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# In His Image: A Question of Creation and Humanity's right to Human Dignity.

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## INTRO

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly introduced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, creating the first documentation of fundamental human rights to be universally recognized and protected. Drafted by a diverse group of world leaders, this document provided a glimmer of hope for oppressed peoples as the world finally recognized their inherent dignity as members of the human race. Many believed this document would end the predominant problem of discrimination and dehumanization as the doctrine protected universal rights and thus universal dignity for all individuals. The disproportionate accounts of violence and oppression that remain following the document however, especially against those with disabilities, suggests that the legal actions meant to affirm human dignity fail to successfully provide relief to these injustices. In this presentation, I intend to expose the many atrocities that bring harm to mentally disabled individuals. Their powerful stories prove the relevancy and the magnitude of oppression the disabled community faces still today.

What will it take to stop this discrimination and even violence brought on by today's stigmas and inefficient legal standards? Many in the academic sphere set out to solve these problems of dignity by analyzing and applying theories developed by philosophers such as Aristotle and Immanuel Kant. These theories provide a strong perspective on the topic, declaring an innate dignity to humans based on their capabilities for reason. Problematically however, these philosophies often serve as a justification for those whose actions dehumanize the cognitively disabled community. In contrast to Aristotle and Kant, I seek to defend the notion that all humans possess the same level of innate human dignity, despite one's reasoning capacity. Thus, individuals with disabilities deserve the same legal and religious rights as all other humans. The authority for this claim stems from the theological understanding of the Latin term *Imago Dei*. Translated as "in the image of God," this philosophy defines human dignity as

something inherent to all humans as all were created in the image of the divine. Unlike the theories of traditional philosophers, the concept of *Imago Dei* secures one's understanding of inherent dignity and thus demands equal human rights for all individuals.

The second part of my presentation addresses the necessity of affirming one's dignity when ensuring human rights. Though human dignity remains inherent, and to a certain extent, imperishable by outside forces, the assertion of this dignity, works to maintain the level of dignity all humans created in God's image deserve. This affects developmentally disabled individuals most severely as they often, lack the cognition to safeguard their rights from those willing to disregard the morals of *Imago Dei*. In other words, those who are intellectually challenged live with a much higher risk of losing universal human rights when lacking the assistance of those with the abilities to defend and assert their dignity. I will also extend the topic of human rights to discuss the religious rights of mentally disabled individuals, specifically regarding one's participation in holy sacraments within the Christian Church. Despite its foundation role in the understanding of *Imago Dei*, the Christian Church possesses a deep history of prejudice against the intellectually disabled. While these views today are deemed extremely inaccurate, the stigma associated with the intellectually impaired continues to make its way into church doctrines as various churches refuse the disabled the right to Baptism or the receiving of the Holy Eucharist. After exploring interpretations of church doctrines across denominations, I will challenge current Christian traditions with the universality of *Imago Dei*, emphasizing the importance of equality in building a sense of community within the body of Christ, and safeguarding one's inherent dignity.

## **Problem**

In world today, millions of helpless individuals suffer from extreme abuse and neglect due to their cognitive delays, most prominently in in low and middle-income countries. In a 2011 study in *Global Mental Health*, researchers documented first-hand accounts of severe human rights violations of numerous mentally disabled people from a variety of countries. This account of a respondent's admission to a psychiatric institution in Zambia vividly describes the atrocities he or she faced: (quote)

“Alas, the place of my treatment and care turned out to be a horrible place to live in. It was characterized [by] unhygienic living conditions, physical abuse, nakedness, and lack of enough food. This experience taught me that mental hospitals are more of a torture chamber causing more mental anguish and torment than ameliorating the mental situation of patients...” (Drew 2004). (end quote)

Although this is only one incident, the number of abuses against mentally disabled individuals of occurs daily around the world to millions of individuals. Members of the mentally disabled community such as this anonymous respondent continue to suffer inhuman treatment from cognitively superior individuals who refuse to acknowledge the inherent dignity of all human beings. [This lack of recognition of dignity creates an environment that nourishes inequality, prejudice, and dehumanization.](#) No justification exists for such barbaric treatment towards any member of God's creation.

### **Aristotle and Kant**

Some propose that we can challenge these problems of dignity by stressing traditional philosophies on the topic such as those of Aristotle and Kant. What results however, are principles that selectively distribute the possession of dignity to a selected few of creation, while completely disregarding a significant faction of the human race. According to Aristotle, humans

reach a virtuous state solely through actions that accord with reasoning. Similarly, Kant demands the participation of reason in the endowment of dignity amongst designated individuals. Disregarding anything empirical, he claims moral law derives from those who act solely in regards to pure reason, claiming these and only these individuals maintain the ability to become an end good in itself. Giving humans the power to determine the moral worth of others deifies those individuals with superior cognitive development while dehumanizing others with cognitive challenges. Determining specific prerequisites for dignity, in this case reason, automatically excludes a percentage of the population who lack that specific trait or function. Resultantly, to find a solution to these human rights violations, we must look beyond the scope of traditional philosophy.

### **Imago Dei in Genesis**

With that the fundamental question remains: “What makes a human being deserving of irrefutable dignity?” After identifying the incompetence of traditional philosophies in the discussion of universal dignity, we now turn to a more wholistic and encompassing approach. Christian theology answers this question with two words, Imago Dei. As written in the book of Genesis, God creates all humans in His image, and thus, all individuals possess inherent dignity. In the first chapter of Genesis it is written, (quote)

“God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.’ ... God saw everything that he had made and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:27-28, 31). (end quote)

God creates all human beings in His image. Nowhere in the chapter does the author later specify the traits or qualifications one needs in order to fit into God’s Image. Instead, God looks at all humanity and deems it “very good.” Imago Dei is not reserved solely for men or women, white

or black, the intellectually elite or the mentally disabled, but for all individuals who belong to the human race. Unlike the works of Aristotle and Kant, the ideals of Christianity provide the necessary foundation in establishing a universal understanding of inherent human dignity and rights.

### **Imago Dei's Role in the Christian Church**

Although the teachings of the Church serve as the rock of this liberating movement, members of the mentally disabled community face significant discrimination from the institution most known for its focus on humility and love for one another. In a twist of irony, the Christian Church degrades the dignity of a portion of its members as it often excludes individuals with primitive reasoning capabilities from full participation in worship. The early Church blatantly disregarded the dignity of many people as they labeled all outcasts as evidence of evil in the world. Reasoning demons possessed those living with limited cognitive functions, the leaders of the church encouraged minimal inclusion into the Christian community. Historically, Christians have sometimes even encouraged the execution of children with deformities or disabilities, viewing them as products of witchcraft. The treatment of people in such a way not only hinders the dignity of those excluded, but directly contradicts the biblical teachings of this religion.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus commands his followers to serve and love “even the least of these,” and by doing so, Christians love and serve Him (Matthew 25:35-45). Historically, Christians viewed those with limited cognitive development as lesser, resorting to dehumanizing actions and exclusion as opposed to responding with a “servant’s heart” as the gospel instructs. In Matthew chapter 25, Jesus proclaims “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25: 45). In this verse, Jesus proclaims his presence even in those who humanity views as lesser. Additionally,

this reiterates Imago Dei's application to all humanity as all people created in God's Image receive the acknowledgement of Christ in them. Jesus' recognition of all people emphasizes the inherent dignity and its universal existence. By neglecting the developmentally challenged, the early Church neglected to serve Jesus in the way Christians are called to do.

A second Christian understanding of disabilities commenced around the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD and continued through the Renaissance. This movement focused on compassion and understanding as opposed to exclusion and dehumanization. In his paper on Western Christianity and its treatment of people, Herbert C. Covey describes the changing views brought about by this new way of thinking. According to the second tradition, "people with disabilities were innocent victims of misfortune. Christianity's role was to be the protector and benefactor for the downtrodden and disadvantaged" (Covey 2005, 111). These views more accurately encompass the Christian lifestyle the bible encourages. This second movement positively impacted society as it led the movement for improved treatment of the mentally disabled. Inexcusably however, stigmas undoubtedly persist in many churches around the world today. This discrimination excludes brothers and sisters in Christ from fully joining the community of the church as a punishment for their cognitive limitations. For Christians who find their identity in Christ, this exclusion actively pulverizes the dignity of the individual.

### **Exclusion of Baptism**

One obvious source of discrimination within the Church is the prevention of cognitively challenged individuals from participation in traditions and sacraments such as Baptism and Holy Communion. In the Christian faith, Baptism joins one to the death and resurrection of Jesus and thus liberates the individual from sin and death (Romans 6:3-4). Through baptism, God sends the Holy Spirit to bring about Faith. While talking to a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus, Jesus

explains in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit” (John 3:5). The “water and spirit” Jesus mentions refers to the water and Holy Spirit in Baptism. Throughout the chapter, Jesus repeatedly expresses the importance of baptism in regards to salvation. Most churches agree that the actual act of baptism is merely an outward expression of an inward reality. The crucial component in all regards is the faith of the individual through the Holy Spirit as well as the forgiveness of sins through the binding to Christ and His resurrection. Further interpretation of this chapter however remains a key divide between modern denominations of Christianity. The differing in beliefs on the magnitude of God’s role verses the individual’s role in faith causes the variation in baptismal traditions and beliefs regarding the legitimacy of baptizing intellectually challenged individuals.

In denominations such as Catholicism and Lutheranism, the church doctrines traditionally recognize infant Baptism, reasoning God alone acts through Baptism in ways human works continuously fall short. Martin Luther comments, “If Baptism is made dependent on faith, we (would) scarcely ever arrive at the assurance of having sufficient faith and thus at the validity of our Baptism. ... Baptism points to the fact that salvation comes only from God" (ELCA.org) According to Luther, because salvation comes solely by the grace of the Lord, no human action or decision alone affirms one’s own faith. Luther’s argument originates from the teachings of the apostle Paul. In his letter to the people of Ephesus Paul writes, “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 8:8-9). Giving all credit to God eliminates the necessity of human work or understanding in the baptismal traditions of churches with similar interpretations. Without the limiting prerequisites, infants and mentally disabled peoples alike possess the right to baptism and thus enter the community of Christ. Membership to this community further

asserts the inherent dignity given to all through *Imago Dei* as God embraces the diversity in His creation.

Unlike the doctrines described above such as those of the Lutheran and Catholic church, factions of Christianity such as various Baptist or Non-Denominational churches provide contradicting interpretations and traditions regarding Baptism. According to Jason D. Whitt, the associate director of Baylor University's Institute of Faith and Learning, "baptism [(according to Baptists)] is supposed to follow faith as a person's conscious and voluntary act of obedience to Christ's command. [It] is symbolic of what has already happened in the person's life" (Whitt 2012, 61) This definition considers baptism a response to what already is the case and thus considers one's faith an achievement independent of God. Churches with this view often criticize infant baptism, reasoning infants fail to understand and accept God's grace for themselves. This practice specifically dehumanizes mentally disabled Christians by denying their inherent right to Baptism should they not possess the mental capacity to fully understand the act. Though salvations does not solely rely on the sacrament itself, excluding non-reasoning adults from it prevents them from entering the community of faith that is established through baptism.

### **A Community of Believers**

If the individuals cannot completely comprehend the theology behind Christian tradition, why focus so much on ensuring their religious rights? As I have previously explained, rights assert the dignity inherent to all humans via *Imago Dei*. Ensuring these rights protects the dignity of individuals with mental disabilities who lack the cognitive power to assert this for themselves. In a religious sense, rights to sacraments such as baptism and communion serve a similar purpose. While these rights similarly protect their innate dignity, participation in religious

sacraments also works to include the mentally challenged in the community of believers. In his epistle to the people of Corinth, Paul writes:

“Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:21-24).

The apostle acknowledges the importance of inclusion and equality in the Church. Termed “the body of Christ,” this community of Christians extends an invitation to all humans created in God’s image. Excluding the mentally disabled from complete participation and acceptance in the Church directly contradicts Paul’s teachings. Instead of treating the seemingly weak with “special honor,” churches that ignore the rights of the mentally disabled subsequently dehumanize members by not treating them as part of the community.

## **Conclusion**

Collectively stated, human beings possess the highest levels of dignity of all living creatures. However, the trait by virtue which makes humans deserving of this dignity varies greatly among philosophers and authors. The philosophies that declare reason as the distinguishing characteristic for humans, such as the ones proposed by Aristotle and Kant, often catalyze the discrimination and dehumanization of those who fail to portray the specified traits. As members of the same species, no one human obtains any dominion over another. The sole trait which makes humans deserving of moral respect is the trait of being human. With human nature unavoidably comes flaws and sin. Thus, these imperfections demand the intervention of a higher,

purser, being to make one deserving of inherent dignity. The notion of Imago Dei provides that higher, purer being required. Because humans are created in God's image, His perfect and all-powerful nature makes all humans, regardless of mental functioning, worthy of innate dignity.

While cognitive limitations fail to diminish the dignity of a person in any way, the altered abilities and unique needs of the individuals often bring about challenges in situations that expose the vulnerability of their dignity. Declaring specific human rights for all humanity helps to promote the dignified treatment of fellow humans. Unfortunately, simply stating rights, whether legally or religiously, ineffectively protects one's livelihood. Because of their diminished abilities to strongly refute, people with mental disabilities remain some of the most susceptible to violations against their dignity. With the lack of cognitive abilities, attempts of asserting one's own dignity often fall short when challenged by cruel and manipulative fellow humans. Thus, the goal of this talk is to emphasize that the responsibility falls on those with the ability to assert their own dignity to be conscious of and active in asserting the dignity of those who struggle to do so themselves. This applies directly to legal, social, and most specifically religious situations. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Philippians, Paul commands: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:4). It is the duty of all those created in God's Image to care for one another in every situation. Whether in secular activities or in religious sacraments, all humans deserve the same human rights. Affirming the rights of all humans allows humanity to protect the dignity of each individual inherent to them by the notion of Imago Dei.