

How is gender related to the human person who is made in the image of God?

1. Introduction

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over [a]all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that [b]moves on the earth."

According to Genesis 1:26-31, God created humankind. He created them as male and female in his image, and after God blessed them, he saw that everything he had made was good – indeed, it was very good. Men and women (male and female) were called to rule, multiply, and nurture children (Wood 2019:1).

I will examine the concept of gender and how the concept of the *imago Dei* can symbolise inclusion and fundamental human dignity. Human identity has two pronounced dimensions, namely relational and substantial dimensions. Our identities are located in the core of our characters as being created in God's image (Lidums 2004:78). We are not only created in God's image but as God's image, which is significant for the dignity and identity of all human beings. I am convinced that more dialogue on gender and the image of God can and will lead to a better understanding and acceptance of other human beings, regardless of their worldviews or gender identity. Why this topic? I often grapple with how LGBTQIA2+ persons suffer under stigmatisation, prejudice, and social exclusion, as if they are excluded from being human and therefore created in the image of God. Therefore, I make a case for greater inclusivity within Christian thinking on gender and human identity regarding sexual and gender minority groups.

I will not venture into biological, psychological, or legal discussions, nor how Christians should react or relate to sex and gender. When I refer to sex and intersex, sex will point to the division of humans as either male or female concerning their reproductive functions. When I refer to

genders and LGBTQIA2+, which is the umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, and allies, it will include terms such as masculine, feminine, man and women. The aim is to provide how gender and the *imago Dei* concepts can symbolise inclusion and fundamental human dignity.

Before moving on, I need to clarify some terms. Sex and gender are not the same. Sex is biological, and gender is a social construct. Since the late 1970s, researchers have started differentiating sex and gender as two separate terms. The essentialist view of gender states that identity that is inherently universal, immutable, and biologically determined (sex as one's sex organs and chromosomal makeup). The binary view of the sex of male and female and intersex does not include those who do not fit into these categories. The constructionist view of gender holds the view that gender is socially constructed thus, influenced by society and culture (De-Francisco & Palczewski 2014:11). Arquilla and Newman (2021:n.p) define sex and gender as follows:

"Sex" refers to the physical differences between people who are male, female, or intersex. A person typically has their sex assigned at birth based on physiological characteristics, including their genitalia and chromosome composition. This assigned sex is called a person's "natal sex." <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/232363>

Gender, ..., involves how a person identifies. Unlike natal sex, gender is not made up of binary forms. Instead, gender is a broad spectrum. A person may identify at any point within this spectrum or outside of it entirely. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/232363>

The social constructionist approach will be used to achieve a general insight and understanding of the term "gender" and humans as created in the image of God. According to Creswell (2009:8), social constructionism proposes that realities are formed through one's experience and one's interactions and relations with others. It uses an interpretive framework whereby individuals seek to understand their world (reality) and develop a meaning corresponding to unique experiences. Roller and Lavrakas (2015:2) state:

[T]he complexities of the human experience and the idea that any one facet of someone's life (and the researcher's role in exploring this life) intertwines with (contributes to) some other facet. That, as human beings we can't be anything other than intricately involved together in the construction of our worlds.

Today, however, the many views from different academic disciplines, society, and the Church, should encourage researchers to apply an inquiring mind and to challenge and uncover the many "truths" about gender. Gender as a research topic in the theological landscape emerged over the years as an energetic and distinctive object. In theology, and across the disciplines of theology, scholars contributed extensively on the topic of gender, as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2006:362) remarks:

I remember in the 1960s when I could read everything that appeared on feminism; in the '70s when I could still read everything in feminist studies in religion; in the '80s when I was still aware of everything published in feminist biblical studies; and in the '90s when I could still keep tabs on everything that appeared in feminist Christian Testament/Early Christian studies. Yet, today, I find it impossible to be aware of everything published in the field.

Identity and the different opinions on human beings or gender(s) created in the image of God, from the functional, relational, and structural perspectives, will be explained, and as Szczerba (2020:14) notes, are rooted in the inclusive theology of Gregory of Nyssa. Theologically our identities are revealed in our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. I believe that through the concepts of inclusion and human dignity, all sexual and gender minority groups (as different gendered persons or LGBTQIA2+) are part of the *imago Dei*.

The substantial, relational, and functional concepts of the image of God are inclusive of human dignity. They symbolise the dignity and inclusion of all genders as being created in the image of God. I believe that the image of God also serves as a symbol against gender inequality. The concept of the *imago Dei* can therefore be used to cross doctrinal and ideological borders. It can lead to the mutual understanding, inclusion, and acceptance of other human beings, regardless of their gender. Applying the concept of the *imago Dei* serves as a symbol for viewing all human beings as being equally created with equal dignity (Szczerba 2020:14).

Growing up, we have had some experience regarding gender, be it through conflict, humour, or simple conversation, state Eckert & McConnel-Ginet (2003:1). Being deeply embedded in our desires, culture, actions, belief systems, and institutions, the concept of gender appears to be natural, accepted as true, a scientific fact, and common sense.

Talking and thinking about gender is almost like having coffee in the morning. It is part and parcel of our everyday activities and assumptions, almost like thinking about whether the earth

is round. Gender is so pervasive in our society that we assume it is deep-seated in our genes. Some find it difficult to believe that gender constantly flows between creating and re-creating human interactions. Gender is constantly developing due to changing human interactions, social life and the norms of that social life (Lorber 1994:277).

Gender as a field of study emerged in diverse and challenging ways. As an ambiguous concept, the question of what gender is continues to be a contested concept today. DoVale (2021:1) argues that the rapid and increasing research on gender issues resulted in fuzziness and uncertainty regarding a theological examination of gender. Furthermore, DoVale contends that academics in theology focus on the many ways gender relates to their disciplines without agreeing on how to proceed or investigate gender.

For Christians, Genesis 1 depicts the starting narrative of humanity. It states that humans were created as male and female in God's image and likeness and were given the authority to rule, fill, and subdue the earth through procreation. Christianity has been – and still is today – a gendered tradition with underlying gender differences in its doctrines, practices, and institutions (Beattie 2005).

2. Identity

God created all human beings to be his children, and our identity is found in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Our identity is chosen or owned, and we can choose to receive or reject God's grace offered to us through Jesus Christ (Cook 2021:32).

Human identity crosses disciplinary boundaries and offers an essential topic of discussion. For example, our biological identity and how we acquire it is debated in the natural sciences. It is also a popular topic in philosophy, social sciences, and arts and science. Regarding our identity in the field of theology, we find answers from scripture, tradition, and human reason (Cook 2021:25). Our identity involves complex relationships with one another, the natural environment, and God. In the broader scheme of human identity, questions about sex and gender are essential.

The evolution process gave us our collective identity. It resulted in diverse individual expressions of human identity, and the difference in human identity (either created or discovered) can be observed in individuals who display unique characteristics and interactions between genetic inheritance and the physical environment (Cook 2021:30). From a social science perspective,

individual identity is referred to as self-identity. It is concerned, among others, with spiritual beliefs, religious beliefs, values, self-esteem and -evaluation (Cook 2021:30). Cook (2021:31) further argues that individual identities may be understood as being created or discovered and that it has a relational component that is concerned with how we stand in relation to other and God. Identity as relational is concerned with love and being loved (Cook 2021:31). Identity is also collective and is reflected in society through nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and gender, and how groups can play an important role in the formation of identity (Cook 2021:31).

Christian identity is found in our relationship with Jesus Christ, as we are created as children of God, free to receive or reject God's grace through Jesus Christ. Christian identity is also individual, collective, and relational and is concerned with sex and gender concepts, such as being male or female or having other forms of gender.

The concept of gender varies across time and society. Sex, sexuality, and gender are all increasingly recognised not to be simple binary categories (Hyde *et al.* 2019). Cook states that "[s]exual identity, gender identity and differences of sexual development (intersex) are all subject to wide variation; many people now no longer self-identify according to traditional norms and expectations."

LGBTQIA2+'s gender identity does not necessarily correspond with their sex as registered at birth, and the incongruence between their inner experience and their registered sex leads to gender dysphoria. These individuals sometimes pursue processes of transition to change their gender roles from their sex as registered at birth to a different role. I opine that no one chooses to be differently gendered and that individual identity is formed through a process of self-discovery. Various gender identities are perceived as violating traditional norms and often lead to the individual's exclusion and marginalisation through prejudice and bullying (Cook 2021:34).

Cook (2021:34) says that some believe that scripture provides validation and affirmation of cis-gender and heterosexual norms for identity, but these texts are more concerned with behaviour than identity. The origin of these texts is from a totally different cultural context, and scripture is concerned with the compassion of God for the marginalised, abused, and strangers in society.

Our identity is revealed in our relationship to God in Christ, and we need to engage more with other sciences that will have the potential to affirm a more inclusive approach to all human beings, specifically with sexual and gender minority groups.

3. Gender

Schüssler Fiorenza once stated that theology is the product of each writer's experience and that this is determined by every theologian's historical and social context. Theology is culturally conditioned and contextually shapes, reflects and serves a particular group's or individual's interests (Schüssler Fiorenza 1975:116). I add my voice to that of Schüssler Fiorenza regarding her thoughts on theology. Still, I want to add that the gender concept, as part of a theological discourse, includes culture, historical, and social contexts and is related to all human persons made in the image of God regardless of sex and gender.

People have significantly different views about gender. Currently, more than ever, it has consequences for everyone. Since birth, we receive messages of gender through society's gender ideas, which affect all aspects of our lives. Sex and gender are often used interchangeably, and although these terms are connected, they are not equivalent.

Gender is complex and plays an important role in the dimensions of body, identity, and social gender. Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin (1999:530) state that

"[g]ender is not merely a system of how I view myself, but also a systematic set of social practices and cultural meanings that organize people into unequal categories based on perceived differences that are constantly reinforced through, often, intimate and personal interactions."

Many biblical texts can be used for or against specific gender roles. However, these texts may be problematic since they do not represent a checklist for stereotyping gender and what the different genders should or should not do. These texts teach us to relate to each other as image bearers in and through God.

Feminism and gender debates focused, for the most part, on femininity and womanhood. Masculinity and manhood, however, did not receive equal examination, which projected the view of normative humanity in Christian texts and practices as a "misleading generic view of being human" (Beattie 2005:3356-3364). Beattie postulates that without acknowledging masculinity and manhood as necessary in the discussions and research on gender, human conditions will remain to be viewed as androcentric. "Gender inequality does not only harm women and girls

but also men and boys," according to Blum *et al.* (2017: 54), and they contest that gender expectations shape adolescence around the world. Gender norms have significant implications for boys and girls, such as child marriage, leaving school early, pregnancy, HIV, sexually transmitted infections, violence, depression, physical violence, substance abuse and suicide. According to Blum *et al.* (2017:54.), these differences are socially, not biologically, determined.

Included in the gender debate is the debate on LGBTQIA2+ and intersex genders, where we often find ourselves puzzled and off guard when the topic of gender arises. Therefore, it is important to clarify gender, LGBTQIA2+, and intersex. Over time, the concept of gender has been defined as a social construct, with varying norms, behaviours, and roles between societies classifying gender as male, female, or nonbinary (Wamsley 2021:np). Although the LGBTQIA2+ acronym stands for a specific group of people, it also includes gender fluidity and sexual identities (Wamsley 2021:np). "Intersex" refers to people with different reproductive anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones that differ from typical male and female definitions and implies some natural variations. "Intersex" is not the same as "nonbinary" or "transgender." Intersex individuals do not fit a specific male or female gender norm, whereas the term is used by those whose reproductive anatomy is not biologically typical (Wamsley 2021:np).

Stone (2022:14) remarks that a lack of a consistent definition for gender is visible in three groups that he associates as cohorts of absence, conflation, and distinction. The absence cohort is where reference works do not comment theologically on the sex and gender concepts, implying that no clear definition exists for sex and gender. Some authors argue that a definition for sex and gender exists, although they are not always prepared to articulate a definition. The conflating cohorts blend gender and sex in one concept, as there is no clear distinction between sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual identity. It is important to note that without a clear definition of gender, the conflating cohort does not provide a schema to connect gender with the *imago Dei* (Stone 2022:16-17). The distinction cohort is influenced by queer theory and transgender perspectives. Here, a distinction between sex and gender is linked to psychology and identity. Sex is viewed as physical and material, and gender relates to one's inner perspectives, culture, and community expectations – a form of ontological dualism between the physical and immaterial representation of gender (Stone 2022:23-24).

People are experiencing a growing awareness of gender incongruence.¹ The Sydney Report (2017), titled "A theology of gender and gender identity," states that discussions on transgenerism provoked more discussions on appropriate clinical and pastoral responses to gender. Research shows that over the past decade, different views on sex and gender arose, specifically those of people who experience gender congruence. According to the report (2017), contemporary Gender Theory accepts that gender is not binary but occurs on a broad spectrum and that gender is not fixed but fluid. It further reports that as Christians, we engage with sex and gender issues

on the biblical doctrines of creation, including its corruption and disorder as a result of human fall into sin, redemption through Christ and the eschatological hope of renewal and restoration. It takes seriously the value of each human being as one created in the image of God, and the biblical imperatives to gentleness and love, and the need to live by faith in Christ in humble obedience to the word of God.

We find a split in what gender is as a social construct and gender as essence. The view of gender as essence is understood as one's sex as biological makeup, namely, genes, hormones, and genitalia, thus, physiological qualities (Stone 2022:97). Gender is a social construct where people are categorised and respond to changing and evolving societal norms. Lorber (1994:276) states that these norms result from human interaction, out of social life, and are the texture and order of that social life.

4. (All) Humans are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*)

When we speak of the *imago Dei*, we often ask questions about what it means to be created in the image of God, whether it is an anthropological or a theological question. We ask questions like, "Is there a distinction between the image of God and Jesus Christ?", "Where is the image of God to be found in humanity?", "Are all genders created in God's image?" and "How can God's image be restored in humanity, specifically referring to gender insensitivity?" It is impossible to answer all these questions now, but it remains important for our understanding of the *imago Dei*. Answers to these questions are varied and diverse but resort outside the parameters for this lecture. How one interprets God's image depends on one's starting point and biases. The substantial/structural, relational, and functional views of the *imago Dei* will

¹ <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/gender-incongruence>: Gender incongruence is the term used to describe when your gender is different to when you were born. People with gender incongruence may describe themselves as transgender (trans) or gender diverse.

contribute to the theological debates on gender and Jesus Christ as the true *imago Dei*. Jesus Christ, the true *imago Dei*, is distinctly Christian and theological.

The idea of humans being created in the image of God implies that we are unique and called to live in harmony with all other human beings, nature, and God. A theological understanding of humans being created in the image of God and its implications in our understanding of gender is essential. Many attempts throughout Christian history were made to establish the theological and anthropological *imago Dei*, using different methods, views, and conclusions. Lidums (2004:1-3) distinguishes five approaches regarding the *imago Dei*. The Antropomorphite approach views the image of God in human beings as primarily a physical phenomenon, as God has a physical body, presented by ecological, feminist, and panentheistic views. The second approach looks at signs of the Trinity in human beings, which Barth and Brunner, among others, have done in their anthropological discourses. A third view holds that God's image is defined in terms of man's dominion over creation and has a strong eschatological emphasis on Jesus Christ as the true *imago Dei*. The fourth view emphasises the image of God in ethical and cognitive terms, such as Calvin. The fifth view emphasises that the image of God is societal in nature, as Barth holds it (Lidums 2004:1-3).

I will now briefly discuss the *imago Dei's* substantial/structural perspective (human beings are the image of God), the *imago Dei* from a relational perspective (human beings reflect divine, Trinitarian relationships), and *imago Dei's* functional perspective (human beings represents God in earthly reality), (Szczerba 2020:27).

4.1 *Imago Dei's* Substantial/Structural Perspective

This view highlights the natural characteristics of God and humans. It holds that the *imago Dei* is not purely metaphorical but ontological, with reason as an essential part of the *imago Dei* (Grenz 2000:169). Thus, the soul is composed of the same substance as that of the divine. The negative influence this view portrays of gender is that substance is the divine. According to Szczerba 2020:23), the *imago Dei* was understood in ontological categories of physical, psychological, and spiritual spheres, including the free will of human beings. The negative influence this view portrays of gender is that the female view of the *imago Dei* is equated. Whilst males are linked with spirit, mind, and reason, females are identified with matter and an inferior body and passion. (Johnson 2012: 35). Moreland (in Stone 2022:176) says that the image of God necessarily implies that human beings have a gender by the nature of their constitution. As an

emergent substance, gender is expressed by signs and symbols. God transfers the *imago Dei* to all individual human beings; therefore, they are substantially identical and organically interrelated as an integral part of the same human nature (Szczerba 2020:26). With the resurrected body of Christ, humans will share in the new embodiment of Christ, transformed to resemble Christ.

4.2 *Imago Dei* from a Relational Perspective

The relational and social view of the *imago Dei* is best understood as a relationship between human beings and God, creation, and other human beings (Cortez 2010:23) and is both vertical and horizontal. Thus, being relational beings reflect the *imago Dei* of the relational Creator.

According to Hale (2013:6), the relational or social view posits the *imago Dei* as nearness to God, as Adam standing right before God. This nearness was lost in the fall but restored by Christ – the second Adam. According to Lodahl (2008:72), the Creator addresses the creatures and calls them into a relationship, accountability, and response before the Creator. Human beings are, in essence, relational beings.

For the inclusion of all genders in the image of God, the relational aspect of the *imago Dei* is important. Moltmann (1985) states that human rights should include democratic relationships between people, society, environment, and generations to come (Szczerba 2020:13). Moltmann (1985:234-44) opined that the image of God should be interpreted as a theological idea and not so much as an anthropological concept. Thus, the *imago Dei* should be a symbol indicating that all genders deserve dignity and equality. Created in the image of God, it is also a symbol against gender discrimination.

4.3 *Imago Dei's* Functional Perspective

The functional view of *imago Dei* associates the image of God with "governing" or "subduing" the earth and suggests that humans act on God's behalf and represent God in the created order (De Franza 2011:22). The focus of this view of the *imago Dei* is on what humans do. There are two lines of thought regarding the functional concept of God: The exegetical argument and the functional concept. Through the exegesis of Genesis 1:1-2:3, we note that humans are mandated to rule and subdue other creatures and the earth. God has dominion over all creation and appointed humankind to act on his behalf and reflect God's rule on the world. The kinship concept was assigned to kings in the image or likeness of a specific god to describe their function of representing that particular deity in the earthly realm (Middleton 2005:72).

The functional aspect of the image of God consists of humanity's likeness to God in having authority and exercising dominion over those aspect of God's image that consist of God's ethical characteristics or attributes, thus holiness, righteousness, and truth.

In Christ, as the true *imago Dei*, all human beings are drawn together as God's people into an egalitarian community. The risen Christ is a union between body and spirit, with body in a communal and individual sense. In Ephesians 2:11-22 and 2:15-16, the unity in the body of Christ, the Jews, and Gentiles, also applies to human beings today. There is no difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free person, no male or female in the true *imago Dei*, Christ, who created one humanity, making peace between and reconciling human beings as one body. Thus, we are brought into a restored relationship with each other and God.

5. Conclusion: The imago Dei is a symbol for gender inclusion and human dignity.

Gender is related to the human person (gender) who is made in God's image. The concept of the *imago Dei* can serve as a religious symbol of inclusion and human dignity. The *imago Dei*'s substantial/structural perspective (human beings are the image of God), the *imago Dei* from a relational perspective (human beings reflect divine, Trinitarian relationships), and *Imago Dei*'s functional perspective (human beings represents God in earthly reality) were presented, and definitions of sex and gender are to include LGBTQIA2+ persons as being made in the image of God.

We all have moral and social responsibilities and should react against the abuse and exploitation of other human beings, including LGBTQIA2+ minorities. All genders have a human nature, given to us by God's action in creation and are equally ontologically interconnected parts of the same body. We are responsible for reflecting the relational *imago Dei* towards each other as brothers and sisters, whether we agree on gender issues or not. Theologically, says Moltmann, human beings are relational and represent God individually and collectively (1985:215).

I concur with Moltmann and Habermas that the *imago Dei* concept should be applied to promote and advocate the equality of all people, and I include all genders, regardless of religious beliefs, because the *imago Dei* should serve as a symbol for the inclusion of all genders to be treated with human dignity.

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