

Are we special? A critique of *imago Dei*

**Author:**Wessel Bentley¹**Affiliation:**

¹Research Institute for
Theology and Religion,
University of South Africa,
South Africa

Corresponding author:

Wessel Bentley,
bentlw1@unisa.ac.za

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'Are we special?' In response to this question, Christian theology has traditionally sought comfort in the notion that humanity is created in the image of God. In light of modern scientific knowledge, is this self-understanding still feasible? Are there different ways in which *imago Dei* can be understood? Is it possible for *imago Dei* to be both grounded in its Christian heritage, while also being helpful in the science and religion conversation? This article critically examines the notion of *imago Dei* and proposes an interpretation that could be credible and acceptable to both science and Christian anthropology.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to address the following research question: 'How are human beings special when considering the doctrine of *imago Dei* in light of contemporary scientific knowledge?' This article argues that human distinctiveness is not embedded in an understanding of *imago Dei*, which elevates humanity above the rest of creation, but gleaned from science, it proposes a theological approach which emphasises the uniqueness in our ability to consciously and deliberately strive towards a more naturally integrated existence.

A recent conference of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology (ESSSAT) asked the following question pertaining to humankind: 'Are we special?' (European Society for the Study of Science and Theology 2016). With this enquiry, perspectives from science and religion considered the notion of human uniqueness. The complexity of this question became apparent as participants offered arguments, ranging from how human beings are peculiar at a molecular level, to the distinctiveness of life (and more specifically human life) in the context of the universe.

Considering this question from a theological perspective, the traditional Christian anthropological doctrine of *imago Dei* played a prominent role in discussions. It could be argued that this pronouncement, rooted in scripture, is fundamental to Christian self-understanding. Thus, this possibility: in a reductionist reading of Christian doctrine, humanity 'being special' is at the heart of humankind's place in the realm of creation, the reason for God entering into covenants with humanity, and is one of the precursors for the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The question of *imago Dei*'s influence on the major Christian doctrines will not to be considered in this article. Nonetheless, given the above-mentioned possibility, it is permissible to conclude that humanity occupies a central cosmological position in a Christian doctrinal worldview.

Needless to say, to the natural sciences, particularly evolutionary biology, the argument of human cosmological centrality is preposterous. Not only does Christian theology base its definition of human identity (and need for divine action) on the premise of a few verses in the Bible (predominantly Gn 1:26–28), but as Dawkins¹ argues '... Adam [*and Eve*]²... never existed in the first place: an awkward fact ...' (Dawkins 2006). He further taunts Christian doctrine by stating:

Oh, but of course, the story of Adam and Eve was only ever symbolic, wasn't it? *Symbolic*? So, in order to impress himself, Jesus had himself tortured and executed, in vicarious punishment for a *symbolic* sin committed by a *non-existent* individual? (p. 253)

In addition, the following questions could be asked: who told humanity that they were created in God's image? Did God say that? If so, who was there to hear what God said before humanity was created? Wasn't the Bible written by human beings (obviously biased in their reflection), locked in particular contexts with the aim of conveying messages which were relevant to their worldview, situation and theology? Is *imago Dei* nothing more than an inflated, self-appropriated notion, addressing the question of human identity using theological and cosmological understandings of a

1.The author acknowledges and emphasises that Dawkins and the 'New Atheists' do not represent the entire scientific community's views. The reason for including Dawkins in this discussion is to point out that Christian doctrine is sometimes criticised for being ill-informed and that it has lost touch with contemporary knowledge systems.

2.My own addition.

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particular time, culture and context? Is it responsible for shaping not only modern theology but worldview, ethics, economic sciences, politics, efforts in conservation, and the list goes on?

Imago Dei, *vis-à-vis* the natural sciences, is problematic on several fronts. The mere suggestion of being specifically and intentionally 'created' by an intelligent and causal God, with the purpose of appointing humanity as God's co-creators and stewards of the 'created' realm, seems from the view of evolutionary biology to be rather arrogant and ignorant. The challenge to *imago Dei* remains that despite this purist perspective of self, humanity is the greatest contributor to the current negative outlook on climate change, the destruction of natural resources and the threat to varied species of life. So much for being in God's image ... or could one argue that the gods of hedonism, self-focussed power and exploitative wealth would demand exactly such destructive behaviour?

What do we make of the Biblical teaching of *imago Dei*?

Traditionally, Genesis 1:28–29 has been a pivotal text in defining human uniqueness. As De Smedt and De Cruz correctly assert, 'Scripture does not provide clear specifications on how the *imago Dei* should be understood. As a result, theologians have developed a wide variety of interpretations of this concept ...' (De Smedt & De Cruz 2014:136). By and large, *imago Dei* has been used to refer to the '... affirmation of human dignity and pre-eminence over the rest of creation' (Altmann 1968:235). This is, however, not always the case.

In his publication, *Alone in the world: Human uniqueness in science and theology*, Van Huyssteen points out that *imago Dei* should not be exclusively limited to a reading of Genesis 1 (Van Huyssteen 2006:118). The risk of doing so leads to an interpretation that human beings occupy an elevated and rather 'relationally dislocated' position in the world. In fact, to only refer to Genesis 1 when speaking about *imago Dei* is doing a philosophical disservice to this complex notion. Van Huyssteen draws on three Biblical images that together give a more comprehensive human self-understanding. In doing so, *imago Dei* could be reinterpreted to point to the unfolding of human self-understanding, and not a pronouncement which seemingly places the spotlight on humanity as the pinnacle of God's creation. Van Huyssteen describes the progression in the Biblical image as follows.

Beings amongst beings: Genesis 1:26–28

As the most commonly used text for expounding the idea of *imago Dei*, this passage describes humanity, both male and female, as created in God's image and likeness. A literal reading would of course suggest a human superiority over the rest of creation, but when read in its historical context, it suggests something different. Genesis 1, written as a response to Enuma Elish,³ draws from Egyptian and Mesopotamian understandings

³Enuma Elish is the Babylonian creation narrative, which suggests that the cosmos is a result of a primordial conflict between the Babylonian deities. Humanity, in the unfolding of the narrative, is created to act as 'slaves' to the gods. The Genesis 1 counter-narrative contests this oppressive creative purpose and instead posits a narrative of human dignity and creative functional cooperation with the God of the people of Judah.

of a king or social leader as being God's representative (Fergusson 2013:455; Van Huyssteen 2006:118–120) and places humanity as beings amongst beings who represent God in the created order (Van Huyssteen 2006:118–123). In this proclamation of being created in God's likeness, humanity is given the position of being the point of contact between God and creation. Not only are the first people given this right, but it is a privilege extended to all humans in the Covenant which God made with Noah and his family (Gn 9:1–7) (Van Huyssteen 2006:120). The passage further alludes to humanity's role in exercising dominion over creation, hence fulfilling its role as God's representatives by maintaining order and balance in creation. On this point, Van Huyssteen concludes that this passage intends to say little about where humans come from but rather reflects something about our nature as responsible participants and co-habitants in God's created order (Van Huyssteen 2006:128).

Knowledge of good and evil: Genesis 3:22

Where Genesis 1 points to the positive and affirming description of humankind, this passage points to the other side of the coin. Humanity, created in God's image, is able to distinguish between good and evil (Van Huyssteen 2006:123). This ability may not seem like a bad thing at first, but we get to know in Genesis 3 that it becomes the precursor for human rebellion against God, replacing divine authority with what humanity itself decides to be good and right. Obviously, from a Biblical perspective, this *image* carries negative connotations. However, scholars such as Vainio point to this feature of *imago Dei* as marking the difference between humanity and all other creatures, for humanity exhibits the capacity for rationality – associated with Van Huyssteen's first point – and the capacity to be morally responsible (Vainio 2014:126).

Agents of restoration: 1 Corinthians 15:45

In this and subsequent images, such as that found in Colossians 1:15, *imago Dei* is described in Christological terms (Van Huyssteen 2006:124). Jesus is described as the Second Adam, the one in whom the completeness of the *imago Dei* is fulfilled. Salvation entails being restored into the image of Christ, who himself is the *imago Dei*, extending God's image to all who respond to God's grace in faith.

The Biblical progression of *imago Dei*, in accordance with Van Huyssteen's interpretation, can thus be summarised in the following points:

1. Human beings act as beings amongst beings, with the purpose of maintaining life and order in the world (employing rationality and functional awareness).
2. Human beings are able to distinguish between good and evil (moral awareness).
3. Human beings strive for ideal existential identity ([self-] actualisation).⁴

⁴Maslow uses the term self-actualisation (Maslow 1943:382). In the context of this article I place the 'self' in brackets, as Christian theology argues that in the order of salvation, it is not human beings who are able to reach an ideal state using their own ability, but that divine action and agency is required to achieve this sense of wholeness.

From these three points, one could argue that *imago Dei* makes sense from the perspective of human psychology, by defining self in the context of a broader world. But it is still problematic when read from biological and cosmological perspectives.

The anthropological dilemma of *imago Dei*

A prominent problem with using the Biblical model of *imago Dei* when addressing the contemporary question of human distinctiveness, is that we are working with a text that is locked in a 3-tier cosmology, undergirded by strong anthropocentrism (Bentley 2016:2). Such a foundation does not, for instance, address the questions of humanity as raised by evolutionary biology. At face value, the first creation narrative, as Lamoureux argues, should be read as a *creatio de novo* (Lamoureux 2011), already a view contrary to what is offered by modern cosmologies and biology. Any sensible engagement with scripture therefore has to first make allowance for the Biblical account of creation to be a source written by authors who did not have our knowledge and understanding of either cosmology or biology.

For instance, if we were to read Genesis 1 using our most recent knowledge of cosmology and evolutionary biology, we will find that it presents a rather flat and static image of humans and human history. To point to the 'first humans' and ascribe to them the identity of being in the image of God, raises complex questions: Biologically speaking, who were the first humans? Are we speaking about the first *Homo sapiens*, or can we include other hominids as well? Humans form part of the evolutionary history of the world, so exactly how far do we go back in human evolutionary history to pinpoint who the 'first humans' were? (De Smedt & De Cruz 2014:136). If evolutionary biology were to seek a meeting point with the Biblical 'first humans', it might find a compromise by narrowing the field and suggesting that the 'first humans' were those hominids who revealed a capacity for rationality, moral awareness, and (self-)actualisation – to draw on Van Huyssteen's model.

But even this argument is contested as human beings cannot claim to be the sole custodians of these attributes. On the question of rationality, Vainio argues that our ability for decision-making is not so different from that of other animals (Vainio 2014:127). In a study by Kate Osto, it was shown that even the domesticated dog has the ability to '... successfully adapt to the environment at times when environmental information is absent...' (Osto 2010:137) and is able to be '... fixed upon a rational course of action by employing processes that have in the past reliably led to successful actions ...' (Osto 2010:137). In fact, as Stanovich argues, humans show a high prevalence for violating the axioms of rational choice, making humans '... [sometimes] less rational than other animals' (Stanovich 2013). Is the *imago Dei* then really enclosed in humans, with the assumption that humans have a monopoly on rationality?

Similarly, animals also display a sense of justice (De Smedt & De Cruz 2014:143) and compassion (De Smedt & De Cruz 2014:147) making the human ability of distinguishing between good and evil not quite as specie-unique as we thought. Of course the notions of 'good' and 'evil' are hard to define. When human beings observe animals, we need to concede that what we witness in animal behaviour is largely influenced by our own constructs of these terms.⁵ Nonetheless, the work of Frans de Waal is of great significance in determining whether human beings are the only species on the planet with some form of moral consciousness. De Waal's studies suggest that rather than humanity 'discovering' its ability for distinguishing between good and evil through the truths conveyed in the mythological explanation of Genesis 3, the basic tenets of morality can be seen as part of evolutionary processes (De Waal 2009a). Notions such as altruism (De Waal 2008), empathy (De Waal 2009b), and forgiveness and consolation (De Waal & Van Roosmalen 1979) are part and parcel of species considering the effect of behaviour and do not necessarily point to *internal motivation* for such behaviour (De Waal 2008:280). In other words, according to De Waal, from the perspective of evolutionary biology, 'moral' behaviour is 'learnt' behaviour which has proven beneficial to a group or species. Internal motivation is secondary to this. If internal motivation is viewed as primary (as suggested by psychology and theology), one has to set aside any suggestion of evolutionary theory. For theology to ask questions such as 'what is a good life?', 'who is a good person?' or 'what does an evil person look like?' shows that theology may not have sufficiently wrestled with the supposition of *effect* but is rather fixated on the *internal motivation/ability* of an individual person to do good or evil. It then further uses images of God to the same effect, suggesting that God sets aside 'morality' as evolutionary process and, by focusing exclusively on 'morality' as *internal motivation/ability*, pronounces eternal judgment on the individual, either welcoming them to heaven or sending them to hell. This approach blurs the lines for an exclusivist approach to moral consciousness, once again placing a question mark over the assertion that *imago Dei* is found in the unique ability of human beings to distinguish between good and evil.

Regarding (self-)actualisation, isn't this the point of evolutionary theory that all life forms part of a process where refinements are continually underway to ensure the success and survival of a species? At times, the progress of one species results in the destruction of another, which suggests that in evolutionary biology we cannot speak of a self-actualising world (where all species eventually reach their pinnacle, resulting in the establishment of a Utopian world), but that in the world there are competing processes of self-actualisation. These processes are not only between species

⁵The imposition of norms and values across species may also be inconsistent. As human beings, we deplore xenophobia, yet, when we observe an ant colony (A) and witness how an ant from a different colony (B) is brutally killed when it strays into their territory, we do not denounce such behaviour as being xenophobic or evil. It would be nonsensical to inform colony A of the provisions made for the protection of asylum seekers as outlined in the Geneva Convention. In the same vein we also err on the other side; it is very tempting to attribute human associations with emotions such as affection and love when we witness a baboon grooming her baby. Is there then truly a universal 'good' and 'evil' which spans beyond species? This question can be explored in a separate article.

but also between individual organisms, ensuring that life is and always will be in a state of flux. From a theological perspective, *imago Dei* complicates matters. In striving towards (self-)actualisation, is humanity moving away from *imago Dei* (if *imago Dei* is the starting point of human existential reality, then a refining process may mean that we are becoming increasingly different from where we began), or are we moving towards *imago Dei* (towards the eschatological point of what it means to be human)? Back to our first question: Are we special? Considering the dilemma of *imago Dei*, can we then conclude that we are becoming less and less special, or are we growing in distinctiveness?

Irrespective of how we deal with these questions, we discover that we have so far declared our theological blind spot: we treat *imago Dei* as a fixed notion, as if we know what it is ... as if we know what God looks like. Perhaps, when referring to *imago Dei*, we should be honest about our assumptions and rather truthfully refer to 'Homo *imago Dei*', as Altman suggests (Altmann 1968). There needs to be an admission that we cannot view humanity as a direct form of divine self-revelation or that human distinctiveness as espoused by the doctrine of *imago Dei* should imply that we ignore aspects of life that we share with other species; aspects that we have used as a licence to think that we are more special than any other living organism. Instead, when referring to *imago Dei*, humanity can at best be an image of an image – even our image of the divine. Is there then another way in which we can speak of human distinctiveness and *imago Dei*?

***Imago Dei* and deep incarnation**

In the discussion on theology and evolutionary biology, the work of the Danish theologian, Niels H. Gregersen, plays an important role. Gregersen's theological starting point is Christology, proposing that when we speak about the Incarnation of Christ, we need to extend our theological framework to what he terms 'Deep Incarnation' (Gregersen 2001).

Deep Incarnation offers the following theological perspective: Divine Incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ is not only to be interpreted as God manifest in the body of a human being, but that the Incarnation points to God's presence in, and association with '... the whole malleable matrix of materiality' (Gregersen 2010:176, 181–183; Bentley 2016), including all evolutionary progress and processes. Deep Incarnation takes seriously the fact that humanity itself is a product of evolutionary history, and hence the term 'humanity' encapsulates an entire developmental history with all its pains and brokenness. While religions such as Christianity often err on the side of strong anthropocentrism, Gregersen also warns that one should be sceptical of a resacralising of nature, for such a Deep Ecology or ecocentrism '... does not allow for distinguishing between different levels of nature' (Gregersen 2010:177–178). To the question, 'Are we special?', Ecocentrism would argue that all life is special. If all life is special, then what is special about life?

No one would argue about the sanctity of life; indeed, all life is special, but perhaps the question we should ask is not 'Are we special?', but rather 'How or why are we special?' Gregersen argues that in the context of the specialness of all life, the Christian faith teaches that in Jesus Christ, '... God appears as a human person' (Gregersen 2013b:252). The full-stop is nevertheless not placed here (for it would suggest an elevation of humanity over all other forms of life). Instead, a comma: God appears as a human person, but more so, as '... an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and systems of nature' (Gregersen 2001:205).

Isn't this where we are missing the point about *imago Dei*, that *imago Dei* is not about making humanity distinct (in a disconnected sense) from the rest of creation, but exactly the opposite? Gregersen phrases this point in the following way: 'The particular entails the universal (not the other way around)' (Gregersen 2013a:383). In other words, Christian theology cannot think that the whole universe came into being so that humanity could be put on a pedestal. This is where Christian doctrine loses the scientific audience.⁶ At the same time, human life cannot be trivialised as simply another form of life, for this is where the scientific community loses its Christian audience.

Human beings are part and parcel of creation; perhaps humanity's recognition of its role and place in a greater context points to the meaning of the ever-elusive *imago Dei*. Being in the image of God does not separate human beings from the physical world, but instead grounds human beings to an existential reality which does not trivialise life in favour of a glorious hereafter. Van Huyssteen, reflecting on the work by Jensen, suggests the following: 'Ultimately it is in *love*, then, that we find the true *imago Dei*, thus weaving together all the historical components of the history of ideas behind this powerful symbol' (Van Huyssteen 2006:147).

Love acts as pointer to the *imago Dei*. We cannot suggest that *love is the imago Dei*, for this would confine the essence of the Divine to the definitions and interpretations of finite beings, who observe their place in the universe from a very limited perspective in time and space. Other terms are needed to flesh out this notion. *Relationship, mutuality, process* and *interdependence* are words that come to mind. Moltmann refers to another, namely, *Shekinah* (Moltmann 1996:317–319). Symbolically, in the first creation narrative (Gn 1), humanity is not seen as the pinnacle of creation, but the Sabbath (Moltmann 1985:6), the *Shekinah*, being the dwelling of God with(in) the fullness of creation. It is this 'indwelling' that Moltmann describes as 'Divine eschatology' (Moltmann 1996:317).

Herewith the proposal: God is not divorced from creation; life, in all its complexity, is mysterious and distinct. The image of God is reflected throughout the progress and processes of creation, encapsulating all its relationships,

⁶The juxtapositioning of Christian and scientific communities in this paragraph is an oversimplification and generalisation. It simply serves to point out the difference in worldviews expressed by these two groups.

mutuality and interdependence. Human beings form part of this creation. As embodied beings, the image of God is reflected in humanity (as God comes *as* a human), personifying the nature of God's being through the broad strokes of *love*. It would then be no wonder that the law is summarised as 'Love for God, and love for neighbour as one loves yourself'. Neighbour in this sense is not limited to fellow human beings but extends to all of nature, including the evolutionary family which has preceded us and that which is to come. *Imago Dei* (perhaps more of a verb than a noun) is the participation in the interconnectedness of life, past, present and future, celebrating in the here and now that I am a human being.

Conclusion

To answer the question 'Are we special?', one has to revert to an ambivalent answer: a 'No' and a 'Yes'. If 'special' means that we see ourselves as disconnected, elevated and superior to all other forms of life, including life at different evolutionary stages, then 'No'. Science tells us that in the evolutionary history of the world we are but one species on a small speck of cosmic dust, called the earth. We have evolved, and we will grow extinct. In the meantime, we will grow and adapt and perhaps be replaced by other hominid species. Furthermore, even our genetic make-up points to our inter-relatedness with the rest of creation. Theologically, the notions of superiority and elevation are equally preposterous (Van Huyssteen 2006:152). Such a 'specialness' will not participate in life but will be a cause for its destruction.

If 'special' means that we see ourselves as connected and integrated, sharing in this experience of life, then 'Yes'. The distinctiveness of life, specifically human life, is scientifically remarkable. For the complexity of life to have evolved to the point where we are (even being able to leave our natural habitat and explore the vastness of the universe) is unequalled (as far as we know). From a theological perspective, the role of humanity as a participant and a responsible caretaker in the world is at the crux of what it means to grow in the image of God (Van Huyssteen 2006:154–155).

The point of contact for science and religion, when it comes to the question of human distinctiveness, would be therefore the understanding that human beings are not elevated or separated in their distinctiveness from the rest of creation, but that there is something special about participating as human beings in the progress and processes of life.

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