state, in the Christ Jesus. I argue the *imago Dei* is best described as human beings living with the mind of Christ Jesus.

The biblical foundation for this claim is found in the four New Testament passages that speak of the *imago Dei* as a state of being in relationship with God that, for human beings, is in process. In light of the Pauline lineage of the four New Testament passages, we must consider the overall style of Paul’s letters, which were intently concerned with the ongoing transformation of Christians. Indeed, passages such as Paul’s critique of the Christian community for their childlike faith in 1 Corinthians 3:1–2 reveal to us Paul’s emphasis on a type of transformation that was fundamental to and characteristic of the life of faith. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 3:18 the “Lord” (*kyrios*) Paul is referring is to God; Jesus Christ, as the mirror, is understood as the clear, visible reflection of God. In this way, when verse 18 reads that we are “being transformed into the same image” it speaks to followers of Jesus being transformed into reflections of the image of God through the unveiling of our faces (Keck 2000). Following this logic, we could argue that for Paul, the unique way human beings were created to reveal the *imago Dei* lies in our capacity to grow and model ourselves after Jesus—the perfect example of Christian maturity.

I believe the clearest expression of what the *imago Dei* should look like is found in Philippians 2:1–11. In this passage Paul urges his readers to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” Once again, if we keep in mind the traditional profession of faith in Christ’s two natures, we

must assume that Jesus possessed a human brain and a human mind. The question that follows naturally, then, is: what kind of mind did Jesus have?

In his book, *The Mindful Brain*, neuroscientist and psychiatrist Daniel Siegel writes that the prefrontal region, which is most highly developed in human animals, mediates the functions of the brain that we consider to be unique to our species (2007, 36). There are nine functions that are regulated by the prefrontal cortex: body regulation (proper function of our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system), attuned communication, emotional balance, response flexibility (capacity to pause before action), empathy, self-knowing awareness, fear modulation, intuition, and morality. Of special interest for our purposes is the fact that the prefrontal area continues to develop and strengthen over time in people who are

non-reactive to inner experience (e.g., perceiving feelings and emotions without having to react to them); observing/noticing/attending to sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings (e.g., remaining present with sensations and feelings when they are unpleasant or painful); acting with awareness (not on auto-pilot); describing/labeling with words (e.g., easily putting beliefs, opinions, and expectations into words); non-judgmental of experience (e.g., criticizing oneself for having irrational or appropriate emotions). (Siegel 2007, 142–44)

If we consider these traits in light of the passage in Philippians and the narratives of Jesus' life in the Gospels, the connection becomes obvious. Jesus, bearing the *imago Dei* as all humans do, was able to be fully human (fully utilize the capacity of his prefrontal region) in ways that allowed these virtues to become a part of his normative state of being.

The ability to harness these capacities to their fullest degree requires what Siegel calls "neural integration." This is the way the brain and the mind are able to become flexible and create new combinations of functioning, being, and relating to the world (2007, 46). From a neuroscience perspective, what we see in the life of Jesus is someone who was able to fully actualize particular capacities of the human mind in a way never realized before. This is proposed as an understanding of Jesus Christ and other humans, without thereby intending to disqualify key figures of other faith traditions. In the way proposed here, Jesus' mind is unique only in the sense that he was able to fully "tap into" important neural capacities that are latent in all human brains.

Jesus was able to utilize his neurological capability in ways that we have not been able to duplicate, but *that are not impossible from a purely scientific standpoint*. It is in this sense that I believe that the *imago Dei* ought best be described as human beings living with the mind of Christ Jesus, that is, living into the full capacity of our human neurological potential. In this way, my understanding of the *imago Dei* holds all three of the aforementioned typologies of the *imago Dei* in dialectic relationship. We

humans could be said to bear the image of God *functionally* in that we are called to *develop* the same mind as Christ Jesus; *substantively* in that only humans would be *capable* of striving toward this goal; and *relationally* in that a proper development of the mind of Christ would bring about proper *relational* response to God and therefore God's creation.

My interpretation of the *imago Dei* raises two concerns that have been historically problematic for Christian theology. The first concern is that my interpretation of the *imago Dei* as the mind of Christ would reinforce the specter of mind/body dualism that has haunted our faith for centuries, arguably since its inception. However, mind/body dualism as it is popularly understood (i.e., prioritizing the mind/intellect over the physical body) is a physiological misnomer. Neuroscientific research tells us that when we are examining the mind/body/brain relationship "we need to be careful of certain preconceived ideas that might restrict our understanding and bias our thinking. . . embrace novel ways of perceiving, and create new categories of thinking in our awareness of concepts in the moment" (Siegel 2007, 48). In describing the relationship between the brain, mind, and body, Siegel writes, "the mind itself can be viewed as both embodied and relational, our brains actually can be considered the social organ of the body" (2007, 48). In other words, we must linguistically *stretch* popular conceptions of what the human mind is. Cognitive mindfulness requires an embodied understanding of the mind, and our embodiedness gives human beings the ability to be uniquely relational. In this way by claiming that the *imago Dei* ought to be understood as having the mind of Christ, I am arguing that human beings have the unique ability to cultivate Christ-like mindfulness with the ultimate goal of embodying Christ-like behavior.

The second concern that my interpretation of the *imago Dei* raises for Christian theology is the danger of human uniqueness. However, the problem of human uniqueness is not limited to my interpretation alone. Indeed, all definitions of the *imago Dei* wrestle with what it means for humans to bear the image of God. Theologically, human uniqueness is a part of Christian tradition and the *imago Dei* is at best only one reason that may explain this rationale. As Clough explains, complete animal egalitarianism is ruled out in a theological context when we consider how often Jesus uses God's care of nonhuman creatures as an example to give confidence to his human listeners that God will provide for them because they are more valuable to God. Jesus did not explain why he believed this and the passages do not give us any contextual rationale for such judgments. As Clough suggests, these passages "do however suggest that when we move from doctrine to ethics, [the second volume of this work] we will need to attend to this form of human/non-human difference" (2012, 76). I agree, from a theological perspective human uniqueness is an issue of ethics and not doctrine. As such, until the second volume of this work is published I will limit my comments to this: human uniqueness, understood as bearing

the *imago Dei*, need not imply superior standing or status with God. Rather our ability to bear the *imago Dei* reveals that human beings have a greater responsibility to God.

To be sure, Clough and I agree on certain principles of the *imago Dei*. We agree that human beings have the capacity to image God, and we agree that our capacity to do so is not static, but rather a process (2012, 101). Our point of divergence lies in my substantive claim that the *imago Dei* is particularly human, a claim grounded in among other things our profession of faith about Jesus' human nature. Moreover, I argue a substantive claim is essential in that it provides a framework in the personhood of Jesus of how human beings ought to live out our functional and relational responsibilities toward God. In this way, only human beings are capable of imaging God in Christ-like ways.

THE LANGUAGE OF "CREATURELINESS" IN LIGHT OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

Preserving the language of human uniqueness may seem counter-intuitive given my pro-animal rights stance. Clough makes a very persuasive case that it is important for Christian theology to minimize uniqueness in order to expand our understanding of the redemptive work of the atonement. Describing the incarnation as God taking on creatureliness appears to be a radical departure from our creedal confessions. Yet Clough is correct in his argument that this departure is best understood as a supplement to the idea that God became human, especially in light of the Johannine description of the incarnation as the Word becoming flesh.

However, if our theology, and therefore our theological language, is going to move in this direction, we must also ask ourselves what is at stake if we use language that flattens distinctions between human and nonhuman animals? To be clear, my position is that in order to persuade Christians to rethink their theological views on nonhuman animals, Clough's description of Jesus taking on the form of "creatureliness" may benefit our theological understanding of the incarnation and the atonement, thereby expanding our comprehension of God's redemptive purposes. However, I fear that referring to ourselves as "creatures," rather than using a term such as nonhuman animal, could serve as a source of alienation that would limit human beings from recognizing that they have the uniquely human capacity to have the mind of Christ. I argue that this type of alienation pushes Christians farther away from embodying the Christ-like mindfulness that we are capable of.

Further, I argue that from an African American Christian standpoint, theological language that flattens distinctions between human and nonhuman animals is especially problematic. Within modern Western civilization, black people have not enjoyed the luxury of being considered fully

“human” (if we even do now) for that long. It was just 160 years ago that in order to codify behavior and maintain control over Africans, the Euro-American white ruling class still used bodily skin color as a determining factor in the designation of *human* status, and only 50 years ago in regard to the designation of complete *legal* citizenship status.

In her book *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* Eboni Marshal-Turman explores the body politics of Christian identity in light of the American racial project (2012). She argues “religious rhetoric, political rationale, and pseudoscientific theory and experimentation all served to sanction the dehumanization of black African bodies and other non-European bodies that varied culturally and phenotypically from the Western norm” (2012, 1). Indeed, the plurality of white American Christianity sanctioned the notion that black bodies were initially less human than their own, and ultimately needed to be defined against a white ideal. In this sense, the track record of white American Christianity’s valuation of black bodies is at best unsettling, and moreover it raises concern about the long-term consequences of “creature” language in light of the racism that is endured by those with slave ancestry.

Indeed, for the last 30 years there has been a subtle movement among liberal scholars and intellectuals, most of whom are white, to assert that race is a *just* ideological construct. Simply put, this position argues that race as such does not really exist, it is an illusory idea that was developed to maintain social inequality. While I agree with the notion that race is an illegitimate biological concept, the ramifications of racial ideology cannot be overcome by choosing to become “colorblind.” This position fails to recognize that on the level of lived experience, race remains part of human identity; we cannot choose to be raceless much in the same way we cannot choose to be genderless. It is within this context that I contend that any move to describe ourselves as “mere” creatures would pose analogous problems for black people. Being referred to and looked upon as fully human is something black people have fought and died trying to achieve—for my people, our common humanity matters. In this way, I argue that for African Americans, adopting the language of “creature” when referring to us not only minimizes our experience as particularized African American human beings, it also creates the opportunity for Christian theology to repeat past mistakes and dehumanize other human beings who do not conform to certain privileged body types.

One could argue that if Black Christians take offense to the language of creatureliness then it is their responsibility to find a more appropriate term. However, I argue that we need to challenge the norm in our culture that places the responsibility of diversity, including appropriate use of language, on minorities themselves. If we are striving to move toward a more inclusive society, indeed a more inclusive Christianity that values all

of God's creation, then this responsibility needs to be shared by all and prioritized by those in positions of power and influence in order to ensure enduring change.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have attempted to address my concerns regarding Clough's interpretation of the *imago Dei* and his use of "creaturely" language. I argued that all human beings bear the image of God and therefore an appropriate interpretation of the *imago Dei* must maintain human uniqueness as a constitutive element. Additionally, I argued that the language of "creatureliness" when referring to human beings is problematic in that it can serve as a source of alienation from our human capacity to image God, and that this language raises concerns for the African American community given Western Christianity's history with racism and slavery.

In regards to doctrinal arguments put forth in *On Animals*, it is important to note that my interpretation of the *imago Dei* is still compatible with Clough's understanding of the incarnation of God and the Atonement of Christ Jesus, the two theological moves in his book that should open the eyes of all Christians to reconsider their view on the role of animals in theology. Clough's book is an important step in accomplishing such a momentous task. However, for this goal to be completed it needs to be embraced by people from all backgrounds, and my hope is that my interpretation of the *imago Dei* would be helpful in accomplishing such a task.

NOTE

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