Scottish Journal of Theology (2026), **79**, 103–107
doi:10.1017/S0036930626101732

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

On creation in the image of God

Ian A. McFarland

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, USA
Email: ian.mcfarland@emory.edu

(Received 12 March 2026 UTC; revised 12 March 2026 UTC; accepted 20 April 2026 UTC)

Abstract

Christian anthropology is characterised by a tension: on the one hand, the believer hopes for life in communion with God, which implies that the believer is distinct from God in agency; on the other hand, the doctrine of creation from nothing implies that the creature cannot have any agency over against God's. This tension has a parallel in the doctrine of the Trinity, in which the Son is over against the Father and yet has no being or agency independent of the Father. This parallel, in turn, provides a novel perspective on Christian understanding of the biblical claim that human beings have been created 'in the image of God', namely, that human beings are in God's image in that, like the Son, they are fully themselves only as they do not live in any respect apart from themselves.

Keywords: agency; creation from nothing; image of God; theological anthropology; transcendence; Trinity

Christian anthropology is marked by a profound tension.

On the one hand, human beings are called to live in communion with God (1 John 1:3) and ultimately to behold God face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). Such a relationship would seem to entail our existing over against God in much the same way we exist over against other people: as subjects who experience those with whom we are in relation as entities with a being and agency clearly distinct from our own. I know and relate to someone else, whether my neighbour or God, just insofar as I experience myself as different from them, as an 'I' who encounters in them a 'Thou'. This sort of otherness seems intrinsic to the Christian hope: the point of God's being 'with us' in Christ (Matt. 1:23) is that in Christ we might be with God (1 Thess. 4:17), so as to be able (in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism) 'to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever'.[1]

On the other hand, the possibility of our existing over against God in this way seems at odds with other, equally fundamental Christian convictions. For if (as has been the teaching of the majority of Christians since the end of the second century) God has created us 'from nothing', such that God is the only antecedent condition of our

[1] *The Shorter Catechism*, Q. 1, in *Book of Confessions: Study Edition* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996), p. 229.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930626101732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

existence, then there is seemingly no way we can have, exercise or experience any agency over against God. For every aspect of our existence – including our agency – during every moment we exist is the immediate and exclusive product of God's agency, such that were God, even for a moment, to cease to uphold and enable our being, we should straightaway cease to be.[2] In short, before God we are *not* 'distinct subjects', because we have no being or agency that is at any point or in any respect independent of God.[3]

Importantly, this analysis does not create any difficulties for the claim that we are distinct subjects, with genuine agency, with respect to *other creatures*. Of course, here, too, it is the case that we (along with those other creatures) have neither being nor agency except as enabled by God, but whatever problems that may imply for the possibility of creaturely agency over against God, it is perfectly consistent with the idea of creatures' agency over against one another. One can draw here on the well-worn analogy of the novel, in which every aspect of the novelistic 'world' is exclusively the product of the author's will, but where events *within* that world (e.g., the effect of a protruding nail on a person's trousers, or the protagonist's decision to run away and join the circus) are nevertheless recognised by the reader as the products of interactions among the entities that populate it, explicable in terms of causal processes internal to that world as created by the writer.[4] So, too, in the world of time and space as created by God, creatures have a relative ontological independence from one another, such that no creature's being, however deeply intertwined it may be with that of other creatures, is reducible without remainder to the agency of any other creature.[5] By contrast, it is logically impossible to imagine any creature being or acting apart from God's agency, if God creates from nothing.

This asymmetry between the character of our relationship with God and with everything that is not God is reflected in differences between the ways in which we are able to know God, on the one hand, and creatures, on the other. Our existential entanglements with other creatures mean that we can and do know them by our own

[2]'For this was shewed: that oure lyfe is alle grounded and rotyd in [God's] love, and without love we may nott lyve . . . . For truly, as to my syght, yf God myght be wroth for a whyle, we shuld neyther have lyfe ne stede ne being. For as verely as we have oure being of the endles myght of God, and of the endlesse wysdom, and of the endlesse goodnesse, also verely we have oure kepyng in the endles myght of God, and in the endlesse wysdom, and in the endlesse goodnesse'. Julian of Norwich, *The Showings of Julian of Norwich*, ch. 49, ed. Denise N. Baker (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 67.

[3]On this reading of the Creator-creature relation, even the fact of our sinning does not entail such independence; rather, our deviation from God's will happens because something impedes God's will from shaping our willing. How this might happen, given Christian confession of God's perfect and indefectible goodness and the absence of any factor other than God in constituting our being, is a mystery, such that, e.g., Thomas Aquinas both denies that God causes sin and at the same time affirms that acts of sin come from God. See Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil* 3.1 (especially the Reply to Objection 9) and 3.2, ed. Brian Davies, trans. Richard Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 141–8.

[4]'Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet . . . he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.' *The Westminster Confession of Faith* V.2, in *Book of Confessions*, p. 179.

[5]Thus, for any two creatures, I can imagine the non-existence of one of them without affecting my ability to imagine the continued existence of the other; indeed, I can imagine any single creature not only in the absence of *any* other creature but also in the absence of *all* other creatures (i.e., the rest of the universe in its entirety) without any logical contradiction. Schleiermacher engages in something very like this thought experiment when distinguishing our 'absolute dependence' on God from our relative dependence on other creatures. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* §4.3, 2nd edn., H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (eds), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), pp. 15–16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930626101732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

efforts; indeed, the essential presupposition of the natural sciences is that, in principle, every phenomenon in the universe can be explained as the product of such intentional observation: isolating the phenomenon in question and then explaining its current state as the product of its evolution from a previous state through the operation of natural laws. By contrast, God's status as the Creator who exists 'outside' of these spatio-temporal entanglements as their comprehensive and continuous cause means that the divine nature is not a possible object of our observation and therefore not subject to scientific investigation.[6] If we are to know God, it will therefore only be because of divine revelation, defined as God's making God's self known to us through the use of created entities, which, by virtue of their this-worldly location, *are* possible objects of our experience.[7]

Now, because any created vehicle of God's self-disclosure will by definition be other than God, no observable feature of it can establish its status as a means of divine revelation: any analysis will turn up only created substance.[8] It follows that we have no ability to recognise any creaturely medium of divine revelation *as* a medium of divine revelation through the exercise of our natural capacities. Such recognition will come only if and as God gives us the ability (through the gift of the Holy Spirit) to acknowledge God's presence in that medium. In short, we know God only as God enables us to know God, both by revealing God's self in a given event *and* by causing us to believe that the one revealed is indeed God (and not, say, a hallucination or Descartes' evil genius). True knowledge of God will therefore always be in the second person; that is, we can come to know God only as God addresses us (and so is experienced by us) as a Thou through a creaturely medium. For the creaturely status of any such medium means that, apart from such second-person address, we will have no basis for inferring God's presence from the features of that medium considered in itself (i.e., as an object of our own investigation).[9] However marvellous the sight of a bush that burns but is not consumed may be, it does not reveal God until God says, 'Moses, Moses! . . . I am the

[6]If the hypothesis of the so-called multiverse is correct, events in parallel universes are also not possible objects of our experience. But insofar as our ignorance of events in parallel universes is a function of our 'spatial' disposition with respect to them and not of the character of the entities (if any) that exist within those universes' respective spatio-temporal frameworks, it is analogous to our (for all practical purposes equally insuperable) ignorance of the humanoids (if any) that exist in the Andromeda galaxy. In either case, our ignorance could in principle be addressed by our relocation, whether within this universe or to another one; but our inability to know God by processes of scientific investigation is a function of the transcendent character of the divine nature and thus not able to be addressed by any act of relocation on our part.

[7]That we might acquire scientific knowledge of God indirectly, on the basis of observation of physical phenomena (e.g., in the mode of the so-called cosmological or teleological arguments), fails because the chain of causation within space and time can only lead from one spatio-temporal phenomenon to another – and thus not to a Creator who transcends the entire spatio-temporal order. That God might be invoked as the (necessary) cause of that order as a whole (or, in the case of the multiverse, as the cause of the set of all such orders) fails because that order is not itself a phenomenon (i.e., something we might confront as an object of experience over against ourselves, like a teacup or a galaxy cluster), but the condition of the possibility of there being phenomenal experience in the first place.

[8]Although the conviction that a particular event is an instance of divine self-disclosure will thus always be a matter of faith, some assessment of any new claim to divine revelation may be made on the basis of its consistency with an agreed-upon previous case (see, e.g., Jer. 26:16–19: Rom. 9:6–13).

[9]In the case of created persons, too, I can only know *them* if they choose, through direct address, to disclose themselves to me as a Thou (i.e., in the second person); but I am nevertheless able to know any number of facts *about* them apart from such self-disclosure through my own (third-person) observation. By contrast, because the divine nature is inherently imperceptible (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16), there can be no (third-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930626101732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exod. 3:4, 6) – and gives Moses the grace to believe it.

To be sure, our knowledge of other creatures is also dependent on God's agency, since our being created from nothing means that we have no being (and thus no knowing) at any point or in any respect except as granted us by God. But with respect to other creatures, this dependence is hidden: whatever one's theology of creation may be, there is no need for me *experientially* to invoke God in order to explain my knowing the apple on my desk, the chemical composition of water or the text of the Gettysburg Address: all can be explained perfectly adequately in terms of my intentional acts of examining phenomena and assessing their objective properties (e.g., using touch, smell and taste to determine whether the item in front of me is really an apple or only a plastic facsimile). Because God is the coefficient that grounds every creature's reality, divinity can, so to speak, be factored out of the equation when explaining any set of interactions among creatures – not because God is not involved, but simply because God's involvement is equal in intensity at every point. In the case of revelation, however, the fact that the knowledge in question crosses the divide between creature and Creator means that there can be no factoring out of God; on the contrary, it is the knowing creature who seems to drop out, insofar as that creature can experience (and thus explain) their knowing God only as God's action in them. In the case of the apple, it makes perfect sense to say, 'I know'. But where God is concerned, such a claim is problematic; instead, it seems necessary to prevaricate along the lines of the Pauline, 'I . . . though . . . not I, but the grace of God that is with me' (1 Cor. 15:10).

In sum, we are somehow other than God; else we could not say that we know or love or hope in God. Yet precisely because it is *God* whom we identify as the object of our knowledge, love and hope, it seems that we cannot claim to have any agency in this knowing, loving and hoping that is separate from God's. To be in relation with God, we must be agents who are other than God, but in relation to God, no creature has independent agency. This is the tension inherent to Christian anthropology.

And yet this tension is not unique to the created sphere. Consider the claim that the Father glorifies the Son, even as the Son glorifies the Father (John 17:1). Such a claim would seem to entail that the Father is other than (i.e., over against) the Son, and that the Son is correspondingly other than (and over against) the Father. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity affirms that there is only one God and so only one divine subject or agent (cf. John 10:30). That is, Christians confess, on the one hand, that the divine persons must be somehow distinct from each other, and yet, on the other hand, that precisely as members of the undivided Trinity, none of these persons can have any agency (or will) that is different from either of the other two. The Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20), and the Son loves the Father (John 14:31); and yet, as there is only one God, there is and can be only one who loves.

This tension is most evident in the person of the Son, whose personhood is entirely in the mode of reception as the one who is (in the words of the Nicene Creed) 'eternally begotten of the Father'. For the Son, 'to be' is to be completely from the Father, and yet precisely in this way the Son is other than the Father: the Word who in the beginning was 'with God' (and thus, evidently, somehow different from God) and yet 'was God' (John 1:1). Paul identifies this Word, made flesh in Jesus, as the divine image (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), presumably because he understands Jesus' life to be so bound up with the life

person) knowledge of facts *about* God that is not derived from those (second-person) acts of divine self-disclosure through which we know *God*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930626101732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the one he called Father that he can be described (in the language of yet another New Testament writer) as 'the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being' (Heb. 1:3). From all eternity the Son is distinct from the Father (John 17:5), and yet this same Son 'can do nothing on his own but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise' (John 5:19). The relationship is so close that Jesus can declare, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9; cf. 12:45); and yet, when Jesus prays to the Father (e.g., Matt. 11:25; John 11:41), he does not appear to be talking to himself.

That the same tension, in which the relationship between the knower and the one known, lover and the one loved, is defined at once by opposition and inseparability, should be a feature of the life of the Creator no less than that of the human creature provides a novel perspective on Christian understanding of the biblical claim that human beings have been created 'in the image of God' (Gen. 1:26–27).

Because in Jesus the Son has shared our flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14), we, too, have been made children of God (Gal. 3:26) so that we have with the Son one and the same Father (Heb. 2:11) and therefore find ourselves, too, loved by God and (thereby) loving God in return (1 John 4:19). And yet this love is not ours, but God's, which 'has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 5:5), such that it is this Spirit in our hearts who cries out, 'Abba! Father!' (Gal. 4:6). Here again appears the tension I have identified at the heart of Christian anthropology: that life in communion with God – the very content of what Christians mean by salvation – entails that we should at once be other and not other than God. But (and this is the upshot of my argument) comparison with trinitarian ontology suggests that although this tension is a consequence of our *difference from God* as creatures made from nothing, it is something we experience only as we have been *caught up into the life of God* as children in and with the Son, glorifying the Father in the power of the Spirit. To be in relation without being in opposition, to know only as being known, to *be* fully oneself and yet not to live in any respect *from* oneself: such is the life of God, and such is the life to which we are called as creatures made in the image of God.[10]

[10]How it is that one can be both 'I' and 'not I' we cannot yet say, for our lives are 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3). But we can say this: 'we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

Cite this article: McFarland IA (2026). On creation in the image of God. *Scottish Journal of Theology* **79**, 103–107. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930626101732

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930626101732 Published online by Cambridge University Press