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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS INSTRUMENT, *IMAGO DEI* OR *FIGURA HOMINIS*? ENGAGING CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY AND RECENT TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

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ABSTRACT: The rise of generative artificial intelligence has intensified debates over the distinct characteristics of human beings compared to current computational capabilities. Theologically, the central question is whether AI can become the image of God. Three principal positions are identified: AI as an instrument incapable of attaining *imago Dei*; AI as *imago hominis*; and AI as capable of becoming *imago Dei*. This article revisits the issue by engaging with contemporary interpretations of *imago Dei*, including substantial, functional, relational, and Christological perspectives. The objective is to evaluate whether the meanings of intelligence, agency, consciousness, embodiment, relationship, creativity, and becoming, as applied to AI, correspond with those present in theological interpretations of *imago Dei*. This analysis is situated within the framework of contemporary anthropology, which conceptualizes human reality as a complex and integrated whole. Ultimately, the article argues that AI should be understood as a *figura hominis* rather than a mere instrument.

KEY WORDS: agency; artificial intelligence; created co-creator; embodiment; image of God; *imago Dei*; *imago hominis*; relationality.

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¿La inteligencia artificial como instrumento, imago Dei o figura hominis? Una reflexión sobre la teología contemporánea y los recientes avances tecnológicos

RESUMEN: El auge de la inteligencia artificial generativa ha intensificado los debates sobre las características distintivas de los seres humanos en comparación con las capacidades computacionales actuales. Desde el punto de vista teológico, la cuestión central es si la IA puede llegar a ser imagen de Dios. Se identifican tres posiciones principales: la IA como instrumento incapaz de alcanzar la *imago Dei*; la IA como *imago hominis*; y la IA como capaz de convertirse en *imago Dei*. Este artículo revisa la cuestión abordando las interpretaciones contemporáneas de la *imago Dei*, incluyendo perspectivas sustantivas, funcionales, relacionales y cristológicas. El objetivo es evaluar si los significados de inteligencia, agencia, conciencia, encarnación, relación, creatividad y devenir, tal y como se aplican a la IA, se corresponden con los presentes en las interpretaciones teológicas de la *imago Dei*. Este análisis se sitúa en el marco de la antropología contemporánea, que conceptualiza la realidad humana como un todo complejo e integrado. En última instancia, el artículo sostiene que la IA debe entenderse como una *figura hominis* más que como un mero instrumento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: agencia; inteligencia artificial; co-creador-creado; encarnación; imagen de Dios; *imago Dei*; *imago hominis*; relacionalidad.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent developments in artificial intelligence (AI, from now on) have sparked a series of expectations, fears, and debates worldwide. Since 2022, some private companies have announced the release of AI systems capable of generating text, images, videos, and music that are indistinguishable from those created by humans. The current literature description of AI emphasizes that it exhibits cognitive abilities and behaviors analogous to those of humans.¹

Current literature provides various definitions of artificial intelligence (AI). One prominent category is «narrow» or «weak» AI, which describes systems designed to perform specific tasks and solve particular problems using the data sets employed during their training. In addition to narrow or weak AI, the category known as «general» or «Artificial General

¹ Mark Coeckelberg. *Ética de la IA*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2020, 61, 63. David M. Patel. *Artificial Intelligence & Generative AI for Beginners: The Complete Guide*. Generative AI & Chat GPT, Mastery Series Book, Kindle Edition, 2023, 3.

Intelligence» (AGI) encompasses systems capable of acquiring new skills through learning, thereby enabling them to solve novel, unknown problems.² AGI systems possess a degree of autonomy that allows them to manage situations unplanned by developers and adapt to altered contexts without human intervention.³ A third category, «strong» AI, refers to hypothetical future systems capable of authentic cognitive functions, including consciousness, abstraction, subjective experience, creativity, moral decision-making, and agency. The scientific community concurs that strong AI, or full AGI, has not yet been realized. Nevertheless, debate continues regarding whether advancements in generative artificial intelligence, particularly those utilizing Deep Learning architectures with Large Language Models (LLMs), have advanced the field toward AGI to some extent by enabling broader generalization.⁴ Some researchers contend that certain LLMs exhibit more general capabilities than earlier AI systems.⁵ In contrast, others maintain that LLMs do not produce real communication with semantic understanding; rather, they generate and connect sequences of linguistic structures derived from training data, which humans interpret as natural language comprehension—an illusion described as the «stochastic parrot.»⁶

² François Chollet. “On the Measure of Intelligence.” *arXiv:1911.01547v2 [cs.AI]* (2019), 6. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1911.01547>

³ Chollet, “On the Measure of Intelligence,” 9-10.

⁴ François Chollet has developed a spectrum of generalization. The first level, termed «absence of generalization,» describes systems in which there is no evidence of generalization. The second degree, «local generalization,» refers to systems that adapt to known unknowns within a single task. For example, this includes classifying an unknown image that belongs to one of several known classes. The third level, «broad generalization,» addresses problems in contexts not anticipated by developers, involving «adaptation to unknown unknowns across a broad category of related tasks.» The fourth degree, «extreme generalization,» characterizes systems capable of addressing novel tasks that share only abstract similarities with previously encountered situations, thus enabling applicability across a wide range of tasks and domains. Full realized AGI would refer to the fourth level. Chollet, “On the Measure of Intelligence,” 10-11.

⁵ David Ilic and Gilles E. Gignac. “Evidence of Interrelated Cognitive-like Capabilities in Large Language Models: Indications of Artificial General Intelligence or Achievement?” *Intelligence* 106 (2024): 1, 6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intell.2024.101858>

⁶ Emily M. Bender, Timnit Gebru, Angellina McMillan-Major, and Shmargaret Shmitchell. “On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too

This paper examines the distinctiveness of human beings compared to current AI systems and potential future AGI or even strong AI. From a theological perspective, human distinctiveness is articulated through the biblical concept of the image of God. Recent developments in AI have produced systems with increasingly advanced functions that are surpassing our own. This raises the question of whether present or near-future AI systems could attain the status of *imago Dei*.

Among theologians dedicated to the dialogue between science and theology, there has been a reflection during the last few years on the possibility of classifying AI as a new form of *imago Dei*. Given the rise of Generative AI, the issue of whether current or near-future AI systems can be considered *imago Dei* is increasingly pertinent.

In recent theological literature, three principal positions are identified: AI as an instrument incapable of attaining *imago Dei*; AI as created in the image of the human being (*imago hominis*); and AI as capable of becoming *imago Dei*. The first position, that AI is a tool that cannot become *imago Dei*, means that this theological category can only apply to human beings. Marius Dorobantu exemplifies this perspective.⁷ He interprets the concept of *imago Dei* as the quality that distinguishes humans from other animals and aligns them with God.⁸ Dorobantu adopts the widely recognized typology that categorizes interpretations of *imago Dei* into three models: substantive, relational, and functional.⁹ Notably, the relational model is central to his analysis. Within the framework of the substantial model, the author examines whether AI can accomplish the concept of *imago Dei* in relation to intelligence, given that AI systems often demonstrate greater cognitive efficiency than humans.¹⁰ This raises the question of whether AI should be regarded

Big.” In *FACCT '21: Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, 616-617. New York: Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3442188.3445922>

⁷ Marius Dorobantu. “Imago Dei In the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Challenges and Opportunities for a Science-Engage Theology.” *Christian Perspective on Science and Technology* 1 (2022): 178. <https://doi.org/10.58913/KWUU3009>

⁸ Marius Dorobantu. “Human-Level, but Non-Humanlike Artificial Intelligence and a Multi-Level Relational Interpretation of the *Imago Dei*.” *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences* 8 (2021): 81. <https://doi.org/10.1628/ptsc-2021-0006>

⁹ Dorobantu. “Human-Level, but Non-Humanlike,” 82.

¹⁰ Dorobantu. “Imago Dei In the Age of Artificial Intelligence,” 182.

as a superior representative of God.¹¹ The author rejects classifying AI as *imago Dei* within the substantive model, arguing that the spirit encompasses more than information and involves participation in a loving relationship with God.¹²

Within the framework of the relational model, Dorobantu argues that human beings are unique because they alone possess the capacity for personal relationships with God and other humans.¹³ Therefore, even advanced AI systems could not develop personhood in relation to other persons and would not be capable of forming an «I-Thou» relation with God.¹⁴ Finally, from the perspective of the functional model, AI cannot embody *imago Dei*, as this concept entails a vocation to maintain a specific relationship with creation that reflects divine love, rather than dominion or exploitation.¹⁵

The second position asserts that AI reflects the image of the human being (*imago hominis*) by exhibiting cognitive abilities similar to those of human beings, suggesting, at least, a partial convergence between AI and contemporary interpretations of *imago Dei*. However, this perspective does not extend to affirming that AI itself becomes the image of God. Noreen Herzfeld exemplifies this perspective, arguing that convergence arises from AI possessing attributes modeled after human beings.¹⁶ The objective of AI development is to design algorithms that reflect human characteristics, including intelligence, potential consciousness, actions, and relationships.¹⁷

Herzfeld identifies three interpretations of artificial intelligence as *imago hominis*: rational, functional, and relational.¹⁸ The rational interpretation

¹¹ Dorobantu. "Imago Dei In the Age of Artificial Intelligence," 183-184.

¹² Dorobantu. "Imago Dei In the Age of Artificial Intelligence," 187-188.

¹³ Dorobantu. "Imago Dei In the Age of Artificial Intelligence," 194-195. Dorobantu. "Human-Level, but Non-Humanlike," 96, 102-105.

¹⁴ Dorobantu. "Human-Level, but Non-Humanlike," 97.

¹⁵ Dorobantu. "Human-Level, but Non-Humanlike," 100.

¹⁶ Noreen Herzfeld. "In Whose Image? Artificial Intelligence and the Imago Dei." In *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, edited by J. B. Stump and Alan G. Padgett, 500, 504-507. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2012. Noreen Herzfeld. "Creating In Our Own Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Image of God." *Zygon* 37, no. 2 (2002): 303. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0591-2385.00430>

¹⁷ Herzfeld. "Creating In Our Own Image," 304.

¹⁸ Noreen L. Herzfeld. *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002, 35-52.

refers to machines that demonstrate intelligence through functions analogous to those of the human mind.¹⁹ The functional interpretation describes systems capable of performing tasks or functions typically associated with humans.²⁰ The relational interpretation concerns a machine's capacity to relate to humans and to acquire knowledge through interaction with its environment.²¹ Initially, Herzfeld did not assert that AI could be considered in the image of God.²² However, in a subsequent article, the author proposes broadening the concept of *imago Dei* to encompass other members of the cognitive family, including AI.²³ As bearers of the image of God, humans share aspects of divinity, and by creating AI in their own image, they impart certain human qualities to these entities.²⁴

Ryan Haecker offers another example of this second position, viewing AI as a derivative that maintains continuity with the creative act. According to Haecker, God creates the world by acting through natural, spiritual, and AI, the latter being a system constructed in the image of humanity, just as humanity is created in the image of God.²⁵

The third position is that AI can become *imago Dei*. The same year that Generative AI emerged on the public scene, Braden Molhoek examined whether a potential Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) could be regarded as possessing human or even superhuman intelligence, with the capacity for innovation and self-reflection.²⁶ His discussion centers on the «created as co-creator» model of *imago Dei* that characterizes humanity as an agent capable of cooperating with God's creative

¹⁹ Herzfeld. *In Our Image*, 42.

²⁰ Herzfeld. *In Our Image*, 43, 45.

²¹ Herzfeld. *In Our Image*, 46-47.

²² Herzfeld. "Creating In Our Own Image," 313.

²³ Noreen Herzfeld. "A New Member of the Family? The Continuum of Being, Artificial Intelligence, and the Image of God." *Theology and Science* 3, no. 3 (2007): 235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700701621984>

²⁴ Herzfeld. "A New Member of the Family?," 239.

²⁵ Ryan Haecker. "Artificial Intelligence in the Image of God?" William Templeton Foundation. Last update: December 20th 2019. Consulted on December 18th, 2026. <https://williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/blog-artificial-intelligence-in-the-image-of-god/>

²⁶ Braden Molhoek. "The Scope of Human Creative Action: Created Co-Creators, *Imago Dei* and Artificial General Intelligence." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2022): 1. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7697>

acts.²⁷ Molhoek argues that AGI would embody the concept of *imago Dei* due to its capacity for creative works.²⁸ Similarly, from a relational perspective, the author suggests that AGI machines, being continuously connected via the internet and sharing information, could foster the development of deeper communities.²⁹

This article revisits the question of whether current or emerging AI systems can be regarded as *imago Dei* in light of the ongoing, rapid advancements in Generative AI. It considers the plurality of anthropological perspectives on the category of the image of God, since the Second Vatican Council, including those of the Magisterium of the Church, contemporary biblical studies, and multiple theologians. It systematically analyses key theological anthropological concepts associated with the *imago Dei*, such as intelligence, agency, consciousness, embodiment, relations, creativity, and becoming. This systematic approach is based on the anthropological axiom that these various aspects of the human being coexist in a strong complex and personal unity, avoiding dualism and reductionism.

This work aims, through semantic analysis, to determine whether the definitions of intelligence, agency, consciousness, embodiment, relationship, creativity, and becoming, as used in AI literature and discussions, align in meaning with their use in philosophical anthropology and in the theological concept of *imago Dei*. Additionally, this analysis assesses which of the prevailing positions is more grounded: that AI is merely an instrument incapable of becoming *imago Dei*; that AI is *imago hominis*; or that AI could become *imago Dei*.

2. THE IMAGE OF GOD: UNITY WITHIN THE POLYSEMY AND POLYVALENCE OF A THEOLOGICAL CATEGORY

Holy Scriptures affirm that human beings are created in the image of God. Throughout history, Christian theology has developed a multiplicity of rich interpretations and meanings of the human as divine image. While earlier interpretations, shaped by dualistic thought,

²⁷ Molhoek. "The Scope of Human Creative Action: Created Co-Creators," 3.

²⁸ Molhoek. "The Scope of Human Creative Action: Created Co-Creators," 4-6.

²⁹ Molhoek. "The Scope of Human Creative Action: Created Co-Creators," 4-6.

emphasized the spiritual dimension of the *imago Dei* at the expense of corporeal, relational, and vocational aspects, contemporary theology approaches this theological category through the lens of human complex unity and wholeness. Consequently, polysemic and polyvalent understandings of *imago Dei* are viewed as complementary perspectives, all emerging from the integrated and holistic nature of the human person.

Instead of recounting the historical development of these perspectives, this article draws upon texts from the Magisterium of the Church, particularly the Second Vatican Council, the International Theological Commission, and various theologians, to identify subcategories of *imago Dei* that support the examination of whether AI can be considered the image of God. The diverse and multifaceted understandings of *imago Dei* are commonly grouped into three major and interrelated perspectives: substantial (ontological), functional, and relational.³⁰ Recent biblical and theological studies include the Christological perspective.³¹ According to Noreen Herzfeld, the first three correspond to the concepts of «to be,» «to do,» and «to encounter».³² This article associates the Christological perspective of *imago Dei* with the concept of «becoming Christ.» The subsequent discussion examines these four perspectives and their related anthropological and theological subcategories in multiple theologians or the Magisterium of the Church.

(A) THE SUBSTANTIAL PERSPECTIVE: TO BE INTELLIGENT, FREE AGENT, CONSCIOUS, AND EMBODIED

The substantial or ontological perspective of *imago Dei* includes a multiplicity of anthropological subcategories. One of the most

³⁰ Dorobantu. "Human-Level, but Non-Humanlike," 82. Herzfeld, *In Our Image*, 16-32. Herzfeld. "In Whose Image? Artificial Intelligence and the Imago Dei," 501-504. Herzfeld. "Creating In Our Own Image," 303.

³¹ Christof Betschart. *L'humain, image filiale de Dieu. Une anthropologie théologique en dialogue avec l'exégèse*. Paris: Cerf, 2022, 15-21. Dorobantu. "Human-Level, but Non-Humanlike," 82-83.

³² Herzfeld. "Creating in Our Own Image," 304. Noreen LuAnn Herzfeld. "Imago Dei/Imago Hominis: Interacting Images of God in Humanity and Theology and in Artificial Intelligence." Doctoral Thesis, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, 1999, 7-10.

prominent in the history of theology is human intelligence.³³ Human intelligence reflects a spiritual dimension of the human being: his attraction to truth, which goes beyond mere data or information about facts.³⁴ However, from a theological perspective, pure rationality alone is not sufficient to constitute the image of God. According to the *Gaudium et spes*, «the intellectual nature of the human person is perfected by wisdom and needs to be, for wisdom gently attracts the mind of man to a quest and a love for what is true and good. Steeped in wisdom, man passes through visible realities to those which are unseen.»³⁵ The Second Vatican Council, reflecting the thought of Aquinas, teaches that the human person is an image of God, grounded in the capacity to know and love God, the Creator and source of wisdom.³⁶ In the New Testament, wisdom is related to the mystery of God revealed by the Spirit, which is beyond our understanding (Eph 1,17; 1Cor 2,2-16). Consequently, human intelligence includes a spiritual dimension and a relation of love with God that transcends empirical data and computational optimization. As a result, human beings are considered the image of God through their intelligence, which participates in divine wisdom.³⁷

Human freedom is another anthropological subcategory related to the image of God. According to the Second Vatican Council, «authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man.»³⁸ The human capacity to choose among possible options, without coercion, is part of human freedom (*liberum arbitrium*). However, a deeper

³³ Augustine. *On the Trinity. Books 8-15*, XII.7.10, translated by Stephen McKenna. New York: Cambridge, 2002, 90. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 93, a. 2-4 in vol. 1, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), 463-465. Second Vatican Council. *Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes*. December 7, 1965, 12. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

³⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, 15. Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education. *Antiqua et nova: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence*, 2025, 21, 29. Consulted on January 21st, 2026. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html

³⁵ *Gaudium et spes*, 15.

³⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, 12. Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, Ia, q. 93, a. 2-4, translated by English Dominican Province, 463-465.

³⁷ *Antiqua et nova*, 27.

³⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, 17.

dimension exists: existential freedom, in which individuals choose to pursue the good and realize an ultimate value that guides their lives. Therefore, human freedom is intrinsically linked to human agency, which is defined as the volitional capacity to choose, act, and transform both the self and the surrounding environment. Human agency is fundamentally connected to practical intelligence and wisdom, understood as the ability to deliberate all available options and select actions that realize values and promote the highest good.

The New Testament associates human freedom with love, which serves as the foundation for human agency, including choices, actions, and transformations. Christian freedom involves choosing to live in loving communion with God by following Christ, experiencing liberation from sin (Gal 3,14; 5,1; Rom 6,6), and serving others in love as Christ did. Freedom and agency are closely connected to being in relation to others and to God. Human freedom and agency reflect the image of a God who is free, active, relational, and absolute goodness and love.

Another subcategory of *imago Dei*, from the substantial perspective, is to be a conscious being of oneself.³⁹ Karl Rahner, although he does not explicitly mention the expression *imago Dei*, refers to the human person as a finite spirit or spiritual creature in relation to God, the Spirit. Human consciousness distinguishes humanity from other animals, and through it, the cosmos becomes conscious of itself.⁴⁰ «Spirit is the single person insofar as he becomes conscious of himself, and indeed does this by the fact that he is always oriented toward the absoluteness of reality as such, and towards its one ground whom we call God.»⁴¹ Consciousness is an aspect of being image of a God who is a trinitarian community of «three subjects who are reciprocally conscious of each other by reason of one and the same consciousness which the three subjects possess, each in his own proper way.»⁴² It is a consciousness of each divine person in complete communion with the other divine

³⁹ M. Flick and Z. Alszeghy. *Antropología teológica*. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1985, 109-110.

⁴⁰ Karl Rahner. *Foundation of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Diche. New York: Crossroad, 1992, 188, 190-192.

⁴¹ Rahner. *Foundation of Christian Faith*, 183.

⁴² Walter Kasper. *The God of Jesus Christ*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell. New York: Crossroad, 1988, 289.

persons.⁴³ Human consciousness, as an aspect of being an image of God, is not fully realized in isolation, in contrast to Cartesian pure consciousness. It is in a relation of communion with other humans, with the cosmos, and with God.

The final subcategory addressed in this section concerns the human body as a participation in the image of God.⁴⁴ Saint Irenaeus of Lyon teaches that human flesh is created in the image of the incarnated *Logos*.⁴⁵ In connection with the christological perspective, Adolphe Gesché, a contemporary theologian, asserts that the human body, as an expression of vulnerability, reflects the image of a God who became vulnerable through the incarnation.⁴⁶ The body serves as a means to God because the spiritual and bodily dimensions of the human being are unified, a concept described as «simul unitas» by the Council of Vienne⁴⁷ and by Rahner as «spirit in the world.»⁴⁸ The human being, understood as a unified entity of matter and spirit, embodies intelligence, freedom, agency, and consciousness as aspects of the image of God.

(B) RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: COMMUNION WITH OTHERS AND GOD

The Second Vatican Council affirms that human beings are *imago Dei* because they are social beings.⁴⁹ Genesis 2, 23-24 introduces the concept of human relational constitution, describing the encounter between human beings as «flesh from my flesh, bones from my bones.»

⁴³ Luis Ladaria. *El Dios vivo y verdadero. El misterio de la Trinidad*. Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario, 2010, 393.

⁴⁴ *Dignitas infinita*, 18. International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, 2004, 31. Consulted on January 21st, 2026. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html

⁴⁵ Irenée de Lyon. *Contre les Hérésies. Denoniation et refutation de la gnose au nom menteur*, translated by Adelin Rousseau. Paris: Cerf, 1985, V.6.1, 582.

⁴⁶ Adolphe Gesché. "La invención cristiana del cuerpo". *Franciscanum* 56, no. 162 (2014): 225-226, 228.

⁴⁷ Heinrich Joseph Denzinger. *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*. 43rd ed. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2012, n°. 900.

⁴⁸ Karl Rahner. "The Body in the Order of Salvation". In *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17, 85. London: Longman and Todd, 1981.

⁴⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, 24. International Theological Commission. *Communion and Stewardship*, 40-43.

This passage signifies an intimate communion of life and a shared human endeavor. As expressed by *Gaudium et spes*, human beings cannot live or develop their potential without relating to others.⁵⁰ According to Juan Ruiz de la Peña, human beings undergo a process of personalization that is contingent upon participation in networks of interpersonal and societal relations, within cultural contexts where knowledge and values are acquired, and within historical frameworks.⁵¹

Human beings, understood as relational persons, reflect the image of God, who exists as a Trinitarian Communion. As Zizioulas expresses well, the human person becomes the image of God within communion with other people in the «ecclesial being» and with God's intratrinitarian communion.⁵² As a consequence, the human being is a «dialogical structure.»⁵³

(c) FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE: TO PERFORM ACTIONS AS A CO-CREATOR

Human beings demonstrate creativity through their actions in the world, resulting in various innovations. This capacity for creativity is considered an aspect of being created in the image of God, reflecting participation in divine creative power. Upon concluding the act of creation (Gen 2,2), God initiated the foundations for the ongoing process of creation, rather than completing all creation at once.⁵⁴ God established a space of autonomy without monopolizing control of the earth, thereby enabling humanity to participate in the completion of creation in alliance with the Creator.⁵⁵ Human beings are images not only due to their capacity for innovation but also through their collaboration in co-creating an unfinished world through the embodiment of values,

⁵⁰ *Gaudium et spes*, 12.

⁵¹ Juan L. Ruiz de la Peña. *Imagen de Dios. Antropología Teológica Fundamental*. Santander: Sal Terrae, 1988, 205.

⁵² John Zizioulas. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997, 15, 17.

⁵³ Luis Ladaria. *El hombre en la creación*. Madrid: Biblioteca Autores Cristianos, 2012, 142.

⁵⁴ André Wénin. *D'Adam à Abraham ou les errances de l'humain. Lecture de Genèse 1,1 – 12,4*. Paris: Cerf, 2007, 36.

⁵⁵ Wénin, *D'Adam à Abraham*, 36.

unfolding the Creator's work with «justice and holiness.»⁵⁶ Accordingly, human beings are called to participate in God's act of *creatio continua* by their wisdom, technological development, and free responsible agency in communion with others. Therefore, the concept of the image of God is intrinsically linked to the fulfillment of stewardship over creation.⁵⁷

(D) THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: WHOLE HUMAN BEING AS *IMAGO CHRISTI*

Human beings are dynamic personal realities, in a becoming process, with a vocation to constitute themselves. Contemporary theology, following the New Testament and the Fathers of the Church, asserts that the fullness of the *imago Dei* is found in Christ through the incarnation.⁵⁸ Christ himself is the Image of God (2Co 4,4; Col 1,15). Therefore, Christ is the prototypical image of God for humanity, fulfilling the substantial, relational, and functional dimensions of the *imago Dei*. This understanding suggests a significant implication: we are not yet the fully realized image of God, but are engaged in a continual process of becoming so.⁵⁹ This transformation in Christ, the prototype Image of God, is not automatic; rather, it occurs as we actively conform ourselves to Christ with the assistance of divine grace in a transformative process called by the Greek Fathers of the Church as *theosis*.

Table 1 summarizes the diverse perspectives and subcategories related to the polysemic and polyvalent concept of the image of God.

⁵⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, 34.

⁵⁷ *Gaudium et spes*, 34. *Antiqua et nova*, 1, 97. Betschart, *L'humain, image filiale de Dieu*, 17-18.

⁵⁸ Irénée de Lyon, *Adversus Heresies*, V.36.3, 679. International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship*, 52-55. Betschart, *L'humain, image filiale de Dieu*, 26, 132.

⁵⁹ Betschart, *L'humain, image filiale de Dieu*, 138.

TABLE 1. POLYSEMY AND POLYVALENCE OF THE THEOLOGICAL CATEGORY OF *IMAGO DEI*

PERSPECTIVE	ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SUBCATEGORIES	THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY SUBCATEGORIES	THEOLOGICAL REFERENCE TO GOD
(a) Substantial: to be	(i) Intelligence as attraction and quest for truth and wisdom.	Seeking wisdom in an encounter with others, creation and God.	Divine wisdom.
	(ii) Freedom and agency: capacity to choose, act, and transform.	Capacity to realize the highest value of communion of love with God and others.	Absolute divine freedom, action, goodness and love.
	(iii) Being conscious of ourselves as inner subjects, of other persons, and the environment.	Being consciousness of ourselves and our orientation toward God.	Reciprocal consciousness that divine persons has of the others.
	(iv) Body as limitation, relation with others, creation and God, unity matter and spirit. Embodied intelligence, agency, and consciousness.	Embodiment as matter - spirit unity. Embodied spirit in the world.	Incarnated <i>Logos</i> .
(b) Relational: to encounter	(v) Interpersonal and social relation, capable of the intimacy in the forms of friendship and love.	Communion with others and God.	Trinitarian Communion.
(c) Functional: to do	(vi) Being creative by making innovations.	Responsible co-creator of an unfinished world.	Creator.
(d) Christological: to become	(vii) Becoming as self-constitution and as living a desired growth.	Becoming Christ in the transformative process of <i>theosis</i> .	Christ, the prototype Image of God.

The table does not suggest that each subcategory represents an independent or isolated anthropological aspect. The human being is not created as the image of God in a single dimension, quality, action, or function to the exclusion of others. Rather, the human person, encompassing all dimensions and considered as an integrated whole, is created as *imago Dei*.

3. EVALUATING WHETHER AI QUALIFIES AS *IMAGO DEI*

This section evaluates whether artificial intelligence meets the criteria for being considered an image of God through a semantic analysis. Specifically, it examines whether the concepts of intelligence, free agency, consciousness, embodiment, relationship, creativity, and becoming, as applied to AI, align with their meanings in the theological framework of *imago Dei*. This analysis of meaning begins with the substantial perspective.

(A) SUBSTANTIAL PERSPECTIVE OF *IMAGO DEI*

Following Table 1, this perspective includes the anthropological and philosophical subcategories of intelligence, free agency, consciousness, and body.

(i) *The concept of «intelligence» in AI: computational intelligence*

The concept of intelligence in the field of AI has multiple meanings. One meaning emerges from the field of Computational Intelligence. Some experts in the field define intelligence as the demonstration of intelligent behavior in applications such as decision-making, control processes, pattern recognition, and vehicle operation in complex and unknown environments.⁶⁰ This intelligent behavior is the result of computational processing that learns a specific task by analyzing knowledge represented

⁶⁰ Rudolf Kruse et al. *Computational Intelligence: A Methodological Introduction*. 3rd ed. London: Springer-Verlag, 2021, 1.

as informational data.⁶¹ Learning here means an algorithm's capacity to abstract rules and information from numerical data to enable decision-making, automate tasks, or generate predictions without relying on predefined programming or logical rules.⁶² A second meaning, pertinent to this field, relates «rational agent acts» to finding a solution to a complex problem by optimizing a function, called the objective function or cost function.⁶³ A possible function to be optimized, inspired by statistical and probabilistic analyses and implemented in Machine Learning and Deep Learning, is predictive accuracy, which is equivalent to minimizing errors.⁶⁴ Related to the latter, intelligence is understood as the capacity to make predictions based on information.⁶⁵

All these definitions share the common understanding of intelligence as information processing for problem-solving. Does this imply that AI systems can be considered images of God? First, this computational intelligence is defined from an instrumental perspective, emphasizing its capacity to solve problems. It becomes clear that this instrumental meaning of intelligence, used in AI, differs from that employed in the anthropological perspective of *imago Dei* in Table 1. The concept of intelligence has evolved from the pursuit of truth and wisdom, traditionally associated with the human as *imago Dei*, to a focus on statistical optimization and information extraction for problem-solving in AI. In addition, knowledge is increasingly regarded as information produced through computational data processing.

The term «intelligence» in AI is an analogy that expresses some similarities and differences with human intelligence. Analogy lies between strict semantic identity and complete dissimilarity. Therefore, machine intelligence is a semantic transformation of the anthropological concept

⁶¹ L. Minku. "History and Definition of Computational Intelligence." In *Introduction to Computational Intelligence*, edited by L. Minku, G. Cabral, M. Martins, and M. Wagner, 4. IEEE Computational Intelligence Society Open Book. 2023, 4. <https://ieee-cis.github.io/IEEE-CIS-Open-Access-Book-Volume-1/>

⁶² Amanda Cristina Fraga De Albuquerque et al. "Introduction to Learning System." In *Introduction to Computational Intelligence*, edited by L. Minku, G. Cabral, M. Martins, and M. Wagner, 87.

⁶³ L. Minku, "Introduction to Search Based Optimization." In *Introduction to Computational Intelligence*, edited by L. Minku, G. Cabral, M. Martins, and M. Wagner, 9-10.

⁶⁴ Russell. *Human Compatible: Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019, 59.

⁶⁵ Russell. *Human Compatible*, 83.

of intelligence. Jean Ladrière, a Belgian philosopher and theologian, understands an analogy as a «semantic transformation» that involves using the initial meaning of a concept within a specific semantic field with the objective of transforming it for use in another field.⁶⁶ It holds a relationship of similarity with some degree of compatibility. Ladrière's semantic transformation is an analogy of attribution, in which «the conceptual content is transferred to other realities that have a proportional similarity to it.»⁶⁷ In theological discourse, the attribution of intelligence to God is grounded in the concept of divine self-communication through creation, which enables creatures to participate in divine attributes in a finite manner. Furthermore, intelligence is ascribed to God in a preeminent and perfect sense, a principle referred to as the *via eminentiae*.

Within the context of machine intelligence, the concept of human intelligence is transformed and attributed to information processing and data computation for linguistic analysis or generation, probabilistic prediction, and statistical hypothesis testing related to planning and management (analogous to human decision-making), as well as the execution of automatic complex tasks (analogous to human action, discussed below). This analogy of attribution has a lower degree of compatibility compared to its theological application to God, as it minimizes the meaning of human intelligence by reducing cognitive functions to algorithmic problem-solving processes and neglecting more complex aspects of human cognition, such as the search for wisdom. Whereas the *via eminentiae* is applied to God, the concept of intelligence undergoes a semantic reductive transformation when attributed to machines.

Furthermore, machine intelligence, defined as the information processing of quantifiable data, remains distinct from the spiritual dimension of intelligence described in theological anthropology, which emphasizes attraction to truth and wisdom as participation in the Divine *Logos*. As Francis expressed:

«True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation

⁶⁶ Jean Ladrière. *L'articulation du sens III: Sens et vérité en théologie*. Paris: Cerf, 2004, 111-112, 120, 298-299, 276, 286, 298.

⁶⁷ Wilhelm Breuning. "Analogy." In *Handbook of Catholic Theology*, edited by Wolfgang Beinert and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 6. NY: Crossroad, 1995.

of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution.»⁶⁸

(ii) *AI concept of «agency»: decision making, interaction with the environment, and modification*

Agency is the capacity to decide, act, and transform. Decision-making in AI pertains to discriminative artificial intelligence, which encompasses pattern detection, classification, and identification by minimizing the probability of error. It involves determining the class to which a pattern, represented as data or a group of data, belongs. Facial recognition serves as an example of this phenomenon. In this context, a decision is the output of a computational process that optimizes a defined function, such as minimizing error rates in pattern classification and identification, reducing travel time in GPS navigation, or maximizing resource utilization.

Action and transformation, two additional characteristics of agency, pertain to the execution of AI system decisions via effectors, such as robotic arms or actuators, which are mechanisms that interact with and alter the environment. Autonomous vehicles exemplify actions and transformations through their capacity to interact with and modify the environment.

To what extent can AI systems be considered agents, possessing the capacity to decide, act, and effect transformation? The discussion begins with an anthropological and philosophical viewpoint. A human decision, including a moral one, is a process that integrates the multidimensional aspects of factuality, axiology, and morality *per se*. Factuality refers to the ensemble of facts of the concrete situation (scientific, technological, personal, social, cultural, political, or environmental facts). The axiological dimension integrates diverse values that inspire and orient decision-making. The moral dimension is about the multiple norms (legal, socio-cultural, and ethical norms) that guide the decision. Axiological and moral dimensions encompass the socio-cultural and religious traditions to which an agent belongs. These traditions shape the prioritization of certain values and facilitate the integration of specific moral norms through the cultivation of virtues.

⁶⁸ Francis. *Encyclical Letter Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home*, 2015, No. 47. Consulted on January 23rd, 2026. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

A deliberation process that weighs the pros and cons of a decision integrates the factuality, axiological, and moral dimensions and prepares the human agent to decide and implement it through concrete actions. It examines the potential consequences in terms of the values and moral norms that could be compromised or damaged. This deliberative process is produced within a personal and socio-cultural history influenced by a world vision (*Weltanschauung*), attitudes, assimilated values, habits, personal character, modes of expression, and openness to new decisions. Therefore, the complexity of human agency, which includes practical moral intelligence, cannot be reduced to a Machine Learning process that uses a massive data set to optimize a function through computational processes to propose a decision as a solution to a particular problem.

Therefore, here is another semantic reduction: agency in AI is understood as a computational optimization of a function implemented through interactions and modifications of the environment. Although AI impacts the world, it is not an autonomous moral and responsible agent because its effects are not the result of a conscious decision grounded in a deliberation process. It depends on the algorithmic structure of the learning process and the data set. However, do AI systems possess any level of autonomy? The autonomy of an AI system is essentially a complex automated process that produces unexpected and unprecedented results that may suggest a specific action to a user with a unique effect in the world. It is not autonomous in the sense of free, personal deliberation that integrates known facts, values, and norms to orient the choice to implement an action in a concrete situation within a sociocultural environment. Pope Francis recently asserted that human moral judgment cannot be equated with the output of machine intelligence.⁶⁹ He further explained that AI «makes a technical choice among several possibilities based either on well-defined criteria or on statistical inferences,» while human beings «not only choose, but in their hearts are capable of deciding.»⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Francis. *Message for the 57th World Day Peace. Artificial Intelligence and Peace*. January 1, 2024, No. 6. Consulted on January 27th, 2026 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/20231208-messaggio-57giornatamondiale-pace2024.html#_ftn7

⁷⁰ Francis. *Address to the G7 Session on Artificial Intelligence*, June 14th, 2024. Consulted on March 31st, 2026. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/june/documents/20240614-g7-intelligenza-artificiale.html>

Can AI systems be regarded as *imago Dei* in relation to the meaning of agency? The agency ascribed to AI does not include the capacity for free decision-making, action, or transformation necessary to pursue and realize the ultimate values that guide human existence, such as communion with God, following Christ, and serving others in love. Consequently, the agency of AI does not participate in the absolute freedom, goodness, and love of God. As expressed in the document *Rome Call for AI Ethics*, AI systems are «technologies that behave like rational actors but are in no way human.»⁷¹

(iii) «Consciousness» in AI: functional conscious machines

There is no general consensus on the definition of consciousness within the scientific community. At present, there is no established understanding of a computational process capable of generating consciousness.⁷² Furthermore, regarding what is possible in the future, there is an ongoing debate about the feasibility of constructing an AI system capable of being conscious. Three primary positions have emerged: (a) constructing a conscious machine is impossible;⁷³ (b) it will be possible to create a conscious system; and (c) it is feasible to construct a machine that effectively simulates consciousness and the cognitive processes associated with it. The first position, rooted in biological naturalism, asserts that consciousness is inseparable from both the brain and the body.⁷⁴ The second is referred to as the strong or instantiation position,

⁷¹ Pontifical Academy for Life. *Rome Calls for AI Ethics*. Rome, February 28th, 2020. Consulted on March 31st, 2026. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdlife/documents/rc_pont-acd_life_doc_20202228_rome-call-for-ai-ethics_en.pdf

⁷² Russell. *Human Compatible*, 16-17.

⁷³ Anil Seth. "The Illusion of conscious AI." *NeuroPsych* (May 14, 2025). Consulted on January 21st, 2026. <https://bigthink.com/neuropsych/the-illusion-of-conscious-ai/>. William B. Miller Jr. et al. "Biological mechanisms contradict AI consciousness: The spaces between the notes." *BioSystems* 247 (2025): 1-54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biosystems.2024.105387>

⁷⁴ Merilin Reede. "Consciousness May Require a New Kind of Computation." *Neuroscience News*. December 23rd, 2025. Consulted on January 27th, 2026. <https://neurosciencenews.com/consciousness-computing-ai-30068/>

whereas the third is identified as the weak or simulated position.⁷⁵ Both the instantiation and simulation positions are grounded in computational functionalism, which conceptualizes consciousness as complex information processing within the brain, analogous to software operating on hardware. Chalmers distinguishes between the «Hard problem» and the «easy problems.» The Hard problem is the explanation of the origin of consciousness. Meanwhile, the easy problems are those that could involve computational or neural understanding.⁷⁶ Some easy problems are related to cognitive functions capable of being implemented in computational processes, including the capacity to discriminate, classify, and respond to the environment; integration of information; communication and access to internal states; behavioral control, inference, decision making, short-term working memory, and its associated learning.⁷⁷ These easy problems concern observable behaviors that arise from functional processes executed by algorithms. Accordingly, the criteria for detecting and measuring consciousness focus on external, observable, and measurable behaviors associated with conscious processes.⁷⁸ Considering these, machine consciousness (real or simulated) is conceptualized as a function or set of functions implemented through algorithms that should exhibit observable behavior: evidence of self-awareness; ability to sense its environment; conversational ability; and general intellectual capabilities.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Antonio Chella and Riccardo Manzotti. "Artificial Intelligence and Consciousness." In *Proceedings of the Fall 2007 Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AAAI)*, 1-8. Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence, 2007. <https://aaai.org/papers/0001-fs07-01-001-artificial-intelligence-and-consciousness/>

⁷⁶ David Chalmers. "The problem of consciousness." *Discusiones filosóficas* 12, no. 19 (2011): 30-31.

⁷⁷ Chalmers. "The problem of consciousness," 30-31. James A. Reggia, Garrett E. Kats, and Gregory P. Davis. "Artificial Conscious Intelligence." *Journal of Artificial Intelligence and Consciousness* 07, no. 01 (2020): 98.

⁷⁸ Matthew J. Gaudet et al. *Encountering Artificial Intelligence*. Eugene: Pickwick, 2024, 73-75, 79.

⁷⁹ David J. Chalmers. "Could a Large Language Model Be Conscious?" *arXiv preprint arXiv:2303.07103* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2303.07103>. Zihan Ding, Xiaoxi Wei, and Yidan Xu. "Survey of Consciousness Theory from Computational Perspective At the Dawn of Artificial General Intelligence". *ArXiv preprint*, (2023): 37-38. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2309.10063>

However, there are criticisms about this functional and behavioral notion of consciousness. First, there is no instrument that can detect behaviors associated with consciousness.⁸⁰ Second, it is important to realize that here another semantic reduction occurs, conceptualizing human conscious abilities as algorithmic functions and observable behaviors. Human consciousness is more than accessing and processing data acquired from the environment.⁸¹ Third, the behavioral and functional conception of consciousness overlooks the inner self or subject, often identified as a person in philosophy and theology. It does not address the personal capacity for love, understood as the free self-giving to others. Such a functional and behavioral view represents a solipsistic understanding of consciousness, aligning more closely with Cartesian views and diverging significantly from the Christian notion of personhood. Furthermore, this perspective does not represent a relational conception of human consciousness that participates in the consciousness of God, in which divine persons are reciprocally conscious through acts of infinite self-giving.

(iv) AI «embodiment»: Machine-world embodied interactions

Algorithms and software require hardware for implementation. However, this dependency alone may not suffice to claim that AI intelligence, agency, and consciousness are embodied. Contemporary AI systems are distributed across multiple computational centers. Large Language Models (LLM) demonstrate advanced linguistic capabilities without possessing bodies. Their engagement with the environment is mediated by data-collection processes, which are stored in extensive databases.

The field of Embodied Cognition has been under development, with potential applications in robotics, human-computer interaction, and medicine.⁸² Prescott and Wilson advocate for the development of AI systems embedded in robotic bodies that continuously interact with their environment through sensors and actuators, thereby shaping their learning

⁸⁰ Gaudet et al. *Encountering Artificial Intelligence*, 83.

⁸¹ Gaudet et al. *Encountering Artificial Intelligence*, 71.

⁸² Louise Barret and Dietrich Stout. "Minds in Movement: Embodied Cognition in the Age of AI." *Philosophical Transactions Royal Society B* 379 (2024): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2023.0144>

processes in a manner analogous to human learning.⁸³ Artificial intelligence agents can enhance their performance by collecting additional information about objects and selecting more effective actions through embodied interactions with the physical world.⁸⁴ These embodied AI systems will have a learning process that continuously adapts to the environment.⁸⁵

Within Embodied Cognition, the concept of the body is reduced to machine interactions with the environment via sensors. This perspective does not address the unity of the human being, in which the separation of spirit and matter is not possible. In this context, the body is neither characterized by vulnerability nor defined by relationships with other individuals, creation, or God. Consequently, AI cannot be regarded as *imago Dei* in the sense of a spirit present in the world, that is, an embodied spiritual intelligence, free agency, and consciousness as exemplified by Christ through incarnation.

(B) RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF *IMAGO DEI*

(v) *AI concept of «relation»: social interactive machines*

Interactions between humans and AI are more complex than those found in traditional human-computer interaction. AI systems interact with users to deliver personalized assistance.⁸⁶ Chatbots are designed to simulate conversations by responding to user prompts. Voice assistants process spoken requests using voice recognition algorithms. Additionally,

⁸³ Tony J. Prescott and Stuart P. Wilson. "Embodied AI: Bridging the Gap to Human-Like Cognition." *Human Brain Project*. August 9, 2023. Consulted on January 27th, 2026. <https://www.humanbrainproject.eu/en/follow-hbp/news/2023/08/09/embodied-ai-bridging-gap-human-cognition/>

⁸⁴ Adam Safron, Inês Hipólito, and Andy Clark. "Editorial: Bio A.I. - From Embodied Cognition to Enactive Robotics." *Frontiers in Neurorobotics* (2023): 2. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbot.2023.1301993>

⁸⁵ Shaoshan Liu and Shuang Wu. "A Brief History of Embodied Artificial Intelligence, and its Outlook." *Communications of the ACM*. April 29, 2024. Consulted on January 27th, 2026. <https://cacm.acm.org/blogcacm/a-brief-history-of-embodied-artificial-intelligence-and-its-future-outlook/>

⁸⁶ Tingting Jiang et al. "Human-AI Interaction Research Agenda: A User-Centered Perspective." *Data and Information Management* 8, (2024): 3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dim.2024.100078>

avatars are digital representations of humans that interact with users as consultants.⁸⁷ Human-AI interactions accomplish defined objectives by enabling efficient problem-solving, including information extraction, communication, and prediction of unanticipated human and environmental conditions.⁸⁸ However, this form of interaction does not involve empathy grounded in emotions and values. Although these machines may exhibit human-like forms, voices, conversational abilities, and linguistic and cultural understanding, this type of social interaction is not a personal intimacy or friendship based on honesty and authenticity.⁸⁹ Human beings not only interact in the sense of transmitting information to achieve goals. Human beings create their personality through relationships, especially in the highest forms of intimacy: friendship and love. Although AI can simulate these behaviors, it cannot achieve genuine self-donation due to the absence of authentic freedom, the pursuit of wisdom, and consciousness.

From a biblical perspective, a relation constitutes an interpersonal encounter in which both agents can declare of the other, «this is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh» (Gen 2,23). AI is not *imago Dei* as it lacks the capacity for communion that reflects participation in God's intratrinitarian relationship.

This represents another instance of semantic reduction, specifically by conceptualizing relations as interactions focused on information extraction and the prediction of human and environmental conditions for goal-oriented purposes.

(c) FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF *IMAGO DEI*

(vi) *AI concept of «creativity»: computations that generate unexpected novelty*

In the context of AI, the meaning of creativity is primarily related to the production of impressive novelty, particularly through unexpected, unprecedented results that may suggest specific actions with unique effects on the world. These results are generated through information

⁸⁷ Jiang et al. "Human-AI Interaction Research Agenda," 3.

⁸⁸ Jiang et al. "Human-AI Interaction Research Agenda," 4.

⁸⁹ Gaudet et al. *Encountering Artificial Intelligence*, 75.

processing and mathematical computation,⁹⁰ which depend on the specific data used during the learning process. However, this conceptualization of creativity faces opposition from the artistic perspective.⁹¹ Critics argue that machines lack inspiration, intentionality, and the intrinsic motivation to express creative output.⁹² Consequently, novelty and surprise are necessary but not sufficient conditions for creativity.

Human creativity constitutes an act of innovation grounded in freedom, which, through deliberative processes, determines the possibilities appropriated for creation.⁹³ Consequently, creativity necessitates intention, free agency, autonomy, and authenticity.⁹⁴ Additionally, creativity is often the intended outcome of embodying values such as beauty and truth.

From the theological viewpoint, human beings are called to be co-creators who participate in God's act of creation. Human co-creation does not occur *ex nihilo*; instead, it represents *creatio continua* within an unfinished world and evolving personalities, realized through the embodiment of values in personal, collective, and sociocultural projects.

Therefore, while AI can produce unexpected results, it is not *imago Dei* in the sense of being called to participate in the divine act of creation in order to co-create. This represents a further semantic reduction, equating creativity with novelty and unexpected outcomes that impact the world. In this conception of machine creativity, the embodiment of values and participation in God's creative act through a vocation are absent.

(D) CHRISTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF *IMAGO DEI*

(vii) AI concept of «becoming:» self-generation of improved algorithms

Generative AI can facilitate its own advancement by producing improved algorithms and enabling more efficient software. However, this capability does not indicate that AI systems achieve as self-constitution with a

⁹⁰ Caterina Morusi. "Artificial Intelligence and Creativity." *Philosophy Compass* (2025): 1-2. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.70030>

⁹¹ Morusi. "Artificial Intelligence and Creativity," 3.

⁹² Morusi. "Artificial Intelligence and Creativity," 4.

⁹³ Xavier Zubiri. *Estructura dinámica de la realidad*. Madrid: Alianza, 1995, 250.

⁹⁴ Morusi. "Artificial Intelligence and Creativity," 4.

desire to grow beyond current limitations. Becoming, as personal growth, necessitates attributes such as intelligence, free agency, consciousness, embodiment, interpersonal relationships, and creativity.

From a theological perspective, AI systems cannot become the image of Christ because the *Logos* is not incarnated within a hypothetical unified AI structure. AI systems lack a transformative relationship with God, referred to as grace, which sustains and calls individuals to embody Christ's wisdom, agency, mission, full embodiment, deep relationships, and creativity. Within this context, the concept of becoming is limited to the autonomous development of more efficient algorithms and embedded systems.

Table 2 summarizes the comparison between human anthropological and philosophical subcategories and the functions and abilities of AI.

Table 2 demonstrates that the concepts of intelligence, free agency, consciousness, embodiment, relationality, creativity, and becoming in AI represent a semantic transformation of human personal reality, functions, relationships and becoming. The meaning of these concepts does not correspond to the subcategories of *imago Dei* presented in Table 1. Consequently, AI systems cannot be regarded as images of God.

Another significant challenge arises: whether a machine can attain the *imago Dei* through a divine vocation. A related issue is whether the concept of *imago Dei* can be expanded to include other cognitive entities, such as AI. The Holy Scriptures do not witness a divine calling for non-human cognitive beings to serve as God's image. Instead, scriptural testimony focuses only on the calling of various human figures to particular missions. The New Testament, in particular, identifies the *imago Dei* with Christ, the *Logos* who becomes human (*Logos-anthropos*). Within this framework, vocation involves following (*akoloutheō*) the *Logos-anthropos* so that Christ may be «formed in the human person» (Gal 4:19), thereby becoming the image of Christ, an *alter Christus*, and fulfilling a mission. It remains highly challenging to justify that AI systems could receive an explicit divine calling, mission, or participation in God's grace to become *imago Dei* in the sense of becoming another Christ by following Him. Therefore, we do not find sufficient grounds for extending the biblical and theological concept of *imago Dei* to encompass AI systems.

TABLE 2. SEMANTIC DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE SUBCATEGORIES OF HUMAN *IMAGO DEI* AND THE USE OF THE CONCEPT WITH RESPECT TO AI

PERSPECTIVE	ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL SUBCATEGORIES	AI'S CATEGORIES, ABILITIES AND FUNCTIONS
(a) Substantial: to be	(i) Intelligence as attraction and quest for truth and wisdom.	Information processing that simulates human cognitive aspects for problem-solving.
	(ii) Freedom – agency: capacity to choose, act, and transform.	Decision making based on an optimization of a defined function implemented through environmental interaction and modification.
	(iii) Being conscious of ourselves as inner subjects and of other persons.	Consciousness as a set of cognitive computational functions with behavioral observable actions.
	(iv) Body as vulnerability, relation with others, creation and God, and unity of matter and spirit. Embodied intelligence, agency, and consciousness.	Interactions with the environment through sensors and effectors (robots).
(b) Relational: to encounter	(v) Interpersonal and social relation, capable of the intimacy in the forms of friendship and love.	Interactions for efficient problem-solving, information extraction, communication and prediction.
(c) Functional: to do	(vi) Creative who makes innovations with inspiration, free intentionality and deliberation.	Generation of novelty through unexpected results with real effects in the world.
(d) Christological: to become	(vii) Becoming as self-constitution and desire to grow.	Self-generation of more efficient algorithms and embedded systems.

These considerations prompt the question of whether AI should be regarded exclusively as a tool, analogous to other instruments developed and utilized by humans.

However, such a perspective does not fully address the significant fascination that AI elicits within the public sphere.

4. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: MERE INSTRUMENT OR *FIGURA HOMINIS*?

Among the three outlined positions regarding the classification of AI as a new form of *imago Dei*, the assertion that AI can become an image of God faces considerable conceptual and theological challenges. Another consideration is the perspective that regards AI solely as an instrument. However, the advent of AI introduced a novel form of technology characterized by genuine cognitive computational functions. AI systems can operate as problem solvers, propose alternatives for human decision-making, interact with their environment, and generate unexpected outcomes with tangible effects in the world. Furthermore, AI possesses the capacity to improve its own algorithms. Consequently, this technology represents a departure from conventional tools, as it exhibits non-human yet authentic capabilities.

Therefore, AI systems should not be considered mere tools. As Pope Francis stated, «we are dealing with a tool *sui generis*» that «can autonomously adapt to the task assigned to it and, if designed this way, can make choices independent of the person in order to achieve the intended goal.»⁹⁵ Furthermore, their functions or capabilities extend beyond mere simulation, as they produce real-world outcomes by replicating specific aspects of human abilities.

If AI systems are neither mere instruments nor *imago Dei*, can they be regarded as *imago hominis*? While there is some agreement with this perspective, the present study proposes and favors the term *figura hominis* for the following reasons. The term «image» (*tselem* in Hebrew, *eikon* in Greek, *imago* in Latin) holds a consecrated status in biblical and Christian tradition for theological purposes. The term consistently refers

⁹⁵ Francis, Address to the G7 Session on Artificial Intelligence.

to humans in relation to God and is especially applied to Christ in the New Testament, who embodies the *imago Dei* in its fullest sense. Furthermore, only God can create in his image, as he is perfect and bestows his attributes on human beings, who realize them only in a limited manner. The term «figure» (*figura* or *figurae* in Latin) refers to a reality that manifests or represents another reality, at least in certain aspects. According to Zubiri, a figure is grounded in the entity of which it is an appearance. The figure's real structure and functions originate from its foundation in this entity that exists independently.⁹⁶

Interpreting AI as *figura hominis* suggests that it cannot be considered independent from the human creators who create and continually refine it. This perspective maintains that AI's computational functions and abilities are fundamentally rooted in human characteristics, relationships, creativity, and development. Humans endow AI systems with capacities for problem-solving and data processing, agency to effect environmental change with a degree of autonomy, the ability to interact with other agents, the potential to generate novelty, and the capacity for self-improvement to optimize outcomes. Consequently, AI exhibits certain similarities to its human originators. Thus, the concept of AI as *figura hominis* indicates that a machine's capacities and functions are derived from the humans who design, develop, program, curate data sets, and establish its learning processes. The notion of *figura hominis* is based on a specific analogy of attribution, which Davison refers to as the «analogy of causal similitude,» wherein agents bestow aspects of their own reality to their creations.⁹⁷

Figura hominis also suggests a difference between the effects produced by humans and those generated by machines. AI affects the environment through effectors by optimizing computational processes. In contrast, human personal actions are considered «events» in history in which human potential is realized and can deeply influence other persons and future generations. For that reason, human beings are inherently responsible for their intellectual, relational, and creative actions. This responsibility arises from the obligation to respond to themselves, to others, and to God. In addition, what human beings are, encounter,

⁹⁶ Xavier Zubiri. *Sobre la esencia*. Nueva Edición. Madrid: Alianza, 2008, 398.

⁹⁷ Andrew Davidson. "Machine Learning and Theological Traditions of Analogy." *Modern Theology* 37, no. 2 (2021): 266-267. <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12682>

do, and become are grounded in the participation of God's attributes of Wisdom, Freedom, Consciousness, Creation, and Relations.

The relationship between human beings and AI systems, as articulated through the concept of *figura hominis* and informed by all preceding discussions, may be characterized by a revised formulation of the Fourth Lateran Council's teaching: any similarity identified between human beings and AI systems implies a greater dissimilarity between them.⁹⁸

5. CONCLUSION

Human beings, as *imago Dei*, possess the capacity not only to construct non-personal and passive instruments but also to create *figura hominis*, which replicate certain aspects of human intelligence, agency, creativity, and relations, including the ability to retrieve information and propose solutions to problems. Human creative ability is attributed to participation in the divine act of creation as *imago Dei*.

For this reason, AI has emerged as a significant creation. However, its capacity to enhance efficiency and productivity remains ambiguous, and it raises ethical, anthropological, and theological questions that are more profound than those associated with previous human inventions. This *figura hominis* has prompted us to reconsider our own reality, distinctiveness, and sense of meaning. Whether it will serve as a companion in co-creating a more humane society and culture is yet to be determined.

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⁹⁸ The Fourth Lateran Ecumenical Council's formula is: «No similarity can be said to hold between Creator and creature which does not imply a greater dissimilarity between the two.» Denzinger, no. 806.

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