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## Embodied, Relational, Desiring, Vulnerable – Reconsidering Imago Dei

<https://doi.org/10.1515/nzsth-2020-0014>

**Summary:** God is always experienced in the mode of representations. The fundamental representation of God is Jesus Christ, the true image of God. In order to specify this designation further, with reference to all of humanity, it is suggested that the basic features of such representation can be identified in the features of desire and vulnerability, as manifestations of interconnectedness and dependence. These features are not only expressing themselves as that with which humans need to come to terms, but they also manifest the deeply relational character of humanity and its internal connection to goodness. They also make it possible to specify further how God and the human being are intrinsically connected, and make it possible to see why love is so important in the realization of *imago Dei*: It is love that secures that both desire and vulnerability can contribute to human flourishing, and thus precludes sin from manifesting itself.

**Keywords:** Representation, Imago Dei, Relationality, Vulnerability, Desire, Love

**Zusammenfassung:** Gott wird immer im Modus von Repräsentation erfahren. Der fundamentale Repräsentant Gottes ist Jesus Christus, das wahre Bild Gottes. Um diese Bezeichnung unter Bezugnahme auf die gesamte Menschheit näher zu spezifizieren, wird vorgeschlagen, die Grundmerkmale einer solchen Repräsentation in den Merkmalen der Begierde und der Verletzlichkeit als Manifestationen von Verbundenheit und Abhängigkeit zu identifizieren. Diese Merkmale drücken sich nicht nur als das aus, womit sich der Mensch auseinandersetzen muss, sondern sie manifestieren auch den zutiefst relationalen Charakter der Menschheit und ihre innere Verbindung zum Guten. Sie ermöglichen es auch, weiter zu spezifizieren, wie Gott und der Mensch in sich verbunden sind, und zu erkennen, warum Liebe bei der Verwirklichung der *imago Dei* so wichtig ist: Es ist die Liebe, die sicherstellt, dass sowohl Begierde als auch Verletzlichkeit zum menschlichen Gedeihen beitragen können, und so die Sünde daran hindert, sich zu manifestieren.

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**Schlüsselwörter:** Repräsentation, Imago Dei, Relationalität, Vulnerabilität, Begehrde, Liebe

## I. Introduction

Perhaps the most significant designation of the human being in Christian theology is that humans are created in the image of God (Gen 1; 27; 2. Cor 4,4; Col. 1,15). The designation is used both for humans in general and for Christ as the true image of God. Recent theology on *imago Dei* has tried to overcome some of the pitfalls that identify the *imago* with special capacities, features, or functions of the human.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the emphasis has been put increasingly on seeing it as a relational category, which establishes an undissolvable link between God and the human being.<sup>2</sup> In various ways, e.g., W. Pannenberg and D. Kelsey both see the image expressed in the constitutive human openness towards the world.<sup>3</sup> Such proposals, like several others, try to establish an experiential element in order to overcome the challenge that to speak of humanity in this way is an unwarranted claim with no experiential warrant.

In the following, I develop a proposal for understanding the *imago Dei* that is closely related to two questions: What are the main experiential elements that allow us to see human beings as images of God? This question cannot be answered unless we also ask in what way, or what exactly it means, that God is represented by the human being. The main answer to these questions, I argue, lies not in elaborations of theological notions, but in two distinct features that are constitutive for the experience of human embodiment and relationality: desire and vulnerability. In other words: To be the image of God is to represent God by

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**1** These proposals, of which only one will occupy us further here, are analyzed and discussed, e.g., in Gerhard EBELING, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979), I, 405ff. Ebeling's analysis are among the more thorough in modern theology on the topic. He distinguishes between positions that see the *Imago* as reflected in the bodily shape or posture of humans, in their stewardship and dominion over nature, in their capacity to act rationally, or their possession of an immortal soul. For different approaches to *imago Dei* in contemporary theology, see also Joshua R. FARRIS and Charles TALIAFERRO, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology* (Farnham Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), Part IV.

**2** Various aspects of this relationship are developed in Claudia WELZ, *Humanity in God's Image: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

**3** Cf. Wolfhart PANNENBERG, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985); David H. KELSEY, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 1st ed., 2 vols. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). Kelsey is nevertheless critical to the central role that the notion has played in theological anthropology.

being desiring and vulnerable.<sup>4</sup> This also means, in turn, that Godself can be understood in a similar way – a point that is, of course, only possible to substantiate from a Christological position. Christ as the true image of God is the one who lives a desiring and vulnerable life in a way that realizes what true human life is, and what God as love is like. This opens up to another understanding of God than one that orients itself primarily from ideas about God as powerful or as unchanging.<sup>5</sup> It also opens up to interpreting the *imago Dei* from a point of view that is based neither in abstract notions nor in metaphorical language.

## II. God as represented

From the point of view of semiotics, significance is constituted when something appears as a sign of something for someone. All signs point to something else, and nothing has significance unless it is experienced as a sign that points beyond its immediate presence. This is also the case when we consider the divine reality – because God is only possible to experience by relating to signs that signify God's presence. These signs are therefore representations of the divine reality.

God can be experienced most adequately as embodied, vulnerable, and desiring, despite the fact that God is not possible to experience as we experience the world. This claim, therefore, makes sense only because God is represented in the world. The advantage of the notion of *imago Dei* is that it takes this most fundamental element in Christian theology seriously: That God is not part of the empirical world, but is the condition for it, and therefore for *how* we experience it as well. Thus, the difference between the creator and the created is manifest in the necessary representative mode in which God makes Godself known in the world.

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<sup>4</sup> There exists a considerable amount of work on both desire and vulnerability in relation to theological anthropology, but not much has been developed in order to specify what it means to be or become the image of God. See, e.g., Sarah COAKLEY, *Powers and Submissions Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford, UK Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 3–39. Coakley relates the discussion of vulnerability to her analysis of Kenosis in feminist theological discourse, but she also acknowledges that this has not been the only context for a discussion of that topic, cf. *ibid.*, 33, n. 65. As for desire, see e.g., Timothy GORRINGE, *The Education of Desire: Towards a Theology of the Senses* (London: SCM, 2001). An interesting recent example of treating desire and vulnerability in the context of *imago Dei*, but drawing on interreligious material, is found in Michelle VOSS ROBERTS, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). Moreover, it is striking that both topics, desire and vulnerability, are missing in the register of the above-mentioned FARRIS and TALIAFERRO, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. KELSEY, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, Vol 2, 896f., who also rightly emphasizes the need for developing the notion of *imago Dei* from the perspective of Christology.

Because God cannot be experienced as an empirical element among others, experience of God is always mediated. The semiotic character of all experience – the fact that everything refers to something more or else than itself – is the empirical condition for such mediation.<sup>6</sup> Hereby, God also appears as relational, because God is, by the effect of the representative mode, necessarily related to the world.

Hegel articulates this insight when he writes that “For human beings, God is primarily in the form of representation.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas God always exists as mediated for human experience, he will also say that the content of this experience nevertheless is God.<sup>8</sup> The valid point Hegel makes here is that God is never immediately present. Even in experiences that may seem immediate in character, God is only present via representations. The inference we can make from this fact is that the semiotic element that characterizes every experience of God representations (because experience is always an experience of something for someone) suggests that one has to move beyond the immediate and sensual or intuitive experience of something towards an interpretation that could be otherwise. There is no way to secure the experience argumentatively as a secure experience of God – it will always depend on the capacity for interpretation in the subject who relates to the one she *thinks* is God.

Against Hegel, however, we have to say that representation is not only a transitory phase or element in the way humans develop their understanding of God. The main element in religion is not the concept, but the actual experience of God and the world as this is illuminated by or made possible to experience more in depth, by means of the concept. Hence, neither the reification of the symbol / representation, or the literal reading of the Scriptures as such is adequate, but neither is mere philosophical speculation that only uses the representation or the scriptures as a stepping-stone towards a certain type of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Representations are not merely indices of something else – they are also expanding our experience of the present reality without leaving it behind. To say, as does Hegel, that “they are only metaphors”<sup>10</sup> is thus misleading, insofar as it only makes the world a mere appearance, *Schein*. The incarnation is the most obvious reason for this claim.<sup>11</sup>

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**6** For mediation, and its basic features from a semiotic perspective, see Andrew ROBINSON, *God and the World of Signs: Trinity, Evolution, and the Metaphysical Semiotics of C.S. Peirce*, Philosophical Studies in Science and Religion (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010).

**7** Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL and Peter Crafts HODGSON, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, One-volume ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 291f.

**8** Cf. *Ibid.*

**9** Hegel is likely to be read thus, cf. his comments on the historical *ibid.*, 293.

**10** *Ibid.*

**11** The notion of the incarnation of God in Christ is therefore also the reason why an understanding of Christ as a representative of God does not exclude, but include, the dogmatic decision that Christ

From the point of view of the biblical material, the notion of the image of the king on coins and along roads indicates the identity of the sovereign of an area.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the king's or emperor's presence was symbolized by means of the images – they were pointing to the ruler. In this way, coins and signs were representations. The notion of the image of God draws on this interpretative context. But unlike this context, God represented thus is not primarily to be seen as the powerful emperor, but as one that loves. God as love is desiring, and therefore, also vulnerable. This is, however, not possible to realize unless God is represented in a specific manner, namely in Jesus Christ. Christ, as the true representation of God, reveals God as love.

Hence, the primary representative of God is Jesus Christ, as the *true image of God*. In him becomes manifest the mode of the designation that all humans are called to realize. For humans to realize this, however, it is necessary to acknowledge and appropriate for oneself what it means *in practical terms* to be the image of God – and that can be done only in life led as faith, hope, and love. To realize true humanity is to find an adequate shape for how one practices the realities of the human condition. This point, however, should be read as an expression of the point Hegel repeatedly makes, that God realizes Godself in the relationship with humanity, just as humanity realizes itself in the relationship with God. From this point of view, then, the meaning of religion in all its forms and modes, as narrative, ritual, doctrine, sacraments, symbols, artwork and belief, have one thing in common: to mediate this relationship so that it can manifest the close and non-dissolvable character in the best way possible through practices that are shaped by the resources for orientation and transformation.<sup>13</sup> The very fact that human

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is God. Accordingly, the following should not be read primarily as an exposition of dogmatic Christology, but as a way to bring Christology and anthropology closer together in order to develop an experientially based understanding of the *imago Dei*.

**12** Cf. for extensive presentations of these materials KELSEY, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, Vol 2, 922ff. and Gunnlaugur A. JÓNSSON, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research*, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1988).

**13** Even Nietzsche, the most ardent critic of Christianity, realized this from early on: “Christianity is essentially a matter of the heart; not until it is incorporated in us, when it has become our very nature, is a human being a true Christian. The principal teachings of Christianity express merely the basic truths of the human heart; they are symbols, just as the highest must always be merely a symbol of something still higher. To be blessed by belief means no more than the old truth, that only the heart, not knowledge, can make us happy. That God became human merely indicates that the human being should not seek blessedness in the infinite but ground its heaven on earth; the illusion of the supernatural has placed the human spirit in a false relationship to the earthly world: this was a consequence of the childhood of peoples. The glowing youthful soul of humanity accepts these ideas eagerly and darkly pronounces the secret that roots itself in both past and future, that God

beings repeatedly are called to come to terms with what this relationship entails and find the most adequate ways to express it, means that religion as the mediator between God and humanity always are open-ended and dynamic. Moreover, it also entails the constant risk of misapprehension and failure, due to lack of faith and trust in the reality of God as the best condition for fulfilling human life and for providing the best opportunities for flourishing.

### III. The desiring and vulnerable imago Dei

The task of finding a good way to live a human life requires that humans need to come to terms with two basic features: desire and vulnerability. These features do not exist in opposition to each other, but they present us with the constant challenge of figuring out how to deal with them – be it in terms of balance, complementarity, rejection, or negotiation. None of them is better than the other: both present us with challenges by and for themselves, and both also represent challenges to the other. Unchecked desire may lead to hurting others in their vulnerability. However, the attempt to shield oneself from vulnerability may also lead to an unhealthy negation of desires, and a rigid rejection of life qualities that contribute to flourishing and community. Furthermore, the denial of both desire and vulnerability may cause problems for human fulfillment. One can interpret the meaning of religious representations as helping to deal with these tasks, through practices of orientation (What is the best thing to do or be?) transformation (Should I transform the object of my desires or my way of dealing with vulnerability) and reflection (How do I live and relate in the best way possible to others and to God?). Hence, the relevance of religious practices can be identified in how they mediate semiotic resources that shape human lives in ways that allow desire and vulnerability to be an integral part of a good life in community with others.

Desires present humans with the need for orientation (what should I desire?) and transformation (I need to shape my desire differently or orient it elsewhere). One can learn about what one may have good reasons to desire, and why something is not worth desiring within communities and their spaces of learning, communication, and discourse. Christian communities and religious communities in general are such spaces in which one learns to offer reasons for one's choices and preferences with regard to the desires one seeks to realize. At its best, the prac-

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became human. Humanity will become manly through arduous doubts and battles; it recognizes in itself 'the beginning, the middle, the end of religion.'" Here quoted from Daniel BLUE, *The Making of Friedrich Nietzsche: The Quest for Identity, 1844-1869* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 140.

tices and relationships that exist and bear communities are those “in and through which we learn how to become practically rational agents and how to exercise those virtues without which rational deliberation is not possible. But to exclude oneself from those practices and relationships is, by impoverishing one’s moral experience, to deny oneself the possibility of understanding what it is to be such a rational agent.”<sup>14</sup> In other words: desires need a context of community to develop into maturity and rationality.

### III.1 Vulnerability – some basic features

Human lives are fragile and vulnerable. Vulnerability always exposes our integrity and puts it at risk.<sup>15</sup> This fact implies that human life has a tragic dimension. Practices shaped by misguided, corrupted, and distorted desire may cause great evil. So may tragic events that befall us, but which nevertheless do not have their origin in human agency (and are therefore not caused by sin, as theologians would say).<sup>16</sup> Illness, disease, accidents, earthquakes, fire, and different types of loss, including the death of close ones, are part of this tragic dimension. Some of the latter can be remedied by human action, whereas other tragedies seem inevitable in the way they cause suffering.

Theological anthropology serves to interpret human experience, including tragedy. It needs to provide orientation in relation to the question: what does it mean to live a good life? How can human flourishing be possible when we are so vulnerable to misfortune? Vulnerability seems to be at the center of what makes the tragic elements in our lives. All the above negativities are what they are because of the vulnerable character of human existence. Without vulnerability, no tragedy. Because vulnerability is a deeply ambiguous element in this existence, it constantly sparks the need for orientation, transformation, and reflection with regard to the conditions on which human beings live, and how to cope with it. This is unavoidable because to be human is to be vulnerable. Moreover, depen-

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 58.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. KELSEY, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, Vol 1, 282–84. For an extensive reflection on vulnerability with special reference to women’s experiences, see Elizabeth O’DONNELL GANDOLFO, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Criticism of the Augustinian interpretation of all evils as caused by human sin has recently been launched in the comprehensive study by David TRACY, “Augustine Our Contemporary,” in *Augustine Our Contemporary: Examining the Self in Past and Present*, ed. Willemien OTTEN; Susan Elizabeth SCHREINER (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), esp. 51f.

gency and vulnerability go hand in hand. It affects the embodied human, and the psychological and social dimensions of being human, as well.<sup>17</sup>

Although cultural ideals in contemporary Western culture stress the need to be independent of others, and thereby to protect oneself from the inherent vulnerability in relationships with others, there is nothing problematic by being dependent on others as such. To be dependent is a fundamental part of what it means to be human. This is the case for all humans, including Christ.<sup>18</sup> However, the fact that we do not all the time live in, and participate in, relationships that are symmetric and shaped by equality, means that we constantly find ourselves in positions where we are either better off than those who depend on us, or worse off than those on whom we are dependent. *Relationality* involves that we are affected by how others live and what they do, or that we are affecting others by what we do and how we live. The exposure to asymmetry, no matter how it is shaped, means that we must constantly consider how to deal with our own vulnerability or that of others.

Of course, one could try to imagine that it would be possible to be dependent without being vulnerable. That is not the case: to be dependent as a human exposes us to vulnerability because we are not self-enclosed and unaffected by our environment and those with whom we interact. Humans are receptive, responsive, and susceptible to what others do to them – and to be susceptible has positive and negative elements alike. On the positive side, it means that we can empathize with others, participate in their experiences of joy and suffering, and hence, share a common world shaped by emotions, mutual recognition, common tasks, and values. Vulnerability is also related to elements like love and trust – because such phenomena expose us to the care and safeguarding of others. If my love is not recognized, and my trust not met by someone that deserves my trust, I am broken, hurt, or frustrated.

Accordingly, instead of starting out by seeing *sin* as a basic element that constitutes the predicament of the human condition, I argue that the finite, fragile, and vulnerable character of human life is the backdrop against which it is possible to understand *sin* as a theological notion. *Sin* is what affects our vulnerable

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<sup>17</sup> For psychological dimensions of vulnerability, and the relationship to a theological interpretation, see W. Paul JONES, “Suffering into Wholeness: Vulnerability and the Imprisoned Child Within,” *Quarterly Review* 15, no. 3 (1995).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. KELSEY, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, Vol 2, 1012: “Like all human creatures, by virtue of God relating to him creatively, Jesus lives on borrowed breath. In his creaturely humanity, he lives in radical dependence on God’s continual relating to him creatively.” Furthermore, “in his creaturely humanity Jesus is paradigmatic of creaturely bodied humanity generally” (*ibid*, 1015).



state in relationships negatively. But to describe human life as finite and vulnerable does not only imply that there are only endangering or negative aspects to it. As Heike Springhart writes,

Created human life is finite life. It is limited in terms of (life) time, resources, power, and possibilities, and it exists in a limited framework. Talking about finitude means talking about limits, which either may be valuable or threatening. Vulnerability characterizes life as susceptible to harm and transformation, and generally open to others and to the environment and social factors.<sup>19</sup>

There are two important elements here that Springhart links together: the fact that human life is created, i.e., as having its origin in something other than itself, and that created life, as finite and vulnerable, is subject to transformation. The implication from this is that human life, as relational, is vulnerable in both positive and negative aspects, and therefore involved in processes of change, cannot be adequately described as fixed and as something that should be shielded from transformation. When the vulnerability is seen as a feature of the created world, it moreover means that it is identified as positive. To the extent that this is the case, we can be transformed by being affected by our relationships with others and the world around us, and that they can be affected positively by us. Hence, vulnerability is represented in religious symbols like “created,” which makes it possible for us to recognize human life as inherently processual and transformative.

Accordingly, when humans recognize their finitude and vulnerability, they can live better with themselves, and in community with others. Acceptance of vulnerability is crucial for a wise way of engaging in practices with others. But as we shall see, this is by no means an argument for idealizing vulnerability as such. It is a deeply ambiguous phenomenon.

A theological approach to vulnerability can take up the notion of created being as its immediate fundamental context of significance. Vulnerability is part of the created world, and hence, it can be considered as part of what constitutes the goodness of Creation. Accordingly, it is possible to agree with Springhart that vulnerability, finitude, dependence, and fragility are dimensions of God’s good creation.<sup>20</sup> However, despite those forms of vulnerability that testify to God’s good creation, there are also destructive forms of vulnerability that calls for human action and practices that can restrict their impact.<sup>21</sup> Against this backdrop, it

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<sup>19</sup> See Heike SPRINGHART, “Vulnerable Creation: Vulnerable Human Life between Risk and Tragedy,” *Dialog* 56, no. 4 (2017): 382.

<sup>20</sup> “Exploring Life’s Vulnerability: Vulnerability in Vitality,” in *Exploring Vulnerability*, ed. Heike SPRINGHART, Günter THOMAS (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 24.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 25.

makes sense to relate the underscoring of God's good creation and God's willing to redeem this creation to the main representation of God in Christian theology: Jesus Christ. Because Jesus makes God appear as a human being, this representation provides the means for seeing God as related to and taking part in the vulnerable and dependent state of humanity. Accordingly, Springhart speaks of "divine vulnerability addressed in incarnational Christology and God's susceptibility to humanity."<sup>22</sup> The primary instance of this exposition of vulnerability is Christ's birth and his crucifixion, but she also points to the "risk of incarnation that God takes in Jesus Christ."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, she points to how Paul interprets Christ's vulnerability as something that "has a direct impact on human vulnerability and vice versa" when he writes about how believers are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). Hence, she sees physical vulnerability in humans in general, not as a defect of the created body. Within the framework of the semiotics that a Christian point of view represents, it is "the visualization of the life and death of Jesus." Moreover, this close connection between human and divine vulnerability takes vulnerability's cruelty seriously without ignoring its Christological significance.<sup>24</sup> And although "the stigmata of the resurrected Christ are traces of vulnerability and are the signs to prove God's humanity," she holds that "the stigmata lose their destructive character after the resurrection."<sup>25</sup>

The resurrection of Christ as God's representative also opens up to an eschatological perspective that enables a focus on the transformative dimension inherent in the vulnerability. Thus, we can address the tension between the real world and the redeemed world, between creation and new creation, a theme that is closely linked to the Christian vision of an embodied community that transcends what is presently given. "This community is the church as the body of Christ, which is constituted by the awareness and recognition of one's own vulnerability and of the vulnerability of others as the community of the vulnerable, sanctified by the Spirit,"<sup>26</sup> writes Springhart. She continues:

By being the body of Christ, believers not only are vulnerable in an individual sense, but they also carry the stigmata of Jesus Christ. Those are the signs of the vulnerable God, which indicate the transformation of vulnerability in an eschatological sense. The Lord's Supper as the meal of vulnerable members of the vulnerable body of Christ is the remem-

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<sup>22</sup> "Vulnerable Creation: Vulnerable Human Life between Risk and Tragedy," 385. Similarly, KELSEY, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, Vol 1, 308 et passim.

<sup>23</sup> SPRINGHART, "Vulnerable Creation: Vulnerable Human Life between Risk and Tragedy," 388.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 389

branch of Christ's vulnerability and the eschatological outlook toward the transformation of vulnerability.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas it is important to underscore from a theological point of view that vulnerability is a risk, it must also be recognized that it is a resource for a truly human life. "It is the precondition and the expression of trust, mutual respect, and responsibility, and a salutary limitation on the illusion of the feasibility of a successful and perfect life. Vulnerability characterizes human life between risk and tragedy and keeps it open to transformation."<sup>28</sup> Again, we see how there is an inbuilt element of openness and unfinished tasks in human life, that suggests that one has to counter the tendencies that lead to stagnation or petrification by idealizing the *status quo*.

Given the acknowledgment of vulnerability as a resource, it is important to address the problematic element expressed in the desire to overcome or ignore it, by struggling for independence from others, or to develop resilience in the face of it. Not to acknowledge vulnerability as a basic and unavoidable life condition implies that relationships are impeded that only thrive if they build on care, trust, empathy, and love. Western individualism is possible to be interpreted as one way to try to overcome vulnerability. Other ways to cope with it can be identified in attempts to increase resilience or to embrace it without reserve.<sup>29</sup> However, the two latter approaches "fail to come to a sufficiently complex and realistic concept of vulnerability" that takes the ambiguity of vulnerability sufficiently into consideration.<sup>30</sup> Each of them contributes to "a static and isolationist understanding of the human life." They do not offer enough room for the processual element in life and for the mutual character in social life.<sup>31</sup> "Unlike resilience, vulnerability implies both the acceptance of given vulnerable situations and the need to enhance life and deal with risky parts of vulnerability."<sup>32</sup>

Springhart sees the advantage of accepting vulnerability in how it makes it possible to safeguard both "existential and conceptual aspects of calmness and an acceptance of the fundamental openness of life."<sup>33</sup> To embrace the vulnerable character of life is also a means to avoid the impact of surprise it entails. The effect of this is, as already suggested, increased opportunities for flourishing: "Para-

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27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 385.

30 Ibid.

31 "Exploring Life's Vulnerability: Vulnerability in Vitality," 20.

32 Ibid., 23.

33 Ibid., 22.

doxically, it is not the struggle for invulnerability that enhances life and gives room for vitality, but the venture of vulnerability. The venture of vulnerability is not to be confused with a pure acceptance or embracing of vulnerability.”<sup>34</sup> It can imply the courage to weep, the abandonment of pride, and the openness to consolation. Thus, it can also strengthen the susceptibility to change and transformation.<sup>35</sup> “It takes the course of life and the ongoing transformation of life not only seriously, but considers it an essential part of life rather than an endangerment of a certain status of life.”<sup>36</sup>

### III.2 Desire – basic features

Desire constitutes the fundamental need for orientation, transformation, and reflection if it is to provide us with the content of a life led well. Hence, like vulnerability, desire is an open and dynamic phenomenon. Among the main tasks in human life is to find out if, and to what extent, our desires are actually able to realize goodness and provide for flourishing. It is nevertheless beyond question that desire is always a desire for what we assume is good – at least for us personally.<sup>37</sup>

Maurice Merleau-Ponty sees desire as neither the result of an involuntary biological impulse nor a phenomenon apparent to a lucid mind. Humans cannot produce their own desire. Humans cannot and do not say that “I want to desire X” and thus force desire to appear. Desire exists in another type of structure, linked to our way of relating to the world. It expresses itself in intentionality that conditions human existence<sup>38</sup> and in the wills and wants that we articulate. Desire is thus an integral element in the embodied direction toward the world and toward oneself; it is a moment in the human being-in-the-world that exists before subjectivity. Desire emerges spontaneously in the experience of the world as the other, and out of the pre-thematic emotional being-in-the-world. Hence, it is not primarily an element in consciousness, to be appropriated intellectually, but in

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34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 For an analysis of the diverse meanings of ‘good’ and their relationship to desires, see MACINTYRE, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, 13–16, 24–31. An important element in Macintyre’s contribution is how he links his constructive understanding of the neo-Aristotelian connection of desire and the good to human flourishing, and thereby to all human capacities, not only to the immediate desire, but also to rational contemplation. Hence, he also underscores the partly contextual element in the conditions for (the realization of) the good / goodness.

38 Cf. M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 178ff.

the world as this world is given with the body and its perception. This is the reason why we say that it is the other who stirs my desire. Hence, humans do not only desire actively; desire is what happens to humans in passivity as well. Desire is a relational phenomenon.

Thus, it is possible to see desire as something that is prior to, but also informs, faith in different ways. Desire guides and interacts with faith. It is an interplay between the desire for goodness and flourishing on the one hand, and faith and in what we put our trust, on the other hand. This relationship, rooted first in the pre-subjective manifestations of desire, and later in the more or less articulated contents of faith, makes it possible to see religious beliefs as rooted in, informed by, and shedding light on the contents of concrete human experience.

Merleau-Ponty sees desire as a motivating force for our choice of experiences. It opens up the individual to a dimension of value and preferences in its actualization of being-in-the-world. Some relationships, imaginaries, actions, and experiences are preferred over others. These preferences come with desire, and thus, desire directs us toward that which is considered or perceived as valuable, as desirable, and it thereby becomes a constitutive part of human action.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, desire is not only important in erotic moments, but is poured out into the whole of human existence. Only in this way can it also be said to define the human being-in-the-world. Accordingly, desire shapes one's directedness toward the other, or others, in a variety of different ways.

Because desire is always personal, and something related not only to the object but also to the embodied self, it exists in a dialectical structure, in the movement or oscillation between the relationship with the other and one's relationship with oneself.<sup>40</sup> Hence, desire is of crucial importance for a relationship with the other. Yet, it is also vital for the ways in which one is able to perceive oneself, namely through the opportunities which desire opens up by relating to imaginaries, contexts of understanding, and belief. The dialectical structure in desire implies a movement from subjectivity to intersubjectivity and vice versa. Although desire emerges out of the relationship with the other, out of intersubjectivity, its motivating force is always providing the individual with a direction in which one is placed in a specific, definitive situation by desire. Desire demands that one takes on this situation in a specific manner – and thereby realizes a specific mode of being-in-the-world. Thus, desire defines subjectivity and shapes the

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Ulla THØGERSEN, *Krop Og Fænomenologi: En Introduktion Til Maurice Merleau-Pontys Filosofi* (Århus: Systime, 2003), 168–69.

<sup>40</sup> This point is also well articulated by Michelle Voss Roberts, who points to how desire manifests itself in attachment, and manifests how human beings cannot be the source of their own existence. Cf. VOSS ROBERTS, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology*, 42–43.

concrete situation by bringing the individual into relation with that which is exterior to its immediate self.<sup>41</sup> This is the reason why it is important to understand desire as a pre-subjective phenomenon prior to the subjectivity that emerges out of the inter-subjectivity, which in turn allows one to become a subject.

We cannot ignore the implications that these phenomenological features of desire have for how humans engage religious imaginaries and representations in their quest for self-fulfillment and flourishing. Such representations of God and imaginaries of the world provide ample opportunities for perceiving oneself and one's desires in a certain light: sometimes affirming them positively, sometimes making them appear as problematic and in need of adjustment, correction, or negation.<sup>42</sup>

To ignore the desire for the other (whatever it may be) implies not only losing a specific mode of possibility for self-transcendence (since one then also loses the other, which presents itself as the other, the one able to open up one's world in a certain respect). One is then also losing a specific chance for self-relation, for relating to oneself in the modus of desire, i.e., as an individual who directs oneself towards someone or something outside of oneself. The crucial consequence here is that one thereby ends up in a situation (or better: lack of situation) that could be described as absolutizing finitude, namely a finite mode of existence in which the other that is present in desire fails to play any significant role with regard to who one is able to become. Ignorance or repression prevents desire from functioning as an instrument for self-transcendence and genuine other-relatedness. The potential severity of this situation is expressed not only in the fact that one may lose the relation to the other constituted by desire. It is also expressed, e.g., in the repression of erotic desire or the desire manifested in creativity, as such repression entails that we may lose our relationship to ourselves as a body, or as a spontaneous or creative agent.

Erotic desire illustrates this possible opportunity: One can take the situation seriously that this desire constitutes, and realize that the desire in question requires an expression, its own fulfillment in an erotic situation where we not only focus on our own desire as such but rather hand ourselves over to the other. In this act of "handing ourselves over to" is implied an openness for the radical otherness of the situation, an openness for a situation different from the one which was previously there, and a moment where control is lacking.<sup>43</sup> Or we can do the opposite. If we

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41 Cf. THØGERSEN, *Krop Og Fænomenologi*, 170–1.

42 Cf. MACINTYRE, op. cit., Chapter One, on how the understandings and depth of human flourishing are different in an emotivist (individualist) and a community-based (communitarian) approach to desire, goodness and flourishing.

43 Cf. THØGERSEN, *Krop Og Fænomenologi*, 169.

ignore the desire emerging in this situation, we lose the chance for the expression of that desire, but also lose the chance for being open in a manner that may give us a possibility for truly experiencing the other. Hence, to recognize desire is to recognize oneself as a being who is open for what lies beyond the immediate presence of the situation and beyond one's own clearly defined projects.

Against this backdrop, religious faith can be understood as manifesting itself as desire. One has to engage in faith in order to realize the specific type of subjectivity it entails. In faith, one not only expresses the desire of what one wants to be, do, or become. One also expresses what kind of relationships one wants to engage in. Also so in the first instances of an erotic situation: one must express desire if that moment is to become an erotic situation at all. If I do not express my outwardly directed desire to her, she will neither know me in this respect nor the openness that I am inviting her to participate in. When desire constitutes the presence of the other as an erotic partner, it is thus only in the expression of desire that the situation can be realized as what it is – as erotic. But this point can be applied to other types of relationships with others, as well – including the relationship with God.

A possible positive function of enjoying desire beyond its mere gratification appears when we are able to recognize that unfulfilled desire is an insurmountable constituent of human life. This is an enjoyment in which desire nevertheless relates the subject to a reality where its own finitude is affirmed and appreciated as part of what it is to be a human open to the other. Then, desire also serves to remind oneself of one's own finitude. It reveals a being who is more than a self-sufficient self. Desire is, therefore, that which disrupts subjectivity without abandoning it, that which transcends what is conceived in the rational subject's already given understanding of the world. It reminds the self about its origin in the other who gives content to its world, and about that which creates fissures and disturbances in its complacencies. Here the other may appear as a constitutive part, and I am called to appropriate desire in the way I want to lead my life. Hence, desire is not only pre-subjective, but it also has important bearings on how subjectivity is constituted.

Moreover, desire also points to a self that is vulnerable, open, unfinished, exposed to what happens in her passivity, and pursuing the quest for goodness in her activity. Thus, one can see these features also expressed in the desire for God – God as a composite symbol, implying goodness, justice, love, recognition, community, safety, and fulfillment. The anthropological point that desire exposes the human subject as vulnerable, in a precarious situation where it always lives under the risk of lack, misfortune, or the consequences of being misguided in her desires, suggests that desire and vulnerability are closely related. If desire is not guided by some form of moral intentionality or insight, a possible result is the subject's internal fragmentation and personal failure.

Desire and vulnerability are both parts of what constitutes human identity as dependent upon elements exterior to the subject that operate within and beyond (as well as behind) them, but which can never be overtaken or fully integrated into rationality. Ricoeur's analysis of desire moves in a similar direction. Ricoeur locates desire in the "between": between opening and closing, between the vision of the world and a point of view.<sup>44</sup> Ricoeur's emphasis is not primarily on the possibility of the self to become aware of itself (i.e., of subjectivity), but on how desire places the subject outside itself, in the world. His description here is accordingly not very different from the one offered by Merleau-Ponty:

Desire does not show me my way of being affected, nor does it shut me up within my desiring self. It does not speak to me at first of myself because it is not at first a way of being aware of myself, even less an "internal sensation." It is an experienced lack of ..., an impulse oriented toward.... In desire, I am outside myself; I am with the desirable in the world. In short, in desire, I am open to all the affective tones of things that attract or repel me. It is this attraction, grasped on the thing itself, over there, elsewhere, or nowhere, which makes desire an openness onto ... and not a presence to the self closed on itself.<sup>45</sup>

However, Ricoeur also views the functions of desire in relation to the self and the body. Here, he underscores the role of the self as the mediator between the body and the world. The body as "the flesh of desire, does not manifest itself as a closed figure but as a practical mediation, in other words as a projecting body in the same sense that we were able to speak of the perceiving body."<sup>46</sup> The parallel he suggests here between desire and perception is noteworthy. It suggests that both perception and desire, though intertwined as bodily conditioned functions of the self, are both similar in that they are not only anchored in finitude but are also that which allow us to transcend finitude: "My flesh of desire is wholly anticipation, that is, a prefigured grasp or hold, over there, elsewhere, nowhere, outside myself. The desiring body steals away in advance, proffering the *élan* of its flesh to the projecting self."<sup>47</sup>

To understand desire as an integral part of the self's being-in-the-world sheds important light on the role of human finitude in relation to desire. The same finite perspective that shapes the content of the perceiving body engenders an affective equivalent in a desire that may obscure its content. Desire may have a certain type of clarity, but the function of the affections may also obscure and darken it.

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<sup>44</sup> Paul RICOEUR and Charles A. KELBLEY, *Fallible Man*, Rev. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



Hence, desire is linked to the emotional confusion to which it may give rise.<sup>48</sup> Ricoeur's intentions in pointing out this are related to his understanding of the relationship between intentionality and desire. The "clarity of desire" can be found in intentionality. Without intentionality, desire may lead us into darkness. However, Ricoeur speaks here of an intentionality that – in spite of being fully anchored in the perceptive and desiring body – allows us to relate the object to the anticipated states of the self, given in our hermeneutically constituted understanding of the world:

Desire is a lack of ... a drive toward.... The "of" and the "toward" indicate the oriented and elective character of desire. This specific aspect of desire, taken as desire of "this" or of "that," is susceptible of being elucidated – in the precise sense of the word – by the light of its representation. Human desire illuminates its aim through the *representation* of the absent thing, of how it may be reached, and the obstacles which block its attainment. These imaging forms direct desire upon the world; I take pleasure in them; in them, I am out of myself. The image is even more; not only does it anticipate the perceptual outlines of gestural behavior, but it also anticipates pleasure and pain, the joy and sadness of being joined to or separated from the desired object. This imaging affectivity, held in pledge by the affective effigy or by the representative or analogue of future pleasure, ends by bringing me in imagination to the goal of desire. Here the image is nothing other than desire. The image informs desire, lays it open, and illuminates it.<sup>49</sup>

I have italicized the word *representation* in this quote in order to make visible how desire is linked to representations constituted by the imaginations that guide it. Representations and desire work in tandem. Hence, one can say that the desired is worked over by intentionality in order to overcome the immediate character of the presence of the desired object in consciousness. This also suggests that it is the self, by constituting the image of desire in a representation, which opens up to desire as that which enters into its field of motivation. The self's motivation is not given with the desired object alone, but with its relation to the self – *because of what it represents to the self in question*. This is why desire must be appropriated in subjectivity. Representation is the instance that makes it possible. Hence, desire can achieve clarity only from intentions as they are linked to representations. These intentions are shaped by values and preferences that orient the self. "From the standpoint of value, desire may be compared to other motives and thereby

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48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 53–54.

sacrificed or privileged, approved, or reproved.”<sup>50</sup> In this sense, then, we can say, with some qualifications, that desire relates us to the good. Without the clarity established by intentionality, it is not necessarily so. Here, desire is not relinquished but rather refined, in terms of the contribution given with its relation to the good.

Religious representations can contribute to shaping the intentions that clarify desire and guide its realization and eventual gratification. However, if this is the case, one faces the question immediately if religions represent no more than imagined representations of gratification, which have their origin in human lack. Is religious imagery simply the result of perceived lack in the human condition? At this point, we need to move beyond Ricoeur’s analysis, towards what Lévinas calls *metaphysical desire*. Such metaphysical desire does not originate from lack, but rather out of the openness for the absolute other, which is not under control by the subject’s intentionality. “The metaphysical desire does not long for return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves,” Lévinas writes.<sup>51</sup> Desire defined in relation to the ‘I,’ as its lack or need, is desire determined from the position of the same, or from absolutized finitude, to put it otherwise. However, the goodness that emerges from desire must emerge from a context and from a desire shaped not by the self alone. Hence, the above understanding of the clarity of desire in Ricoeur appears apt only if we see that the other who constitutes the self, shapes these intentions also – this other who is never there only to fulfill the need, want, or lack of the desiring self. Thus, metaphysical desire is the strongest possible expression for the basic, non-satisfied character of the human struggle to gratify desire: it is in this form that desire keeps ourselves open to, and deepen our relationship to, goodness, and does so in a way that allows us to transcend the immediately given content of life by remaining open continuously to that which is to come – that which is still open-ended, unfinished, without closure.

The desires one can satisfy resemble metaphysical desire only in the deceptions of satisfaction or in the exasperation of non-satisfaction and desire which constitutes voluptuousness itself. The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.<sup>52</sup>

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50 Ibid., 54.

51 Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 33.

52 Ibid, 34.

It is worth noting that Lévinas here points to how the intention behind metaphysical desire extends beyond everything that can complete it. Only a self that understands itself as more than a mere finite embodied being, self-enclosed and independent, can harbor such desire. This is exactly the mode of self-understanding that religious consciousness mediates. Hence, metaphysical desire abolishes the totality given with the finite self. It opens the finite self to the infinite beyond itself.

## IV. To live as *imago Dei*

The most profound decision Christian theology made is to see every human being as the representation of God – as *imago Dei* – and the true realization of this determination as revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus, human life can be seen as oriented towards something it is not yet – and hence, the calling to be and become the image of God is not only a basic designation on which humans have to understand themselves, it also presents human life with a goal and an aim to be realized. *Humans realize their calling to be and become the image of God by living in faith, hope and love – and among these, love is the most important element, because it is through the practice of love that desire and vulnerability can be handled in a way that represents and makes present the will of God in the world. Thus, God is represented by humans that are created in God's image, as they relate to the world in faith, hope, and love.* This thesis points to concrete practices in the community and for the community as the primary modes in which God's presence can be experienced.

It follows from these initial remarks that not only is it advisable to orient one's life from the task of dealing with desire and vulnerability, but that such orientation also can direct oneself towards processes of transformation. The transformative power that contributes to shaping the way humans can handle in the best way possible these fundamental features is *love*. It is because humans are created in the image of God that it is not only capable of loving (a created capacity), but this is also the reason why human beings are lovable: they are the object of God's unconditional love – and hence, the symbol of God as love points to an experiential element of ultimacy in the midst of human life. Therefore, we can relate the notion of the image of God to the notion of love as a transcendental condition for human experience.

As unconditional, love is spontaneous, not based on merit, achievement, or specific capacities or religious status. It is like grace: spontaneous, impossible to trace back to the conditioning causal elements. However, unconditional love needs to be expressed or stated in ways that presuppose close relations of communication and affirmation. Unconditional love allows a person to experience the

love present at hand as something that is more and different than just a limited instance of something good – it is unlimited.

To see *love as basically unconditioned* has a profound impact on the establishment of God as a powerful symbol as well as for concrete experiences of charity. In Christian theology, such love is often expressed by the notion *agape*. Jean-Luc Marion points to a feature that may deepen our understanding of this feature. He sees unconditional love as prior to ontology because love is in need of nothing to go on; it is not based on being, on reciprocity, or on a return of investment. “The lover has the unmatched privilege of losing nothing, even if he happens to find himself unloved because a love scorned remains a love perfectly accomplished, just as a gift refused remains a perfectly given gift,” Marion writes aptly.<sup>53</sup>

We have hardly any ability to know what it means that God is love without the experience of the love of others. This is why it is so important that God is represented by those who are called to be God’s image. Although some people have not had the chance to experience the love of others, they are still directed towards love, desiring love, desiring both to receive love, and to love others. This underlying desire for love in human life seems to be a basic element in our world-orientation. Love determines human life even when it has not been or is not present. Theologically, it is due to our fundamental relationship with and non-dissolvable participation in God, as Paul Fiddes so beautifully has spelled out: “God is not the *object* of our desire, a thing to be desired, but the one *in whom* we desire the good. We are truly *in* love. God offers a movement of desire in which we can share.”<sup>54</sup>

When love shapes the concrete experience of the world, it also shapes the distinct character of human life and human participation in the world as it is mediated by desire and vulnerability. Thereby, it may also help us to see how the one we call God is present in the other, and someone we participate in the life of through the experiences with them – in ways that are not guided by our immediate need for recognition or affirmation in relationships with others. Thereby, actual experience manifests religious content, and the contents of the everyday may point beyond the immediate present.

To recognize God in the other precludes us from focusing on God at the expense of the other human. This is a point that can be substantiated by Werner Jeanrond’s critique of Augustine’s concept of love. He argues that true love in

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53 Jean-Luc MARION, *The Erotic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 71.

54 Paul S. FIDDES, *Seeing the World and Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2013), 264.

Augustine's view fundamentally is and can only be God's love or the love of God.<sup>55</sup> In this perspective, the other person is subjected to the risk of becoming instrumentalized as a means for displaying my love for God and may lose her status as a true object of love in and for herself. Thus, to live as the image of God is to have faith in God as love. It is to live in a specific manner in the world – directed from a vision of love and oriented with love in mind. From this vision, God may be understood as the infinite source of that which is directing the world toward its future and its consummation in love.<sup>56</sup> The impact of the symbol “God as love” provides a vision for human life that may change the world, and not allow it to be a mere expression of self-interest and the struggle for survival – as a mere evolutionary account can be taken to imply. When we spell out the symbol ‘God’ like this, it becomes clear that whom you believe in matters, and what is ultimate. If we orient ourselves from a vision determined by the symbol “God as love” it means that the basic features of human orientation and transformation relate to the transcendental conditions for specific experiences, and not to some arbitrary empirical elements: God is the fountain beyond life that we can understand as the source of all that is good in life. To speak of God as love is an adequate expression of why this goodness is either present or something we desire or for which we struggle. The vision of love keeps us open for the continuous gifts that we receive through life from others and from participating in the world.

*Faith is the insistent conviction that we lose ourselves and the world God has given us if we orient ourselves basically from another perspective than love.* The risk of losing this way of life is linked to the vulnerable state of all life – not only human life but life on this planet in general: Living truly in a world that is perceived with rich opportunities to love is a way of making the symbol of God change the world. The Christian understanding of God's realization of Godself through those who are created in God's image thus makes possible the strong claim that *to face and engage in reality from the perspective of love is the most rewarding way to lead a life.* Moreover, the creative and sustaining power of love that is present in all realms of reality, and which is struggling to come to the fore in them enables us to uphold a vision of the world and of life that constantly may manifest itself in

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55 Werner G. JEANROND, *A Theology of Love* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), 45–66, see esp. 52. Jeanrond here builds on the critique posited by Hannah Arendt in her work on Augustine.

56 There is also a Christological dimension to this point, that is well expressed by Paul Fiddes in a way that also points to the semiotic character of Christ's work and presence: “So Christ is the bodily text which gives the due to whole text and body of the world. This is not because he is a cosmic mediator, bridging a gap between two worlds, but because the pattern visible in the actions and words of Christ is the rhythm in which the world comes to its fullness.” FIDDES, *Seeing the World and Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context*, 346.

new forms of community, creativity, and to positively shape desire and deal with vulnerability. With the perspective of love as a basis for living, it makes sense to keep on the quest for justice, goodness, and integrity of creation, without giving in to the powers that are threatening the efforts to achieve these aims. In short: to live as if love is the deepest meaning of it all is to lead a meaningful life. It requires faith and hope, but these two are made possible from the perspective of love (cf. 1 Cor 13,13).

In his work on vulnerability, Sturla Stålsett claims that “vulnerability is such a decisive phenomenon since it is an irreplaceable dimension of love.”<sup>57</sup> It is worth noting here that it is love and not vulnerability that is the fundamental notion, and vulnerability is a dimension in love. He holds that love requires vulnerability because it is only a vulnerable human who can love. Moreover, love *creates* vulnerability in the loving subject. Vulnerability also makes love a *sine qua non* for life. Stålsett points to the tacit dimension of desire in relation to vulnerability as well, since there is a risk in love: “In this seeking, there is an opening up. There is receptivity; there is a need. There is a longing. All of this implies vulnerability.”<sup>58</sup> Love creates vulnerability in the loving subject as one can never be sure if the desire it entails will be unrequited.

There is in love an invitation, and a proposal, which may be turned down. There is a trust that may be misused. And this is not just a vague possibility. It is something that happens often. Most people would know from their own life that the risk of having one’s love turned down is part and parcel of the loving experience. It is part of its excitement, its bliss – and its possible sorrow.<sup>59</sup>

The risky business of love appears in the vulnerability that being loved creates in the person who is the object of love as well. Stålsett holds that “love creates a certain sense of vulnerability in the person being loved” because it “seems impossible to turn away from, or even turn down, the love of another person without in some way, at some level, being affected by one’s own act of rejection.”<sup>60</sup>

Stålsett makes some further observations that are profoundly relevant from the point of view of Christian theology. He claims that “only the one who recog-

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<sup>57</sup> Sturla J. STÅLSETT, “Towards a Political Theology of Vulnerability: Anthropological and Theological Propositions,” *Political Theology* 16, no. 5 (2015): 469. Also Voss Roberts underscores the internal relationship between vulnerability, desire and love, and links it to the *imago Dei*, cf. Voss ROBERTS, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology*, 62.

<sup>58</sup> STÅLSETT, “Towards a Political Theology of Vulnerability: Anthropological and Theological Propositions,” 469.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

nizes him or herself to be vulnerable can truly be an agent of love.”<sup>61</sup> This claim is important because it qualifies the conditions under which our desire can appear as something else than seeking itself: it is in being open to the other in vulnerability that love can be practiced. If vulnerability is not part of what shapes desire, the other cannot be loved, and desire becomes a mere tool for self-gratification. The triad love-desire-vulnerability thus appears as significant for shaping what matters in human life in the best way possible. I suggest that this triad is the best point of departure for understanding what it means to live as an image of God.

Moreover, Stålsett makes an important observation to consider from the theological point of view that humans are not justified by their works and merits, but by their relationship with Jesus Christ through faith. He claims that “only the vulnerable person can be truly loved.”<sup>62</sup> His argument for this claim is that someone considered by others to be invulnerable can be an object of admiration, respect, or reverence, but not of love. Moreover, the invulnerable may instead instigate fear as a likely response.<sup>63</sup> Hence, it is not *what* a person can show for herself that makes her loveable, but *how* she shows herself as truly human – as vulnerable. From the point of view of the doctrine of justification, this analysis implies that one can consider the attempt to establish justification by works as an attempt to make oneself resilient to the fundamental condition of vulnerability. Such struggle implies a misguided desire because it is basically a desire for oneself.

Against the backdrop of the above, it makes sense to say, with Springhart, that “Love has an anthropological and a theological dimension and as such, it is a paradigmatic focal point for valuing vulnerability.”<sup>64</sup> She sees divine vulnerability becoming visible in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and in particular, at the Cross. This vulnerability and divine love are connected to each other. Springhart here deepens Stålsett’s reflections as referred to above, by stating that “the transformative power of God’s vulnerability characterizes the incarnation.” In the incarnation, “love increases vulnerability and requires vulnerability.” Therefore,

the incarnation as expression of God’s love increases Divine vulnerability. Also, divine love requires vulnerability in order to really adopt humanity and to be affectable and susceptible to human life in general and the encounters with specific human beings in particular situations of healing, for example. The Cross then reveals the connection of shame with vulnerable love, as part of the passion of Christ is the humiliation that comes with it. The risk of

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61 Ibid., 469.

62 Ibid., 469f.

63 Ibid., 470.

64 SPRINGHART, “Exploring Life’s Vulnerability: Vulnerability in Vitality,” 32.

love is the possibility of shame and of being shamed, while shame at the same time protects vulnerability and increases it.<sup>65</sup>

It makes no sense to speak of vulnerability without speaking about community. If we understand the church as a model for how love can express itself in vulnerability and the desire for justice, we can develop this as a model that is of significance for others than those who take part in the community of believers. Springhart points to how the church is “the community of vulnerable limbs of the vulnerable body of Christ. Love’s vulnerability in the social, communal, and ecclesiological sense is related to the aspects of care and vision.”<sup>66</sup> In this respect, the church is not a self-enclosed entity, but a model for human life in general. The practices of the church in love and its concomitant shaping of human features like desire and vulnerability are relevant beyond its walls.

## V. Conclusion: Love as the fulfillment of desire and vulnerability

To describe the human being from the point of view of desire and vulnerability provides us with a specific perspective on its relational being. It is then possible to see humans not only from the point of view of what and how they are, but also allows us to address the *de-centered* character of the constitution of human life and experience because both desire and vulnerability points to how we exist in connection with something or someone else. Desire and vulnerability both suggest that the “self” exists as conditioned by otherness and by something beyond its own control and power. The theological symbol of *imago Dei* articulates these elements further because it goes directly to the heart of understanding the human being as decentered. It gives the human being a distinct qualification. Humans are willed by God, recognized by God, loved by God. We emerge out of the love of God. This very relation to God gives us our human dignity. It also makes humans *persons*, in the sense that God calls forth a distinctive awareness of our selves as being something more and other than what we actually are and do. We are more than the present. To be a person is to transcend the perceptible positivity of our actions and capabilities – it is to have a distinct identity that is grounded in something not positively given, but yet present – in hope and desire, which relates us

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65 Ibid.

66 Cf. Ibid., 33.



to a future yet unfulfilled. Accordingly, being a person is the opposite of being a *thing*. A thing cannot relate to its own future as the determining factor for its presence. However, human beings can experience themselves and others to be more than things, and also realize that if we conceive of ourselves or others as things, we are degraded as humans – and that there is something lacking in such an approach to humans.

Because being created as a person by God implies that we are called to goodness, to witness, and to realize the good of the loving God who created us, goodness is internal to human life. God made us capable of doing good, leading good lives – and of desiring goodness. Created life is good and God-willed, and our destiny as humans is, from the point of view of the doctrine of creation, that we live according to the desire for the goodness that emerges out of the fact that we are created in the image of God. Hence, *our love and our hope and desire for goodness are related intrinsically to being created in the image of God. Simultaneously, this hope for goodness is not secured once and for all: it does not eliminate the vulnerable situation in which we can still be disappointed, hurt, or injured.*

In this way, the Christian doctrine of human beings as created in the image of God relates God and humans to each other and allows us to develop practices in which the goodness of God and the desire for love and for goodness in human life are closely related. Simultaneously, the destiny of the human being as created in the image of God not only lends the human his or her dignity, but it also offers us the task set for our lives: to be mirrors of the God who created us.

Whereas the description of reality as God's creation spells out humanity's relationship with God and how the human desire for love and loving desire are what orient us and may shape our being in the world, the doctrine of sin spells out how the human being separates itself from God in ways that alter this fundamental situation. God addresses this specific situation concretely in the *incarnation*, by inviting concrete human beings into a concrete and caring community with his representative, Jesus Christ. If Christians do not continue this practice of inviting to such a community after his model, they are not fulfilling their calling to live as images of God and as God's representatives.

Furthermore, while the doctrine of creation affirms the goodness of the human being, the doctrine of sin articulates how the will of the human being is not shaped by love, but instead exposes us to the negative features of vulnerability. Instead, sin implies that human desire is lacking in true *eros*, and exchanged for a desire for what is already present in me and in my perception of how the world should be – a perception not shaped by openness toward others that implies vulnerability. Thereby, we not only attempt to construct our reality and our self in ways that neglect the given qualities of God's creation, but we are also ourselves – tacitly at least – trying to establish ourselves as God, i.e., as the center of reality

and with the power to uphold and control it – by shielding ourselves from the consequences of life's inherent ontological vulnerability.<sup>67</sup> Hence, as sinners, humans not only oppose God – but negate God by excluding love from what constitutes their actual selves. True *eros*, on the other hand, is characterized by the quest for self-transcendence with the aim of achieving liberation that in the past which manifests inadequacy and failure.

The desire that comes from goodness, and which expresses itself in every part of human activity and desire, emerges from our relationship with God. It is an expression of how we, from the outset, are determined by God's love in the innermost core of our being. It is when we separate ourselves from the love of God and stop loving God that our desire goes astray. Then we no longer express to a full extent our calling to be the image of God and to bear witness to God's love and God's desire for goodness and justice.

However, when we relate to our future and see ourselves in a not yet fulfilled destiny, and realize that it cannot be wholly appropriated or fulfilled at present, this attitude safeguards the possibility of living here and now in a way that may recognize the vulnerability of both others and oneself. Humans are not perfect, and to realize this is to be confronted with the vulnerability that is given with the fact that we are dependent upon others, live exposed to the power of others, and in responsibility for them as well. This is one of the reasons why love and the safeguarding function that love has are so important in human life. Love provides us with the opportunity to see ourselves as human beings in our distinct otherness – from different centers and perspectives – and in a way that still recognizes how we are related to other living beings, dependent on them, and partake with them in history. It is only against this background that we can interpret our experience of what it means to be human, harbouring love, desire, and the struggle to become a self and find our own identity by means of faith, hope, and love. Desire and the vulnerability that is open to transformation by faith, hope, and love are thus the very embodied manifestations of God's future in us. It is by manifesting and realizing this fact that humans represent God as *imago Dei*.

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<sup>67</sup> “Sin might now be redefined as an inappropriate attitude toward limits as we both exaggerate and also reject our own limits and the limits of others.” Thus, Deborah Beth CREAMER, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities*, Academy Series (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 33. Here quoted from Voss ROBERTS, *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology*, 68.

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