
On the Dignity of All Humans as Images of God

Par visu cilvēku cieņu Dieva tēlā

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The present article by *Dr. Klaus Kießling* points to seemingly simple question – evaluation of humans by use of stereotypes. Using vast references to the Biblical sources in both Old and Testaments dealing with creation and redemption of man, as well as documents of the Roman Catholic Church and well-known theologians, the author describes stereotypes as a special type of idolatry forbidden in the 2nd Commandment (“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image”). Human beings were created in God’s Image and Likeness, and that ontological dimension can’t be exhausted by use of stereotyped presumptions. The article describes humans as bearers of the mystery of life, created for freedom, oriented towards love, seeking for future and in need for advocates to become human – they seek for meaning and become blessed in this path.

Key words: *Imago Dei*, dignity of man, mystagogue.

Introduction

“Men are all criminals” – is the beginning of a popular song from the posse ‘Like it was once in May’ written in Berlin in 1913. “Men are all criminals” – this verse is cited, most of the time humorously, by women criticising male behaviour which confirms them in their view of men who they believe are all criminals. And the consequence of this image of men is that a woman should never put trust in a man. For those who believe in it: an image of men with consequences.

“Women are Better Diplomats” – is the title of a film produced in 1941, in which the niece of a casino director is meant to prevent the shutting down of the casino by the competent authority. “Women are better diplomats” – this sentence expresses the conviction that women pursue an aim with greater tactical skill, perhaps with more cleverness, perhaps with more subtlety than men. This image of women requires the deployment of women in difficult diplomatic missions. For those who believe in it: an image of women with consequences.

One of so many images of men, one of so many images of women – and nonetheless both are of such nature that they entail consequences which are obvious. Images of women, images of men, images of humans are worth dealing with them, in particular with a view to their consequences.

“You Shall Not Make For Yourself a Graven Image”

I also recall the famous caution: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image” (Ex. 20:4 and Deut. 5:8; *see* Deut. 27:15). Images can be a constraint, can nail someone down. When God was literally nailed down, God died on the cross. The ban on images in the Old Testament keeps a criticism alive that is not only targeted at images of God, but also at images of humans. For images can be so powerful that a human being assimilates more and more to this image and becomes less and less able to break free from it. So are images of humans not only dangerous to life when they take a shape which is opposed to human dignity? Are images of humans already hazardous as such, because they are a constraint, because they nail a person down?

Yet how then can Pope Paul VI write about the liberation through the Gospel that “it is therefore attached to a view of man which it can never sacrifice to the needs of any strategy, practice or short-term efficiency”, as we read in the 1975 publication “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” about the evangelisation of today’s world? And what is the sense of the claim made by the Latin American bishops four years later in Puebla: “The Christian view of man has to be revalued by us”? And how can political parties today make reference to a ‘Christian view of the human being’ in their programmes?

Some warn against any image of humankind, others warn against neglecting it – does this refer to the same image that the ones seek to destroy and the others uphold?

What should and has to be destroyed is an image of the human being that freezes certain contents and restrains, or even kills, life. However, a view of the human being that can provide orientation and maps out an open meaning should be upheld, as the ethicist Dietmar Mieth puts it. Statements on a Christian view of the human being do not aim to describe, to define, to determine. Such statements are promises regarding, and possibly striking, the humanly possible. Such meaning is open for changes and modifications – for example the image of women in the course of historic processes – and at the same time continuously presses ahead with the question of purpose.

In this regard the theological discussion about images, in particular about images of humankind, gets its strongest encouragement and legitimation by the fact that God himself reached unparalleled visibility by becoming man. According to the New Testament, the incarnated Lord is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). And doesn’t God’s incarnation mark the beginning of our own existence as human beings?

Against this backdrop I feel empowered to sketch an image of the human being from a theological point of view – in the sense of an open meaning that seeks to avoid the danger of predetermination, to which the ban on material representations continually points, while at the same time acknowledging that images of humans and incarnation are interwoven. This sketch shall consist of five brushstrokes that neither allow humans to be lowered to the level of beasts nor to be raised to a self-proclaimed deity – brushstrokes that let human dignity, the dignity of all human beings, shine, their inviolable human dignity, as the German Basic Law puts it.

After these brushstrokes I will contemplate consequences arising from this outline: What do people long for and who do they need to become humans, especially when affected in their inviolable human dignity?

Being Oriented Towards Meaning:

Women and Men as References to the Mystery of Life

The first brushstroke goes back to the first chapter of the Bible where we read: “And he said: Let us make Man to our image and likeness...” And God created man to his own image; to the image of God he created him; Male and female, he created them’ (Gen. 1:26f). And in the Book of Wisdom we read: “For God created man ... and he made him in the image of his own likeness” (Wisd. 2:23). So God creates man to his own image – while at the same time humans are not allowed to make for themselves an image of God. And yet the “image of God” or rather the “statue of God”, as an ancient oriental title of king, refers to God’s representation in the world. The Biblical text takes up this concept of the image of God, takes it out of the monarchy context and, in a certain manner, democratises it by converting the “image of God” into an anthropologic title which allows every human being, every woman and every man, to act as “images of God”, while conveying inalienable dignity to them. The inalienability of human dignity is underlined in what follows in the Book of Genesis for, even after the Fall of Man, man is described “as made to the image of God” (Gen. 9:6).

The term “to the image” highlights the differentness of creator and creature, but also their connectedness. This connectedness points to a human openness for areas that surpass the borders of the habitual, and ultimately to the mystery of human life which cannot be retained, which appears and absconds, which flashes up in borderline situations and disappears again. I would like to recall the experience of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus: the moment they recognise that their companion is the Risen Lord, he withdraws from them: “And their eyes were opened, and they recognised him. And he vanished from their eyes” (Lk. 24:31).

On their way, however, they were so desperate that “their eyes were restrained, so they would not recognise him” (Lk. 24:16). Even today people often have their eyes restrained, in situations the meaning of which can only be grasped with hindsight – if at all. God lets himself be seen only afterwards and becomes visible retrospectively when we look back at the tracks of our paths. So the Lord says to Moses: “And when my glory will cross over, I will set you in a cleft of the rock, and I will protect you with my right hand, until I pass by. And I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back. But my face you are not able to see” (Ex. 33:22f). Only when humans look back, what appeared to be a coincidence begins to make sense. In the face of their limits, humans are open for the mystery of their lives. As women and men, they have to rely on “hindsight”, while at the same time they are – and here I subscribe to what the Jesuit Karl Rahner postulated – living references to the mystery of God.

Being Oriented Towards Freedom:

Humans as Released Creatures

Creativeness, giving birth to biological children and brainchildren, requires freedom in the first place, open spaces, playing fields that enable people to play and give shape. Fear can be generated where these open spaces are threatened to become constricted. When people seek to become humans, they will also try to widen such spaces again. Yet not only massive and sudden constrictions, also the nearly unlimited expansion of human freedom can appear to be too much. Humans look for security, even for limits, that give them orientation.

One or the other departure into freedom has come to a halt because people on their way to the Promised Land rather wished to return to the proverbial bowls of meat in the land of Egypt (Ex. 16:3). And nonetheless humans are free creatures, set free to shape their freedom.

Let us not forget that in the New Testament Jesus asks the paralytic: “Do you want to be healed?” (Jn. 5:6). Apparently, such a solution out of paralysis, a way towards salvation and healing, cannot be forced upon someone; such an option requires the free will to adopt change: Jesus does not impose it.

Being oriented towards love: Humans as fellow human beings

Biblically, loving our neighbours really means loving those next to us. In the Judgement of the Nations (Mt. 25:31-46), Jesus Christ closely relates his presence in history to the poor: “Whenever you did this for one of these, the least of my brothers, you did it for me” (Mt. 25:40). The sisters are added by me.

According to the Biblical testimony God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). God himself is relation, the Father, the Son and the Spirit, so much so that God gives part of himself in becoming man, he establishes relation, so that human encounters can become places of contact with God. Humans need the love of their fellow human beings; they live in and out of relations, around the globe, in world-wide solidarity.

Being Oriented Towards Hope: Humans as People Seeking a Future

“For we have been saved by hope. But a hope which is seen is not hope. For when a man sees something, why would he hope? But since we hope for what we do not see, we wait with patience” (Rom. 8:24f).

This promise from the Letter to the Romans deals with an elixir of life for humanity: hope. I think of phrases such as “life is hope” and “hope springs eternal”.

Many images in the New Testament are images of hope that promise us a future with God, like the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be consoled. Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth ...” (Mt. 5:3ff).

At the same time I think of a statement that is found repeatedly in the Gospel: “And behold, some of those who are last will be first, and some of those who are first will be last” (Lk 13:30, with parallels in Mt. 19:30 and Mk. 10:31; cf. Mt. 20:16). This verse puts the accepted order into question, appears to imply a threat, gives rise to fear: in those who do not really know whether they are among the first or the last; in those who feel like the last and powerless, while only *some* of those who are last will be first; in those who would rather let others go ahead so as to shirk responsibility; and in those who think they are first and now might become last.

This statement aims at revolving the order, not by putting things upside down but, on the contrary, by bringing down to earth what used to be at the top, due to a way of thinking and acting which criss-crosses traditional structures and comes with the Kingdom of God. Such ways of thinking and acting cannot and do not seek to be politically neutral, but show partiality and solidarity with the last, seeing hope for them and cutting the cloak in half to share it with them.

Human Failure

Let me summarise at first: There is the human as a mystery that cannot be retained; there is the human as a free creature with freedom to shape; there is the human as a relation, living in love; there is the human awaiting the future, borne by hope, while also going through great disappointments.

These disappointments hint to the fifth brushstroke: Humans are threatened by failure. Perhaps failure does not constitute a fifth brushstroke though, in addition to the other four strokes, but rather a stroke across the image of the human who would only reckon with the other four ones. For humans can fail in any of the orientations mentioned: in hope, when it yields to deception and the fear of future; in love when communication is interrupted, relations are broken off, betrayal is committed; in freedom when it is lowered to the level of slavery or degenerates into mere arbitrariness; in the quest for meaning, when human reference to a mystery is veiled, when humans are deprived of their right to religion and cheated of God.

For Karl Rahner, Christendom is “the occurrence which perceives this failure and accepts it in a redemptory act”. Thus, he raises the question about the consequences of this sketch. What do people long for and who do they need to become humans? For this purpose, I will go back to the different orientations.

Being Oriented Towards Meaning: Women and Men as References to the Mystery of Life Need Mystagogues and Inspirators to Become Human

The first brushstroke in attempting to draw a Christian image of the human being points to people as references to the mystery of life. Such a view of humans entails consequences. For people to become humans for each other, they need others who treat them with dignity, like a sort of midwife. A midwife helps so that everything which is not or only indirectly visible and urges to be born, can see the light of day. This midwifery art is practiced by so-called mystagogues, people, who already in pre-Christian times introduced others, who wanted to become part of a ritual community, to the secrets, the mysteries of their cult. Today, mystagogues are people who accompany and inspire fellow human beings on the lookout for the mystery, the meaning of their lives. Mystagogues do not instil their wisdom in others; they rather give fellow human beings the opportunity to make their own experiences – similar perhaps to the healing of the sick woman to whom Jesus does not say: “I have healed you”, but: “Your faith has saved you” (Mk. 5:34, with parallels in Mt. 9:22 and Lk. 8:48).

Being Oriented Towards Freedom: Humans as Released Creatures Need Releasers and Admonishers to Become Human

This brushstroke concerning an image of the human being also entails consequences. Those wanting to help people to become humans work as releasers – comparable perhaps to the figure of Moses as a type of companion and prophetic admonisher on the way towards freedom. And like Moses will never cross over into the land (Deut. 34:4), companions and admonishers today have to reckon with the fact that their companionship will come to an end without them ever knowing whether the humans cross over into the Promised Land or not.

Being Oriented Towards Love:

Humans as Fellow Human Beings

Need Representatives and Advocates to Become Human

This brushstroke making up the sketch of an image of the human being also entails consequences. In the Book of Isaiah, in the fourth of the Servant Songs, we read: “But he himself was wounded because of our iniquities. He was bruised because of our wickedness. The discipline of our peace was upon him. And by his wounds, we are healed” (Jes. 53:5).

The Lord’s servant acts as our representative. People act as representatives for each other out of love. For needy people to become human, those contribute who act as their representatives until they themselves can assume the pending tasks again. Until then they need advocates who raise their voice on behalf of those who do not speak themselves – and representatives who do not oust the represented persons from their positions, but keep the space open for them.

Being Oriented Towards Hope:

Humans Seeking a Future

Need Companions to Become Human

The consequences from this brushstroke adding to an image of the human being have already been insinuated. People need companions, males and females, to become human, who help them live: hope lets live – hope maintained on behalf of someone else can help preserve life. At times, a companion can become someone on whom hopes are pinned by the one who cannot cherish, or even tolerate, hope anymore and who does not feel borne by hope any more. In virtually hopeless times it is important that a companion carefully keeps alive each modicum of hope that grows in a desperate person.

Hope springs eternal – yet when it dies, we can only stay alive when others hope on our behalf, near and far, especially in our work for the Universal Church.

Again: Human Failure

Failure is a threat to hope when there is no one who would have hope on my behalf; to love when there is no one who would act as my advocate; to freedom when there is no one who would take me out of entanglements and ties of guilt, release and admonish me; to the quest for meaning when there is no one who would unwrap my complicated biography.

Brushstrokes implying consequences

Failure is practically the stroke across the reckoning of the other four brushstrokes. Yet failure does not just strike the other orientations out; failure rather underlines the urgency of the consequences arising from the brushstrokes, especially when I take the inviolable dignity of all human beings as images of God for granted – be they children, women or men, be they the better diplomats or all criminals!

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Par visu cilvēku kā Dieva attēliem cieņu

Kopsavilkums

Dr. Klaus Kießlinga raksts aktualizē šķietami vienkāršu jautājumu – cilvēka vērtēšanu pēc stereotipiem. Izmantojot plašas atsauces uz Bībeles Veco un Jauno derību, kas stāsta par cilvēka radīšanu un izpirkšanu no grēka, kā arī atsaucoties uz Romas Katoļu Baznīcas dokumentiem un ievērojamākajiem teologiem, tiek norādīts uz stereotipiem kā uz savdabīgiem elkdievīgiem priekšstatiem, kas aizliegti Mozus 2. bauslī (“Netaisi sev elku tēlu .. Nezemoties to priekšā un nekalpo tiem”). Cilvēks ir radīts pēc Dieva tēla un līdzības, un šī ontoloģiskā dimensija nav ietverama stereotipiskos priekšstatos. Autors raksta par cilvēku kā dzīvības noslēpumu, kas radīts brīvībai, savstarpībai, ar cerību nākotnē, kas meklē jēgu un ir kas ir svētīti šajā ceļā.

Atslēgas vārdi: Imago Dei, cilvēka cieņa, mistagogs.



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