

Beyond Luther's *Imago Dei*: Imagining a Modest Humanity¹

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Abstract

In this article I use a comparative theology—engaging First Nation insights—to explore the *imago Dei*, and argue that this can only be affirmed by pairing it with the theme of *imago mundi*. I first review the *imago Dei* in dialogue with Genesis 1:26-27 before considering modern scholars' various identifications of it. My point of departure is Luther, who identifies it as being without fear of death and being content with God's favor, and as unique to *homo sapiens*. I propose that humans are also created in the image of the world. In concert with Indigenous thinkers, I note that we fall from this image in our loss of balance in life. This can be seen in Eliade's treatment of the *imago mundi*. He reflects a common prejudice of ignoring liminality, which I consider under the motif of the skin and nakedness. In opposition to Agamben, whose treatment of nudity precludes nakedness as lost and irretrievable, I turn to Luther who described nakedness as our dependence on God and retrievable with eschatological proviso. Yet I contest Luther's assertion that the human alone knows of this nakedness, and point to the earth and God in Christ both as "dressed" in this naked dependence. In summary I note the gift of a comparative theology in allowing theologians to embrace the twin gift of being same and different in the task of engaging our world with a measured humility.

¹ An earlier version of this was delivered May 27, 2014 as the Presidential Address at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Theological Society at Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.

Introduction

In October, 2011, while on sabbatical, I found myself on the Hobbema reserve in Central Alberta. This reserve is now named Maskwacis and is composed of four nations which are among the 16 that are signatories to Treaty Number Six. My sabbatical research question was “What might Christian theologians learn from Indigenous Spiritualities and Worldviews?” In order to facilitate some of this learning, I engaged my High School friend Trevor Swampy. We had recently reconnected via Facebook and he arranged a number of meetings with some local elders, who very generously offered me glimpses into a way of being about which I knew next to nothing. I was continually awed, humbled, and confused by what I heard. I felt as if I was walking on holy ground, or rather, I felt as if I was being taught that ground is holy and all of Mother Earth is best traversed with bared feet. On one of these occasions I found myself in the company of John Crier.

This was an especially auspicious meeting. As was the case with many of these encounters, I would get a call from Trevor, who would invite me to join him in 20 minutes or so at this place or that. I would jump in my rental car and travel to what was then Hobbema from Ponoka, my hometown where I was visiting. On this particular occasion, Trevor had proposed a meeting with John, who had mentioned that he was about to have a circle at the Pe Sakestew Centre, a low security prison on the reserve. Indigenous inmates from across western Canada ended up in this alternate sentencing program.

We arrived, made our way through the requisite security and met a handful of inmates interested in learning how Native Spirituality relates to Christianity. The format of the evening involved me asking a series of questions, and John would offer some thoughts, and invite further question and conversations. It was memorable for a number of reasons, but the interchange that most impacted me was John’s teaching on the human condition. He said that this is where native spirituality differed from Christianity in the most dramatic fashion. He iterated that there is no fall from Eden story in Indigenous spirituality. As he put it, and as I have since heard from different people in different first nations: the human is born whole, and stays whole by walking in a good way—keeping ceremonies that mend the ruptures of our life—so as to die whole. There is no original sin, and no consequent need for redemption in the Christian sense.

Of course, my inner and outer Lutheran chaffed, but I bit my tongue and listened hard. In fact, I am still listening as I think through what it means to be human as I continue to ask my sabbatical question. In what follows I engage the thought of one of my spiritual ancestors, Martin Luther, and ask hard questions of him as he asks hard questions of us. In sum, I will explore the theme of *imago Dei*, and argue that in a time and place such as ours, this can only be affirmed by pairing it with the theme of *imago mundi* to the end that only in this way are we

able to imagine a modest theological anthropology: one that respects the integrity of God's creative and life giving work with Mother Earth.

Imago Dei: Imaging God

The Imago Dei and Genesis 1:26-27

Christian and Jewish readers of Holy Scripture find support for the theme of *imago Dei* in the Priestly writer's account of creation in Genesis 1:1—2:4a. In what follows I will draw attention to some textual work by Biblical scholars before exploring a theological treatment of the same under the tutelage of Luther and in conversation with some theological insights from contemporary thinkers as I consider Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Westermann provides a brief overview of theological treatments of the *imago*, noting that biblical scholars, in the main, do not imagine that it has been lost as a result of the fall.² It functions within the text to identify the wholeness of the human, and so iterates that the human is unique among God's creations as having the capacity for partnership with God.³ Westermann notes that biblical scholars generally avoid a Christological reading of this text, and invite us to consider its *Sitz im Leben*, which points to the possibility that the text is borrowed.⁴ Von Rad suggests that the theme of the *imago Dei* per se was related to the ancient practice of Sovereigns setting up images of themselves throughout their reign as a ways to enact their rule.⁵ The text, then, stands as a startling proposal: divine sovereignty is signaled in the stewardship of creation by humanity as a whole rather than by any one nation, or people group. J. Richard Middleton further qualifies this qualification when he notes:

The democratization of the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1 thus constitutes an implicit delegitimation of the entire ruling and priestly structure of Mesopotamian society (and especially the absolute power of the king). In the Genesis vision, it is ordinary humans (and not some

2 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 148.

3 Ibid., 150, 157.

4 Ibid., 155-56.

5 Ibid., 151.

elite class) who are understood to be significant historical actors in the arena of earthly life.⁶

Middleton notes that this perspective radically counters the Mesopotamian worldview with which the text is in contention. It presumes all have direct access to God.⁷ Moreover, humans “as *imago Dei* are thus not only priests of the Most High, they are (if we may dare to say it) God’s living cult statues on earth.”⁸ We are God’s reminder to ourselves that *God* is sovereign. Brueggemann notes that the human alone is the object of direct divine speech, which indicates a higher degree of intimacy accorded the humans than the rest of creation from Genesis 1.⁹ He also underscores the manner in which this text supports the impossibility of imaging God—since humans are the irreducible image of God and are beyond representation in our totality. The text, thus, anticipates the prohibitions of idolatry.¹⁰ The image of God is to be predicated of human-kind, with the astounding assessment that humans alone disclose something of God.¹¹ But we dare not leave it at that insofar as a theological accounting of who we are (a theological anthropology) that does not attend to where we are (a theology of creation) leaves the human with license to do as she will with planet earth, a theme I will take up in earnest after first attending to the reception of the theme of *imago Dei* in its various modes.¹²

Identifying the Imago Dei

Ian McFarland provides a very fine summary of the treatment of this text throughout the history of its reception in the tradition.¹³ He notes that the *imago Dei* is understood in the history of the tradition in the following categories: 1) the *imago* references a human capacity, such as intellect, will, freedom etc.; 2) it references human relationality; 3) it points to Christ. In fact, all three might be engaged by a given thinker, but in many systematic theologians, the latter is the touchstone: Jesus is the image of God. Yet, as McFarland notes, in engaging the work of Mary McClintock Fulkerson, identifying the *imago Dei* with Jesus introduces more

6 J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 204.

7 Ibid., 207.

8 Ibid.

9 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 31.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 32.

12 See Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 262. Middleton provides a helpful critique of the too common propensity to imagine creation as creation-by-combat, wherein evil is given an ontological foundation as the necessary over-against of God’s wrestling creation into being wherein God is thus imaged as sovereign (250-52). Instead, Middleton identifies the Divine to be imaged under the motif of generosity (271-97).

13 Ian McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 2-4.

questions than answers:¹⁴ the identity of Jesus as God and human is perplexing and hardly perspicuous. Furthermore, Jesus does not solve God for us, and so the *imago* remains an enigma, which is, finally, a good thing. Yet, all three of these solutions—both on their own and in variation thereof—have the unhappy consequence of allowing a certain hubris to breed in humanity. In order to confront this, I now turn to one of my favored conversation partners, Martin Luther, in order to find a vantage point from which to expand our assessment of the human in a manner faithful to the tradition, yet respectful of the earth.

Luther and the Imago Dei

From the outset, it is good to recall that when reading Luther, systematic theologians are well advised to loosen their ties, to let down their hair, to do whatever it takes to make vexation endurable. Luther was no systematic thinker—at least in the sense that this signals a neat and tidy thinker—and so was more than content to put contentment to rest. This is not to say his writings and musings were without a trajectory. Clearly all he writes is in service of the gospel and to advance its liberating message: God’s righting the wrong of the human condition in Christ and in so doing making new all of creation. For Luther, this message is articulated Scripturally, and so narratively. A story is told that does what stories do and good stories move people to the places they need to be; often by laying bear our condition, which is decidedly unsystematic. Stories are, in the words of Indigenous author Thomas King, all we are.¹⁵ First Nations know well that it is the storied world that provides healing for our Mother, the earth, and its inhabitants, and so to walk in a good way always involves telling a story. This is not a bad way to read Luther: as a story teller, who sees truth emerge in the faithful articulation of what is seen and heard, which seems, to me, to be precisely what Scripture does. So, in what follows, I simply bring to the fore two unsettling sets of insights Luther advances in his exegesis of the creation story in Genesis. The first addresses the question of the nature of the *imago Dei* and its propriety to the human. The second addresses its loss.

The Propriety of the Imago Dei for Humans

What is the *imago Dei* for Luther? We read that Luther was rather nervous about identifying the *imago* with any human virtues, or faculties, as per Augustine or other ancient authors. He writes:

If these powers are the image of God, it will also follow, that Satan was created according to the image of God since he surely has these natural endowments, such as memory and a very superior intellect

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵ Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2003), 2.

and a most determined will to a far higher degree than we have them.¹⁶

Luther does not identify human powers with the *imago*, yet understands that the qualities of the intellect as well as the qualities of the body were enhanced by the *imago* to the end that human sight was perfect and human insight was profound; that human strength bested lions and bears and Adam and Eve's strength of character cannot even be imagine by us today. But these characteristics still do not speak specifically to the *imago*. Luther writes:

Therefore my understanding of the image of God is this: that Adam had it in his being and that he not only knew God and believed that God was good, but that Adam lived a life that was wholly godly; that is, he was without the fear of death and any other danger and was content with God's favor.¹⁷

We see, then, that Luther marries two themes in this definition: being without fear of death or danger (a kind of confidence in body) and being content with God's favor (a well settled soul). This latter is significant in that the phrase "God's favor" recurs in Luther's writing and references not only God's beneficent acceptance of the human as she is, but more importantly it speaks to God's self-giving in creation proper.¹⁸ To know the favor of God is know that God sees you as a child born from her own womb and so bearing something of God's own character. The favor of God is, for Luther, both God's gracious gaze upon her children and what that gaze renders. This latter is more important than first obvious because Luther notes that the human is lovely not because of our intrinsic loveliness, but because God's look renders the human lovely. God doesn't see passively, but creatively. And what is true of sight is also true of speech. We read in his reflections on the creation of the lights in the sky by saying "let there be":

16 Cf. Martin Luther, *Luther's Work American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955, 1986), hereafter referenced as LW. LW 1, 61. The question of the relationship of the *imago Dei* to the term original righteousness is pertinent. In the Genesis lectures, Luther does not simply equate them, nor discuss them as different. When he speaks of original righteousness in his discussion of Genesis 3, however, he identifies it as "to love God, to believe God, to know God, etc." (Ibid., 165), and so we see that it is nearly the same. Moreover, the two images of corruption and loss that we see in his treatment of the *imago Dei* are also used with the theme of original righteousness. What is especially important is that this original righteousness is deemed to be a part of nature, and its corruption/loss results in the corruption of the natural part of all human faculties (165). Original righteousness, then, is a part of human nature rather than an adornment. Oswald Bayer, in discussing the *imago Dei*, identifies it relationally with the given-ness of the human and her capacity to hear the word. Insofar as the *imago Dei* is corrupt she hears the wrong message. See Oswald Bayer, "Being in the Image of God," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 27/1 (Spring 2013): 80-86.

17 LW 1, 63.

18 Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism" in *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 124.

God does not speak grammatical words. He speaks true and existent realities. Accordingly that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God. Thus sun, moon, heaven, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc.—we are all words of God, in fact only one single syllable or letter by comparison with the entire creation.¹⁹

The notion that each extant in creation is but a syllable in a divine discourse renders two results: first, each part matters and second, our part only makes sense in the sounding of the whole. It is significant that each star is a saying of God, as is each quark. There is something profoundly leveling about this, but yet Luther holds forth something peculiar about the place of the human in this, and so—at this point—writes in concert with the Christian tradition. As he comments on the establishment of the Sabbath he notes that the human

was especially created for the knowledge and worship of God; for the Sabbath was not ordained for sheep and cows but for [humans], that in them the knowledge of God might be developed and might increase.²⁰

So, on the one hand we see a radical flattening of creation: all of creation is born by the Word and reflects that. In fact, in these same Genesis lectures, he writes that “The word is present in the very body of the hen” and in his Preface to Psalms 1 and 2 we read concerning all creatures that they are “watching and listening and paying attention to the Word of God (for it is correct to believe that everything reveres the Word of God, through it was created, except for the [human] and the devil)”²¹ So, something of a space is created between these two truths. The human is special, but not. This paradoxical truth *is* the *imago Dei*, but has it been lost?

The Imago Dei: Lost or Not, or . . . ?

Here again, as with his treatment of the specialness of humanity we experience Luther speaking out of both sides of his mouth. On the one hand he writes:

Our adversaries today maintain the foolish position that the image and similitude of God remain even in a wicked person.

On the other hand he continues:

After sin all these things were marred to the extent that all creatures and the things which were good at first later on became harmful on account of sin.²²

19 LW 1, 21, 22.

20 LW 1, 80.

21 LW 14, 281.

22 LW 1, 90.

So, while Luther speaks of the *imago Dei* as lost—no longer present to the human—he also describes it as marred: present, but broken. Elsewhere he describes the *imago Dei* as “obscured and corrupted.”²³

But to be present and broken is radically different than being utterly lost and without presence. To be certain, Luther does hold forth the possibility of *imago* being restored for Christians: in both senses of the word: being returned to its place and being returned to its condition, yet in a fragmentary fashion.²⁴ An eschatological proviso obtains even in this more optimistic vein.²⁵

In sum, something of an aporia arrives in my mind as I read Luther on the *imago Dei* in his commentary on Genesis. On the one hand the human’s place in creation is radically qualified, and on the other there is a kind of specific, if not special, dignity accorded it. Likewise the perdurable character of this same *imago* is uncertain. In these perplexing assertions something of a gap, or a wound, or a fissure arrives. A boundary is rendered permeable and therein appears an invitation for exploration of the nature of this skin we live in: where does the human begin, and where does she end?

Imago Mundi: Imaging the World

A World in Miniature

Let me use Luther, once again, but now as a launching pad that will take us beyond Luther. In his treatment of the first chapter of Genesis wherein he writes of the differences between the animal that is human and the remaining animals. We read:

In the remaining creatures God is recognized as by [God’s] footprints; but in the human being, especially in Adam, [God] is truly recognized, because in [Adam] there is such wisdom, justice, and knowledge of all things that he may rightly be called a world in miniature.²⁶

“A world in miniature.” This is most interesting way to imagine the human, and one that serves as something of a counter-point to the theme of *imago Dei*; a counter-point that does not necessarily undo, or undermine the *imago Dei*, but simply reflects the astounding reality that the human is world. Composed of water, iron, nitrogen, etc., we share much with our fellow animals. But to stake out our relationality with the other animals is not yet enough. In Wayne Grady and David Suzuki’s marvelous book “Tree: A Life Story” they describe the link between *homo sapiens* and the Douglas Fir. In the work they explore the manner in which

23 LW 1, 65.

24 LW 1, 64.

25 LW 34, 139.

26 LW 1, 68.

the said fir furnishes us with energy via its conversion of Brother Sun's rays. They write of a certain Donald Peattie, who in his student days extracted chlorophyll from a plant, and in peering at it discovered its make-up to be eerily familiar. He saw that chlorophyll was likened to hemoglobin. We read:

The one significant difference in the two structural formulas is this: the hub of every hemoglobin atom is one atom of iron, while in chlorophyll it is one atom of magnesium'. . . . Chlorophyll is green blood. It is designed to capture light; blood is designed to capture oxygen.²⁷

To be a world in miniature is, then, to be made in the *imago mundi*. We reflect the world as surely as we reflect God; but it is also important to note, from the outset, that we reflect the world as poorly as we reflect God. Perhaps you noticed that Luther commended *Adam*—that is the Edenic Adam—as the *microcosmos par excellence*. Fallen humanity fails in this fashion, and so as we explore this notion we do so recognizing that one of the things that makes us “special” is our failure to live up to our potential as animals: our failure to live in integrity with creation, our failure to live simply, our failure to live within our means. The Indigenous thinker Taiiaka Alfred says it well as he addresses the need for First Nations to take leave from certain Settler sensibilities:

The challenge we face is made up of specific patterns of behaviour among Settlers and our own people: choices made to support mentalities that developed in serving the colonization of our lands as well as the unrestrained greed and selfishness of mainstream society. We must add to this the superficial monotheistic justifications for the unnatural and misunderstood place and purpose of human beings in the world, an emphatic refusal to look inward and an aggressive denial of nature.²⁸

Without doubt Luther and his heirs have contributed to this “aggressive denial of nature” yet it must also be recalled that Luther did not imbibe modernity and so can be read against the current of too much interpretation of his thought. I propose that this theme of the human as the world in miniature, this *imago mundi*, might serve such a project. It is also important to recall that this theme of *imago mundi* has had some traction in the world of religious studies; and so as I imagine a theological deployment of this phrase I first explore its use in one of the preeminent theorists of religion, Mircea Eliade.

27 Wayne Grady and David Suzuki, *Tree: A Life Story* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone Books, 2004), 68.

28 Taiiaka Alfred, *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 102.

Mircea Eliade and the Imago Mundi

In his provocative book *The Sacred and the Profane* Mircea Eliade addresses these two categories in his title, recognizing how the strict separation of the sacred and profane in modernity was not germane to ancient cultures. This is nowhere more apparent than in pre-modern construals of space, of no small importance for discussing the *imago mundi*. In discussing space, Eliade notes that for pre-modern cultures all space is holy, but some spaces are more holy than others.²⁹ The great Ojibway storyteller Basil Johnston says the same as he describe women and men who are especially sensitive to Kitchi-Manitou:

With their senses, nay their entire beings, awake and alive to the world, men and women discovered the presence of Kitchi-Manitou. Certain precipices, recesses in woods, ravines, waterfalls, caves, or valleys were infused with a greater presence of Kitchi-Manitou than were others.³⁰

Sensitivity to the sacred and its weighty presence on the land marks First Nations and those who have not set up an impermeable wall between the sacred and the profane. Religious ceremonies celebrate this. John Crier, whom I mentioned above, told me that Cree ceremonies generally retell the creation story. Creation and space are fundamental categories in Indigenous thought. Eliade is also very interested in the connections between space and the narratives of the world's founding. He writes:

It must be said at once that the religious experience of the non-homogeneity of space is a primordial experience homologizable to a founding of the world.³¹

What Eliade suggests is that the recognition of sacred space alerts us to the world as created. His use of “homologizable” is significant in that it carries quite a bit of weight in Eliade’s work on the *axis mundi*. The *axis mundi* points to a central space in rituals, or nature, which functions to open the human to the beneficent powers above and the malevolent powers below.³² He notes that the “*axis mundi*, seen in the sky in the form of the Milky Way, appears in the ceremonial house in the form of a sacred pole.”³³ This high point in the temple references the founding of the world, and so temples function as cyphers of creation. But Eliade recognizes

29 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001), 20.

30 Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Press, 2001), 6.

31 Eliade, *The Sacred*, 20-21.

32 *Ibid.*, 39.

33 *Ibid.*, 35.

that this identification of what some traditions call “thin spaces” is not restricted to temples alone. He writes concerning the human house:

The house is not an object, a “machine to live in”; *it is the universe that the [human] constructs for [the self] by imitating the paradigmatic creation of the gods, the cosmogony.*³⁴

So the temple and the house share a construction that mimics the creation of the world, but still more is asserted. He goes on to note that the human’s “dwelling is a microcosm; and so too is [the human’s] body.”³⁵ In sum, Eliade propose a homologation of cosmos/house/human body. These three entertain a semantic overlap. There is a certain convertability of these sacred realities in the minds, the eyes, and the touch of the ancient peoples. I have to admit that I am quite excited by this idea, the notion that my home can project the cosmogony; the idea that my *corpus* embodies the Big Bang; the idea that it is not enough to say that I am a person in the world, but that it is also true that the world is a person in me. Because the world is a person in me I am an *imago mundi*. Yet there is something I find somewhat disconcerting in Eliade’s configuration of this axis mundi, this *imago mundi*. Consider his articulation of the life of the religious human:

It is [her] familiar everyday life that is transfigured in the experience of the religious [woman]; she finds a cipher everywhere. Even the most habitual gesture can signify a spiritual act. The road and walking can be transfigured into religious values, for every road can symbolize the “road of life,” and any walk a “pilgrimage,” a peregrination to the Centre of the World.³⁶

This motif of centre is recurring in Eliade’s work and is married to the image of highest point.³⁷ This is architecturally encoded in temples and houses both. The high centre is where God is to be found. Of course, in light of the homologation, then, one might expect the high centre point of the human body too—hat is, the head—to be the *locus sanctus*. This is probably not a very helpful thing to dwell upon, and is especially troublesome in his identification of the cross on Mount Golgotha as Christianity’s elevated centre, and so a point of contact with God by virtue of being high and centred. This theme can be contested from two directions. Many feminists theologians and their allies have rightly critiqued those exaltations of the cross whereby suffering is glorified and those who suffer are sainted when they ought to be aided. From my own faith perspective, Eliade’s articulation of

34 Ibid., 56-57 (italics original).

35 Ibid., 172.

36 Ibid., 183.

37 Ibid., 38-39.

the cross in this key is highly problematic in that it undermines the fundamental message of the cross: God chooses to be recognized in suffering as love.³⁸

The cross, in this theological tradition, is not so much a *locus sanctus* as the site of God's abandonment of God, and so the paradox of God's decentering of God. In a fashion, the cross, as a horrific spectacle draws our eyes to it so that we look away. The cross decenters us and if we want to imagine what decentering looks like on the human body, we will need to turn our gaze away from the head, that highest and central site of disembodied spirituality, and look instead at the skin, the locus of orifice, of wound, of interaction that wraps the body round and puts in place even the head. So I turn, now, to the skin as the meeting site par excellence of the *imago Dei* and *imago mundi*; as I do, I ponder the possibility of imagining a modest humanity, starting with the skin.

Imaging a Modest Humanity

Luther on Nakedness

In light of pertinent and important critiques—from both theological and other quarters—of humanity's puffed up sense of self, what is the way forward in imaging a modest humanity? In the above section I spoke of the need to add to the definition of the human as *imago Dei* the theme of the *imago mundi*. How might these two be woven together in a way that does justice to justice, that is in a way that attends to the message of the cross wherein God is especially interested in the marginalized? Let me begin again with Luther. In his treatment of the Genesis 3 Luther makes the interesting observation regarding the primal pair's embarrassment regarding their nakedness. In verse 11 God asks Adam who told him he was naked, and God then asks him if he has eaten from the forbidden tree. Luther comments:

Here Adam's conscience is roused by the real sting of the Law. It is as if God said: "You know that you are naked, and for this reason you hid. But your nakedness is my creation. You are not condemning it as something shameful, are you?" . . . Here, Adam pressed hard in this manner was in the midst of death and in the midst of hell. He was compelled to confess that nakedness was not evil, for it had been created by God. On the other hand, he realized that evil was this: that now he had a bad conscience because of the nakedness in which he had previously glorified as in a unique

38 Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 206.

adornment, and that he was now terrified by God's voice, which he had previously heard with utmost pleasure.³⁹

Nakedness is described by Luther as an adornment, a unique adornment; this is most interesting place to begin thinking about modesty. Modesty, in contemporary parlance, is generally associated with clothing, and plenty of it. We dress modestly, yet Luther here reminds us that once *undress* was our unique, God-given and modest adornment. What might we do with this, this theme of nakedness?

Agamben on Nudity

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his little book entitled *Nudities* discusses the theme of the nakedness of the primal pair. He makes some important philosophical and theological observations that may be of help as we rethink nakedness as an adornment. He notes that the theologian Eric Peterson makes a distinction between nakedness and nudity. Nudity only appears after the fall, when eyes have now been opened.⁴⁰ Agamben connects this appearance of nudity with the loss of grace. Grace, here, is seen as a kind of clothing.⁴¹ Agamben then works through the reflections of Augustine and Cajetan in conversation with Peterson to explore how, after human sin, nakedness is really a kind of place-holder concept, or perhaps a transcendental. Nakedness cannot be observed, while nudity can. Nakedness is the condition for the possibility of nudity, but is beyond the realm of our experience. Nakedness is lost, and can only be thought of as what once was but can now no longer be. Nudity, on the other hand, speaks to the human condition as that moment of exposure, when a thing's knowability is revealed. He writes:

The nudity of the human body is its image—that is, the trembling that makes this body knowable but that remains, in itself, ungraspable. Hence the unique fascination that images [of nudity] exercise over the human mind.⁴²

The nudity of the human body—he identifies it with trembling—makes the body knowable but not graspable. Elsewhere he identifies nudity with the appearance of appearance.⁴³ He also calls it the arrival of disclosure.⁴⁴ But what is disclosed is not nakedness—the naked body—but rather the removal of clothes. We cannot see a body clothed in grace, which is what the body was before sin. Grace was an adornment to the natural body, and so its boast, but we can know nothing of

39 LW 1, 176.

40 Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 58-59.

41 *Ibid.*, 59-60.

42 *Ibid.*, 84.

43 *Ibid.*, 86.

44 *Ibid.*, 81.

this naked body, this place holder, this transcendental. I must admit that I am not altogether happy with this understanding of nakedness. It hardly seems satisfying to know that disclosure only reveals a more primordial closure; to know that there is a hidden, a hiding mode of being human that is lost forever, beyond reach and finally only construed, or constructed in the key of lament. Is that all there is? I want to move this forward a bit using Luther, but in a mode of contestation, at least eventually. First, though, I must explain why I use Luther to go beyond Luther.

Beyond Luther: In the Skin

Unlike some of his Catholic interlocutors, Luther did not see the *imago Dei* as an addition to the human, something super-added, but instead as constitutive of her. This way of being—without fear of death and content with God’s favor—was what it meant to be human. Nakedness as adornment speaks to this because skin is the dress of nakedness. I like this bit from Luther, but what I don’t like is that it is defined by Luther as an adornment unique to the human. I protest his claim that nakedness as an adornment is unique to the human. It seems to me that living without fear of God and in gratitude is predicated of the cosmos and her members that laud the God who made them. The earth, too, is naked. In fact, so is God. The human, the earth, and God all are naked. Christ on the cross is God naked, as was the lot of an executed criminal in 1st century Rome. But beyond that, God is naked in laying bare what God-forsakenness means to God. God is vulnerable on the cross, and so we know that nakedness as adornment is not unique to *homo sapiens*. In fact, I contend that we need to look away from ourselves to understand what nakedness is.

The nakedness of the human is an adornment precisely because it is the meeting place of the self and other—the divine and cosmic other—in the skin. Skin needs to be exposed for nakedness to be disclosed. The skin is that organ of the human body that facilitates touch, the means whereby the aches and pains, the pleasures and passions of the self both impress and express our interaction with the world and God. Skin is humanity in the mode of liminality, and while it does not eschew the possibility of a human core, a *coeur*, a heart, it negotiates with it. There is no center without circumference; no focus without margins; no *entrée* without an edge, and our skin is our edge. Our skin makes us edgy. The edge of the human body is shaped by its skin and so this pliable cover of the *corpus* continually reconfigures the center. The center of my body moves as my feet leap from the burning sand that scorches my skin. The skin of the church, in like fashion, is where Christ is and since it is the edge that locates the centre, the church’s middle point is never static—but always under negotiation. A modest church is one which recognizes that it is its skin and it only knows where it is, only knows what it is by exposure. Insofar as the church lays bare its body as broken, it gives

the world a token of what it means to be human. Of course, it is not only the church that has this task of pointing to a more authentic humanity, but the church is most surely given this task: to be in its skin, to be at its edge, to negotiate a centre that is nomadic and so to be a sign of manifest modesty.

In sum, a modest humanity is a naked humanity, a people who know that they are made in the image of God and in the image of the world. The unique adornment of the human, according to Luther, is her, is his nakedness: a sign of relationality, of vulnerability, and of utter dependence on God. But where does that leave the beginning of this my essay, my attempt to think through that elder's understanding of the human as born, not in sin, but in community, where rituals shape and reshape its members so that they walk in a good way? I will restrict my comments to two. The first addresses the need to embrace difference, the second the need to address continuity.

Being the Same, Being Different

Part of the gift of a comparative theology—a theological method that is interested in and informed by other religious perspectives—is the affirmation that difference is scripted into this play that is life, and we have to leave its resolution to the play-writer, so to speak. But at the heart of this drama, is the understanding that I do not need to flatten difference, and can indeed celebrate it. So, the fact that some of my Indigenous friends do not sign on to the diagnosis of original sin in considering the human condition is no reason to wring my hands, but an occasion for me to think through the consequences of this belief in my life. And for that, I give those who think differently from me thanks. The world is richer for its diversity because a monoculture is susceptible to disease. This is an important learning for all disciplines, including theology. But is difference all there is? Can we imagine a unity in community?

Clearly, learning to live together is also critical to the flourishing of human and non-human life. Settlers need to learn to live with our Indigenous hosts, and from them we need to learn to live with land. Christians, in the main, haven't been so very interested in learning from other religions, although there are important and celebrated examples to the contrary. More often, alas, Christendom has been patronizing. But the disestablishment of Christianity gives us a new vantage point as our sense of entitlement slowly erodes, as this mighty ship, corroded and compromised not so slowly slips into oblivion, and we—survivors few—arrive barely alive on a shore that looks vaguely familiar: we have finally come to be where we are. Yet this land now looks foreign, frightening and we know not how to survive. And so we know that now is the time to ask the people of land how to walk on it in a good way. What can they teach us? I asked this very question of John Crier and he told me: Indigenous people can teach Christians to be free. What did he

mean by that? Well, in the course of our conversation we discussed how First Nations were flexible in keeping their ceremonies. So, for example, going clockwise, or counter-clockwise around a circle is not absolutely determined. Rituals are determined by a particular land, or territory and the rituals she commends. In sum, do what you do in dialogue with the territory and its residents. As I have thought about that, I have realized that our first task in this life long walk is to figure out where we are. So, we might begin with this question: where are you, where am I? Where are we? In a way, John told me: “Get to know the lay of the land where you are and you have begun in a good way.” It is given to us to learn to listen to this land, and it is the people who know this land best who can best school us in this careful listening.

What kind of continuity can we discern between the religious worldview of our hosts and our own settler sensibilities in the above peregrination about the themes of *imago Dei* and *imago mundi*? Well, I suppose we can imagine that when we live authentically, we live with vulnerability, we live in our skin, where the *imago Dei* and the *imago Mundi* meet. Difference does not preclude this task of learning to live in our skin, where we are, in harmony with the land our feet caress. And together, with them, we will learn to humbly image the Creator who so lovingly makes us, and our Mother, the earth, who so generously hosts us. Together we will learn to live in our skin, modestly.