

What makes us human through the lens of Christian theology

In this video, we will explore the concept of humanity in Christian theology, a notion deeply intertwined with being created in the image of God, or *imago Dei*. The *imago Dei* doctrine is foundational in understanding what makes us uniquely human. This theological perspective suggests that humans are not only physical beings but also spiritual entities that reflect God's nature and purpose. The *imago Dei* implies a relational aspect, where humans are seen as God's representatives on earth, tasked with stewardship over creation and embodying divine attributes such as rationality, morality, and relationality. This concept is further enriched by the idea of humans as *imago Christi*, which emphasizes the messianic calling and eschatological glorification of humanity, suggesting that our ultimate purpose is to reflect Christ's image and partake in divine communion.¹ Theologically, this understanding of humanity is not static but dynamic, involving a continuous process of transformation and redemption through Christ, which aligns with the broader narrative of God's history with the world. Moreover, the relational interpretation of the *imago Dei*, as proposed by theologians such as Karl Barth, highlights the importance of community and interpersonal relationships, suggesting that our identity is shaped by our interactions with others and with God.² This relational aspect is mirrored in the Trinitarian nature of God, where the distinct persons of the Trinity are defined by their relationships with one another, offering a model for human community and identity.³

The concept of humanity in Christian theology is not limited to individual attributes but extends to the collective human vocation to participate in God's creative and redemptive work, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all creation and the responsibility to care for it. This theological framework challenges anthropocentric views by positioning humanity within the broader context of God's creation, underscoring our true identity and purpose being found in our relationship⁴ with God and the fulfillment of His divine will. Through these lenses, Christian theology offers a comprehensive

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 228.

² J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 20.

³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 439.

⁴ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 170.

understanding of humanity that integrates spiritual, moral, and communal dimensions, shaping a vision of what it means to be truly human.

The doctrine of the *Imago Dei* significantly shapes the Christian theological perspective on human uniqueness by emphasizing the distinct role and status of humans as reflections of God's image. As such, this concept suggests that humans are created to be God's presence on earth, which inherently bestows a unique dignity and purpose upon humanity.⁵ The *Imago Dei* is seen as humans being God's representatives, entrusted to care for and manage creation while reflecting God's authority and creativity in the world.

In Christian theology, relationality and community are central to understanding humanity, as they reflect the divine nature and purpose of human existence. The concept of *imago Dei* is foundational, suggesting that humans are inherently relational beings, created to reflect God's communal nature.⁶ This theological perspective posits that humans are not only individuals but are also part of a larger community, which is essential for their development and fulfillment.⁷ The community of believers, or the Church, is seen as a manifestation of this divine relationality, where individuals are united in Christ, transcending distinctions such as ethnicity, gender, and social status, to form a single body.⁸ This unity is not merely a social construct but a theological reality that reflects the unity and diversity within the Godhead. Furthermore, the relational nature of humanity is expressed in the covenantal relationships that God establishes with humanity, which are characterized by mutual commitment and love. The Christian doctrine of God emphasizes that God's being is inherently relational, and this relationality is extended to humanity, inviting humans into a participatory relationship with the divine and with each other. Thus, relationality and community are not just aspects of human social life but are integral to the theological understanding of what it means to be human, as they reflect the divine image and purpose in creation.

In Conclusion, Christian theology synthesizes the concepts of *Imago Dei* and relationality to present a holistic view of humanity by emphasizing the interconnectedness of human beings with God and each other. The *Imago Dei*, traditionally understood as humanity being created in the image and likeness of God, is interpreted in various ways, including substantialistic, relational, and functional perspectives. The relational interpretation, influenced by theologians like Karl Barth,

⁵ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 208.

⁶ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 19.

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 47.

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 139.

suggests that being made in God's image involves a fundamental relationality, reflecting the divine relationships within the Trinity itself, where each person of the Trinity is defined by their relations to the others. This relational aspect is not merely about human relationships but extends to the divine-human relationship, where humans are seen as God's representatives on earth, tasked with stewardship and reflecting God's glory through their interactions with creation. Theologically, this relationality is further enriched by the concept of perichoresis, which describes the mutual indwelling of the Trinity, suggesting that human identity is similarly constituted through relationships with others, echoing the divine model of interconnectedness. This view challenges the notion of isolated individuality, proposing instead that true humanity is realized in community and relationality, both with God and with fellow humans. The synthesis of Imago Dei and relationality thus offers a vision of humanity that is dynamic and communal, emphasizing that human beings are not only reflections of God's image but also active participants in a divine relational network that calls for mutual love, responsibility, and stewardship. This holistic view underscores the theological assertion that human dignity and purpose are rooted in the divine image and are actualized through relational living, aligning with the broader Christian narrative of redemption and community.

References

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