

## In His *Image* ...? What's That?

### The Image of God

We have all, surely, read or heard many times the statement, in Genesis, that we're made 'in God's image'. This is an idea fundamental to Christianity and, I fancy (though I know little about modern Judaism) to the whole Judeo-Christian understanding of humankind. But what, exactly, does it mean, and how should we interpret it?

I have read an account that bases the value, and valuing, of individual people on the fact of having, within their essence, this *imago dei*; in particular, I recall the writings of a Christian embryologist, who outlines the various stages in human development from conception, and says that only in some later stage (I forget the exact technical description for the development stage in question – it might have been *blastocyst* – but not being a scientist, I would not have been able fully to comprehend it anyway) does a foetus acquire, or become 'stamped with', the image of God (and not before).

Only (in this account) at this stage, following this acquisition, does the nascent human person become a thing of infinite worth. Before this (you might have guessed what's coming) aborting the foetus (I prefer 'nascent human person') is quite justified, and not incompatible with Christian love, compassion for all, etc.

Reading that account made me think of the Image of God more than I might have done otherwise (being, myself, so totally without sympathy for the embryologist's kind of thinking – indeed, I would find it hard to acknowledge it as *Christian*). This is not unlike that thinking (by materialists, I'm sure) who suggest that foetuses (indeed, new-born humans) have no worth until they have developed cognition, in effect, are able to reason. But what, I ask, of those people who have lost those mental abilities through accident, dementia, or other sickness? Are they of no worth? Do not they (still?) hold the Image of God?

My answer is this: having thought for some time about this *imago dei*, I have concluded with the idea that we bear it as a *species* or race, not (or is it "not just"?) as *individuals*. This is what divides us (sharply, in my view) from other animals; we are like animals in many ways (more similar to some than to others). We, but not they, have reason, and self-awareness; perhaps that is what we share with God, and the thing which caused the one who inspired the first chapters of Genesis to try to explain it (as finite beings cannot understand, I would suggest, reality that is infinite, without the use of some this-worldly analogy) as being made in the *image* of God.

Of course, materialists will argue with this, suggesting that some animals have much intelligence, emotions, social urges, and thus, perhaps, self-awareness. I'm sceptical about this (as of most things). No doubt such persons will continue setting experiments which will be modern-day versions of those in which they got roomfuls of monkeys typing, trying to re-create the works of Shakespeare. They will be disappointed.

July 2018