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The divine image: envisioning the invisible God

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The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God

Ian A. McFarland

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005

214 pages, \$ 26.00 Softcover

Ian McFarland's very fine book explores what it means when Christians confess that the human is created in the image of God. Theologically, this notion contests the otherwise clear assertion that the God who is transcendent cannot be knowable, at least in the way we usually refer to knowledge. God's being known can most certainly not equate to God's circumscription, and yet the biblical witness asserts that God does have an image. McFarland suggests that this affirmation reflects the theological assertion that God is not "a prisoner of God's transcendence" (157). God's image, however, is first to be identified with Jesus Christ. The history of theology witnesses to the mistake too often made whereby the reduction of the *imago dei* to a human faculty results in the idolatry of humanity. The *imago dei* is finally predicated of humans insofar as we are participants in the body of Christ. Whereas Christ is the image of God, humanity is made *in* the image of God and bears it eschatologically. Of course, the preceding invites the reader to ask where and how this image is discerned, the very topic broached effectively by this accessible book.

After outlining the notion of the image of God as a theological problem demanding a christological resolution, McFarland queries how the church has historically imaged God. He notes that one of the earlier, and contentious, means by which God's image was discerned was with the catholic and orthodox tradition of iconography. McFarland notes that the resolution of this dispute by affirming iconography equates to an ecclesial affirmation that God can be imaged in such a way that the first commandment is not broken. Yet he also notes that iconography fails to commend the ordinary, which is at the very heart of God as imaged in Jesus Christ. The rest of the book is given over to exploring how the image of God might be differently discerned, all the while engaging the Christian tradition.

McFarland first considers the long-standing tradition of discerning what the image of God is by way of venerating the saints. Here he follows the custom of distinguishing *latría* as worship from *dulia* as applied to veneration. The latter alone applies to our

apprehension of the human. The notion of venerating the saints has the specific benefit of commending the communal dimension whereby it is established who exactly is to be accorded such a designation. Moreover the canonization of saints affirms the value of a measured and patient assessment of sanctity. But the veneration of the saints is not without its problems. He notes the propensity for the church catholic to designate wealthy men as symptomatic of little ecclesial interest in upsetting the status quo. Additionally, the veneration of the saints has sometimes led to the marginalization of Jesus, which gives McFarland cause to look to the fringes of society for a corrective to a one sided emphasis on the veneration of the saints. Discerning the *imago dei* in the poor is advocated as an equally important resource for envisioning the outline of the body of Christ. McFarland rehearses the important lessons learnt from liberation theology on this front and nicely locates all of this within a biblical and doctrinal treatment of the image of God. Yet, this approach is not without problems. Christological specificity is compromised when it is the poor *per se* by which we pursue a glimpse of the image of God. McFarland suggests the need to see the veneration of saints and attentiveness to the poor as two mutually correcting communal activities whereby we discern the image of God. These two, however, are not yet enough.

Thus far McFarland has pointed to communal means whereby the image of God has been discerned. In important ways, the church depends upon a communal discipline to discern the image of God in these two means. McFarland also recognizes the importance of personal means whereby the image of God is encountered in our daily lives. Here he turns to chastity, and in particular, its manifestation in marriage as an important locus for encountering Christ. His is no romanticized notion of marriage, however, and he recognizes that it is only in the long-suffering embrace of a partner who is ever changing that the invisible God is envisioned. McFarland does not suggest that marriage alone is a means for discerning the body of Christ at a personal level and he claims that the most significant of its advantages are possible in other chaste relationships.

In conclusion, McFarland also points to the sacraments as canons for discerning the *imago dei*. He gives the Eucharist a kind of logical priority because at it the body of Christ is simultaneously present as it is variously understood: as the eucharistic elements, the physical body of