Affirming the image of God within humanity

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Detail from the *Scenes in Genesis* fresco on the ceiling of the Sistene Chapel by Michaelangelo (1475-1564)

I see God in every human being.
- Mother Teresa

The consequences of rejecting God's image in mankind

Human beings tend to deny the creational and redemptive truth that each person is made by God, for God, in the likeness of God, and to be a temple of his Spirit. Consequently, awful attacks on the sanctity of life sadly arise, which may include homicide, oppression, and self-harm:

Homicide (such as killing the unborn, newborn, handicapped, and elderly) occurs in the belief that human life is expendable. This stems from rebellion toward God - as Cain killed his brother Abel, having failed to honour their Heavenly Father (Genesis 4).

Oppression (such as human commodification, rape, injustice, and slavery) arises as we reject Almighty God as creator, as noted in Proverbs 14:31a: *He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker.*

Self-harm (including suicide, compulsive behaviour, and eating disorders) arises among people whose identities are damaged, sometimes following abuse and neglect, or sometimes through demonic influence - as in the case of the possessed man at Gerasa, described in Mark 5.



In 2005, a sad combination of self-harm and human commodification occurred in the US when a woman auctioned her forehead for advertising purposes. The winning bid ($US10,000) enabled the Golden Palace Casino to have its web address tattooed permanently on the forehead of Karolyne Smith - who needed the money to pay for the education of her son.

The creational status of mankind

Three fundamental assertions describe humanity's uniquely created status:

Firstly, we are made by God. While *all things through him were made* (John 1:3), and though we are amazed by every part of nature, people are especially incredible as the most complex and sophisticated of creatures. Each person is uniquely fashioned. Since man is the pinnacle of nature, God has *crowned him with glory and honour* (Psalm 8:5) and mankind is listed as the last (and concluding) work of creation as described in Genesis 1.

Secondly, we are made for God. Though *all things were created by him and for him* (Colossians 1:16), mankind has special responsibility as the prime steward within nature. Humans have the leading role in the created order and are listed as the first (and foremost) creation in Genesis 2, being placed within God's garden *to work it and take care of it* (2:15) and name all the animals (2:19). No other creature has such stewardship of nature.

Thirdly, we are made in the image of God. While the divine character is seen in every part of creation, being *understood from what has been made* (Romans 1:20) humans above all in the natural world are the main created witnesses to God's personality, and are the only species to bear the image of the one who announced: *"Let us make man in our image, in our likeness"* (Genesis 1:26). We are not *like God* in the sense of being his equal (3:5), but in the sense that we reflect who he is. So all good or evil people can love their children (Matthew 7:11) and may appreciate creativity, compassion, beauty, irony, and humour. Human beings have the ability to promise, pray, laugh, intentionally procreate, and comprehend kinship, ancestry, posterity, and are aware of our own mortality. Such awareness is unique to humanity.

But sinful choice has compromised our glorious creational state. So in our rebellion we *invent ways of doing evil* (Romans 1:30), and tend to regard ourselves and others as having no inherent value. Across history there have been countless rejections of the profoundly special status of each human, mainly by God-denying individuals - whose philosophies regard people as objects that are sellable, despicable and disposable. But by recognising our creational status, we comprehend the great need to be reconciled to the Creator, and with all humanity, and we are grieved by selfish ideology that denies honour, protection and blessing to others.

The redemptive potential of mankind

Though sin brings guilt and separation from God that damages our created status, self-concept, relationships, and stewardship of nature, we rejoice that by faith in Jesus we receive forgiveness and a restored creational standing, along with a new perspective as agents of renewal and reconciliation:

> *So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation* ... (II Corinthians 5:16-18).

Saved by God, we are *conformed to the likeness of his Son* (Romans 8:29) and we therefore gain his perspective. So we look beyond wounded, cruel, unlovely, ungrateful and self-damaging humanity to see God's image. We observe in children a pattern of trust that portrays the pre-fall state that sets a standard of faith (Matthew 18:3); we see in each woman a depiction of the heavenly bride; and we see in each man a testimony of the divine husband (Ephesians 5:24-25). Reverencing every person as a unique expression of God's image, we respond to curb injustice and oppression, recognising that *whoever is kind to the needy honours God* (Proverbs 14:31b).

So we help the needy, as Jesus stands in the place of all the oppressed, the poor, the unlovely, the unborn facing abortion, the elderly who are rejected, and anyone whose mind or body is ruined - the spirit, however, is whole. Jesus stated, concerning the needy: *"whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me"* (Matthew 25:40).

Further, we urge everyone to profess faith in Jesus as the only way to regain creational purpose and reconciliation to God. So he delivers us from sin and death that impacts all human activity, as guilty people are afraid to love and serve our heavenly father. Recognising the good news that we are redeemed *with the precious blood of Christ* (I Peter 1:19) and also that *we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works* (Ephesians 2:10) we respond to Paul's instruction: *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you ... you were bought at a price, therefore honour God with your body* (I Corinthians 6:20). So we encourage people toward the loving activities which flow from the restored condition.

Impressing an awareness of God's image and purpose

Christians may be encouraged by the prayer of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955): *Grant me to recognise in other men, Lord God, the radiance of your own face*. Applying such a profound approach, we should not simply draw a conclusion, but may sensitively impress awareness of the creational reality and redemptive potential that God urges everyone to join his family through Jesus - receiving his free gift of salvation. Consequently we recruit a world-transforming multitude whose work can astound unbelievers.

While many atheists give value to the person, atheism has not formed the agencies which serve at the forefront of humanitarian relief. But the Christian faith, asserting the creational purpose and redemptive potential of mankind has founded ministries such as the Red Cross (1863), the Salvation Army (1865) and St John's Ambulance (1113). Without awareness of our creational state and redemptive potential, at best there is a weak response to a multitude of problems facing humanity. At worst, the various God-denying ideologies and regimes have deliberately caused incalculable suffering and death.

But care of the needy, arising from the Christian faith, has helped turn many from their unbelief, as noted by a former atheist **Malcolm Muggeridge** (1903-1990):



> *I've spent a number of years in India and Africa, where I found much righteous endeavour undertaken by Christians of all denominations; but I never, as it happens, came across a hospital or orphanage run by the Fabian Society, or a humanist leper colony* - 'The Observer', 15/12/1968

He embraced the Christian faith after seeing the love of God for the poor and needy, expressed though the action of believers like **Mother Teresa** (1910-1997) - who famously told 'Time' magazine, 4/12/1989:



> *... The dying, the cripple, the mentally ill, the unwanted, the unloved - they are Jesus in disguise.*

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