

# *Imago Dei* as the foundation of Christian ethics in addressing the ecological crisis in Indonesia

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This study analysed the relationship between creation theology and environmental responsibility, with a focus on *Imago Dei* as the basis for Christian ethics in the context of the ecological crisis in Indonesia. The introduction outlines the ecological crisis, which includes worsening issues such as deforestation, pollution and climate change. The aim of this study was to investigate how the concept of *Imago Dei* can be utilised as a foundation for Christian ethics in environmental management. The methods employed include a theological approach and document analysis to assess the impact of creation theology on Christian environmental practices. The findings indicate that applying *Imago Dei* reinforces human responsibility as stewards of God's creation and encourages more sustainable conservation efforts. The discussion highlights the importance of integrating creation theology into Christian environmental ethics to effectively support environmental preservation efforts.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This study has intradisciplinary implications within the fields of systematic theology, moral theology and ecotheology by enriching the understanding of the *Imago Dei* as an ethical basis for Christian involvement in environmental stewardship. Interdisciplinarily, this research opens dialogue between Christian theology and environmental science, social ecology and public policy. Emphasising ecological responsibility grounded in the *Imago Dei* can support ecotheological education in churches and encourage church engagement in environmental policy advocacy, thus offering practical contributions to addressing the ecological crisis through a cross-disciplinary approach.

**Keywords:** *Imago Dei*; creation theology; Christian ethics; environmental responsibility; ecological crisis.

## Introduction

As a country with abundant natural wealth, Indonesia is now facing a profound and complex ecological crisis. With diverse ecosystems such as forests, tropical rainforests, savannas and coral reefs, Indonesia plays a crucial role in the global ecological balance (Haryanto 2021). However, massive deforestation, pollution and increasing climate change have threatened environmental sustainability and the livelihoods of local communities. According to a Greenpeace report, deforestation caused by land conversion for palm oil plantations and mining has led to a significant reduction in rainforest area. These forests not only serve as habitat for diverse species of flora and fauna but also function as critical carbon sinks that mitigate the impacts of climate change. As noted by Xu et al. (2022), 'The rapid expansion of palm oil plantations and mining operations has led to a dramatic reduction in rainforests, which play a critical role in carbon sequestration and biodiversity'. Addressing this issue requires strict enforcement of anti-deforestation laws, adoption of sustainable agricultural practices such as agroforestry and comprehensive collaboration between the government, private sector and civil society to balance economic development with environmental conservation.

Environmental degradation not only triggers an increasingly severe climate crisis, marked by the rising frequency and intensity of natural disasters such as floods, droughts and forest fires, but also reveals humanity's failure to fulfil the divine mandate to care for creation. From an eco-theological perspective, this destruction is not merely a technical or ecological issue but a reflection of a moral and spiritual crisis in which humanity neglects its responsibility as the steward of the earth. Air and water pollution caused by harmful emissions from factories and vehicles, as well as the contamination of clean water sources by industrial and domestic waste, demonstrate

an abuse of power over creation. The impact of this crisis on public health, including the rise in respiratory diseases, as noted by Shetty, that industrial and vehicular emissions have significantly contributed to air pollution, worsening respiratory health problems among the population, underscores that environmental damage directly affects life, which is a gift from God (Shetty 2023). Similarly, the degradation of marine ecosystems because of overfishing and plastic pollution not only threatens the sustainability of species but also violates the principle of ecological justice, which demands harmony between humanity, nature and the Creator.

Amid these challenges, Indonesia urgently needs sustainable solutions rooted in deeper ethical principles. In Christianity, creation theology and *Imago Dei* highlight humanity's moral responsibility to care for creation as God's purposeful and good work (Gn 1:31), viewing the universe as a divine masterpiece that must be preserved. Bartholomew explains that 'The theology of creation teaches that the natural world is a divine artwork, and humanity is entrusted with the moral duty to steward and sustain it' (Bartholomew 2020a). This statement emphasises the profound responsibility given by God to humanity to care for the natural world. This perspective aligns with the understanding that the environment is not merely a resource to be exploited but a sacred creation that reflects divine intent and beauty. As stewards, humans have the duty to preserve and tend to this 'divine work of art', which entails a moral obligation to ensure the health and sustainability of ecological systems. This theological framework underscores the importance of integrating ethical considerations into environmental practices and policies, highlighting the need for a mindful approach to ecological management that respects both the spiritual significance of creation and the practical demands of conservation.

The concept of *Imago Dei*, meaning 'image of God', is a central teaching in Christian theology that asserts humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26–27). This provides a theological foundation for the understanding that each individual has intrinsic dignity and value as a reflection of God's character. In the environmental context, *Imago Dei* also reflects humanity's moral responsibility to manage and preserve the Earth as part of their divine calling. Gordon states that 'The doctrine of *Imago Dei* underscores the inherent dignity of humanity and our moral obligation to care for and preserve the environment as a divine mandate' (Gordon 2019). *Imago Dei* emphasises that humans have a special role as stewards of God's creation. This means that humans not only have the right to utilise natural resources but also have the obligation to protect and restore the environment. Christian ethics based on *Imago Dei* encourages believers to view themselves as integral parts of the ecosystem and to act responsibly in every aspect of environmental management. Wright adds that 'Christian ethics based on *Imago Dei* encourages believers to view themselves as integral stewards of creation, holding both the right and the responsibility to protect and enhance the environment' (Wright 2022b).

In facing the ecological crisis, applying the principles of creation theology and *Imago Dei* can provide a strong moral guide for more sustainable and ethical actions. This approach promotes the understanding that environmental conservation efforts are not only a practical obligation but also an expression of faith and commitment to deeper spiritual values. Through the lens of Christian theology, ecological challenges become an opportunity to translate faith into tangible actions that support the preservation of the planet for future generations.

Although Indonesia, as a country rich in natural resources, plays a crucial role in global ecological balance, there is a significant gap between awareness of the importance of ecosystems and the implementation of effective actions to address the ecological crisis. Massive deforestation, pollution and increasing climate change threaten environmental sustainability and community well-being, while efforts to protect the environment are often hindered by inconsistent policies and a lack of commitment from various stakeholders. For example, land conversion for palm oil plantations and mining has led to a significant reduction in rainforests, which serve as carbon sinks and habitats for diverse flora and fauna. Despite Greenpeace reports highlighting the severe impacts of deforestation, the implementation of effective environmental protection policies remains minimal.

On the other hand, the concepts of creation theology and *Imago Dei* provide a theological foundation for understanding human responsibility toward the environment, but the application of these principles in practical contexts remains insufficiently integrated into environmental management policies and practices. Creation theology, as outlined in the Book of Genesis, teaches that humans have a moral responsibility to care for and maintain creation. However, there is a noticeable gap in applying these principles to encourage tangible actions for environmental protection (Bavinck 2012). *Imago Dei*, which emphasises that humans are created in the image of God, provides a moral foundation for sustainable environmental management. However, this role is often not translated into concrete policies or everyday behaviours. Thus, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between theological understanding of environmental responsibility and the implementation of more effective and sustainable actions.

The aim of this study was to examine the role of the *Imago Dei* concept in Christian ethics concerning environmental management, as well as to analyse the application of creation theology principles in addressing the ecological crisis in Indonesia. The concept of *Imago Dei*, which affirms that humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26–27), provides a profound ethical foundation for sustainable environmental stewardship, as humans are called to serve as God's representatives (*viceroys*) on earth, responsibly caring for his creation. In this context, the study explored how understanding human dignity as a reflection of God's character can shape more responsible, ethical and just environmental policies and practices.

## Creation theology in Christian tradition

In Christian theology, the creation account in Genesis 1–2 lays the foundation for understanding humanity's relationship with the environment and their moral duty toward it. God created the world good and purposeful (Gn 1:31) and appointed humans, made in His image (Gn 1:26–28), as stewards to rule over and care for all creation, highlighting both the right to use resources and the responsibility to protect them. As Richard Bauckham explains (Bauckham 2010):

The creation mandate given to humanity in Genesis involves both the privilege of ruling over creation and the responsibility to care for it in a way that reflects God's intentions for the world. (p. 89)

This understanding affirms that humans, as the image of God, have a moral responsibility to maintain the integrity and balance of creation. This principle promotes a Christian environmental ethic that integrates the responsibility for environmental conservation with the belief that actions toward creation are a form of devotion to God. Additionally, Christopher Wright (2006) notes, 'The Biblical view of creation underscores that humanity's role is to be faithful stewards of the earth, acting in accordance with God's purposes for the world'. Thus, the theological teachings on creation and the role of humanity emphasise the importance of responsible environmental stewardship, reflecting divine values in everyday practices.

*Imago Dei*, or 'the image and likeness of God', is a central concept in Christian theology that refers to the belief that humans are created in God's image, as stated in Genesis 1:26–27. The definition of *Imago Dei* reflects the view that humans possess divine qualities and capacities that distinguish them from other creatures, and this has profound implications for human responsibility towards the environment. Richard Bauckham (2010) explains that, 'The concept of *Imago Dei* entails that human beings, as the image of God, are entrusted with the responsibility to reflect God's own care and stewardship over creation'. As God's image, humans have both the right and moral duty to care for the environment. Ecological responsibility reflects not only ethical practice but also human spiritual identity, as humans act as God's representatives in managing creation according to divine values. Wright (2022b) emphasises that:

'The Biblical understanding of *Imago Dei* asserts that humanity's role involves acting as faithful stewards of God's creation, demonstrating care and respect for the environment as a reflection of God's own attributes'. (p. 180)

Thus, environmental responsibility becomes a manifestation of the theological understanding of who humans are as the image of God, demanding careful and sustainable management of all aspects of creation.

## Ecological crisis in Indonesia

Indonesia is one of the countries with the greatest biodiversity in the world, but it is currently facing a severe ecological crisis. One of the major issues is deforestation, caused by illegal logging, land clearing for palm oil plantations and infrastructure development. According to data published by Global Forest Watch, in 2021, Indonesia lost approximately 270 000 hectares of primary tropical forest. This deforestation not only threatens biodiversity, including endangered species such as orangutans and Sumatran tigers, but also significantly contributes to global climate change (Goldman 2021). Lebih lanjut dalam informasi yang dirilis oleh Greenpeace (2022) indicates that, 'Deforestation in tropical countries like Indonesia contributes to around 10% of global carbon emissions, exacerbating climate change'. In addition to deforestation, air and water pollution have become major issues in Indonesia. In large cities like Jakarta, air pollution levels are extremely high because of emissions from motor vehicles and industries. A study conducted by AirVisual in 2020 ranked Jakarta as one of the cities with the worst air quality in the world. On the other hand, major rivers in Indonesia, such as the Citarum, have been heavily polluted by industrial and domestic waste (BBC News 2023). Furthermore, the World Bank Group (2023) states that, 'The Citarum River is one of the world's most polluted rivers, with industrial waste and plastic debris overwhelming its once clear waters'. Climate change further exacerbates the environmental crisis in Indonesia.

As an archipelagic country, Indonesia is highly vulnerable to rising sea levels, changing weather patterns, and increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters such as floods and landslides. These phenomena directly impact the lives of communities, particularly in coastal areas. 'Rising sea levels pose a significant threat to Indonesia's 80 000 km of coastline, threatening millions of people who live in low-lying areas' (Liliansa 2023). This statement indicates that climate change in Indonesia poses a serious threat to human survival.

## Impact of ecological crisis on society and ecosystems

This ecological crisis has a widespread impact on both society and ecosystems in Indonesia. Many rural communities that rely on natural resources are facing significant difficulties because of environmental degradation. Fishermen in coastal areas are experiencing reduced fish catches because of damage to marine ecosystems, while farmers are facing uncertain harvests because of unpredictable weather caused by climate change. 'The degradation of ecosystems affects the livelihoods of communities, especially those dependent on agriculture and fisheries, exacerbating poverty and inequality' (Kundu et al. 2024). The loss of biodiversity disrupts ecosystem balance and reduces vital services like pollination, pest control and clean water. In the long term, this crisis worsens social and economic injustices, especially for communities most vulnerable to environmental changes in Indonesia.

## Causes of the ecological crisis

### Exploitation of natural resources

One of the main factors causing environmental degradation and ecological problems in Indonesia is the excessive or careless use of natural resources without regard for sustainability. This means that humans exploit forests, water, mines and other resources faster than nature can recover, resulting in negative impacts such as deforestation, pollution, loss of biodiversity and climate change. Activities such as mining, land clearing and deforestation are carried out with little or no consideration for the long-term environmental impact. For example, coal mining in Kalimantan has caused extensive ecosystem damage, including water and soil pollution. 'Indonesia is one of the world's largest coal producers, and the environmental cost of coal mining includes deforestation, water pollution, and the destruction of biodiversity' (World Bank Group 2023). Deforestation from coal mining destroys habitats, reduces biodiversity and disrupts ecological balance. Poor mining practices also pollute water sources, harming aquatic life and local communities dependent on them.

### Urbanisation and industrialisation

Rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in Indonesia also contribute to the ecological crisis. The development of large cities such as Jakarta and Surabaya often overlooks environmental impacts, leading to the conversion of forested areas into urban spaces. This reduces water absorption areas and exacerbates problems like air pollution and domestic and industrial waste. 'The rapid urbanization in Indonesia has resulted in the destruction of natural habitats and an increase in pollution, which has a direct impact on public health and the environment' (Programe 2023). Habitat destruction and pollution from vehicles, industry and waste reduce biodiversity, worsen air and water quality and threaten public health. This calls for urgent sustainable urban planning to protect ecosystems and minimise urbanisation's environmental and health impacts.

### *Imago Dei* as the foundation of Christian ethics

This article explores how *Imago Dei* shapes the Christian ethical framework that guides moral actions and decision-making in the context of daily life.

### The concept of stewardship in Christian ethics

In Christian ethics, the concept of 'stewardship' is a foundational principle that emphasises humanity's responsibility toward God's creation. Humans, as stewards, are entrusted by God to care for and maintain the world he has created. This principle is based on the belief that the earth and everything in it belongs to God, and humans have a moral obligation to manage natural resources wisely and sustainably. As Berry explains, 'Christian stewardship calls believers to recognize that the Earth is the Lord's and that we are entrusted with its care' (Berry 2020). In the Christian view, the concept of stewardship is not merely an

administrative responsibility over natural resources but also reflects a deeper relationship between humans and creation.

Stewardship involves not only utilising natural resources to meet human needs but also emphasises the importance of maintaining ecosystem balance and ensuring that these resources remain available for future generations. This concept reflects a call to act with responsibility and respect towards nature, avoiding excessive exploitation that could harm the environment. John Stott asserts, 'We are called to exercise responsible stewardship, recognizing that our actions have a profound impact on the creation and, consequently, on our relationship with the Creator' (Stott 2019). Stott's statement highlights that stewardship means managing resources wisely while recognising its impact on our relationship with the Creator. In Christian ethics, this view reminds us that every action affects creation and carries consequences beyond practical or economic outcomes.

### Ecological justice and moral responsibility towards creation

Ecological justice in Christian ethics refers to the effort to ensure that all living beings and ecosystems are treated fairly and respected as integral parts of God's creation. This principle is based on the belief that all creation has intrinsic value because it is created by God, and humans have a moral responsibility to protect and preserve that creation. As stated by Hessel, 'Ecological justice in Christian ethics recognizes the intrinsic value of all creation and our moral duty to preserve it as part of God's handiwork' (Hessel 2021).

Ecological justice also emphasises the need to consider the impact of human actions on the environment, particularly on vulnerable groups and threatened ecosystems. In this context, human moral responsibility includes protecting those who are most affected by environmental damage, such as impoverished communities that often suffer the most from pollution and climate change. N.T. Wright reminds us that, 'Our moral obligation extends to ensuring that our environmental practices do not disproportionately harm the most vulnerable, upholding the principle of justice as a reflection of our faith' (Wright 2022a).

Christian ethics offers a strong framework for environmental protection through stewardship and ecological justice, enabling Christians to actively help build a just, sustainable world that honours God's creation and reflects His love and justice.

### Implementation of *Imago Dei* in environmental management

Implementing *Imago Dei* in environmental management explores how seeing humans as God's image-bearers shapes their responsibility as stewards of nature, encouraging more responsible and sustainable efforts to protect and restore the environment.

### Application of *Imago Dei* principles in environmental protection and conservation practices

As explained by Wright (2022a), 'The doctrine of *Imago Dei* underscores our inherent dignity and moral obligation to care for the environment as a reflection of our divine image'. This principle directs Christians to view the environment not merely as a resource but as God's creation that should be valued and protected. By understanding that every element in the ecosystem functions within a larger divine design, human actions in managing natural resources should reflect the respect and responsibility entrusted by God.

Additionally, Bartholomew (2020b) emphasises that '*Imago Dei* implies a stewardship role in which human beings are entrusted with the care and preservation of the natural world, reflecting God's intent and glory'. In this context, the application of the *Imago Dei* principle includes actions such as waste reduction, resource conservation and the use of environmentally friendly technologies, all carried out with the awareness that these actions are expressions of a religious commitment to God's creation.

### Case studies or examples of applying this principle in the life of Christian communities in Indonesia

In Indonesia, several Christian communities have adopted the principle of *Imago Dei* in their efforts to protect and preserve the environment. One significant example is the initiative by Christian churches in the Papua region, which are involved in reforestation projects and sustainable forest management. The community understands that the forests of Papua are not only crucial for ecological life but also part of God's creation that must be preserved.

The project 'Save Papua Forest' is a project that was initiated by the Christian community in Papua emphasises that preserving forests is part of members of the community's responsibility as 'stewards' of God. In a report about the project, church leaders (Papua Report 2024) state, 'We view our conservation efforts as a sacred duty, reflecting our commitment to preserve God's creation and promote environmental justice'.

Additionally, Christian communities in Java are also engaged in environmental education programmes that promote the principles of *Imago Dei*. These programmes include training on sustainable agriculture, waste management and biodiversity conservation and are driven by the Christian communities' belief that caring for the environment is a direct expression of their faith and reverence for God's creation.

The implementation of the *Imago Dei* principle in environmental management in Indonesia demonstrates that theological principles can be translated into concrete actions that support environmental conservation. By understanding and applying

this teaching, Christian communities in various regions can play an active role in maintaining ecosystem balance and honouring God's creation. This approach not only strengthens religious commitment but also contributes to global efforts to combat the environmental crisis.

### Conclusion

The concept of *Imago Dei*, which affirms that humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26–27), has a significant impact on the development of Christian ethics that are responsible toward the environment. In the face of the worsening ecological crisis in Indonesia, creation theology reminds Christians of their duty as stewards of God's creation. As beings who reflect God's character, humans are called to be God's representatives [*viceroys*] on earth, with the responsibility to care for, preserve and restore the environment rather than exploit or destroy it. The ecological crisis in Indonesia, including deforestation, pollution and climate change, demands deep theological reflection on humanity's role within all of creation. This study shows that applying the *Imago Dei* as a foundation for Christian ethics not only emphasises respect for human dignity but also the integrity and sustainability of the entire creation. Therefore, responsibility toward the environment must be regarded as an integral part of Christian faith, where the management and preservation of creation is an expression of obedience to God as the Creator of all things.

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### Authors' contributions

R.S. was responsible for conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, the writing of the original draft, visualisation, project administration, software, validation, resources., the review and editing of article, supervision and funding acquisition. Y.B. was responsible for conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, the writing of the original draft, visualisation, project administration, software, validation, resources., the review and editing of article, supervision and data curation.

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## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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