African Journal of Biblical Studies, Translation, Linguistics and Intercultural Theology

Volume 2 (2) 28-40, September 2026
ISSN: 3093-4613 (online) | ISSN: 3093-4605 (print)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63811/jnbvys77

Imago Dei and Human Dignity: An Ethical and Musicological Exploration

John Ayo Oladapo (PhD)
Baptist College of Theology, Igede, Ekiti

Oderinu Elizabeth Olubunmi
Baptist College of Theology, Igede Ekiti

ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the doctrine of Imago Dei (Image of God) and its implications for human dignity, ethics, and musicology amid the erosion of dignity in Nigeria through socio-economic inequality, political corruption, ethnic tension, and violence. It explores how Imago Dei can ground an ethic that restores respect for persons, and how music, especially sacred genres, can serve moral and spiritual renewal. Using a qualitative, descriptive method, the study examines biblical and theological sources to establish the doctrine's relevance to human rights, dignity, and value, and interrogates its ethical implications for relationships marked by power differentials and systemic exploitation. Through a musicological lens, it shows how music reflects and promotes dignity and advocates for the marginalised. The study argues that dignity derives not from socio-political status or economic worth but from the divine imprint in every person. Findings show that music grounded in a theology of Imago Dei can cultivate communal harmony and moral sensitivity. The study recommends that churches, educators, and artists in Nigeria prioritise a relational ethic anchored in Imago Dei to foster mutuality, solidarity, and social cohesion in pluralistic societies.

Keywords: *Imago Dei, Human Dignity, Ethical Exploration, Musicology, Power, Inequality.*

Publication History
Date received: 03-03-2026
Date accepted: 08-08-2026
Date published: 24-09-2026

Correspondence
John Ayo Oladapo
oladapojohnayo@bctie.com.ng

Copyright ©2026 Author(s).
Published by Bibliotheca Publishers, Sunyani, Ghana.
Available online at: http://ajobit.brainfa.org/index.php/files/
This is an open access article under the CCBY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Human dignity has become a pressing moral concern in Nigeria, a nation burdened by political instability, corruption, poverty, and the devaluation of human life. Extrajudicial killings, ritual practices, human trafficking, and systemic injustice raise urgent questions about the value of life. Ehusani argues that Nigeria's crisis of human worth reflects a disconnection from the theological foundations that should govern public and private life, since to degrade a person is to dishonour the Creator whose image that person bears.[1] Moltmann likewise contends that dignity flourishes only where justice and freedom are upheld, and that a society tolerating systemic dehumanisation has lost its theological moorings.[2]

The concept of *Imago Dei*, the assertion that humans are created in the image of God, offers a profound moral and ontological basis for protecting human dignity. As Kilner observes, it is not a theological abstraction but the most powerful available foundation for resisting the commodification of human life.[3] Yet the doctrine has often remained abstract, divorced from daily ethical practice and cultural expression, so its interpretation is pivotal. Accepting it leads to an affirmation of dignity that underpins positions ranging from prohibitions against torture to the defence of free expression and advocacy for the marginalised, as Howard shows in his ecumenical survey.[4]

The doctrine also resonates in musicology, where it informs music-making as an act of participatory, relational dignity. Shelemay documents how marginalised communities have used music to assert their humanity and resist dehumanisation, showing that music is always also a statement about what persons are wort.[5] This study therefore examines the biblical and theological foundations of *Imago Dei* and its implications for dignity, rights, and intrinsic value; addresses its ethical dimensions in relation to power and structural inequality; and explores its intersection with musicology as a tool for advocacy. It argues that restoring dignity in Nigeria requires both ethical reformation and aesthetic engagement.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive design integrating theological, ethical, and musicological reflection on *Imago Dei* and human dignity. The primary source is the biblical text, examined through established hermeneutical principles. Secondary data came from peer-reviewed articles, theological texts, commentaries, and historical records sourced from JSTOR, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories, using the search terms "Imago Dei," "Human Dignity," "Ethics," and "Musicology." Data were analysed thematically, following the principles of theological inquiry outlined by Smith.[6] The paper proceeds through the biblical and theological foundations of *Imago Dei*, a clarification of human dignity, the biblical link between the two, ethical analysis in the Nigerian context, a musicological exploration, ethical implications, and conclusions and recommendations.

3.0 THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE IMAGO DEI

Genesis 1 gives the most comprehensive biblical reference to humanity created in God's image, though with notable ambiguity. On the sixth day God declares, "Let us make mankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1:26, NIV). Male and female are both explicitly

[1] George Ehusani, *An Afro-Christian Vision: "Ozovehe!" Toward a More Humanized World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 12.

[2] Jürgen Moltmann, *Man: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 45.

[3] John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 74.

[4] Thomas Albert Howard, *Imago Dei: Human Dignity in Ecumenical Perspective* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 23.

[5] Kay Kaufman Shelemay, *Soundscapes: Exploring Music in a Changing World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 30.

[6] Kevin G. Smith, *Academic Writing and Theological Research: A Guide for Students* (Johannesburg: South African Theological Seminary Press, 2008), 46.

included as image-bearers, with no hierarchical distinction, and both share the charge of dominion and the blessing to be fruitful (Gen 1:28, NIV). Humanity is the apex of creation, marked by the shift from "good" to "very good" (Gen 1:31, NIV). Yet Genesis never defines the divine image, leaving its content to the history of interpretation.

3.1 Patristic Period

The church fathers first sought to define the content of the image and its condition after the fall. Irenaeus distinguished image (*eikon*), the rational and structural aspects of human nature, from likeness (*homoiosis*), moral and spiritual development toward God; the image survived the fall, while the likeness needs progressive restoration through the incarnation and the Spirit.[7] Tertullian located the image in the soul's rational and spiritual capacities while insisting that the body shares in dignity through its creation and eschatological destiny. [8] Origen associated the image with the soul's participation in the divine Logos, the perfect image of the invisible God.[9] Athanasius argued that Christ restored the image distorted by sin, making Christ the normative lens for understanding it. [10] Cyril of Alexandria developed this reading, describing the image as a dynamic capacity for union with God through Christ, actualised by the indwelling Spirit. For the fathers, the image represents humanity's unique dignity, rationality, and capacity for relationship with God, which sin impairs but does not obliterate.

3.2 Medieval Period

The medieval period produced the most systematic treatments of *Imago Dei*, integrating Christian theology with Aristotelian philosophy. Augustine located the image in the rational soul and its Trinitarian structure of memory, understanding, and will, a triad mirroring the Trinity itself.[11] Though marred by original sin, the image retains sufficient dignity to ground the soul's capacity for God (*capax Dei*). Aquinas located the image in intellect and will, operating at three levels: the natural capacity for knowing and loving God, the actual knowledge and love of God in grace, and the perfect knowledge and love of God in glory.[12] This schema affirms the image's continuity through creation, fall, redemption, and glorification while insisting on the difference grace makes. Bonaventure stressed the traces of the Trinity in creation and the image's deepest expression in the soul's mystical ascent to God through Christ. The tradition as a whole held the image to be indelible, though its exercise is affected by sin and requires grace for restoration.

3.3 Reformation Period

The Reformers radically modified the medieval consensus, insisting on the devastating effects of original sin and on Scripture as the sole norm. Luther argued that the fall so devastated the image, once consisting in Adam's perfect knowledge of God, righteousness, and conformity to the divine will, that only a vestige remains; it is restored through faith in Christ and fully recovered in the resurrection.[13] Calvin held that reason and will persist in fallen humanity but are so corrupted that they cannot reliably guide people to God. He conceded that "obscure lineaments" of the image remain but are "so vitiated and maimed" that they may be said to be destroyed (Inst. I.xv.4). Yet he also grounded universal dignity in the image, arguing in his Genesis commentary that any violation of a human being affronts the God whose image that person bears.[14] The Reformers' realism about sin gave their ethics a sharper sense of human tragedy and a deeper dependence on grace for authentic dignity and moral life.

---

[7] Paul O'Callaghan, *The Mystery of the Human Person: A Personalist Theology* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2016), 50.

[8] O'Callaghan, *Mystery of the Human Person*.

[9] O'Callaghan, *Mystery of the Human Person*.

[10] Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*.

[11] Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 12.

[12] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1920), 20

[13] Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*.

[14] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 90.

3.4 Post-Reformation Period

Post-Reformation debate extended across Protestant orthodoxy and the Enlightenment. Protestant scholasticism distinguished the formal image, the structural characteristics of personhood such as rationality, will, and immortality, which persist after the fall, from the material image, the original righteousness, holiness, and knowledge of God, lost at the fall and restored in regeneration.[15] This allowed theologians to maintain the indelibility of human dignity while accounting for the fall's moral catastrophe. The Enlightenment challenged theological accounts by grounding human worth in reason, autonomy, and natural rights; Kant's account of dignity in rational autonomy is its most influential attempt to preserve dignity without theological foundations. The nineteenth century brought renewed attempts to integrate modern anthropology and evolutionary biology with Christian accounts of the image. Schleiermacher located it in humanity's God-consciousness, the capacity for awareness of and dependence upon the infinite, anticipating the twentieth century's emphasis on personhood and relationality.

3.5 Modern Period

Modern theological anthropology has reframed *Imago Dei* in response to historical criticism, evolutionary biology, feminist and liberation theology, and interreligious dialogue. Barth argued that the image lies not in any inherent human capacity but in the human person as being-in-relation, the I-Thou relationship mirroring the Father-Son relations within the Trinity; Genesis 1:27 points to this in the differentiation of male and female.[16] Berkouwer likewise insisted that the image is not a static property but a dynamic orientation of the whole person toward God.[17] Feminist theologians challenge the tradition's association of the image with rationality or the male, which has legitimised women's subordination; Oduyoye insists that the image affirms the equal dignity of women and men, grounded in mutuality.[18] Liberation theologians, notably Cone and Gutiérrez, press the image's social and political implications, arguing that it demands solidarity with the poor and a structural critique of systems denying them the material conditions for dignified life.[19] Collste identifies six categories in modern thought on the image: ontological similarity between God and humanity, stewardship of creation, Christ as its fullest expression, the believer as image-bearer, the human male as representative, and sanctification as participation in the divine image.[20]

3.6 African Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives

African theology situates the divine image within the communal and relational networks that constitute human identity, rather than in the individual. The Akan proverb *Onipa na ohia onipa*, "a person needs other persons," expresses an anthropology in which personhood is constituted through relationship, making community the proper context for understanding image-bearing. Boaheng shows how the Akan concepts of *sunsum* (spirit) and *mogya* (blood) together constitute the person's identity and dignity, offering a culturally resonant framework through which *Imago Dei* can be received and enriched.[21] This understanding, that dignity is a divine gift realised in community, converges with the Christian insistence that the image grounds an inviolable dignity independent of social achievement. Dube highlights postcolonial and feminist readings that resist exclusion and the colonial anthropological categories that denied full

---

[15] G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), 40

[16] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/1, trans. J. W. Edwards et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958).

[17] Berkouwer, *Man*, 27.

[18] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 34.

[19] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 20.

[20] Göran Collste, *Is Human Life Special? Religious and Philosophical Perspectives on the Principle of Human Dignity* (Berlin: Peter Lang Press, 2002), 35.

[21] Isaac Boaheng, "The Doctrine of Imago Dei and the Challenge of Euthanasia," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 6 (2020), 19.

humanity to Africans.[22] Orobator interprets *Imago Dei* as a liberative principle empowering the oppressed to reclaim their dignity and demand justice.[23] Afolayan argues that moral renewal in Nigeria requires rediscovering values grounded in respect for life and community, a vision rooted in *Imago Dei*.[24]

4.0 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

Human dignity is the baseline moral status, the respect owed to every person by virtue of humanity, not accomplishment or characteristics; it is a default entitlement without qualification or prerequisite. Kilner shows how the conviction that dignity is ontological rather than achieved has been the theological spine of resistance to slavery, torture, and political dehumanisation.[25] Membership in the human species entitles every person to fundamental respect, making dignity foundational to every system of rights and justice. Howard demonstrates that this status is affirmed across Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox traditions, one of the most ecumenically robust claims in Christian ethics despite disagreement about its content and grounding.[26] Equal dignity extends the claim: all humans possess the same inherent value regardless of background, physical attributes, or social status, a non-negotiable mandate against discrimination.

Scholars break dignity into three claims. The ontological claim concerns the unique, intrinsic qualities that make human beings invaluable and irreplaceable, inherent rather than earned; it grounds dignity in what humans are, making it resistant to erosion through illness, disability, or marginalisation. Berkouwer argues that this dimension is inseparable from the confession that humans are created in God's image, giving it a depth secular accounts cannot replicate.[27] The relational claim recognises that dignity has an irreducibly social dimension, partly defined by how individuals are perceived and treated in their communities. Moltmann insists this reflects God's own relational character: the image is not possessed individually but realised in community, so contempt, exclusion, and social invisibility are theological affronts.[28] The limited-state claim holds that the state exists to serve the individual, guaranteeing a minimal standard of living through social and economic rights. Agbiji and Swart argue that this demands responsive, participatory governance that prioritises human well-being over political gain, with profound implications for Nigeria.[29]

5.0 THE IMAGE OF GOD AND HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE BIBLE

The biblical understanding of *Imago Dei* is the central foundation for human dignity across both Testaments, affirming the sanctity, equality, and intrinsic worth of every life. In the Old Testament it originates in creation: "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'" (Gen 1:26-27, NRSV). Unlike other creatures, humans are endowed with capacities for moral reasoning, relationship, creativity, and stewardship that reflect the Creator's character. Wenham argues that the phrase echoes ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, in which the king's image was placed throughout his domain to represent his authority; image-bearers thus represent divine sovereignty on earth.[30] Ehusani emphasises that dignity is a divine endowment rather than a human achievement, intrinsic, inalienable, and non-negotiable.[31]

This truth shapes the ethical fabric of Old Testament community life. Genesis 9:6 reaffirms the sanctity of life after the flood:

[22] Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 19.
[23] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008), 40.
[24] Adeshina Afolayan, *Philosophy and the Crisis of Values in Nigeria* (Ibadan: University Press, 2019), 18.
[25] Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*.
[26] Howard, *Imago Dei*.
[27] Berkouwer, *Man*.
[28] Moltmann, *Man*.
[29] Obaji M. Agbiji and Ignatius Swart, "Religion and Social Transformation in Africa: A Critical and Appreciative Perspective," *Scriptura* 114, no. 1 (2015), 14.
[30] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 12.
[31] Ehusani, *Afro-Christian Vision*.

"Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind" (Gen 9:6, NRSV). Violence is thus a theological affront, an assault on God's image. Westermann argues that the verse joins protection of life to the human person's status as image-bearer, making the prohibition of murder both a moral and theological imperative.[32] The prophets, such as Isaiah and Amos, called Israel to covenantal justice rooted in respect for human worth (Isa 1:17; Amos 5:24, NIV). Odozor observes that Old Testament ethics locate human worth in divine ontology rather than in race, class, or power, an insight relevant to Africa's struggle for social equity.[33] The Psalms exalt humanity as "a little lower than the angels" and crowned "with glory and honor" (Ps 8:4-5, NIV); Kidner notes that the passage places humans at the apex of creation with dignity, authority, and responsibility qualitatively different from any other creature.[34]

In the New Testament, *Imago Dei* reaches its fullest revelation in Christ, the true image of God. Paul declares that Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15, NIV) and "the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3, NRSV). In Christ humanity's original image is revealed and restored; the incarnation itself is the ultimate affirmation of dignity. O'Brien notes that this designation is not merely functional but ontological, describing the one in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily and in whom people see genuine image-bearing. [35] Orobator adds that Christ's redemptive work shows that divine love restores and dignifies all humanity, inviting everyone into renewed fellowship with God. [36] Salvation transforms believers into Christ's likeness: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29, NRSV). Schreiner observes that this conformity is the goal of the whole redemptive process, encompassing justification, sanctification, and final glorification.[37]

Jesus' ministry exemplifies restored dignity. He reached out to the marginalised through parables such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37, NIV) and the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7, NIV), showing that God's concern extends to every individual, particularly the excluded. Green argues that these parables subversively reframe social hierarchy, placing those society regards as least at the centre of divine concern and embodying the truth that marginalisation does not diminish the image of God.[38] Christian ethics grounded in *Imago Dei* therefore demands justice, compassion, and inclusion as the hallmarks of discipleship.

6.0 THE ETHICAL CONTEXT OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN NIGERIA

Nigeria's moral landscape reveals a profound crisis of dignity. Political instability, economic inequality, and religious intolerance have fostered a culture in which life is frequently commodified or disregarded, as extrajudicial killings, trafficking, gender-based violence, and ethnic conflict demonstrate. [39] This exposes a dissonance between theological anthropology and the structures governing society. Bonhoeffer warned that when humanity loses awareness of the divine image it loses reverence for human life.[40] Ehusani traces the erosion to colonial disruption of African communal values and the imposition of structures prioritising extraction over flourishing, arguing that the

[32] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 10.
[33] Paulinus I. Odozor, *Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition since Vatican II* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 63.
[34] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, TOTC (London: IVP, 1973).
[35] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Colossians, to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 80.
[36] Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*,12.
[37] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 86.
[38] Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 34.
[39] Ehusani, *Afro-Christian Vision*.
[40] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 46.

church must recover a theological anthropology adequate to postcolonial Africa.[41]

This crisis reflects what Augustine termed *homo incurvatus in se*, humanity turned inward, prioritising self-interest over the communal good; corruption, tribalism, and exploitation of the poor illustrate it. The call to love one's neighbour (Mark 12:31, NIV) and act justly (Mic 6:8, NIV) is subverted by materialism and political greed. Moltmann argues that dignity flourishes only where justice and freedom are upheld, so moral reconstruction must begin with a theological consciousness that sees every person as reflecting God's glory.[42] Onah similarly argues that the crisis demands not merely better governance but a moral framework locating human worth in theological rather than utilitarian or political categories.[43]

Nigeria's pluralism further complicates the discourse. Christianity, Islam, and traditional religions all affirm human worth, yet cultural practices and socio-economic pressures distort these affirmations, and patriarchal norms continue to marginalise women and children despite theological claims of equality, as Orobator documents.[44] Agbiji and Swart argue that transformative religion must move beyond privatised spirituality to engage the structural conditions sustaining poverty and inequality, making the social implications of *Imago Dei* indispensable to an African Christian ethic.[45] Ehusani concludes that recovering the divine image is "the recovery of our humanity and the path to social healing."[46]

7.0 MUSICOLOGY AND THE EXPRESSION OF IMAGO DEI

7.1 Theology of Music and the Human Person

Music is inherently relational, communal, and creative, qualities associated with *Imago Dei*, and has long been a conduit for theological and ethical reflection. Wolterstorff argues that aesthetic activity, including music-making, is a primary way humans fulfil their vocation as image-bearers, expressing the creative and relational capacities that reflect the Creator.[47] Music has been both a vehicle for expressing dignity and a means of resisting its violation, as spirituals, gospel songs, and indigenous music articulate the cry for justice and recognition. Shelemay documents how marginalised communities use music to assert their humanity, establishing its potency in affirming *Imago Dei* in others.[48]

Ayorinde and Ajose demonstrate that Nigerian gospel music transcends entertainment, functioning as spiritual praxis that shapes moral consciousness, strengthens communal bonds, and reinforces identity; through lyrics, melody, rhythm, and performance it fosters self-worth, solidarity, and hope, reaffirming dignity rooted in *Imago Dei*.[49] Music education aligned with this theology builds empathy, respect, and ethical sensitivity, promoting inclusive practices that recognise every person as an image-bearer in congregational singing, community music, and formal instruction. Euba establishes that African music has always carried social, ethical, and theological weight, making it a natural vehicle for the moral and spiritual formation that *Imago Dei* demands.[50]

7.2 Music as a Lens for Dignity and Inclusion

Music can be an inclusive, democratising space affirming each participant's dignity regardless of

[41] Ehusani, *Afro-Christian Vision*.
[42] Moltmann, *Man.*
[43] Greg Onah, *Human Dignity and Social Justice in Nigeria: Theological Reflections on Contemporary Challenges* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2020), 345.
[44] Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*.
[45] Agbiji and Swart, "Religion and Social Transformation in Africa", 15–17.
[46] Ehusani, *Afro-Christian Vision*.
[47] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 23.
[48] Shelemay, *Soundscapes*.
[49] Olumide Ayorinde and Tolu S. Ajose, "Music and Spirituality in Africa: Gospel Music, Spirituality, and Everyday Meaning-Making in Nigeria," *Religions* 13, no. 12 (2022): art. 1227.
[50] Akin Euba, *Towards an African Pianism: Keyboard Music of Akin Euba, Joshua Uzoigwe, and J. H. Kwabena Nketia* (Bayreuth: African Music Publishers, 1992), 78.

ability or status, and a powerful instrument for shaping attitudes toward racism, sexism, and economic injustice. Cone shows how enslaved African Americans used spirituals to assert their humanity, preserve their dignity, and resist slavery's dehumanising logic, sustaining through the conviction that they were made in God's image a hope their circumstances denied.[51] Music can also influence behaviour to the glory of God, inspiring listeners to adopt new values. From the Psalms of Asaph to the hymns of Watts and Wesley, it has shaped theological conviction, moral sensibility, and communal identity in ways theological discourse alone cannot.

Adedeji and Loko show that forming Nigerian gospel musicians goes beyond technical proficiency to embrace music as a sacred vocation, fostering lyrical sensitivity to words that affirm human worth and musical expressions that inspire compassion, healing, and moral elevation.[52] Through such training, Nigerian gospel music becomes a vehicle for *Imago Dei*, nurturing artist and audience alike as bearers of God's image. Christians must therefore be authentic and truthful in representing God in their music. Musicology can also challenge social stratification, resist ethnonationalism, and foster peace in multiethnic communities, making music a powerful instrument for the social ethics of *Imago Dei* in pluralistic societies such as Nigeria.

8.0 ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF IMAGO DEI IN NIGERIA

Imago Dei is the cornerstone of Christian ethical reflection: all human beings, regardless of ability, status, or achievement, possess inviolable dignity. In Nigeria this challenges systemic injustice, corruption, and dehumanisation. Moltmann and Odozor insist that its ethical implications demand concrete structural transformation in how societies are organised and governed.[53] Six implications follow.

8.1 The Sanctity of Human Life from Conception

The doctrine affirms the inherent dignity of every human life from conception onward, a non-negotiable baseline of worth irrespective of social or economic status, age, ability, or stage of development. It underpins universal human rights: protection of all persons, whether unborn, elderly, or disabled, is intrinsic to the human condition as defined by creation. Wright argues that this challenges elitism and neglect of the poor, promoting equality grounded in God's creative act rather than social hierarchy.[54] Augustine insists that all humans share a common origin and destiny in God; to despise another is to despise the Creator's image (Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV.4). Olusegun emphasises that the prohibition of murder in Genesis 9 is rooted in recognition that humans bear God's image, making violence a profound moral and spiritual transgression rather than merely a policy issue.[55] In Nigeria, where extrajudicial killings, ritual murders, and political violence persist, this provides a theological framework for resistance and advocacy.

8.2 Relational Dignity and Communicative Ethics

Imago Dei creates a communicative link between humanity and God and among human beings. Created in God's image, humans have capacities for relationship, vertically with God and horizontally with others, absent in other creatures. This relationality is descriptive and prescriptive, calling people to mirror compassion, truthfulness, and justice. Barth argues that the image, expressed in the male-female differentiation of Genesis 1:27, is

[51] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1972), 84.
[52] Femi Adedeji and Omolara Loko, "African Sensibility in the Training of Nigerian Gospel Musicians," *Journal of Nigerian Music Education* 11, no. 1 (2019), 34.
[53] Moltmann, *Man.*
[54] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 56.
[55] Fawenu Bamidele Olusegun, "Imago Dei and the Sanctity of Human Life in the Context of Genesis 9:1–6,",46. *Religions: A Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions* 24, no. 2 (2014).

fundamentally relational, enacted in the quality of human relationships rather than in isolation.[56] Owoeye contends that *Imago Dei* has substantive, relational, and functional dimensions bound to the binary of male and female, obliging the church to teach what it understands as biblical ethics of sexuality and identity in ways that honour the full dignity of persons. [57] In communicative ethics, imago-grounded dignity demands that public discourse be governed by truthfulness, respect, and recognition of the other's full humanity, with direct implications for Nigeria, where political rhetoric, social media, and ethnic speech-acts dehumanise outgroups and feed violence.

8.3 Social Justice and Ethical Governance

God's breath imparted to humanity (Gen 2:7, NIV) gives human beings a unique moral consciousness and capacity for spiritual engagement, foundational for ethics of justice, dignity, and peace. Pauline theology (Rom 8:29, NIV) calls individuals to embody practices reflecting divine intent and contributing to societal redemption. Corruption, abuse of power, and exploitation of citizens by Nigeria's political elites violate God's image in others. Bonhoeffer argued that injustice is a desecration of the divine likeness, and that any political order systematically degrading persons offends the God in whose image they are made. [58] Nigerian leaders are therefore obligated to govern with justice and compassion. Gutiérrez insists that justice for the poor is a structural demand of the gospel, since God's image is present in the suffering face of the oppressed and ignoring their suffering dishonours God.[59]

8.4 Power, Authority, and Servant Leadership

Imago Dei challenges traditional paradigms of authority. In many Nigerian traditional systems, authority is vested in elders, chiefs, religious leaders, or patriarchal heads, with status, age, gender, ethnicity, or wealth conferring unquestioned obedience. *Imago Dei* interrupts this by asserting that dignity is inherent, not earned through lineage, power, or privilege. Christ, "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15, NIV), reorients power toward servanthood and sacrificial leadership (cf. Phil 2:5-11, NIV). Volf argues that the Trinitarian model, in which power is exercised in relationship and for the other's flourishing rather than self-aggrandisement, grounds a Christian account of leadership that resists both autocracy and abdication. [60] Image-bearers are called to exercise power through service and ethical stewardship, with direct implications for reforming political leadership, church governance, and communal authority in Nigeria.

8.5 Economic Justice and Human Flourishing

The implications extend to economic justice. Structural inequalities, whether economic, racial, or related to ability, affront the premise that every person bears God's image; systems ascribing differential value to lives subvert the biblical vision of equality. Nigeria's poverty and inequality contradict the divine vision of flourishing, for every image-bearer has a right to basic welfare, education, and opportunity. Agbiji and Swart argue that development rooted in *Imago Dei* demands responsible stewardship, equitable distribution of resources, and participatory governance prioritising well-being over political gain. [61] Wright argues that the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28 establishes an obligation to manage resources so as to sustain human flourishing rather than concentrate

[56] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/1.
[57] Emmanuel Akande Owoeye, "A Theological Reflection of 'Imago Dei' as a Response to LGBTQ Advocates," *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105, no. 2 (2024).12.
[58] Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*.
[59] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 45.
[60] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).34.
[61] Agbiji and Swart, "Religion and Social Transformation in Africa", 10–12.

wealth in the few.[62] The misuse of Nigeria's resources by elites is thus not merely economic failure but a desecration of the mandate given to all image-bearers.

8.6 Communal Ethics and Reconciliation

Because all persons bear God's image, Christian communities and Nigerian society must forge relationships, structures, and norms reflecting fairness, mutual care, inclusion, and the repair of harm. Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity, potentially a strength, has often been exploited for division and violence. *Imago Dei* calls for communal ethics recognising that every ethnic group and individual reflects a facet of God's creative image, promoting reconciliation, tolerance, and unity in diversity.[63] Moltmann observes that the image is realised in community, so genuine image-bearing requires communities of justice, mutuality, and shared life rather than mere individual piety.[64] Awoshori locates covenant and communal identity in Scripture as resources for reconciliation, arguing that a shared understanding of all persons as image-bearers can cross ethnic and religious lines as a unifying frame in a divided nation.[65] This resonates with African values of solidarity, communal responsibility, and restorative justice, suggesting the doctrine can be developed in dialogue with African ethical traditions rather than imposed as a Western concept.

9.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends prioritising a relational ethic rooted in *Imago Dei* and musicology, fostering a just and compassionate society marked by mutuality, solidarity, and peaceful coexistence. The recommendations are directed to policymakers, practitioners, religious leaders, and individuals.

9.1 Promote the Inherent Dignity of Every Person

Religious leaders should teach in preaching, catechesis, and religious education that every person is created in God's image and deserves dignity and compassion irrespective of ethnicity, gender, economic status, or religion, since to honour any human being is to honour the Creator. Churches and mosques should be spaces of sanctuary and solidarity where the vulnerable, including the poor, women, children, and persons with disabilities, are actively protected rather than merely affirmed in principle.

9.2 Deploy Music as an Instrument of Social Justice

All stakeholders should vigorously use music in worship and community settings to promote social justice, advocate human rights, and support the marginalised. Nigerian musicians, gospel artists, and educators should ground their practice in *Imago Dei*, and music organisations and church programmes should develop repertoires that combine affirmation of dignity with prophetic critique of structural injustice.

9.3 Foster Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Exchange

Collaborations promoting cross-cultural understanding build solidarity across ethnic and religious boundaries. Interreligious and intercultural musical projects can bridge Nigeria's divisions, because shared aesthetic experience can prepare the way for shared ethical commitment. Religious and cultural leaders should invest in initiatives uniting communities divided by ethnicity, religion, or class around their common humanity as bearers of God's image.

9.4 Integrate Imago Dei into Educational Curricula

Imago Dei should be incorporated into curricula from primary school to university to deepen understanding of dignity and its implications for ethics, civic life, and relationships. Seminaries

[62] Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*.
[63] John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969),5.
[64] Moltmann, *Man*.
[65] Williams Peter Awoshori, "Covenant and Communal Identity: Biblical Foundations for Unity in a Religiously and Ethnically Divided Nigeria," *Uyo Journal of Religion and Society* 4, no. 1 (2025). 44.

and Christian universities should equip graduates to apply the doctrine across professional, pastoral, and social contexts, and interdisciplinary collaboration among theologians, musicologists, ethicists, and social scientists should explore the relations between *Imago Dei*, dignity, and cultural expression in Nigeria.

9.5 Foster Inclusive and Equitable Public Policies

Government and policymakers should develop inclusive, equitable policies recognising every individual's worth as an image-bearer. Economic policies should be judged by their effects on the vulnerable, not only by efficiency and aggregate growth, and human rights frameworks, anti-corruption legislation, and welfare provisions should rest on the conviction that dignity is God-given and non-negotiable, which goes deeper than political ideology or international pressure.

10.0 CONCLUSION

This study has explored the ethical ramifications of *Imago Dei* through a musicological lens, focusing on human dignity and social action in Nigeria. It argues that a robust theology of the doctrine requires moving from theoretical acknowledgement to concrete engagement: confronting systems of oppression and promoting social change grounded in every person's divine worth, and forming communities of mutual care and reciprocal responsibility in which all relationships are properly ordered under divine sovereignty.

Drawing on scriptural analysis, a historical survey from the patristic period to the present, African perspectives, and socio-ethical critique, the paper has shown that *Imago Dei* mandates recognition of equal dignity and inherent worth for all, a foundational imperative undergirding resistance to domination and advocacy for justice. Music grounded in this paradigm becomes a powerful instrument for affirming dignity, building solidarity, and fostering moral transformation where the devaluation of life persists.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adedeji, Femi, and Omolara Loko. "African Sensibility in the Training of Nigerian Gospel Musicians." *Journal of Nigerian Music Education* 11, no. 1 (2019).

Afolayan, Adeshina. Philosophy and the Crisis of Values in Nigeria. Ibadan: University Press, 2019.

Agbiji, Obaji M., and Ignatius Swart. "Religion and Social Transformation in Africa: A Critical and Appreciative Perspective." *Scriptura* 114, no. 1 (2015).

Aquinas, Thomas. Summa Theologiae. Translated by English Dominican Province. London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1920.

Augustine. De Trinitate. Translated by Edmund Hill. New York: New City Press, 1991.

Awoshori, Williams Peter. "Covenant and Communal Identity: Biblical Foundations for Unity in a Religiously and Ethnically Divided Nigeria." *Uyo Journal of Religion and Society* 4, no. 1 (2025).

Ayorinde, Olumide, and Tolu S. Ajose. "Music and Spirituality in Africa: Gospel Music, Spirituality, and Everyday Meaning-Making in Nigeria." *Religions* 13, no. 12 (2022): art. 1227. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121227.

Barth, Karl. Church Dogmatics. Vol. III/1. Translated by J. W. Edwards et al. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958.

Berkouwer, G. C. Man: The Image of God. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1962.

Boaheng, Isaac. "The Doctrine of Imago Dei and the Challenge of Euthanasia." *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 6 (2020): 158–68. https://doi.org/10.38159/erats.2020062.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Ethics. Edited by Eberhard Bethge. New York: Macmillan, 1959.

Calvin, John. Institutes of the Christian Religion. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006.

Collste, Göran. Is Human Life Special? Religious and Philosophical Perspectives on the Principle of Human Dignity. Berlin: Peter Lang Press, 2002.

Cone, James H. A Black Theology of Liberation. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970.

Cone, James H. The Spirituals and the Blues. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1972.

Dube, Musa W. Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000.

Ehusani, George. An Afro-Christian Vision: "Ozovehe!" Toward a More Humanized

World. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003.
Euba, Akin. Towards an African Pianism: Keyboard Music of Akin Euba, Joshua Uzoigwe, and J. H. Kwabena Nketia. Bayreuth: African Music Publishers, 1992.
Green, Joel B. The Gospel of Luke. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.
Gutiérrez, Gustavo. A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973.
Howard, Thomas Albert. Imago Dei: Human Dignity in Ecumenical Perspective. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013.
Kidner, Derek. Psalms 1–72. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. London: IVP, 1973.
Kilner, John F. Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015.
Mbiti, John S. African Religions and Philosophy. London: Heinemann, 1969.
McKim, Donald K. The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.
Moltmann, Jürgen. Man: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
O'Brien, Peter T. The Letter to the Colossians, to Philemon. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982.
O'Callaghan, Paul. The Mystery of the Human Person: A Personalist Theology. Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2016.
Odozor, Paulinus I. Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition since Vatican II. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016.
Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.
Olusegun, Fawenu Bamidele. "Imago Dei and the Sanctity of Human Life in the Context of Genesis 9:1–6." *Religions: A Journal of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions* 24, no. 2 (2014).
Onah, Greg. Human Dignity and Social Justice in Nigeria: Theological Reflections on Contemporary Challenges. Enugu: Snaap Press, 2020.
Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Theology Brewed in an African Pot. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2008.
Owoeye, Emmanuel Akande. "A Theological Reflection of 'Imago Dei' as a Response to LGBTQ Advocates." *Pharos Journal of Theology* 105, no. 2 (2024).
Schreiner, Thomas R. Romans. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998.
Shelemay, Kay Kaufman. Soundscapes: Exploring Music in a Changing World. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.
Smith, Kevin G. Academic Writing and Theological Research: A Guide for Students. Johannesburg: South African Theological Seminary Press, 2008.
Volf, Miroslav. After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.
Wenham, Gordon J. Genesis 1–15. Word Biblical Commentary 1. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987.
Westermann, Claus. Genesis 1–11: A Commentary. Translated by John J. Scullion. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984.
Wolterstorff, Nicholas. Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980.
Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006.

About the Authors

Rev. Prof. John Ayo Oladapo is an Associate Professor of Ethics with interdisciplinary research interests in Christian ethics, pastoral ministry, marriage and family life, counselling, religion and society, church leadership, digital media, and sustainable societal development. His scholarship engages contemporary ethical issues in African and Nigerian contexts, particularly the intersections of faith, family, leadership, technology, social transformation, and public morality. He also has extensive experience in pastoral, ecclesial, and community leadership.

He serves as the Executive Director of the Institute of Family Life and Societal Development, Director of Academic Affairs at Baptist College of Theology, Igede-Ekiti, and Editor of the McGee Journal of Theology and International Journal of Family Life and

Societal Development. As a scholar and researcher, Prof. Oladapo has contributed significantly to the advancement of knowledge, with about 50 scholarly publications in his areas of expertise.

Rev. Mrs. Oderinu Elizabeth Olubunmi is the Head of Department of Church music at Baptist College of Theology, Igede Ekiti and a Doctoral candidate in the faulty of Church Music at the Nigerian Baptist theological seminary Ogbomosho. She specialises in Music Education, Voice and Composition.