

Beyond Capacity-Based Imago Dei: A Relational–Teleological Model for Theological Anthropology in the Age of Generative AI

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Abstract: This study examines theological claims concerning *Imago Dei*—particularly substantive, functional, and relational models—as its unit of analysis, in light of the rise of generative artificial intelligence capable of mimicking cognitive, linguistic, and social performance. The study aims to critically reassess the adequacy of these models and to formulate a more resilient theological framework that preserves human dignity without reducing it to measurable capacities or simulated interactions. Methodologically, the article employs a systematic-critical conceptual review of theological anthropology and interdisciplinary AI literature, combined with comparative analysis and systematic theological synthesis. The findings indicate that capacity-based interpretations render substantive and functional models vulnerable to technological replication, while purely relational accounts risk collapsing into phenomenological simulation. As a conceptual novelty, the article proposes a relational–teleological model of *Imago Dei* grounded in covenantal participation, vocational orientation, and embodied social existence. This model distinguishes between performative similarity and ontological participation, thereby clarifying the theological boundaries between human persons and AI systems. The study contributes to systematic theology by offering a coherent doctrinal reconstruction that is both conceptually robust and contextually responsive, while also providing a normative framework for evaluating AI in ethical, ecclesial, and public contexts.

Keywords: Imago Dei; Generative AI; Theological Anthropology; Relationality; Teleology; Human Dignity; AI Ethics

1. Introduction

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years has transformed from laboratory innovation to a social reality that significantly shapes daily work practices, education, and human interactions (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence [HAI], 2025; McKinsey & Company, 2025). A global survey shows that around 78% of organizations have adopted AI in their operations by 2024, a sharp increase from the previous year (HAI, 2025), while a national study in the United States shows that nearly 40–45% of the working-age population has used generative AI in a variety of productive activities (Bick et al., 2024; Deming, 2026). In the education sector, the use of generative AI such as ChatGPT is increasingly widespread and affects the way students produce knowledge and interact academically (Shahzad et al., 2024; Budhathoki et al., 2024). In addition, social psychology studies show that humans tend to attribute personal and even

moral traits to AI systems through seemingly relational interactions (Kim & Im, 2023; Santoro & Monin, 2023). This phenomenon suggests that AI not only replaces cognitive tasks, but also enters the relational realm of humans, thus giving rise to what can be called "anthropological pressure" on the understanding of human uniqueness. Thus, this sociotechnical reality demands a theological reflection that is no longer speculative, but rather rooted in concrete transformations in modern human experience.

In the systematic theological literature, the doctrine of *Imago Dei* has historically been understood through three main approaches, namely the substantive, functional, and relational models (Jenson, 1999; Pannenberg, 1991; Peters, 2018). The substantive model emphasizes the rational or mental capacity of man, the functional model emphasizes the mandate of dominion and ethical responsibility, while the relational model sees man as a creature who exists in relation to God and others (Westermann, 1992; Herzfeld, 2012). In contemporary developments, the dialogue between theology and technology has enriched this discourse, particularly through the work of Foerst (1998) who shows that humanoid AI projects contain implicit theological assumptions, as well as Dorobantu (2021, 2022) who asserts that AI serves as a "testing ground" for theological anthropology. On the other hand, the interdisciplinary literature highlights the emergence of a "relational turn" in the concept of personhood, where relationships become the main ontological category (Watts & Dorobantu, 2023; Coeckelbergh, 2010). However, recent studies have also shown that AI is able to convincingly simulate social interactions, so that risky relationality is reduced to a performative phenomenon (Graves, 2023; Müller, 2025). In addition, the embodiment approach (Balle & Nissen, 2023) and the Global South perspective (Kaunda, 2020) are beginning to broaden the horizon of discussion, but have not been systematically integrated within the doctrinal framework. Thus, although the literature is very rich, there is still fragmentation between classical theological approaches and the empirical challenges presented by AI.

The main gap in this study lies in the absence of a doctrinal formulation that explicitly and systematically responds to two challenges at once, namely capacity reductionism and relationality inflation in the era of generative AI. Many previous studies have tended to maintain the *Imago Dei* model by adding new attributes or expanding the definition of relationships, without examining in depth how theological criteria can be distinguished from technological simulations (Gunkel, 2018; Nyholm, 2020). On the other hand, the AI ethics literature focuses more on normative issues such as privacy, justice, and governance, while ontological and dogmatic aspects are often marginalized (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). This shows a gap between ethical reflection and fundamental theological reconstruction. Therefore, this research aims to fill this void by developing a conceptual framework that is not only responsive to the development of AI, but also able to maintain the theological integrity of the doctrine of *Imago Dei*. In particular, this study seeks to integrate relational and teleological dimensions as a normative basis for distinguishing between human "performative similarity" and "theological identity".

Based on this framework, this article makes the main argument that *Imago Dei* can no longer be adequately understood as a collection of measurable capacities or as phenomenologically observable relations, but rather as a relational structure directed by divine teleology. In other words, the uniqueness of man does not lie in what can be done (performance), but in how he participates in a covenant relationship with God and directs his life towards a divine purpose (Dorobantu, 2022; Balle & Nissen, 2023). Within this framework, AI can mimic cognitive outputs and even create the illusion

of relationships, but it lacks the vocational orientation and horizon of meaning that defines human existence as a theological subject. Therefore, the relational–teleological model proposed in this article serves as a discriminating framework that distinguishes between simulation and participation. This argument not only makes a theoretical contribution to systematic theology, but it also offers a normative basis for ethical evaluation of the use of AI in a variety of social, religious, and public contexts. Thus, this research places theology not only as a response to technology, but also as a discipline that actively shapes conceptual understanding of human beings in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Imago Dei* in Systematic Theology and Problematics of a Capacity-Based Approach

In the systematic theological tradition, the doctrine of *Imago Dei* is classically developed through three main approaches, namely substantive, functional, and relational, each of which seeks to explain the uniqueness of man in his relationship with God and creation (Jenson, 1999; Pannenberg, 1991; Grenz, 2001). The substantive approach emphasizes rational capacity, self-awareness, and morality as the main characteristics of human beings, which are often associated with the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions (Aquinas, 2002; Herzfeld, 2012). Meanwhile, the functional approach interprets the *Imago Dei* within the framework of the mandate of dominion and human ethical responsibility towards the world (Middleton, 2005; Wright, 2004). The relational approach then developed as a critique of capacity reductionism, emphasizing that human beings were created to live in relation to God and others (Barth, 1960; Moltmann, 1985). Nevertheless, a number of studies show that these three models are often implicitly understood as "capacity indicators" that can be measured or observed empirically (Herzfeld, 2012; Peters, 2018). In this context, human uniqueness becomes dependent on certain performance, such as rationality or creativity, which in turn opens up the possibility of comparisons with non-human entities such as AI (Gunkel, 2018; Nyholm, 2020). Thus, although the classical model remains important as a theological foundation, an overly capacity-focused reading risks reducing the *Imago Dei* to a functional category vulnerable to the challenges of contemporary technology.

This problem has become increasingly prominent along with the development of AI that is able to mimic various capacities that were previously considered exclusive to humans, such as language, reasoning, and even creativity (Floridi et al., 2018; Russell & Norvig, 2021). In the theological and technological literature, Foerst (1998) has earlier shown that humanoid AI projects contain hidden theological assumptions, particularly when intelligence is treated as the main indicator of *Imago Dei*. Dorobantu (2021) then asserts that AI can achieve a level of "human-level performance" without becoming "humanlike," thus shaking up the ontological basis of capacity-based models. Other studies in the philosophy of technology show that the tendency to look for human differentiators in the form of internal attributes often fails as technology continues to evolve and transcend those boundaries (Dreyfus, 2007; Floridi, 2014). In addition, empirical research shows that AI's ability to generate complex texts, art, and analysis has changed the public's perception of human uniqueness (Bick et al., 2024; Santoro & Monin, 2023). Thus, the contemporary literature consistently shows that a capacity-based approach is no longer adequate as a theological basis for distinguishing humans from technological artifacts, so a new framework that is more resistant to the phenomenon of "capacity mimicry" is needed.

2.2. AI, Personhood, and Relational Turn: Opportunities and Limitations

Recent developments in theological discourse and AI show a significant shift towards what is referred to as a *relational turn*, which is a paradigm shift from a definition of personhood based on internal attributes to a relational-centric understanding (Watts & Dorobantu, 2023; Coeckelbergh, 2010). In this framework, personal existence is no longer determined by cognitive capacity alone, but by involvement in meaningful relationships, both with other human beings and with God (Zizioulas, 1985; Gunton, 1993). This approach has the support of various disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, and computer science, which show that human identity is formed through social interaction and relational networks (Turtle, 2011; Floridi, 2014). In the context of AI, relational approaches are also used to assess the moral status of robots and intelligent systems, arguing that social relations can be the basis for ethical considerations (Coeckelbergh, 2010; Gunkel, 2018). However, empirical research shows that humans tend to attribute personal traits to AI even when the interaction is entirely simulative (Kim & Im, 2023; Pentina et al., 2023). This phenomenon reinforces the relevance of relational approaches, but at the same time raises critical questions about the boundaries between real and simulated relationships.

Nonetheless, a number of recent studies highlight the serious limitations of relational approaches when applied in the context of AI. Graves (2023) shows that AI systems designed for social participation can create convincing relational experiences, even if they don't have a real personal subject. Müller (2025) further criticizes the relational approach in technology ethics by pointing out that AI is deliberately designed to trigger human moral responses through simulated social interactions, so that relationships can no longer be used as ontological indicators. In addition, research in human-computer interaction shows that users often develop emotional attachment to chatbots or social robots, which can create the illusion of interpersonal closeness (Turtle, 2011; Pentina et al., 2023). From a theological perspective, this condition poses a risk that relationality is reduced to an empirical phenomenon that can be engineered, rather than as a normative reality rooted in a relationship with God (Watts & Dorobantu, 2023). Thus, although *relational turn* offers an important correction to capacity reductionism, this approach requires an additional foundation capable of distinguishing between relations as simulations and relations as ontological participation.

2.3. The Direction of Reconstruction: Embodiment, Teleology, and Global Perspectives

In response to the limitations of capacity and relational approaches, the cutting-edge literature points to three main directions of *Imago Dei reconstruction*, namely an emphasis on embodiment, teleology, and the expansion of global perspectives. The embodiment approach emphasizes that the uniqueness of humans does not lie in cognitive abilities alone, but in the existence of a living, vulnerable, and engaged body in the world (Balle & Nissen, 2023; Fuchs, 2018). In this framework, the body is not just an additional attribute, but the main medium through which humans experience reality and build relationships (Malafouris, 2013). Studies in phenomenology and cognitive science also show that human consciousness is incarnate and cannot be reduced to computational processes (Dreyfus, 2007; Fuchs, 2018). On the other hand, the teleological approach emphasizes that human identity must be understood in terms of divine purpose or calling, not just function or performance (Dorobantu, 2022; Grenz, 2001). In this perspective, *Imago Dei* is inextricably linked to man's

orientation to God and the ultimate purpose of life, so it cannot be replicated by systems that operate instrumentally. Thus, the combination of embodiment and teleology offers a more solid foundation for understanding the uniqueness of humans in the context of AI.

In addition, contemporary literature also emphasizes the importance of broadening theological horizons through a Global South perspective and interdisciplinary approaches. Kaunda (2020) shows that concepts of relationality in African traditions, such as *mystico-relationality*, offer a more communal and cosmic understanding of personhood, which differs from Western individualistic approaches. This perspective enriches *the discourse of Imago Dei* by emphasizing the dimensions of community, harmony, and participation in a wider network of life (Mbiti, 1990). Meanwhile, the global AI ethics literature shows that technology issues are inseparable from diverse cultural and social contexts (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019). Cross-disciplinary research also confirms that dialogue between theology, philosophy, and computer science is necessary to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework (Zhang et al., 2021). Thus, the direction of *the reconstruction of Imago Dei* that blends embodiment, teleology, and global perspectives not only enriches theological reflection, but also allows for a stronger integration with contemporary social and technological realities.

3. Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach based on *systematic-critical conceptual review* to analyze and reconstruct the doctrine of *Imago Dei* in the context of the development of generative artificial intelligence. This approach was chosen because it allows for integration between theological textual analysis and interdisciplinary dialogue with the literature on AI, philosophy of technology, and contemporary ethics (Jabareen, 2009; August, 2015). Epistemologically, this research departs from the assumption that theological doctrine is not static, but can be systematically re-reflected through interaction with changing historical and sociotechnical contexts (Pannenberg, 1991; Grenz, 2001). Therefore, AI is not treated solely as an object of applied ethics, but as a conceptual "testing ground" that challenges ontological and anthropological boundaries in systematic theology (Dorobantu, 2022). This approach is also in line with the tradition of *science-engaged theology*, which emphasizes the importance of a critical dialogue between theology and science in constructing conceptual categories that are contemporary relevant (Southgate, 2011; Peters, 2018). Thus, this research method aims not only to summarize the literature, but to build a coherent and argumentative conceptual synthesis.

The data sources in this study are textual and consist of two main categories, namely (1) primary literature in systematic theology that discusses *Imago Dei* and theological anthropology, and (2) secondary literature from reputable international journals that discuss AI, personhood, and philosophy of technology. The data collection process was carried out through a systematic search of several major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ATLA Religion Database, and Google Scholar, to ensure a wide and relevant literature coverage (Page et al., 2021). Keywords used in searches include "Imago Dei," "theological anthropology," "generative AI," "artificial intelligence and theology," "personhood," and "AI ethics," which are combined with Boolean operators to improve the precision of results (Okoli, 2015). The inclusion criteria include *peer-reviewed articles*, academic books, and research reports published in the 2010–2025 time frame, with a focus on works that explicitly address the relationship between theology and AI or the concept of personhood in a

technological context. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria include popular non-academic writings, articles with no direct relevance to the research theme, and duplication of sources. The literature selection process follows the principle of transparency in the style of PRISMA, which includes the identification, screening, eligibility, and final inclusion stages (Page et al., 2021).

The data analysis stage is carried out through three main steps that are integrated with each other. First, a conceptual analysis of the three main models of *Imago Dei*—substantive, functional, and relational—was carried out by examining the underlying ontological, epistemological, and theological assumptions (Jenson, 1999; Herzfeld, 2012). Second, a comparative analysis was carried out by mapping the strengths and limitations of each model in dealing with AI phenomena, especially in terms of AI's ability to mimic human cognitive and relational capacity (Floridi et al., 2018; Gunkel, 2018). At this stage, the concept of "capacity mimicry" is used as an analytical lens to evaluate the extent to which traditional indicators of *Imago Dei* can be replicated by AI systems. Third, a systematic theological synthesis is carried out to formulate an alternative model that integrates relational and teleological dimensions as a new normative framework. This synthesis process follows a *conceptual framework building approach* that emphasizes the identification of core categories, relationships between concepts, and internal coherence testing (Jabareen, 2009). Thus, the results of this research are not just a description of the literature, but a conceptual construction that can be used as a basis for further theological analysis.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the research, several methodological strategies were used. First, triangulation of sources is carried out by combining literature from various disciplines, including theology, philosophy, and computer science, resulting in a more comprehensive perspective (Denzin, 2012). Second, the principle of *critical reflexivity* is applied, in which the author consciously evaluates the theological assumptions used in the interpretation of the data (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018). Third, an argumentative approach based on logical consistency and conceptual coherence is used, which is the main standard in systematic theology research (McGrath, 2017). In addition, the limitations of this research are explicitly acknowledged, especially related to the non-use of empirical field data, so that the findings are conceptual and normative. Nevertheless, this limitation is also a strength, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of theological categories that are often overlooked in empirical research. Thus, the methods used in this study provide a solid basis for producing relevant and academically accountable theoretical contributions.

4. Result

4.1. Empirical Reconfiguration of Human Cognitive and Relational Capacities

The development of generative artificial intelligence shows a measurable empirical shift in the distribution of cognitive capacity and knowledge production in modern society (Bick et al., 2024; Deming, 2026; McKinsey & Company, 2025). Longitudinal studies show that generative AI has been routinely used in text writing, data analysis, and information-based decision-making, especially in the knowledge-based work sector (Brynjolfsson et al., 2023; Noy & Zhang, 2023). Experimental research found that the use of AI increased worker productivity by up to 14% in text-based tasks, especially for users with intermediate skills (Noy & Zhang, 2023). In the context of higher education, studies show that students use AI as a tool of knowledge production, not just an aid, thus changing the parameters of academic competency evaluation (Shahzad et al., 2024; Cotton et al., 2024). In addition,

a global survey shows that more than half of AI users leverage such systems to generate ideas, formulate arguments, and structure complex texts (Stanford HAI, 2025). These findings suggest that cognitive capacity previously associated with humans has now been technologically diffused. Thus, empirically, human uniqueness can no longer be identified exclusively through cognitive output.

In addition to cognitive shifts, the literature also shows significant changes in the relational dynamics of humans with technology (Kim & Im, 2023; Pentina et al., 2023). Experimental studies in human–computer interaction show that individuals consistently attribute emotions, intentions, and even personalities to conversation-based AI systems (Złotowski et al., 2017; Waytz et al., 2014). Other research suggests that repeated interactions with chatbots can result in emotional attachment that resembles interpersonal relationships (Pentina et al., 2023). In social contexts, AI is used as an emotional companion, tutor, and conversational agent in various digital platforms (Graves, 2023; Turkle, 2011). Neurocognitive studies have also shown that the brain's response to interactions with AI agents can resemble responses to human interactions (Krach et al., 2008). Thus, at the level of subjective experience, human–AI relationships can produce phenomenological effects similar to human–human relationships. These findings suggest that relationality is no longer limited to interactions between human subjects.

Furthermore, studies in the sociology of technology show that the development of AI has influenced the way humans categorize ontological identities and status (Floridi, 2014; Gunkel, 2018). Experimental research shows that exposure to AI capabilities tends to shift human perceptions of what is considered a "human trait" (Santoro & Monin, 2023). Other studies have shown that individuals are beginning to redefine the boundaries between humans and machines based on function, not essence (Cave et al., 2019). In addition, the literature in the philosophy of technology shows that technology not only expands human capabilities, but also forms the conceptual framework used to understand oneself (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2011). Thus, empirically it can be concluded that AI not only replicates human capacity, but also changes the way that capacity is interpreted. These findings suggest that the changes that occur are structural in human experience and understanding.

4.2. Dominant Theological Patterns and Their Structural Limitations

Analysis of the theological literature shows that the *Imago Dei* model is still dominated by substantive, functional, and relational approaches rooted in the classical tradition (Jenson, 1999; Pannenberg, 1991; Herzfeld, 2012). Contemporary theological studies show that the substantive model is still often associated with rationality and self-awareness as the main indicators of the image of God (Peters, 2018; Cortez, 2010). In functional models, human uniqueness is associated with a dominion mandate and ethical responsibility to creation (Middleton, 2005; Wright, 2004). Meanwhile, the relational model emphasizes that human beings are defined by their relationship with God and others (Barth, 1960; Moltmann, 1985). However, systematic studies show that these three models are often practiced within frameworks that assume the existence of certain capacity indicators (Herzfeld, 2012). In the AI-theological literature, this approach is still used to distinguish humans from machines, despite facing growing empirical challenges (Dorobantu, 2021; Foerst, 1998). Thus, descriptively, the dominant pattern in theology still maintains a classical structure without significant conceptual transformation.

In addition, the literature shows that relational approaches have seen a significant increase in contemporary discourse (Watts & Dorobantu, 2023). Cross-disciplinary studies show that the concept of personhood is increasingly understood as a result of social relations and interactions (Coeckelbergh, 2010; Gunkel, 2018). In a theological context, this approach is used to avoid capacity reductionism and emphasize the community dimension (Zizioulas, 1985; Gunton, 1993). However, the AI literature shows that relationality can be reproduced phenomenologically through system design (Graves, 2023; Müller, 2025). Empirical studies show that users can experience interaction with AI as a meaningful relationship, even if no personal subjects are involved (Turkle, 2011). Thus, there is a tension between the use of relationality as a normative category and the reality that relationality can be simulated technologically.

In addition to these two patterns, the literature also shows that AI discourse in academic publications focuses more on ethical and regulatory issues than on ontological reconstruction (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019). Bibliometric studies show that most AI research focuses on privacy, bias, and governance, while anthropological and theological aspects receive relatively little attention (Zhang et al., 2021). In the context of theology, this is reflected in the tendency to use *the Imago Dei* as a normative framework without systematically redeveloping the concept (Graves, 2022). Thus, empirically it can be concluded that there is a gap between ethical reflection and theological reconstruction in the existing literature.

4.3. Emerging Directions in Imago Dei Reconstruction

Recent literature suggests that the reconstruction of *Imago Dei* is moving towards the integration of embodiment, teleology, and global perspectives (Balle & Nissen, 2023; Dorobantu, 2022). Studies in phenomenology and cognition show that human consciousness is embodied, so it cannot be reduced to a computational process (Fuchs, 2018; Dreyfus, 2007). Within this framework, the body is understood as the primary medium of human experience, not just an additional attribute (Malafouris, 2013). Additionally, research shows that AI does not have an embodied experience equivalent to humans, despite being capable of simulating social expression (Graves, 2023). Thus, the embodiment approach emerged in response to the limitations of capacity-based models.

In addition to embodiment, the literature also emphasizes the importance of the teleological dimension in understanding *Imago Dei* (Dorobantu, 2022; Grenz, 2001). Theological studies show that human identity is not only determined by attributes or relationships, but by orientation toward divine purposes (Pannenberg, 1991). In this context, teleology is understood as a normative direction that cannot be replicated by an AI system that operates instrumentally (Floridi, 2014). Thus, the teleological approach provides an alternative framework that does not rely on empirical indicators.

In addition, the literature also shows the importance of the Global South perspective in expanding the discourse of *Imago Dei* (Kaunda, 2020). Studies show that the concept of personhood in non-Western traditions emphasizes community, harmony, and cosmic relations (Mbiti, 1990). In the context of AI, this perspective provides an alternative to the dominant individualistic approach in Western literature (Floridi et al., 2018). Thus, empirically it can be concluded that the direction of *the reconstruction of Imago Dei* is multidimensional, although it has not been integrated in a single systematic framework.

5. Discussion

The results of this study show that the development of generative artificial intelligence has resulted in an empirical shift in the way human cognitive and relational capacities are understood, particularly because AI is able to replicate functions that were previously considered exclusive to humans (Bick et al., 2024; Noy & Zhang, 2023). These findings show that indicators such as writing, analysis, and communication skills can no longer be used as unique markers of human beings in socio-technological contexts (Deming, 2026; Brynjolfsson et al., 2023). In addition, human interaction with AI also shows that relationality can be generated phenomenologically through system design, so that the experience of relationships is no longer limited to relationships between humans (Kim & Im, 2023; Pentina et al., 2023). Thus, these results confirm that the changes that occur are empirical and structural in human experience. Overall, these findings provide the basis that the main problem in the doctrine of *Imago Dei* is not a change in human ontology, but rather a mismatch between traditional theological frameworks and new empirical realities.

Reflection on these findings shows that the development of AI serves as a catalyst that exposes the limitations of capacity-based anthropological frameworks in systematic theology (Herzfeld, 2012; Floridi, 2014). When cognitive abilities can be replicated by technological systems, then approaches that define humans based on internal attributes become unstable (Gunkel, 2018; Nyholm, 2020). In this perspective, AI does not threaten human existence, but reveals that the categories used to understand humans so far are contingent and historical (Floridi et al., 2018). In addition, the phenomenon of social attribution to AI suggests that humans tend to judge relationships based on subjective experience, rather than on ontological status (Santoro & Monin, 2023). This reinforces the argument that relationality as a theological category needs to be distinguished from relationality as a psychological phenomenon. Thus, this reflection suggests that AI uncovers the tension between normative categories and empirical experiences in theological anthropology.

Further interpretation of the results of this study suggests that a purely capacity-based and relational approach is no longer adequate to explain *Imago Dei* in the context of AI. The capacity model loses its discriminative power because AI is able to produce outputs that are functionally equivalent to humans without having awareness or intentionality (Russell & Norvig, 2021; Floridi, 2014). Meanwhile, relational models face the risk of reduction when relationships are understood as observable interactions, as AI can conclusively simulate those interactions (Graves, 2023; Müller, 2025). In this context, the difference between humans and AI can no longer be determined through empirical indicators, but must be sought at a deeper conceptual level. Therefore, these results can be interpreted as the need to shift the focus from attributes towards ontological and normative structures. Thus, this interpretation leads to the need for a theological reconstruction that does not depend on performance, but on a teleologically directed relational dimension.

When compared to previous research, these findings show a significant shift in the way theological discourse and AI are positioned. Previous studies have tended to use *Imago Dei* as a normative framework for evaluating AI, without systematically revisiting the concept (Graves, 2022; Peters, 2018). Meanwhile, the relational approach developed in the contemporary literature has made an important contribution in avoiding capacity reductionism, but has not been able to answer the problem of relational simulation by AI (Watts & Dorobantu, 2023; Coeckelbergh, 2010). In addition, contributions from the Global South perspective show that the concept of personhood is

more communal and does not depend entirely on individual attributes (Kaunda, 2020). Thus, this study expands the literature by integrating these approaches into a single relational–teleological framework. Overall, this comparison suggests that this study not only continues existing discourses, but also offers a more comprehensive conceptual synthesis.

Based on these findings and interpretations, this study opens up several important directions for further research. First, there is a need for further development of the relational–teleological model within a broader doctrinal framework, particularly in relation to Christology and Eschatology (Dorobantu, 2022). Second, empirical research is needed to examine how humans experience relationships with AI in everyday social practices, so that they can enrich theological reflection with phenomenological data (Pentina et al., 2023). Third, interdisciplinary dialogues between theology, philosophy, and computer science need to be strengthened to develop a conceptual framework that is more responsive to technological developments (Zhang et al., 2021). Thus, this research not only makes a theoretical contribution, but also opens up space for further development in the study of theology and AI.

6. Conclusion

This research shows that the development of generative artificial intelligence has created significant empirical pressure on the way human uniqueness is understood within the framework of systematic theology. The findings show that the capacities that have been used as indicators of *Imago Dei*—such as rationality, creativity, and relatability—are no longer exclusive, as they can be operationally replicated by AI systems. In addition, the literature suggests that relationality, which was previously considered an alternative to capacity-based approaches, also faces limitations when social interactions can be phenomenologically simulated by technology. Thus, the main problem identified in this study is not ontological changes in humans, but rather the inadequacy of the conceptual framework used to explain human uniqueness in the context of contemporary technology.

Based on these findings, this study proposes a reconstruction of *Imago Dei* in a relational–teleological framework. This model places *the Imago Dei* not as a measurable attribute or capacity, but rather as a relational structure directed by a divine purpose. In this framework, the uniqueness of man does not lie in cognitive performance or the ability to interact, but in participation in normative relationships with God and teleological orientation in life. Thus, the model is able to conceptually distinguish between the "performative resemblance" generated by AI and the human "theological identity" rooted in divine relationships and purpose. This approach also allows for the integration of the dimensions of embodiment, relationality, and teleology in one coherent framework.

Theoretically, this research contributes by shifting the focus of *the Imago Dei* discourse from capacity comparison to a more in-depth normative framework that is resistant to technological developments. In practical terms, the relational–teleological model offers a conceptual basis for evaluating the use of AI in the context of ethics, education, and pastoral practice, without falling into technophobic or uncritical optimism. Thus, this study shows that systematic theology not only plays a role as a response to technological developments, but also as a discipline that is able to provide conceptual direction in understanding humans in the digital era.

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