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Calum MacKellar, *The Image of God, Personhood and the Embryo*

(London: SCM, 2017). xii + 270 pp. £35.00. ISBN 978-0-334-05521-1 (pbk)

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If someone believes that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1.26-27), what should he or she think about embryonic human beings? Is the image of God also reflected in the human embryo? And if so, what follows?

In bringing together the themes of the 'image of God' and the human embryo this book makes an important contribution to contemporary Christian reflection on bioethics.

However, this juxtaposition is not novel. Indeed, it was an ancient way of framing the issue.

The book contains an extended discussion of the Septuagint translation of Exodus 21:22-25, a passage that concerns an assault on a pregnant woman (pp. 15-21). The Septuagint, drawing on Greek categories, introduces a distinction between the 'formed' and the 'unformed' child in the womb. As Calum MacKellar notes, this distinction was to enter the Latin Christian tradition through the Old Latin translation of the Bible and through sermons and commentaries by theologians such as Augustine of Hippo.

What MacKellar neglects to mention, though it would have strengthened the main narrative frame of his book, is that the word used in the Septuagint is not derived from the

Aristotelian terms 'form' (*morphe*) or 'species' (*eidos*) but from the Scriptural term 'image' (*eikon*). The 'formed' child is a 'being in the image' (*exeikonismenon*).

The use of a word derived from 'image' evokes the story of the creation of human beings in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and perhaps also the begetting of Seth according to the image of the first human being, Adam (Genesis 5:3). It also echoes the injunction given to Noah that 'Whoever sheds the blood of a human being, by a human being shall his blood be shed, for God made human beings in his own image' (Genesis 9:6). In the Septuagint of Exodus, it is only the child who is 'in the image' whose death is to be punished 'life for life'.

The theme of being 'in the image' is absent from the Hebrew text of Exodus 21, but a connection between the image of God and the status of the embryo is made in the Talmud in its interpretation of Genesis 9:6. According to this reading, the prepositional phrase '*ba-adam*' denotes not '*by* a human being' but '*in* a human being'. The verse therefore is: 'Whoever sheds the blood of a human being in a human being, his blood shall be shed, for God made human beings in his own image'. MacKellar alludes to this reading (p. 17) but not its source, and again fails to draw out the significance. The verse in Genesis which links the image of God with the protection of human life is, according to the Talmud, specifically concerned with the protection of *unborn* human life.

Both the Septuagint (with its formed/unformed distinction) and the Talmud (without any such distinction) thus make a link between the presence of the 'image [of God]' and the moral status of the human life in the womb. However, this link was lost in the Old Latin translation of Exodus which, while preserving the Septuagint formed/unformed distinction,

did not maintain the allusion to 'image'. In the Greek East, the link was effectively marginalised by the influence of Basil the Great who stated that it was not significant whether the child was 'formed' (*ekmemorphomenou*) or was 'not in the image' (*anexeikonistou*). In Judaism, the interpretation of Genesis 9:6 was of limited significance for it was a Noahide law, binding on gentiles, but not the law on abortion to be followed by Jews. Discussion of the status of unborn life in relation to the 'image of God' thus fell into neglect for many centuries. Nevertheless, it was an ancient way to frame the issue, and in exploring it at length, MacKellar is retrieving and developing an idea that has always been present in the Judaeo-Christian tradition but lying dormant, as it were.

Contemporary bioethical discussion of the moral status of human beings begins, and sometimes ends, with the concept of 'personhood'. This is presented as a secular concept and one susceptible of a clear definition, typically drawn from the philosopher John Locke. There is an irony here for, notwithstanding the importance of the 'law of persons' within Roman law, discussion of the essence of a human being by reference to the term 'person' is to a large extent a Christian innovation. For more than a millennium, discussion of human beings as 'persons' typically began with the definition provided by Boethius in the sixth century: a person is 'an individual substance of a rational nature'. Boethius was a philosopher, but it is noteworthy that this definition comes from his book *On the Two Natures of Christ*.

The title of MacKellar's book brings together religious ('image of God') and secular ('personhood') terminology in relation to the human embryo. He also explores contemporary scientific understanding of the human embryo and brings this into

conversation with theology and philosophy. The book is addressed to those who accept the message of the Gospel and wish to consider what further light Christian revelation sheds on the human embryo as envisioned by contemporary science. Such an enquiry requires knowledge not only of theology but also of biomedicine and public policy and requires a guide who is able to negotiate this interdisciplinary terrain.

MacKellar is such a guide. He began his academic career as a bench scientist, working in biochemistry and genetics. This included postdoctoral research in Edinburgh on synthesising genetic antivirals against HIV. He later worked for the Bioethics Division of the Council of Europe before returning to Scotland as the director of research for the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics. The Council of Europe and the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics are broad-based secular organisations, not specifically religious but nevertheless attentive to the range of views within society. Mackellar also brings knowledge of the theological debate over these issues within the Church of Scotland, a Church of which he was an elder from 1998. He was a member of its Church and Society Council when that body considered the ethics of experimentation on human embryos.

The theological approach taken in the book is thus distinctively Scottish and is strongly influenced by the Reformed theologian Thomas F. Torrance. Nevertheless, the approach is genuinely ecumenical in spirit, drawing on Anglican theologians such as Oliver O'Donovan and on Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians, including 'Saint[!] John Paul II' (pp. 92, 269).

The combination of different disciplines poses a challenge and MacKellar elects for 'repetition of some of the information being presented' (p. x) as this is discussed in relation to different themes and ideas. The text also includes extensive direct quotation. This is a conscious policy undertaken 'in order to do justice to the very careful wording of the authors being mentioned' (p. xi). Nevertheless, both features place a burden on the reader. The text also suffers from the lack of a final bibliography and of a Scripture index. Given the complex and somewhat repetitive structure it is not easy to return to passages. This is unfortunate as many passages merit a second or a third reading.

The book is divided into two parts, the first presenting a brief sketch of the history of reflection on the moral status of the embryo (chapter 1), followed by a summary of Christian theological views on the image of God (chapter 2) and on personhood (chapter 3).

The second part is divided into five chapters, but among these there is a clear distinction between the first two, on the embryo in relation to creation and to the incarnation, and the next three, on substantive, relational and functional aspects of the embryo. It would have clearer had the book been divided into three parts, with part II consisting of chapters 4 and 5 and part III chapters 6, 7 and 8. After a helpfully concise conclusion the book also includes a useful appendix on the moral status of new kinds of embryos and embryo-like entities.

Chapters 4 and 5, on creation and incarnation are the richest, theologically speaking, and, for this reader, the high point was the discussion of Torrance's reflections on the human embryo and the incarnation (pp. 134-139). If I were to recommend a short passage from this book for a student of moral theology, it would be these pages. Torrance enjoined that

to understand the human embryo we must go 'to him who became a holy embryo in the Virgin's womb and was born of her to be the Saviour of the world' (p. 135) for 'in becoming a human being for us, he also became an embryo for the sake of all embryos' (p. 136).

In contrast, the book's first three chapters contain little that is original in the presentation or analysis of their material. Nevertheless, they prepare the ground for the last three chapters, on the substantive, relational and functional aspects of the embryo. The earlier discussion of the human person as an individual substance prepares the ground for an understanding of the embryo as 'substantive', that is, as an individual living being. Similarly, the discussions of relationality in the accounts both of the image of God and of the human person prepare the ground for an understanding of the human embryo 'in relation' to his or her parents, to the human community, and to God. Finally, the oft-rehearsed criticisms of some accounts of the image of God in human beings that restrict this 'image' to the rational powers or faculties of the soul find a direct parallel in merely 'functional' accounts of the status of the human embryo. The rational powers of the human being which develop over time must, rather, be seen in the context of a prior substantive and relational understanding of the human being.

This last point is perhaps the most original contribution of the book, showing how the critique of a narrow rational-faculties conception of the 'image of God' applies equally to a narrow function-based understanding of the status of the human embryo. In the words of Colin Gunton, to be in the image of God 'is not, therefore, to have some timeless quality like reason, or anything else, but to exist in a directedness, between our coming from nothing and our being brought through Christ before the throne of the father' (quoted on p. 46).

The book thus builds up, by repeated return to key theological themes, an appreciation of the significance of human life even in its earliest stages. Nevertheless, when the author states that it is not his aim 'to give an exhaustive definition of the image of God in human beings before or after birth' (p. 3) and that the objective was never 'about proving that the image of God is reflected in the human embryo' (p. 226), he is to be taken at his word.

While MacKellar urges that embryos be treated with the respect due to a human person made in the image of God this is not because he regards such status as certain and unambiguous. It is rather that he is impelled by the Gospel to approach all human beings, 'including those whose humanity is ambiguous and uncertain to us, with the expectancy and hope that we shall discern how God has called them out of nothing into personal being' (p. 232, quoting Oliver O'Donovan).

This is not a proof of the presence of the 'image of God' in the human embryo of a kind that could be known independently of the dispositions of faith, hope and love. Neither is it a matter of probability. What is the antecedent probability that God should have created human beings in his own image and likeness? The thesis of this book is best understood not as a demonstration but as a question: If we dare to acknowledge that every human being is fashioned in the image of God and that, for the sake of all humanity, God truly became a human embryo in the womb of his mother, how dare we deny the presence of that same Divine image, in an embryonic way, in the very earliest stages of human life?