

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON HUMAN DIGNITY

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to explore the theological foundation and expression of the concept of human dignity. Starting with the concept of *imago Dei* as the foundation for human dignity, and continuing with the expression of human dignity, namely, human being's place and role in creation, the argument will end with the affirmation of human dignity, namely, the aim of God's redemptive actions. The argument of this article has as its presupposition the fact that according with the theological revelation, human dignity is inherent to humankind. Therefore, the article is a plea for a personalist view of human dignity as opposed to a functionalist view of human dignity.

Keywords: *Human being, human dignity, theological reflection, creation, redemption.*

Introduction

In the preamble of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is affirmed the „inherent dignity” of all human beings that “is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”¹ Yet, the concept of human dignity has a long history. From ancient Greek philosophy to the modern philosophical thought, thinkers were connecting the concept of human dignity with human beings' uniqueness as a moral and spiritual being.²

If Andorno affirms that there is a distinction between inherent dignity (what we are as persons) and moral dignity (what we do),³ Johnson considers that in modern thought there could be distinguished two views

1 James R. Lewis, Carl Skutsch, *The Human Rights Encyclopedia*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, INC. 2001, p. 955.

2 Roberto Andorno, “Human Dignity and Human Rights” in H. ten Have & B. Gordijn (eds.), *Handbook of Global Bioethics*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2014, pp. 45-57, pp. 46-47.

3 Roberto Andorno, “Human Dignity and Human Rights” in H. ten Have & B. Gordijn (eds.), *Handbook of Global Bioethics...*, p. 45.

on human dignity, that he calls, the functionalist view (characteristic to the naturalists) and the personalist view (characteristic to theists).⁴ In describing and illustrating the diversity of angles of the functionalistic view, Johnson concludes that what all have in common is that “if one fails to earn the status of personhood, then one’s life is not to be particularly protected morally or legally.” From here Johnson argues the danger of the functionalist view, namely, that of the fact that “to the value of a person can easily be given a different ideological orientation,” that could legitimize atrocities and genocide,⁵ that the history of the twentieth is a vivid testimony.⁶

The personalist view, offers a different vision about the dignity of human beings. Johnson is affirming the fact that it is exactly this kind of view that offer a robust foundation for “medical care, human rights, humanitarian aid and personal safety, as it affirms the dignity of human being as being given by the fact that human being was created in the image of God.”⁷

The aim of this paper is to reflect on three dimensions that are vital for the contribution of the theological reflection on the inherent or personalist view about human dignity. The three dimensions are the divine design, the creation mandate, and the redemption aim. Therefore, starting with the divine intention in creation, and continuing with the mandate that God gave to human beings in creation, the article will then focus on the way human dignity is affirmed through the divine redemptive actions in history.

Imago Dei as the Basis for Human Dignity

When God created human being in the sixth day of creation, we are informed in the account of creation that, she was created in His image and

4 Thomas K. Johnson, *Is Human Dignity Earned or is Human Dignity a Gift? A Contribution of the Evangelical Faith to Human Rights Discourse*, Martin Bucer Seminar, 2019, p. 4.

5 Thomas K. Johnson, *Is Human Dignity Earned or is Human Dignity a Gift? A Contribution of the Evangelical Faith to Human Rights Discourse...*, p. 6.

6 Nikolai Berdiaev, *Destinul omului în lumea actuală (The Destiny of Man in the Actual World)*, ABC Dava, 1993, p. 29

7 Thomas K. Johnson, *Is Human Dignity Earned or is Human Dignity a Gift? A Contribution of the Evangelical Faith to Human Rights Discourse...*, pp. 7-8. Also, David Gooding and John Lennox, *Being Truly Human: The Limits of our Worth, Power, Freedom and Destiny*, Belfast, Myrtlefield House, 2018, p. 49.

according with His likeness (Gen 1:27). Reading the entire account of creation, one will observe that all things were created through the creative word of God. Human being was created differently, not only by word but also through the direct intervention of God, who “formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Gen 2:7).⁸ This differentiation expresses the uniqueness of human being created by God, amid entire creation. Theological reflection on the concept of *imago Dei*, animated the thinking of theologians in the entire history. For Karl Barth, human being as “the creature whose relation with God is revealed to us in the Word of God...is the central object of the theological doctrine of creation.”⁹

Moreover, theologians were clear in their affirmation that the entire creation has as its reason not God’s necessity, but God’s love, in which human being created in the image of God, was designed to participate.¹⁰ Or in the words of Jurgen Moltmann: ‘Creation is not a demonstration of his boundless power; it is the communication of his love, which knows neither premises nor preconditions...’¹¹

The dignity of human being is rooted in this uniqueness, given by the divine design of creation. Being in the image of God, is what differentiates human being from all the creation. As Jurgen Moltmann says: ‘As God’s *work*, creation is not essentially similar to the Creator; it is the expression of his will. But as *image*, men and women correspond to the Creator in their very essence, because in these created beings God corresponds to himself.’¹²

In describing the difference between image and likeness, Stăniloae explains it in the context of the Fall. For him the image cannot disappear, it being rather weakened because of the Fall. He describes the image of God in human being as being “the tendency towards God,” and the likeness as

8 Joseph Ratzinger, *Despre creație și cădere: La început Dumnezeu a creat. Consecințele credinței în creație. Omilii* (About Creation and Fall: In the Beginning God Created. The Consequences of Faith in Creation. Homilies), Târgu-Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2020, p. 58

9 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3: 2, Hendrickson Publishers, 2010, p. 3

10 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică* (Dogmatic Theology), vol. 1, București, IBM-BOR, 1996, pp. 226- 233.

11 Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, SCM Press Ltd, 1985, p. 76.

12 Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation...*, p. 77.

“the entire journey of the development of the image, through human will and the grace of God.”¹³

Therefore, the Fall was not destroying the image, it rather stopped the process of becoming according with the likeness of God. The dignity of human being is given by the fact, as Stăniloae argues, that the image of God in human being is that “ontological structure” that has the tendency towards communion with the supreme communion of the divine Persons.¹⁴ This ontological structure, affected by the Fall, is restored in its full capacity, through the incarnation of the Word of God, Who through His salvific ministry, makes possible the restart of the process of likeness of God for human being, who becomes in Christ the channel for the restoration of the entire creation through the work of the Spirit.¹⁵ Or in the words of Moltmann:

In his creative activity, God employs his inner, divine life. Consequently he also communicates his love to the creatures of that love. This gives human beings a share, not merely in the productivity of his will, but also in his ‘nature’ (II Peter 1.4). The beings who are created to be his image are also ‘of his race’; they are ‘his offspring’ (Acts 17.28f.). This suggests a fellowship with God which really does go beyond mere creatureliness, even if the expression, ‘emanation of the divine Being’ is an inappropriate way of describing it. To be God’s creature and his image means being more than merely a work of his hands. It means being actually ‘rooted’ in the creative ground of the divine life. This becomes especially clear if we understand creation pneumatologically, in the light of the Creator Spirit who dwells in his creation.¹⁶

The Place of Human Being in Creation as the Expression of Human Dignity

The above considerations lead to the second aspect that reveals the inherent human dignity¹⁷, that of his place in creation. Before the Fall, and the

13 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică...*, 1, pp. 272-273.

14 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică...*, 1, p. 280.

15 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologie Dogmatică...*, 1, pp. 279, 286.

16 Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation...*, p. 85

17 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Plea for Human Dignity”, *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, Vol. 1, No.1/2016, pp. 29-43.

account of creation, reveals that, human being was created with the unique role to have “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” (Gen 1:26).

Moreover, this dominion is materialized, according with the account of creation, by the transfer of authority from God towards human being in naming all the animals (Gen 2:19). In fact, the place of authority for human being, given by God reveals the fact that the entire creation was made for man. The fact that human being was created in the image of God and her place in creation are two realities that cannot be separated. As Cardinal Schoenborn states:

Affirming, as the Christian tradition does, that the world was created for man and with man in mind does not give us the ultimate reason for his dignity. The world was made for man, but man was made for God. The true “locus” of his dignity is to be sought in this unique designation of man, which makes him, in the midst of all other creatures, the living image of God.¹⁸

The second aspect of human beings’ role in creation is revealed in the same biblical account of creation. We are informed that is God’s design for human beings to be caretakers of the entire creation (Gen 2:15). In this quality, human being was designed to be God’s representative in creation. As part of creation a human being is the creation’s representative before God. And as such, human being is the intersection of two worlds.¹⁹ Or in the words of Jurgen Moltmann:

He is *imago mundi*. As microcosm the human being represents the macrocosm. As ‘image of the world’ he stands before God as the representative of all other creatures. He lives, speaks and acts on their behalf. Understood as *imago mundi*, human beings are priestly creations and eucharistic beings. They intercede before God for the community of creation. Understood as *imago Dei*, human beings are at the same time God’s proxy in the community of creation.

18 Christof Cardinal Schonborn, *Man, the Image of God: The Creation of Man as Good News*,

Apple Books, “San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2011, p.45.

19 Nikolai Berdiaev, *Sensul creației: Încercare de îndreptățire a omului (The Meaning of Creation: An Attempt to Justify Man)*, București, Humanitas, 1992, p. 69.

They represent his glory and his will. They intercede for God before the community of creation. In this sense they are God's representatives on earth.²⁰

Human Dignity in the Redemption's Aim

When one comes to the biblical doctrine of human being, there are three hypostases in which biblical account describes human being. First is, human being in the original state, before the Fall, second, the fallen human being, and third the redeemed human being.²¹ In the original state, human being was created in a twofold dependence. First, is the dependence on God, expressed in the fellowship of obedience. Karl Barth names the human being in fellowship with the creator, as „covenant-partner of God,” called to “participate in the history in which God is at work with and he with God,²²

This covenant initiated by God is „the internal basis of creation”, whilst creation is „the external basis of the covenant.”²³ It is this covenant in creation that is the beginning of a biblical trajectory that could be reconstituted through the elements of the covenants that God initiated in the history of God's people.²⁴ In fact, the initiation of covenants by God, are not only „the most striking decisive moments”²⁵ in the history of God's people, but they are “:the core of the Hebrew understanding of their relationship with God.”²⁶ Yet, in the Fall of human being, we have the picture of the fact that human being broke the covenant initiated by God.

The entire process of redemption has as its aim the restoration of this covenant. The first instance of this restoration is the new covenant

20 Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation...*, p. 190. Also, Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol 2, Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, p. 99.

21 Fred H. Klooser, “The Nature of Man,” in *Christian Faith and Modern Theology*, Carl F. H. Henry (Ed), Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971, pp. 50-153.

22 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3:1, p. 203.

23 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection with Introduction*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961, p. 151.

24 Daniel G. Oprean, *From Shalom to Koinonia: Toward a Theology of Communion*, București: Ed. Universitară, 2021, p. 16.

25 Gerhard Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, vol 1, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1975, p. 129.

26 William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology*, London: Paternoster Press, 1998, p. 85.

with Noah, after the Flood that was the manifestation of God's judgment for a alienated humanity (Gen 6:6-7). This covenant with Noah is the initiative of God for the restoration of the covenant with creation that was broken.²⁷ The covenant with Abraham, is the second stage on the trajectory of God's redemptive initiative towards human being. This covenant reveals the scope of God's redemption – the entire humankind (Gen 12:2-3).²⁸ The mosaic covenant, as the third stage on the trajectory of God's redemptive initiative, reveals the community in which redemption is appropriated – the people of God (Ex 19:5-6).²⁹ With the davidic covenant there is an advance on the trajectory of God's redemptive initiative, that of revealing the One that leads the process of redemption (2 Sam 7) – the eternal King of the Father.³⁰ And that leads to the ultimate stage of God's redemptive initiative, the New Covenant in His Son, Jesus Christ, prophesied in the book of Jeremiah and fulfilled in Christ event. If in Jeremiah's prophecy the New Covenant is something that people look to in future, in the Christ event the New Covenant is fulfilled. Therefore, Christ's birth is the introduction of the New Covenant and Christ's ministry is the establishing of the New Covenant.³¹

Apostle Paul as the earlier writer in the New Testaments, contrasts the two ways of living for human beings, namely, "in Adam" and "in Christ." (Ro. 5:12-20). Or in Barth's words: "Adam is the 'old' subject, the EGO of the man in the world... Christ is the 'new' subject, the EGO of the coming world."³²

For Paul being "in Adam" means to live as an old self that is not crucified and therefore to live as a slave of sin (Ro 6:6), living according with the sinful nature (Ro 8:5a), and being subject to death (Ro 8:6a). In contrast being "in Christ" means to live as an old self crucified with Christ (Ro

27 W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*. Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1984, p. 28.

28 Ronald S. Wallace, *Abraham: Genesis 12-23*, London, SPCK Press, 1981, p. 1.

29 Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997, p. 431.

30 Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology...*, p. 310.

31 Gerard Van Groningen, *From Creation to Consumation*, Iowa: Dordt College Press, 1996, p. 147.

32 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, London: Oxford University Press, 1933, p. 181. Also, Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace & Community*, Downers Grove, Illinois, Inter-Varsity Press, 2000, p. 92.

6:6), living according with the Spirit (Ro 8:5b), and being subject to life (Rom 8:6b).

In this context Paul develops what was called “the interchange in Christ.”³³ The main idea in this interchange says Hooker, is that “Christ became what we are in order that *in him*, we might become what he is.” Hooker observes Paul’s argument that in Christ identification with what we are, Christ became a curse (Gal 3:13) and was made sin (2 Cor. 5:21). She says: “Christ became a curse in order that a blessing might come to others; he was made sin in order that we might become the righteousness of God.”

Conclusions

It was the aim of this article to explore the theological foundation, expression and affirmation of human dignity as inherent truth. In the framework of the distinction between functionalist view on human dignity (that denies the fact that it is inherent), and the personalist view on human dignity (that affirms the fact that it is inherent), we started with the concept of *Imago Dei* as the foundation for human dignity. We have found that the theology of *Imago Dei* reveals the fact that *Imago Dei* is an ontological structure that differentiates human being from the rest of creation. It is also the unique tendency inherent in human being towards communion with God and with each other.

Then, we have found that human dignity as its expression in the place and role of human being in creation. Being created by God, to live in dependence of Him, human being was also placed in a web of interdependence with each other and with the created order. Therefore, the dignity of human being, is expressed in his double role, as the representative of God in creation, and as the representative of creation in front of God.

In the end, we have found that human dignity is affirmed in the aim of God’s redemptive actions. The process of redemption, whose trajectory is revealed on the coordinates of God’s covenantal initiatives, culminates in the redemptive ministry of God’s Son incarnated, in order to become the second Adam (as the Redeemer of the entire humankind,

33 Morna D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 13.

that reedeem the potential that thorough the Fall, the first Adam (as the representative of the entire humankind). Through His incarnation and life, Jesus Christ, becomes the representative of a transfigured humanity, in front of God, a humanity whose dignity was reaffirmed by Christ, thorough His redemption.

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