

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND RACIAL RECONCILIATION: A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO XENOPHOBIA IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Xenophobia and ethnic conflicts continue to pose significant threats to peace, social cohesion, and human dignity in many African nations. These divisions not only fracture communities but also stand in stark contrast to the biblical affirmation of the inherent worth and equality of all human beings. This article explores how the theological concept of the *Imago Dei* (Image of God) can serve as a foundational biblical framework for addressing xenophobia and fostering racial reconciliation within the African context. The study seeks to answer the question: How can a biblical understanding of the Image of God offer a theological response to xenophobia and promote racial harmony in African societies? This study adopts the narrative theological method of biblical interpretation by analyzing key scriptural texts, notably Genesis 1:26, alongside relevant passages from both the Old and New Testaments. The bible pericope affirms that all people, irrespective of ethnicity or nationality, are created in God's image and possess equal dignity. The findings highlight the consistent biblical mandate to love and care for the foreigner and to pursue unity in Christ across ethnic divides. The inclusive, multi-ethnic nature of the early church is presented as a model for contemporary African congregations. The article concludes that embracing the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* equips the African church to actively resist xenophobia through theological education, preaching, advocacy, and community engagement. It calls upon African Christian communities to lead by example in cultivating inclusive spaces that reflect God's justice, love, and vision for human unity.

Keywords: *Imago Dei*; Xenophobia; Racial Reconciliation; African Church; Biblical Theology.

Introduction

According to Klein et. al. (2017), the scripture gives meaning through the normal use of language and helps to interpret texts just as the original audience would have understood them well. This approach will be well fitting for the interpretation of Genesis 1:26, as it provides clarity on the ancient overview of man's identity that is rooted in the doctrine of the

Imago Dei. The method adopted is the narrative theological method of biblical interpretation. This method will help the role of the reader in the ongoing narrative, finding meaning in the overarching story of God and humanity. The belief of doctrine of *Imago Dei*, meaning “Image of God,” comes from a place of Christian anthropology and theology. It confirms that humans are created with inherent worth, value, and dignity, created in the image of God (Middleton, 2005; Kilner, 2015). The term arises from Genesis 1:26, which forms the basis of understanding human identity in biblical thought. Theologically, in Hebrew text “וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נָעָשֶׂה אֶת־מֹבֵן כְּצַלְמָנָנוּ” which is transliterated as “Vayomer Elohim na'aseh adam b'tzalmenu kid'mutenu” (Swete, 1925–1930, Vol. 1) the bible text says “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (ESV, 2016, Genesis 1:26). This bible passage introduces the unique identity of humans as bearers of God's image (*tzelem*). The plural pronouns used in this passage, as “let us make” have been widely interpreted by scholars such as Walton (2011) and Wenham (2003) as an expression of the oneness of Godhead. More importantly, the bible passage sets a tone for understanding humanity not just as a part of creation, but as its uttermost being entrusted with stewardship, dominion, and responsibility, yet marked by divine likeness of God Almighty. The book of genesis itself is a theological declaration regarding human identity in addition to being a cosmological account. The concept of creation, covenant, sin, and salvation are all introduced in the Book of Genesis, which means "origin" or "beginning." Humanity is the result of a sovereign God's orderly and purposeful creation, which is introduced in Chapter 1. This work highlights that all people, regardless of their color, nationality, or origin, are divinely created with holy value by concentrating on Genesis 1:26. This knowledge serves as the basis for biblical racial reconciliation and a theological response to the sin of xenophobia. It emphasizes how the Bible calls for unity in difference and how reconciliation is essential to the Christian message rather than an elective (Boesak & DeYoung, 2012).

In recent years, Africa has seen a rise in xenophobia and ethnic conflicts. These issues pose a serious threat to social peace across the continent. South Africa, in particular, has regularly faced violent assaults on foreigners, especially those from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Nigeria. These attacks have caused property damage, loss of life, and the displacement of thousands of people (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014). Nigeria has also seen ethnic clashes, especially in the Middle Belt area. Conflicts between Fulani herders and local farmers have grown more intense, often along ethnic and religious lines. These trends reveal a pattern of exclusion and strong ethnic nationalism. Such xenophobia and ethnic hostility do more than

disturb peace. Victims are often dehumanized, publicly blamed, and denied basic rights (Okoli & Atelhe, 2014). As these tensions grow, the need for a religious perspective becomes clear. This perspective should affirm the value of every human life and encourage reconciliation. The Christian belief that all people are made in God's image offers a strong response to these issues. It stresses that every person has worth given by God, no matter their race, ethnicity, or nationality (Middleton, 2005; Towner, 2010).

While many studies look at xenophobia and ethnic conflicts in Africa from a social or political view, few focus on theological ideas. Especially rare are studies that connect biblical teaching with the issue of race and dignity. Studies like Ilo (2012) and Chitando (2019) discuss religion's role in peace and development. But only a few explore the *Imago Dei* as a model for racial healing in Africa. Many theological talks about xenophobia stay at a distance and do not look closely at the social and political realities of local communities. This shows a need for studies that combine biblical science with today's African problems. Such research can link scriptural ideas with current issues of race and justice. It can give a clear Christian voice to debates on dignity, fairness, and social harmony (Magezi, 2023). Recognizing that all humans are created in God's image offers a strong moral and biblical basis for promoting racial equality and reconciliation in Africa. The belief in the *Imago Dei* affirms that every person has inherent dignity. It challenges ideas of discrimination, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia. By rediscovering and applying this core truth, African Christians can play a key role in healing ethnic divisions. This belief will help to build inclusive communities and show the unity that both the Old and New Testaments call for. This approach highlights the importance of respecting each person's worth and working towards harmony among different groups.

Hence, this research aims to explore how the biblical idea of *Imago Dei* can guide efforts for racial reconciliation in Africa. It will explore how Christian beliefs can challenge xenophobic ideas and support justice. The study will examine words in the Bible that support human dignity and equality. It will look at early Christian practices that included all people. It will also consider practical ways churches and communities can build peace in societies divided by ethnicity. By focusing on religious principles, this work adds to the broader discussion on peacemaking, human rights, and how religion can bring about social change. It encourages churches, faith groups, and Christian thinkers to see their roles as prophets and caregivers. Their work should help reduce ethnic violence and exclusion.

Clarification of Terms

Imago Dei (Image of God)

The Latin term *Imago Dei* translates literally to “Image of God” and forms a core principle in Christian theology. It refers to the notion that human beings are formed in the likeness and reflection of God (Middleton, 2005). This concept influences how we perceive equality, human dignity, and purpose. Declaring that all persons are created in the image of God affirms that all people have intrinsic value and divine significance, irrespective of their color, ethnicity, or background (Kilner, 2015). Practically speaking, *Imago Dei* serves as the prism through which interpersonal relationships are assessed. This idea is directly contradicted by racism, discrimination, and prejudice since they reject the divine image of others. According to van Huyssteen (2006), a proper interpretation of *Imago Dei* encourages the recognition of our common humanity, which serves as the theological foundation for justice, peace, and reconciliation.

Racial Reconciliation

The process of mending racial divisions and establishing connections founded on equality, justice, and respect for one another is known as racial reconciliation. It is a profoundly spiritual and theological enterprise that is based on the understanding that everyone possesses *Imago Dei*, rather than only being a social or political endeavor. In addition to addressing the institutional and historical injustices that have caused division in communities, racial reconciliation aims to mend the strained links between individuals by love, forgiveness, and the revealing of the truth (Tisby, 2019). Christian racial reconciliation places special emphasis on the church's role in addressing sin and bridging racial gaps. In keeping with Paul's assertion that "there is neither Jew nor Greek.....for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28), it aims to exemplify Christ's call for unity in diversity. God wants people to live in harmony and reflect His image, and this goal is in line with His redemptive work (Harvey, 2020).

Xenophobia

Xenophobia, the fear or hate of strangers or foreigners, is a global phenomenon that appears in prejudice, exclusion, and even violence against those considered as outsiders. This idea contradicts how Christians define neighborliness, love, and hospitality. Because it devalues people based on their nationality, ethnicity, or cultural distinctions, xenophobia runs

counter to *Imago Dei* (Carroll, 2008). A recurring motif in the Bible is the exhortation to welcome strangers. Since God's people are commanded to care for the foreigner and the downtrodden in both the Old and New Testaments (Leviticus 19:34; Matthew 25:35), xenophobia not only destroys human connections but also disobeys. God's intention for inclusive and loving community. As followers of Christ, opposing xenophobia becomes an act of affirming God's image in all people (Yong, 2014).

The Context of Genesis 1:26

Genesis 1:26 says, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" (ESV) This bible passage establishes humanity's special place in creation, which is quite essential. Humans, in contrast to other animals, are created in the image of God. Many studies see the line "Let us make..." as a reflection of divine debate or the plurality inside the Godhead, which has generated extensive theological discussions over time (Walton, 2011). But there is no denying the fact that God has bestowed intrinsic worth and dignity upon humans. This context emphasizes the biblical exhortation to respect each individual as a bearer of God's image by relating this passage to the current issues of racism and xenophobia. It confirms that *Imago Dei* is universal rather than culturally specific. Racial reconciliation and anti-xenophobia initiatives are, therefore, spiritual imperatives rooted in the very first chapter of Scripture, not just social obligations.

Theological Foundation for Human Dignity

The idea of *Imago Dei* is the belief that all humans are made in God's image, and it is central to Christian belief and morals. Genesis 1:26-27 states, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This part of the Bible teaches that everyone has worth, dignity, and should be treated equally, no matter their race, background, or nationality. The verse does not single out any group, social class, or tribe (Middleton, 2005). The scripture explains that all people of the world share the divine image equally. This view strongly challenges ideas that devalue or dehumanize others. It offers a clear basis for justice, fairness, and respect for human rights (Towner, 2010). When human identity is rooted in God, not social labels, it provides a strong answer to racism and xenophobia (Dube, 2017). From the

idea of the divine image comes the duty to treat everyone with respect and kindness. The image of God is given by God, not earned through achievements, race, or nationality. It affirms that all people are equally valuable (Yong, 2014). This view questions unfair systems that create inequality or exclude others. It also influences how societies arrange their laws and social systems. If mankind created by God carries the image of God, then laws and institutions should reflect this truth (Ilo, 2012). The church, as the body of Christ, must show a community where all races and backgrounds are equal. Prejudice and racist actions are not just social problems; they are violations of God's will.

In many regions of Africa, especially in South Africa, Nigeria, and Libya, studies have shown that violence based on xenophobia remains a serious issue. Migrants and foreign nationals are often blamed for economic problems and face exclusion and violence (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014). These acts of hostility come from fears, strong national pride, and a distorted view of identity. Most times, it seems as though those who are different are seen as threats instead of being recognized as fellow humans created in God's image (Yong, 2014). The concept of the *Imago Dei* offers a helpful way to see and understand these social problems. It rejects the unfair treatment and discrimination that promote xenophobia. This idea shows that all humans share a divine origin and belong to one human family. Churches across Africa must take the lead in sharing this truth from the Bible and in guiding followers of Christ to challenge prejudice (Chitando, 2019). They should also promote unity in diversity. By viewing xenophobia through the lens of the *Imago Dei*, the African Church can help society move towards reconciliation. This approach honors both God's image and mankind as a whole. It is a clear biblical call and a social need, especially in a continent where ethnic and racial differences still cause conflict and division.

Biblical Teaching against Xenophobia

The Old Testament offers a strong religious basis for justice and inclusion, especially in how foreigners and marginalized groups are treated. In Leviticus 19:33-34, God instructs the Israelites: "When a foreigner lives among you, do not mistreat them. A clear instruction was given to treat strangers as the same as their people. Love them as you love yourselves, because you were foreigners in Egypt." This shows that God's moral code is based on memory, compassion, and fairness. Including foreigners in Israel's community life is not optional but essential to the special relationship between God and His people. As Wright (2004) points out, the Old Testament law shows care for strangers, widows, and orphans as a reflection of God's

character. The theme of justice appears repeatedly in the writings of the prophets. They often call for fairness and equal treatment, especially for those who are vulnerable, such as the poor and oppressed. (Isaiah 1:17; Amos 5:24). Justice is seen as more than just following laws; it requires including everyone, as a divine duty (Brueggemann, 2014). These ideas strongly oppose xenophobia and ethnocentric attitudes, which still exist in many African communities today.

The New Testament strongly calls for unity and reconciliation, especially through the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ. In Galatians 3:28, Paul emphasizes that division based on social status is broken down in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This statement challenges the divisions of society by affirming that all believers are equal in the eyes of God. The message of the gospel removes obstacles based on race, class, and gender, welcoming everyone into one community focused on reconciliation and love (N.T. Wright, 2012). The core idea is simple: faith in Christ goes beyond ethnic differences, creating a universal link founded on respect and love. Jesus’ dealings with groups such as Samaritans, Gentiles, and women show that God’s kingdom is open to all. It reflects a clear intention to include those who are often pushed aside by society and culture (John 4; Matthew 8:5-13). The ministry of Christ was marked by a regular effort to help those who were ignored or rejected. This sets an example for the church to work towards racial and social reconciliation, showing that inclusion is a key part of faith (Jennings, 2010).

The early Christian community, as described in the book of Acts from the scripture, provides clear examples of diverse and inclusive fellowship. At Pentecost, different tribes and races from many nations listened to the gospel in their languages (Wright, 2012). This event showed that the new covenant was meant for everyone. It was more than just a symbol; it marked the start of a church that welcomed both Jews and Gentiles. This broke down long-standing racial and ethnic barriers. In Acts 10, Peter’s visit to Cornelius’s house, a Gentile, was a major change in Jewish-Christian relations. Peter came to understand that God shows no bias. He accepts anyone who fears Him and does what is right, regardless of their race or background. This idea gave a new foundation for ending ethnic separation. As Bosch (2011) points out, the early church’s inclusive attitude was radical for its time. It still offers lessons for the modern African church, which faces issues like ethnonationalism and xenophobia. These examples show how early Christians put their beliefs into practice. This created

communities that shared resources, showed generosity, and welcomed different cultures. Today, the church must follow this example. It should build communities that oppose ethnic discrimination and truly reflect the inclusive message of the gospel.

Addressing Xenophobia and Fostering Racial Reconciliation in Africa

A key role for the African Church in fighting xenophobia is delivering strong sermons and providing clear biblical teaching. The pulpit remains a vital platform to shape moral values and challenge wrongs such as racism and ethnic bias. The biblical idea that all humans are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27) should be taught repeatedly. This concept is the basis for believing in human equality and dignity. It helps to counter ideas of racial superiority and tribal exclusiveness, affirming that everyone has equal worth in God's eyes (Middleton, 2005; Towner, 2010). Church leaders need to emphasize through sermons, Bible studies, and education programs that xenophobia and racial prejudice go against the gospel message. As Paul teaches in Galatians 3:28, believers in Christ are united beyond ethnicity, race, or social status. This truth must shape how church members think and act (Yong, 2014; Nanthambwe, 2022).

African churches need to go beyond talk and involve their communities in acts of reconciliation and multicultural inclusion. Creating worship spaces that welcome different ethnic and national groups reflects God's vision of every tribe and nation praising together (Revelation 7:9). Showing open hospitality is a strong stand against the rising forces of exclusive nationalism and xenophobia (Ilo, 2012). Events like town hall meetings, cultural exchanges, and community dinners can help build understanding and empathy. These gatherings break down stereotypes and foster personal connections that cross tribal and national lines (Chitando; Nell 2019). When churches become places of honest encounter instead of division, they show the true community Christ calls for.

The church's work also involves speaking out against unfair systems and fighting structures that promote xenophobia. Faith communities must challenge unfair policies on immigration and stand against hate speech (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014; Irobi, 2021). Jesus showed support for those on the margins, and today's churches must do the same for refugees, migrants, and ethnic minorities facing discrimination or harm. Working with other churches, non-governmental groups, faith-based organizations, and community groups strengthens this effort. These partnerships share resources, exchange ideas, and support initiatives that promote

unity and fairness. When churches speak together, they represent the body of Christ working as one for justice and peace in society (Van den Berg, 2020).

In times marked by social division and conflicts between ethnic groups, spiritual leaders have an essential role. They serve as examples and advocates for biblical unity. Christian views on spiritual leadership are based on Jesus' model of serving others (Mark 10:45). Leaders like pastors, theologians, and lay ministers are in a special position to spread the idea that all people are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). This message challenges harmful beliefs and encourages understanding and support among different ethnic groups (Middleton, 2005; Towner, 2010). A leader who is grounded in faith should go beyond just talking about peace, but also live it for people to see and believe. Leaders must also foster qualities like kindness, humility, and moral strength. These qualities help confront the causes of fear of foreigners and unfair systems. Such leaders act as moral guides in their communities, shaping attitudes and stories that build respect and dignity for everyone (Pietersen, 2022; Chitando, 2019).

The church must do more than just speak about these ideas. It needs to take real action to promote reconciliation. Holding meetings and workshops focused on healing from racial hurt provides spaces for open talk, sharing stories, and learning. These gatherings will help break down prejudice, deal with past injustices, and support healing. This includes teachings from the Bible, local history, and personal stories that highlight the value of human life created in God's image (Yong, 2014). It is also very important to support people affected by xenophobia. This support includes pastoral care, trauma counseling, legal help, temporary shelter, and help to rejoin society. The church should be a safe place that provides healing, fairness, and hope to those who are on the margins (Crush & Ramachandran, 2014). By showing love through these actions, the church can honestly witness the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

The call for justice found in the Bible in Isaiah 1:17; Micah 6:8 also applies to public policy. Churches, church groups, and ecumenical groups must actively work to shape laws and policies. These policies should protect human dignity and promote fairness. This includes fighting for the rights of citizens, helping refugees, ending discrimination, and making sure social services are fair. Religious leaders should work with community groups, legal experts, and activists to create policy ideas based on faith. Churches also need to help their members understand their role in society and the moral importance of standing against unfair laws and

government indifference to racist violence (Irobi, 2021). By shaping public talk and policies, the church can act as both a voice for justice and a force for change in African countries.

Conclusion

The belief in the Imago Dei that all humans are created in God's image offers a strong, biblically based response to rising issues of xenophobia and ethnic violence in Africa. According to Middleton (2005), this idea is centered on the affirmation that each person has inherent dignity, value, and equality, no matter their race, ethnicity, or nationality. It challenges harmful beliefs and actions that devalue others and cause social division, especially against migrants and minority groups (Towner, 2010; Ilo, 2012). Reflecting on both Old and New Testament teachings, such as God's command to love foreigners and the unity of believers in Christ, this study highlights the Bible's call for racial healing. The early church's practice of welcoming diverse peoples (Acts 2; Acts 10) provides a model for today's African churches. By staying true to biblical views of humanity, Christianity can speak prophetically and compassionately into the xenophobia crisis. In times of social and ethnic strife, affirming human equality through the Imago Dei is not just a doctrine but a practical guide. It shapes Christian actions towards justice, hospitality, and community well-being, as seen in Christ's example and the early church. The African Church is in a unique position to lead reconciliation, offer healing, and bear witness to hope across a continent torn by conflict and displacement.

Recommendations

Based on the study, the following recommendations are needed. For biblical teaching and preaching, church leaders and educators should include the Imago Dei in sermons, follow-up programs, and study materials. Highlighting this belief helps members understand human dignity from a biblical point of view and counters prejudice rooted in ethnic bias. Churches should also create spaces where different ethnic groups can worship together and share their faith traditions. Making intentional efforts to promote honest conversations and share personal stories can reduce prejudice and increase understanding.

Religious communities need to go beyond ideas and offer practical help to those affected by xenophobia. This can include giving shelter, providing counseling, or offering legal aid. Churches should also support policies that protect people's rights and encourage national

unity. Given the widespread nature of xenophobia, churches should work with other Christian groups, faith communities, and civil organizations. They can build joint efforts to promote peace and social harmony.

Finally, the study recommends that Christian groups and leaders should participate in national discussions about citizenship, migration, and inclusion. Supporting fair policies and providing civic education can challenge fears and promote justice grounded in biblical teaching.

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