

Created in God's Image

In 2003, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was interviewed for a BBC Radio Programme asking influential people about defining moments in their lives: (LINK: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3052274.stm>)

The biggest defining moment in my life was when I saw Trevor Huddleston and I was maybe nine or so. I didn't know it was Trevor Huddleston, but I saw this tall, white priest in a black cassock doff his hat to my mother who was a domestic worker. I didn't know then that it would have affected me so much, but it was something that was really - it blew your mind that a white man would doff his hat.

And subsequently I discovered, of course, that this was quite consistent with his theology that every person is of significance, of infinite value, because they are created in the image of God. And the passion with which he opposed apartheid and any other injustice is something that I sought then to emulate.

Compare this with what a priest told me a parishioner recently said: he wasn't sure he could accept her priesthood because men were created in God's image while women were created in the image of men.

Both incidents indicate how two different passages from the bible about human identity and God's image are read and applied to real life situations and real people to enhance or diminish their worth. They show that how we read and interpret biblical passages about human identity affects and even shapes the way we think about and behave towards other people.

The first anecdote is probably based on a reading of Genesis 1:26-7 (NRSV), in which God's creation of humankind reflects something of God's nature, character, or image:

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them 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.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

The KJV translates this passage differently:

"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

In this translation, God creates "man" (Hebrew: adam), that is, human being understood as male and female, as we see from the next phrase: "and let them have dominion..."

There's no substantive difference in these translations. The translation "humankind" is clearly attempting to render the gender inclusive sense of adam. The only thing that differentiates these translations is an archaic usage of "man" for humankind. Humankind, however, is a conflation of species designation and gender designation. Perhaps a better translation would have been mankind, making it clearer that "man" means male and female. But on the whole I think humankind is the best we can do at the moment. In the Greek version of Genesis 1:26-27, God declares, "Let us make the human being (anthropos) according to our image and likeness...according to the divine image he made it, male and female he made them" where the Greek focuses on the singular "anthropos" twice.

The second anecdote is probably based on a reading of I Cor 11: 7, part of Paul's explanation of why women should veil their heads in public assembly at Corinth: "For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man."

The first passage interprets the connection males and females have with the image of God equally. The second proposes that only the male reflects God's image whilst woman reflects that of the male. Perhaps it is based on a limited reading of Genesis 1:26, understanding only men to have been created in the image of God.

Confining the reflection of God's image to one gender only is even more acute when we consider New Testament passages describing Christ as the image of God. But the issue is quite straightforward: Christ becomes human in the incarnation, not exclusively male. And this understanding is reflected in language of the New Testament and the creeds but not, alas, some modern translations.

Colossians, for example, hymns Christ, "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature" (1:15); Hebrews likewise says of Christ, "Who, being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person..(1:3). In both passages I use the KJV translation which keeps the (masculine) relative pronoun of the Greek. Unfortunately, more modern translations of both passages emphasize not the relative pronoun but its masculine gender: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (NRSV Colossians 1:15); "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.." (NRSV Hebrews 1:3). It is a question of emphasis; Bishop Krister Stendahl said some time ago, "the masculinity of God, and of God-language, is a cultural and linguistic accident, and I think one should also argue that the masculinity of the Christ is of the same order. To be sure, Jesus Christ was a male, but that may be no more significant to his being than the fact that presumably his eyes were brown. Incarnation is a great thing. But it strikes me as odd to argue that when the Word became flesh, it was to re-enforce male superiority."

We must do everything we can to promote the theological idea that men and women are created in God's image. For the insidious idea that only men reflect God's image or that they reflect more of it than women do, has led and leads to sinful denigration, devaluation and abuse of women in the mistaken name of Christian tradition.