***In God's Image: The Making of the Modern World***

Dr. Tomer Persico.

*In God's Image* examines the central role that the biblical idea of the “image of God” has played in the development of Western civilization. Focusing on five themes – *selfhood*, *freedom*, *conscience*, *equality*, *meaning* – the book takes the reader through a cultural history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, from biblical times through modernity, explaining how each of these ideals was profoundly influenced by the ancient conception that every human being was created in the divine image. It makes the case for a cultural, ideational understanding of history, that places the development of the individual at the core of Western civilization.

The book is an academically founded work of research, weaving together historical events and developments in the methodological approach of cultural history. The work focuses on ideas as agents of change, and challenges the common scholarly emphasis on material conditions. It posits the fundamental role of the idea of the Image of God – running through the Jewish and Christian traditions and being constantly reinterpreted – in the making of the ideals and social institutions that we hold and enjoy today.

*In God's Image* begins by exploring the role of the notion of Divine image in the ancient Near East. Unlike Mesopotamian cultures, which applied that idea to royalty alone, the ancient Hebrew culture insisted on its universal application, suggesting an essential equality between all persons. The uniqueness of the Hebrew approach is explored through a comparison of ancient laws – Assyrian, Babylonian (Hammurabi) and biblical, focusing on different conceptualizations of the sanctity of human life and to the application of law in determining cases involving sexual offenses and issues of life and death. We witness the fundamental roots of individualism – *selfhood* – though the understanding of each human as a legal subject, and not as an appendage to their paterfamilias.

Proceeding to the Christian era, the book analyses the Pauline emphasis on the subject’s faith and inner metamorphosis as the foundation of the Christian internalization of the Image of God and the roots of the abstract individual – the person as a person, unencumbered by ethnicity, class, race or gender. *Freedom* is given a new, personal, perspective, and we see how the adoption of the notion of the value of human life and of human equality results in a Christian critique of Roman slavery, leading to the decline of intra-European slavery by the 9th century.

Entering the 12th century we examine the roots of the discourse of human rights in the merging of the concepts of natural law, human reason and free will, resulting in a new understanding of the Image of God. The individual is now recognized as having dimensions of agency and subjective depth - “rights” – that must be universally recognized and protected. In the 16th century these developments will already influence the encounter of the first Europeans with the indigenous cultures of the Americas, and in the 18th century will become the core of the United States’ Declaration of Independence.

Examining the struggle for Freedom of Conscience, the book begins with the Protestant Reformation, in which the role of the conscience – again rooted in the idea of the Image of God

– takes increasing importance. Martin Luther himself places *conscience* at the center of his refusal to recant on his criticism of the Church. The English civil wars and “Glorious Revolution” are profoundly influenced by the public discourse over freedom of conscience. Figures like Roger Williams and John Locke are the first to insist that all human beings, of all religious persuasions, be granted religious freedom, and even equal civil rights. This is the beginning of the separation of church and state and the formation of the modern world.

The book explores the democratization of the West, the naturalization of the Jews in Europe and the creation of a new modern Jewish identity: Judaism as a religion – rather than an ethnic minority with its own path of worship, as Judaism traditionally understood itself. This modern Jewish vector begins at the end of the 18th century, when Jews were offered *equality* in Europe, i.e. : civil rights and the freedom of religion – though with one condition: they would have to cease identifying as a nation or an ethnic group and turn Jewishness into a “confession,” a faith alone. We follow Locke, Schleiermacher, Mendelsohn, Kant and Napoleon to witness Judaism, like the image of God concept, being internalized, and becoming the concern of the individual.

Finally, the idea of the image of God plays a crucial role in the emergence of secularism. The rise of modern atheism draws heavily on the struggle for freedom of conscience and personal autonomy. Following thinkers like Descartes, Matthew Tindal, Baron d'Holbach and Camus, the book examines how the notion of God shifted from being a precondition to morality to a *threat* to the very possibility of acting in a moral way. Religion and morality are transformed and gain new *meaning.* By the 19th century, the concept of human dignity is no longer embedded in the image of God, but negated it in the name of a secular conception of humanity.

The book reveals the historical, political and religious roots of the ideals and values Western society holds dear today, answering, in the process, the perennial though controversial question: why the west? It offers a new understanding of the development of the modern conception of religion, through the Jewish testcase, and traces the deep-seated ethical causes for the development of western individualism, modernity and the secular world – all placed within the context of the seminal idea of the image of God.

*In God's Image* joins other broad reaching works such as Tom Holand’s *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (Little, Brown) and Larry Siedentop’s *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Belknap) in attempting to shed new light on our particular and peculiar predicament for the educated reading public, here through the specific uses of the idea that all humans were created in the Image of God.

The book was [published](https://www.ybook.co.il/book/7900/%D7%90%D7%93%D7%9D-%D7%91%D7%A6%D7%9C%D7%9D-%D7%90%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%94%D7%99%D7%9D) in Hebrew in June 2021, and was received very well. Apart from TV, radio and newspaper interviews with myself, part of a chapter was published in both the [Hebrew](https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/the-edge/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-1.9888776) and [English](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.HIGHLIGHT.MAGAZINE-man-against-god-what-explains-the-rise-of-atheism-1.9916663) editions of the Haaretz daily, the foremost newspaper in Israel, and a very positive review was [published](https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/study/.premium-REVIEW-1.10203630) in the Hebrew edition thereof. The book is going through its second edition right now.