



## *Imago Dei* and Soul: How to Justify A Special Position of Humans?

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**Abstract:** Today, it is highly controversial in Western societies, that humans are made in the image of God (“*imago Dei*”). This article is looking for a unique feature of man that can justify his special position. The methodological approach consists of contrasting research results and social developments documented in current publications with modern theological and philosophical publications. Our intelligence and the fact that we are self-aware are no longer sufficient as a unique human feature, because biology, palaeoanthropology and computer technology call it into question. This article shows that the soul remains the unique feature of the human being. But often no clear distinction is made between the transcendent soul and the immanent mind. The article therefore emphasises that the soul is transcendent, eternal and a gift of God from transcendence. In order to achieve this, we must abandon the bipartition of man into body and soul and accept the tripartite division of man into body, mind and soul. The transcendence of the soul provides us with a justification for why humans and only humans are “*imago Dei*”. This gives us a basis for claiming the right of every human being for life and personal realisation.

**Keywords:** Christianity, image of God, soul, theology and nature, tripartite view of humans

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### **1. Introduction**

Humans differ from all other created beings on Earth in that they are made in the image of God. “Image of God” is translated into Latin as “*imago Dei*”. It comes from the first creation narrative in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. “Then God said, ‘Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness....’ So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Gn. 1:26–27). This biblical passage makes three fundamental statements about humans that clearly outline the Bible's image of human beings: *First*, humans are creatures of God. *Second*, humans are male and female. *Third*, humans are made in the image of God.

Even though these statements are perhaps 3,000 years old, they are highly relevant and hotly debated topics in today's society. Let's start with the first one: “creature of God”. This statement gives a clear hierarchy: He is the Creator, we are the

creatures. When God commands, we should obey. The rules he gives us (keyword: Ten Commandments) should be the guideline for our actions. Instead, a large part of humanity rejects the divine laws and/or wants to live according to its own human laws.

The second statement, that humans are either male or female and nothing else, meets with fierce resistance in today's society. However, this statement is an observation in nature that has been confirmed time and again by biology and medicine. Apart from extremely rare exceptions,<sup>1</sup> every person is biologically clearly identifiable as male or female. This is contradicted by gender ideology, which believes that there are two independent concepts: on the one hand, the biologically defined "sex" and, on the other, the socially constructed "gender".<sup>2</sup> This leads to the conclusion that, in order to make people happy, they must be given the opportunity to shape their lives and bodies in accordance with the "gender" to which they feel they belong. Even among Christians, there are numerous advocates of gender ideology, although it is clearly incompatible with the Judeo-Christian view of humanity. Gender ideology is the systematic denial of myself as God's masterpiece! If I were to accept that I am a masterpiece of God, I would also accept my biological sex as a gift from God to me and also accept the possibilities and tasks resulting from my biological sex; and then I would not need to deny my biological sex and look for a different "gender" or even undergo a "sex change". If I accept that I am a masterpiece of God, then I can also accept and believe that other people are also masterpieces of God. Then I no longer look down on others, but realise more and more that every person is valuable just as he/she is. This opens the way to tolerance, love and solidarity and puts selfishness in its place.

If even the first two statements of Genesis 1:26–27 are largely denied or at least questioned in Western societies today, then it should come as no surprise that large parts of Western societies cannot relate to the statement "Humans are made in the image of God" (*imago Dei*). Nevertheless, precisely the concept of the *imago Dei* is the only viable justification for the special position of humans in this world, for their special dignity and their special value. If the concept of the *imago Dei* is rejected, human rights are inevitably jeopardised and human dignity degenerates into a relative value that can be sacrificed to the interests of powerful groups. The example of human trafficking of women in Nusa Tenggara (Indonesia) shows how important it is to firmly defend the statement "Humans are made in the image of God". By

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Roger Lebel, "Gender: Genetics, Genitality, Generosity (Grace), Gentility," *Theology and Science* 9, no. 4 (2011): 435–450, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2011.616017>.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence S. Mayer, and Paul R. McHugh, "Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences," *The New Atlantis* 50 (2016): 87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43893424>.

contemplating the concept of the *imago Dei*, the female victims of human trafficking recognise that they have the same dignity and value as men in the sight of God.<sup>3</sup>

The topic of *imago Dei* has been the subject of intense debate among philosophers and theologians in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Very different approaches are represented, which look at the topic from a wide variety of philosophical and theological perspectives. It is remarkable that in this wealth of different approaches, the soul is not used to justify the special position of the human being.

In this essay, I will first provide a brief insight into the current discussion and the threats to the concept of *imago Dei*. I will then explain how the belief in the existence of the soul can be a solid foundation for the statement “Humans are made in the image of God”. However, as I will explain, it is necessary to abandon the bipartition of man into body and soul and instead accept the tripartition of man into body, mind and soul.

## 2. Research Method

This article brings fundamental statements of the Christian faith into dialogue with the research results of modern natural sciences and current social developments. The

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<sup>3</sup> Ira D. Mangililo, “Imago Dei. Sebuah Upaya Membaca Alkitab Sebagai Perempuan Indonesia Dalam Konteks Perdagangan Orang di Nusa Tenggara Timur,” *Indonesian Journal of Theology* 5, no. 2 (2017): 147–177, <https://doi.org/10.46567/ijt.v5i2.23>.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Wentzel Van Huyssteen, “Fallen Angels or Rising Beasts? Theological Perspectives on Human Uniqueness,” *Theology and Science* 1, no. 2 (2003): 161–178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1474670032000124577>; Celia Deane-Drummond, ““Shadow Sophia in Christological Perspective”: A Reply to Responses,” *Theology and Science* 6, no. 1 (2008): 61–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700701806056>; Joshua M. Moritz, “Evolution, the End of Human Uniqueness, and the Election of the Imago Dei,” *Theology and Science* 9, no. 3 (2011): 307–339, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2011.587665>; Joshua M. Moritz, “Are Hominins Special? Human Origins as the Image and Likeness of God,” *Theology and Science* 18, no. 4 (2020): 537–551, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2020.1825188>; Claudia Welz, “Imago Dei. References to the invisible,” *Studia Theologica* 65, no. 1 (2011): 74–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2011.578372>; Murray Stein, “Imago Dei on the Psychological Plane,” *Jung Journal* 10, no. 4 (2016): 15–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19342039.2016.1225245>; Joanna Leidenhag, “Uniqueness and the Presence of the Image: Towards a Pneumatological Foundation,” in *Issues in Science and Theology: Are We Special? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, edited by Michael Fuller, Dirk Evers, Anne Runehov, and Knut-Willy Sæther (Basel: Springer, 2017), 255–270; Karen O'Donnell, “Performing the Imago Dei: Human Enhancement, Artificial Intelligence and Optative Image-Bearing,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 18, no. 1 (2018): 4–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2018.1448674>; Ted Peters, “Imago Dei, DNA, and the Transhuman Way,” *Theology and Science* 16, no. 3 (2018): 353–362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2018.1488529>; Michael Fuller, and David Jasper, Eds. *Made in the Image of God* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2021); Annelien C. Rabie-Boshoff, and Johan Buitendag, “Imago Dei: We are but dust and shadow,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 77, no. 3 (2021): a6766, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6766>; Eva van Urk-Coster, “Created in the Image of God: Both Human and Non-Human Animals?,” *Theology and Science* 19, no. 4 (2021): 343–362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2021.1982248>; Braden Molhoek, “The Scope of Human Creative Action: Created Co-creators, Imago Dei and Artificial General Intelligence,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2022): a7697, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7697>; and Eric Priest, “Human Uniqueness: Debates in Science and Theology,” *Zygon* 58, no. 2 (2023): 384–404, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12901>.

methodological approach in this article logically consists of first analysing relevant research results of modern natural sciences and current social developments on the basis of modern publications and then contrasting them with Christian statements of faith and modern theological and philosophical publications. In doing so, it is important to work out where central terms are used in a blurred or contradictory way and to clarify these terms.

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### 3. Results and Discussion

#### The Current Discussion and Threats to The Concept of *Imago Dei*

Even if parts of Western society can no longer do anything with the statement “Humans are made in the image of God”, there has been an intensive discussion about this among philosophers and theologians in recent years. I have already quoted some modern contributions to this discussion in the introduction above. A distinction can be made between approaches to the discussion that consider human beings in their substance, others that consider their relationships and others that consider their function in creation.<sup>5</sup> This discussion is understandable and necessary, because the topic of *imago Dei* is about the question of what makes us humans unique, what makes us special, what distinguishes us from animals. It is precisely this special nature of humans that has been increasingly called into question since the end of the 20th century. These questions and doubts about the concept of *imago Dei* are centred on the human being in his substance. Examples of this are:

- a. Modern biology is showing more and more clearly how closely related the great apes are to us. This has led to certain people wanting to introduce basic rights for great apes that are similar to human rights. Well-known is the “Great Ape Project”, which goes back to the book by Cavalieri and Singer.<sup>6</sup>
- b. On the other hand, there are politicians and interest groups who claim that a human embryo is a living being, but not a human being.
- c. Modern palaeoanthropology not only proves that humans are descended from apes, it also shows that until around 40,000 years ago, two other widespread human species existed alongside the present-day *Homo sapiens*: *Homo*

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<sup>5</sup> David Hollenbach. “Human dignity in Catholic thought,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Human Dignity. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Marcus Düwell, Jens Braarvig, Roger Brownsword and Dietmar Mieth, 250–259; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511979033.031>

<sup>6</sup> Paola Cavalieri, and Peter Singer. Eds. *The Great Ape Project: Equality Beyond Humanity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

*neanderthalensis* in Europe and *Homo heidelbergensis daliensis* or the so-called “Denisovans” in Asia.<sup>7</sup>

- d. There is intense debate as to whether there will one day be robots or computers that are as intelligent as humans. The keyword is “artificial intelligence”. In this context, I would like to refer to the articles by Balle<sup>8</sup>, Molhoek<sup>9</sup>, O'Donnell<sup>10</sup>, Turner<sup>11</sup> and Navon<sup>12</sup>. I would also like to mention the book by Puzio et al.<sup>13</sup>, which contains English and German contributions on the topic of “Theology and Artificial Intelligence”. Larson<sup>14</sup> explains the limits of artificial intelligence.

So what makes humans human? What makes us fundamentally different from other beings? What makes us the “image of God”? What is our “unique feature”? Well, certainly not that man has two arms, two legs and a head. Because God is a transcendent being, and as a transcendent being he needs neither arms nor legs nor a head. On the other hand, all apes have two arms, two legs and a head, and robots can also be constructed in this way.<sup>15</sup>

Many people will answer the question of what distinguishes us from all other beings with the following: our intelligence, our reason and the fact that we are self-

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<sup>7</sup> Andreas May, *Viaje a la Ciudad Eterna – En la búsqueda del sentido de la vida* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2024 [in press]). Giorgio Manzi, “Before the Emergence of *Homo sapiens*: Overview on the Early-to-Middle Pleistocene Fossil Record (with a Proposal about *Homo heidelbergensis* at the subspecific level),” *International Journal of Evolutionary Biology* 2011 (2011): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.4061/2011/582678>. João C.Teixeira, and Alan Cooper. “Using Hominin Introgression to Trace Modern Human Dispersals,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 116, no. 31 (2019): 15327–15332, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1904824116>. Kaileigh D. Ahlquist, Mayra M. Bañuelos, Alyssa Funk, Jiaying Lai, Stephen Rong, Fernando A. Villanea, and Kelsey E. Witt, “Our Tangled Family Tree: New Genomic Methods Offer Insight into the Legacy of Archaic Admixture,” *Genome Biology and Evolution* 13, no. 7 (2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gbe/evab115>. Anders Bergström, Chris Stringer, Mateja Hajdinjak, Eleanor M. L. Scerri, and Pontus Skoglund, “Origins of Modern Human Ancestry,” *Nature* 590 (2021): 229–237, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03244-5>

<sup>8</sup> Simon Balle, “Theological Dimensions of Humanlike Robots: A Roadmap for Theological Inquiry,” *Theology and Science* 21, no. 1 (2023): 132–156, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2022.2155916>

<sup>9</sup> Molhoek, “Scope of Human Creative Action”.

<sup>10</sup> O'Donnell, “Performing the Imago Dei”.

<sup>11</sup> Léon Turner, “Will We Know Them When We Meet Them? Human Cyborg and Non-Human Personhood,” *Zygon* 58, no. 4 (2023): 1076–1098, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12923>.

<sup>12</sup> Mois Navon, “To Make a Mind – A Primer on Conscious Robots,” *Theology and Science* 22, no. 1 (2024): 221–241, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2023.2294530>.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Puzio, Nicole Kunkel, and Hendrik Klinge. Eds. *Alexa, How Do You Feel About Religion? Theological Approaches to Technology and Artificial Intelligence*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.53186/1030373>

<sup>14</sup> Erik J. Larson, *The Myth of Artificial Intelligence: Why Computers Can't Think the Way We Do*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Balle, “Theological Dimensions of Humanlike Robots”. Puzio, Kunkel, and Klinge, *Alexa, How Do You Feel About Religion?*

aware and reflect on ourselves.<sup>16</sup> This answer has a lot going for it, because although apes are very intelligent animals, there is no evidence that they are self-aware and self-reflective. On the other hand, we have these characteristics in common with God, so that the image of God could be related to them. But there are the following reasons that speak against seeking our distinction from all other beings in this:

- a. The fact that we are aware of ourselves and reflect on ourselves does not apply to all people and to all stages of life: what about embryos or newborn children on the one hand and mentally handicapped people or elderly people with dementia on the other? Another example: In addition to our four daughters, my wife also gave birth to our only son, Isaac Maria, who died after 13 hours because he had anencephaly, a malformation incompatible with life that prevents the brain from developing properly. We had been counselled to abort him, but we knew that he was a human being like us, so my wife carried him to term and let him live the time he was allowed. Many people think differently; that's why abortion is permitted in many countries and euthanasia is openly contemplated or even practised.
- b. Even if the great apes living today are clearly different from us in their intellectual abilities, the fossil record shows that we humans descended from great apes, which descended from other apes, and so on. In terms of the body, we see a continuous evolution.<sup>17</sup> And with regard to intellectual abilities, we must assume that there was also a continuous evolution. So where should we draw the line between humans and animals?
- c. The constant development of computer technology and research into "artificial intelligence" is raising expectations in many people that it should one day be possible to create supercomputers or robots that are just as intelligent as we are and are also self-aware and self-reflective.<sup>18</sup> At the moment, this is not yet possible, because the brain of an adult male has around 86 billion neurons,<sup>19</sup> which are interconnected in multiple ways; and no computer in existence today even comes close to this level of complexity. However, this does not mean that it is impossible in principle, as each neuron can only perform a very limited number of actions and impulse processing operations. The efficiency of the human brain is based on the large number of neurons and their complex interconnections. It is marvellous that such a complex and powerful human

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<sup>16</sup> Priest, "Human Uniqueness", 388.

<sup>17</sup> May, *Viaje a la Ciudad Eterna*.

<sup>18</sup> Balle, "Theological Dimensions of Humanlike Robots", 138. O'Donnell, "Performing the Imago Dei."

<sup>19</sup> Frederico A. C. Azevedo, Ludmila R. B. Carvalho, Lea T. Grinberg, José Marcelo Farfel, Renata E. L. Ferretti, Renata E. P. Leite, Wilson Jacob Filho, Roberto Lent, and Suzana Herculano-Houzel, "Equal Numbers of Neuronal and Nonneuronal Cells Make the Human Brain an Isometrically scaled-up Primate Brain," *The Journal of Comparative Neurology* 513, no. 5 (2009): 532–541, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cne.21974>

brain is made up of such “simple” building blocks. If there were supercomputers or robots that are just as intelligent as we are and are also self-aware and self-reflective, could we still regard our intelligence as a special characteristic of humans? Would we then have to give these supercomputers or robots “basic rights” or “human rights”? Or perhaps at least the right to be a copyright owner?<sup>20</sup>

Do we now have to give up and accept that we humans have nothing special and that embryos and old people can be killed, but great apes and supercomputers must be protected? If we want to defend the concept of *imago Dei* and thus the dignity of human beings, do we now have to limit ourselves exclusively to the relationships of human beings and their function in creation? Not necessarily, because we humans have a unique feature in our substance: the soul.

The concept of *imago Dei* is of great importance if we want to protect the dignity and value of the human being from abuse. It is therefore very necessary to have generally understandable and comprehensible justifications for the concept of *imago Dei*. In this context, the soul has a key position, as it represents a unique feature of the human being that cannot be rendered obsolete by technological progress.

### **The Soul and Its Distinction from The Mind**

According to its definition, the soul is something transcendent, i.e. it does not come from our universe and it possesses neither matter, nor energy, nor space, and therefore it can also be immortal. For this reason, the natural sciences cannot investigate the soul and we only know that it exists from the religious and cultural traditions of humanity as well as personal experiences. The far-reaching power and large number of religious and cultural traditions that testify to the existence of the soul<sup>21</sup> is a very good reason to be convinced of the existence of the soul, far beyond a personal will to believe or not to believe.

However, a few misunderstandings must now be avoided and terms clarified. Until a hundred years ago, a distinction was only made between the material part of the human being, i.e. the body, and the non-material part of the human being. As the level of knowledge in the natural sciences about the non-material part of the human

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<sup>20</sup> Jasper Doomen, “The Artificial Intelligence Entity as a Legal Person,” *Information & Communications Technology Law* 32, no. 3 (2023): 277–287, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2023.2196827>

<sup>21</sup> See, for example: Cosmin-Tudor Ciocan, “The Value of the Soul in the Religious Views: An Overview targeting the Salvation of an Individual,” *Dialogo* 6, no. 2 (2020): 233–244, <https://doi.org/10.18638/dialogo.2020.6.2.21>. Karl-Heinz Ohlig, “La muerte y su “superación” religiosa en la historia de la humanidad,” *Concilium* 318 (2006): 19–22, <https://www.revistaconcilium.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/pdf/318.pdf>

being was still low at that time, it was not a relevant cognitive problem if no clear distinction was made between soul and mind.

This is why, to this day, not only most Christian theologians but also society as a whole still categorise the entire non-material part of the human being as the “soul” as opposed to the body. Even in current scientific discussions on these topics, the entire non-material part of the human being – i.e. soul and mind – is usually lumped together and undifferentiatedly contrasted with the body:

- a. A good example of this is a modern review article on the body-soul problem, which gives the following definition right at the beginning: “By ‘substance dualism’ we mean the generic view that (1) there is a substantial self, soul, or ego that is immaterial and (2) that self, soul, or ego is not identical to the body and is the bearer of personal identity.”<sup>22</sup>
- b. Another example is the work of theologian Joshua Farris on the soul, who adopts an “emergentist view” in his reflections on the origin of the soul.<sup>23</sup> He does not distinguish between mind and soul, but uses both terms as if they were identical. Farris explicitly writes: “I am using ‘soul’ and ‘mind’ interchangeably.”<sup>24</sup> And in his 2012 article in which he defends the concept of “soul”, he constantly refers to the “soul”, but it is clear from the context that he means what is referred to here as “mind”.<sup>25</sup>
- c. As a third example, I would like to cite Ehrman, who is concerned with the transcendent soul but lumps it together with the immanent mind. This is shown by the following sentence: “Braine emphasizes humankind’s animal form of intellectuality – language – as the key to the coherence of talking about ‘soul’.”<sup>26</sup>

Such a vague definition of the immaterial aspects of the human being, which does not distinguish between immanent and transcendent, can lead to numerous misunderstandings in the dialogue between theology, philosophy and the natural sciences; because then it is of course very easy to talk at cross-purposes and compare apples with oranges. The research findings of modern natural science repeatedly

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<sup>22</sup> Jonathan J. Loose, Angus J. L. Menuge, and J. P. Moreland, “Introduction: Substance Dualism and Its Physicalist Rivals,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism*, edited by Jonathan J. Loose, Angus J. L. Menuge, and J. P. Moreland (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Joshua Ryan Farris, “Souls, Emergent and Created. Why Mere Emergent Dualism Is Insufficient,” *Philosophia Christi* 20, no. 1 (2018a): 83–92, <https://doi.org/10.5840/pc201820111>

Joshua Ryan Farris, “Creational Problems for Soul-Emergence from Matter: Philosophical and Theological Concerns,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 60, no. 3 (2018b): 406–427, <https://doi.org/10.1515/nzsth-2018-0023>

<sup>24</sup> Farris, “Souls, Emergent and Created”, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua Ryan Farris, “The Soul-Concept: Meaningfully Disregard or Meaningfully Embrace,” *Annales Philosophici* 5 (2012): 59–68.

<sup>26</sup> Terrence P. Ehrman, “Anthropogenesis and the Soul,” *Scientia et Fides* 8, no. 2 (2020): 175, <https://doi.org/10.12775/SetF.2020.018>

demonstrate that an important area of the non-material part of the human being depends on the body. As a result, certain authors – such as Aslan<sup>27</sup> – go so far as to claim that important aspects of the non-material part of the human being – e.g. consciousness and feelings – are only the result of physical, chemical and biological processes.

Personally, I am not so sure about this; but I openly admit that nowadays it is easy to prove that feelings and consciousness can be influenced by physical, chemical and biological processes, while it is much more difficult to prove any other opinion. These advances in the natural sciences, together with the generally accepted vagueness of terminology for the non-material part of the human being, lead to the fact that statements such as the following two are not only made, but also accepted by numerous people as scientifically justified:

- a. Nancey Murphy: “To sum up, science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness.”<sup>28</sup>
- b. William Hasker: “And finally, I propose that, rather than consider souls as being created individually by God and infused into their organisms, we should embrace an emergentist view in which the souls are generated naturally as a result of the structure and functioning of the biological organism – in the case of humans and the higher animals, of the brain and nervous system.”<sup>29</sup>

An interesting detail is that Nancey Murphy is a Christian theologian. Many more atheists than Christians will certainly agree with Murphy's quote.<sup>30</sup> But even with Hasker's interpretation,<sup>31</sup> not much remains of the original concept of the “soul”; for if the soul were “generated naturally as a result of the structure and functioning of the biological organism”, how would the existence of a soul be a unique feature of humans? And the next, even more important question to Murphy and Hasker:<sup>32</sup> How can a human survive the death of his biological body if he has no soul or if this “soul” is immanent and not transcendent?

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<sup>27</sup> Reza Aslan, *God: A Human History* (New York: Random House, 2017), 39.

<sup>28</sup> Nancey C. Murphy, “Human Nature: Historical, Scientific and Religious Issues,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, edited by Warren S. Brown, Nancey C. Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 18. Jones and LaRock deal with the later works of Nancey Murphy on this topic: Mostyn Jones & Eric LaRock, “From Murphy's Christian Physicalism to Lowe's Dualism,” *TheoLogica* 5, no. 2 (2021): 100–128, <https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v5i2.56273>

<sup>29</sup> William Hasker, “A Critique of Thomistic Dualism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Substance Dualism*, edited by Jonathan J. Loose, Angus J. L. Menuge, and J. P. Moreland (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 130.

<sup>30</sup> Murphy, “Human Nature: Historical”, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Hasker, “Critique of Thomistic Dualism”, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Murphy, “Human Nature: Historical”. Hasker, “Critique of Thomistic Dualism”.

If what Hasker<sup>33</sup> calls the “soul” has arisen naturally from the brain, it cannot be transcendent, but must be immanent. So either what Hasker calls the “soul” is something immanent – and then it cannot be immortal – or he would have to assume an unimaginable further step, a step in which the immanent becomes something transcendent... We must therefore formulate the following decisive criticism of Hasker's view quoted above:<sup>34</sup> It is plausible to assume that the material body produces the immanent mind; but it is completely implausible to assume that the immanent mind evolves into the transcendent soul. In what way should this transition from the immanent mind to the transcendent soul take place? Is it a self-redemption or a self-deification?

In complete contrast to the opinion of Hasker,<sup>35</sup> all Christian churches consider the soul to be a voluntary gift from the Creator. For example, today the doctrine of the Catholic Church is that the human body was created through biological evolution, but that the soul was created directly by God.<sup>36</sup> Accepting the teaching of the Christian churches, there is no longer any problem to explain the transcendence of the soul: Of course, the transcendent Creator is able to give something transcendent to man as his immanent creature. Man receives his transcendent soul from God. It is not necessary that something immanent has to transform itself into something transcendent by its own power. Being transcendent, the soul can be immortal. If, on the other hand, one were to claim that the soul is not transcendent at all, but something immanent, then it would be very difficult to justify why the soul should be immortal, because everything immanent that we know is transient.

Since we need the immortal soul in order to survive biological death as a person, the belief in the existence of the soul is an important element of the Christian faith. If we want to prevent that a naive transfer of scientific knowledge into the realm of philosophy and theology destroys the belief in the soul and thus undermines the eternal perspective of the Christian faith, we must abandon the hitherto prevailing division of the human being into a material body and a non-material soul. That is why I distinguish between soul and mind in the non-material parts of the human being:<sup>37</sup>

- a. The “mind” differs from the body in that it is not material, and from the soul in that it is not transcendent. The mind has a lot to do with thoughts,

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<sup>33</sup> Hasker, “Critique of Thomistic Dualism”, 130.

<sup>34</sup> Hasker, “Critique of Thomistic Dualism”, 130.

<sup>35</sup> Hasker, “Critique of Thomistic Dualism”, 130.

<sup>36</sup> La Santa Sede, “Mensaje del santo padre Juan Pablo II a los miembros de la Academia Pontificia de Ciencias (22 de octubre de 1996),” [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/messages/pont\\_messages/1996/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19961022\\_evolutione.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/messages/pont_messages/1996/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19961022_evolutione.html) (accessed November 11, 2023). Ehrman, “Anthropogenesis and the Soul”, 181. Kenneth W. Kemp, “God, Evolution, and the Body of Adam,” *Scientia et Fides* 8, no. 2 (2020): 139–172, <https://doi.org/10.12775/SetF.2020.017>.

<sup>37</sup> Andreas May, “Since When have Humans had a Soul?,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (2022): 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7311>. May, *Viaje a la Ciudad Eterna*.

consciousness and feelings, but is not limited to these. Personality and personal history have their seat in the mind. It interacts with both the soul and the body. Although being non-material, the mind is certainly immanent, being a part of our universe. The mind is immanent because feelings and consciousness are strongly influenced by physical, chemical and biological processes.<sup>38</sup> Important aspects of the mind can be explained by physical, chemical and biological processes. Furthermore, a direct relation between the state of the mind and the state of the brain can be recognized; just as a direct relation between the evolution of the mind and the evolution of the brain can be recognized. However, the mind cannot (yet?) be fully explained by the activities of the brain – for example, it has not yet been possible to localise where exactly in the brain the seat of consciousness is.<sup>39</sup>

- b. The soul is a gift of God from transcendence that every human being receives shortly after conception.<sup>40</sup> The soul comes from transcendence and can therefore be immortal. This enables a person to survive after their biological death. Since the soul comes from transcendence, it is neither matter nor energy; nor can it be recognised using the methods of the natural sciences.
- c. The soul is what makes us the image of God, not the mind, because the soul itself comes from transcendence, just like God.
- d. Christianity teaches that the soul is separated from the body when a person dies.<sup>41</sup> At death, a person's personality and personal history are not destroyed, but remain in the soul. This means that after the death of the biological body, the mind is only connected to the soul. Therefore, I assume that, during the lifetime of the biological body, the immanent mind is already closely linked to the transcendent soul or, at least, cooperates with it.

Now, and only now, after we have clearly distinguished the immanent mind from the transcendent soul, can we use the soul as a unique feature of human beings. Possession of the transcendent soul distinguishes humans from all apes and from all other living beings on this planet. And even supercomputers or robots will never have a transcendent soul, no matter how clever they may be. On the other hand, every

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example: Mark Pretorius, "Examining the Function of Neurobiology in Christian Spiritual Experiences and Practice," *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): a6182, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6182>

<sup>39</sup> Riccardo Manzotti, and Paolo Moderato, "Neuroscience: Dualism in Disguise," in *Contemporary Dualism*, edited by Andrea Lavazza, and Howard Robinson (London: Routledge, 2013), 86, 90.

<sup>40</sup> Identical twins are created from the same egg shortly after fertilisation. As each of the two – genetically identical – twins has its own personal soul, it must be assumed that they have received their souls after the two twins have separated from each other.

<sup>41</sup> The Holy See, "Catechism of the Catholic Church," section 997, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM) (accessed November 11, 2023). May, *Viaje a la Ciudad Eterna*.

human being, whether embryo or old man, genius or mentally handicapped, has a soul.

Since every human being has a transcendent soul given to him by God, we can rightly say that every human being is *imago Dei*. However, this being human is not limited to the present-day human *Homo sapiens*; his ancestor *Homo heidelbergensis heidelbergensis* and his sibling species *Homo heidelbergensis steinheimensis* and *Homo neanderthalensis* in Europe as well as *Homo heidelbergensis daliensis* or the so-called "Denisovans" in Asia most likely also possessed a soul.<sup>42</sup> The conclusion that not only *Homo sapiens* but also *Homo heidelbergensis steinheimensis* and *Homo neanderthalensis* possessed a soul can be drawn from the fact that they buried their dead in certain places.<sup>43</sup>

I am aware that many people will find it difficult to give up the dichotomy of man into body and soul and instead accept the tripartite division of man into body, mind and soul. Perhaps it helps to accept the tripartite division of man into body, mind and soul if you realise that a comparable tripartite division exists in the Jewish tradition since a long time.<sup>44</sup> In Christianity, Irenaeus of Smyrna founded in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century a very long tradition of a similar tripartite division of the human being.<sup>45</sup> Since then, there were always Christian theologians who believed in a tripartite division, despite the fact that the predominant view was and still is the twofold division into body and soul.<sup>46</sup>

We have no choice but to accept the tripartition of the human being into body, mind and soul if we want to avoid equating the soul with the mind. We must distinguish mind and soul from each other, because otherwise we can no longer justify why the soul CANNOT be "generated naturally as a result of the structure and functioning of the biological organism". Only with a concept that clearly distinguishes the mind from the soul can we credibly argue that the soul is a gift of God from transcendence. And only then can we credibly defend the concept of the *imago Dei*.

By the way, if it were the case that the "soul" would be "generated naturally as a result of the structure and functioning of the biological organism", it could also be possible that a supercomputer would one day develop a "soul". This mind game may seem absurd; but if we fail to establish the distinction between the transcendent soul and the immanent mind, we will eventually end up in a society where great apes and

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<sup>42</sup> May, "Since When have Humans". May, *Viaje a la Ciudad Eterna*.

<sup>43</sup> May, "Since When have Humans". May, *Viaje a la Ciudad Eterna*.

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Bendeck Sotillos, "The Jewish Tradition and its Science of the Soul," *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 46, no. 4 (2023): 102, [https://jcla.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/JCLA-46.4\\_Winter-2023\\_Samuel-Bendeck-Sotillos.pdf](https://jcla.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/JCLA-46.4_Winter-2023_Samuel-Bendeck-Sotillos.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Gregg R. Allison, "Four Theses Concerning Human Embodiment," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 23, no. 2 (2019): 175, <https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/four-theses-concerning-human-embodiment-2/>. May, "Since When have Humans", 2.

<sup>46</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 322–327.

supercomputers have rights like humans, but unborn, old, sick or mentally disabled people no longer have rights.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this essay, I have explained that the topic of *imago Dei* – that humans are made in the image of God – is very controversial in Western societies today. It is not only intensively discussed by philosophers and theologians, but also questioned by modern biology and palaeoanthropology as well as modern technology. An obvious answer to the question of what distinguishes us from all other beings is: our intelligence, our reason and the fact that we are aware of ourselves and reflect on ourselves. But it is precisely this answer that is no longer viable in today's society because, on the one hand, biology and palaeoanthropology show how fluid the transitions are; and on the other hand, the constant development of computer technology and research into “artificial intelligence” are increasingly relativising our intelligence. There may even be robots with consciousness and feelings one day.

The soul remains our unique feature as human beings. However, the concept of the soul is also subject to severe erosion in Western societies. The problem is that the participants in scientific, philosophical and theological discussions do not distinguish clearly between the transcendent soul and the immanent mind in the non-material parts of the human being. Until a hundred years ago, it was not a significant problem of cognition if no clear distinction was made between soul and mind. But today it is a serious problem, as the natural sciences are increasingly able to explain the mind through the body. It is therefore all the more important today to work out that the soul is transcendent and eternal and that the soul is a gift of God from transcendence.

In order to achieve this, we must finally abandon the dichotomy of man into body and soul and accept the tripartite division of man into body, mind and soul. If we manage to clearly differentiate mind and soul, the two non-material parts of the human being, and no longer lump them together, then the findings of the natural sciences, which show ever more clearly how much the mind is something immanent and a product of evolution, can do no harm to the belief in the transcendent soul.

If we manage to establish the transcendent soul as the reason why man and only man is *imago Dei*, we will have a basis for claiming the right of every human being to live and develop – for every human being, born or unborn, genius or mentally handicapped. But if we do not give up the dichotomy of man into body and soul, the advances of neuroscience will continue to dismantle the Christian image of the soul until there is nothing left of it; and many people will throw the hope of life after death into the dustbin of history, just like Christianity.

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