

Imago Dei and artificial intelligence: A theological inquiry into personhood and human ontological boundaries

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Advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) technology challenge traditional theological understandings of human personhood. This article examines the concept of personhood in light of the doctrines of *Imago Dei*, Christology and pneumatology, and contrasts it with the phenomenon of 'simulated personhood' in AI. Employing a systematic theological approach and interdisciplinary reflection, the article argues that human personhood is rooted in Trinitarian relationality and participation in the Holy Spirit – dimensions that cannot be reduced to cognitive functions or digital simulations.

Contribution: The original contribution of this study lies in introducing the category of 'simulated personhood' and in developing a framework for digital pastoral theology. Engagement with African theological voices enriches the analysis of personhood as a relational and communal reality. The article concludes with recommendations for further research in the areas of digital liturgy, contextual pneumatology and the ethics of technology.

Keywords: personhood; *Imago Dei*; artificial intelligence; Christology; Holy Spirit; African theology; digital simulation; digital pastoral theology.

Introduction

Throughout human history, every major technological leap has shaken our understanding of reality, existence and humanity itself. However, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) in the contemporary era presents not merely practical challenges but also existential ones. Unlike earlier technologies that functioned as external and instrumental tools, AI ventures into domains previously considered exclusive to humans: thinking, learning, speaking, creating and even feeling (Battista et al. 2025). From large language models such as ChatGPT to social robots capable of expressing 'emotions' and offering interpersonal responses, we now encounter entities that not only operate like humans but seemingly *become* human-like – despite lacking intentionality or ontological consciousness. This phenomenon is not merely a technological issue but poses profound anthropological and theological concerns (Coeckelbergh 2020:89–105; Gunkel 2012:7–15).

The fundamental questions raised here are not only ethical: How should humans use AI responsibly? They are also ontological and metaphysical: what truly differentiates humans from machines? If AI can perform cognitive, linguistic, and even creative tasks more rapidly and accurately, does it imply that machines may equal or surpass humans in certain respects? Can abilities such as machine learning, improvisation or simulated empathy be categorised as forms of *personhood*? (Prathomwong & Singsuriya 2022; Cafolla, Rittman & Ni 2025) At this point, the distinction between simulating human behaviour and the *existential substance* of humanity becomes crucial – particularly in relation to consciousness, intentionality and the human capacity for relationship with the transcendent (Rueda et al. 2025). Should artificial entities be granted ethical consideration comparable to that of humans or animals? If not, what theological grounds justify such differentiation?

Within the Christian theological tradition, the answer does not lie solely in functional capabilities but in the ontological status of humans as beings created in the image and likeness of God – *Imago Dei* (Gn 1:26–27). This doctrine serves not only as a foundation for human dignity but also as a theological basis for ethics, social relationships and human responsibility within creation. However, in the digital era, the concept of *Imago Dei* faces new hermeneutical challenges: can the attributes often associated with it – rationality, morality, relationality and spirituality – be deconstructed into algorithmic structures? If so, does the uniqueness of the human *subject* become

replaceable by intelligent entities that are functionally similar, although ontologically distinct? This leads to further inquiry: if the human mind can be technologically extended, does the reflection of *Imago Dei* also expand accordingly? Or is it confined to a spiritual dimension that remains irreducible and non-engineerable?

This debate cannot be separated from the broader discourse in the philosophy of technology, especially theories addressing the human–machine relationship within posthumanist frameworks. Scholars such as Clark and Chalmers (1998) have proposed the ‘extended mind’ thesis, which redefines human cognition as not limited to the biological body but encompassing technological extensions. In this logic, the boundaries between human and machine become increasingly blurred, demanding a redefinition of concepts such as consciousness, free will and moral responsibility from an interdisciplinary perspective (Verbeek 2011). Nevertheless, from a theological standpoint – especially within Patristic and Reformation traditions – there is a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the distinguishing element in human life. Thus, while AI may imitate many human faculties, it does not partake in the divine breath that animates human beings (cf. Job 32:8; Jn 3:6).

This article aims to re-evaluate theological conceptions of personhood and *Imago Dei* in the light of emerging developments in AI. By integrating systematic theology, philosophy of technology and theological ethics, it will examine the ontological distinction between humans and machines, highlight the spiritual and relational significance of *Imago Dei*, and assess whether AI has the capacity to approximate or even replicate certain aspects of human existence. The concluding section will discuss the pastoral and practical implications of this phenomenon for the Church, particularly in areas such as faith education, interpersonal relationships and digital presence within Christian communities.

Literature review

Imago Dei in Christian theology

The doctrine of *Imago Dei* serves as a foundational pillar in Christian theological anthropology. In the Patristic era, Irenaeus interpreted the ‘image’ [*eikon*] as the human capacity to know and relate to God, while the ‘likeness’ [*homoiosis*] signified the eschatological goal of becoming like Him (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in ed. Schaff 1885:526–531). Athanasius further clarified that the restoration of the image of God occurs through the incarnation of Christ, who bridges the fracture caused by sin and reveals the true model of humanity (Athanasius 1998:50–54).

Augustine (1991:244–275) emphasised the rational aspects of the human soul – intellect, will and memory – as reflections of the Trinity, forming a substantialist view of *Imago Dei* that shaped Western theological traditions. In the 20th century, however, Barth (1958) rejected this substantialist perspective

and proposed that *Imago Dei* is primarily relational, seen in the human capacity for interpersonal relationships, particularly between male and female, mirroring the relational nature of the Trinity.

Pannenberg further developed this view with an eschatological dimension. For Pannenberg (1985:220–227), *Imago Dei* is not a fixed ontological status but a future-oriented goal realised fully in the eschaton through Christ. Thus, the image of God is not a present possession but a relational and teleological potential.

In Eastern Orthodox theology, Palamas (1983:118–125) introduced a mystical and participatory perspective by emphasising human participation in the *energeia* of God – His divine energies – which allow engagement with God’s life without touching His essence. This opened space for a more participatory and theotic (or theological) interpretation of *Imago Dei*. Such mystical-participatory readings have gained renewed attention in contemporary discussions of AI, where the ontological separation between divine and artificial being becomes a central concern (Kaunda 2020).

Zizioulas (2006) contributed significantly by asserting that personal existence is only possible within ecclesial relationships. For Zizioulas, personhood is not a biological or psychological category, but a relational ontology rooted in participation in the Trinitarian life through incorporation into the Body of Christ.

In general, three major theological approaches to *Imago Dei* can be identified:

- Substantial, emphasising reason, will, or moral capacity (Augustine 1991).
- Functional, focusing on humanity’s role as God’s representative over creation (Molhoek 2022; Von Rad 1972:56–59).
- Relational, highlighting the capacity for relationship with God and others (Barth 1958; Blessing Temitope Emmanuel 2020; Zizioulas 2006).

These frameworks have significant implications when comparing humans with AI. If *Imago Dei* is defined mainly in substantial terms, one might argue that AI, possessing human-like cognitive abilities, could be considered ‘persons’. However, if relational and participatory dimensions – particularly those rooted in divine communion – are deemed essential, then the ontological boundary between human beings and machines remains impassable. Herzfeld (2002) strongly maintains that, while AI can mimic human functionality, it lacks the capacity for true relationality with the divine. Similarly, Molhoek affirms that humans, as co-creators with God, uniquely bear the responsibility and privilege of ethical agency grounded in communion, which AI cannot replicate (Molhoek 2022).

These contributions not only enrich the theological anthropology of *Imago Dei* but also frame the contemporary

dialogue concerning AI within a more robust and nuanced understanding of what it means to be human before God.

***Imago Dei* and personhood in contemporary theological and artificial intelligence ethics discourse**

The development of AI has fundamentally reshaped how we understand consciousness, agency and personhood. In this context, numerous theologians and philosophers of technology are actively engaging classical theological concepts in dialogue with the emerging digital reality.

Herzfeld (2002:35–47) asserts that AI merely ‘resembles’ human beings in its capacity for information processing but lacks the essential capacity for personal relationship with God. For Herzfeld, *Imago Dei* is a vocation to respond in love to the divine Other, not a function of cognitive ability or aesthetic similarity.

Hefner (1993) develops the concept of the human as a ‘created co-creator’, who participates in God’s creative activity, including technological innovation. Yet, despite his affirmation of technology as a cultural extension of humanity, Hefner insists that self-awareness and spiritual value remain uniquely human.

Waters issues a theological warning against the trajectory of posthumanism, which, he argues, displaces the incarnational understanding of human existence (Waters 2006). For Waters, personhood cannot be reduced to performative capability; it is rooted in humanity’s relational calling to live before God incarnate. In a subsequent analysis, Waters asserts that a truly Christian anthropology requires fidelity to the embodied, covenantal and vulnerable nature of human life (Waters 2010).

In the realm of AI philosophy, Searle’s famous ‘Chinese Room’ thought experiment demonstrates that AI systems lack genuine understanding and merely manipulate symbols syntactically (Searle 1980:417–420). This highlights the critical distinction between the simulation of intelligence and the possession of intentionality or consciousness.

Floridi (2013), while advancing *information ethics*, treats AI as informational agents with limited moral autonomy. Nevertheless, he denies intrinsic value to machines because of their lack of self-reflective awareness and intentional depth.

Gunkel offers a pragmatic argument for ‘robot rights’, not based on AI’s ontological status, but on the socio-relational impact of human–machine interaction. According to Gunkel (2012:133–159), personhood in this context is contingent and shaped by relational perception and cultural construction.

This methodological divergence is significant: while AI ethics and philosophy tend to adopt a bottom-up approach – emphasising functional performance and social

relations – Christian theology follows a top-down framework grounded in divine revelation and the bestowed ontological status of the human person (Graves 2023). This distinction serves as a critical lens for evaluating whether AI can truly be considered a *person*, or whether it remains a simulation of personhood without ontological substance. The *Imago Dei*, in this framework, cannot be merely attributed based on function or recognition, but must be seen in the context of divine calling, covenantal relationship, and eschatological destiny (Geraci 2007).

This review highlights the epistemological and ontological tensions between classical Christian theology and contemporary philosophy of technology. Christian theology continues to affirm that personhood and *Imago Dei* are irreducible categories – not merely grounded in function or social relations, but rooted in the transcendent relationship with God. This affirmation provides the evaluative framework for comparing human beings and AI in the subsequent sections of this article.

Methods

This article adopts an interdisciplinary systematic theological approach, employing a normative-critical method of analysis that draws on classical Christian doctrinal sources (such as the Council of Chalcedon, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession), key theological figures from modern theology (including John Zizioulas and Wolfhart Pannenberg), as well as contributions from contemporary African theology (notably Bénézet Bujo, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Tinyiko Maluleke and Musa Dube). In addition, this study engages with the philosophy of technology and information ethics to examine the epistemological and anthropological assumptions underlying digital simulation.

The methodology employed is both constructive and critical: constructive in its effort to rearticulate a theological concept of personhood in the digital age and critical in its evaluation of AI’s claims to human ontological capacities. Special emphasis is placed on the integration of Christology, pneumatology and the doctrine of creation. To address the Global South context, contextual theological methods and relational hermeneutics are utilised to bridge the discourse of digital theology with the lived faith experiences of communities in Africa and Asia.

Review findings

Theological concept of personhood and the *Imago Dei*

Christian theology understands personhood as an ontological reality grounded in the creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God [*Imago Dei*], and fulfilled in relationship with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. This doctrine is affirmed by ecumenical councils such as the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), which declared Christ as one divine person (hypostasis) in two natures – divine and

human – unmixed, unconfused, yet united (Grillmeier 1975:556–560). Thus, personhood is not merely a functional category but is rooted in the perichoretic relationality of the Trinity, manifested supremely in the incarnation.

Zizioulas argues that personhood derives not from substance but from relationship and communion: ‘being as communion’ becomes the paradigm for understanding human personhood not as autonomy but as participation in divine relationality (Zizioulas 2006:18–25). In this view, the human person expresses the capacity to receive and respond to God through the Holy Spirit, a capacity that cannot be reduced to intelligence, volition, or functional consciousness.

Classical confessions of faith, such as the Heidelberg Catechism (Q.6) and the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q.10), affirm that humanity was created in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness – attributes that reflect the moral and relational structure of the *Imago Dei* (Heidelberg Catechism 1563; Westminster Assembly 1647). This perspective also resonates with African theological traditions. For instance, Bujo (1998:42–49) emphasises personhood as a relational and ethical reality within the community, rather than as an atomistic or autonomous entity.

Artificial intelligence and the simulation of personhood

A defining characteristic of modern AI is its capacity to imitate human behaviours – whether in dialogue, decision-making, or affective expression. However, this mimetic capacity must not be conflated with the ontological reality of personhood. Artificial intelligence can manipulate signs and symbols but lacks true intentionality, self-awareness, or spiritual relationality.

In theological terms, we may refer to this phenomenon as ‘simulation of personhood’ – an algorithmic construct that mimics interpersonal interaction yet is devoid of spiritual substance. Floridi (2013:102) explicitly resists attributing *intrinsic moral worth* to AI, citing its absence of moral intent and existential relationships. Herzfeld (2002:45) similarly emphasises the chasm between creature and Creator, highlighting why AI cannot possess a soul or engage in pneumatological relation with God.

Artificial intelligence thus creates the *illusion* of participation but lacks genuine participation. This demands caution to avoid projecting personhood onto digital systems that merely mimic external cues without possessing inner essence.

This critique is supported by recent theological inquiry. Balle (2022) highlights that human-like robots may evoke relational responses but lack the spiritual and sacramental capacities embedded in Christian anthropology. Likewise, Burdett (2020) argues that, while one might ‘say “You” to artifacts’ in a conversational or ethical sense, such relationships remain structurally limited and cannot be equated with genuine personhood rooted in the *Imago Dei*.

Contemporary philosophical analysis further underscores the gap between functional mimicry and true subjectivity. Formosa, Hipólito and Montefiore (2025) argue that, although future AI may approximate a form of hybrid moral agency, current systems lack critical features such as critical self-reflection, genuine autonomy, and consciousness – attributes central to theological understandings of personhood.

Ontological comparison: Human beings versus artificial intelligence

From a Christian ontological perspective, human beings are created in the image of God, possessing body, soul and spirit, and are capable of existential relationship with God. Artificial intelligence, on the other hand, is a human-made artefact lacking free will, consciousness, or intrinsic value.

Pannenberg emphasises that human identity is historically constituted – shaped in dynamic relationship with God and others over time – underscoring that persons are historical beings (Pannenberg 1985:22). Artificial intelligence lacks historical, spiritual and moral dimensions, and remains limited to instrumental or functional roles.

In the African theological context, scholars such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Tinyiko Maluleke define personhood communally and embodiedly: personhood is realised in presence within the community and moral engagement (Maluleke 2000; Oduyoye 2001:89). This reinforces the inability of AI to attain ontological equivalence with human beings.

Recent contextual theologians have explored these ontological distinctions in the light of AI. Forster (2022) argues that while AI might serve as a theological stimulus, it cannot participate in the embodied, sacramental, and moral matrix that constitutes personhood in Christianity. Similarly, Ndaka et al. (2025:209–210) critique mainstream AI ontologies as rooted in Cartesian dualism and Western techno-optimism – frameworks that often contradict metaphysical assumptions about being, relation and dignity.

The role of the Holy Spirit and the incarnation as distinguishing factors

Christology and pneumatology form foundational doctrinal distinctions between human beings and AI. The incarnation of Christ (Jn 1:14) confirms that God assumed human nature – not a system or machine. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon humans to renew the image of God within them (Rm 8:29), not upon artificial creations.

The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) affirmed the union of two natures in Christ within one person – an event that cannot be digitally replicated or synthetically engineered: there is no algorithmic incarnation. Human personhood is redeemed, sanctified, and glorified in Christ and through the Holy Spirit – participation that AI cannot achieve.

In the African theological context, Dube (2014) emphasises that the presence of the Holy Spirit is evident in the

restoration of community and embodiment – not in disembodied systems. Incarnation and pneumatology thus constitute ontological walls between humans and digital simulations.

Implications and recommendations

Pastoral implications

Firstly, the Church must help its members understand that human dignity cannot be replaced by the mimetic capabilities of AI.

Secondly, spiritual formation should emphasise the uniqueness of each person in the light of the *Imago Dei* and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, in the context of digital ministry and the use of AI pastoral assistants, there is a need to develop a pastoral ethics that clearly distinguishes between functional interaction and spiritual relationship. A theology of digital pastoral care must guide believers not to fall into the illusion of emotional intimacy with systems, but instead to affirm genuine relationship with Christ and the community of faith.

Recommendations for further research

Future research may explore the following areas:

Firstly, the liturgical implications of incorporating AI into communal worship practices.

Secondly, the formulation of a contextual pneumatology in the digital age, including perspectives from African and Global South traditions.

Thirdly, a comparative study between simulated empathy in AI systems and authentic pastoral presence.

In addition, it is necessary to develop a framework of digital ethics grounded in ecclesiology and relational Trinitarian theology to guide the Church towards an integrative and theologically robust response.

Conclusion

This article affirms the ontological distinction between human beings and AI, a difference that cannot be equated. Grounded in the doctrines of the *Imago Dei*, the incarnation and the work of the Holy Spirit, Christian theology offers a normative foundation for a holistic understanding of personhood. Although AI may functionally simulate personhood in persuasive ways, it does not reach the core of human existence as spiritual beings created for relationship with God.

The contribution of this article lies in offering a conceptual framework that distinguishes between cognitive resemblance and pneumatological participation, while also advocating for the development of a contextual 'digital pastoral theology'. By incorporating voices from African theology

and the broader ecumenical tradition, this study broadens the horizon of theological discourse in the face of 21st-century technological challenges.

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