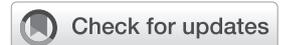


Imago Dei: A contemporary theological and hermeneutical reflection



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In this article, we discuss the concept of *Imago Dei*, rooted in the biblical narrative from theological and hermeneutical dimensions. We assert that humanity's creation in the image and likeness of the divine serves as a foundational principle influencing contemporary discourses on human dignity, moral responsibility and social justice. This discussion is contextualised within the frameworks of feminism, postcolonialism and ecological perspectives. While there is an acknowledgement of the importance of other religions, the use of the Hebrew Christian Bible in this study subsumes that it has a bias towards Christianity. However, the concept intersects with human rights, ethics and interfaith dialogue in addressing systematic inequalities that make people vulnerable to ecological crises like pandemics and disasters alongside human-made crises like economic and socio-political failures. This article is theoretical and thus uses a hermeneutical lens on literature to respond to the question: What are the theological and hermeneutical reflections on *Imago Dei*, and how do contemporary perspectives enrich our understanding of human identity and relationships? The study presents the concept of *Imago Dei* as an ethical concept from a historical perspective using the relationist and functionalist interpretation models rather than from the substantialist model. Key findings suggest that embracing the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* has the potential to inspire deeper compassionate activism, promote social equity and advocate for environmental stewardship, thereby responding to urgent moral challenges of our time. By reimagining this doctrine, this study contends that *Imago Dei* can catalyse transformative action, compelling individuals and communities towards a renewed commitment to justice, inclusivity and a holistic appreciation of all creation within the divine narrative.

Contribution: The article contributes to theoretical and hermeneutical discussions of the theology of the *Imago Dei*. The study provides a contemporary definition of *Imago Dei* given feminist, ecological, postcolonial and narrative approaches.

Keywords: *Imago Dei*; human divinity; theological reflection; social justice; hermeneutics; biblical anthropology; moral responsibility; divine likeness; relationality.

Introduction

Background

Imago Dei [translated: Image of God] is an enduring theological and philosophical principle, which asserts that human beings are created in the image and likeness of the divine (Haack 2012). Image has been variously interpreted as that which people can see, while the likeness represented the spirit of life (Eidson 2020:3). In this context, *imago* does not refer to superficial likeness. It refers deeper and functional resemblance of humanity to God in aspects of rationality, moral capacity, creativity and relationality. Humans thus were created to reflect and maintain these divine attributes. This raises questions like: How do these qualities influence human morality, identity and purpose? How has the divine image been interpreted, preserved or distorted throughout history? However, we can argue that humanity never lost the image, but lost the likeness, which has been regained in Jesus Christ (Eidson 2020:7–8). This anthropological perspective is also framed by Marais (2021) as a divine fulfilment and transformation through Christ, which, in the perfect image of God, redefines human anthropology (Marais 2021:3). Human uniqueness is therefore understood through the divine-human relationship mediated and/or redefined by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This uniqueness is succinctly defined by St Thomas of Aquinas, saying:

The image of one thing is present in another in one of two ways. The first, as in a being of the same specific nature, e.g. the king's image in his son; the second, as in a being of a different nature, e.g. the king's image on a coin. The Son is the Image of the Father in the first manner; man (*sic*) is the image of God in the second. (Aquinas ST, 7, 1a, 35.2)

Imago Dei, however, directly influences our conception of human dignity, moral responsibility, and the relationship between humanity and the divine, where Christ's work of restoration of our identity leads to a Christocentric hermeneutic of the *Imago Dei*. This study is a theological contemplation, as it examines the *Imago Dei* from two lenses, theology and hermeneutics. In this interpretative process, the historical, biblical and cultural comprehension, translation and application of *Imago Dei* shape our understanding of what it means to carry a God-bearing image. Yet, in contemporary society, numerous challenges confront our comprehension and application of the *Imago Dei*, particularly in the contexts of social injustice, discrimination and the ecological crisis. Image-bearing in human beings is thus performative as human beings act out their imageness in a community of relationships between God and all of creation (Deane-Drummond 2012). Thus (Hoekema 1986):

The image of God in man (*sic*) must therefore be seen as involving both the structure of man (*sic*) (his gifts, capacities, and endowments) and the functioning of man (*sic*) (his actions, his relationships to God and to others, and the way he uses his gifts). (p. 73)

Navigating the complexities engendered by these multifaceted issues necessitates a critical reassessment of the relevance of *Imago Dei* in shaping ethical frameworks and community engagement.

Scholars such as Thomasma et al. (2013) contend that the doctrine of *Imago Dei* underscores the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, providing a bedrock for respecting human rights across diverse societal structures. Sands argues that 'Human beings possess an inalienable dignity that must be respected' (2010:40). In a similar vein, Settimo (2023) emphasises that a robust grasp of the *Imago Dei* is crucial for upholding ethical standards; without it, such standards can become nebulous and convoluted, thereby complicating the pursuit of social justice within communities. By recognising the *Imago Dei* in every individual, Tarus (2016) argues for an ethical imperative to engage with marginalised populations, advocating for justice and active commitment towards advocacy. Furthermore, theological reflections offered by McFague (1993) and Burrow Jr. (2016) stress the link between *Imago Dei* and environmental stewardship, positing that an authentic understanding of this concept necessitates holistic attention to ecological well-being alongside social responsibilities.

Despite the foundational significance of *Imago Dei*, the discourse surrounding it has inadequately tackled contemporary challenges, including systemic inequality and the urgent crises resulting from environmental degradation (Sonessa 2021). Numerous investigations have been conducted regarding the application and interpretation of *Imago Dei* within theological and ethical scholarship. Middleton (2005), for instance, argues that the *Imago Dei* not only establishes a framework for human dignity but also evokes a profound responsibility towards creation itself. In addition, Curtis III (1984) posits that an understanding of

Imago Dei inherently challenges societal discrimination, advocating for a collective recognition of divine likeness present in every individual. Sutherland's (2024) recent work posits that the concept of *Imago Dei* is intricately tied to the necessity of redemption and restoration (Haack 2012), particularly in communities struggling with disconnection from the divine paradigm.

However, despite the valuable insights provided by these scholars, there remains a palpable gap in the literature concerning the contemporary implications of the *Imago Dei* doctrine in light of urgent social and environmental challenges, particularly exacerbated during and following the global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Sonessa 2021). The pandemic has significantly intensified discourse surrounding human dignity and our collective responsibility to creation, necessitating an urgent re-evaluation of established theological constructs. In response, our study endeavours to address this gap by investigating how traditional understandings of *Imago Dei* can inform and inspire contemporary initiatives in social justice and ecological stewardship, ultimately advocating for a holistic recovery from the adversities caused by the pandemic.

The principal aim of this study is to analyse the theological and hermeneutical ramifications of the *Imago Dei* concerning pressing societal and ecological issues, suggesting meaningful pathways to embody the divine image through acts of justice, compassion and stewardship. The paper is systematically organised to include an exploration of the study background, the theoretical framework, key findings (i.e. theological foundations, the concept's history of evolution, biblical insights, ethical dimensions, ecological stewardship, as well as contemporary approaches to reimagining *Imago Dei*), and concluding reflections. Through this comprehensive examination, we seek to illuminate the transformative potential of the *Imago Dei* in reimagining our ethical commitments and responsibilities in an era marked by profound interconnectedness and urgency.

Theoretical and/or conceptual framing

Imago Dei [translated from Latin – image of God] is a theological cornerstone derived from what Settimo calls a solemn statement in Genesis 1:26–27, which says: 'God created Man in his [own] image ...' (2023:873), seeming to assume that only humans possess the image of God. Szczerba notes that 'According to the Bible, human beings are the only creatures created by God in/as the image (Heb. *Selem*; Gr. *Eikon*) and likeness (Heb. *Demut*; Gr. *Homoiosis*) of God' (2020:14). Shaw argues, 'It is notoriously difficult to define the term image. Is it an idea, an artefact, an event, or another phenomenon altogether?' (2021:23). This is because images were used to mediate the presence of a person or deity in the Near East cultures (Grenz 2004:621), wherein the Old Testament did not strictly forbid the divine image because it was integrally part of progressive divine revelation (Shaw 2021:26). For this reason, there are theophanies, although incomprehensible, but omnipotent, wherein the

visual representations of God are accompanied by verbal explanations (Shaw 2021:28, 29). In other words, there is no consensus on the meaning of the concept by biblical and systematic theologians, yet *Imago Dei* involves an attribute central to human beings, although criticised for focusing on what humans do rather than what they are (Shaw 2021:32). This is because discussions focus on relationships and in the New Testament, writers focus on the Christocentric understanding of the concept, where glory replaces image (Shaw 2021:33; Heb. 1:3). Narrowness emanates from focusing only on the Genesis account putting anthropocentrism at the fore. This study argues for the extension of the *Imago Dei* to all of humanity, like in Genesis 5:1–2, where God’s likeness relates to the collective aspect of humanity. Indeed, this seminal idea points towards a unique relationship between the divine and humans, articulating humanity’s distinctive status as bearers of the divine image, thereby imbuing each individual with inherent dignity and worth that separate them from the rest of creation (Middleton 2005). The relational dimensions of *Imago Dei* in the Trinity are broadly ‘ontological, relational and functional’ (Szczerba 2020:18), reflecting the social nature of humanity towards the inherent nature of the Trinity. *Imago Dei* thus is a highly inclusivist concept, underscoring ‘the fundamental dignity of every person’ (Szczerba 2020:19). This champions the idea of a shared humanity and collective responsibility towards each other and nature, which can be interpreted as democratic relationships and ecological stewardship.

Historically, the theory of *Imago Dei* has developed within the broader tapestry of Judeo-Christian thought rather than speculative Gnostic myths, cultivated by influential theologians and philosophers, including Justin Martyr, Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, in support of their ethical projects. For instance, Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 CE) in his Dialogue with Trypho Chapter 78, page 333, says: ‘God, being the cause of all things, made man (*sic*) after His own image and likeness, giving him reason and understanding, and a share in His divine nature’ (Martyr 1989). This is viewed by St Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) as truth, goodness and love, saying: ‘The image of God in man (*sic*) is the rational soul, which has understanding and free will, and through which man (*sic*) is capable of knowing and loving God’ (Augustine 2003:468). Also, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274 CE) discusses rationality and the soul’s capacity for knowledge and love saying: ‘The image of God in man (*sic*) consists chiefly in the rational soul, by which man (*sic*) is distinguished from all other creatures’ (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 93, a. 4). Their explorations of the *Imago Dei* emerged as nuanced responses to diverse socio-political and philosophical currents of their times, often serving as a counter-narrative to the dominant perceptions of human nature that prevailed in their respective eras (Burrow Jr. 2016). For instance, Augustine’s reflection on the divine image in humanity underscores the significant moral and relational responsibilities that accompany this unique status (Settimo 2023). The view of the soul of living beings can be traced back to Aristotle, which suggests that the rational nature of the human soul plays a critical role in fulfilling

ethical obligations, hence the emphasis on being created in the image of God. Thus, ‘man (*sic*), as the most evolved creature, must protect first all of humanity, but also other living forms of creation’ (Settimo 2023:871).

The predominant assumption underlying the *Imago Dei* theory posits that it signifies not only the intrinsic value and dignity of each human being but also their moral and relational obligations towards one another and the broader created order. This foundational understanding is pivotal for contemporary discussions regarding ethics, human rights, social justice, human responsibility and the preservation of life (Settimo 2023):

According to this, human beings are invited to act righteously and with prudence in order to protect firstly the future of humanity, and further to safeguard all living forms within the entire ecosystem. (p. 870)

As Gushee and Franke (2013) elucidate, acknowledging the *Imago Dei* compels us to recognise the interconnectedness of all humans as God’s image bearers, challenging hierarchical structures based on race, gender and social status.

In this context, the relevance of the *Imago Dei* theory to this study cannot be overstated, as it furnishes a comprehensive framework for examining the theological and hermeneutical implications of being created in the likeness of God in modern contexts. By engaging deeply with this concept, the study endeavours to address urgent issues surrounding human dignity, moral agency, and the persistent call for social justice that is especially pertinent for marginalised and oppressed communities (Kwok Pui-lan 2005; Settimo 2023). This, however, raises complex theological and ethical considerations on God’s image in oppressive human beings. Basically, all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, hence an affirmation of inherent dignity and worth. However, when individuals or groups engage in oppression, their actions distort this divine image, highlighting a profound discrepancy between their inherent potential and their conduct. While those involved in oppression retain the divine image within them, they have a moral responsibility to recognise and restore that likeness through repentance, justice and compassion. Thus, God’s image in oppressors reminds them of their inherent dignity and this call to moral accountability. In all, despite human failings, the divine imprint remains, urging a commitment to justice that honours the divine in all, especially the marginalised and oppressed communities.

Moreover, the *Imago Dei* serves as a crucial lens through which proposed solutions to contemporary challenges can be framed. By rooting discussions of human rights and ethical responsibilities in the recognition of divine image within each person, the theory compels scholars and practitioners alike to reconsider their understandings of humanity and their roles within community and creation. This re-evaluation fosters a more inclusive, compassionate and just society, an aspiration echoed by ecological theologians such as Sallie McFague, who emphasise humanity’s role as caretakers and co-creators with

God (McFague 1993). Henriksen (2005) explores the element of human agency (i.e. as co-creators with God) given reproductive technologies such as cloning, as bearing a responsibility taken from the divine (p. 157). The imageness legitimates human participation in God's creative and moral endeavours.

Ultimately, the choice of *Imago Dei* as the guiding framework for this study aligns seamlessly with the central themes of dignity, responsibility and interconnectedness that permeate contemporary theological and social discourse. It invites a rigorous exploration of how the divine image shapes our ethical imperative towards one another and the entire created order, thereby enriching our collective engagement with pressing contemporary issues. As Hans Jonas argues, understanding our responsibility within the divine narrative empowers us to confront the complexities of modern life ethically and conscientiously (Settimo 2023).

Through this robust engagement with the *Imago Dei*, this study aspires to illuminate the pathways towards a more just and dignified existence for all, affirming the intrinsic worth of each individual as a reflection of the divine, while simultaneously advocating for a renewed commitment to the stewardship of creation (Grenz & Franke 2001; Middleton 2005; Shaw 2021). By grounding discussions of ethical responsibility in the recognition of the divine image, this inquiry seeks to challenge and inspire a transformative re-conception of human identity and cooperation within the mosaic of creation.

Theological foundations of *Imago Dei*: Exploring human dignity and divine likeness

In this concept, '[a]lthough the Bible rarely speaks explicitly of the *Imago Dei*, the concept itself is foundational for biblical anthropology' (Sands 2010:29). Various contexts of biblical anthropology can be considered for this study to consider technological advances, biblical interpretations and Christological themes. Lombaard (2019) in '*E-Imago Dei*' explores the extension of the *Imago Dei* into the electronic realm, reinterpreting the multilayered dimensions of biblical anthropology (i.e., biological, spiritual and relational) through contemporary digital realities. The digital age challenges and enriches the biblical view of humanity concerning creation in the image of the divine (Lombaard 2019:220). The linkage of anthropology, *Imago Dei*, and technology is, however, problematised unless theology, philosophy and technology are understood as cross-disciplines (Lombaard 2023). He argues that equating human uniqueness with technological capacities risks reducing the view of human dignity (Lombaard 2023:10). This is because technological determinism might diminish the theological significance of human uniqueness rooted in divine imageness.

We use the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* in anthropology as a cornerstone in Judeo-Christian theology. The discourse surrounding *Imago Dei* reveals essential characteristics that

define humanity's relationship with the divine. The social embodiment of the divine emphasises relationality and communality as we interpret *Imago Dei* in the context of individuality and stewardship (Marais 2013:109). Theologian Karl Rahner, because of Genesis 1:26–27, asserts that the divine likeness encompasses rationality, creativity and moral agency, implying a reflective capacity inherent to human nature that mirrors God's essence in multifaceted expressions of intimacy (Rahner [1965] 1993). Thus, human dignity is perceived not merely as a bestowed quality but as an integral aspect of what it means to be human, intricately linked to our nature and purpose as beings created in God's image and likeness of the divine. This image reflects the intrinsic worth of every individual; hence, human life becomes a reflection of divine intent and character.

Furthermore, the relational dimension of the *Imago Dei* is pivotal in understanding human dignity. It posits that being fashioned in God's image signifies not solely the ability to manifest divine attributes but also fosters the capacity for profound relationships with God and fellow humans. Wojciech Szczerba notes this relational aspect as crucial: it advocates communal values of empathy, compassion and justice, reinforcing the notion that our dignity compels us to engage with one another meaningfully (Szczerba 2020). Walter Brueggemann elaborates on this relational imperative, suggesting that the *Imago Dei* propels a moral mandate to uphold care for our neighbours, particularly those marginalised within society, thereby establishing communities founded on justice and equality (Brueggemann 2012).

The ethical ramifications of grounding human dignity in the *Imago Dei* create a robust framework for universal respect and moral responsibility. J. Thacker (2022) argues that this understanding fosters advocacy for human rights and social justice by establishing that divine-derived dignity transcends arbitrary social divisions, including ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status. This ethos resonates within Pauline theology, notably illustrated in Galatians 3:28, which proclaims that unity in Christ supersedes individual distinctions, inviting a collective recognition of shared dignity.

The implications of the *Imago Dei* are particularly salient in bioethical discussions surrounding the sanctity of human life. Theologian Gilbert Meilaender (2013) emphasises that comprehending the sanctity of life necessitates acknowledging our creation in the divine image, particularly as it pertains to contemporary bioethical dilemmas such as stem cell research and euthanasia. This recognition compels individuals to navigate complex ethical landscapes through the lens of intrinsic human value, thus anchoring moral decision-making in a theological context.

Contemporary hermeneutical approaches to the *Imago Dei* elucidate its theological profundity while broadening its application. Liberation theology, for instance, reinterprets *Imago Dei* to underscore the imperative of social justice, asserting that the dignity inherent in every individual

הַרְמֵשׁ הַרְמֵשׁ עַל הָאָדָם. וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלְמֵי אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ וְנִקְבָּהוּ בָרָא אֹתוֹ, meaning ‘And God said, “Let Us make Adam in Our image, and Our likeness [...] So God created man [Adam] in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”’

This narrative not only distinguishes humanity’s unique status in creation but also lays the groundwork for understanding human dignity, purpose and relational dynamics with God and each other. This uniqueness, however, sets human beings apart from the divine (i.e., radical alterity or otherness) because of inescapable finiteness and fallenness that bears the divine imprint, moral agency and creativity (Kelsey 2009:55). He views this image as an ongoing and dynamic process of moral growth and relational capacity where divine likeness and existential finiteness are in a forever tensile relationship. However, our participation in divine creativity must be governed by a moral and theological awareness of our finite and fallen condition (Marais 2013:160).

Scripture offers several key passages that illuminate the theological significance of being created in God’s image and the profound implications for human identity and interrelations. For instance, Genesis 9:6 states, ‘Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind’. This verse affirms the deep moral dimensions associated with the divine image reflected in humanity, underscoring an inherent sanctity of life that anchors human rights (Middleton 2005). It establishes an ethical framework emphasising the intrinsic value of each individual as a bearer of God’s image, advocating fervently for justice and the protection of life.

In the New Testament context, Colossians 3:10 enriches this theme by declaring, ‘καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν’, meaning ‘and have put on the new man, who is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator’. This passage captures the transformative aspect of the *Imago Dei*, where believers are summoned to embody the image of Christ through ethical living. On Colossians, one can argue that this renewal of the divine image is pivotal to relational dynamics, contributing to the formation of a community rooted in love and equality that mirrors the relational nature of the Trinity. Sands criticises a heavy reliance on the Trinitarian concepts, saying that it ‘utilises a quasi-trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 1:26 that is exegetically unjustified’ (2010:39).

Furthermore, the apostolic affirmation of believers as image bearers serves as a crucial lens for interpreting interpersonal relationships. As articulated in 2 Corinthians 3:18, ‘ἡμεῖς δὲ πάντες ἀνακεκαλυμμένῳ προσώπῳ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου κατοπτρίζομενοι τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν, καθάπερ ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος’ meaning ‘But we all, with unveiled faces seeing the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory; even as from the Lord, the Spirit.’

This suggests an ongoing, dynamic process of becoming more like God, thereby enriching community life and personal identity (Brueggemann 2005). The imagery of transformation here invokes a relational intimacy that not only elevates one’s personal identity but also cultivates a vibrant communal atmosphere that reflects divine love.

Reflecting on the implications of *Imago Dei*, the esteemed theologian N. T. Wright (2011) highlights that humanity’s identity encompasses not only the privilege of being created in God’s image but also the accompanying responsibilities. He argues that being made in God’s likeness involves a vocation – an imperative to exercise stewardship over creation. This is explicitly shown in Genesis 1:28, where humanity is charged with ruling over the earth. Such a concept necessitates an interaction that is both responsible and compassionate, acknowledging humanity’s role as co-creators with God in the pursuit of justice, compassion and stewardship (Bryant 2020).

In all, the biblical narrative underscores humanity’s connection to the divine through the lens of *Imago Dei*, revealing profound implications for human identity and relationships. As Romans 8:29 states, ‘For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son’, emphasising the ultimate purpose of being restored in Christ’s image. This shapes identity and interactions, advocating for the marginalised. Sin hinders human ability to glorify God, with Calvin noting that the image of God was (Hoekema 1986):

[D]estroyed by sin, obliterated by the Fall, wiped out or lost by sin, cancelled by sin, ‘as it were, blotted out ... by Adam’s sin’, or utterly defaced by sin. (p. 43)

Embodying the divine image fosters community, as Ephesians 4:22–24 encourages believers to ‘put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness’. Through *Imago Dei*, believers are called to realise their identity as integral participants in the divine narrative, echoing God’s nature and promoting justice, compassion and mutual respect.

Ethical dimensions of *Imago Dei*: Implications for social justice and human rights

Imago Dei carries profound ethical implications that serve as a robust foundation for social justice and human rights. Embedded within this theological framework is the assertion that all human beings possess inherent dignity and worth (Gn 1:26–27) by declaring that humankind is created in the divine image. This principle compels a recognition of the equality of all individuals, squarely challenging systemic inequalities and injustices entrenched within society.

Understanding *Imago Dei* as a source of human dignity necessitates an unwavering commitment to advocate for social justice and human rights, which underscores the universality of this doctrine. Thacker compellingly asserts,

'Without a proper understanding of the *Imago Dei*, no one can actually do good ... Everything about our lives, including our ethics, must be rooted in this doctrine' (2022:56). This declaration underscores the urgent need for a moral framework that prioritises the rights and dignity of every individual, particularly those marginalised by race, gender, socio-economic status or other systemic barriers.

The concept of *Imago Dei* further informs the ethical responsibility to confront injustices that devalue human life. Historically, theological discussions surrounding *Imago Dei* have galvanised social movements aimed at manifesting God's justice on earth. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1949), which articulates the 'inherent dignity' of all human beings, resonates deeply with the biblical premise that every individual is crafted in the divine image (United Nations 1949). This declaration signifies a global acknowledgement of human rights grounded in a shared understanding of divinely endowed worth and dignity.

Moreover, the *Imago Dei* posits a compelling rationale for advocating for the marginalised, illuminating God's 'preferential option for the poor and oppressed'. The prophetic tradition within Scripture underscores this imperative, as evinced in Micah 6:8, which calls for acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God. Jesus' ministry serves as a poignant testament to this call, as he addressed the urgent needs of the disadvantaged, affirming that caring for 'the least of these' inherently reflects a commitment to honour divine image in all creation. Within this framework, the ethical dimensions of *Imago Dei* transcend mere acknowledgement, becoming an actionable mandate for social engagement.

In all, the *Imago Dei* doctrine is being re-examined by feminist and liberation theologians to address gender inequities and systemic oppressions. As Cone (1970) states, liberation theology necessitates a 'radical reinterpretation of the divine image', emphasising marginalised groups' agency and dignity. By affirming that all bear the image of God, theologians challenge oppressive frameworks that exclude women and people of colour. Conradie (2006) extends this perspective to environmental stewardship, asserting that understanding humans as bearers of the divine image implies a 'divine mandate to steward the earth'. This interconnected approach recognises rights and responsibilities towards individuals and the environment. Ultimately, the *Imago Dei* serves as a foundational ethos for social justice and human rights, compelling individuals to uphold dignity, advocate for equality and challenge injustice. By embracing the complexities of the *Imago Dei*, we reflect divine love and justice in our engagement with humanity and the earth, underscoring a collective responsibility to fight for the marginalised.

Ecological stewardship: *Imago Dei's* call to care for creation and the environment

Imago Dei, articulated as humanity being created in the image and likeness of God, serves as a profound theological

foundation for our ecological responsibilities. In Genesis 1:26–28, where humanity is endowed with dominion over the earth, the implications of this dominion extend far beyond mere authority; they encompass stewardship and caretaking of the created world. This divine mandate implies that humanity's role is not one characterised by exploitative control but rather by relational stewardship, reflecting God's own inherent care for creation (Szczerba 2020:14).

Paul Sands asserts that 'the *Imago Dei* is best understood as a God-given vocation, arising out of a summons – a divine call to a task that confers dignity and imposes obligation' (2010:34). This perspective obligates humanity to perceive creation not merely as a resource to be exploited but as a sacred trust that embodies the Creator's intent. As co-creators and collaborators with God, humans are called to cultivate, protect and promote the flourishing of the planet. Bryant (2020) further emphasises that the *Imago Dei*, as a concept, incorporates an active responsibility towards environmental care and stewardship.

From an ecological perspective, the *Imago Dei* invites a profound rethinking of how humans engage with the environment. In the Christian tradition, particularly within the framework provided by the Hebrew Scriptures, the relational aspect emphasised by Gehring (2013) underscores that being made in the image of God entails a mutual relationship with the earth. This mirroring of God's character inherently implies an obligation to care for all living beings and the intricate ecosystems that sustain them (Conradie 2006:308).

Contemporary theologians posit that the *Imago Dei* must not only be understood in anthropocentric terms but should also reflect a commitment to ecological justice. This perspective illustrates that the connection between the *Imago Dei* and environmental stewardship provides a strong theological basis for ecological advocacy. Recognising the divine image in creation means that all elements of the natural world participate in the inherent dignity granted by their Creator. Consequently, a failure to respect and care for the environment directly contradicts the theological declaration that humans are made in the image of this Creator (Eidson 2020:1).

The call to stewardship addresses urgent contemporary environmental crises, such as climate change, deforestation and biodiversity loss. The theological premise of humans as stewards intensifies the obligation of believers to confront these issues, advocating for sustainable practices and policies that honour the integrity of the created order. The World Council of Churches articulates this beautifully, referring to the 'God-given responsibility to exercise stewardship over the whole creation' (1990:102), thereby framing stewardship as essential to embodying the *Imago Dei* in today's ecological context.

As McFague poignantly observes, 'the image of God in humanity calls for stewardship, not exploitation' (1993:99). This understanding resonates across various spheres, echoed by church leaders and environmental activists alike,

who advocate for a collective movement towards sustainable living. The evolution from a paradigm of dominion to one of stewardship reflects a deeper understanding of the divine-human relationship, wherein the image of God in humanity demands not only reverence for the Creator but also an earnest respect for the created order. This imperative extends to all aspects of ecological engagement, including social justice, where ecological degradation disproportionately impacts marginalised communities.

In all, the *Imago Dei* doctrine compels us to be ecological stewards, integrating environmental sustainability with social equity and promoting policies that promote environmental justice and restoration efforts for a vision of flourishing for all of creation (Settimo 2023:878). This theological principle and compelling ethical framework drive transformative action, ensuring all living beings flourish in harmony and preserving creation's integrity.

Contemporary hermeneutical approaches: Reimagining *Imago Dei* in diverse contexts

In sum, the concept of *Imago Dei* has been a pivotal cornerstone of Christian theology, not being merely limited to the creation story in Genesis as it is understood within the context of the risen Christ of eschatology; that is why Irenaeus of Lyons 'rooted his understanding of *Imago Dei* not with Adam, but with the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ' (Eidson 2020:4). This is because 'The church is Christ's body ... We become more in the image and likeness of God by our participation in the church' (Eidson 2020:11), serving to emphasise the inherent worth and dignity of every human being as reflections of the divine. In recent years, however, scholars have approached this profound construct through a multitude of hermeneutical lenses, thereby enriching our understanding of *Imago Dei* and its expansive relevance in contemporary contexts. This section will explore feminist, postcolonial and ecological perspectives on *Imago Dei*, illuminating the transformative possibilities embedded within these approaches.

Feminist hermeneutical approach

The basis of feminism is in the fact that 'The Bible consists of a corpus of books written predominantly by men, reflecting a male-chauvinist perspective and serving primarily male interests' (Conradie 2006:308).¹ With this perspective, everything that was feminised became victimised including women, the environment and children. This called for concepts of resistance and justice herein feminist theology and ecological ethics. This section discusses feminist theology, and asserts that feminist theologians have challenged traditional understandings of *Imago Dei*, especially the patriarchal norms and exclusions that emphasised that 'Women should not play leadership roles ... A woman was to "inspire" her man and educate his children' (Oakley 1990:161;

1. Speculation has it that there are several (holy) books that were written by women, but the Church has captured and hidden them from the public in order to maintain a male-dominated scholarship.

qtd. in Giddings 1984:316). Thus, *Imago Dei* comes to affirm the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of gender or social status (Burrow Jr. 2016:20). Thinkers such as Elizabeth Johnson assert that *Imago Dei* affirms the dignity and worth of all individuals regardless of gender or social status. Johnson articulates that 'the image of God is not confined to a particular group or class, but is a universal attribute that belongs to all human beings' (1988:123). Also, St. Thomas of Aquinas has interesting thoughts saying: 'the image of God is common to both sexes, being in the mind which has no distinction of sex' (Aquinas, ST, 13, 1a, 93.6). These insights underscore the importance of inclusivity and equality within the framework of *Imago Dei*, inviting a rethinking of humanity's shared identity (as men and women, all races, all ages and all classes of people) as endowed with divine significance.

Further emphasising this challenge, Rosemary Radford Ruether interrogates the nexus between *Imago Dei* and patriarchal domination, underscoring how traditional interpretations have perpetuated systems of oppression. Ruether contends that 'the biblical concept of *Imago Dei* has been used to justify patriarchal domination and oppression' (1983:145). By re-examining *Imago Dei* through feminist lenses, Ruether seeks not only to reclaim this notion as a symbol of equality but also to champion justice and liberation for marginalised groups. This reclamation becomes essential for a holistic understanding of humanity created in God's image.

Postcolonial hermeneutical approach

Postcolonial theology presents a critical framework for investigating *Imago Dei*, challenging Western-centric interpretations that have historically shaped the concept and exposing the deleterious effects of colonialism on our understanding of God's image. Scholars such as Kwok Pui-lan (2005:210) argue that '*Imago Dei* has been used to justify colonialism and imperialism' using Charles Darwinism. This is why Hall contends (1986):

The notion that it is human reason that constitutes Homo Sapiens, God's earthly imago, is so firmly entrenched in the convention of Christendom that it is hardly possible for anyone who is part of the intellectual stream of our culture to read Genesis 1:26–27 without immediately and subconsciously assuming that the ancient Hebraic author's phrase 'image of God' specifically referred to the rational capacities of the human creature. (p. 92)

Thus, postcolonial theologians argue that we must re-examine the concept in light of postcolonial critiques of Western modernity (Burrow Jr. 2016:25). In the contemporary globalised world, image, being relational, defines God in an active sense, where humans reflect God's glory in life and actions (Ramsey 2009:13, 37). This view opposes the substantial view, which posits that image refers to substances possessed by humans, hence advances individualism and modalism, while relational relates to interpersonal and holistic views. That is why Luther thought image referred to original holiness rather than rationality because the

relationship with God was of supreme importance (Bell 2004), allowing different races, religions and convictions to coexist and engage in intercultural dialogues. 'To assert that every theology is always already political is to recognize that every theology embodies, either implicitly or explicitly, a mythos, a vision of how human communities ought to be organized' (Bell 2004:423). This call emphasises the necessity for a contextual theology that recognises and accounts for the diverse experiences and identities of humanity, thereby dismantling the monolithic interpretations that have often marginalised indigenous peoples and their understandings of divine image.

Through this lens, postcolonial theologians encourage a critical reassessment of *Imago Dei*, advocating for interpretations that honour the plurality of cultures and histories, and illustrating the universality of divine creation without complicit colonial annexation of the theological discourse.

Ecological hermeneutical approach

Ernst Conradie, a professor in ecological ethics, says, 'The Universe, Earth and all its components have intrinsic worth/value' (2006:311). His tone calls humanity to take responsibility as stewards if they are to reflect God's image and likeness. By image, there is inclusion of collaborative relationality with God's creation (Conradie 2006:306). This contrasts the inaugural assignment of dominion on humanity over creation in Genesis 1:27–28; hence, 'It is clear that "stewardship" functions here as a heuristic key to relate biblical texts with ecological responsibility within the contemporary context' (Conradie 2006:308). Dominion, thus, is not a hierarchical position but an emphasis on partnership and mutual custodianship. In highlighting the imperative interconnectedness between humans and the natural world, Sallie McFague contends, '*Imago Dei* must be understood in terms of human's role as caretakers and co-creators with God' (1993:234). McFague emphasises the necessity of acknowledging 'the intrinsic value and dignity of all creatures, not just humans' (1993:242). Duality has been used to negate the flesh by putting body and soul in opposition to each other, in a form of anthropocentric misinterpretation of the concept, separating humans from the natural order (Settimo 2023:874). However, the framing of the *Imago Dei* within an ecological context not only recognises a hermeneutic that includes ecological voices, but one that emphasises stewardship, justice and interdependence. We want to recognise interdependence as one of the key aspects of dominion because the '[e]arth and its components not only suffer from injustices at the hands of humans but actively resist them in the struggle for justice' (Conradie 2006:311). In fact, '[n]o discovery about the laws and functions of matter logically affects the possibility that these very laws ... may subserve a spiritual, creative will' (Settimo 2023:871). This perspective not only challenges anthropocentrism but also urges a comprehensive environmental stewardship that aligns with the divine mandate for care and responsibility. This recognises

humanity's role as co-creators with the ethical obligation to protect and sustain our shared ecosystem, thus redefining the theological implications of being made in God's image from the perspective of ecology.

Narrative hermeneutical approach

Narrative theology offers a dynamic and compelling approach to understanding *Imago Dei*, emphasising its integral connection to the broader biblical narrative. According to thinkers like Walter Brueggemann, '*Imago Dei* is not a static theological concept, but a dynamic thread that weaves through the unfolding drama of God's relationship with humanity' (2005:256). Brueggemann urges that 'we must engage with *Imago Dei* in light of the diverse narratives, characters, and events presented in the Scriptures' (2005:261). This viewpoint illustrates that *Imago Dei* is crucial within the contextual unfolding of salvation history, characterised by relationality, community and the evolving story of God's engagement with creation.

In this narrative approach, the past, present and future of humanity's identity in relation to the divine are woven into a tapestry where *Imago Dei* serves as a continual source of inspiration and reflection, beckoning believers to embody the values inherent in the divine image as they navigate their unique stories.

Contemporary hermeneutical approaches to *Imago Dei* present a rich and intricate tapestry of perspectives, deepening our understanding of this fundamental concept. Feminist, postcolonial, ecological and narrative approaches not only challenge traditional interpretations but also highlight the transformative possibilities of reimagining *Imago Dei* across diverse contexts. By embracing these multifaceted insights, the theological discourse surrounding *Imago Dei* becomes not merely a reflection of divine truth but a beckoning call for justice, inclusivity and responsible stewardship in a complex and interconnected world.

Conclusion

In concluding this article, we want to reiterate Sands' words who says, 'If the *Imago Dei* is constitutive of the human and entails the fulfilment of a God-given vocation, then the fulfilment of this vocation is the actualisation of the human' (2010:41). This statement pivots the concept as a theological construct that transcends traditional boundaries to address contemporary ethical dilemmas in profound ways. By exploring its theological, historical and hermeneutical dimensions, this study illuminated the transformative potential of *Imago Dei* to inspire a comprehensive engagement with social justice, human rights and ecological stewardship. As scholars increasingly draw from diverse interpretive lenses – feminist, postcolonial, ecological and narrative approaches – they enrich the discourse surrounding human dignity and relational ethics, advocating for inclusivity and justice in an era marked by systemic inequities and environmental crises. Recognising that being made in the

image of God confers both intrinsic worth and moral responsibility invites individuals and communities to embody divine attributes through advocacy for the marginalised and stewardship of creation. Ultimately, a renewed commitment to *Imago Dei* can catalyse significant ethical reflection and action, fostering deeply interconnected communities rooted in compassion and justice. It beckons a reimagining of human identity – one that compels us to cultivate a shared existence reflective of divine love, challenging us to confront the complexities of modern life with integrity and purpose. Thus, the enduring significance of *Imago Dei* stands as both a theological cornerstone and a moral compass for our collective journey towards a just and flourishing world.

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G. Mufanbadza contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing, visualisation and resources. G. Masengwe contributed to methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing, project administration, software validation, data curation, resources, review and editing.

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