The Imago Dei and Man Come of Age

WILLIAM L. POWER

When one chooses to write on the **imago dei** and man come of age, he immediately confronts two major difficulties. First, the intelligibility of the expression **'imago dei'** obviously depends upon knowing who God is and what kind of God he is. Traditionally, philosophical and revealed theology have attempted to speak to these concerns, but at a time when knowledge of and talk of God are up for grabs, it is hard to find any consensus as to what the expression signifies. Secondly, while the expression 'man come of age' captures our present appreciation of man's capacities to actualize those possibilities which enable him to live, live well, and live better in his environment, there is considerable ambivalence over the extent and portent of these capacities. On the one hand we are exhilarated by the strength and grandeur of the human spirit, and we celebrate man's achievements and possibilities; on the other hand we are appalled by the weakness and misery of the human spirit and we lament his failures and thwarted opportunities. Even as we celebrate man's coming of age, we are haunted by the realization that every day his behavior suggests the contrary.

In spite of these difficulties, I believe that both expressions **'imago dei'** and 'man come of age' (granted that the latter has become somewhat of a cliche) signify something about who man is, or might be, and the kind of man he ought to be. Even if we recognize that the **imago dei** can become horribly deformed and that man can be considerably immature, we must say along with John Bennett that "the image of God is the vital reality" and that "the Fall is always the second rather than the first thing to say about man."[1] Moreover, if the image of God is the vital reality, and God is the one who is able to actualize what he intends for man and the cosmos, then man's immaturity can never be the final and hopeless end of human destiny.

WILLIAM L. POWER is Assistant Professor of Religion at the University of Georgia. This paper was originally presented before the National Meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

I

Unquestionably, the mainstream of our contemporary culture and civilization, which can be designated as our 'secular ethos,' has emerged from the revolutions in science and technology. Nothing has so altered our ways of thinking, acting, and feeling as the impact of these two revolutions. As Whitehead noted some forty years ago, this "new mentality" has altered the metaphysical and imaginative contents of our minds; so that the old stimuli provoke a new response."[2]

In recent years there has been considerable discussion as to the origins of science and technology. Some have claimed or suggested that the scientific posture is a child of the Judeo-Christian tradition.[3] According to those who hold this belief, the Judeo-Christian understanding of God the Creator undermined the pagan notion that nature was divine. When this happened, man's orientation to the world became different. First, when the world was no longer thought to be divine, man became free to examine the world without fear of tampering

[1] John C. Bennett, "Christian Realism: Retrospect and Prospect," *Christianity and Crisis,* XXVIII (1968), 182.

[2] A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: A Mentor Book, 1956), p. 2.

[3] Some of those who have suggested this view are A. N. Whitehead, M. B. Foster, John Baillie, Friedrich Gogarten, Ronald Gregor Smith, Harvey Cox, and Arend Van Leeuwen.

with divine things. Secondly, so the argument goes, since the world is not divine, man is free to exercise his dominion over it. In spite of the appeal to this line of argument among a number of theologians it is more plausible (as the Hebrews had no science to speak of and were technologically infantile as compared with their Egyptian and Cannaanite neighbors) and historically more accurate to argue that the scientific posture is a child of the Greek heritage. Certainly, the Ionian philosopher - scientists had no fear of tampering with divine things when they tried to find out the way things were. It is true that the pre-Socratics as a whole were short on observation and experimentation, for they too quickly moved from hypothesis to assertion of fact; yet, their main assumption was that the cosmos was not divine. Thales' claim that all things "are full of gods" was probably no more than a metaphorical way of expressing his belief that the ultimate stuff which makes up the world contains within itself its own principle of motion and change. Anaxagoras rejected the belief that the sun was a god, and, instead, claimed that it was burning metal. When the development of Ionian science culminated in the atomism of Democritus, the fundamental assumption remained. Nature was not divine. While Socrates and Plato were both dissatisfied with the applicability of Ionian science to all aspects of the cosmos and human experience, they still retained the belief that natural processes were not divine ones. Furthermore, Aristotle did a creditable job of observing and examining much of his environment, and his **Nichomachean Ethics**, along with Plato's **Laws**, are testimonies to man's sense of lordship over the world. In any full account of the origins of science and technology, Egypt certainly cannot be eliminated, for her technological skill was one of the marvels of the ancient world. Thales himself was impressed with the expertise of Egyptian technology in which the Egyptians devised a method of calculating rectangular areas to solve the practical problem of marking their fields so that when the Nile flooded each year the fields could be remarked with accuracy and speed. Of course one need hardly mention the mature engineering skill which went into the building of the Great Pyramids at El Giza.

Whatever role any particular country or civilization played in the development of science and technology, I believe that one must in all honesty recognize that science is no more than the outcome of man's capacity for accurate observation and logical deduction, and technology the expression of man's ability to act upon his environment through his body. In other words, science is no more than "self-conscious common sense," as Quine suggests,[4] and technology is in fact the extension of the human body, as Marshall McLuhan has widely publicized. While the great strides in science of recent centuries have been facilitated by technology and the sophisticated advances in mathematics, in the final analysis, our present ethos seems to be the logical outcome of man's nature as a psycho-physical being with limited capacities for free choice and interaction with his environment. Given our place in time, we find ourselves heirs of a way of life which is now capturing the allegiance of the non-Western world, and, apparently, nothing will hold back this mainstream from engulfing the entire globe. As Whitehead also observed: ". . . this quiet growth of science has practically recoloured our mentality so that modes of thought which in former times were exceptional are now broadly spread through the educated world."[5]

In what follows I wish to argue that the alterations in the cognitive, conative, and affective areas of man's life, which are the fruits of the scientific and technological revolutions, and which characterize our secular ethos, bear significant-

[4] Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 3.

[5] Whitehead, p. 2.

ly on the meaning of the expression 'man come of age' and likewise relate to the meaning of man being created in the image of God.

II

In the **Phaedrus** (270D) Socrates said that if man wants to know the nature of a thing he must find out "what natural capacity it has of acting upon another thing, and through what means; or by what other thing, and through what means, it can be acted upon." For the most part man has desired this knowledge and has set out to acquire it. Through his power of discernment facilitated by the extension of his body through technology and his power of discursive reasoning, man has more and more come to understand the workings of the universe. Ever since the publication of Copernicus' **The Revolutions of the Heavenly Bodies** in 1543 there has been a rapid expansion in man's knowledge of the world disclosed in his experience. There has fundamentally been no aspect of the universe that has escaped the searching eye of inquiry, as the birth of the special sciences testify. Not only has man generalized and made inferences as to the working of micro- and macroscopic objects external to himself (including his own body) but he has also done the same with regard to his personal life. We have arrived at that point in time where we recognize that there is nothing **in principle** that is not open to man's power of understanding. Moreover, through the use of our ordinary and formal languages we are able to express and describe with ever greater precision what is the case as to the nature of things.

These are rather standard claims, to be sure, but the significant fact that often goes unnoticed is that there are certain assumptions of the new mentality that characterize our secular ethos which are axiomatic for what Van Harvey calls a "morality of knowledge"[6] in the quest for truth. Perhaps too simply stated, these are: (1) While we certainly experience more than we can actually know and express, only that which is or might be disclosed in experience can be known or meaningfully talked about. (2) That which is disclosed in experience is part of a universe which is basically ordered such that one is able to make inferences from what is given in experience to other aspects of the universe in this, or some past, or some possible future state. (3) From (1) and (2) it follows that knowledge is potentially public, and (4) any belief as to the way things are or might be must be supported with reasons which are clear, simple and applicable to what others have or can discern if they pursue inquiry far enough. In short, scientific methods and procedures are preferred in justifying our beliefs because they are self corrective; anyone who follows them can achieve the same results; and they provide a growing body of knowledge of the universe of which we are a part. Any appeal to authority, private intuitions, self-evident truths, and the like, as a means of justifying our beliefs is immediately suspect as a cover up for a lack of intellectual rigor, integrity, and honesty — that is a violation of the morality of knowledge.

By implication I have already alluded to the area of power, namely the power to acquire knowledge of that which is disclosed in experience. But the power which is so expressive of our secular ethos is the power of man to create who he is becoming and to exercise his dominion over the world he has come to understand. Where once fate or the deity were held solely responsible for the destiny of man and the cosmos, man is finding out that he is able to assume responsibility for himself and his world. Understanding himself and his environment, man is able to apply his knowledge to do for himself and his world what he thinks ought to be done.

Where once man prayed to God for rain or danced to conjure the deity at

[6] Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. xiii.

hand, now he sprinkles the clouds with dry ice or irrigates from a source hundreds of miles away from where he desires water. Where once man believed illness could be explained as an act of God or demon (depending on one's theology or demonology), now he speaks in terms of virus infection, metabolic disorder, and functional disorder. Moreover, he knows that by applying his skills his bio-chemical, as well as his psychic, ills can be cured or potentially can be cured. It is equally true that there are limitations to man and his powers for achieving the good life. At any given time or place man can recognize that there was a time when he was not and there will be a time when he will cease to be and that he lives in a cosmic epoch which is not everlasting. Moreover he can recognize that the particular structure and character of his environment decisively affects the ways that he can act, feel, and think. He can only act on his environment through his body, and knowledge of his world and himself is not possible without the mediation of his body. Likewise his particular feelings are largely influenced by all that impinges upon him, and the kinds of feelings that he has depend upon the kind of world in which he lives. Also his environment is risky. Accidents debilitate his powers, premature death cuts short life, unwise decisions bring untold tragedy upon man and other beings. In addition to the circumstantial tragedy in the world, there is the intentional sloth and pride of man which brings havoc to himself and other creatures.

Perhaps even more amazing than the alterations in the cognitive and conative areas of man's life is the alteration in man's sensibility and feeling. For the first time in human history, all people recognize that they can share in the benefits of culture and civilization which are the fruits of man's knowledge and power. Because of this, a burning desire, passion, and hope have been kindled in the human spirit. This, to be sure, is the distinctive mark of the masses of mankind. Not only is there the desire of the masses to receive and enjoy what men of knowledge and power can give, but there is also their passion to be able to exercise their own knowledge and power in ordering and directing their lives. If man has a universal need to actualize those capacities which enable him to have a happy life and to lead a responsible life, and if for the first time in human history these needs are in principle capable of being met, then the universal hope which characterizes the sensibility of our secular ethos is perhaps also for the first time in human history realistically justified.

In the morality of his knowledge, in the responsible use of his power, and in his desire to lead a responsible life and have a happy life lies the maturity of man. It is in this way that man can be spoken of as "come of age." This is his strength, and it is this which we ought to encourage, sustain, and applaud; yet man is finite and weak. For this reason a mature man will likewise recognize real limitations, tragedy and immaturity. Thus, in "coming of age" man must acknowledge his limits, and his capacity for clinging to childish ways.

III

In both Judaism and Christianity God has been spoken of as Creator, Revealer, and Redeemer. He creates by his word; he knows the world and reveals himself and his aims for the world; and he acts in ways which are loving and just. In the unity of his action he is called 'The Holy One.' Anyone familiar with the moral and intellectual background of these claims can recognize the part that the triad of Being, Truth, and Goodness (the unity of which is signified by 'Beauty') has played in the development of western monotheism. God is powerful, wise and expressive, good, and holy. For the most part this monotheism is monopolar. God limits everything by his absolute power; he knows the world but is not internally affected by it; he is without desire, and his happiness can neither be added to nor diminished. In

more traditional language he is omnipotent, omniscient, simple, immutable, eternal, and internally complete in every way.

From the very beginning, there were those who were puzzled by this view of God. How can one so simple act in the ways ascribed to him? How can one so distinct from everything else be known and spoken of? How can one love him who is without desire for the well-being of the beloved? And what is love without being sensitive to or affected by the needs, desires, and hope of those who are loved? What kind of happiness is it that is commensurate with those states of affairs wherein there is tragedy and misery? St. Anselm relates some of this puzzlement in his **Proslogium.** "But how art thou compassionate, and, at the same time, passionless? For, if thou art passionless, thou dost not feel sympathy; and if thou dost not feel sympathy, thy heart is not wretched from sympathy for the wretched; but this it is to be compassionate. But if thou art not compassionate, whence cometh so great consolation to the wretched? How, then, art thou compassionate and not compassionate, O Lord, unless because thou art compassionate in terms of our experience, and not compassionate in terms of thy being."[7]

One of the most penetrating criticisms and yet appreciative commentaries on the classic theistic position is found in Whitehead's **Adventures of Ideas.** Whitehead claims that there are three culminating points in Western moral and intellectual discernment which mark the growth of recent civilization. They are: (1) The publication of Plato's final conviction, near the end of his life, that the divine element in the world is to be understood in terms of persuasion rather than coercion; (2) Christianity's appeal to the life of Christ as a revelation of God and his agency in the world; and (3) the publications of the theologians of Alexandria and Antioch wherein they attempted to express what empowered their lives, and in so doing were the only thinkers who in a fundamental way improved upon Plato by affirming that the world includes God and his ideas rather than just the image of God and imitations of his ideas.[8]

Whitehead believed that these three insights embodied the greatest advances in Western culture; he also believed that the period as a whole ended in failure. The reasons for the failure were likewise moral and intellectual. The barbarism which the period attempted to overcome and the major defects in intellectual comprehension were carried over into the ways of life and systems of theology of orthodox and heterodox Christianity alike. The barbarism was perpetuated in certain images of God which depicted God as a coercive, despotic ruler of the universe and in man's existence as he imitated that image. Moreover, as Christian theologians borrowed from Platonism in order to facilitate interpretation, certain sides of Plato's thought gave metaphysical reinforcement to the despotic image of God when the divine was described as simple, impassionate, immutable, eternal, omnipotent and unchanging. In short, man's discernment of God as a persuasive, compassionate, and loving agent never achieved adequate expression in man's religious images, his individual or corporate life, or in his systems of theology. Even when God was spoken of as one who acted upon the universe in a persuasive way, it was never seen that such a being could also be spoken of as one receptive to the influences of the creatures he persuades.

While Whitehead believed that Christianity was showing all the signs of decay, he was convinced that the divine persuasion and man's response to that persuasion remained the source of the tenderness of life and the essential ele-

[7] Anselm, *Proslogium,* trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle: Open Court, 1948), p. 13.

[8] Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1933), p. 212.

ments in civilization. What he envisioned, and believed had begun was a new reformation in which man's best and most valid moral and metaphysical insights would find adequate expression. In this "re-formation" the dual task would be to purge the barbarism from our religious images, dogmas, and institutions, and to formulate a clear and meaningful description of the God signified by the life of Christ. Such a description of God would be thoroughly social in character. God would be described as not only one who acts upon and affects the world but also as one who is acted upon and affected by the world. Thus God would be interpretable by the generalities applicable to the world and the world by the generalities applicable to God. If on the one hand Whitehead was appealing to the best in our religious images, he was also appealing to another and neglected side of Plato's thought represented by the Socratic claim in the **Phaedrus** which I cited earlier — that the way to reflect on the nature of anything is "to inquire what natural capacity it has of acting upon another thing, and through what means; or by what other thing, and through what means, it can be acted upon."

If Whitehead's claims are valid, as I believe them to be, then God like man would be describable as one with capacities for feeling, thought, and action. As such he could meaningfully be spoken of as one who desires that there be creatures, and that these creatures live, live well, and live better in their cosmic environment. He could be spoken of as one who envisions the infinite possibilities as to the way things might be, remembers what has come to be and perished, and knows directly what is coming to be. He could be spoken of as one who has the power to do for the universe what needs to be done to insure an environment in which the creatures can actualize their own creative capacities for leading a responsible life and having a happy life with the minimum of risks. This God would do by disclosing himself and his aims for the cosmos. In this sense, God would be the lure and source of possibilities for the self-creating creatures. Lastly, because God himself is self-creating and affected by the world, his happiness could be increased or decreased depending upon whether the creatures lead responsible lives or have happy lives.

IV

In the Priestly and Yahwist stories of creation, man is depicted as living in an environment which is essentially good and which is understood as God's gift. Within this environment man is able to enjoy God's blessings, thus finding fulfillment through an intimate life with God and his fellow creatures. Man, however, is not only to receive and enjoy. His special function is to care for his world and to exercise a limited dominion as God's faithful steward. Created in God's image (Genesis 1:26f.) man shares with God the privilege of participating in the very creative process itself. While there is no hint in the biblical imagery that God is without desire for his creatures or that he is unaffected by their fortunes, as Genesis 1:26f. came to be interpreted over the centuries, this aspect of the whole narrative was neglected. Most theologians have interpreted the **imago dei** primarily to signify man's intellectual capacities, although from time to time man's power to act has come into dominance. Given the classic monotheistic position, this is understandable in as much as sensibility was negated in God. If Whitehead's observations are correct then perhaps considerably more sense can be made of the biblical imagery. In actualizing his capacities for being like God, the full range of man's cognitive, conative, and affective life would come into play, and no interpretation of the **imago dei** could signify less. While this claim is a significant departure from much traditional theology, it is not without warrant given a more social understanding of God.

To speak in this way of God's capacities, or of man's, tells us little as to the

way the capacities can be actualized. What is essential is to know how God feels and acts in regard to the world. Here is where the character of God is all important, for if we can discern God's character, then we would be able to say what the character of man **ought** to be. If God is loving and just and if he takes joy in giving and receiving and is pained by the misfortunes of his creatures, then the human norm takes shape. In terms of moral obligation, man would have two **prima facie** duties, i.e., to act lovingly and to do so justly. This I take to mean simply desiring the life and happiness of all beings, knowing in what that life and happiness consist, and in having the power and skill in creating and sustaining the conditions which make such life and happiness possible. In other words, a good man would simply be one who has a dominant desire and intent to act according to the general welfare and that all of his wisdom and expertise would be utilized in achieving that aim. Because man is likewise one who is affected by the world, to be like God would be to take joy in the life and happiness of all creatures and be pained by any diminishing of this one intrinsic value. In this context the good society would be a cosmic one rich in the intrinsic value of life and happiness and in the instrumental ones of love and justice. And inasmuch as life is receiving from others as well as giving to others, gratitude would always be that expression of man which marks the mystery that in the final analysis life is a gift.

How now can one relate the **imago dei** to man come of age? Given the view of God that I have sketched, the expressions **'imago dei'** and 'man come of age' actually signify the same thing. They both stand for an understanding of who man is or might become within his cosmic environment or, differently stated, the kind of man which has emerged or might yet emerge out of our secular ethos. Religiously speaking, man come of age is one who recognizes the essential fitness of his environment for achieving the good life and takes that environment as a sign of God's just benevolence. This is God's gift to man. But the gift is also an inheritance. As heir, man has the task of managing the estate. Sonship morally commits him to utilitarianism with justice, the ethic of secular man.

Given our secular ethos it also follows that the only view of God that could be intelligible within our present culture and civilization is a view similar to the one that I have sketched in this paper. Any other view would be incompatible with what we know to be the case or might be the case about the world in which we live. If the fitness of our environment really makes for intellectual, moral, and emotional maturity, then any view of God which denies the obvious will not be attacked; it will simply be ignored. The alternatives to a social view of God are atheism, anachronism, or meaningless irrelevancy, the options which much contemporary theology apparently has adopted. In addition to being compatible with man come of age, such a view of God would facilitate a way of doing theology that accepts secular theories of knowledge and speech. That is to say, to recognize that God is a being that can act and be acted upon, entails that one can know God like we know anything else and that we can talk about God like we talk about anything else.[9] But that is another article at another time.

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[9] One of the most interesting and relevant approaches to the problem of natural and revealed theology as well as the problem of language is to be found in the works of Bowman L. Clarke. See especially his book *Language and Natural Theology* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966) and an article "How Do We Talk About God," *The Modern Schoolman,* XLV (1968), 91-104.