Imago Dei: God's Grace and Distance

Perspectives for a Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue

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Introduction

The anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 offered an occasion to reflect on various fundamental aspects of Martin Luther's theology. In December of that year, a colloquium in Geneva and Chambésy brought the theological anthropology of the Reformer into focus and at the same time opened an ecumenical perspective by inviting Protestant and Orthodox scholars to study Luther's work together.¹ The task of the following contribution is to outline a specific aspect of Lutheran anthropology, namely Luther's interpretation of Gen 1:26 – the discourse of man and women created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). There is no single, systematic account of this idea in Luther's work; instead, it appears in various places in his writings. In the presentation that follows, we will discuss the idea of the image of God in two of Luther's texts – the *Disputatio de Homine* of 1536² and the *Lectures on Genesis* of 1535–45.³ We will show that Luther embarks on nothing less than a fundamental reinterpretation of this theme. The theology of his predecessors is revolutionized by Luther's assertion that the *imago Dei* in human beings has been completely and irrevocably lost. In order to make plausible the Christian hope for salvation despite this radical dogmatic claim, Luther opts for a special form of theological speech – narrative theology. We will describe the train of thought that Luther's argumentation follows before showing in a second step the significance of the idea

1 *L'anthropologie de Luther: Perspectives protestantes et orthodoxes*. Conference at the Institut d'études supérieures en théologie orthodoxe (Chambésy) and the Faculté de théologie de l'Université de Genève, 7th–8th December 2017.

2 Martin Luther, "The Disputation Concerning Man, 1536," in *Luther's Works* (hereafter *LW*), vol. 34, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 133–44. When using the Latin term "*homo*" Martin Luther refers to both men and women. To illustrate this reality, which risks to remain unclear if "*homo*" is simply translated as "man," this contribution mostly uses inclusive language.

3 *LW* 1 (Lectures on Genesis 1–5), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958).

of *imago Dei* for his understanding of corporeality and sexuality – a topic that has only been more widely explored in recent years. Finally, in a third step, an ecumenical comparison will be made between the position of Luther and modern Orthodox anthropology as presented at the colloquium. We will show that Luther's fundamental theological decisions still entail clear differences to the presentation of Orthodox anthropology and that recent developments in Protestant theology offer better prospects for finding common ground about the question of *imago Dei*.

1 Disputatio de homine

In 1536, Martin Luther provided a precise and comprehensive definition of the human being in the 40 theses of his *Disputatio de homine* (*Disputation Concerning Man*).⁴

This relatively short text contains the most important elements of Luther's anthropology. The decisive element for the definition is found in thesis 32:

32. Paul in Romans 3[:28], "We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works," briefly sums up the definition of man, saying, "Man is justified by faith."⁵

Human beings owe their existence completely and continuously to God's attention; in other words they are justified by God and cannot justify themselves. But through the Fall, Adam and Eve and with them the whole of humanity turned away from God and cannot re-establish the relationship with God by their own efforts. After the Fall the special relationship of humans with God persists and they continue to depend on God's care. Only by the gift of God's salvation in Jesus Christ can this broken relationship be healed.

As the text of the *Disputatio* also shows, Luther opens a discussion with his theological colleagues in the field of anthropology. Interestingly, he characterizes the dispute as a conflict between theology and philosophy, although in fact it is a conflict between theologians, some of whom, in Luther's view, have got too close to philosophy. According to Luther, the anthropological approaches of the two disciplines are fundamentally different. While philosophy describes humans according to their external appearance, that is to say, according to the earthly reality in which humans differ from animals through reason and

⁴ LW 34:133–44.

⁵ LW 34:139.

freedom of choice, theology focuses on the “cause” (*causa*) of the human being. Theology therefore does not describe men and women by reference to their earthly deeds or their natural predispositions, but as God’s creatures:

20. Theology to be sure from the fullness of its wisdom defines man as whole and perfect:

21. Namely, that man is a creature of God consisting of body and a living soul, made in the beginning after the image of God, without sin, so that he should procreate and rule over the created things, and never die,

22. But after the Fall of Adam, certainly, he was subject to the power of the devil, sin and death, a twofold evil for his powers, unconquerable and eternal.

23. He can be freed and given eternal life only through the Son of God, Jesus Christ if he believes in him.⁶

According to the philosophical interpretation, the human being stands out from the rest of creation by virtue of their reason, which gives them a special closeness to God. Luther does not, however, share this idea: although the human being differs from animals in particular by their reason, it is not reason that constitutes the very essence of their existence. Reason, to which philosophy is so much attached, distinguishes the human being only “as a mortal and in relation to this life” (thesis 3). A description of human beings that is based only on the effects of their intellect is “fragmentary, fleeting, and exceedingly material” (thesis 19). Luther explains that no internal quality differentiates humans from the rest of creation – neither traits of character nor special abilities – but that it is an external feature, namely the relationship with God, that makes the human being unique. This relationship with God is expressed as follows: women and men are created in the image of God; but although this relationship with God is the very purpose of God’s creation, the original relationship was destroyed by the Fall (Gen 3).⁷

Luther’s thus develops his own anthropological approach on the basis of opposing world views: theological versus philosophical anthropology; earthly reality versus reality of creation; image of God versus image of the devil; eternity of sin versus promise of salvation in Jesus Christ.⁸

⁶ LW 34:138.

⁷ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie. Eine Vergegenwärtigung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 143.

⁸ Berthold Wald, *Luthers Anthropologie im Spiegel seiner Biographie* (Heimbach/Eifel: Patrimonium-Verlag, 2015), 110.

2 Human Reason Corrupted by Sin

Luther's polemic against a theological anthropology that draws its inspiration from philosophy is directed against both medieval scholasticism and early church anthropologies influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian thought. Luther explicitly rejects two important anthropological strands of tradition. The first goes back to Augustine's theology, whose anthropology has a Trinitarian orientation.⁹ For Augustine, the soul consisting of its three parts – memory, reason and will – is the mirror of the Divine Trinity. The image of God is thus to be found in the human soul and can be identified with specific human capacities.¹⁰ Luther criticises this “speculative” approach and provides a definition of the human being that is not substantialist, but relational.¹¹ Unlike Augustine, Luther does not seek to identify the image of God with a specific part or capacity of the human being. As we have seen, the very essence of the human condition is acquired through an external relationship; namely, by responding to God's call. Luther must also reject Augustine's idea because it is too close to the philosophical approach and attempts to infer God's work from the observation of human reality. But for Luther, placing one's trust in human reason and intelligence is a mistake and the theologians should know better: As he noted, theology is well aware of the fact that the Fall of humanity has profoundly corrupted the human intelligence. This also applies to the rational statements that men and woman make about themselves:

17. Nor is there any hope that man in this principal part (the soul) can himself know what he is until he sees himself in his origin which is God.

18. And what is deplorable is that he does not have full and unerring control over either his counsel or thought but is subject to error and deception therein.¹²

Augustine's statements, which “the remaining doctors in general follow,” are speculative and theologically questionable, because they do not take into account the ‘blind spot’ of human reason and “contribute very little toward the correct explanation of the image of God.”¹³ Even more “dangerous” from

9 Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien, Band II: Disputatio de homine, dritter Teil: Die theologische Definition des Menschen. Kommentar zu These 20–40* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 99–101, notes 32–36.

10 Augustine, *De trinitate*, X, 11–12.

11 Albrecht Peters, *Der Mensch* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979), 196.

12 LW 34:138.

13 LW 1, 60.

Luther's point of view, however, is a second line of tradition that goes back to the early church anthropologies of Origenes and Irenaeus. There the statement in Gen 1:26 (*"Et ait: Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostrum [...]"*) ("And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness [...]") is interpreted to the effect that the two terms *imago* (image) and *similitudo* (likeness/resemblance) are identified with two different expressions of the image of God in the human being. Origen asserted that human beings were given the potential for perfection through the *imago*, while *similitudo* refers to the task to achieve likeness with God through human's own efforts.¹⁴ Similarly, Irenaeus held the view that *imago/similitudo* points to the perfection of humans, which they attain only through receiving God's spirit.¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas took up Augustine's idea, according to which *imago* denotes the God-given faculties of memory, reason and will. He understood *similitudo* as the perfection of human virtue, which is realised in the good use of these abilities.¹⁶ This dynamic relationship between *imago* and *similitudo* and their connection to ethics was what led to the sharp criticism of Martin Luther, since the scholastic opinion was that only one part of the image of God in humans had been affected by the Fall, namely the resemblance, that is to say, the ability to love unconditionally and act according to the Gospel. The memory, reason and will, on the other hand, would have remained intact in their relation with God, so that the human being still represents an image of God, with reason standing as their most excellent part. Following the scholastics, one could deduce that despite the Fall, human reason would still be in harmony with God's intentions. It could also be concluded that men and women have with reason an infallible orientation by which they could re-approach God by their own strength. Luther and the reformers accused the Catholic Church of downplaying God's grace by claiming that humankind could contribute to its salvation through its own intellectual forces or works. This conflict, which was above all a conflict with the Roman Catholic Church of Luther's time, also becomes apparent in the question of anthropology. In the *Genesis Lectures*, Luther sets out the crucial problem with the philosophical tendency of his theological predecessors:

[...] for there is also added a discussion concerning free will, which has its origin in that image. This is what they maintain: God is free; therefore,

14 Origen, *On First Principles*, III, 6, 1, ed. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 223.

15 Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, IV, 38, 13.

16 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 93, a. 9.

since man is created according to the image of God, he also has a free memory, mind, and will. [...]

Thus, this was the origin of the dangerous opinion that in governing men God permits them to act under their own impulse. From this assertion came many inconvenient ideas. It is similar to the quotation: "God, who created you without you, will not save you without you." From here the conclusion was drawn that free will co-operated as the preceding and efficient cause of salvation.

But if this is true, it follows that by the powers of his nature man can bring about his own salvation.¹⁷

According to Luther, therefore, the speculation about the human soul and the identification of human reason with *imago Dei* leads to a theological self-justification that does not correspond to the message of the Gospel:

24. Since these things stand firm and that most beautiful and most excellent of all creatures, which reason is even after sin, remains under the power of the devil, it must still be concluded

25. That the whole man and every man, whether he be king, lord, servant, wise, just, and richly endowed with the good things of this life, nevertheless is and remains guilty of sin and death, under the power of Satan.

26. Therefore those who say that natural things have remained untainted after the fall philosophize impiously in opposition to theology.

27. The same is true of those who say that a man "in doing what is in him" is able to merit the grace of God and life;

28. So also, of those who introduce Aristotle (who knows nothing of theological man) to witness that reason aspires to the best things;

29. Also, those who say that the light of God's countenance is in man, as an imprint on us, that is, free will which forms the precept right and the will good;

30. In like manner, that it rests with man to choose good and evil, or life and death, etc.

31. All such neither understand what man is nor do they know what they are talking about.¹⁸

The great difference between Luther and his predecessors is the fact that for Luther the loss of the image of God is total. Since Luther does not identify the

¹⁷ LW 1, 61.

¹⁸ LW 34:138–39.

image of God with a specific human capacity, his interpretation of the Fall is more encompassing and existential. Luther certainly recognises the merits of reason and the free will in secular life. Yet, for him, these capacities fall completely under the domination of the devil, and human beings are therefore unable to decide in favour of God and avoid sin by their own efforts as scholasticism suggested. For Luther, men and women, thanks to reason, can indeed remember having been created in the image of God. But by their human reason alone and without God's intervention, they are unable to capture God's saving action, to understand it deeply and finally to believe what this means for their existence.¹⁹

There can therefore be no alternative for Luther but to abandon the theological anthropology of his predecessors and redefine the nature of human beings, i.e. the meaning of *imago Dei* from the very beginning.

3 A Redemptive Journey

After distancing himself from his theological predecessors, Luther established his own hermeneutical approach by aligning himself with the texts of the New and the Old Testament.

Some aspects of anthropology are indeed radically new and radically different from those of Luther's predecessors. We have already named the first profound redefinition: Luther rejects the distinction between *imago* and *similitudo*, which according to him stand for the same thing, namely the relationship with God. Furthermore, he assumes that this *imago Dei* has been lost completely. In other words, regarding the earthly, human reality, no presence of God's image can be found in humans. The corruption and depravity of humankind is radically opposed to salvation by grace testified in the Gospel. In order to establish a connection between these two realities a special theological move is required. The underlying problem, however, is already present in the Bible, where the definition of the *imago Dei* in Gen 1:26 encounters a contradictory voice in the Pauline letters (Col 1:15), which leaves space for two questions: is humankind the bearer of God's image because it was attributed to Adam at the time of creation, as the book of Genesis says? Or is Christ the one and only true image of God, as suggested by Paul? Is the image of God a protological and anthropological fact, or a Christocentric and eschatological affirmation?²⁰

19 Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie*, 145–46.

20 Peters, *Der Mensch*, 55.

Luther's solution to this question is to be found in narrative theology. He interprets the loss and restitution of the image of God as a redemptive journey. The path of salvation corresponds to its eschatological character, which according to Luther finds its completion not in earthly conditions but in the Kingdom of God. In order to describe this eschatological process Luther distinguishes four different stages: human nature in its original, creational state; the Fall and its consequences; the restoration of the *imago Dei* by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and the current status of humans living between the image of God and the image of the devil.

The starting point of Luther's narrative theology is the creation and the circumstances of the first human couple in Paradise. Indeed, already at this point he understands the image of God differently from most of his predecessors. While traditionally the ontology of *imago* is substantialist, Luther quite clearly takes a different position describing it as relational. The image of God in men and woman is the conception they have of God and thus also of their environment as a whole as God's creation. In other words, humans do not live *as* God's image, but *in* the sight of God who created them and sustains them in their existence and humans fully share the will of their creator. This state of mind is not expressed in any essential human qualities. Instead, it can be read in the human emotions. To live in the sight and vision of God's care is to have trust and to be fearless, in other words to believe in God. It is only from this fundamental attitude that the human being develops certain abilities, such as the ability to recognise and control their fellow creatures.

Therefore my understanding of the image of God is this: that Adam had it in his being and that he not only knew God and believed that He was good, but that he also lived in a life that was wholly godly; that is, he was without the fear of death or of any other danger, and was content with God's favour. In this form it reveals itself in the instance of Eve, who speaks with the serpent without any fear, as we do with a lamb or a dog. For this reason, too, if they should transgress His command, God announces the punishment: "On whatever day you eat from this tree, you will die by death," as though He said: "Adam and Eve, now you are living without fear; death you have not experienced, nor have you seen it. This is My image, by which you are living, just as God lives. But if you sin, you will lose this image, and you will die."²¹

21 LW 1:62–63.

However, in line with his reservations about the capacity of human reason after the Fall, Luther also points out that from the perspective of the earthly human being it is impossible to accurately grasp life in the image of God in Paradise:

Therefore, when we speak about that image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we had no experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite; and so, we hear nothing except bare words. In Adam there was an enlightened reason, a true knowledge of God, and a most sincere desire to love God and his neighbour, so that Adam embraced Eve and at once acknowledged her to be his own flesh. Added to these were other lesser but exceedingly important gifts – if you draw a comparison with our weakness – namely, a perfect knowledge of the nature of the animals, the herbs, the fruits, the trees, and the remaining creatures. If all these qualities are combined, do they not make up and produce the sort of man in whom you would think that the image of God is reflected, especially when you add the rule over the creatures?²²

Luther is of the opinion that, before the Fall, Adam and Eve were created for eternal life, meaning that God would have led them from their earthly life to spiritual life without them having to suffer physical death. After the Fall, this original passage from earthly life to spiritual life is blocked. But this is not all: after the seduction of the first couple by the serpent with the promise of becoming like God, humans have become more like the devil. Instead of the image of God, the image of the devil has been established in them and now dominates their intentions. Humans are no longer able to turn to God through their own will, because the original trust in God has turned into suspicion:

So, we see now what great dangers and how many varieties of death and chances of death this wretched nature is compelled to meet with and to endure in addition to the execrable lust and other sinful passions and inordinate emotions that arise in the hearts of all. We are never secure in God; apprehension and terror cause us concern even in sleep. These and similar evils are the image of the devil, who stamped them on us. But Adam lived in supreme bliss and in freedom from fear; he was not afraid of fire, of water, or of the other discomforts with which this life is beset and of which we are inordinately afraid.²³

²² LW 1:63.

²³ LW 1:63.

Without the vision of God, the human being now fundamentally lacks security, confidence and orientation. The resulting vacuum is fatal. Humankind no longer finds support and security in its Creator and therefore turns to the creature, that is, to themselves, which gives rise to permanent disappointments. The human being suffers from the consequences of sin, which have made them “a transgressor and unjust” (thesis 33). This applies not only to Adam and Eve after the Fall, but to all human beings up to the present day, according to Luther, who here joins Augustine’s teaching on original sin. Conversion to Jesus Christ is the only way to interrupt the human being’s selfish impulses, because Christ represents exactly the opposite of the human being’s existential distress. Jesus does not cling to material possessions or his human existence, as the gospels show by depicting Jesus leading a life of trust in God.²⁴ Luther’s interpretation of the image of God is obviously inseparably linked with the idea of original sin and with the doctrine of justification. In Luther’s view, the restoration of *imago Dei* has nothing to do with perfecting the qualities originally inherent in men and women. Luther’s discourse about the image of God is fundamentally about the restoration of the relationship with God:

Jesus Christ is the image of the Father from all eternity. He becomes human to restore the image of God in humankind. Restoration requires that humanity be renewed in the image of Christ in order to live a new creation on the spiritual and physical levels. As a result, men and women find themselves once again before God, where again they can breathe without anxiety. But how is this conversion supposed to happen, since according to Luther, after the Fall humankind has lost the free will to decide for God? In the *Disputatio* thesis 35–38, Luther underlines a core point of his theology, namely that humankind remains totally passive and contributes nothing by their own efforts to this new creation:

35. Therefore, man in this life is the simple material of God for the form of his future life.

36. Just as the whole creation which is now subject to vanity (Rom 8:20) is for God the material for its future glorious form.

37. And as earth and heaven were in the beginning for the form completed after six days, that is, its material,

38. So is man in this life for his future form, when the image of God has been remoulded and perfected.²⁵

²⁴ Peters, *Der Mensch*, 204.

²⁵ LW 34:139–40.

The human being cannot intervene in the battle between God and the devil, although taking part in it, inasmuch as since Adam's and Eve's Fall the image of the devil painfully determines their existence. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God saves the human being from the consequences of this miserable existence. The vision of God is restored anew for the human being and this time God becomes visible not only as the Creator but also as the Redeemer. However, it is of crucial importance for Luther that it is not only a virtual redemption, that is to say, an event in the human's imagination, but a substantial redemption and change of human nature. To this end, Luther refers to the doctrine of the two natures and the doctrine of the Trinity, according to which God himself is truly present in Christ.²⁶ Christ is truly human and truly God. As he represents both God and humankind the latter is fully participating in his death and resurrection.

Humankind emerges from this event as endowed with a new nature. This is not human nature as it was before the Fall however. As Luther repeatedly emphasized, men and women are justified by grace – *sola gratia*. With Paul he argues that this is a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). But the righteousness before God that is thereby attributed to the human is a foreign righteousness – *iustitia aliena* – and it is in permanent tension with his other nature, which is corrupted by Adam's and Eve's Fall. This also applies to the image of God. Human beings continue to suffer from existential fear and the blindness of their intellect. What has changed, however, is the fact that since the coming of Jesus Christ there is again reason to hope that this dark vision may not have the last word, because God has shown that he is determined to save the “*homo incurvatus in se*” from himself and from the devil.

In the *Disputatio*, Luther writes that humans in their earthly life experience salvation only when they believe in (or have faith in) Jesus Christ. But how do they come to faith, for which they likewise cannot freely decide? The answer to this question is given by pneumatology. As human reason is under the power of the devil – in other words, not capable of understanding the relieving news of being saved by God's grace – the Holy Spirit creates the capacity of receiving the Gospel.

In the *Genesis Lectures*, Luther writes:

But now the Gospel has brought about the restoration of that image. Intellect and will have remained, but both very much impaired. And so,

26 Johann Anselm Steiger, *Fünf Zentralthemen der Theologie Luthers und seiner Erben. Communicatio – imago – figura – Maria – exempla* (Leiden/Boston/Cologne: Brill, 2002), 111.

the Gospel brings about that we are formed once more according to that familiar and indeed better image, because we are born again into eternal life or rather into the hope of eternal life by faith, that we may live in God and be one with Him, as Christ says (John 17:21). And indeed, we are reborn not only for life but also for righteousness, because faith acquires Christ's merit and knows that through Christ's death, we have been set free. From this source our righteousness has its origin, namely, that newness of life through which we are zealous to obey God as we are taught by the Word and aided by the Holy Spirit.²⁷

However, the restoration of the image of God will not be completed during the earthly life of men and women, but it is an eschatological process that will only come to an end on the Day of the Last Judgment, when the mystical union between God and the human being is completed. But until that moment, men and women find themselves in a double relationship with two different images – the image of God and the image of the devil – and, consequently, in a situation of permanent struggle.²⁸

39. Meanwhile, man lives in sins and daily is either justified or becomes more polluted.²⁹

The life of the believer is marked by the struggle between the two contradictory realities: their salutary relationship with God, in which they recognise themselves as saved, is constantly undermined by the image of the devil, which is in direct contradiction to this trust. This sinful existence manifests itself in the life of men and women in different ways. On the one hand, it is present in anxiety and despair, which Luther described in the *Genesis lectures*. In this life, men and women are therefore permanently dependent on having the good news of the gospel proclaimed, in word and sacrament. But sin is also expressed in a certain use of reason, in the desire to justify oneself and thereby to negate one's existential dependence on God and one's created and fallen nature. This tug-of-war between the image of God and the image of the devil is a parallel to Luther's central claim of justification by grace, from which humans according to Luther emerge as justified and sinful – "*simul iustus et peccator*" in its Latin expression.³⁰

27 LW 1:64.

28 Steiger, *Fünf Zentralthemen der Theologie Luthers und seiner Erben*, 117.

29 LW 34:140.

30 Steiger, *Fünf Zentralthemen der Theologie Luthers und seiner Erben*, 113.

Human reason in its striving for self-justification needs admonition in order to stay aware of the limits of its intellectual capacities. Otherwise it runs the risk of losing itself in triumphalism, self-glorification and despair. The challenge of Luther's anthropology is its demand not to use the earthly reality as a yardstick for human self-understanding. Instead, it exhorts them to face the paradox that they and their fellow creatures are deeply unfree, corrupted and in need of redemption, notwithstanding all earthly successes and achievements.³¹ Christians find consolation and hope in Jesus Christ as well as an orientation for their moral life. But they cannot correspond to that frame of orientation by only the means of human reason for the latter is deprived of its powers as a result of the original sin. Humankind has experienced an existential change in Jesus Christ, which Luther describes as a "joyful exchange."³² Their sin is absorbed by the sinlessness of Jesus Christ, the only true image of God. In him God has reconnected with humans. If humans believe in this act of deliverance, they are no longer sinners, but sinners and justified at the same time.

4 Human Body and Sexuality

So far, we have studied the consequences of *imago Dei* for the human soul and reason. Now we move on to the question whether the idea of the image of God also has a meaning for men and women as physical and sexual beings. Here we can refer to the most recent research on Luther's theology, given that the 2017 anniversary of the Reformation stirred interest in Luther's attitude towards the body and human sexuality, and some of the new insights brought about by this recent research are pertinent for the question of Luther's interpretation of the *imago* as well.

It is the merit of the Australian historian Lyndal Roper to have drawn attention to the way in which the character of Luther is depicted in Protestant iconography.³³ Roper points to the fact that the representation of his large and ample body was particularly well received by his contemporaries and later generations. This massive body, which has been immortalised by Protestants on countless images and statues presenting power and paternity, is at the same time a counter-program to the representations of Catholic saints and

³¹ Wald, *Luthers Anthropologie im Spiegel seiner Biographie*, 115.

³² Martin Luther, "Von der Freyheit eynisz Christen menschen," in WA 7,20–38, here 7,25,34.

³³ Lyndal Roper, *Der feiste Doktor: Luther, sein Körper und seine Biographen*, trans. Karin Würdemann (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012); see also Lyndal Roper, "Martin Luther's Body. The 'Stout Doctor' and His Biographers," *American Historical Review* 115/2 (April 2010): 350–84.

theologians honouring the ideal of asceticism. Luther's well-nourished body seems to convey a message of its own that is intimately linked to Lutheranism. But can this appreciation of bodily aspects also be found in the reformer's theology itself, and is there any impact on the topic of the *imago Dei*? As we have shown above, Luther proceeds to an extension of the idea that the image of God is lost by saying that the human soul as a whole is corrupted by sin. Now what is his point of view concerning the human body and, in a wider perspective, human sexuality?

In Luther's writings, there is more than one indication that the human body is also a field of experience where the sinful and at the same time justified existence before God is lived out. Eating, drinking, digestion and sexuality are frequently mentioned. Luther is also particularly creative when it comes to inventing bodily metaphors or gross insults to defame his opponents or to illustrate the fight against the devil. Numerous examples can be found: If the devil should appear at night to destabilise the Christian's trust and resists theological arguments, Luther advises driving out the devil with a loud fart. And if the devil should use times of melancholy to weaken the faith – a situation that Wittenberg's reformer knew only too well – he recommends eating and drinking well, and even looking for beautiful girls as a reliable remedy for chasing out the devil.³⁴ The historian Lyndal Roper is sure that she has detected in Luther an extraordinary openness to the carnal and a positive attitude towards all aspects of the body.³⁵ But Roper's theses did not go unchallenged and led to a lively discussion, demonstrating that this aspect of Lutheran anthropology and the supposedly positive view of the reformer on the human body requires more research.³⁶ In order to point out some crucial aspects, we turn once again to Luther's *Genesis Lectures*, a book that provides numerous insights also on this topic.

First, it is clear that Luther's existential and universal conception of the Fall prevents a one-sided condemnation of the body. If sin dominates all humankind and the human being as a whole, neither body nor spirit is free. But Luther goes one step further and applies this perspective to the judgment of human sexuality where the sharp dialectic between the status of the human being before and after the Fall also has an effect. For him, it is clear that the original materiality of the body has been judged good by God himself. Following this

34 Roper, *Der feiste Doktor*, 58–59.

35 Roper, *Der feiste Doktor*, 77.

36 Ute Gause, "Reformation als Entdeckung von Leiblichkeit?," in *Die Entdeckung des Individuums: Wie die Reformation die Moderne geprägt hat*, ed. Annette Kurschus and Vicco von Bülow (Bielefeld: Luther Verlag, 2017), 123–33.

idea, Luther insists on God's will in creating the human being as a sexual being who has been ordered to reproduce. For Luther, therefore, until the Fall, human sexuality is in harmony with God's intentions. However, the Fall changes everything, because from then on sexuality is no longer experienced in the image of God but in the image of sin, that is, full of corrupted and voluptuous impulses. In this harsh conception of sexuality, Luther is once again close to Augustine. He writes in the *Genesis Lectures*:

But after the Fall death crept like leprosy into all our perceptive powers, so that with our intellect we cannot even understand that image. Adam would not have known his Eve except in the most unembarrassed attitude toward God, with a will obedient to God, and without any evil thought. Now, after sin, we all know how great passion is in the flesh which is not only passionate in its desire but also in its disgust after it has acquired what it wanted.³⁷

But since it corresponds to God's will that a man should have a wife and vice versa, there truly exists an appropriate way of life where human beings are less subject to the sinful aspects of sexuality after the Fall: Luther finds this way of life in marriage, as God intended for Adam and Eve and thus for every man and woman. Interestingly, celibacy is not the appropriate way to tame a corrupted sexuality. According to Luther and other reformers, the Catholic Church harms itself by imposing celibacy.³⁸ The Pope has no legitimacy, according to Luther, to impose celibacy upon priests, monks and nuns because it openly contradicts the will of God.³⁹ In accepting the marriage of pastors, the Reformation churches have thus opted for the way God had willed to limit sin.

But even marriage cannot completely eradicate corrupted desires, and the power of sin remains a challenge, as Luther must admit:

What in all nature is nobler than the work of procreation? This work was assigned by God neither to the eyes nor to the mouth, which we regard as the more honourable parts of the body, but to that part which sin has taught us to call the pudendum and to cover lest it be seen. Moreover, although in the innocent nature the entire work of procreation would

37 LW 1:62.

38 Celibacy pushes priests into cohabitation and endangers public safety because even honorable women and girls are threatened by the harassment of priests. In: Ute Gause, "Durchsetzung neuer Männlichkeit: Ehe und Reformation," *Evangelische Theologie* 73/5 (2013): 334–36.

39 LW 1:239.

have been most holy and most pure, after sin the leprosy of lust has made its way into this part of the body. Hence those who live outside the married state burn most shamefully. And unless those who live in the married state restrain their passions and carefully guard their relations with each other, they encounter all sorts of temptations.⁴⁰

Regarding the last paragraph, it can be said that Luther has a relatively relaxed approach to the human body, in the sense that he expresses himself openly about bodily needs, which he also presents as being in accordance with God's will. The recent study by Lyndal Roper points out some of Luther's more than surprising interpretations concerning bodily aspects, such as his understanding of good digestion as a sign of God's victory over the devil.⁴¹ The fact that Lutheran anthropology recognises sexuality as a basic human need in accordance with the will of God – including for priests – is a considerable step forward in emancipating men and woman from a negative perspective towards all forms of sexuality. However, the representation of the body is not completely positive and its appreciation clearly has limits, when the body appears – beside the mind – as another space corrupted by sin. Therefore, Luther's perspective on the body and on sexuality is rather ambivalent, and sometimes even clearly negative, as can be seen in the last quote from the *Genesis Lectures*. Against the background of the theme of the image of God, which had been limited for centuries to the capacities of the human spirit, the theological change introduced by the Reformation nevertheless becomes clear: Physical processes, even the most uncontrollable ones, are recognised and valued as being part of creation and are integrated into the theology of the image of God alongside spirit and reason. Nevertheless, this extension of the image of God does not mean any one-sided appreciation or even divinisation either of the human body or of the intellect and mind. For just as Luther denies that human reason is exclusively a mirror of the *imago Dei* and thus represents a possibility for men and women to recognise God and to do justice to him, the human body in its physical functions is also not exclusively turned towards God, but carries the shadow of corruptness. Therefore, on the redemptive journey to the restoration of the image of God, the human being is permanently challenged physically and mentally, and, according to God's will and its own spiritual attitude, experiences both God's grace and distance.

⁴⁰ LW 1:167–68.

⁴¹ Roper, *Der feiste Doktor*, 57.

5 Interconfessional Insights

At the colloquium in Geneva and Chambésy the anthropology of Martin Luther was contrasted with contemporary Orthodox voices. Kallistos Ware presented an interpretation of the idea of the image of God. In his contribution, Kallistos Ware takes up many elements of classical Orthodox anthropology and describes the human condition in four major sections: relationship, growth, self-awareness and freedom. Interestingly, his argumentation is based not only on the patristic tradition, but also on examples from philosophy and especially psychology. He points out that “as heirs to the living tradition of the Fathers, we have our own agenda, and we are not to allow the secular environment to set the agenda for us.”⁴² On the other hand he uses secular examples to support the theological argumentation. His contribution culminates in the statement: “The human person is the crown and fulfilment of the divine creation – microcosm and mediator, priest of the cosmos, God’s royal image.”⁴³ Bearing in mind what has been said about Luther’s anthropology so far, we can already see in this quotation clear differences between the two positions. These we will now examine in detail and compare Ware’s contribution to the position of Martin Luther. Is this comparison meaningful?

Before comparing the two positions, it is necessary to clarify some of the preconditions: It is not surprising that the comparison reveals numerous differences, but there is a danger of proceeding anachronistically. After all, probably the greatest difference between Luther and Ware is not in the area of dogmatics, but rather in the spirit of the times that the two positions represent. Kallistos Ware’s contribution is clearly influenced by the philosophical ideas of the modern age and contains subjectivist and psychologising elements, as well as insights from Judaism. Luther’s theological discourse bears the hallmarks of the confessional age with its strong polemics against theological opponents, and it necessarily differs fundamentally from a contribution from the 21st century.

Ecumenical development also needs to be taken into account. Orthodox and Lutherans have been engaged in ecumenical dialogue for some time, and have become familiar with each other’s theological style, which has an effect how contradictory views are exchanged. Lutheran-Orthodox conferences on anthropology have already been held in the past and the theme of *imago Dei*

⁴² See Ware, below, 49.

⁴³ See below, 62.

has also been discussed there.⁴⁴ However, these discussions differ from the comparison of Ware and Luther insofar as they focused on contemporary theological positions. This is all the more significant because not only has the spirit of the times evolved as well as certain scientific paradigms, but also the anthropological positions are no longer the same as they were 500 years ago. It might therefore seem more appropriate not to compare Luther's position with Ware's, but to contrast the latter with a contemporary Lutheran position. Recent developments in Protestant theology may offer better prospects for finding a common ground between Lutherans and Orthodox in the question of *imago Dei*. On the other hand, the comparison with Luther points out some fundamental differences with the Orthodox anthropology and show where Luther's harsh demarcation from the theology of his predecessors is still of relevance for today.

We will therefore first point out the most important differences in the anthropology of Ware and Luther. From there, of course, the recent development of a theology of *imago Dei* in the Protestant theology must also be taken into account. But since its detailed presentation cannot be given in the context of this article, we will conclude by pointing out only one important development and its possible potential for the future Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue.

5.1 *Remaining Differences*

Let us recapitulate the most fundamental points in which Luther differs from the preceding theological tradition: 1. Luther does not follow the distinction between *imago* and *similitudo*; 2. Unlike his predecessors he rejects the idea that the *imago Dei* has been preserved in men and woman after the Fall; 3. Consequently, for Luther the *imago Dei* cannot be identified with certain human capacities that are available to him to come closer to God by his own efforts. How do these theological decisions relate to the position of Kallistos Ware?

Regarding the distinction between *imago* and *similitudo* supported by the majority of but not by all the Church Fathers, Ware quite rightly refers to "the wide variety in the Patristic understanding of personhood."⁴⁵ However, this

44 Kirchliches Außenamt, ed., *Das Bild vom Menschen in Orthodoxie und Protestantismus. Drittes Theologisches Gespräch zwischen dem Ökumenischen Patriarchat und der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland vom 2. bis 5. Oktober 1973 in Chambésy/Schweiz*, Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 26 (Korntal bei Stuttgart: Evangelischer Missionsverlag, 1974); Metropolit Serafim von Deutschland, Zentral- und Nordeuropa, Hermann Schoenauer, and Jürgen Henkel, eds., *"Was ist der Mensch?" Theologische Anthropologie – ein lutherisch-orthodoxer Dialog* (Hermannstadt/Bonn: Schiller Verlag, 2013).

45 Ware, below, 56.

point does not merely address the philological exegesis of Gen 1:26, but rather the resulting consequences, namely a quasi-naturalistic disposition that men and women are called to perfect in life in order to achieve their humanity.

Examining Ware's contribution in this regard, it becomes clear that the dynamics of divinisation (*theosis*) based on the distinction *similitudo/imago*, is still a highly inspiring and productive idea for Orthodox anthropology. The idea of a trinitarian image of God in human beings, already so important for Augustine, is also found in modern Orthodox anthropology, as is the idea of perfection. Ware argues:

We have God at the innermost center of our existence. Human beings cannot be understood apart from divine being, for the divine is the determining element in our humanity. [...]

To be created in the image means that we are created for the fellowship and communion with God, and if we repudiate that fellowship and communion, we are denying our own true self. [...]

We humans are called to reproduce on earth the perichoresis (interchange of mutual love) that unites the three members of the Holy Trinity in heaven. [...] To be authentic human persons "in the image," therefore, we must reflect on [...] "the ethos of Trinitarian communion." [...] God is solidarity, exchange, mutual gift; so also, is human personhood. [...] Because as an Orthodox Christian I believe in a God who is Trinity, therefore *I need you in order to be myself*. [...] Personhood is always interpersonal and there can be no "I" without a Thou. [...] The whole purpose of our life on earth is that we each develop from an individual into a person, and it is precisely communion after the likeness of the Trinity that distinguishes the second from the first.⁴⁶

Created in the image of the Trinity, human beings must necessarily live in communion and solidarity in order to realise their personhood. In classical Orthodox thought, the personhood of the human being is conceived through analogy to the three persons distinguished by their different relationships. Interestingly, in Ware this idea is linked to philosophical personalism and modern psychological thought that both conceive humans as social beings. Ware's contribution thus proves to be compatible with 21st century discourse.

The Trinity as a social and ecclesial model has proved to be extremely fruitful, not least through the contribution of John Zizioulas, especially for the worldwide ecumenical movement, because the trinitarian structure is also

⁴⁶ Ware, below, 50–53.

important for the ecumenical model of *koinonia*/communion.⁴⁷ John Zizioulas describes the idea of personhood thus:

The eternal survival of the person as a unique, unrepeatable and free “hypostasis,” as loving and being loved, constitutes the quintessence of salvation, the bringing of the Gospel to man. In the language of the Fathers this is called “divinization” (*theosis*), which means participation not in the nature or substance of God, but in His personal existence. The goal of salvation is that the personal life which is realized in God should also be realized on the level of human existence. Consequently, salvation is identified with the realization of personhood in man.⁴⁸

Before turning to the many differences, let us use this quote from Jean Zizioulas to signal an important common ground: modern Orthodox anthropology, like Luther, has an ontology of relation when determining the nature of humans. In the same way as Luther, Zizioulas’ thinking makes it evident that soteriology is situated within the anthropological framework. For Zizioulas, as for Luther, the salvation of human beings from sin means that human relationship with God is restored and thus allows them to experience the true quality of humanity.

Nevertheless, the idea of a divine structure providing human beings with a compass to shape their social environment is not compatible with Luther’s perspective. Luther points to the fact that men and women have irretrievably lost the image of God within themselves. Moreover, they do not have the intellectual capacities to decide whether their deeds are in accordance with God’s will and justice or not. Only God alone can decide this question. Whenever attempting to do so, humans go astray, and fall prey to overestimation and self-justification, which according to Luther are expressions of sin.

The fact that for the Orthodox the promise of salvation goes along with a moral imperative is likewise suspicious from Luther’s point of view. If salvation – as in Ware’s quotation above – depends on whether or not humans at the level of their humanity – that is to say, in moral decisions – fulfil the model of the Trinity, the salvation does not come by grace alone but also depends on human activity. Of course, Luther’s theology also has a social dimension, and also for him good works and behaviour towards fellow humans play a non-negligible role. Nevertheless, Luther and Ware think very differently when it comes to how and why the *imago Dei* is apparent in these works. For Ware, the *imago*

47 Robert D. Turner, “Foundations for John Zizioulas’ Approach to Ecclesial Community,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 78/4 (2002): 438–467, here 465.

48 John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 49–50.

is a divine disposition in men and women in which they try to correspond by works in the prospective of their "divinization." For Luther, human beings live in the eschatological hope of being redeemed by grace in Jesus Christ. The human works are a grateful reaction on this promised salvation.

In Ware's contribution we also find another aspect of traditional anthropology criticised by Luther, namely the idea of *imago Dei* manifested in human reason. Ware calls it the "self-awareness through the conscious mind."

As humans in the divine image, we do not merely live in the world, following our instincts; we reflect, and by virtue of this capacity for reflection we reshape and refashion the world endowing it with new meaning, giving the creation a voice and rendering it articulate in praise of God. [...] Without an attitude of joyful offering without gratitude and thanksgiving, I am not truly personal.⁴⁹

As we have shown, Luther does not reject the role of reason per se, although "under the power of the devil,"⁵⁰ per se, but recognises its capacity within the earthly reality. However, he denies that human reason and works could lead to divine salvation. This also applies to ecclesiology. For Luther, only Christ is the head of the Church and he offers himself in word and sacrament, without human cooperation. Luther would therefore reject Orthodox statements such as the following that connect the *imago* with the role of the church and making *theosis* depending on the ecclesial structure:

The ontological unity of humanity finds its fullest possible manifestation in the ecclesial community, in the church as the body of Christ and the kingdom of God on earth. In the eschatological-soteriological perspective of being God by grace, of becoming similar to God, man returns to himself – naturally on a new level of existence, because that is his real being in his transcendence and theonomy. Cleansing the image of God from the mud of sin and preserving it, man receives his uniqueness, the uniqueness of his union with God, realised communally in the spiritual unity of the Church as Eucharistic, blessed-eschatological and soteriological community. Becoming like the Creator, man transcends the limitations of his nature and becomes the perfect inhabitant of the heavenly Jerusalem.⁵¹

49 See Ware, below, 58.

50 LW 1:63.

51 Ina Merdjanova, "Das Bild Gottes im Menschen. Die orthodoxe Anthropologie als Anthropoziee," *Orthodoxes Forum* 12/2 (1998): 87–100, here 96.

This quotation shows humans as actors in the cleansing from sin and thereby also displays a position – contradicting that of Luther – of humans as co-workers within the process of salvation. In the Orthodox view, there is no contradiction between the fact that the salvation of humans is by grace and by their own participation at the same time. Interestingly, Kallistos Ware speaks of “cooperation with God’s grace”⁵² and does not mention in his contribution the term of “*synergeia*” that usually denotes this highly controversial aspect in conversation with Protestants.⁵³

A characteristic that Protestants often find disconcerting in Orthodox anthropology is the predominant concentration on the “new man in Christ, who since the incarnation of God is the only human reality.”⁵⁴ Less attention is paid on the Orthodox side to the God-forsaken, broken human being in need of salvation, whose reality is so important for Luther’s theology. In the interpretation of *imago Dei*, the Orthodox interest is not in “what equates man with creation, but in what distinguishes him from the cosmos and connects him with the Creator.”⁵⁵

This predominantly optimistic view of the human being created and saved by God can also be observed in Ware, as when he says that “the worst thing that the Evil Urge can achieve is to make someone forget that he is the child of a king.”⁵⁶ With regard to the human being who has been saved, Luther seems to even surpass Orthodoxy at this point, in so far as he is not afraid to call the Christian a “king.”⁵⁷ But that is not the basis of his anthropology. Luther praises the redeemed life only in the tension of his narrative-theological approach, which starts with human sin and unredeemedness. Luther’s anthropology is linked to his theology of sin and judgment, in which the Fall of Adam and Eve is the decisive moment. Luther could never support Ware’s statement that “the Fall is to be viewed not as a willful lapse from an unimaginable height of wisdom and glory but in more compassionate terms, as a failure to grow in the right way.”⁵⁸

52 Ware, below, 61.

53 Kirchliches Außenamt, *Das Bild vom Menschen*, 106.

54 Friedrich Heyer, “Orthodoxe Anthropologie der Gegenwart in der Sicht eines evangelischen Theologen,” in *Das Bild vom Menschen*, ed. Kirchliches Außenamt, Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 26 (Korntal bei Stuttgart: Evangelischer Missionsverlag, 1974), 31–43, here 34.

55 Merdjanova, “Das Bild Gottes im Menschen,” 90–91.

56 Ware, below, 61.

57 Luther, “Von der Freyheyt eynisz Christen menschen,” in *WA* 7, 27.

58 Ware, below, 57.

While Ware has the divine potential of humans in mind, Luther speaks of the sinner who has completely lost their image of God and whose attempts to reorient themselves by means of their own reason fail and end in complete entanglement and disorientation. In this context it is remarkable how differently Luther and Ware take up the theme of freedom. For Ware, freedom, like reason, is an element of the image of God in humans: "Yet despite every limitation, our human liberty continues to be a genuine reflection of the divine Trinitarian liberty" and "we are never to lose sight of this royal liberty that is our birth right as persons in God's image." Consequently, Ware also understands freedom essentially as "freedom to," in other words as the possibility to make moral decisions freely and to promote or destroy one's own salvation. Furthermore, for Ware freedom is the source of the realisation of human uniqueness and diversity – a thought that is particularly compatible with modern individualism.

The idea of freedom also plays an enormous role in Luther's theology. But unlike the Orthodox tradition, Luther emphasises more strongly the "freedom from," at least when it comes to the soteriological relationship between God and humans. In the world men and woman do not exercise God's freedom, they do not imitate it, do not try to become more divine by exercising their creative faculties. Instead, humans have been "liberated" themselves, in the first place, liberated from the burden of their persistent sin and thus been enrolled in a liberation process which they themselves cannot direct. For Luther, the act of liberation proves once again what has been already attested to in the account of Creation, namely, that the human being is deeply dependent on God, and that his humanity comes out most clearly when they acknowledge this existential dependence and does not try to escape from it. Luther also described the earthly works of men and women as "free."⁵⁹ For him, however, freedom consists in the fact that humans are freed from caring for themselves and the pressure to redeem themselves through good works, since God already redeems him by grace. Humans free acts are acts of love and obedience. The enthusiasm shown by Ware in several places about the "inexhaustible variety"⁶⁰ of possibilities in life as a mirror of God's abundance is foreign to Luther's thought. From Luther's point of view, one would have to ask critically here, whether there is a criterion, which of the numerous possibilities realised in the life of a human being were actually part of his *theosis* and which are to be attributed only to human vanity or hedonism?

59 Luther, "Von der Freyheyte eynisz Christen menschen," in *WA* 7,31.

60 Ware, below, 49.

5.2 *Possibilities for Dialogue*

The contradictions between Orthodox and Lutheran anthropology are striking as long as one follows Luther and considers original sin as the decisive paradigm in the interpretation of *imago Dei*. This way of thinking cannot be connected to Orthodox anthropology and the idea of *theosis*, because Luther's identification of the *imago Dei* with the lost original state of humans before the Fall simply makes it impossible to connect to the Orthodox idea of perfecting humans' divine dispositions in this life. Luther's dialectical interpretation, according to which the image of God is on the one hand definitely lost to human reality and on the other hand definitely restored to the believer in Jesus Christ as foreign righteousness (2 Cor 3:18), leaves no room for the idea of a progressive redemption in which the human being participates themselves. For the Orthodox, on the other hand, there seems to be no alternative to a processual, dynamic way of thinking, if the idea of divinisation is not to be abandoned.

It is the case, however, that Protestant theology has developed since Luther's time and has adopted influences from modern philosophical thinking. Could this perhaps lead theologians to a new agreement or at least invite them to a dialogue? At the conclusion of this article, we want to pursue this reflection and show one example that challenges the seemingly insurmountable contradiction.

As early as 1979, the German Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg put forward the thesis that the understanding of *imago Dei* in Protestant theology had changed since Luther. In his view, the harsh rejection of a possible orientation of human action according to Gen 1:26 had not been shared by all reformers even during Luther's lifetime.⁶¹ But it was only with the Enlightenment and under the influence of humanism that, according to Pannenberg, a new interpretation of the *imago Dei* gained influence: Pannenberg shows that Johann Gottfried Herder brought together various philosophical and theological strands of thinking at the end of the 18th century, thereby introducing a new way of looking at things. Herder understands the *imago Dei* as the "vocation" (*Bestimmung*) of the human being to humanity and development. This originally philosophical idea, which is unmistakably rooted in the attitude of the Enlightenment, was then appropriated and further developed by Protestant theology:

61 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Gottebenbildlichkeit als Bestimmung des Menschen in der neueren Theologiegeschichte* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1979), 3–23, here 10; John Calvin, *Institutio Religionis Christianae*, vol. 1, 15, 4.

If the image of God in man is only realised in Christ, then it cannot have already been present in Adam, unless as a disposition: it must then be understood as the divine vocation of man in the act of his creation. This point of view has [...] liberated theological anthropology from its attachment to the doctrine of original state and enabled to acquire an evolutionary image of man.⁶²

This evolutionary idea of humans as creatures of God created for a specific purpose is a frequent motif in contemporary Protestant anthropology. But even if the idea of humans as teleologic beings may have had its beginning in the theology of the Enlightenment, there are also other influences that make this approach plausible today. In 1960 and quite independently from the developments in theology, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in an article with the title "The image of God and the epic of man" understood the *imago Dei* as "promise" and tried to grasp its effect by associating it with the social and psychological phenomenon of "imagination":

The imagination has a metaphysical function which cannot be reduced to a simple projection of vital, unconscious, or repressed desires. The imagination has a prospective and explorative function in regard to the inherent possibilities of man [...] Every *real* conversion is first a revolution at the level of our directive images. By changing his imagination, man alters his existence.⁶³

Ricoeur concludes his article by asking the question whether God himself, in his promise in Gen 1:26, did not endow man with the idea of the *imago*, thus taking the risk of initiating a story that humans might or might not want to engage with. Thus associating the *imago Dei* with the idea of promise, imagination and – in a positive sense – utopia, Ricoeur has pointed to an approach that is followed by many theologians today.

If contemporary Protestant theology talks about the interpretation of *imago Dei*, it refers to the exploration of human reality initiated by this promise. In this way an existential dynamic is regained which could not find a place in Luther's approach. Philosophy of language comes into play here, understanding the act of creation and especially Gen 1:26 as a performative act of speech:

62 Pannenberg, *Gottesebenbildlichkeit als Bestimmung des Menschen in der neueren Theologiegeschichte*, 22.

63 Paul Ricoeur, "The Image of God and the Epic of Man," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 110–128, here 126–27.

to be in the image of God is a promise to men and women, and human existence has the purpose of exploring the scope of this promise. Under these conditions Protestant theology explicitly renounces ontological statements about the consequences of *imago Dei*, about the human character or its qualities: neither are humans the crown of creation, nor does *imago Dei* show itself in a human potential that can somehow be generally described or has to be brought to unfolding or perfection.⁶⁴ An important difference to Orthodox anthropology, which, as we saw, makes such statements, thus remains. By renouncing ontological elements, Protestant theologians wish to do justice to the biblical account, which also shows no sign of a clear definition about what is meant by *imago Dei*. Instead, Gen 1:26 is often read like the overture of a drama. This overture consists in the promise to men and women that they are “a creature according to God’s expressed will.”⁶⁵ What exactly humans are according to God’s will, however, can only be determined from inside the story that every man and woman experience with their Creator.⁶⁶ Theological anthropology cannot speak about the human being in an abstract or an universalist way. There is no question that Gen 1:26 is also associated with a task for humankind. This does not, however, consist in becoming more like God, but, on the contrary, in honouring God as Creator by doing God’s will, by constantly exploring the meaning of the *imago Dei* according to the situation and by expressing it in this way:

It is not those who hermeneutically squeeze out Gen 1:26 who will learn more about the image of God, but those who become aware of how often and in how many different ways in biblical texts, stories, instructions and prayers, people become aware of themselves and others; how they are created; when they discover what God considers them worthy of, even if they themselves are most surprised about it [...] If we ask what the creation of man in God’s image “means,” we will find an answer in places, where God’s expressed will is manifested on and with people – and remains hidden though to such an extent that people cannot usurp it.⁶⁷

64 Hans G. Ulrich, “Gottes Ebenbild und die Bedeutung von Menschenwürde in der christlichen Ethik,” in “Was ist der Mensch?” *Theologische Anthropologie – ein lutherisch-orthodoxer Dialog*, ed. Metropolit Serafim (Hermannstadt/Bonn: Schiller Verlag, 2013), 151–165, here 156.

65 Gerhard Sauter, *Das verborgene Leben. Eine theologische Anthropologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011), 59.

66 Ulrich, “Gottes Ebenbild und die Bedeutung von Menschenwürde in der christlichen Ethik,” 155.

67 Sauter, *Das verborgene Leben*, 80.

Humans have been considered worthy by God to be in his image, but what this means must always be brought up anew by theology. Thus, the break with Luther's anthropology described by Pannenberg is actually a change on a hermeneutical level and not a rejection of the Reformation convictions. Theological anthropology refrains from a normative discourse and understands humans as being called and being under God's permanent care. In God's promise, the *imago Dei* has always been preserved for humans. In Christ, it is God who has fulfilled humans' vocation, as Christ alone fully represents the *imago Dei*. From this twofold commitment of God to accompany humans' history, men and women gain the confidence to discover the dimension of *imago Dei* in their own lives and actions, without any obligation to be perfect.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Despite the recent developments, the idea of salvation by grace alone can be observed as a continuing motif in Protestant anthropology from Luther to our times: It is not through striving for achievement that human beings attain the *imago Dei*. According to the younger generation of Protestant theologians, men and woman explore the image of God as an existential dimension in their own life. The proper meaning of that image may reveal itself unexpectedly in actions and encounters as a gift from God and not as a result of their own efforts.

This position is not only a contemporary theological way of speaking within Protestant anthropology, but also builds a bridge to Orthodox perspectives, because the effect of the *imago Dei* in human reality has been rediscovered in the Protestant tradition. Thus, both traditions may agree that men and women live under a vocation and for a purpose that creates a dynamic of exploration affecting the human being as a whole. Despite the persisting differences about the possible divine character of human personhood and human action the door has been opened for a new discussion about the dynamics of human development and the criteria of ethical decision making.

68 Ulrich, "Gottes Ebenbild und die Bedeutung von Menschenwürde in der christlichen Ethik," 157.

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