

Tuesday, May 31, 2005

Is Man "Created in the Image of God"?

The Christian worldview claims that man is "created in the image of God." This teaching is first given in the Genesis story which tells of the creation of allegedly the first man, named Adam, who was created in the "image" of his maker, Yahweh. There is no tangible, extra-biblical evidence of this, such as photographs of both Adam and Yahweh which could be compared side by side, which could put to rest any disputes over this matter in the Christian's favor. So people who accept this claim do so on faith, that is, without supporting evidence. In spite of any confirming support, the supposition that man is "created in God's image" is reiterated as if it somehow explained certain phenomena that have proven philosophically difficult for many thinkers throughout history to explain and integrate, such as man's reasoning ability and concepts of value, good, purpose, etc. Thus we have another contentless religious expression intended to do much heavy lifting.

The apologetic value of the expression "the image of God" is its lack of clarity, its vagueness, its ambiguity and its imprecision. It is because this expression has no objective meaning that apologists can use it in such a wide variety of ways; it has no objective content and thus no obviously conflicting applications when doctrinally sloganeered as a kind of stop-gap. Its apologetic value is therefore its very meaninglessness - a conceptually referenceless putty that can assume virtually any shape impressed upon it, since it has no inherent shape of its own. Indeed, saying that "man was created in the image of God" makes no more sense than saying "Man was stencil-graphed in the JPEG of Geusha" or "Man was traced on the silhouette of Hoola." The only reason why people don't question the former is because they've been hearing it all their lives and are thus accustomed to its effect and prone to reacting to it as desired (namely by shutting down all further inquiry), even though its implications remain completely indefinite and unmeaningful. Moreover, cursory analysis of the notion of "the image of God" will show why it has no objective reference, and that the claim that man was "created in the image of God" consequently has no explanatory value and thus no valid apologetic use.

We should not be surprised, then, to find that apologists tend to have difficulty when pressed to explain precisely what they mean by "the image of God." Even simple and straightforward questions remain unanswered. For instance, what does it mean to say that something that is said to be invisible (cf. I Tim. 1:17) has an "image"? We usually tend to have in mind something visual - or at least understandable in terms of vision - when using the term "image." But something that is invisible doesn't have a visual image. So already we might suspect that the wrong term is being used here.

The Christian could not say, for instance, that man resembles the Christian god in that it has two arms and two legs, and walks upright, for these are bodily descriptions, and the Christian god is said not to have a body. John 4:24 says "God is a Spirit," and Luke 24:39 says "a spirit hath not flesh and bones." But man has flesh and bones, indeed a physical body. So in what sense does Christianity teach that man was "created in the image of God"?

Some Christians seem to think that man was "created in the image of God" in a "personal" sense. For instance, apologist Cornelius Van Til says, speaking of man as such, that "he is like God in that he is a personality." (*Christian Apologetics*, p. 40.) Here we must then ask: What is the defining characteristic of personality which serves as the common denominator to both the Christian god and man? It seems that this would reduce ultimately to consciousness, for man has consciousness, and Christians attribute consciousness to their god. For how could something be said to have personality if it did not first have consciousness?

But this raises some questions:

- Most if not all animals have consciousness, and yet it is only man which is said to be "created in the image of God." If the apologist admits that personality stems from or presumes consciousness, does he assume that animals other than human beings have no personality? If so, on what basis would he assume this? Most dog- and cat-owners would argue that their pets have distinct personalities. So something other than (or in addition to) mere consciousness must provide the distinguishing factor here. Believers might say that "spirit" is the distinguishing factor. But on further examination, such assertions prove unhelpful to clarifying what is meant by "the image of God" since the term 'spirit' remains just as indefinite and nebulous as the expression under consideration. One does not gain any mileage by explaining one ambiguous notion with another. Why say man has a "spirit" but animals do not? Again the apologist is confronted with Luke 24:39: "a spirit hath not flesh and bones," but man does undeniably.

- Also, what can we say about the fundamentally contradictory orientations to the objects of consciousness enjoyed by the Christian god

as opposed to man? In the case of man, the objects of consciousness hold primacy over his consciousness. That is, the objects he perceives remain what they are regardless of his wishes and imaginings. The function of man's consciousness is to be aware of objects and to identify them. But the consciousness of the Christian god, given Christianity's own description of it, is entirely and radically different from the nature of man's consciousness in this most fundamental regard. For according to what we gather from the bible, the objects of the Christian god's consciousness conform entirely to its wishes and imaginings. In fact, there would be no objects of the Christian god's consciousness if it did not first create them out of its wishes and imaginings, which reduces the claim that it is conscious to the fallacy of pure self-reference. At any rate, how could one say that man, for whose consciousness the objects hold metaphysical primacy, was "created in the image of God," whose consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over its objects? It is in this sense that the claim that man was "created in the image of God" amounts to the view that objectivity finds its source in subjectivism, but this is nonsensical. A rational orientation of consciousness does not find its basis in its contradiction.

Van Til also says that "[man] is therefore like God in everything in which a creature can be like God" (Ibid.). Again we are given nothing specific to go on here, just a vague generalization suggesting that there are ways in which that which is natural, finite, imperfect, non-omniscient, non-omnipotent, fallible, mortal, temporal, destructible, physical, biological and visible can be "like" that which is supernatural, infinite, perfect, omniscient, omnipotent, infallible, immortal, eternal, indestructible, non-physical, non-biological and invisible. This raises a question on the Christian god's ability to create. Could not the Christian god create a personality that is infinite, perfect, omniscient, omnipotent, infallible, immortal, eternal, indestructible, non-physical, non-biological and/or invisible? In this statement, Van Til apparently overlooked angels and demons. Are these not also created by the same Christian god, and yet are they not personal beings which have greater attributes and powers and are thus more "like" the Christian god than man? If man is the best that the Christian god could create, how could Christians turn around and say that their god is omnipotent? If we accept Van Til's statement, which fails to take into account Christian teaching about supernatural creatures like angels and demons, it would seem that the Christian god's expertise is in creating imperfection. Christians will likely want to point to the fall of Adam to account for man's imperfections. In other words, they want to blame the creature rather than the creator, even though the state of affairs is said to be precisely how the creator intends them to be. But even by pointing to the fall of Adam, Christians implicate their god as something less than what they claim it to be. For Adam would not have fallen had he been endowed with perfect judgment, for one who has perfect judgment does not judge erroneously and consequently come up short morally. Since, on Christianity's own story line, Adam could have only had imperfect judgment, those same premises necessarily imply that the Christian god is an imperfect creator, for a perfect creator does not create imperfection, by definition. Thus we uncover yet another inconsistency internal to Christian theism.

What other sense of "image" could the Christian have in mind when he says that "man was created in the image of God"?

Could he mean that man was "created in the image of God" in a *physical* sense? No, he could not mean this. While man is in fact physical, the Christian god is said to be non-physical - it is something *other than* physical (we are told only what it is not - we are not told what it is). Does it have arms and legs? Apparently it does and doesn't - sort of like the trinity: it's three but one. But Luke 24:39 and John 4:24 together strongly suggest that it could not be a physical image, and yet man is physical. If man is physical, how could one say that it bears the image of something that is non-physical? Unanswered questions abound.

"God's Intellectual Image"?

Could the Christian mean that man was "created in the image of God" in an intellectual sense? No, he could not mean this, for the Christian god is said to be omniscient and infallible. But man is neither of these. In fact, man needs reason *precisely because* he is neither omniscient nor infallible. Man needs reason to discover knowledge about reality (and without knowledge of reality he will not be able to live), and he needs reason to guide his mind, for it does not operate automatically. An omniscient, infallible being, however, has no such needs, and thus it would have neither need nor capacity for reason whatsoever. As it is described, if the Christian god existed, it would simply and automatically "just know" everything without effort and without any need to discover and/or validate new knowledge content (since there could be no new knowledge for it to discover and validate), and its infallibility would be equally automatic. A mind that is automatically always right would not have any need for a faculty which enabled it to discover and validate knowledge. So saying that man's reasoning ability is somehow "explained" by having been "created in the image of God" misses some enormous points.

But missing such points is common even with defenders of the Christian faith. For instance, in [his discussion with Zachary Moore](#), Christian pastor Gene Cook clearly ignores such vast and fundamental differences when he states that "part of being made in the image of God is the ability to reason." But do Christians give any reason to suppose this any more than that their ability to reason stems from having been created in the image of Allah, Geusha or Ripitornula? Indeed, to say that our reasoning ability comes from having been "created in the image of God" only results in making our faculty of reason all the more mysterious and thus incomprehensible; it sheds no light on how or why we reason or why we would need reason in the first place. Rather, it's just an empty faith claim void of content which consequently cannot be backed up by a rational appeal to fact, but which also cuts off an entire category of valid ideas from man's

consideration and understanding.

Cook goes on to say "God says 'come reason with me,' then we have a... we have reasonableness universally, that is, man reasons logically." All this because man was "created in the image of God," right? It obviously doesn't fly. For consider: How can a man reason with someone who thinks he's always right? Reasoning with others necessarily involves the potential for mutual discovery on the part of all parties involved. The ability to discover and validate new knowledge is preconditional to the use of reason, and crucial to reasoning with others. But an omniscient and infallible being would be incapable of discovering and validating new knowledge, since from its perspective there would be no such thing as new knowledge to begin with. Also, reasoning with others involves a two-way dialogue which consists of the consensual exchange of information. But with the Christian god there is no possibility of such dialogue; any "discourse" between man and the Christian god would be one way and only one way - from it to man. Moreover, reasoning with others is only possible if knowledge is hierarchically contextual, which is the result of discovery and validation of new knowledge on the basis of previously validated knowledge, which reason makes possible for man but which is impossible for an omniscient being. Such would not be the nature of the Christian god's knowledge, if it could be called that; its "knowledge" would not have a hierarchical structure for it could not have discovered and validated new knowledge by integrating it with previously validated knowledge for there would be no such thing as new knowledge for a being that somehow has all knowledge already. So again, on the Christian's own premises, man has an ability that an allegedly omnipotent deity could not itself have, and yet we are told that we are "created" in its image.

Cook tries to assert his way beyond such problems, as if he wasn't even aware of them, saying "since logic is an attribute of God, and we are made in His image, I now have a source for why I think logically." It's difficult to make sense of such statements, since they don't refer to anything that reduces to what we can discover and validate from what we can perceive. Cook makes it sound like he has some kind of uplink to his god's mind which thus serves as a "source" from which "logic" is downloaded into his finite, human mind so that he can use it for something his own god could not use it for, namely discovering and validating new knowledge. Additionally, the idea that "logic is an attribute of God" - something Cook asserts, but nowhere justifies - is nonsensical. Logic is not an "attribute" of entities, since logic is not a concrete. Indeed, we do not say that rocks are "logical" any more than we say that vinyl siding is. Rather, the term 'logic' refers to a conceptual method of organizing ideas in a way that exposes their inferential support, allowing a thinker to integrate new ideas with previously validated ideas and to reduce ideas to their perceptual basis. Thus ideas can be said to be logical or illogical; but such terms do not apply to the specific concretes to which those ideas ultimately refer but to principles that are derived from the axioms. But such misunderstandings as the one Cook offers here are to be expected from Christians, since their worldview does not teach an objective theory of concepts.

"God's Moral Image"?

Could the Christian mean that man was "created in the image of God" in a moral sense? The answer here is clearly no as well, because the Christian god wouldn't even need morality, while man does. This would be the case whether we consult the Christian's subjective (whim-based) morality, or the objective (reason-based) morality of the rational atheist. On the Christian model, morality consists of commandments which must be obeyed on pain of eternal punishment, and man's actions need to be commanded because thinking on his own (so-called "autonomous reasoning") is strictly prohibited and anathema to the mindset desired by religious leaders. Quite simply, the Christian view is that man is intellectually impotent (a remarkable creation, is he not?) and thus cannot figure out what is good or evil on his own. As [one Christian puts it](#), "As finite beings there's no way for us to know what's right unless our creator tells us." By contrast, the Christian god could hardly be said to have a need to be told by someone else what is good and what is evil, let alone any need to obey someone else's commands. Besides, those commands would have to come from some being that is somehow greater than the Christian god, but Christians wouldn't allow for the existence of such a being. So on Christianity's own conceptions, it's unlikely that the believer would say that his god would need morality, for saying that the Christian god needs morality would, on Christianity's own premises, be tantamount to saying that it could not guide itself autonomously and that it needs someone else's imperative direction.

Furthermore, on an objective model, morality consists of a set of rational principles which guides one's actions and choices. Man needs this because he needs to act in order to live; he cannot live by being inactive. But the Christian god is said to be immortal, eternal, indestructible, perfect and lacking nothing. Thus it could not be the case that the Christian god, were it to exist, would face the fundamental alternative that man faces, namely life vs. death. Man needs morality precisely because he faces such an alternative and because his actions are not automatic; he must choose to take those actions which make his life possible, and it is his nature as a biological organism and his environment which together dictate which actions will be pro-life as opposed to anti-life. Since the Christian god does not face such an alternative, it could not be said to have any need to act in the first place (remaining inactive would in no way hurt the Christian god), and thus it would have no need for a code of values which guides its actions. If such a being acts by choice, its choices and actions could be nothing but arbitrary.

Additionally, Greg Bahnsen's suggested resolution to the problem of evil, which he gives in his book *Always Ready* (cf. pp. 171-172),

makes it clear that the Christian god's nature is not moral in the sense that man's moral nature can and should be. Bahnsen frames the problem as follows:

1. GOD IS ALL-GOOD.
2. GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL.
3. EVIL EXISTS.

Bahnsen then suggests that the obvious tension among these premises is resolved by the following additional premise:

4. GOD HAS A MORALLY SUFFICIENT REASON FOR THE EVIL WHICH EXISTS.

While clearly resting his solution to the problem of evil on man's ignorance of the Christian god (for Bahnsen admits on page 172 of his book that the believer does not need to know what that "morally sufficient reason to allow evil" might be), Bahnsen makes it clear that his god chooses not to stand against evil with all that is in it. But men can (and some men do) choose to stand against evil with everything that is within them, thus morally distinguishing themselves from the Christian god in ways that it could not achieve, given such responses to the problem of evil. What Christianity ignores is the fact that moral character is something one chooses for himself, not something that is dispensed by invisible magic beings. Those who choose a moral character would reject any view that suggests that there is such a thing as "a morally sufficient reason" to allow evil or "a perfectly good reason for the human misery" (Ibid.) that results at the hands of evil-doers, for they would see this as a contradiction in terms. On a rational view, this would essentially amount to saying that there are moral reasons for allowing immoral actions, or pro-value reasons to allow anti-value actions. The idea that it is good to allow that which is opposed to the good, is, on rational premises, completely and unavoidably self-contradictory. Christians do not see this as a contradiction, for they have already divorced morality from values, and to the extent that they embrace values, they experience personal guilt, for values are profoundly selfish, and selfishness is anti-Christ by nature. As a man devoted to his own values, then, every Christian must necessarily view me as anti-Christ by my own chosen nature.

So on both the Christian and the objective models of morality, there are fundamental differences between man and the Christian god as Christianity has conceived of it. Consequently, saying that man is "created" in the Christian god's "moral image" ignores these fundamental distinctions, thus slighting both man and Christianity's teachings about the nature of its deity.

Man is biological, but the Christian god is not. So where does the "image" part come into play? Here Christianity draws a blank, and the believer is left in the darkness of its perennial cave. The coldness he experiences upon reading such words is not causeless; indeed, it is the result of his monstrous worldview.

Exposing Christian Absurdity:

The "image of God" is really an image projected against the blank screen of a desperate mind that seeks to evade reality and hopes to rationalize that evasion by submitting to an imaginary authority and by claiming that all human beings have a duty to do likewise. Such evasion is possible only when one rejects reason as his only means of knowledge. Indeed, we saw above that, according to the Christian view, man's mind is impotent, therefore his reason is likewise impotent. According to Christianity, man cannot figure things out for himself; rather, he needs to be told what is true, and he can only do what is "right" if he does so in obedience to someone's commandments.

In the case of all religious viewpoints, we learn of them - not from the being alleged to have authored these "truths" - but from other *men*, finite human beings who are just as fallible and ignorant as the rest of us. They call us "the damned" while they reserve for themselves the pretended privilege of numbering among "the chosen." As fallible men, religious leaders are just as prone to confusing their imaginations with what is real as anyone else, and more likely to do so since their religious teachings offer no guidance on objectively distinguishing between the one and the other. This opens up a chasm in the minds of the believer who invests religious anecdotes, which he reads in biblical literature, with images he selects from his memory of personal experiences and rearranges in his imagination to fit the descriptions depicting those anecdotes, thus making the religious stories he reads in the bible seem more real than they really are. There is no way to visualize the events described in the gospels, for instance, without fitting one's imagination to the scant details they supply. The believer has most leeway in filling in those details which are not specified in the stories. The more the believer invests the stories with his own imaginary content, the more real they become in his mind and the more incapable he becomes when it comes to distinguishing fact and fantasy. Here the image is all in the believer's mind, one invested with inputs he's gleaned from personal experiences and assembled according to anecdotal cues given in the narratives themselves. This is the real "image of God" - an entirely subjective construct encouraged in the religious literature itself.

In the final analysis, a grand reversal is suggested by the inescapable conclusion that the Christian god is created in man's imagination: those who imagine that there is a god, imagine a being modeled on man's nature but free of the constraints of that human nature at the same time. Herein resides the inherent contradiction that grounds the Christian god-belief, a contradiction which is exposed when the claim that man is "created in the image of God" is examined closely given what can be known of man, and what Christianity claims about its deity.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:30 PM](#)

4 Comments:

[Zachary Moore](#) said...

Another great installment. I mentioned during our conversation of 7/27/04 that "I think that the Creator is actually humanity, that God was actually created, or that the concept of God was created by humanity."

[June 01, 2005 8:55 AM](#)

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

Looks like Zach beat me to the comments section ;)

Nice post Dawson! I like how you analyse the "reasoning" portion of the man/god/image problem. I never thought about that before. I mean, I've argued before about the nonspecificity of the "created in His image" claim, but I didn't have any specific refutations for when the Christian claims a "personality trait" as a "created in his image" property.

But it makes perfect sense. An infinite mind would have no need for the processes of reasoning, which of course as you said is a kind of "give-and-take" mental process.

With an entity who will shall ALWAYS be fulfilled and who ALREADY knows everything that is and everything that will happen, there are not many personality or mental-trait similarities available to back up the "created in his image" claim.

I think we can even take it a step further. We can claim that angels and even SATAN are closer to being "in God's image" than a human is.

We can even attack it from the other side (in reference to your "animals also have consciousness" statement) and contend that humans are created MORE in the image of apes or even lizards than in the image of God. For all these animals with brains have, like us, FINITE minds and they require the use of reason and give and take, for they do NOT know the future. So we can ask the Christian "if we are created in God's image, aren't we even MORE created in an apes image? And isn't SATAN created MORE in God's image than we are?"

Wow! Thanx Dawson for providing so much food for thought.

[June 01, 2005 9:24 AM](#)

[Francois Tremblay](#) said...

I admire Dawson's rigorous analysis of the topic, but IMHO this is way too much space and energy dedicated to such a pitiful topic.

I would also like to add that "God is rational" or "God is logical" is strictly impossible because there is nothing for God to reason or think logically about.

[June 01, 2005 12:53 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Thanks for your encouraging comments, everyone. I think this is a topic that has gotten very little attention in the literature, and even if it is, as Franc says, "way too much space and energy dedicated to such a pitiful topic," it will be available here for future reference

whenever an apologist pulls the "image of God" BS. And I think you're right, Aaron - given Christianity's own descriptions, how is man, a biological organism, more god-like than Satan, which is supernatural and able to possess human minds (like the Holy Spirit - only Christians call possession by the HS "indwelling" instead of possession)? Points like this simply serve to expose how disintegrated the believer's mind has to be in order for him to think any of these things are true. There is no logical relationship between any of the doctrinal positions in Christianity (it takes people like us who aren't confessionally invested in the religious devotional program to point these things out), so the Christian mind has no way to integrate all the positions he's told to affirm in any coherent manner. And we're told that Christianity is the only coherent worldview? They can't even keep their own story straight.

[June 02, 2005 6:27 AM](#)