

Image of God and Abyss of Desires

SNF Research Project (Bern)

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Theological implications of anthropological conceptualisation in
Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and pagan-religious Platonism

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Abstract

In traditional theology, the human being can be understood as both “image” of the incomprehensible God and unfathomable “abyss” of desires. This traditional understanding presents, however, any religio-philosophical anthropology with a seemingly irresolvable paradox: On the one hand, as the image of the divine, humankind is said to bridge the epistemological gap between the phenomenal world and the transcendent God. On the other hand, as fallen creature, the human being bears in itself an “abyss” reflecting the utmost distance from God. This project investigates how the theological implications of this fundamental paradox come to theological fruition in religious Platonist circles from early Imperial times to Late Antiquity (1st century BCE - 6th century CE), by examining the concepts, images and arguments in Jewish (Philo of Alexandria), pagan (e.g. Plutarch, Plotinus) and Christian texts (e.g. Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius). These ideas culminate in a new apophatic anthropology as spelled out in later Church fathers, which converts a boundless abyss into a infinite depth leading to the unspeakable divine sublimity.

Research topics and questions

1. Theological and anthropological developments on negativity
2. How is the relationship between anthropology and theology constructed in considering the human being as image of God (implicitly human “iconic” constitution)?
3. How can the discourse on a sensible approach to Divinity inform the understanding of the human in the image of God?
4. Which metaphors are used to express and enhance the human dynamic as image of God?
5. How is a double-meaning of darkness and illumination generated?

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„The Image of God“ – in Metaphors

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„The Image of God“ – in Metaphors

The mirror

- 1Cor 13,12;
- Plutarch, De Pythiae oraculis 404B-D; De facie 945A;
- Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man 12, 161C.

The seal

- Platon Theaet. 191c;
- Plutarch, De Pythiae oraculis 404C;
- Basil, On the Holy Spirit 26, 185C.

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The Mirror of a Mirror

Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio* 12, 161 C-D:

“And as we said that the mind was adorned by the likeness of the archetypal beauty, being formed as though it were a mirror to receive the figure of that which it expresses (οἷόν τι κάτοπτρον τῷ χαρακτῆρι τοῦ ἐμφαινομένου μορφούμενον), we consider that the nature which is governed by it is attached to the mind (καὶ τὴν οἰκονομουμένην ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ φύσιν ἔχεσθαι τοῦ νοῦ λογιζόμεθα) in the same relation (κατὰ τὴν αὐτὴν ἀναλογίαν), and that it too is adorned by the beauty that the mind gives, being, so to say, a mirror of the mirror (οἷόν τι κατόπτρου κάτοπτρον γινομένην); and that by it is swayed and sustained the material element of that existence in which the nature is contemplated”.

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Human Interiority as Abyss

Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 41.13*:

“What then is the deep (*abyssus*) that is calling out there, and what the deep that is invoked? If ‘deep’ signifies profundity, surely the human heart is a deep abyss? Could anything be more profound? Human beings can speak, they can be observed as they use their limbs, and heard in their speech; but can we ever go to the bottom of one person’s thoughts, or see into anyone’s heart?”

(WSA III.16, 251)



Thank you!

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