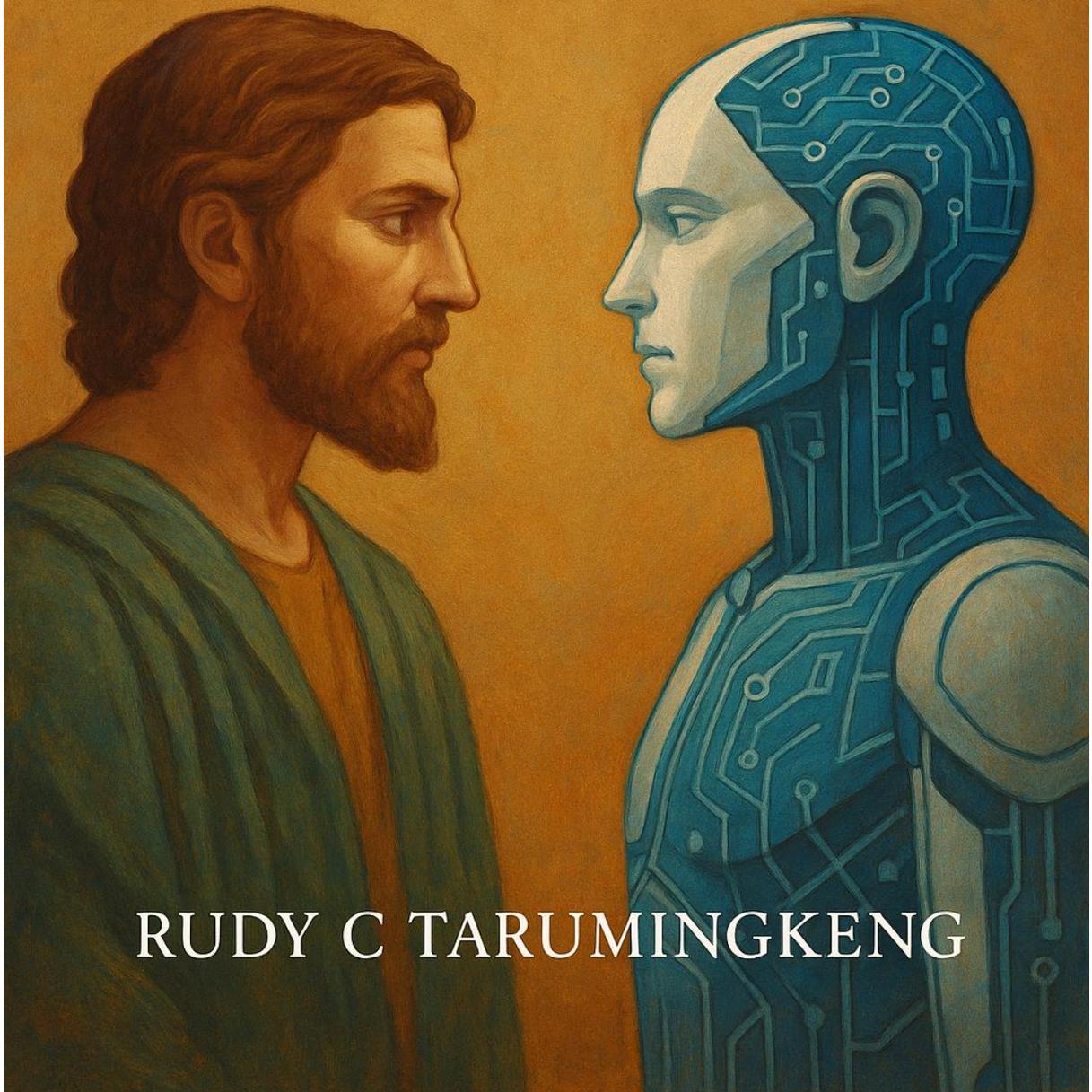


# IMAGO DEI IN THE AGE OF AI

AN ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL  
INQUIRY INTO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



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*Rudy C Tarumingkeng: Imago Dei in the Age of AI - An Ethical and  
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# **IMAGO DEI IN THE AGE OF AI: AN ETHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE**

## **Abstract**

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping not only human civilization but also the deepest reflections on what it means to be human. Within Christian theology, humanity has long been understood through the lens of *Imago Dei* — the belief that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. This concept grounds human dignity, moral responsibility, and creativity. Yet in an age when machines can think, learn, and even create, the theological question becomes urgent: does AI threaten, mirror, or expand our understanding of *Imago Dei*? This essay explores the historical, ethical, and theological contours of the image of God in light of technological transformation. Through an interdisciplinary approach — drawing from Scripture, theology, philosophy, and AI ethics — it argues that while AI cannot possess divine likeness, it can serve as a mirror reflecting the human vocation to co-create responsibly with God. The *Imago Dei* thus remains not a static status but a dynamic calling — to use technology not to replace humanity but to deepen love, wisdom, and stewardship.

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## **1. Introduction: When Machines Reflect Our Minds**

When Alan Turing proposed his famous test in 1950 — asking whether a machine could imitate human intelligence convincingly — few could

imagine a world in which machines compose symphonies, diagnose diseases, and converse with humans. Today, with the rise of large language models, robotics, and generative algorithms, the boundary between the human and the artificial appears blurred. Artificial Intelligence no longer simply assists human activity; it simulates thought itself.

In such a world, theology faces a profound question: what is the human being? The Christian tradition answers with the ancient affirmation of Genesis 1:26–27: “*Then God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.*” From this verse arises the doctrine of *Imago Dei*, which for millennia has grounded human dignity and purpose. To be human is to mirror divine attributes — rationality, creativity, relationality, and moral agency.

But as AI systems exhibit traits once thought exclusively human — reasoning, learning, even moral decision-making — theologians and ethicists are compelled to revisit *Imago Dei*. Is intelligence alone the marker of divine image? Or is there a deeper dimension — the capacity for relationship, freedom, and love — that no machine, however advanced, can replicate?

This essay journeys through the history of the *Imago Dei* doctrine, examines its encounter with artificial intelligence, and reflects on how faith and technology together shape our destiny as image-bearers in the digital age.

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## **2. The Biblical Foundation of Imago Dei**

The theological roots of *Imago Dei* lie in the opening chapter of Genesis, where creation culminates in the making of humankind. The phrase “*in our image, after our likeness*” (Hebrew: *tselem* and *demut*) has generated

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centuries of debate. Scholars interpret these terms as indicating resemblance, representation, or vocation.

In ancient Near Eastern contexts, “image” referred to the statue or symbol of a deity placed in a temple to signify divine presence. Likewise, humanity is portrayed as God’s living representation within creation — not gods themselves but stewards of God’s dominion. As such, *Imago Dei* is both identity and calling: to reflect God’s character and to exercise responsible rule over the earth.

In later biblical texts, the *Imago Dei* is linked to moral and relational dimensions. Genesis 9:6 bases the prohibition of murder on the image of God in every human, affirming intrinsic dignity. The Psalms marvel at human glory and responsibility (*Psalms 8*), while the New Testament deepens the theme: in Christ, “the image of the invisible God” (*Colossians 1:15*), humanity finds restoration of its true likeness. Thus, the *Imago Dei* is not lost but renewed in the redemptive relationship between God and humanity.

This theological foundation is crucial. It means that being made in God’s image is not merely a matter of intellectual capability but of relational vocation — to love, to create, to serve. Intelligence, in itself, does not define divine likeness; relationship and moral responsibility do. This insight becomes vital as we enter the age of artificial intelligence.

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### **3. Historical Interpretations: From Augustine to Barth**

Throughout Christian history, theologians have interpreted *Imago Dei* through various lenses — each emphasizing different aspects of humanity.

**Augustine** saw the divine image in the *trinitarian structure* of the human mind: memory, understanding, and will — a reflection of the Father, Son,

and Spirit. For him, rationality and inner consciousness were central to divine likeness.

**Thomas Aquinas** developed this intellectual tradition further. For Aquinas, reason (*ratio*) was the highest faculty distinguishing humanity from animals. To think and to know truth was to participate in the eternal Logos. Yet he also acknowledged the moral dimension: the image is perfected in love of God.

**Martin Luther** and **John Calvin**, during the Reformation, reframed the *Imago Dei* in terms of righteousness and relationality. Calvin wrote that the image consisted not only of intellect but of the entire excellence of human nature before the fall — holiness, justice, and the right ordering of affections.

In the 20th century, **Karl Barth** radically reinterpreted the doctrine as *being-in-relation*. The image of God, he argued, is reflected in the *I–Thou* relationship between man and woman, mirroring the relationality within the Triune God. Humanity’s likeness to God lies not in capacities but in communion.

Each of these interpretations — intellectual, moral, relational — contributes to our understanding of *Imago Dei*. In dialogue with AI, however, these aspects take on new significance. If reason and creativity are no longer uniquely human, perhaps relationality and moral freedom become the final frontier distinguishing humanity from its own creations.

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#### **4. The Emergence of Artificial Intelligence: A Brief Overview**

Artificial Intelligence, in essence, is the human attempt to replicate certain cognitive functions — learning, reasoning, perception, and problem-solving — through machines. From Turing’s early mathematical theories to neural networks and deep learning, AI has evolved from symbolic logic to systems capable of self-improvement.

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Contemporary AI, such as large language models, can produce art, write poetry, simulate empathy, and even engage in philosophical dialogue. The frontier of *Artificial General Intelligence (AGI)* — machines that match or surpass human cognitive versatility — now seems imaginable, if not imminent.

Philosophically, AI challenges long-held distinctions between the natural and artificial, the mind and the machine. Theologians face questions once reserved for metaphysics: Can machines possess consciousness? Could they develop moral awareness? If intelligence is programmable, what becomes of the soul?

AI thus becomes a mirror in which humanity encounters itself — its genius, its hubris, and its longing to transcend finitude. As we program machines to think like us, we risk forgetting what makes us more than machines.

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## **5. Imago Dei and Human Uniqueness: Intelligence, Consciousness, and Moral Freedom**

One of the earliest theological responses to AI centers on *human uniqueness*. For centuries, theologians equated the *Imago Dei* with rationality — the ability to reason, plan, and make moral judgments. Yet as AI demonstrates remarkable reasoning abilities, the question arises: is rational intelligence truly what makes us divine image-bearers?

To answer, we must differentiate *functional intelligence* from *existential consciousness*. AI operates through data processing and pattern recognition, while human consciousness includes self-awareness, intentionality, and moral agency. Theologian Nancey Murphy observes that “intelligence without consciousness is a tool, not a person.”

Human intelligence is embedded in moral and emotional life. We do not merely calculate; we care. The *Imago Dei* is not about efficiency but

about *meaning*. It involves the capacity to discern good and evil, to act freely, and to assume responsibility for others. Machines may mimic empathy, but they do not suffer or hope.

Moreover, the human being is not an isolated mind but a relational creature — defined by love, dependence, and transcendence. AI can simulate conversation, but it cannot enter covenant. Thus, while AI may extend human intelligence, it cannot embody the divine likeness that includes moral freedom and relationality.

The challenge, then, is not that AI might become “too human,” but that humans might become “too artificial” — reducing themselves to algorithms of utility and control, forgetting their sacred vocation.

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## **6. The Ethical Mirror: Technology, Power, and Responsibility**

The story of AI is not only technical but moral. Every algorithm reflects human values — whether in medicine, finance, or warfare. Biases embedded in data can perpetuate injustice; automation can widen inequality; surveillance can erode privacy. The question is not merely *what can machines do?* but *what should humans do with them?*

Theologically, this echoes the Genesis narrative: humanity given dominion over creation, yet tempted to “be like God.” The tower of Babel becomes an enduring symbol of technological hubris — the attempt to reach heaven through human ingenuity. AI can become our modern Babel if it seeks to transcend human limits without wisdom.

Ethics, therefore, must accompany every step of AI development. To create is to assume responsibility for what we create. The *Imago Dei* entails stewardship — caring for creation, not exploiting it. In the digital age, stewardship includes algorithms, data, and the social impact of automation.

Christian ethicists like Jacques Ellul and Reinhold Niebuhr warned that technology magnifies human sin as much as it amplifies human capacity. Without humility and accountability, progress becomes idolatry. Thus, the ethical dimension of *Imago Dei* reminds us that our likeness to God is not in power but in responsible love — the power to serve, not to dominate.

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## **7. AI as Co-Creation: Extending the Divine Mandate**

While some fear AI as a threat to human dignity, others view it as an extension of divine creativity. The doctrine of *Imago Dei* implies participation in God's creative work — *co-creation*. To build tools, cultivate the earth, and advance knowledge is to fulfill the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28.

In this sense, AI can be seen as the latest expression of human inventiveness — a continuation of the same spirit that produced art, science, and civilization. The key lies in intention: are we creating for domination or for flourishing?

Theologian Philip Hefner coined the term "*the created co-creator*." Humanity, made in God's image, is called to participate in ongoing creation responsibly. AI development, when guided by ethical discernment, can enhance this vocation — aiding medicine, education, and ecological sustainability.

However, co-creation without moral compass degenerates into self-creation. The danger is that humanity may seek to *replace* rather than *reflect* God. In this tension, *Imago Dei* must be understood not as autonomy but as relational creativity — acting in freedom under divine guidance.

Thus, the question is not whether AI should exist, but how it should serve life. When used for justice, compassion, and the common good, AI becomes not an idol but an instrument of stewardship.

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## **8. The Challenge of Personhood: Can AI Be “In the Image”?**

The rise of AI prompts the provocative question: could an artificial being ever bear the image of God? Some futurists, inspired by transhumanism, suggest that consciousness may one day emerge from complex computation, making machines “persons” in a moral sense.

Theologically, this is problematic. The *Imago Dei* is not a property that can be transferred or manufactured. It is a gift rooted in divine relationship. To be “in the image” is to be addressed by God and capable of response — to stand within covenant, to experience grace and moral accountability.

AI, no matter how advanced, lacks this existential relation. It cannot sin, repent, or love. It has no interiority, no soul capable of communion. As philosopher John Searle noted in his “Chinese Room” argument, simulation of understanding is not understanding itself.

Yet the question remains instructive. In striving to make machines more human-like, we confront what we most value about humanity. AI, therefore, becomes a theological mirror: not a bearer of *Imago Dei*, but a reminder of it — reflecting our creativity, dependence, and ethical limits.

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## **9. The Crisis of Identity: Dehumanization in the Digital Age**

The greater danger may not lie in AI becoming human, but in humans becoming machine-like. As society measures value through efficiency and data, the human soul risks reduction to metrics. In workplaces,

education, and even relationships, algorithmic logic shapes perception and decision-making.

This dehumanization challenges the heart of *Imago Dei*. If humans define themselves by productivity or cognitive output, they neglect the spiritual, emotional, and moral depths that constitute divine likeness.

In social media, identity becomes performative; in automation, labor becomes disposable. The danger is a new form of Gnosticism — the belief that the digital mind is superior to embodied life. Yet Scripture affirms embodiment: “the Word became flesh.” The divine image includes the body, not just intellect.

Thus, to affirm *Imago Dei* in the age of AI is to defend the wholeness of human being — body, mind, and spirit. It is to insist that dignity does not depend on function but on being. In this sense, theology serves as a humanistic safeguard against the mechanization of life.

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## **10. Theological Anthropology Revisited: Humanity as Relational Being**

AI forces theology to revisit its anthropology — the doctrine of the human person. If intelligence and creativity can be replicated, what remains distinctively human? The answer, many theologians argue, lies in relationality.

Humans exist *in relation*: to God, to one another, and to creation. The triune nature of God — Father, Son, and Spirit — reveals that being itself is communion. To bear God’s image is to live in love.

This relational ontology contrasts with the isolated rationalism of much modern thought. AI, by contrast, functions instrumentally, not relationally. It processes information but does not participate in mutual self-giving.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann emphasized that “the image of God is not a solitary image but a community.” Thus, the future of *Imago Dei* lies not in competition with AI but in rediscovering human solidarity. In a world of digital isolation, the most radical act of faith may be genuine encounter — face-to-face compassion that no machine can simulate.

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### **11. The Ethics of Creation: Limits, Humility, and Hope**

To create in God’s image is to recognize limits. Genesis portrays not only creation but Sabbath — a rhythm of work and rest, creativity and restraint. In technological culture, this rhythm is often lost. The drive for innovation becomes relentless, eroding reflection.

Ethical theology calls for humility: an acknowledgment that human knowledge, though vast, remains finite. The myth of technological omnipotence must yield to a spirituality of stewardship. As Psalm 8 declares, humanity is “a little lower than the angels” — exalted yet dependent.

AI development must therefore be guided by virtues — wisdom, justice, compassion. These virtues translate theological truth into technological ethics. They remind developers that every line of code has moral weight.

Hope, too, belongs to ethics. While AI poses risks, it also offers opportunity — to heal, to educate, to connect. The Christian hope is not in machines but in the Spirit who renews creation. Yet the Spirit may work through human creativity, guiding technology toward life rather than domination. The true mark of *Imago Dei* is not fear of progress, but faith in purposeful creation.

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### **12. Eschatological Perspectives: The Image Restored**

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Christian theology views *Imago Dei* not merely as origin but as destiny. The image marred by sin is restored in Christ, who embodies perfect humanity. In Him, the human and divine meet — not through code, but through incarnation.

This eschatological vision offers an alternative to transhumanist dreams of digital immortality. Salvation is not self-enhancement but transformation through grace. Eternal life is not uploaded consciousness but renewed creation.

In the resurrection, humanity attains its fullest image — not by escaping the body but by glorification of it. Technology may extend life, but only divine love redeems it. Thus, while AI promises control over nature, Christian eschatology proclaims communion beyond control — a future where human and divine coexist in restored harmony.

In this hope, the *Imago Dei* finds its final meaning: not in machines that mimic us, but in persons who mirror God.

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### **13. A Theological Ethics for the AI Era**

To live as image-bearers in the digital age requires a new theological ethic. Three principles emerge:

**Dignity over utility.** Every human being retains worth beyond computational value. Systems that treat persons as data points violate *Imago Dei*.

**Responsibility over autonomy.** Creativity must serve the common good, not unchecked power. Ethical AI requires communal discernment and accountability.

**Relation over replication.** The goal is not to replicate human intelligence but to enrich human relationships — to use technology to foster justice, empathy, and connection.

Churches, universities, and policymakers thus share a vocation: to form moral imagination for the technological age. Theology must dialogue with data science, not to baptize technology uncritically, but to humanize it.

As theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "The ultimate question for a responsible man is not how he is to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation is to go on living." The ethics of AI is precisely that question — how the next generation may live humanly amid intelligent machines.

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#### **14. The Spiritual Challenge: Worship and Idolatry**

Beyond ethics lies spirituality. Every technology risks becoming an idol when it promises salvation. The ancient temptation — to worship the work of our own hands — returns in digital form. Algorithms, once tools, become authorities. Data becomes omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent.

The *Imago Dei* confronts this idolatry by reminding humanity that only God is ultimate. To bear God's image is to reflect, not replace, divinity. Worship of technology leads to dehumanization; reverence for God restores freedom.

Thus, spiritual discernment is essential. The Church must teach not rejection of technology but orientation — using it in thanksgiving rather than fear. Prayer, contemplation, and community remain acts of resistance against digital idolatry. In silence before God, humans rediscover their true algorithm: love.

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#### **15. Re-imagining Humanity: From Image to Responsibility**

In the final analysis, *Imago Dei* is less a static image than a dynamic responsibility. To be human is to mirror God's creative, relational, and moral nature — to bring life, not destruction.

Artificial Intelligence, when viewed theologically, becomes both test and teacher. It tests whether we will use our intelligence for control or communion. It teaches humility — that even as we build machines in our image, only God can make beings in His.

The *Imago Dei* in the age of AI thus calls for ethical imagination: to envision technologies that heal, connect, and serve. It invites theology to expand, not retreat — to interpret creation as a partnership, not a rivalry, between divine purpose and human creativity.

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## **16. Conclusion: Bearing God's Image in the Age of Machines**

The digital revolution confronts humanity with its own reflection. In crafting artificial minds, we glimpse both our genius and our limits. The doctrine of *Imago Dei* endures as a compass — reminding us that intelligence, however dazzling, is not the ultimate measure of being.

To bear God's image is to love, to create responsibly, and to live in relationship. AI may assist these vocations, but it cannot fulfill them. The task of theology, therefore, is not to fear machines but to form humanity — to ensure that in making intelligent systems, we do not lose the wisdom to be human.

The *Imago Dei* is the eternal affirmation that every human being — in code or clay, in data or dust — is called to mirror the Creator through compassion and stewardship. The age of AI does not erase this image; it magnifies its urgency. For in every algorithm, humanity writes not only its intelligence but its soul.

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## **Glossary**

**Imago Dei:** Latin for “Image of God,” the theological concept that humans are created to reflect God’s character and relational nature.

**Artificial Intelligence (AI):** Computer systems capable of performing tasks requiring human-like intelligence such as learning, reasoning, and problem-solving.

**Co-creation:** The theological idea that humans, as image-bearers, participate in God’s ongoing creative work responsibly.

**Transhumanism:** A philosophical movement advocating technological enhancement of human capacities, sometimes envisioning digital immortality.

**Personhood:** The state of being an individual with moral agency, consciousness, and relational capacity.

**Theological Anthropology:** The branch of theology studying human nature in relation to God.

**Technological Idolatry:** The worship or ultimate trust in technology as the source of salvation or meaning.

**Relational Ontology:** A philosophical view emphasizing that being is defined through relationships rather than isolated existence.

**Ethical Stewardship:** The responsible and moral use of technology and creation for the good of humanity and the environment.

**Eschatology:** The theological study of ultimate destiny — the final things such as resurrection, judgment, and the new creation.

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