

Human Being in the Image of God: Implications for the Sanctity of Life in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the biblical and theological foundations of the *Imago Dei* in Scripture and historical Christian thought, and analyzed how differing interpretations of the doctrine shape Christian ethical perspectives on the sanctity of human life. In light of contemporary bioethical challenges and shifting moral frameworks, the paper employed a qualitative theological methodology that integrates biblical exegesis, historical and doctrinal analysis, comparative denominational perspectives, and engagement with contemporary bioethics literature. The study finds that, despite interpretive differences, the *Imago Dei* offers a coherent moral framework for affirming intrinsic human dignity across Christian traditions. When understood through a synthesis of substantive, relational, and functional dimensions, the doctrine offers a balanced ethical approach that upholds the inherent worth of every human being, reinforces communal responsibility toward vulnerable populations, and encourages responsible engagement with medical and technological advancements. The paper concluded that the *Imago Dei* remains a vital theological resource for ethical decision-making in an increasingly complex bioethical landscape. It recommends a renewed and context-sensitive application of the doctrine within Christian communities, healthcare practice, and public discourse, particularly in African and other global contexts where questions of human dignity and the sanctity of life remain pressing.

Keywords: *Imago Dei*, Sanctity of Life, Human Dignity, Bioethics.

Introduction

The doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, articulated in Genesis 1:26-27, affirms that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. This doctrine has long provided the theological foundation for Christian understandings of human dignity and the sanctity of life. Within Christian anthropology, human life is regarded as inherently valuable because it reflects God's creative intention and character (Middleton, 2021). Historically, the church has drawn upon the *Imago Dei* as a central framework for moral reasoning, social responsibility, and ethical reflection (Kilner, 2015). Despite its foundational status, the interpretation and application of the *Imago Dei* remain contested in contemporary ethical discourse. Advances in biotechnology, changing moral sensibilities, and evolving conceptions of human identity have generated new challenges that test traditional theological categories. While Christian ethics frequently appeals to the *Imago Dei* to defend the sanctity of life, the doctrine is often employed in a generalized or underdeveloped manner, resulting in ethical arguments that lack theological depth and coherence (Kilner, 2015). This has weakened the capacity of Christian bioethics to engage persuasively with contemporary moral debates.

A significant source of this difficulty lies in the diversity of theological interpretations of the *Imago Dei*. Classical theology, particularly the substantive view, associates the image of God with inherent human capacities such as rationality or moral agency (Aquinas, as cited in Stump, 2018). In contrast, the relational view, articulated prominently by Karl Barth, emphasizes humanity's capacity for relationship with God and with others (Barth, 1958). The functional view, meanwhile, understands the divine image in terms of humanity's vocation to exercise responsible dominion and stewardship over creation (Middleton, 2021). Although these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, they generate different ethical emphases and raise critical questions about how human dignity should be grounded and protected. The implications of these interpretive differences become evident in contemporary ethical debates. Discussions on abortion frequently revolve around criteria such as viability, consciousness, or autonomy, while debates on euthanasia often prioritize compassion and quality of life considerations over intrinsic human worth (Meilaender, 2016).

In such contexts, theological anthropology is often marginalized, allowing secular ethical frameworks, such as utilitarianism, autonomy-centred ethics, or post-humanist thought, to dominate public discourse. Similarly, although modern human rights language retains concepts such as "inherent dignity," it often lacks a stable metaphysical foundation once detached from its theological roots (Perry, 2013). Another pressing concern involves the treatment of vulnerable populations. Persistent challenges such as discrimination, human trafficking, genocide, disability marginalization, and systemic poverty continue to undermine the value of human life. Historically, the *Imago Dei* functioned as a powerful theological argument against oppression and the devaluation of persons deemed socially or biologically inferior (Wright, 2006). Yet many contemporary Christian communities struggle to apply this doctrine consistently and systematically across diverse ethical issues.

Against this background, the central problem addressed in this study is the need for a coherent, systematic, and contextually relevant articulation of the *Imago Dei* that can inform Christian understandings of the sanctity of life in a meaningful way. This study, therefore, examines the biblical and theological foundations of the *Imago Dei* within Scripture and historical Christian thought, and analyzes how differing interpretations of the doctrine shape Christian ethical perspectives on the sanctity of human life, with particular attention to contemporary ethical challenges. This study examines the Christian theological doctrine of the *Imago Dei* and its significance for understanding and affirming the sanctity of human life within Christian ethics. Its scope is deliberately confined to biblical, theological, and ethical analysis, and it does not pursue empirical investigation.

The study begins by examining the scriptural foundations of the *Imago Dei* within both the Old and New Testaments, with a particular focus on Genesis 1:26-27, Genesis 9:6, Psalm 8, and selected New Testament texts with Christological significance. These passages are examined alongside interpretations drawn from significant periods in Christian theology, including patristic, medieval, Reformation, and contemporary traditions, to situate the doctrine within its historical and theological development. The study then analyzes prominent theological models of the *Imago Dei*, examining its substantive, relational, and functional aspects, and assesses their respective contributions to Christian ethical reasoning. Within this framework, it examines how differing interpretations of the doctrine influence Christian perspectives on human dignity, moral worth, and the value of human life.

Building on this theological analysis, the study applies the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* to selected contemporary ethical issues related to the sanctity of life. These include abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide, genetic engineering, disability ethics, and broader questions concerning human rights and human value. Rather than offering exhaustive treatments of each issue, the study employs these areas as illustrative cases through which the ethical implications of the *Imago Dei* can be examined. Ultimately, the study aims to establish a comprehensive theological framework that harmonizes the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* with a robust understanding of the sanctity of human life, one that is responsive to contemporary ethical discourse. The analysis remains focused on theological and ethical interpretation, engaging scientific, legal, sociological, or psychological considerations only to the extent that they provide necessary contextual clarity.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative, doctrinal-theological, and analytical research design. Given its conceptual focus on theological interpretation and ethical reasoning, empirical quantitative methods are not appropriate. Instead, the study integrates systematic literature review, biblical exegesis, hermeneutical analysis, and normative ethical evaluation to develop a coherent theological framework for understanding the *Imago Dei* and the sanctity of human life. This approach aligns with the study's conceptual and theoretical frameworks by connecting biblical foundations, interpretive models, and ethical application.

The study draws on four main categories of sources. Primary theological sources, including biblical texts, historic creeds, church confessions, and doctrinal documents, were used. Also,

Secondary scholarly sources, such as peer-reviewed books and journal articles in theology, Christian ethics, and bioethics, were utilised. Similarly, *Bioethical literature*, including contemporary discussions in medical ethics, genetics, legal and policy documents, and selected case studies for contextual analysis were used as well. Other sources used include denominational and ecclesial statements from Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical, and the African Independent Churches addressing human dignity, life ethics, and social responsibility.

A structured review of scholarly literature on the *Imago Dei*, Christian anthropology, sanctity of life, and bioethics was conducted using databases such as ATLA, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Peer-reviewed works published between 1980 and 2025 were included, while non-scholarly or theologically disengaged materials were excluded. The review process followed a PRISMA-style sequence to ensure transparency and rigour, enabling identification of key themes, convergences, and gaps in existing scholarship.

Key biblical texts, particularly Genesis 1:26–27 and related passages, were analyzed using exegetical and hermeneutical methods that consider original languages, historical context, and canonical interpretation. A historical-theological survey traced the development of the *Imago Dei* from patristic through contemporary theology, ensuring that ethical conclusions are grounded in established doctrinal reflection.

The study applies substantive, relational, functional, and integrated interpretations of the *Imago Dei* to selected bioethical issues, including abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, disability ethics, and human rights. Each issue is evaluated by examining the ethical dilemma, assessing interpretive implications, and proposing a coherent theological-ethical response grounded in the sanctity of life. Comparative case analysis allows engagement with diverse cultural and denominational contexts.

Teachings and ethical statements from major Christian traditions are analyzed to identify areas of convergence and divergence in the application of the *Imago Dei* concept. This comparative approach highlights shared commitments to human dignity while accounting for theological and cultural distinctives, contributing to ecumenical understanding.

Methodological rigour is ensured through careful exegetical practice, consistent analytical criteria, and transparent documentation of sources and procedures. While the study does not employ empirical validation measures, coherence and reliability are maintained through sustained engagement with authoritative theological scholarship. Limitations include reliance on published materials and restricted access to some denominational documents, particularly within less-documented traditions.

Although the study involves no human subjects, it engages ethically sensitive topics. Sources are treated respectfully, diverse viewpoints are fairly represented, and language that could demean vulnerable groups is avoided. Cultural sensitivity is maintained, especially in engagement with non-Western theological contexts.

The study presents an integrated theological-ethical framework for understanding the *Imago Dei* and the sanctity of life, offers a critical analysis of contemporary bioethical challenges, and provides a comparative account of denominational perspectives. It contributes to scholarly discourse in theology and bioethics, with particular relevance to global and underrepresented contexts.

Theological Understandings of the *Imago Dei*

Across the literature, three dominant interpretations emerged: the substantive, relational, and functional models. Scholars such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Berkhof (1996) favour a substantive reading, arguing that reason, moral capacity, and spirituality distinguish humans and form the basis of their dignity. Aquinas maintains that human rationality reflects God's nature, grounding the moral worth of every person (Stump, 2018). This model supports the sanctity of life by asserting that human worth is intrinsic rather than socially assigned.

Relational scholars emphasize human participation in community, love, and relationality as the core meaning of the image. Barth (1958) argues that God's "Let us" in Genesis 1:26 points to relational communion within the Trinity, mirrored in human relational life. Zizioulas (2006) extends

this by framing personhood as communion; to attack human life is to violate the relational ontology inherent in creation. This view supports sanctity-of-life ethics through a communal, responsibility-based framework.

Functional interpretations highlight human dominion and stewardship. Middleton (2021) advances the view that "image-bearing" is inherently vocational, tied to humanity's responsibility for creation. Here, sanctity of life is linked not only to identity but also to human purpose. Kilner (2015) mediates between these views, arguing that the *Imago Dei* is neither a capacity nor a function but a destiny fully realized in Christ. This eschatological reading reinforces dignity as universal and non-contingent.

Across these frameworks, one central result appears: all major theological models affirm that human beings possess inherent, non-negotiable value, forming the basis for theological objections to practices that diminish, commodify, or intentionally destroy human life.

Implications for the Sanctity of Human Life

The analysis reveals that the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* consistently grounds prominent Christian positions on abortion, euthanasia, assisted reproduction, and human rights. Rae (2016) argues that the sanctity of life logically flows from the divine image, making intentional killing morally impermissible except in narrowly defined just war or self-defense scenarios. Similarly, Meilaender (2013) asserts that Christian bioethics rests on the conviction that life is a gift entrusted to humanity, not a possession to dispose of. The Catholic tradition reinforces this through magisterial documents. *Dignitas Personae* (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2008) insists that the image of God is present from conception, making embryo destruction a violation of human dignity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) echoes this, declaring every deliberate attack on innocent life a "moral evil."

Protestant traditions converge on similar conclusions, though with varied emphases. O'Donovan (1986) focuses on life as grounded in the resurrection, arguing that Christian ethics derives not merely from creation but also from the redemptive order. Wolterstorff (2008) extends this to political ethics, asserting that human rights derive from intrinsic worth, not governmental grant. African Christian perspectives, represented by Bujo (2011) and Mbiti (2015), add a communal and ancestral dimension, portraying human life as intertwined with spiritual and communal identity. In these views, harming life fractures relationships not only with the individual but with the community and spiritual order.

Application to Contemporary Bioethical Issues

i. Abortion

Scholarly positions differ sharply in secular philosophy but remain largely unified in Christian theology. Beckwith (2007) defends the concept of personhood from conception, arguing that biological humanity is morally relevant. Marquis (1989), even from a secular standpoint, contends that abortion is immoral because it deprives the fetus of a "future like ours." The theological analyses of Kilner (2015) and Middleton (2005) reinforce that divine image-bearing applies regardless of developmental stage. This convergence strengthens the theological case that abortion violates sanctity-of-life principles.

ii. Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide

Keown (2002) and Gorsuch (2006) argue that legalizing euthanasia erodes societal protections for the vulnerable. Meilaender (2013) adds that human life should be received with patience, not controlled through technologically mediated death. Sulmasy (2013) proposes that the goal of medicine is not the cessation of life but the alleviation of suffering, making physician-assisted suicide incompatible with medical ethics. Across the theological spectrum, euthanasia is consistently portrayed as a rejection of divine sovereignty and the gifted nature of life.

iii. Assisted Reproductive Technologies

While many Christians support infertility treatment, significant concerns remain regarding IVF, embryo surplus, and genetic manipulation. *Dignitas Personae* (2008) warns that technologies which

separate procreation from marital union or instrumentalise embryos contradict human dignity. Protestants express more flexibility, but scholars like Rae (2016) highlight the moral dangers of commodifying life. These findings address objective three and research question three by demonstrating that the *Imago Dei* provides a coherent evaluative lens for assessing modern bioethical issues.

Comparative Denominational Perspectives

The study reveals substantial unity among Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and African Christian traditions regarding the sanctity of human life, despite different theological emphases. Catholics emphasize natural law and magisterial authority (Catechism, 1994); Orthodox thinkers stress relational ontology (Zizioulas, 2006); Evangelicals prioritize biblical authority and personal moral responsibility (Grudem, 2018); African theologians foreground community and spiritual continuity (Bujo, 2011). This comparative result supports the study's expected output on ecumenical convergence and reveals a broad consensus that human dignity is non-negotiable.

Reaffirming the Imago Dei as Foundation for Human Dignity

i. The Substantive Dimension and Human Worth

The substantive view of the *Imago Dei* emphasizes inherent qualities such as rationality, spirituality, and moral agency (Berkhof, 1996). This perspective asserts that dignity is an intrinsic quality rather than one that is achieved or conferred. Consequently, human beings possess value that is independent of their functionality or socio-biological utility (Kilner, 2015). In ethical discourse, this lends theological support to claims that life should be protected irrespective of developmental stage, disability, or cognitive decline. This intrinsic worth directly challenges utilitarian frameworks that measure value by capacity or contribution. For example, contemporary debates on euthanasia often appeal to concepts of "quality of life," yet the substantive view maintains that dignity remains constant even when capacities diminish (Sulmasy, 2013).

ii. The Relational Dimension and Communal Ethics

The relational model emphasizes that humans bear God's image in their capacity for relationships with God and with one another (Barth, 1958). This implies that ethical decisions must consider communal obligations, not merely individual autonomy. In bioethical contexts, this dimension reinforces responsibilities toward the vulnerable. Christian traditions such as African communitarian theology and Catholic social teaching stress solidarity and interdependence as moral imperatives (Bujo, 2011; Pontifical Academy for Life, 2000). These frameworks critique hyper-individualistic justifications for euthanasia or abortion that disregard relational responsibility for sustaining life.

iii. The Functional Dimension and Human Agency

The functional model views humans as bearing the divine image through their God-given vocation to steward creation (Middleton, 2021). This involves agency, responsibility, and participation in God's purposes. Ethical implications encompass the responsible use of biotechnology, environmental stewardship, and life-protecting governance. Functional stewardship is especially relevant in debates on genetic engineering and emerging technologies. It suggests that while humans may modify biological structures, such actions must preserve dignity, justice, and the sacredness (Meilaender, 2013).

Denominational Perspectives on the Imago Dei and Sanctity of Life

A central expected output of this study is a comparative denominational analysis. This section synthesizes the theological positions of major Christian traditions.

i. Roman Catholic Perspective

Catholic theology affirms the *Imago Dei* as the foundation of human dignity and the basis for natural law. Life is sacred "from conception to natural death," and thus abortion, euthanasia, and artificial reproductive technologies that commodify embryos are prohibited (Catechism of the

Catholic Church [CCC], 1994). The Catholic emphasis on relationality is evident in its critique of autonomy-centred ethics.

ii. Protestant Evangelical Perspective

Evangelicals affirm both the substantive and functional dimensions, emphasizing a personal relationship with God and moral accountability. They strongly oppose abortion and euthanasia, grounding the sanctity of life in scriptural authority (Grudem, 2018). However, evangelicals tend to be more flexible in areas such as genetic therapies, provided they do not violate human dignity.

iii. Eastern Orthodox Perspective

Orthodox theology views the *Imago Dei* through an ascetical lens, emphasizing theosis (participation in divine life). This leads to a holistic vision of dignity that encompasses body, soul, and communal worship (Zizioulas, 2006). Consequently, the Orthodox tradition is cautious about technologies that fracture embodied personhood or treat humans as objects.

Case Studies in Contemporary Bioethics

Case Study 1: Abortion and Prenatal Dignity

A Nigerian hospital's ethical committee faced a case involving a 14-year-old girl impregnated through rape. While some argued for termination based on psychological trauma, others appealed to the sanctity of fetal life.

Applying the *Imago Dei*:

- i. *Substantive view* → fetus has intrinsic dignity
- ii. *Relational view* → responsibility of the community to support mother and child
- iii. *Functional view* → caregivers must steward life, not destroy it

The ethical recommendation is that compassionate support, trauma counselling, and life-affirming care should be prioritized (Kilner, 2015).

Case Study 2: Euthanasia in Terminal Illness

In the Netherlands, legal physician-assisted suicide has raised global concern. A Christian application of the *Imago Dei* challenges the assumption that loss of functionality negates dignity (Meilaender, 2013). The relational model also rejects isolation in suffering, emphasizing communal solidarity.

Case Study 3: CRISPR and Genetic Editing

CRISPR technology presents opportunities and risks. Therapeutic interventions (e.g., correcting sickle-cell mutation) may align with functional stewardship, whereas enhancement interventions risk commodifying human life (Middleton, 2021).

Conclusion

This study has examined the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* as a foundational theological resource for understanding and defending the sanctity of human life within contemporary Christian ethical discourse. By engaging biblical texts, historical theology, and diverse denominational perspectives, the study has shown that the Christian affirmation of human dignity is neither incidental nor culturally constructed, but firmly rooted in the belief that human beings bear the image of God. Despite differing theological emphases, substantive, relational, and functional interpretations of the *Imago Dei* converge on the conviction that human life possesses inherent and non-negotiable worth. The findings demonstrate that ethical disagreements within Christian traditions often arise not from rejection of the *Imago Dei*, but from divergent interpretations and applications of the doctrine. When examined in isolation, each interpretive model offers valuable insight but also exhibits limitations. However, an integrated approach that holds together intrinsic dignity, relational responsibility, and vocational stewardship provides a more coherent and comprehensive ethical framework. Such an approach enables Christian ethics to address complex bioethical challenges such as abortion, euthanasia, genetic technologies, and disability ethics without reducing human value to functionality, autonomy, or social utility.

Furthermore, the study highlights significant ecumenical convergence across Christian traditions regarding the sanctity of human life. Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and African theological perspectives, despite contextual and doctrinal differences, consistently affirm that violations of human life constitute violations of divine intention. This shared conviction suggests that the *Imago Dei* remains a viable and unifying theological principle capable of informing both internal ecclesial reflection and broader public moral discourse. In an era marked by rapid technological advancement and shifting moral assumptions, the *Imago Dei* continues to offer a stable theological anthropology that resists reductive accounts of personhood. By grounding human dignity in divine image-bearing rather than capacity, productivity, or autonomy, the doctrine provides a critical alternative to dominant secular ethical frameworks. The study, therefore, concludes that the *Imago Dei* remains indispensable for sustaining a Christian vision of human dignity and sanctity of life in contemporary ethical deliberation.

Recommendations

i. For Theological Scholarship

Future research should continue to develop integrative approaches to the *Imago Dei* that draw from multiple interpretive traditions, rather than privileging a single model. Greater engagement with non-Western and Global South theologies, particularly African perspectives, would further enrich theological anthropology and ethical reflection.

ii. For Christian Communities and Church Leadership

Churches should strengthen doctrinal teaching on the *Imago Dei* and its ethical implications, especially in relation to bioethical issues confronting contemporary societies. Pastoral responses to sensitive matters such as abortion, disability, and end-of-life care should combine doctrinal clarity with compassion and communal responsibility.

iii. For Christian Engagement in Public Ethics

Christian ethicists and institutions should articulate the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* in ways that are both intelligible and constructive within pluralistic contexts, contributing thoughtfully to public debates on human dignity, human rights, and bioethics without compromising their theological integrity.

iv. For Healthcare and Policy Contexts

Christian healthcare practitioners and policymakers should draw on the *Imago Dei* as a moral framework that affirms patient dignity, prioritizes care over utility, and encourages responsible stewardship of medical technologies. Ethical guidelines should explicitly resist practices that instrumentalize or commodify human life.

v. For Future Research

Further interdisciplinary studies combining theology, bioethics, law, and social sciences are recommended to explore how the *Imago Dei* can inform practical decision-making in healthcare systems, legal frameworks, and technological governance.

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