PICTURING SUFFERING: THE MORAL DILEMMAS IN GAZING AT PHOTOGRAPHS OF HUMAN ANGUISH

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ABSTRACT

Photographs of human suffering inundate everyday life in the United States. The camera lens brings the human gaze into the intimate anguish of state sponsored torture and "natural disaster." This essay argues that photographs of suffering in contemporary culture present a nexus of ethical and moral issues. These issues arise from how photographs represent suffering "others" and how these images inform collective response to human anguish. This essay interrogates this intersection through the lens of Christian ethics' root metaphor of *imago Dei*. First, the essay explores the power and privilege that are invisible in the act of gazing upon a photograph of human suffering. Second, Kevin Carter's 1994 Pulitzer Prize winning photo of a Sudanese girl-child is deconstructed through the use of visual cultural studies. This analysis illustrates that photographs are not a literal depiction of suffering but rather a cultural representation which deeply condition the knowledge of human suffering. Finally, the essay argues that the photo is an invitation for the viewer to become an agent, not a spectator whose morality is realized in the sociality of *imago Dei* in suffering.

Individuals in contemporary culture are inundated with photographs depicting human suffering. Daily, photographs of suffering "others" are presented to the viewer on television, in magazines and newspapers as well as on the internet. In Christianity suffering is considered as a universal human experience. Suffering is also "a master subject of our mediatized times." To "regard the pain of others" is a daily occurrence. These images range in kind from survivors of "natural disaster" to victims of state sponsored torture. Videos

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and cameras take viewers into the intimate world of human pain and anguish.[1]

Photographs present this reality to viewers with a shattering intensity. The focus on images of human suffering is not new to Christian ethics and theology; the central symbol of Christianity is the One who bears suffering. What is new is the knowledge of the staggering number of suffering human beings around the globe, the awareness of their plight, and realization that it could be otherwise.[2] In presenting the reality of human suffering, photographs function in a number of ways: documenting human injustice, giving testimony for human anguish, and mobilizing popular sentiment and collective action. In addition, these images of suffering function commercially as a commodity in processes of global marketing and business competition.[3] Photographs of suffering also become cultural artifacts which take on a life of their own apart from their suffering subjects.[4] As Arthur and Joan Kleinman suggest, in processes of representation suffering as a human experience "is being remade, thinned out, and distorted."[5]

In contemporary North American culture, knowledge of suffering human beings is often dependent solely upon images. Photographs present a problem for Christian social ethics because their function in relationship to the suffering human being is often ambiguous.[6] These

[1]Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times," in *Social Suffering,* ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 1; Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

[2]Rebecca Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), 2.

[3]One example of this commodification is the Benetton Company's use of images of suffering to market clothing. See Nathaniel Nash, "Benetton Touches a Nerve and Germans Protest," *The New York Times,* February 3, 1995, D1, D18.

[4]There are many examples of photos of suffering which have transitioned from documentation to artwork and to "emblems of suffering." One example is Robert Capa's falling soldier; see Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 119–26. See also Elizabeth Spelman, "On the Aesthetic Usability of Suffering" in *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 133–56; Vicki Goldberg, "Looking at the Poor in a Gilded Frame," *New York Times,* April 9, 1995, sec. 2: 1, 39.

[5]Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience," 1.

[6]I am indebted to Susan Ross for her thought-provoking work on the theological value of ambiguity. She writes: "When a situation is marked by ambiguity, its resolution is unclear: there is more than one possible solution, more than one meaning. It is often marked by tension, as competing resolutions are suggested by those involved. In between order and chaos, ambiguity demands further reflection, consideration of new and different outcomes, decisions on what issues are at stake in it resolution. . . . But such a situation means that those involved must be able to tolerate, at least for a time, a certain 'lack' of order. This 'disorder' allows for dimensions of the situation to reveal themselves, or to be uncovered by questioning, opening up issues and concerns that could affect the situations resolution" (*Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* [New York: Continuum, 1998], 69).

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images can bring much needed attention to persons in anguish, while sometimes simultaneously exploiting these persons. The popular assumption is that photographs document an "on-the-spot eyewitness account" of reality. To accept these images as simply "pictures of the real" ignores the institutions of power and systems of oppression that condition how photography mediates this reality.[7] I argue that photographs are cultural texts whose assumptions and meanings are often unclear in regard to what they say about suffering human beings and what they imply about the causes of and responses to their plight. To ignore these deeply imbedded meanings may be to erase the suffering subjects of history and their claim upon us.

My major thesis is this: *Photographs of suffering human beings must be questioned in order to determine what they imply about the causes and responses to human anguish.* The necessity of questioning photographs of suffering is grounded in Christianity's root metaphor of *imago Dei* which holds out an imperative to realize the dignity and radical sociality of viewer and viewed.

My essay proceeds as follows. First, I will introduce the moral problem of viewing a photograph of human suffering by exploring the complex process of viewing from the standpoint of the viewer. A fundamental assumption of my work is the powerful and provocative way that photographs offer knowledge of human suffering to the imagination, not directly to rational thought. A photograph of a human being suffering acts as a multivalent image communicating multiple ideas that are received by the imagination before critical thinking can begin. The image and the complex process of viewing are often unconscious and taken for granted because we see the picture as a window on reality, not a constructed image communicating a message about reality. The experience of viewing a photograph is assumed to offer a new factual account or documentation of reality, but rather this process of viewing can reinforce common sense understandings of people and situations. In regard to suffering human beings, the knowledge gained from viewing photographs may or may not benefit the suffering subject and may reinforce the notion that their suffering is "natural" or deserved. In addition, the act of viewing itself may reinforce the notion that the suffering is distant and unrelated to the viewer's existence. In order to interrogate the photograph's capacity to communicate solidaritistic

[7]See Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 167: "The institutional uses of photography makes us think photographs are truthful pictures, not photographic techniques themselves. . . . Foucault's emphasis on institutions and power/knowledge is crucial for understanding the belief that photography pictures the real."

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knowledge of human suffering it is necessary to stop, step back, and reflect on what happens in the moment when the viewer looks upon the image.

Second, I will draw on visual cultural studies to demonstrate the morally ambiguous character of photographs of human suffering. Visual cultural studies is a discipline at the intersection of art history, anthropology, film studies, linguistics, comparative literature, cultural studies and post-structural theory. This interdisciplinary field is a rich body of work that deserves sustained attention by Christian social ethicists.[8] This field of study offers Christian social ethics a variety of tools to interrogate how photographs are part of processes of cultural representation that deeply condition the knowledge of human suffering. Here my purpose is limited, I utilize these resources to analyze Kevin Carter's 1994 Pulitzer Prize winning photo of a Sudanese child. Through my analysis of this image I will illustrate that photographs are not a literal depiction of suffering but rather a "reflection of or response to—social, political and economic processes."[9]

Third, drawing upon the fundamental principle of *imago Dei* I will argue that questioning photographs of suffering human beings deconstructs the moral character of the representation in relationship to the imperative of human dignity, and reconstructs the ties that bind the viewer to the viewed as a human being with a claim on the viewer's shared humanity. Questioning photographs of suffering human beings creates the possibility of realizing the dignity and radical sociality of being made in the image and likeness of God.

I. The Power of Gazing

Visual cultural studies is a treasure trove of insight to help Christian social ethicists to interrogate the multifaceted phenomenon of gaze in

[8]This limited space does not allow for a full catalog of this valuable work. However, such a list would include Rose, *Visual Methodologies;* Jessica Evan and Stuart Hall, eds. *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage Publications, 1999); Stuart Hall, ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London; Sage Publications, 1997); Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell, eds. *Interpreting Visual Culture: Explorations in the Hermeneutics of the Visual* (New York: Routledge, 1999); S. Brent Plate ed., *Religion, Art and Visual Culture: A Cross Cultural Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photo Journalism, Catastrophe and War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz and Jay Ruby eds., *Image Ethics in the Digital Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

[9]Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 1.

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relationship to photographs of suffering. This growing body of literature helps to understand eyes as windows on the world, and also to unpack this view of the world as a moral problem of understanding human suffering through photographs.

The term "visual culture" first appeared in 1969 in Caleb Gattegno's book, *Towards a Visual Culture: Educating through Television*.[10] This text articulates a key assumption of the field, namely that the viewer of the image is a processor of images.[11] Visual cultural studies challenges "looking" as visual common sense by demonstrating that what our eyes register is not a "reality out there." Our gaze is constituted by data from the eyes and information from our other senses, and combined with complex dynamics in the brain which synthesizes all this to present our mind with an image of the world.[12] The visual world we receive through our eyes is an image in our brain which is a map of reality. As Alfred Korzybski explains, "the map is not the territory." To acknowledge "gaze" as a complex process of perception is considered by visual cultural studies theorists to be the first level of "visual intelligence."[13]

What makes the viewer morally vulnerable is the fact that occular perception involves processes that are often not conscious but profoundly impact judgment.

> Not only is our perception liable to distortion, it is also highly susceptible to emotional manipulation on an unconscious level, which in turn affects our conscious thinking. Lighting, shadow, and color can be changed to produce a more positive or negative emotional impact; context can be subtly suggestive enough to alter our conscious opinion of the subject within it. All of this can happen before we consciously form a judgment that we believe to to be informed, objective and unbiased—in other words, "intelligent."[14]

The field of visual cultural studies thus implies that how we understand visual perception deeply conditions human capacity to judge, to choose, and to act in relationship to suffering human beings.

[10]Caleb Gattegno, *Towards a Visual Culture: Educating through Television* (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1969).

[11]"To talk of the medium of television is a way to talk of man (sic) as the perceiver, the responder, the expander, the processor of images" (Gattengo, *Towards a Visual Culture*, 15). For an extended work on human beings as processors of images see Richard Gregory, *Eye and Brain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[12]For a and excellent and thorough exploration of gaze as complex sense and brain process in producing mental image see Ann Marie Sward Barry, *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 15–68.

[13]Ibid., 15 ("map"), 67 ("visual intelligence").

[14]Ibid., 66.

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What may be the most difficult element of vision to make conscious is the dynamics of power involved in gazing and being gazed upon. Visual cultural studies points out that to gaze at photographs suggests that the viewer is a spectator. In many cases, particularly in relationship to photographs of suffering, being a spectator implies more power than being the object of the gaze.[15] The person who gazes is the subject of agency, one who can act. The one who is gazed upon is captured in the frame of the photograph as the object.

In the case of photographs of suffering, the one who gazes is never seen and never in the "picture," while the one who suffers never leaves the frame of reference of suffering.

> In other words. . .as a member of a community whose primary relationship to to suffering is as a *spectator*, as those whose relationship to suffering might be summarized as: we can take it for granted that our life does not include certain kinds of suffering; we are at a distance from those who suffer; the visible suffering of others is available to us a means to reflect on our own lives and subjectivities?[16]

This provocative question by Anna Szorenyi orients my inquiry into gaze. In this section I will explore how this often barely conscious role as a spectator informs our understanding of the suffering we view in photographs. I will argue that our passive and uncritical gaze upon suffering human beings in photographs may reinscribe the role of viewer as spectator and "normalize" the suffering of the humans upon whom we gaze.[17] This divide between spectator and "sufferer"—between

[15]Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 88.

[16]Anna Szorenyi, "Distanced Suffering: Photographed Suffering and the Construction of White In/vulnerability," *Social Semiotics* 19 (2009): 93–109, at 94.

[17]Since the terms "spectator" and "spectacle" signal a discussion that is beyond the scope of this article, I will limit my use of the terms. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright define spectacle as "a term that generally refers to something that is striking or impressive in its visual display." These scholars point out that a spectacle will "dominate contemporary culture and *all social relations are mediated by and through these images*" (*Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 366 [my emphasis]). The term "spectacle" was employed in a specific way in 1967 in Guy Debord's seminal work, *Society of the Spectacle* (trans. Donald Nickolson-Smith [New York: Zone Books, 1994]). Stuart Hall's work brilliantly uses this concept to interrogate the dynamics of racist cultural representation; see Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'" in *Representation,* 223–90. To understand the dynamic of spectacle in relationship to current visual cultural studies, see W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a fascinating introduction to this issue, see Larry Gross, "Privacy and Spectacle: The Reversible Panopticon and Media Saturated Society," *Image Ethics in the Digital Age,* 95–113. "Spectacle" and "spectator" refer to social roles and processes of power. My use of these terms is limited in this essay to denote the powerful social role the viewer has in gazing

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agent and object—subverts the fundamental claim and responsibility of the dignity and radical sociality of being made in God's image and likeness. In order to realize dignity and radical sociality, the task of the viewer is to make visible the privilege that masks shared human vulnerability with the suffering human being in the photograph.

The act of gazing involves looking steadily with intention.[18] bell hooks describes how children learn that the act of gazing has power. Children are scolded by parents either because their gaze is defiant, or their stare is rude. When being punished the child is told, "Look at me when I talk to you."[19] She elaborates on the power of looking by noting that enslaved black people in America could not look at white masters directly and were punished for gazing upon white people. Who could gaze and who is gazed upon constituted relationships of dominance and subordination. Gaze in this social context reinscribed subject and object positions for white masters and black slaves. "The politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that slaves were denied their right to gaze."[20] hooks' writing deftly illustrates the core insight of visual cultural studies in regard to looking at photographs of suffering. The issue of gaze not only concerns the act of looking itself, but more importantly how gaze constitutes power relationships.

Interrogating the roots of documentary photojournalism reveals how power relationships are constitutive to the production and viewing of photographs of human anguish. The advocacy stance of documentary photojournalism implies a privileged standpoint on the part of the viewer in relationship to the person viewed. The photograph

upon an image of suffering and not having to act in relationship to this anguish. See also Lillie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006).

[18]Gaze is defined as "to look steadily, intently, and with fixed intention." *The American Heritage College Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 565. Within visual cultural studies, the term "gaze" is multifaceted and embedded in a rich and interdisciplinary body of literature including film theory, feminist theory, literary criticism and psychoanalytic thought. For the purposes of this essay I use the term to connote the power relationship of the one who looks. I draw upon Michel Foucault's idea that the gaze is not only something a person does, but is a relationship of power into which one enters through the mechanism of vision in society as a whole; see Michel Foucault, "The Eye of Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977,* ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980); idem, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979). For a clear overview of the ideas of gaze and power in visual cultural studies, see Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Spectatorship, Power, and Knowledge" in *Practices of Looking*, 72–108.

[19]bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.

[20]Ibid.

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communicates knowledge of a social situation to inform persons who do not share that circumstance.[21] The works of Walker Evans, James Agee, Margaret Bourke-White, and Dorothea Lange demonstrate this privilege of the viewer in documentary photojournalism.[22] Dorothea Lange's iconic image "Migrant Mother" illustrates this privileged perspective and how it functions in documenting suffering. Lange's photo of a migrant farm working mother, surrounded by her children in California has become iconic in portraying the situation of white working poor people during the Depression.[23] One function of the photograph was to give a face to a news story that described the reality of the New Deal in California.[24] The emotionally evocative power of the image crossed geographic and economic barriers making an appeal to shared humanity among Americas. The photograph invoked compassion, "an impulse to help that crosses social boundaries."[25] The viewer to whom this photo appeals does not share the same anguish but is invited from within a position of privilege to acknowledge, understand, and help those who are suffering.

In his provocative book *States of Denial,* Stanley Cohen contends that the social gap between those who suffer and those who view suffering has widened since the Second World War. He points out that "most people in most Western democracies have not lived in worlds of mass suffering and public atrocities."[26] Before the picture comes before the eye, the worlds of suffering have passed through "multiple

[21]For more on the development of the practice of photojournalism as advocacy see John Stomberg, "A Genealogy of Orthodox Documentary," in *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain,* ed. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Dugganne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 37–56.

[22]See further William Scott, *Documentary Expression in Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941); Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937).

[23]For historical background on this photograph, see Robert Hariman and John Luis Lucaites, *No Caption Required: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 49–67.

[24]"What Does the 'New Deal' Mean to This Mother and Her Child, *San Francisco News*, March 11, 1936, 3.

[25]Robert Hariman and John Luis Lucaites, *No Caption Required*, 56.

[26]Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 168. One could argue that this is no longer true for Americans since 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina. However, I believe that Cohen's thesis is still relevant because he demonstrates that the knowledge we have of mass suffering is mediated by layers of institutions, even within our own country. This was and is true of how the images of 9/11 mediated knowledge of suffering to people in the United States. See Daniel Sherman and Terry Nardin eds. *Terror, Culture, Politics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001); Merryl Wyn Davies, "September 11: The Visual Disaster," *Third Text* 15, no. 57 (Winter 2001–02): 13–22.

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layers filtering, representation and interpretation—by the mass media, humanitarian organizations, political discourse, high art and mass culture, history and social science. . ."[27]

Scholars of documentary photography argue that the gaze of privilege is embedded in the unequal power relations that are intrinsic to the structure of documentary photojournalism. Martha Rosler contends that documentary photography presents the "powerless" to the group addressed as "powerful."[28] The relationship of viewer and viewed is structured so that the one who gazes observes the unfortunate. The photo creates a "perch" from which one can get up close and be far away at the same time.[29] Those who look do not directly share the experience and are therefore regarded as "lucky."[30]

The problem is that this mediated knowledge is rooted in what Shawn Copeland calls the "ocular epistemological illusion." This "equates knowing with simply looking at that which is visible."[31] The problem with the visual as a basis for knowledge is that "such a foundation for knowing is easily seduced to support the Eurocentric aesthetic 'normative gaze' with its attendant racist, sexist, imperialist, and pornographic connotations."[32] In other words, the illusion of this gaze is that the knowledge generated from this viewpoint is reality, not a mediated picture of reality. This gaze is inherently privileged because it assumes a universalizing capacity for knowing the world, without accounting for any of the layers of mediation that have created the representation before one's eyes.

[27]Cohen, *States of Denial*, 168.

[28]Martha Rosler, "In, Around and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)," in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 321.

[29]Ibid., 23.

[30]Luc Botalski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* trans. Graham Burchill, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 3.

[31]I want to thank Margie Pfeil for this insight; see her article, "The Transformative Power of the Periphery: Can a White U.S. Catholic Opt for the Poor?" in *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence,* eds. Laurie Cassidy and Alex Mikulich (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 113.

[32]M. Shawn Copeland, "Foundations for Catholic Theology in an African American Context," in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk: Contributions of African American Experience and World View to Catholic Theology,* ed. Jamie T. Phelps, Marquette Studies in Theology 5 (Milwaukee: WI: Marquette University Press, 1997), 112. Copeland makes this same point in "The Exercise of Black Catholic Theology in the United States," *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 3 (1996), 11. See also Susan Griffin, "Pornography and Silence," *Made From This Earth: An Anthology of Writings by Susan Griffin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 110–60; Clarence Rufus J. Rivers, "The Oral African American Tradition Versus the Ocular Western Tradition: The Spirit of Worship," in *Taking Down Our Harps, Black Catholics in the United States*, ed. Diana Hayes and Cyprian Davis (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 239.

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This privileged gaze holds a dangerously ironic twist in regard to "knowledge" of suffering human beings. David Theo Goldberg writes that this gaze gives the viewer the illusion of knowing, while the person—and the reality of their suffering—may actually remain invisible. "Invisibility also happens when one does not see people because one 'knows' them through some fabricated preconception of group formation."[33] The photograph becomes a known commodity, while the suffering person and the viewer's relatedness to this anguish are obfuscated.

While acknowledging the imbedded politics of photography, the power of such images offers the possibility of destabilizing the viewer as a passive spectator because of their emotional appeal to the viewer—the evocative emotional medium of seeing a human face in the photograph. Judith Butler has persuasively argued that photographs of suffering human beings can promote an ethical response. She maintains the photograph will promote such a response to the extent that it can provoke the privileged viewer to recognize the vulnerability that is shared with the object of the viewer's gaze.[34] "Butler is careful to point out that not just any image will provoke this ethical response."[35] She notes that if the viewer is presented with a stereotype, or an image that is "expected," it will not create reflection on the reality of shared vulnerability.

So the question for Christians becomes how to engage and be engaged with photographs in order to shift the viewer from the gaze of unmarked/invisible privilege to the position of shared vulnerability with those upon whom we gaze. This shift of the viewer to shared humanity and vulnerability is a journey to which I will return in the last section of this essay. This shift begins by questioning. Susan Sontag explains that questioning photographs is necessary because we "understand very little just looking at the photographic witness of some heart breaking arena of indignity, pain and death. Seeing reality in the form of an image cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. . . ." A photograph can not "do the moral work for us, but it can start us on the way." Sontag states emphatically that

[33]David Theo Goldberg, *Racial Subjects: Writing on Race in America* (New York: Routlege, 1997), 80. For a profound treatment of how this dynamic of being "known" and invisible impacts the understanding of domestic violence against Black women see Traci West, *Wounds of the Spirit*: *Black Women, Violence and Resistance Ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 57–59.

[34]Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*: *The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004), 20.

[35]Szorenyi, "Distanced Suffering," 95.

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"there are questions to be asked."[36] The moral work begins as the viewer questions his/her own power and privilege. Questioning one's own concrete historical particularity holds the possibility of locating ourselves on the same map of humanity as the suffering person.

II. Photographs as Cultural Representations

Visual cultural studies as an interdisciplinary field came together in the 1980's with an "inclusive concept of culture as 'a whole way of life'" in which visual images act as "the focal point in the processes through which meaning is made in a cultural context."[37] In other words, visual cultural studies invites the viewer of photographs to become consciously aware of the act of looking at a photograph as an cultural event, an act that involves a dynamic interaction of viewer and image within a larger cultural context. The photo is not a literal depiction of suffering but rather is a text which may be read in several ways because it is a cultural site that reflects or responses to social, political, and economic processes.[38]

For many theorists in visual cultural studies it is assumed "that capitalist industrial societies are divided unequally along ethnic, gender and class lines."[39] Visual images are representations of the social, political, and economic processes that condition these inequalities. Images are one way that the dominant culture expresses and reinscribes the meaning of these relationships of dominance and subordination in society.[40]

Visual representation is a concept and a practice in culture; it involves a complex process engaging feeling, attitudes, and emotions that mobilize fears, longings, and anxieties within the viewer.[41] My focus here is in analyzing how the processes of visual representation engage the viewer's agency in relationship to suffering human beings. Three central questions orient this inquiry: *What does this representation imply about causes of this human anguish? How does the representation draw the viewer to the viewed to understand the human ties*

[36]Susan Sontag, "Preface," *Don McCullin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), 16.
[37]Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, 1.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Ibid., 16.
[40]Iris Marion Young identifies five specific forms of oppression which I believe are at work in visual representation; exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).
[41]Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of 'The Other'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications), 226.

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that bind them? What response does the representation evoke on behalf of the suffering person(s)?

To explore these questions in relation to the claims of photographs as cultural representations I will analyze Kevin Carter's 1993 photo of a Sudanese child.[42] First, I will explore this image through the lens of Susan Sontag's observation that photographs are a record of the real and a personal testimony. In the case of Carter's photograph a record of the genocidal famine in Sudan and also an interpretation of that suffering. Second, I will analyze Carter's photograph as an "icon of starvation" which misrepresented the actual material conditions of Sudanese famine but revealed the global power relations that define the subaltern position of suffering Black bodies in sub-Saharan Africa.[43]

Photographs: "Everyone is a Literalist"

"Everyone is a literalist when it comes to photographs."[44] This observation by Susan Sontag brings to awareness the commonly accepted assumption—even in this digital age—that a photograph is a literal depiction of reality. The power of Sontag's work is that she adroitly enables viewers to question the evidentiary claim of photographs while also maintaining a value of the medium for suffering human beings. In her view, the moral authority is not found in the photograph but in the human viewer.

In looking back at the history of photography, Sontag sees photographs as always uniting two contradictory features. "Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view."[45] Sontag explains that the contradictory features of photographs are no more problematic than in photographs of human suffering.

[42]See http://www.corbisimages.com/Enlargement/Enlargement.aspx?id=0000295711-001&tab=details&caller=search. It is problematic that as a white North American social ethicist I will focus on a photograph from Africa to argue that representation inscribes racist power relations. Barbara Andolsen and Shawn Copeland have pointed out that North American Christian social ethicists and theologians often use examples in Africa rather than the United States to obfuscate their own involvement in white privilege. I join with this critique and intend my analysis to show how this representation is an expression of this obfuscation. This photo serves as a "spectacle of the other" which reveals the global implications of North American white privilege. See George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1987) as well as bell hooks, *Black Looks*.

[43]Donatella Lorch, "Sudan Is Described as Trying to Placate the West," *The New York Times* (March 26, 1993), http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CE2D7123FF935A15750C0A965958260&sec=&spon=&&scp=2&sq=donatella%20lorch%20sudan&st=cse (accessed October 24, 2010).

[44]Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 47.

[45]Ibid., 26.

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> Those who stress the evidentiary punch of image-making by camera have to finesse the question of the subjectivity of the image-maker. For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance. Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don't have the look that comes from being "properly" lighted and composed. . . .[46]

As Sontag states, photographs are a record of the real, since at the same time a machine was there doing the recording and a human being was present bearing witness to the event.[47] However, photographs are always "both an objective record and a personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality. . ."[48]

Sontag's claims about the interpretive element of photography are powerfully demonstrated in Kevin Carter's Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of a Sudanese girl crawling to a feeding station. Carter's photo depicts a small Black female child, barely larger than an infant. The little girl is naked except for a bracelet on her wrist and a necklace around her neck. "She appears bowed over in weakness and sickness, incapable, it would seem, of moving; she is unprotected."[49] Ominously present in the frame is a vulture. No family appears in the photo to protect the little girl and "to prevent her from being attacked by the vulture, or succumbing to starvation and then being eaten."[50]

The historical context of the photo and the photojournalism of Kevin Carter demonstrate the ambiguous moral character of photographs as "real and interpretations of reality." Carter, a white South African, was a photojournalist who worked for the *Johannesburg Star*.[51] In March of 1993, Carter and a colleague went north from South Africa to photograph the rebel movement in famine stricken Sudan.

> Immediately after their plane touched down in the village of Ayod, Carter began snapping photos of famine victims. Seeking relief from the sight of masses of people starving to death, he wandered into the open bush. He heard a soft, high-pitched whimpering and saw a tiny

[46]Ibid., 26–27.
[47]Ibid., 26.
[48]Ibid., 26.
[49]Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience," 4.
[50]Ibid.
[51]Carter and three other white South Africans (Joao Sliva, Greg Marinovich and Ken Oosterboek) were on a mission to use photojournalism to expose the brutality of apartheid. The four men became so well known in the townships for capturing the violence of apartheid they became known as the "Bang-Bang Club."

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> girl trying to make her way to the feeding center. As he crouched to photograph her, a vulture landed in view. Careful not to disturb the bird, he positioned himself for the best possible image. He would later say he waited about 20 minutes, hoping the vulture would spread its wings. It did not, and after he took his photographs, he chased the bird away and watched as the little girl resumed her struggle. Afterward he sat under a tree, lit a cigarette, talked to God and cried. 'He was depressed afterward,' Silva recalls. 'He kept saying he wanted to hug his daughter.'[52]

After the photo was bought and printed by *The New York Times,* hundreds of people wrote and called to inquire about this Sudanese child.[53] The paper reported that it was not known whether she had reached the feeding center.[54] Papers around the world reproduced the photograph and the image generated political will to aid Sudan and help non-government organizations raise money to stop hunger in Africa.[55] In 1994 the photograph won the Pulitzer Prize and was deemed the "icon of starvation."[56]

Within a few months of winning the prize Carter committed suicide, leaving a note saying, "I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings and corpses and anger and pain . . . of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police or killer executioners. . . ."[57]

The notoriety of the photograph and the public nature of Carter's death generated a firestorm of controversy about this photo, about photojournalism, and about how photos of human suffering function in contemporary culture.[58] What did Carter do after he took the photo? Was the photo posed because he waited so long for the vulture to spread its wings? How could Carter allow the vulture to get so close to the little girl without doing something to protect her? "Inasmuch as Kevin Carter chose to take the time, minutes that may have been critical at this point

[52]Scott MacLeod, "The Life and Death of Kevin Carter," *Time* 144:11, September 12, 1994, 70–73.

[53]Ibid.

[54]Bill Keller, "Kevin Carter, a Pulitzer Winner For Sudan Photo, is Dead at 33," *The New York Times,* July 29, 1994, B8.

[55]Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience," 4.

[56]In April 13, 1994 *The New York Times* ran a full-page advertisement in recognition of the three Pulitzer Prizes that it won in that year. In describing Carter's photo it read: "To *The New York Times* for Kevin Carter's photograph of a vulture perching near a little girl in the Sudan who had collapsed from hunger, a picture that became an icon of starvation" (cited in Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience," 5.

[57]MacLeod, "The Life and Death of Kevin Carter," 73.

[58]Richard Harwood, "Moral Motives," *The Washington Post,* November 21, 1994, A25. Using Carter as an example, Harwood explores the positive contribution of photojournalists while also giving a nuanced picture of their ethical dilemmas.

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when she is near death, to compose an effective picture rather than to save the child, is he complicit?" It was suggested that Carter was a predator, another vulture on the scene of this little child's anguish.[59] Even Carter's friends wondered aloud why he had not helped the little child.[60]

The implication of Carter's complicity in this Sudanese child's death, and the account of his suicide surface the complex ethical and moral world of photographs of human suffering; "Carter becomes a subject in the cultural story his photograph helped write by being transformed, infected more than affected, by what he had to bear."[61]

Few photographs of suffering so explicitly reveal the multiple layers of interdependence between the suffering subject, the photographer and the viewer as does Kevin Carter's photo of this Sudanese child.

> But what of the horrors experienced by the little Sudanese girl, who is neither a name nor a local moral world? The tension of uncertainty is unrelieved. Only now, with the story of Carter's suicide, the suffering of the representer and the represented interfuses. Professional representation as well as popular interpretations would have us separate the two: one a powerless local victim, the other a powerful foreign professional. Yet, the account of Carter's suicide creates a more complex reality. The disintegration of the subject/object dichotomy implicates us all.[62]

The history of the photograph challenges the subject/object dichotomy and points the viewer to the larger processes that the image represents and reinscibes. The claim that we are all implicated by the photo rests on the idea that the photograph of this little Sudanese girl maybe actually be implicitly revealing to the viewer the power relationships that conditioned her suffering and death.

Photographs: "Politically Relevant Rhetoric"

The photograph of this Sudanese child is problematic because its power is in its compelling capacity to make it appear as though the viewer is close enough to touch her, to hold her, to feed her, and to rescue her. This photograph is a representation which appears not to be. The representation of this child masquerades as "natural immediacy

[59]MacLeod, "The Life and Death of Kevin Carter," 73.
[60]Ibid.
[61]Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal to Experience," 7.
[62]Ibid.

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and presence."[63] In *The Politics of Representation*, Michael Shapiro explains this dilemma.

> In simple terms, then, representation is the absence of presence, but because the real is never wholly present to us—how it is real for us is always mediated through some representational practice—we lose something when we think of representation as mimetic. What we lose, in general, is insight into the institutions, actions and episodes through which the real has been fashioned, a fashioning that has not been so much a matter of immediate acts of consciousness by persons in everyday life as it has been a historically developing kind of imposition, now largely institutionalized in the prevailing kinds of meanings deeply inscribed on things, persons, and structures.[64]

My purpose here is not to dispute the immense achievement of the photograph, it is because of its power in making a moral appeal that its and political and cultural assumptions are instructive to analyze.[65] My point here is to interrogate how this moral appeal was made. My intent is to understand the relations of power that deeply inscribe themselves upon the representation of this child's suffering. In documenting the anguish of this Sudanese child, what does the photo say about the causes of her suffering? How does this photograph enable the viewer to reflect "on how our privileges are located on the same map as [her] suffering. . . [?]"[66] And what moral claim does it make upon the agency of the viewer?

First, Carter's photograph first appeared in the *New York Times* in March of 1993. Carter's photo accompanied an article by Donatella Lorch entitled, "Sudan Is Described as Trying to Placate the West." Lorch's article documented food aid allowed by the Sudanese government for the starving people in the South. At the time of this aid more than a million people were suffering from famine and were at risk of starvation in southern Sudan. In her article Lorch gives an accounting of this nightmare of social suffering.

Forced to leave their lands and with their cattle herds virtually decimated, hundreds of thousands of mostly nomadic southern Sudanese are either on the brink of starvation or face severe malnutrition, relief workers say. In the area around the town of Kongor, 625 miles

[63] W.J.T. Mitchell as cited in Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture*, 16.

[64] Michael Shapiro, *The Politics of Representation: Writing Practices in Biography, Photography, and Policy Analysis* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), xii.

[65] Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience; the Dismay of Images," 18.

[66] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 102–03.

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from Khartoum 145,000 displaced people face starvation, and more than 15 are dying each day. About 100,000 more cattle herding Dinka, have been pushed to camps along the Kenyan border. In some areas there are no children under 5 years of age. The famine suffered by the southern Sudanese was (and is) the result of political violence and chaos resulting from the civil war in Sudan. The article explained that famine was used as a tool of "ethnic cleansing" by the Sudanese government in Khartoum to subjugate the people in the South. Moreover, in 1993 the United Nations Human Rights Commission had "accused the Sudan of widespread executions, torture, detention and expulsions and had voted to appoint a special investigator." Lorch's article documented the first convoy of aid, which she judged to be placating the Western governments. This gesture was deemed a response to United States' government's threat to place Sudan on the list of countries that sponsor terrorism.[67]

The caption of Carter's photo read, "A little girl, weakened from hunger, collapsed recently along the trail to a feeding center in Ayod. Nearby, a vulture waited."[68] For this photograph to accompany Lorch's article of famine as systemic violence is problematic in a number of ways. The article is documenting the systemic causes of the suffering of the people in Southern Sudan. The famine is not a "natural" occurrence, but is the result of human intent.[69] The famine is a systemic form of violence, and it is interpreted today as a weapon of genocide in Sudan. However, the photo situates the suffering of this little girl against the horizon of "nature." The child's nakedness, the presence of the vulture, the dried grass and trees in the background give the impression of her starvation as the result of the crop failure and cycles of nature, absent of any collective human intent. "The vulture embodies danger and evil, but the greater dangers and real forces of evil are not in the 'natural world:' they are in the political world, including those nearby in army uniforms or in government offices in Khartoum."[70] The photo thus represents the causes of suffering in a manner that contradicts the documentation of the article it accompanies.

In addition, the child is alone: her community and local world are absent.[71] To represent this child as bereft of any local world functions in two ways. First, to represent famine as the suffering of the lone individual

[67]Lorch, "Sudan Is Described as Trying to Placate the West."

[68]Ibid.

[69]Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and Public Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Dreze and Sen demonstrate the political causes of famine in sub-Saharan Africa.

[70]Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience," 4.

[71]Ibid., 7.

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is uniquely Western.[72] Modern conceptions of pain and suffering in the West have been deemed as existing only in the individual's nervous system or in personal consciousness.[73] This representation of suffering and human anguish is unable to account for the social suffering of collective groups of human beings on a massive scale. For instance, "[t]he Holocaust cannot be accurately described as the suffering of a single Jew repeated six million times."[74] To represent the famine in Sudan as an individual's experience is to reduce the radically social experience and impact of this suffering. This child's suffering is not the result of any unique characteristic, but because she belongs to a social, political and cultural group in Southern Sudan that is also part of a global community.[75]

In addition, the next inference of the viewer to seeing this child alone is to assume that there are no families, no communities, no local institutions or programs to assist her. "The local world is deemed incompetent, or worse."[76] This child is helpless without outside immediate assistance.

> There is, for example, the unstated idea that this group of unnamed Africans (are they Nuer or Dinka?) cannot protect there own. They must be protected, as well as represented, by others. The image of the subaltern conjures up an almost neocolonial ideology of failure, inadequacy, passivity, fatalism, and inevitability. Something must be done, but *from outside* the local setting.[77]

[72]Ibid. See also Walter Slatoff, *The Look of Distance: Reflections on Suffering and Sympathy in Modern Literature—Auden to Agee, Whitman to Woolf* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1985).

[73]David Morris, "Voice, Genre, and Moral Community," *Social Suffering* eds. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 38. An example of this thinking is in C.S. Lewis' idea that at any one moment in the universe there is never more pain than one person experiences. *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 103–04.

[74]David Morris, "Voice, Genre, and Moral Community," 38.

[75]Robert Desjarlais, et. al., *World Mental Health: Problems and Priorities in Low-Income Countries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). This volume demonstrates how the World Bank and International Monetary Fund impact post-Cold War global conditions which adversely effect health care and social policies in sub-Saharan Africa, especially for women.

[76]Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience," 8. For another such example see the photo by Ruth Fremson of an unnamed Haitian woman, with the caption, "A woman in Fort Dimanche laying out biscuits to dry, biscuits made of butter, salt, water and *dirt*." (emphasis my own) *The New York Times* (May 5, 2004), 1. I want to thank Anna Perkins, Ph.D. who commented that the perspective of the photo and caption's message implies that Caribbean peoples may be thought by Americans as destined to eat dirt.

[77]Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience," 7. Emphasis in the text.

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The authorization for foreign aid and intervention to help this Sudanese child comes from indignation at the absence of her local world; foreign aid is evoked by erasing local voices and acts.[78]

What is most troubling is the "racial knowledge" that this picture reinscibes about suffering in Africa.[79] This child's representation is not without precedence but is rather part of the archive of images of black suffering children in Africa who appear desperate and victimized in the Western media.[80] The image of this little child's suffering body becomes an overcrowded intersection of views of the racialized suffering "other." Her suffering—her Blackness—and her predatory surroundings makes her "not us." The photo in one image links together the ideology of the primitive with suffering and Blackness in such a way that all these together in one body appear naturalized.[81]

III. Photographs and the Imperative of Imago Dei

The insights of visual cultural studies to analyze the image of the Sudanese child demonstrates that images like this are not morally neutral in regard to the person or persons suffering. This photograph is not simply evidentiary but rather is a morally ambiguous representation, one that is unclear, unresolved, and incomplete. This ambiguity demands further reflection and analysis of what is at stake in the realization of the dignity of viewer and the viewed as *imago Dei*.[82]

In this section I use the principle of *imago Dei* to offer an alternative practice of gazing on photographs of human suffering. This Christian doctrine is key to the alternative gaze because it claims a just relationality as that which makes us like God. "We are like the Trinity: of and for one another."[83] It is the imperatives of dignity and radical sociality which flow from this principle that ground the work of deconstruction and reconstruction in viewing and responding to photographs of human suffering.

[78]Ibid.

[79]This term "racial knowledge" is from David Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 148–84.

[80]One example is the photograph of a frightened Rwandan child entitled, "Helpless" on the cover of *The Economist* July 23, 1994. For more on this see Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 225–77.

[81]"Those thus rendered Other are sacrificed to the idealization, excluded from the being of personhood, from social benefits, and from political (self-)representation." David Goldberg, *Racist Culture*, 151.

[82]See Susan Ross's definition of ambiguity no. 8.

[83]Vilma Seelaus, O.C. D., *Distraction in Prayer: Blessing or Curse? St. Teresa of Avila's Teachings in the Interior Castle* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2005), 52.

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The reader may ask why I start with the principle of being made in God's image and likeness when the cross may seem more appropriate for the subject of suffering. Liberationist and feminist theologians have been warning those who will listen of the dangers of too quickly turning to the cross as a norm or principle.[84] This critique reveals that for those with privilege to start with the cross as a normative principle, this starting point may lead to a justification of the suffering of those who are oppressed. These theologians demonstrate how the suffering of Christ has been used to legitimate systems of oppression in history. For example, to enslave black human beings in the United States, to justify domestic violence against women all over the globe, and to claim a redemptive power to poverty in Latin America.[85] Such scandalous use of the redeeming power of God's love obfuscates systemic oppression and attempts to hide the responsibility of human agents in causing human aguish.

These theological warnings hold insights that apply to this project. The first insight is in regard to the impact of social location to theological claims. As a theologian, I am a white, straight, middle-class citizen of the United States. I have privileges that implicate me in the very systems that I critique as operative in the representation of human suffering. I am also a middle-aged female and experience the impact of objectifying gaze, which I define as a problem in regard to photographic representation of suffering. The complexity of penalty and privilege is not unique to my experience and, I would suggest, is always at work for North Americans gazing upon suffering human beings in photographs.[86] To claim the cross as a theological principle for readers who also share many of these same privileges may jettison the necessary steps of

[84]For a sample of the classic critique of this problem see Joann Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God so Loved the World?" *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse,* ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carol Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989); Rita Nakishima Brock, *Journeys by Heart*: *A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); William Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1973).

[85]See further James Cone, "An African American on the Cross and Suffering," in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering,* ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 48–60; Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Nancy Nienhuis, "Battered Women and the Construction of Sanctity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17 (2001): 33–61; Johann Vento, "Violence, Trauma, and Resistance: A Feminist Appraisal of Metz's Mysticism of Suffering unto God," *Horizons* 29 (2002): 7–22; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 209–11.

[86]See Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 201–28, where the author explains intersectionality of race, class and gender in regard to the creation of knowledge and theory development.

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understanding the ties of power that bind—and implicate—the viewer to the viewed in addressing the problem of gazing upon photographs of human suffering. The principle of *imago Dei* is a call to examine the layers of human relation and the imperative of radical sociality the viewer has with the human being who is viewed.

The revelatory text of Genesis offers a vision of creation as sacred and interconnected. The first chapter of Genesis reveals creation as coming from God and as reflecting the Creator. This story of creation proclaims that being from God and reflecting the Creator generates the sacred and interrelated character of all of reality. Genesis informs humanity of our origin, our character, and our destiny.

The revelatory vision of Genesis grounds Christian belief in human beings made in God's image and likeness. The doctrine of *imago Dei* functions as a root metaphor disclosing the connection of belief in the trinitarian God as Creator, the vision of radical sociality of the human person, and the call by God to realize this sociality through communion with God and one another.[87] This doctrine is a rich resource that informs moral imagination regarding what it means to be human and holds out an imperative to realize our sociality in suffering.[88]

Contemporary trinitarian theology breaks open implications of being made in God's image, being human, and the nature of reality. Jürgen Moltmann describes humanity made in God's image as "*Imago trinitas*."[89] To claim humanity as imaging the Trinity is to articulate more clearly being human as grounded in the deeper mystery of God as relation. God as Trinity is a faith proclamation of God's essence as being-in-relation. "At the heart of reality is relationship, personhood, communion."[90] Elizabeth Johnson states that, "the Trinity as pure relationality . . . epitomizes the connectedness of all that exists in the universe. Relation encompasses and constitutes the web of reality and,

[87]Lucien Richard explains that a root metaphor functions by disclosing the connection of different elements of an identity by its relatedness to reality as a whole, and specifically to Ultimate Reality. As a root metaphor the doctrine of *imago Dei* reveals the connection of God as Creator, the dignity and value of the human person, and the communitarian nature of the human vocation. See Lucien Richard, "Toward a Renewed Theology of Creation: Implications for the Questions of Human Rights," *Eglise at Theologie* 19 (1986): 149.

[88]For more on this point see David Tracy, "Religion and Human Rights in the Public Realm," *Daedalus* (Fall 1983): 248.

[89]Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation,* trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 216.

[90]Mary Catherine Hilkert, "Cry Beloved Image: Rethinking the Image of God," in *In the Embrace of God,* ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 200. See also Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 243–317; Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

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when rightly ordered, forms the matrix for the flourishing of all creatures, both human beings and the earth."[91] This theology of the Trinity informs us how we might imagine human beings in God's image and likeness by its focusing believers' attention on kinship with God and with each other. It is our orientation to communion as persons that makes us like the Creator.

This fundamental principle that all human beings are made in God's image and likeness theologically undergirds all Catholic social teaching;[92] it is essential to the understanding of what it means to be human.[93] The principle of *imago Dei* is the primary category to both interpret personal value and also to understand human relationality.[94] In other words, the principle of *imago Dei* is not only a lens by which to see, to understand, and to interpret human inherent and inestimable value; it is also the imperative that gives rise to right relations.[95] Mary Catherine Hilkert explains this connection clearly:

> Every human being is endowed with radical dignity, every aspect of humanity as created by God shares in the human potential to imagine the divine. As fundamentally social and relational beings, we image God most profoundly when our human relationships, our families and our communities, and our social, political, economic, and ecclesiastical structures reflect the equality, mutuality, and love that are essential to the trinitarian God revealed in Jesus and in communities living in the power of his Spirit.[96]

Contemporary Catholic social teaching demonstrates the inextricable link between the theological principle of *imago Dei* and Christian practice. For example, the Bishops of the United States teach that the dignity and sociality of our being *imago Dei* must serve as criterion for measuring our collective life. Human beings are ends, not means and deserve to be respected, "with a reverence that is religious." The bishops suggest that this reverence should inspire awe that arises "in the

[91]Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 222–23.

[92]See Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed 24 October 2010), §§ 3, 12. For an overview of this basis of Catholic social teaching, see Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching: 1891–Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 136.

[93]Hilkert, "Cry Beloved Image," 192.

[94]See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Toward a Christian Theory of Human Rights," *The Journal of Christian Ethics* 8 (1980): 279.

[95]Hilkert, "Cry Beloved Image," 195.

[96]Ibid., 203.

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presence of something holy and sacred."[97] While this teaching arose in relationship to national economic concerns, it also has profound implications in relation to cultural production of images of human beings. Such reverence is particularly fittings in regard to photographs of human suffering. The bishops' teaching may suggest a reverence and awe as we look at photographs of human beings who suffer. Such reverence interrupts Kevin Carter's photograph as "icon of starvation." Such a reverential gaze upon the young Sudanese child creates a relationship in which the viewer and the viewed are persons. From within the gaze of reverence, this image can become icon of God's suffering and objectified black body in the world.[98]

M. Shawn Copeland describes the painfully true reality that recognizing God's image and likeness in human beings who do not "look like us" is the most difficult task in living out the imperative of *imago Dei*. "Nothing has proved harder in the history of civilization than to see God, or good, or human dignity in those whose language is not mine, whose skin is a different color, whose faith is not mine and whose truth is not my truth."[99] This struggle points to the fact that socially constructed messages about "others" obfuscate the reality of our shared humanity.

This indictment of human gaze proves true in regard to the photograph of the photograph by Kevin Carter that I examine in this essay. This small crouched and starving female child in Sudan is caught up in a photographic genealogy of representing black children as animals. The image of the black child as pickaninniy bears an uncanny resemblance to Carter's image of this small Sudanese child in the African countryside being pursued by a vulture.

> Black children depicted as pickaninnies were small and almost subhuman if not animal like. They were often mistaken for animals and were often pursued by hunters and other animals—dogs, chickens and pigs.[100]

[97]See United States Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (1986), http://www.usccb.org/jphd/economiclife/pdf/economic_justice_for_all.pdf (accessed 24 October 2010), §28.

[98]I want to thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested I explore concepts of image and icon in this article. I have not done justice to this reviewer's insight, but hope to expand upon this in future work.

[99]M. Shawn Copeland, "Knit Together by the Spirit as Church" in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women's Strategies for Reform,* ed. Colleen M. Griffith (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 20. Here she quotes Johnathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 65.

[100]Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave/McMillan, 2006), 142. On the history and cultural (dis)function of this image, see Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising*

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Emilie Townes explains the (im)moral implication of such representations of black children in white people's imagination. The image of the pickaninny generated a (mis)belief that "Black parents were inherently indifferent to their children's welfare."[101] Such a view of black parents and children made it easier for white people to not feel any sense of responsibility for the welfare of black children. Moreover, as Townes so keenly reveals,

> The existence and maintenance of these caricatures prevented or made difficult any acknowledgement or examination of how elite White-controlled economic factors might have contributed to the slovenly appearance and substandard education of Black children.[102]

This blotting out of the fundamental humanity of black children in representing them as animals is a heinous illustration of the essential connection of dignity and radical sociality in the claim to *imago Dei*.[103] The process of representing a black child that denies dignity is also an obfuscation of how the white viewer is essentially related to this child's suffering.

IV. Facing the Suffering Subjects of History

Each day images of suffering human beings are appropriated in visual cultural as "infotainment" in the nightly news, or in the commercial exploitation of "charitainment."[104] To question photographs of suffering is to refuse to be a voyeur to the spectacle of the suffering victims of human history. In this final section I will demonstrate that questioning is a biblically rooted practice that interrupts the representational process and holds the possibility for solidaristic response to human suffering. Here I will offer a constructive theological rationale for the practice of questioning as a stance of political compassion toward human suffering. I will also suggest a series of specific questions to be used by

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994); Patricia Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

[101]Townes, *Womanist Ethics,* 143.

[102]Ibid., 144.

[103]See further the United States Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1979), 3: "Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, violates the fundamental dignity of those called to be children of the same Father."

[104]Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience," 1. For more on this notion of "Charitainment," see James Poniewozik, "The Year of Chaitainment," *Time Magazine,* December 26, 2005, 93.

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the viewer that make up a spirituality and an ethic that face the suffering subjects of history, even as we gaze on their images in photographs.

Visual theorists demonstrate the irony that the gaze can actually be an evasion of authentic vision of reality. Gazing upon photographs of suffering can reinscribe the very power relations the photo proposes to contest. Here I will draw upon Johannes Baptist Metz to develop the process of questioning that holds the possibility of interrupting the unmarked position of the spectator and transforming it to one of a vulnerable participant within human history.[105] To create the possibility of such a shift demands a spirituality that is willing to be vulnerable to suffering—one's own and that of other human beings in history—and to be willing to understand one's relationship to them as *imago Dei*. The shift from the universalizing gaze begins when one becomes conscious of this illusion of this gaze and conscious of our limited standpoint in looking at a photograph of a human being. Facing the privilege of our limited standpoint is one small step toward becoming vulnerable to the lived and shared humanity of the person we view.

"I pray to the God within me that He will give me the strength to ask him the right questions."[106] This haunting line from the opening scene of Elie Weisel's classic novel *Night* tells of Moche the Beadle finding Eliezer weeping as a he prays. Moche and Eliezer begin a conversation on praying as crying out to God with our questions. Eliezer recounts that Moche explained with great insistence that, "every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer."[107] This powerful scene demonstrates that questioning begins as a prayer, crying out to God in the context of a faith community. This practice of questioning holds a transformative power that is not dependent upon an answer. Johannes Baptist Metz draws on this biblically rooted practice of crying out to God as a way to face the suffering people of history. For Metz, to cry out our questions to God is to become vulnerable to suffering people in history. To cry out to God is to become vulnerable to the truth of our connection to this suffering, to face the real anguish and to face the God who is at this crossroads of history.

The power of Metz's construction of this spirituality is that he situates it within the seductive power of capitalism. According to him, "to suffer unto God" reclaims Christianity from its domestication as "bourgeois religion." Domesticating Christianity in bourgeois religion recasts Christian faith into a religion that functions within a capitalist society to soothe and pacify the anxieties and concerns that cannot

[105]Szorenyi, "Distanced suffering," 99.
[106]Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stell Rodway (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), 3.
[107]Ibid., 2.

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be dealt with in any other way.[108] To "suffer unto God" is to break out of individualistic questions of bourgeois religion and realize the sociality of being human by hearing the cries of suffering human beings.

To take up Metz's challenge of asking the right questions suggests that questions can orient the viewer of a photograph of suffering to the journey of acknowledging and unpacking the "invisible knapsack" of privilege.[109] For example, one critical question is "does this image interrupt or reinscribe the stereotypes of people who look like this or share this social position?" This question has a dual function. First, it makes the viewer stop and examine the images within the mind that determine perception of this person/these persons and their situation.[110] This inquiry is the first step in acknowledging shared human vulnerability. To inquire into these stereotypical images is to acknowledge that human vulnerability is conditioned and impacted by the communities in which we live. These socially construed internalized images make the human being vulnerable to ignorance and bias, and blind us to the reality of being made in God's image.

The second function of this question is that it shifts the viewer from a passive receptor of the representation to an engaged participant in a message of the photograph. To inquire into the nature of how the suffering person is being represented is to begin understanding the photograph as a text and "reading" its message about the causes and possible responses to this anguish.

Metz offers valuable insight on the power of questioning as a stance that enables Christians to face suffering human beings and God in history. Metz defines questioning as a stance in the world that is committed to facing suffering human beings.[111] For Metz, the theological problem of rational or theoretical "answers" to suffering is that it is an attempt to speak for God, not with God about the horror and plight of history's victims. Answers to suffering evade the reality of sufferers' plight and evade the question of collective moral responsibility for

[108]James Matthew Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 128.

[109]This term of "Unpacking the invisible knapsack" was coined by Peggy McIntosh in her now classic article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom* (July/August 1989):11–12.

[110]For more on this idea of the unconscious, but very active images that condition perception and judgment see Shankar Vedantam, *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars and Save Our Lives* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2010).

[111]This notion of questioning as a stance is rooted in the work of J.B. Metz. See *A Passion for God: The Mystical Political Dimension of Christianity* ed. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 62.

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human anguish. In other words, such answers can reinforce the stance of privilege.

Metz's description of the dynamic quality of questions is applicable to the stance toward photographs of suffering. This stance of questioning holds an energy, and engagement that leads to relationship and responsibility rather than theoretical justification or legitimation. One such question that reveals this dynamic relational quality is this: "If I or a loved one were in this photograph, how might I want this image to be different?" This question is a deeper step in the journey of shared human vulnerability because the viewer now begins to imagine themselves and their relations as inhabiting this same social space of suffering. Would it be acceptable for us to be photographed naked and violated? Would it be acceptable for us to be captured at the moment of shattering pain or grief? Would it be acceptable for our loved one to be pictured as tortured, or dismembered? Even to consider these images as possible may be painful. This consideration of how we might want the knowledge of our suffering to be communicated has an heuristic quality. The question creates a space in the viewer's moral imagination that acts as a bridge between the humanity of the viewer and the humanity of the person who is viewed.

Questioning God about suffering is a radical stance of faith. For Metz, "suffering unto God" is to cry out to God, to lament and to call God to account for the victims of injustice.[112] Metz finds in Israel's tradition of prayer "a language of suffering, a language of crisis, a language of affliction and radical danger. . . ."[113] The purpose of this passionate language is not to produce consoling answers to suffering but rather to raise questions in the midst of suffering. To "suffer unto God" with our questions is to believe in a reality other than one's self. By refusing to rationalize suffering in passionately questioning God, questioning creates the possibility for experience of God—not just ideas about God. According to Metz, to cry out to God is to follow in the footsteps of biblical ancestors like Hannah, Job and Jesus; it is "the fundamental and authentic Jewish and Christian way of being sensitive to the world; our suffering, but particularly the suffering of others."[114]

[112]Metz's original terminology in German is *Leiden an Gott*. Matthew Ashley, Metz's translator, explains that the German construction would normally be translated as "to suffer from . . ." as to "suffer from a fever." Ashley explains, "I have chosen admittedly a more peculiar translation of 'suffering unto God' to capture the dynamic character of this relationship" (*Interruptions,* 218 n. 31).

[113]Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity,* trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist, 1998), 66.

[114]Ashley, *Interruptions*, 128. See J.B. Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World,* trans. Peter Mann (New York: Seabury, 1981), 1–6.

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To cry out to God in the biblical way that Metz suggests is to claim our vulnerable humanity in the moment of viewing photographs of suffering. For the viewer to cry out at the suffering of others is to feel and to face the pain of shared human existence. To cry out to God with our questions is to lament. Rather than succumbing to the numbness engendered by visual culture, questioning as a prayer of lament is a practice that implicitly acknowledges shared human existence. To cry to God while looking at a photograph is to claim that the image and the person who suffers matter. Questioning in this way is an act of re-membering our human bonds of connection and to discover how our existence is inextricably related to this suffering human being.

Kathleen O'Connor, in her profound work *Lamentation and the Tears of the World,* explains the connection of lament and the work of justice for those who suffer:

> Laments create room within the individual and the community not only for grief and loss but also for seeing and naming injustice. Laments name the warping and fracturing of relationships—personal, political, domestic, ecclesial, national and global.[115]

The activity of questioning is a practice that enables the viewer to begin to interrogate how her privileges may be located on the same map as the subject's suffering.

For example, another question the viewer might ask is the following: "Is this suffering avoidable, and how so?"[116] To question the image in this way resists the ways that the photograph may imply that this suffering is "normal" or destined for this person or group of people.

Often to look at a picture is an experience which reinforces the belief that the viewer and viewed are unrelated. The viewer turns away because the suffering appears either too close or too distant.[117] This complex interplay of close and far away, seeing from a distance and being up close up can create a strange combination of apathy and sympathy that mystify the viewer's connection to the person who is suffering.[118] The result of such mystification is that it obfuscates the viewer's connections to power and blinds the viewer to how her privileges are located on the same map as the suffering she views. To interrogate the historical causes of the suffering that one views holds the possibility of

[115]Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002),128.

[116]This question is compiled from a series of questions suggested by Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 116–17.

[117]Ibid., 99.

[118]Ibid.

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reconstructing the ties the bind us to the suffering person as a human being and realize the claim they make upon us.

These questions are a beginning, not the end of the moral work presented to those who gaze upon photographs of suffering human beings. These questions are one step in the journey of shared human vulnerability that is aware of being made in God's image and likeness. To question as I have described it creates the possibility of realizing solidaristic action with those who suffer.

> [It resists] the apathy and cynicism in which suffering, injustice, and oppression, about which we are so well informed today, inspired only the helpless shrug or the world-weary wisdom that knows so much about 'the way things are' and hopes for so little."[119]

For a majority of the world's people, to live is to suffer. In North America, knowledge of that reality is conditioned by visual images that represent this anguish. Visual cultural studies demonstrates that to the extent that Christians trust the ocular epistemological illusion, we will—even unwittingly—participate in the obfuscation of the claim of our interdependent existence. I conclude by returning to Carter's photograph of the Sudanese child who remains frozen in time as faceless and nameless. Questioning this image is the first step to allowing the memory of her actual endangered existence to cry out and wake up sleeping viewers from the slumber of inhumanity.[120]

[119]Ashley, *Interruptions*, 130.

[120]Jon Sobrino, "Awaking from the Sleep of Inhumanity," *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People Down from the Cross*, trans. Dimas Planas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 1–14.

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