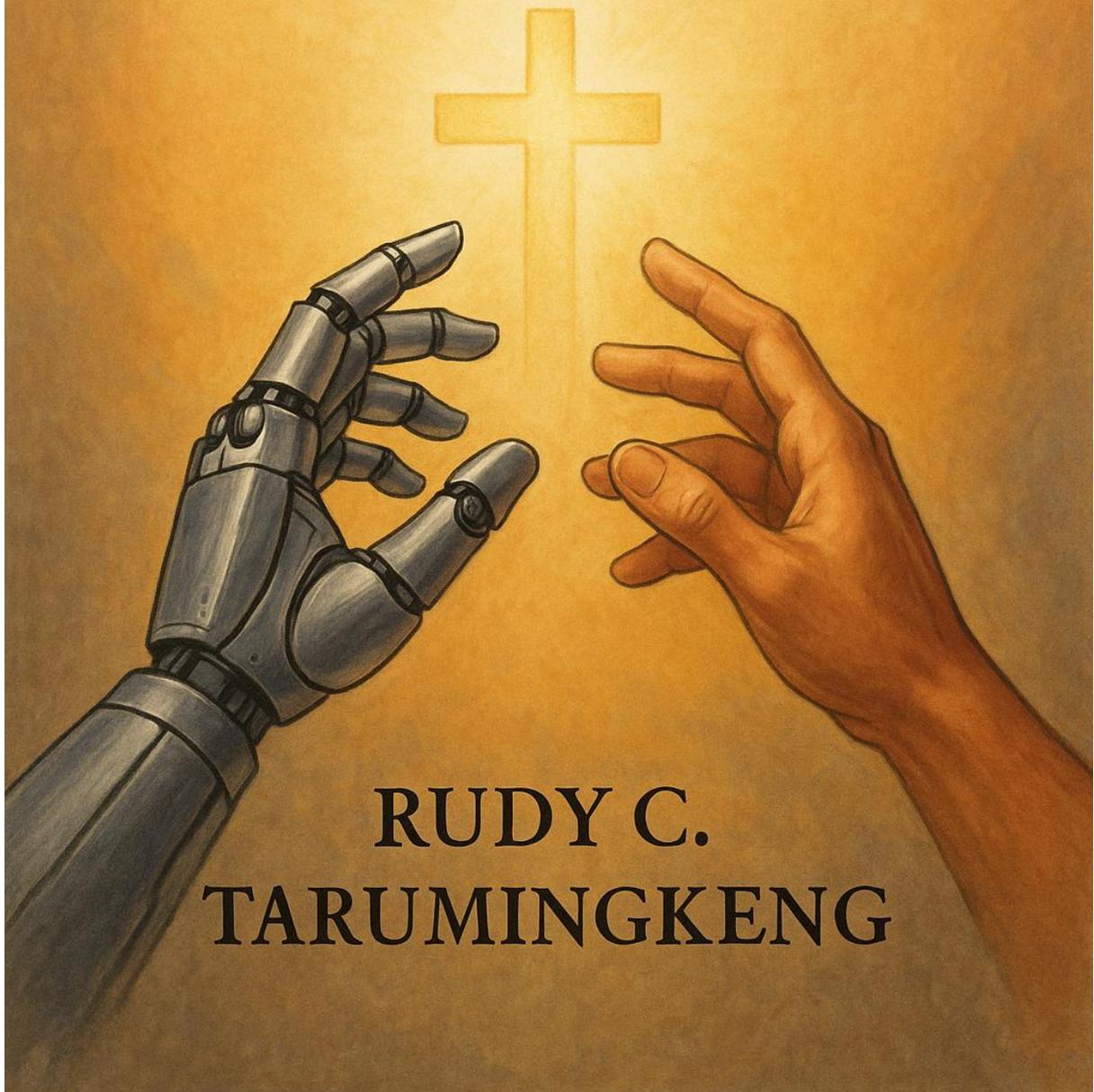


HUMAN AFTER ALL?

AI, CHRISTIAN ETHICS,
AND HUMAN DIGNITY



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Rudy C Tarumingkeng: Human After All? - AI, Christian Ethics, and
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Will be structured as follows:

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Human After All? AI, Christian Ethics, and Human Dignity

By Rudy C. Tarumingkeng

1. Introduction: The Question of Humanity in the Age of AI

We live in an age where machines learn, algorithms predict, and artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly acts in ways that once defined human distinctiveness. From medical diagnosis to creative writing, AI systems now demonstrate remarkable cognitive capacities that imitate human reasoning, memory, and problem-solving. This technological transformation raises a profound theological and ethical question: *what does it mean to be human after all?*

For centuries, human dignity has been grounded in the Christian belief that every person is created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) — a truth that confers unique moral worth upon each individual regardless of utility, intelligence, or social function. Yet AI, by replicating some aspects of human cognition, threatens to blur the boundary between person and machine, creation and creator. The challenge is no longer merely technical or economic; it is metaphysical and moral.

This essay explores the intersection of AI, Christian ethics, and human dignity. It asks how Christian anthropology can respond to a world where machines appear “intelligent,” and whether our understanding of *imago Dei* must evolve to address the moral agency and societal power of algorithmic systems. By engaging biblical theology, ethical reflection, and social analysis, we aim to reaffirm the irreplaceable dignity of human beings while articulating a faithful framework for responsible AI.

2. The Rise of Artificial Intelligence and the Challenge to Human Uniqueness

AI's rapid development — from rule-based systems to deep learning and generative models — represents a qualitative shift in technological capability. Machines no longer merely execute human commands; they learn from data, adapt, and even generate novel outputs. This evolution challenges one of modernity's central anthropological assumptions: that humans are unique in their rational and creative capacities.

Historically, human uniqueness was often tied to reason (*logos*). Enlightenment thinkers defined the human as *homo rationalis*, the rational animal. Yet if machines can now process information faster, solve complex problems, and even produce art or poetry, what remains uniquely human? The challenge, therefore, is not that AI becomes human, but that humans risk reducing themselves to machines — mere processors of efficiency and output.

Theologian Jacques Ellul warned decades ago that technological society tends to subordinate ethical reflection to instrumental rationality. What matters is not whether something *should* be done, but whether it *can* be done. In this context, Christian ethics must recover a vision of humanity that transcends computational logic — a humanity rooted not in capacity but in relationality, not in performance but in grace.

3. Imago Dei: The Theological Foundation of Human Dignity

The doctrine of *imago Dei* is foundational for Christian anthropology. In Genesis 1:26–27, God declares, “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness.” This image bestows upon human beings an intrinsic dignity and moral responsibility within creation. Unlike functionalist or utilitarian accounts of value, *imago Dei* asserts that human worth is not earned but given — a reflection of divine intentionality.

Throughout Christian history, interpretations of *imago Dei* have varied. Some emphasize **substantive** aspects — reason, will, or moral

conscience — as reflecting divine attributes. Others focus on **relational** dimensions, seeing humanity's image-bearing as participation in the Trinitarian communion of love. A third view highlights the **functional** aspect — humanity as steward or co-creator entrusted to cultivate creation.

In the context of AI, each of these interpretations offers both insights and tensions. If the image of God lies primarily in rationality, then intelligent machines seem to encroach upon it. If it lies in relational capacity and moral freedom, then no machine — however sophisticated — can replicate the depth of personal encounter, empathy, and spiritual consciousness that defines human life before God.

The Christian claim, therefore, is that dignity is not derivative of intelligence but of divine relation. Humanity's worth does not arise from what it does but from whom it reflects. In a world enamored with artificial minds, *imago Dei* anchors human value in divine grace rather than algorithmic performance.

4. From Rationality to Relationality: Rethinking the Image of God

The rise of AI invites theology to move beyond a purely rationalist interpretation of *imago Dei*. For too long, Western thought equated the divine image with cognitive capacity — a legacy of Augustine's and Aquinas's emphasis on intellect as the highest faculty. Yet relational and communal interpretations offer a richer and more resilient anthropology.

According to Karl Barth, to be created in the image of God means to exist in relationship — “male and female he created them” — a reflection of the relational life of the Triune God. Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasized that the divine image is realized not in isolation but in responsible encounter with others. Thus, the essence of humanity lies in **relation**, not computation.

AI, despite its linguistic fluency and conversational mimicry, cannot truly relate. It can simulate empathy but lacks interiority — the *I-Thou*

encounter that Martin Buber described as the foundation of genuine personhood. A machine can model sentiment but cannot *suffer*; it can process language but cannot *pray*. Therefore, even as AI grows ever more “human-like,” the essence of humanity remains rooted in relational being — the capacity to love, forgive, and worship.

This relational turn also reshapes ethics. It implies that moral worth is not a measure of power or knowledge but of fidelity to relationship — with God, others, and creation. The danger of AI ethics framed purely in utilitarian or deontological terms is that it abstracts morality from relationship. Christian ethics insists that right action flows from right relation.

5. Christian Ethics in the Age of Artificial Agency

AI challenges traditional categories of moral agency. If a self-driving car causes an accident, who is responsible — the programmer, the user, or the algorithm itself? If a generative model produces harmful misinformation, can it be “blamed”? Such questions expose the limits of human control and the diffusion of accountability in technological systems.

Christian ethics, grounded in personal responsibility and moral intention, must resist the temptation to ascribe agency to machines. Algorithms operate according to parameters and data provided by humans. Responsibility, therefore, remains human — individual, corporate, and systemic. Yet, as AI systems become autonomous in decision-making, accountability becomes collective, requiring ethical governance rather than mere individual virtue.

The Christian tradition offers two crucial insights. First, technology is never neutral. It embodies human values, priorities, and worldviews. Second, moral discernment demands humility and community. Ethical decisions about AI — from facial recognition to predictive policing — cannot be left to engineers alone. They must involve theologians, ethicists, sociologists, and those affected by the technology.

In this sense, the Church has a vital role to play as a moral conscience, articulating not only what is technically possible but what is humanly and spiritually good. The prophetic vocation of Christian ethics is to call society to remember the person behind the data — the face behind the code.

6. Moral Decision-Making and Machine Learning: A Theological Analysis

Machine learning operates by pattern recognition. It does not understand meaning; it calculates correlations. This epistemological distinction is critical for ethics. True moral judgment requires not only data but discernment — the capacity to weigh intention, consequence, and virtue in light of the good.

Christian ethics has always linked morality to wisdom (*sophia*) rather than mere knowledge (*epistēmē*). Proverbs declares that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Wisdom, unlike algorithmic optimization, integrates love, empathy, and moral imagination. AI lacks these dimensions because it operates without consciousness or conscience.

Nevertheless, humans are tempted to outsource moral judgment to machines — from algorithmic sentencing to social scoring systems. Such delegation reveals a deeper moral crisis: the erosion of trust in human virtue. When societies prefer data-driven decisions over ethical discernment, they risk reducing justice to calculation and compassion to efficiency.

Theologically, moral agency cannot be automated. It arises from the freedom and responsibility that define humanity before God. To surrender that freedom to algorithms is to diminish the *imago Dei* within us. Thus, the task of Christian ethics is not to humanize machines but to re-humanize ourselves.

7. Technology, Transhumanism, and the Temptation of Self-Deification

Beyond AI lies a broader movement known as transhumanism — the aspiration to transcend biological limits through technology.

Transhumanist thinkers envision a future where human consciousness can be uploaded, bodies enhanced, and death itself defeated. This narrative echoes an ancient temptation: “You shall be like gods” (Genesis 3:5).

Christian theology recognizes in this desire both the noble longing for transcendence and the peril of idolatry. Humanity was created for eternity, yet seeks immortality apart from grace. In the transhumanist dream, salvation is redefined as technological progress rather than divine redemption. The human is no longer a creature receiving life but a designer manufacturing it.

C.S. Lewis warned in *The Abolition of Man* that when humanity gains total power over nature, it also gains power over itself — and risks self-destruction. The pursuit of limitless enhancement may lead to the loss of humanity’s soul. AI-driven bioengineering, genetic manipulation, and brain-machine interfaces thus raise not only ethical but eschatological questions: Are we approaching the Tower of Babel once more, building our way to heaven without God?

Christian ethics calls for humility. To be human is to be finite yet beloved, capable yet dependent. True transcendence is not technological but theological — found not in surpassing our humanity but in redeeming it.

8. Human Dignity under Pressure: Labor, Creativity, and Responsibility

One of the most visible impacts of AI is economic. Automation threatens millions of jobs, from manufacturing to journalism, raising fears of mass displacement and inequality. In a society that equates

dignity with productivity, this poses a theological crisis: what becomes of human worth when labor is replaced by machines?

Christian social teaching, from Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* to John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens*, affirms that work is not merely instrumental but participatory — a way of sharing in God's creative activity. Work confers dignity not because of economic output but because it expresses the image of the Creator. When AI automates tasks, it should not automate meaning.

The Church's ethical response must thus defend the dignity of labor while promoting just transitions. Technologies that increase efficiency must also serve inclusion, training, and human development. Policies for universal basic income or lifelong learning can be evaluated through the lens of *solidarity* and *subsidiarity* — principles that balance communal care with personal agency.

Creativity is another domain of concern. AI-generated art raises questions about authorship and inspiration. Can a machine create beauty, or merely imitate it? From a theological perspective, creativity reflects divine participation. While AI can assist in artistic production, the *spiritus* — the creative breath — remains human. Machines may compose, but they cannot *contemplate* beauty as praise.

Ultimately, human dignity persists not in doing what machines can do, but in doing what only humans can — love, care, forgive, imagine, and worship.

9. AI as a Mirror of Humanity: What Machines Reveal about Us

AI, far from being a neutral tool, acts as a mirror reflecting human biases, desires, and fears. Algorithmic discrimination in hiring or policing exposes the moral deficiencies embedded in data. The biases of society become encoded into technology, amplifying injustice under the guise of neutrality.

This mirroring function offers a theological insight. AI reveals not only our intelligence but our fallenness. It exposes the human tendency to

create idols in our own image — efficient, rational, yet morally flawed. Just as Israel’s golden calf was shaped from human hands, so our digital idols are formed from code and computation.

But mirrors can also be instruments of repentance. By confronting the distortions AI reveals, humanity can rediscover the ethical responsibility that technology cannot bear. Christian ethics thus sees in AI both a warning and a call — a chance to examine our values, repent of technocratic pride, and renew the moral imagination grounded in love.

AI reminds us that the problem is not the machine but the maker. The challenge is not to make machines more moral, but to make humans more humane.

10. Ethical Frameworks for Responsible AI in Christian Thought

Across disciplines, ethicists propose various principles for responsible AI — fairness, transparency, accountability, and beneficence. Christian ethics complements these with a deeper moral vision grounded in theological anthropology.

1. **Dignity:** Every AI system must respect the inherent worth of all persons. This prohibits exploitative data practices, surveillance abuse, and dehumanizing automation.
2. **Justice:** Algorithms must be designed and governed to promote equity and inclusion, protecting the vulnerable from technological exclusion.
3. **Solidarity:** AI ethics must consider the global poor, ensuring that technological benefits are shared rather than concentrated.
4. **Stewardship:** Technology is a gift, not an idol. Humans are called to steward creation responsibly, using AI to serve life rather than dominate it.
5. **Wisdom:** Beyond rules, ethics requires discernment — the integration of moral knowledge with humility and compassion.

These principles align with broader Christian social teaching. The Vatican's 2020 *Rome Call for AI Ethics* emphasizes the need for AI that is transparent, inclusive, and oriented toward the common good. Similarly, Protestant and Orthodox theologians have called for a "theology of technology" that situates innovation within the narrative of creation, fall, and redemption.

Ethical governance of AI, therefore, must be both **technical** and **spiritual** — addressing not only how machines behave but how humans become.

11. Case Reflections: Church, Academia, and Policy Responses

Across the world, faith communities and Christian institutions are beginning to engage the moral challenges of AI. The Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life convenes interdisciplinary dialogues on digital ethics. Protestant seminaries now include courses on "Theology and Technology," exploring AI's implications for pastoral ministry and human formation.

Churches use AI tools for evangelism, translation, and administration, yet must also discern boundaries. AI-generated sermons or pastoral chatbots raise concerns about authenticity and spiritual authority. The essence of ministry lies in *presence* — the incarnational encounter that cannot be digitized.

Academically, theologians such as Brent Waters, Noreen Herzfeld, and John Wyatt contribute to the emerging field of *theological AI ethics*. Herzfeld's notion of AI as "mirror and challenge" emphasizes that technology reflects human aspirations and anxieties. Wyatt, a Christian physician and ethicist, insists on preserving human vulnerability as the locus of moral wisdom.

Policy-wise, Christian ethics supports democratic deliberation and human rights-based governance. AI regulation must integrate moral reflection, not merely compliance. Christian participation in public

discourse can ensure that the voice of conscience — informed by faith, reason, and compassion — continues to shape the technological future.

12. The Hope of Redemption: Grace, Wisdom, and Limits in a Technological World

At its deepest level, the Christian response to AI is not fear but hope. The hope that human creativity, when guided by grace, can serve life rather than threaten it. The hope that wisdom can balance power. And the hope that technology, though born of human fallibility, can be redeemed for good.

Grace reframes the narrative. The world is not divided between humans and machines, but between love and idolatry. The danger is not AI itself but the human will to mastery without morality. Redemption, in Christian understanding, is God's restoration of creation — including the technological — toward its intended harmony.

The doctrine of the Incarnation offers profound relevance. In Christ, God became flesh, not data. Salvation occurs not through uploading but through embodiment, suffering, and resurrection. This incarnational truth grounds Christian ethics in the affirmation of the human body, community, and mortality as sites of divine encounter. AI can assist life but never replace the mystery of life given by God.

Thus, humility and gratitude must govern our technological imagination. We build not as gods but as stewards; we create not to rival the Creator but to reflect divine creativity. In recognizing our limits, we rediscover our dignity.

13. Conclusion: Human, Still — After All

So, are we still human after all? In the face of artificial intelligence, Christian ethics answers unequivocally: *yes, and more so than ever*. For humanity is not defined by intelligence alone but by love, conscience,

and relation. AI may simulate thought, but it cannot mirror the soul's depth or the heart's moral freedom.

The rise of AI is not the end of humanity but a mirror through which humanity must rediscover itself. The challenge is to remain faithful stewards of knowledge without losing sight of wisdom, to embrace innovation without abandoning compassion, and to wield technology as a servant, not a sovereign.

Christian theology reminds us that dignity is indestructible because it flows from God's image. No algorithm can erase the divine imprint, and no machine can usurp the sacred worth of the human person. To be human after all is to live in relation — to God, to others, and to creation — as bearer of a love that cannot be coded.

In an age of artificial minds, the ultimate task of ethics is to cultivate authentic hearts. The future of humanity depends not on machines becoming more human, but on humans becoming more humane.

14. Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. How does the doctrine of *imago Dei* shape our understanding of human uniqueness amid AI development?
 2. Can moral decision-making ever be automated without losing ethical depth?
 3. What theological parallels exist between transhumanism and the biblical account of the Fall?
 4. How should Christian institutions engage with AI ethically in education, ministry, and governance?
 5. In what ways can the Church model technological humility and stewardship in a digital society?
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15. Glossary

- **Artificial Intelligence (AI):** Systems designed to perform tasks requiring human-like cognition such as learning, reasoning, and perception.
 - **Imago Dei:** The belief that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, conferring intrinsic dignity.
 - **Transhumanism:** A movement advocating technological enhancement of humans beyond biological limits.
 - **Moral Agency:** The capacity to make ethical decisions and bear responsibility for actions.
 - **Algorithmic Bias:** Systematic prejudice in AI outputs resulting from biased training data or design.
 - **Stewardship:** The ethical responsibility to manage creation, including technology, in service to the common good.
 - **Solidarity:** Christian social principle emphasizing unity and mutual responsibility across humanity.
 - **Incarnation:** The doctrine that God became human in Jesus Christ, affirming the sacredness of embodiment.
 - **Ethical Governance:** Oversight mechanisms ensuring moral accountability in technological systems.
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