


Article

Diaconia and Identity: Agency of the Marginalised

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Abstract: The question under investigation relates to the agency of the marginalised as a model for taking responsibility for care and progress. This complex phenomenon of existence outside of the centre will be critically evaluated. Two notions of *imago Dei*—Wentzel’s image of God and Kelsey’s images of Christ—indicate the debates around the positioning of the marginalised. These debates are becoming an emerging field of interest within the development and diaconia fields of research. A growing interest is in the escalation and unprecedented poverty that some parts of the world are experiencing. The division amongst and between nations is growing rapidly, never seen in modern history. The interest of this contribution lies specifically within the intersections of identity and agency. I seek to explore Christian anthropology within and concerning the rest of God’s creation. Questions such as the absolute doctrinal formulation of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God, how the doctrine relates to contemporary challenges such as the destructiveness of the created order by human beings, the oppressive and exploitative political and economic systems; and the continuation of the doctrine with situations of poverty will be considered. Using a post-colonial approach to Christian anthropology, I will argue that the marginalised as part of the creation of God has the call and gifts to take responsibility, the right and the dignity for care and development. Such an approach redefines marginalisation as a space of liberation. The positioning of the marginalised in relation to the centre and the agency of the poor will be correlated with Radford Ruether’s dialectical approach to what it means to be the church. Radford Ruether’s approach forms the basis for Dietrich’s view of the positioning of the marginalized within the diaconal perspective.

Keywords: Christian anthropology; *imago Dei*; dialectics; diaconia; marginalised



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1. Introduction

This contribution investigates the agency of the marginalised as a model for taking responsibility for care and progress. The ‘marginalised’ is a complex and contested term and reference for people who do not possess the means, space, and power to develop and progress within the dominant economic, social, and political systems. The church is not exempted from this dominant space that characterises differences in centres and margins or hierarchies of power. The editors of a recent international edited volume on diaconia, Christian social practice, and social work observe that:

In this book, the authors highlight the transformative process of inclusion, which is ever ending and acknowledge the present realities of power abuse, exclusion and marginalisation also seen within the life of Christian churches and other community organisations. (eds. [Haugen et al. 2022](#), p. 3)

These differences can refer to categories such as ordained and laity, bishops and priests, the processional order and altar party and congregation.

The separation of the *koinonia* within groups is much more evident in the mainline church traditions than in the more fluid Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions. This does not exclude the latter from the critique of exclusivity and domination. However, the extent of marginalisation is less in the churches that practice a more egalitarian leadership model

than the New Testament and Early Church systems of order, class, and institution. The shepherd-sheep model of the gospels and the gifts of the Spirit model of the Pauline letters¹ demonstrate the differences between the mainline and charismatic movements. Within both paradigms of the church, there is an entrenched and traditional hierarchy, division, and separation that has influenced the church's teachings, practices, and mission. One such teaching is the doctrine of the *imago Dei*². This doctrine encapsulates the Christian anthropology that forms the theological motivation for the identity of humanity.

Notwithstanding the efforts of the church order and structures to include the whole worshipping community as part of the ecclesia, the traditional systems and order of the ecclesia are exclusive, separated, patriarchal, and hierarchical. Feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983, 1985) and Denise Ackermann (2008) and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001), and Emile Townes (2006), and Liberationists such as Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988) are theologians who have demonstrated through post-colonial theoretical approaches the limitations of the dominant modern and postmodern models of church. Here I refer to the institutionalised and hierarchical church models that are a male-dominated, autocratic, and absolute traditionalist, e.g., the shepherd-sheep model, used within certain mainline church traditions.

I seek to explore Christian anthropology as situated within and in relation to the rest of God's creation. Questions such as the absolute doctrinal formulation of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God and how the doctrine relates to contemporary challenges such as the destructiveness of the created order by human beings, the Anthropocene, the oppressive and exploitative political and economic systems, and the continuation of the doctrine within situations of poverty will be considered.

Using a post-colonial approach to (Radford Ruether—Feminist Dialectics and Social Constructionist) Christian anthropology, I will argue that the marginalised, as part of God's creation, have the call and gifts to take responsibility for care and development. Such an approach redefines marginalisation as socially constructed and uncovers spaces of liberation. It calls for deconstruction and possible reconstruction of spaces within a synthesis of margins and centres. Symbolic and metaphoric creativity might well play a role. This is the function of diaconia in a concrete and tangible form. The positioning of the marginalised in relation to the centre, and the agency of the poor will be explored as a means for a common concern and common good. I further argue that Christian anthropology rejects uniqueness based on materialism, skills, distorted power relations and any construction that discriminates, marginalises, or oppresses. This implies that uniqueness as being and doing applies to all of humanity.

2. Van Huyssteen and Kelsey on the Image of God

The teachings of the image of God are also rooted within the two Testaments of the biblical tradition. The Hebrew influence is rooted within certain biblical texts, i.e., Genesis 1:26–28, 9:17, 5:1–3 and 3:22. Whilst the first three texts are probably the most used references for the images of God, it is the last one that refers to the moral dimension of being human (Marais 2021, p. 4). One of the most prominent representatives of the Hebrew influence is Princeton theologian Van Huyssteen (2006, 2008, 2010), who stands within the tradition of the uniqueness of humanity.

Despite the overwhelming use of the Genesis texts for the image of God, Christian theological anthropology has not only become influential within the theological, doctrinal formulations of what it means to be human but, in many respects, has replaced the Hebrew Scriptures' interpretation of Christian anthropology. Here the influential work of Kelsey (2009) is worth mentioning (Marais 2021, pp. 4–5). Whereas the former, based on Genesis 3:22, refers to human uniqueness as a moral human being, the latter is more pastoral. Based on Christ as the image of God, human beings become the images of the image of God. The difference between the two is that in the first instance, human beings are the image of God, and in the second instance, the image of God is intrinsic to human beings through Jesus Christ. The subtle point of a Christological theological approach to the image

of God is that human beings are not alone in this world, but Jesus is the only one alone (Marais 2021, pp. 4–5). What does this imply for the relationship between humans, the rest of creation, humans, and God? Put differently, what does this mean for the positionality of humans in relation to the rest of creation? Are humans the unique species as propelled by Van Huyssteen, or are humans images of Jesus, who is the image of God as described by Kelsey?³ How do humans relate to each other in relation to the rest of creation/to the environment as the image of God and images of God through Jesus?

The two notions of *imago Dei* indicate the debates around the positioning of the marginalised. These debates are becoming an emerging field of interest within the development and diaconia fields of research (Klaasen 2021). A growing interest is in the escalation and unprecedented poverty that some parts of the world are experiencing. The division amongst and between nations is growing rapidly, never seen in modern history. Not to mention the absolute poverty of the developing world and the relative poverty of the developed world. Here I am referring to poverty in both the international indicators and the actual lived experience of people. Whereas relative poverty determines the deprivation of persons compared to each other, absolute poverty refers to the long-term deprivation of groups or nations.

The interest of this contribution lies specifically within the intersection of identity and agency. The former refers to Christian anthropology as in the *imago Dei* and the latter to diaconia. By diaconia is meant the different forms of service by individuals, groups, and communities towards self and others for the common good of humanity and the rest of creation. I am particularly interested in the position and capital of the poor within the church and the world. The identity of the marginalised, the occupied spaces, and their capacity for development is imperative for sustainable and lasting development. From a theological point of view, and my sense is that from a diaconal perspective, the image of God as the theological anthropology of the Christian tradition holds meaningful knowledge and values for sustainable and transformative change and development.

Notwithstanding the contributions of the ecumenical movement such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and diaconia approaches such as Asset Based Development and Use your Talents and the capabilities approaches of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum towards the development of the developing world, this essay hypothesises that diaconia and identity are two sides of the same coin, and that inherent in human beings is the call to care for self, each other, and the rest of creation based on a shared uniqueness or, at least, multiple uniqueness's. Therefore, this contribution will investigate the inherent responsibility of human beings to develop and care for themselves and others despite the lack of capital such as material, technical and economic skills and assets.

This idea of human beings as unique species will be critically examined, and new forms of the uniqueness of humans will be investigated. Uniqueness based on developed and underdeveloped, superior and inferior, dominant and minority will be rejected based on shared humanity and equal power relations. In this sense, uniqueness might not be absolute or universal. Is there room for dynamism, creativity, and non-essentialism?

3. Christian Anthropology and Marginalisation

In one sense, all of humanity is marginalised. Theologically, according to Kelsey, only Jesus, as the image of God, is alone in the world, and human beings are a derivative of Jesus' aloneness. This idea holds two quite contrasting points. Marais explains this by describing Kelsey's notion of humans as the image that "means that human beings reflect the mystery of the triune God, making us 'finite living mysteries that image the triune living mystery' (Kelsey 2009, p. 1009) in a threefold manner: (1) by living on borrowed breath, (2) by living on borrowed time, and (3) by living by another's death" (Marais 2021, p. 4). Marais (2021, p. 5) further notes that the New Testament portrayal of Christological anthropology, such as in Hebrews 2:6–8, provides a critical pastoral approach to lived experience. First, it implies that human beings are by themselves, not alone but amongst others and themselves.

And secondly, the other, alone, has meaning for human beings in a substantial form. The other, the minority, the abandoned on the cross, isolated, or resurrection from the dead and ascended, taken out, are theological themes that make sense in the ever-increasing degree of poverty and provides meaningful spaces for diaconia outside of the traditional theological *imago Dei* as espoused from the Genesis texts.

In relatively simple sociological and anthropological terms, these spaces are familiar to the margins. To be set outside, to be forgotten, to be in the minority, to be left abandoned and alone in the world are images and symbolic metaphors for those without power and alienated from the mainstream, the centre, and the powerful spaces. From a Christological anthropological perspective, it is in these spaces that God dwells, where Jesus' salvific presence is embedded. The revelatory expression 'God Immanuel', or 'God with us', evokes the stark reality of the contested and conflated dwellings of those within the margins.

Within the traditional theological anthropology of Van Huyssteen lies the kind of interdisciplinary overlapping process of reasoning about human identity and what it means to be human. This kind of reason is not the abstract and instrumental reason for modernity but the kind of practical reason that is embedded in experience. In this sense, the lived experience of the margins becomes the lens through which sensemaking takes place. This postfoundationalist approach of Van Huyssteen also has implications for ethical and moral issues such as what justice is, whose justice it is, and what it means to love and have mercy. Conradie rightly observes that for Van Huyssteen, the ethical or moral thrust of human uniqueness lies within human dignity, human responsibility, and human rights (2021:23). In the context of the uniqueness of human beings, these three moral values set humans apart from other species. It is only humans who have human dignity, take human responsibility, and have human rights. It is worth noting that those at the margins are also included, although it is sometimes limited to the law and not always the case in practice.

From a pastoral point of view, the issue of how and what we communicate about the meaning of human life takes on a turn that has implications for the condition of humanity and the position of the human race. The positioning of the communicator within the world of interconnected beings, persons, and materiality, coupled with the environment, forms a web of connecting points or episodes that demands dialogical and dialectical communication for a consistent, logical, and truthful narrative. Communication is not an innocent activity of exchange of ideas or the transmission thereof, but it becomes a game changer within the processes and systems of power dynamics. Who communicates influence and what is communicated determines the perceptions and notions of reality. In this sense, pastoral care becomes more than a one-way process from the carer as the professional to the care receiver as the passive recipient.

I contend that the carer and care receiver occupy spaces of power and transformation. The question is not whether the carer exercises responsible power over the care receiver or whether power is transferred from one to the other but whether the care receiver exercises agency within the process of care. Theoretically, those at the margins exercise agency for transformative whole-making "catholicity". Perhaps the question of Van Huyssteen's *Alone in the World*, also the title of his influential book, is not as innocent as it seems. Maybe the caregiver isolates the care receiver through domination and marginalisation or simply does not accept or respect the power of the other. This can be because power has different dimensions and forms. Nissen provides four abbreviated definitions of power identified by The Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, namely:

Power over, this power involves an either/or relationship of domination and subordination. Ultimately, it is based on socially sanctioned threats of violence and intimidation.

Power to: This power relates to having decision/making authority, the power to solve problems, and can be creative and enabling.

Power with: This power involves people organizing with a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals.

The power within This power refers to self-confidence, self-awareness, and assertiveness. It relates to how individuals can recognize through analysing their experiences how power operates in their lives and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this. (2008:30)

It is noteworthy to mention Horan's provocative question about the absoluteness of doctrine, particularly the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Horan suggests three formulations of doctrine within Catholicism. First, for most of Christian history, the doctrine is absolute and should be seen and received for its historical and traditional relevance. Second, the doctrine remains unchanging and universal as it speaks timeless truths and unchanging ideas. Van Huyssteen's absolute human uniqueness falls within this category. For Van Huyssteen, the scientific knowledge received through theories such as Darwin's evolution and the cultural knowledge espoused by feminism does not change the traditional notions of the Hebrew meanings of what it means to be human. Third, whilst the uniqueness of the traditional formulations of the image of God is still dominant within the corpus of literature and doctrines of Christian anthropology, new interpretations are emerging, providing a vibrate and critical engagement within the contextual and current scholarly debates.

Horan proposes a more nuanced approach to doctrine. The possible way to interact with Christian anthropology is to reject the *imago Dei* as a meaningful doctrine of anthropology. For example, Horan demonstrates through the writings of Cunningham (Horan 2019) that the concept "image" (*selem*) has been criticised and rejected in favour of concepts such as 'flesh' (Hebrew "*basar*" and Greek "*sarx*"), which appear far more than 'image' in the Bible. The term also refers to God's relation to all creation and not just human beings; it also offers a sense of commonality and a cosmic sense of healing (Horan 2019, pp. 94–97).

A second response to the *imago Dei* is to redefine it. Drawing from Moritz (2011), Horan demonstrates how a redefinition of *imago Dei* places human beings in a different category, i.e., for a function or service, and not above the rest of creation or as the absolute and unique species. Using the biblical and historical notion of the election of Israel for a particular purpose and place, he demonstrates the definite and concrete call of Israel by God to be the chosen people for an exact purpose. Israel is not called because it has specific capacities, skills, or character, but it is out of God's free will and choice that Israel finds herself in this position (Horan 2019, pp. 97–99).

A third response is to expand the *imago Dei* to non-humans. This alternative to the exclusive uniqueness of human beings is contrary to both Van Huyssteen and Kelsey's formulation of the doctrine. This approach discontinues the exclusive and redefinition of the image of God to a continuation from humans to the rest of creation. "In other words, to understand the *imago Dei* as pertaining to a collective network of relations . . . is to incorporate the truth of the community of creation unveiled in scripture and confirmed by contemporary natural science, especially evolutionary biology, into Christian doctrine explicitly" (Horan 2019, pp. 103–5).

My response is aligned with the second one, which assumes that humanity is called to a specific purpose not because of its dominant position or superiority but because God calls humans to care for his creation, including the environment and fellow human beings. This position encapsulates the fundamental points of the common responsibility of humanity and the non-threatening, non-exploitative relationship that humans ought to have with the environment.

4. Radford Ruether, Dialectics, and Marginalisation

Radford Ruether bases her dialectical approach on experience. In a stark divergence from many feminists, womanists, and liberationists, Ruether views experience as human experience, which is not limited to specific groups, classes, or sexes. For Radford Ruether, "human experience is the starting point of the hermeneutical circle" (Radford Ruether 1983, p. 12). The inclusivity of human experience rejects the experience of the margins as insignificant for interpreting and transforming people's circumstances from oppression and deprivation to holistic and sustainable development. Ackermann

supports that human experience does not denigrate the centrality of the margins and those whose experience is characterised as marginalised (2008, pp. 37–46).

Dialectics seeks to move beyond the either/or that separates and forms hierarchies to a broader and more inclusive synergy than dualisms or binaries. “Dialectical thinking for Radford Ruether provides a way to discover deeper truths about persons, communities, and ideas that may appear on the surface to be oppositional or negative, but that after their polarities are explored in a mutually critical way, reveal new insights and syntheses heretofore unrealized” (Snyder 1996, pp. 399–410). Dialectics invites differences as critical components of interaction, whereas dualisms separate for peaceful coexistence. Dialectics seeks commonalities amidst diversity, so domination is replaced by cooperation, interaction, and dialogue. Human experience, and not the experience of certain groups, is one commonality that breaks the barriers and transcends the separation of those who are different or the other. Nissen, who draws from Bach (1979), describes this kind of re-identification as an emerging form of diaconia that is more concerned with “who we are” than “what we must do”. He describes this emergence of a new form of diaconia as,

[A]n understanding that which involves not action (What we should do?) but a style of life (Who we are?) What pattern do we impose on our lives? Instead of taking for granted a confrontation between two groups (we-the normal people and the others who have problems and for whom we must show concern), this is a thinking that presupposes the solidarity of all. (Nissen 2008, p. 41)

Within the dialectic approach, the church becomes the community not of hierarchies but as the coexisting, co-enriching, and co-empowering church of the gifts of the spirit model where all members of the community have gifts that are varied within the service of each other.

From a diaconal perspective, dialectics does not abandon the marginalised and marginalised spaces for the more perceived powerful groups. On the contrary, the marginalised take responsibility to stand in a mutual and reciprocal relationship with other groups. Interaction between people is not to replace nor dominate, but it is an empowering and self-emptying process based on the common good for a shared humanity.

5. Marginalised, Marginalised Spaces, and Identity

Those at the margins have the capital, skills, capabilities, values, and principles to address poverty differently than the oppressive and separatist modes of progress to which modernity has become accustomed. The WCC made its preferential option for the poor⁴ clear in 2012 after attempts at its Church and Society gatherings in Geneva in 1966 and Uppsala in 1968. Notwithstanding significant shifts at the previous gatherings, it was the 2012 gathering in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where the margins—both as a space and as an identity—became the paradigm shift of diaconia. Dietrich rightly observes that this shift compels the church to redefine power and reality. Instead of the modern perspective of material superiority, absolute autonomy, and prosperity at all costs, the margins are places where “actors and subjects, not as recipients and objects of development imposed by, the Global North” (Dietrich 2022, p. 97). Dietrich attempts to provide a critical perspective of autonomy within diaconia. In trying to keep a critical approach to autonomy, Dietrich further claims that the autonomy of every individual should be respected, while diaconia involves the interdependence of different persons in service of each other and not just a giver and receiver or a charity type of diaconia. In this sense, the charity act of the powerful—the giver, the helper—is rejected in favour of a reciprocal, mutual interaction for the benefit of both actors (Dietrich 2014, pp. 14–17). This position aligns with the more recent approach of diaconia from charity to justice. Justice refers to the transformation and change of situations of deprivation by both individuals and institutions, including the state and the church. While charity remains a necessary diaconal activity in cases of unforeseen disasters and shocks against the normal operations of societies, the move towards a holistic restoration is best served through justice and intentional systemic change.

Dietrich rightly asserts that diaconia from the margins is not restricted to specific groups or individuals but includes the spaces from which persons approach diaconia. According to Dietrich,

Much of this engagement from diaconal actors has its normative basis in a theological understanding of equal value and dignity of every human being as created in the image and likeness of God (Christian anthropology). Diaconal actors often refer to the biblical tradition of prophetic diakonia, renouncing injustice and speaking up for the poor and marginalised. In addition, reference is given to Jesus as a model for radical engagement in supporting people in need and empowering them to create a better life for themselves and their communities. (Dietrich 2022, p. 97)

Dietrich further develops her approach towards the community-oriented diaconia by criticising autonomy from the perspective of Ubuntu. The type of Ubuntu that Dietrich takes for her critique of autonomy is different from the radicalised community Ubuntu of Tempels and Mbiti and the moderate community of Gyekye. First, this type of Ubuntu implies that humans are not bound up with each other and each other's humanity, as expounded by Tempels and Mbiti, but that persons are growing towards full humanity through interaction despite differences and uniqueness's. This kind of Ubuntu of Eze is also the perspective of Tutu, whose Ubuntu is rooted in a contemplative Christian spirituality and an interdependent relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. This perspective of Ubuntu moves beyond the anthropocentrism of the radicalised and the moderate community notions of Ubuntu. Within this notion of Ubuntu, the autonomy of the individual is not absolutized or relativized, but the individual and community are in a creative tension that does not disregard difference or uniqueness. Secondly, this notion of Ubuntu takes the non-human community, the environment, and the rest of creation as essential actors within the broader community. As Tutu affirms, humans are the "viceroys" of God's creation (Battle 1997).

Dietrich builds on the definition of marginalised proposed by Nissen, that the marginalised are those who are excluded from decision-making processes through social exclusion processes. She asserts that exclusion based on politics and economics should also be included in the spheres of marginalisation. Dietrich further problematises Nissen's definition of marginalised by raising the multidimensional nature of marginalisation. While the marginalised can be the working class in one context, it can be both the working class and being a woman in another context. Similarly, in yet another context, it can be the working class, a woman, and people with disabilities, while in a further distinct context, it could be the working class, a woman, being disabled, and a non-citizen. For Dietrich, marginalisation includes questions of the identity of a community, demarcating the community according to processes of exclusion and inclusion, insiders and outsiders, decision-makers and objects of the decisions (Dietrich 2022, p. 100). The question of identity is at the heart of the positioning of persons. One's identity determines one's position within the demarcated spaces. To ask if humans are alone in the world is a complex assertion that can imply both the uniqueness of humans and their relationship with the rest of creation. More importantly, the question raises the fundamental issue of the fragmented human race considering the growing poverty levels within its relative and absolute forms.

Drawing from the ecumenical diaconia perspective, and particularly from the Colombo gathering, Dietrich claims that diaconia within the margins has become an indispensable form of embedded transformation. "Diakonia is not action *for* the marginalised, but Diakonia *of* the marginalised people. Taking a starting point in this perspective on Diakonia includes depending on the insights of 'the margins' and acknowledging its faith and agency" (Dietrich 2022, p. 98). Dietrich elaborates that the Colombo gathering affirms the agency of the margins and seeks to challenge the margins to both accept their vocation and call as diaconal actors with the power to participate and, more damning, to shift the traditional power relations of domination and oppression and to "define reality upside down" (Dietrich 2022, p. 98).

An approach to diaconia from the margins does not exclude those at the so-called centre. The centre plays a role in diaconia on the basis that to be created in the image of God includes all humanity. When we consider the two perceived divergent notions of the image of God—that of Van Huyssteen (the absolute uniqueness of humanity) and that of Kelsey (the images of the image of God)—a synthesis is uncovered that does not divide or separate for the sake of domination or alienation. Instead, the dialogical action is different but not separated. The marginalised do not replace the centre to create another margin. Rather, the spaces of the margins provide specific and possible uniqueness that the centre is oblivious or ignorant to. Lived experience of deprivation and, in most cases, absolute poverty could be ignored by the centre as concrete knowledge that informs appropriate agencies, such as the service of those in the margins. Contextual knowledge is best evaluated as authentic from within the embeddedness of the situation or actual environment. These kinds of the capital provide what first might seem counterintuitive, but a pause in the highly individualistic and autonomous environment might provide the glimpse that it takes to discover the common identity of all of humanity. Human experience, according to Ruether and Ackermann, is the hermeneutical circle. From this feminist-postcolonial-dialectic perspective, transformation does not start from the centre, the so-called powerful, but from the margins and the spaces that are characterised by marginalisation. Perhaps the centre is an illusionary contrast to margins if one considers that the Christological anthropology of Kelsey rejects the absolute uniqueness of Van Huyssteen and argues for a kind of marginalisation from God of all humanity, except Jesus Christ, who is the image of God.

It is from the affirmation of the common humanity of those at the margins that the margins are places of liberation and salvation. The margins as places of humanity in Kelsey's notion of *imago Dei* are where God dwells, where God prefers to be, and where the symbols of love relate to humanity. Reflecting on the creation narrative in Genesis 2, Conradie observes that the "crown" of creation is not the species but the Sabbath that creates the space where all creatures live peacefully. The Sabbath is "best understood as an eschatological and not a primordial symbol—that violent conflict, predation, biting, chewing, digesting each other do not have the final word. If so, human uniqueness may be best understood not in terms of what distinguishes us from other animals but in our anticipation of the relatedness of all creatures". Conradie (2021, p. 7) defines the nature of such relationships "not as a disposition of a subject or an agent, nor a form of selflessness or altruism (contra sociobiologists), but as a characterisation of the quality of relationships, with the connotations of mutual respect, reciprocity (being willing to receive and to give), desiring each other (eros), finding joy in each other's intimate presence".

6. The Church as Community of Diaconia

What might such a church look like? The Christian church is too dynamic and creative to contain within a single definition, concept, model, or format, as is evident in the classical book of Avery Dulles, *Models of Church* (Dulles 1974). The dialectical method of Ruether provides a broad framework for conceptualising the church within its diversity and limitations. In her book *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Communities* (Radford Ruether 1985), Ruether analyses what it means to be the church. She draws from the Monasticism movement, the bishops' attempts to counter the emperor's hierarchical, shepherd-sheep model of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The Monastic movement was to return to the charismatic movement and hence, a more egalitarian or at least inclusive *koinonia*. This trend can be traced to the 17th centuries "movements such as antinomians led by Anne Hutchinson and Quaker Margaret Fell, who prioritised grace over works and egalitarian ministry over hierarchical ministry or separateness. Movements such as Methodism and Pietism in Germany had informal worship that operated concurrently with the established church" (Klaasen 2016, p. 15). Within the Anglican Church, this tension of different expressions of church is found between the traditional models of the three-fold ministry (bishop, priest, and deacon) and the more contemporary expression, such as

Alpha, Fresh Expressions, and Renew and Small Christian communities (Klaasen 2016, p. 15).

Diaconia contributes towards the synthesis of these opposite and divergent forms of church. Nevertheless, there is a commonality in the mission and being of the church that keeps the tension or perceived opposites in creative tension. The common denominator is service to people with low incomes through the lens of the human experience and with the margins. It means from the perspective of the lived experience of the poor, the alienated, and the “other”. The church ought to be an inclusive community with an inclusive mission. This kind of church is well documented in the Faith and Order text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (WCC 2013). This text assumes that the communion of baptised people of God reflects the Trinitarian communion and that the church’s mission, embedded in the *missio Dei*, is to bring all people in communion with each other and with the rest of God’s creation. This text of the Faith and Order envisions a church that spans and transcends denominational confessions and creeds through the common mission of service to all God’s creation (Christensen 2019, p. 51).

Such a church that is inclusive, symbiotic, in creative tension and open-ended holds perceived opposites and antagonisms in a dialectical movement for the mission of God. When all people are accepted as God’s created in God’s image and Christ reflects the perfect image of God, the church becomes a real community. The church becomes the church when worship and liturgy become the vehicles through which people are formed into images of God.

7. Conclusions

Diaconia is widely and generally associated with the service of individuals, the church and faith-based organisations, and God towards the common good of all people. The church has a long and contested history. From a small group of individuals threatened by the establishment of state and religious dominance in the first century to a global and dominant institution for most of history after the common era, it has taken on many forms and shapes. These diverse expressions of the church have caused serious schisms and breakaways because of doctrinal, confessional, creedal, traditional, biblical, and liturgical differences among the Christian communities. This contribution sought to critically engage with religious ideas, specifically the *imago Dei* as the dominant Christian anthropology. The nexus between identity and diaconia questions some of the significant models of the church through Ruether’s dialectical methodology. This approach by Radford Ruether uncovers models of church that were situated within the margins and occupied by those of the margins. The margins become the hermeneutical lens for an inclusive church and an authentic service for the common good for a common humanity. The lived experience of those at the margins becomes valuable capital and contributes towards a holistic, effective, and sustainable transformation. Those at the margins become both those to be capacitated and those to be affirmed as having capital for self-development.

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Notes

¹ The following can be consulted for a broader discussion of the two different symbols of the church: Lawrence, P. Sheep and Shepherd: An Ancient Image of the church and the contemporary challenge (Porter 2001; Miller 2014).

² At the very least, this is one of the most complicated and contested doctrines within recent theological discourses. The term *imago Dei* has various interpretations, and as Van den Brink notes, this variety of interpretations within the Christian tradition and contemporary theology should be carefully studied and interpreted (Van den Brink 2012, p. 4). This article does not provide

the scope to give a comprehensive overview of *imago Dei*. However, it is noteworthy to mention some of the term's essential theological notions and historical significance. Biblical revelation and particular scripture are at the heart of human nature and what it means to be human. Whilst the image of God reflects the connection between the Near Eastern notion of the king as the image of God on earth, there is a strong divergence towards that all persons and everything of persons *more than the biology is created in the image of God and that the image is closely connected to the responsibility that humans share to the rest of creation. Persons are also not created in isolation but in relation to each (Ge. 1.27). Within the New Testament, the created image is completed within *imago Christi* with the development of Christological and Trinitarian perspectives and the sacramental mediation. Human plays an active role in becoming the image of God through the Son—the patristic period development along different lines and the distinction between image and likeness or ontological and moral. Within Thomas Aquinas, a three-stage development is recognized and within the Reformation, the static nature of the image of God and the role that sin plays. Finally, the modern critique based on modern scientific discoveries and pushed by questioning the centrality of human beings by notions of Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Max, and Sigmund Freud and secularization theology and politics cast more critical questions over the theology of the image of God. For a more comprehensive discussion, see the [Report of the International Theological Commission and Stewardship \(2012\)](#). Considering this rich and diverse history of the *imago Dei* and the complexities and diverse interpretations, I use the work of mainly South African theologians and the two perspectives that is somewhat different and partly representative of the complexities and diversity of the concept. The two perspectives represent, in a limited way, the development from the Old Testament to the New Testament perspectives. The two perspectives are also used as conversational partners for a South African theological landscape dominated by the scholarship of the late South African theologian Wentzel van Huyssteen.

- 3 Notwithstanding the normative acceptance of the continuation or renewal of the *imago Dei* from the Old Testament to the New Testament notions, a growing corpus of the literature suggests Christian anthropology within the New Testament be considered to replace the Old Testament notions of *imago Dei*. Here [Kelsey \(2009\)](#), McClintock Fulkerson's Feminist approach to the *imago Dei* is of particular interest. Marais provides a more comprehensive list of publications that explores this phenomenon ([Marais 2021](#), p. 3).
- 4 The term marginalized is used for the poor in diaconal circles in writings by prominent scholars of diaconia, such as Kjell Nordstokke in the seminal work of *Diakonia in context-* Lutheran World Federation. The interexchange of the terms is also used within disciplines such as Sociology and Anthropology, which demonstrates the position of the poor at the fringes of the economic, social and political centres.

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