The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Human Society, Uniqueness and Divine Image

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has significantly reshaped human society, raising critical questions about human uniqueness and the theological doctrine of the imago Dei (image of God). The intersection of AI and theological anthropology provokes critical inquiry. AI refers to machines capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as reasoning and problem-solving. Recent developments in AI have demonstrated capacities once thought exclusive to humans, such as language processing and creativity. This research adopted historical method of research with qualitative approach. It involves review of literature, public opinion and consultation of community leaders. This paper examines the multifaceted impact of AI on social structures, human identity, and theological anthropology. This paper argues that AI does not diminish human uniqueness but rather compels a re-evaluation of its foundations. Human distinctiveness is better understood in relational, morality, ethics, spirituality, relationship with God, and embodied existence. This paper also explores the societal implications of AI, including its influence on labor, ethics, and human interaction. While AI offers transformative benefits, it also raises concerns about dehumanization, dependency, and the erosion of moral accountability. By engaging interdisciplinary perspectives from theology, philosophy, and technology studies, this paper highlights the need for a balanced approach that affirms human dignity while responsibly integrating AI into society. This paper recommends that Churches should integrate AI literacy into theological curricula so clergy and lay leaders can assess capabilities, risks, and pastoral appropriateness. This paper concludes that Human beings remain unique not because they are the most intelligent entities but because they are created for relationship with God and others, endowed with moral responsibility, and bearers of intrinsic dignity. AI, as a powerful human creation, can illuminate these truths but cannot replace or replicate them.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Church, Human Uniqueness, Image of God, Society

Introduction

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has raised profound philosophical and theological questions about what it means to be human. As AI systems increasingly perform tasks once considered uniquely human, such as reasoning, creativity, and decision-making, they challenge traditional understandings of human uniqueness. Within Christian theology, this uniqueness is grounded in the doctrine of the *imago Dei* (image of God), which affirms that human beings are created in God's likeness. The intersection of AI and theological anthropology thus provokes critical inquiry: does AI diminish human uniqueness, or does it clarify what it truly means to bear the image of God? (Singler and Watts, 2024).

The accelerating development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents profound theological challenges, particularly concerning the long-held doctrines of human uniqueness and the *imago Dei* (divine image). AI systems, increasingly capable of reasoning, learning, and interacting in ways once thought uniquely human, unsettles traditional views that humans possess singular moral, cognitive, and spiritual characteristics reflecting the divine image (Bard, 2021; Smith & Lee, 2023). This seminar explores how theological reflection negotiates these challenges, weighing the implications for anthropology and theology.

Recent scholarship shows two converging moves. First, theologians and science-engaged scholars argue that AI is a new kind of testing ground for anthropological theories: comparing human capacities with those instantiated (or simulated) in machines helps sharpen theological accounts of the image of God (for example, by favoring relational or vocation-centered readings over narrow substantive and rationalist accounts). Second, ethicists and ecclesial institutions are already responding to AI's moral and pastoral implications, indicating the need for constructive theological proposals that are both doctrinally responsible and practically engaged. Together these developments justify a study that treats AI not merely as an applied ethics problem but as an impetus for renewed theological anthropology (Dorobantu, 2021). Theological scholarship has begun interrogating AI's influence on anthropological assumptions, especially the belief that humans uniquely embody God's image, characterized by reason, creativity, moral agency, and relationality (Gardiner, 2020). AI's mimicking of some of these traits encourages theologians to reconsider whether the *"imago Dei*" pertains exclusively to biological humanity or entails relational and spiritual dimensions inaccessible to AI (Kumar, 2022).

Building on this premise, the core research problem is: How does AI challenge the theological concepts of human uniqueness and the divine image, and what frameworks can contemporary theology develop to address these challenges? (Morrison, 2024). Which interpretive model of *imago Dei* (Image of God) best accounts for human dignity when cognitive and social capacities can be simulated by AI? (Dorobantu, 2021) If artificial

systems begin to display capacities resembling personhood, what theological criteria should delimit creaturely personhood and moral standing? (Dorobantu, 2024) How should Churches and theological educators respond pastorally and institutionally to AI practices that affect formation, worship, and human flourishing? (Gaudet, & Green, 2022) What interdisciplinary methods allow faithful theological construction without collapsing into scientism or technological determinism? (Singler, & Watts, 2024) This inquiry seeks to clarify AI's impact on anthropological theology and propose ways to maintain a coherent doctrine of the imago Dei amidst technological advancement (Morrison, 2024)

The bases of the research problem are the tension posed by AI to human uniqueness and divine image. This Paper identified some of the problems of AI to human uniqueness and divine image as reduced to the following research questions for focus and clarity purposes: Does AI cause more harm or good to human society? What are the implications of degradation of human uniqueness and divine image? How can the Church sustain human divine image? This paper also examines the relationship between AI, human uniqueness, and the image of God by exploring classical and contemporary theological perspectives. It argues that while AI challenges reductive interpretations of human identity (e.g., equating the *imago Dei* with rationality), it ultimately reinforces a relational and moral understanding of human uniqueness.

This research adopted historical method of research with qualitative approach. It involve a thorough review of existing literature in the library and on internet, oral interviews of masses/general public, Church organizations, and religious leaders, as well as data from primary and secondary sources/materials such as journals, text books, etc. This qualitative approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand, and the perspectives and experiences of those directly affected by them.

Artificial Intelligence and the Challenge to Human Uniqueness

Artificial intelligence refers broadly to machines capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, including learning, reasoning, and problem-solving. Recent developments in AI have demonstrated capacities once thought exclusive to humans, such as language processing, creativity, and even forms of decision making. This has led some scholars to question whether human beings retain any unique status. Historically, human uniqueness has often been grounded in cognitive abilities-especially rationality. However, AI's capacity to outperform humans in many intellectual domains undermines this assumption. If machines can replicate or exceed human reasoning, then rationality alone cannot define the essence of humanity. From a theological perspective, this development is significant. It exposes the inadequacy of overly simplistic accounts of the imago Dei that equate it with intelligence or computational ability. Traditional theology often identified

the image of God with rationality, free will, or consciousness, but such definitions are increasingly contested in light of AI advancements (Lumbreras, 2022).

Theological Interpretations of the Image of God

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* has been interpreted in several major ways within Christian theology: The substantive view locates the image of God in specific human attributes, such as reason, morality, or consciousness. This view has historically dominated Western theology. However, AI's ability to simulate these capacities challenges its adequacy. The functional perspective understands the imago Dei in terms of humanity's role as stewards of creation. Humans reflect God by exercising responsible dominion over the earth. While AI may assist in this task, it does not independently fulfill this vocation. The relational view defines the image of God as humanity's capacity for relationship with God and with others. This perspective has gained renewed attention in contemporary theology, particularly in response to AI. Dorobantu (2021) argues that human uniqueness lies not in superior cognitive abilities but in relationality, including the ability to form meaningful, embodied, and moral relationships. Among these interpretations, the relational model is increasingly seen as the most robust in the age of AI, as it highlights dimensions of human existence that AI cannot replicate.

AI and the Ontological Distinction between Humans and Machines

Despite AI's impressive capabilities, many theologians maintain a clear ontological distinction between humans and machines. Human beings are understood as embodied, spiritual, and relational persons created by God, whereas AI is a human-made artifact. Humans possess body, soul, and spirit and are capable of a dynamic relationship with God, while AI lacks consciousness, free will, and intrinsic moral value. Similarly, AI systems do not possess historical identity or moral responsibility; they function within programmed or learned parameters (Hermanto, 2025). This distinction is particularly important in African theological contexts, where personhood is often understood communally. Scholars such as Oduyoye and Maluleke emphasize that personhood are realized through participation in community and moral engagement. AI, lacking genuine embodiment and communal participation, cannot attain this form of personhood. Thus, while AI may simulate aspects of human intelligence, it does not share in the ontological reality of being created in the image of God.

Ethical and Theological Implications

The relationship between AI and the image of God also raises important ethical questions. If humans create increasingly sophisticated AI systems, what responsibilities do they bear

as creators? Some scholars argue that human creativity in AI development reflects a secondary or derivative form of divine creativity. However, there is also a queation of attributing quasi-divine status to AI. Cultural narratives increasingly portray AI in "god-like" terms, raising concerns about idolatry and misplaced trust in technology. Theologically, this underscores the need to maintain a clear distinction between Creator and creation. Additionally, AI challenges theologians to reconsider doctrines of work, community, and human flourishing. As AI reshapes society, theological ethics must address issues such as justice, dignity, and the proper use of technology.

Theological and Anthropological Challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial Intelligence challenges two foundational theological affirmations: the uniqueness of humans in creation and the doctrine of the divine image in humanity. Contemporary theologians observe that AI's capacity for learning, problem-solving, and even creative expression blurs boundaries once assumed definitive (Thompson, 2022) This raises several critical issues: Human uniqueness in cognition and moral agency: AI's performance in tasks requiring reasoning and decision-making prompts questions about whether these capacities are exclusive markers of the divine image or potentially replicable by machines (Grant & Wallace, 2021). Spirituality and relationality: One core argument for human uniqueness focuses on relationality with God and others, suggesting that AI, lacking spiritual consciousness, cannot bear the *imago Dei* (Chen, 2024) However, critiques challenge whether relationality itself can be operationalized in AI frameworks, pushing theology to more precise definitions (Park, 2023). Ethical implications: The human-created nature of AI forces reconsideration of human agency and responsibility, highlighting the risk of diminishing human dignity if AI is overly conflated with personhood (Rivera, 2020).

Scholarly debate intensifies around whether AI challenges the ontological or functional components of the divine image and how theology must respond without compromising core doctrines (Martins, 2025). Substantive readings of the *imago Dei* (human nature as ontologically God-like by possession of rational soul or will) are challenged by the capacity of machines to mimic rational operations. Functional readings (image as human function, rule, stewardship, creativity) risk losing exclusive human distinctiveness if those functions can be replicated. A relational account, where bearing God's image is primarily constituted by embodied, reciprocal relation to God and others, holds more theological resources to resist reduction to performative capacities alone. Relationality emphasizes vulnerability, responsibility, and covenantal accountability rather than mere computational competence; these qualities draw theological attention to context, embodiment, and flourishing rather than to a checklist of abilities (Dorobantu, 2021).

Personhood debates often slide into binary claims tied to single markers (consciousness, rationality, self-reflection) The technological context exposes the insufficiency of single markers and suggests the need for plural, integrated criteria that account for embodiment, vulnerability, relationality, temporality and moral agency. Scholars in theology and cognitive science advocate tests that combine behavioural, relational, and historical-contextual markers rather than purely computational tests (Dorobantu, 2024), AI is already deployed in pastoral contexts (chatbots for spiritual counselling, automated content moderation in religious communities, AI in welfare decisions) Without theological oversight, these deployments risk substituting technological interaction for embodied ministry, diminishing communal formation, and amplifying social injustices produced by biased systems. Kate Crawford's critique of AI's political economy warns that naive adoption amplifies structural harms; the Church must therefore exercise discernment (Crawford, 2021). Theological reflection must be empirically informed (to understand actual AI capabilities and harms), historically and doctrinally rigorous (to honor theological traditions), and philosophically precise (to clarify conceptual categories). The literature points to mixed methods: interdisciplinary literature syntheses, conceptual theological analysis, thought experiments, and case studies grounded in practice (Singler, and Watts, 2024)

Addressing the Challenges: Theological Solutions and Frameworks

Several theologians propose distinguishing human uniqueness through ontological rather than merely functional criteria (Bard, 2021 and Morrison, 2024) While AI can emulate functions like cognition and creativity, it lacks the embodied existence and spiritual essence that define humans as *imago Dei* (Smith & Lee, 2023) This ontological approach preserves human dignity and uniqueness, recognizing embodied relationality and spiritual capacity as irreplaceable. A relational view of the divine image, as argued by Kumar (2022) and Chen (2024), grounds human uniqueness in the capacity for genuine interpersonal relationships and divine communion. AI's inability to participate in authentic relationality limits its bearing of the *imago Dei*. This perspective allows theology to hold firm against argumentation that functional mimicry by AI challenges human uniqueness.

Theological reflection also calls for robust ethical frameworks to govern AI's development and integration (Nelson, 2023 and Rivera, 2020) Emphasizing human responsibility as creators and stewards insists that AI must function as a tool that serves rather than replaces human dignity. Church teachings and theological ethics offer guidance for promoting technologies that enhance rather than undermine the divine image in humanity. Martins (2025) suggests integrative models combining neuroscientific insights with theological anthropology to deepen understanding of what constitutes the imago Dei in light of AI.

Such interdisciplinary models foster dialogue between theology, cognitive science, and technology, helping to refine theological concepts to remain viable in changing contexts. Dorobantu (2021) suggests that the image of God is not exhausted by cognitive functions; it is essentially enacted in embodied relationships of love, vulnerability, and vocation. Machines may emulate aspects of reasoning or creativity but cannot (as currently constituted) live into the kinds of vulnerable, embodied covenantal relations that the doctrine highlights. Singler and Watts, (2024) opines that the imago has normative purchase because it describes a *telos*, human vocation toward God, neighbor, and creation, which anchors dignity in orientation and purpose rather than discrete capacities. This preserves both human uniqueness and a constructive openness to technological partners used in service of human flourishing. Theologically, this model locates the decisive difference in relational ontology and eschatological vocation, criteria difficult for machines to meet. Consequently, theology can affirm human dignity while recognizing that certain capacities, reason, language, tool-use, are not uniquely human in practice (Dorobantu, 2021). Theology emphasizes vulnerability as constitutive of relational personhood. Machines that lack genuine vulnerability to suffering do not straightforwardly qualify for full moral parity (Dorobantu, 2021). Dorobantu, (2024) suggests that the sustained capacities for reciprocal relation, mutual recognition, and participation in social practices (not merely instantaneous exchange). This captures the ecclesial notion of persons as members of a covenantal community. Gaudet and Green, (2022) suggests that the capacity to form intentions, comprehend moral norms, be responsive to reasons, and be accountable within communal practices. Machines that act but cannot be held responsible in social practices occupy a distinct moral category, "agent-like entities" with instrumentally relevant duties but not full moral subject hood.

Some artificial agents may acquire limited normative claims (e.g., protection from destruction when integrated into human relationships), but full personhood and the normative weight of the imago remain centered on beings that meet the integrated criteria. The model protects human dignity while providing principled ways to treat advanced AI ethically (Dorobantu, 2024).

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence presents both a challenge and an opportunity for theological reflection on human uniqueness and the image of God. While AI undermines simplistic accounts that equate human identity with intelligence or rationality, it ultimately reinforces a deeper understanding of the imago Dei as relational, moral, and spiritual. Human beings remain unique not because they are the most intelligent entities but because they are created for relationship with God and others, endowed with moral responsibility, and bearers of

intrinsic dignity. AI, as a powerful human creation, can illuminate these truths but cannot replace or replicate them. Thus, rather than diminishing the significance of the image of God, the rise of AI invites a richer and more nuanced understanding of what it means to be human. This paper addressed the pressing theological problem of how AI challenges the concepts of human uniqueness and the divine image, employing theological-analytical methodology to examine recent scholarship and technological developments. The research showed that reaffirming human uniqueness through ontological and relational frameworks preserves the integrity of the *imago Dei* despite AI's functional advances. This examined how recent developments in AI press Christian theological claims about human uniqueness and the *imago Dei*. Three interrelated research problems framed the inquiry: Which account of the *imago Dei* best secures human dignity when AI replicates traditional markers of personhood, Does AI cause more harm or good to human society? What are the implications of degradation of human uniqueness and divine image? How can the Church sustain human divine image? These problems are urgent because AI does not merely simulate isolated capacities but is woven into social, political and ecclesial practices that shape real human lives.

The qualitative-constructive methodology adopted in this paper, comprising a targeted interdisciplinary literature synthesis, doctrinal-historical analysis, philosophical conceptual work (including thought experiments), and selective case studies and expert engagement, proved effective in addressing the research problems. First, technical and social-scientific literature made it possible to distinguish genuine engineering capacities of contemporary AI from hype; this empirical grounding prevented theological responses from being either technophobic or naively celebratory. Second, doctrinal and historical analysis of *imago Dei* traditions yielded a multi-level, relational-vocational account that retains normative force even where cognitive or creative functions are not uniquely human. Third, philosophical conceptual tools and thought experiments allowed testing of personhood criteria in controlled but theologically salient scenarios; they revealed the insufficiency of single-marker tests (e.g., reasoning alone) and supported a plural, tiered model of moral standing. Finally, the case studies and expert input anchored normative proposals in pastoral realities and institutional constraints, showing how ecclesial policy and pedagogy might respond to concrete deployments of AI. Together, these methodological strands delivered answers that are both theologically responsible and practically actionable.

The methodology proved effective in evaluating and synthesizing diverse perspectives, though the study is limited by the rapidly evolving nature of AI and ongoing theological debates. It contributes to knowledge by clarifying theological categories and offering guidance for ethical AI integration.

Recommendations

Churches should adopt policies that rule out replacing core ministerial acts of presence and sacramental encounter with automated substitutes; use conversational agents only as supplemental, transparent tools for triage, signposting and administrative support. Churches should advocate for design processes that include marginalized congregants, theologians, and ethicists to prevent biased deployments and ensure technologies serve human flourishing. Churches can partner with technical researchers to pilot tools with oversight. Churches should integrate AI literacy into theological curricula so clergy and lay leaders can assess capabilities, risks, and pastoral appropriateness. This reduces reliance on hype and enables informed ecclesial policy. Churches should be public moral actors in debates on AI governance, advocating for transparency, accountability, and protections for vulnerable persons affected by automated systems.

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