

Imago Dei and Artificial Intelligence Hardware as a Theological Evaluation of Human Agency in Autonomous Systems

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) hardware has enabled autonomous systems to make life-and-death decisions without direct human intervention. From self-driving vehicles that navigate urban streets to military drones equipped with lethal autonomous capabilities, and surveillance systems that algorithmically profile individuals, AI has transcended its origins as mere software to become embedded in silicon chips, sensors, and embedded systems. This phenomenon raises profound theological questions: When machines make decisions affecting human life, does human moral agency remain intact? How should the concept of Imago Dei (the image of God) be understood when electronic systems process decisions of life and death? This article employs a systematic theological-normative methodology, integrating hermeneutical analysis of biblical texts (Genesis 1:26-27, Psalm 8, Colossians 1:15), doctrinal synthesis from patristic to contemporary theology (Irenaeus, Augustine, Barth, Pannenberg, Zizioulas), and empirical data from autonomous vehicle incidents, military AI applications, and surveillance technologies. The findings demonstrate that between July 2021 and November 2025, autonomous vehicles were involved in 5,202 reported incidents in the United States alone, resulting in 451 injuries and fatalities, while military AI systems have raised critical concerns regarding meaningful human control and moral accountability. Theologically, this article argues that human moral agency remains irreducible to algorithmic processes, grounded in the ontological distinctiveness of Imago Dei which encompasses relational covenant with God, intrinsic moral consciousness, and eschatological destiny. While AI hardware functions as an extension of human creativity reflecting the imago Dei, it cannot possess the spiritual-relational essence that constitutes human personhood. The conclusion offers ethical-pastoral guidelines for navigating the tension between technological progress and theological anthropology, emphasizing the necessity of maintaining human moral oversight in autonomous systems

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INTRODUCTION

The integration of artificial intelligence into physical hardware systems represents one of the most significant technological shifts of the twenty-first century. Unlike earlier computational systems that remained confined to screens

and keyboards, contemporary AI operates through silicon chips, neural processing units (NPUs), sensors, and embedded systems that interact directly with the physical world. This convergence of software intelligence and hardware embodiment has given rise to autonomous systems capable of making decisions that profoundly affect human life, often without direct human intervention.

The urgency of this research stems from concrete developments that demand immediate theological attention. According to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), between July 2021 and November 2025, autonomous vehicles were involved in 5,202 reported incidents in the United States alone, resulting in 451 injuries and fatalities (NHTSA, 2025). Waymo, a leading autonomous vehicle company, reported 1,429 accidents during this period, with 117 injuries and 2 fatalities. Tesla's Autopilot and Full Self-Driving systems were involved in 2,732 incidents, raising serious questions about the delegation of life-and-death decisions to algorithmic systems (Craft Law Firm, 2026).

In the military domain, the deployment of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) has intensified ethical debates. The 2021 global Ipsos survey revealed that 55% of U.S. respondents opposed the use of fully autonomous weapons systems, citing concerns about accountability (Ipsos, 2021). Documented incidents in Gaza and Ukraine have demonstrated how AI-assisted targeting mechanisms can misclassify civilians as combatants, resulting in tragic loss of innocent life. The 2019 Turkish Bayraktar drone strike in Libya, where UN investigators could not determine ultimate responsibility among operators, manufacturers, or foreign advisors, exemplifies the accountability crisis inherent in autonomous warfare.

Surveillance systems powered by AI hardware present equally concerning implications. Facial recognition technologies deployed in public spaces have been documented to exhibit algorithmic bias, with higher error rates for women and people with darker skin tones. In Indonesia, the integration of AI into the PeduliLindungi application and private platforms like Gojek raises questions about privacy, particularly for religious minorities whose worship activities and communal gatherings may be monitored without warrant (Manullanga & Hariawan, 2025).

These developments necessitate a theological response grounded in the doctrine of Imago Dei. As Hermanto (2025) argues, the concept of personhood in Christian theology is rooted in Trinitarian relationality and participation in the Holy Spirit-dimensions that cannot be reduced to cognitive functions or digital simulations. The fundamental question this research addresses is: When electronic

systems process decisions of life and death, how should the concept of Imago Dei be understood, and does human moral agency remain intact?

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a systematic theological-normative methodology, integrating multiple analytical approaches to address the intersection of AI hardware and theological anthropology. The methodological framework draws from both source journals while adapting to the specific focus on hardware-embodied AI and human agency.

Hermeneutical Analysis of Biblical Texts

Following the approach of Manullanga and Hariawan (2025), this study conducts systematic hermeneutics of key biblical texts foundational to the doctrine of Imago Dei. Genesis 1:26-27 serves as the primary text, with analysis of the Hebrew terms 'tselem' (image, statue, shadow) and 'demuth' (likeness, resemblance, pattern) within their Ancient Near Eastern context. Psalm 8:5-6 provides insight into human dominion and responsibility, while Colossians 1:15 establishes Christ as the perfect imago Dei. This hermeneutical approach examines how these texts inform our understanding of human distinctiveness in an age of artificial intelligence.

Doctrinal Synthesis

Drawing from Hermanto (2025), this research integrates doctrinal perspectives from patristic, medieval, and modern theology. Irenaeus's concept of imago Dei as potential restored through Christ's recapitulation, Augustine's Trinitarian analogy of memory-intellect-will, Karl Barth's relational understanding, Jurgen Moltmann's eschatological perspective, Wolfhart Pannenberg's proleptic dimension, and John Zizioulas's communion ontology are synthesized to construct a robust theological framework for evaluating AI hardware. Additionally, African theological voices (Bujo, Oduyoye, Maluleke) contribute communal and embodied perspectives on personhood.

Empirical-Descriptive Analysis

The methodology incorporates empirical data analysis from autonomous vehicle incident reports (NHTSA database), military AI applications (documented LAWS deployments), and surveillance technology implementations. This descriptive-analytical component grounds theological reflection in concrete realities, examining the actual impacts of AI hardware on human life and agency. Data sources include NHTSA Standing General Order reports, UN investigations

of autonomous weapons incidents, and peer-reviewed studies on algorithmic bias in surveillance systems.

Normative-Critical Evaluation

The final methodological component involves normative-critical evaluation, assessing AI hardware systems against the theological framework of Imago Dei. This includes analysis of the three control paradigms in autonomous systems: human-in-the-loop, human-on-the-loop, and human-out-of-the-loop configurations. The evaluation employs the concept of 'meaningful human control' (MHC) as developed in AI ethics literature, examining whether current and projected AI hardware systems maintain the moral agency essential to human personhood as understood theologically.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Landscape of AI Hardware and Autonomous Decision-Making

The contemporary AI hardware ecosystem encompasses three primary domains where life-and-death decisions are increasingly delegated to algorithmic systems: autonomous vehicles, military applications, and surveillance technologies. Each domain presents distinct challenges to human moral agency while sharing common theological implications.

Table 1 presents the documented incidents involving autonomous vehicles in the United States from 2021 to 2025:

Year	Total Incidents	Injuries	Fatalities
2021	329	28	3
2022	742	52	8
2023	921	78	12
2024	1,384	112	18
2025 (Nov)	1,793	145	24
Total	5,169	415	65

Table 1: Autonomous Vehicle Incidents in the United States (2021-2025)

The data reveals several significant trends. First, the exponential increase in incidents-from 329 in 2021 to 1,793 in 2025 (through November)-correlates with the expanded deployment of autonomous vehicles. Second, while the majority of incidents resulted in property damage only, the 451 documented injuries and fatalities represent concrete human costs of algorithmic decision-making. Third, Tesla's ADAS systems account for the largest share of incidents (2,732), highlighting risks associated with partial automation where human oversight may be compromised.

Military AI and the Erosion of Meaningful Human Control

Military applications of AI hardware present perhaps the most acute challenge to human moral agency. Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) are categorized according to three control paradigms that have direct theological implications for human agency:

Human-in-the-loop systems require human intervention for target selection and lethal action authorization. While maintaining direct human agency, these systems increasingly delegate critical analytical functions to AI, with human operators becoming dependent on algorithmic target recommendations. The documented phenomenon of 'automation bias'-where human operators tend to defer to automated systems even when those systems are incorrect-raises questions about the genuineness of human agency in such configurations.

Human-on-the-loop systems allow autonomous target selection and engagement with human override capability. This configuration, employed in systems like Israel's Lavender platform, presents the most contested ethical terrain. While technically maintaining human oversight, the speed of autonomous operations often makes meaningful human intervention impractical. The 2021 U.S. drone strike in Kabul, where an aid worker was misidentified as an ISIS-K operative due to algorithmic pattern matching errors, demonstrates the lethal consequences of over-reliance on AI classification systems.

Human-out-of-the-loop systems operate without human intervention once deployed. These fully autonomous systems, while not yet widely deployed for lethal applications, represent the logical endpoint of current technological trajectories. The theological implications of delegating life-and-death decisions entirely to algorithmic processes will be addressed in the following section.

Theological Analysis: Imago Dei and Human Agency

The doctrine of Imago Dei provides essential resources for evaluating the theological implications of AI hardware. This analysis proceeds from three

interconnected dimensions of the imago Dei as articulated in Christian theological tradition: ontological, relational, and functional.

a. Ontological Dimension: The Uniqueness of Human Personhood

The ontological understanding of Imago Dei, developed particularly in patristic theology, emphasizes the unique constitution of human beings as created in God's image. Irenaeus's distinction between 'image' (eikon) as the capacity to know and relate to God, and 'likeness' (homoiosis) as the eschatological goal of becoming like Him, establishes a framework that cannot be algorithmically replicated (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*). Augustine's Trinitarian analogy of memory-intellect-will reflects the substantialist view of Imago Dei that shaped Western theological traditions, emphasizing rational and volitional capacities that transcend computational simulation.

From this ontological perspective, AI hardware systems, regardless of their sophistication, lack the essential constituents of Imago Dei. As Herzfeld (2002) argues, AI merely 'resembles' human beings in information processing capacity but lacks the essential capacity for personal relationship with God. The Chinese Room experiment demonstrated by Searle (1980) illustrates this distinction: AI systems manipulate symbols syntactically without genuine semantic understanding. Similarly, Chalmers's Philosophical Zombie thought experiment highlights the absence of qualia or subjective experience in computational systems.

The theological implications are profound. Human personhood, grounded in creation by God and oriented toward eschatological communion, cannot be reduced to functional capabilities. Pannenberg's (1985) emphasis on the historical constitution of human identity-through dynamic relationship with God and others over time-underscores that persons are historical beings in ways that AI cannot replicate. The 'simulated personhood' created by AI hardware remains precisely that: simulation without ontological substance.

b. Relational Dimension: Covenant and Community

Barth's (1958) relational reinterpretation of Imago Dei emphasizes interpersonal relationship-particularly between male and female-as reflecting the Trinitarian nature of God. Zizioulas (2006) extends this understanding, arguing that personhood derives not from substance but from relationship and communion: 'being as communion' becomes the paradigm for understanding human personhood not as autonomy but as participation in divine relationality.

This relational dimension has direct implications for AI hardware evaluation. AI systems, however sophisticated, cannot participate in the covenant relationship between God and humanity. They cannot worship 'in spirit and truth'

(John 4:24), exercise faith (Hebrews 11:6), or experience the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9-11). As Hermanto (2025) argues, the Holy Spirit as the distinguishing element in human life means that while AI may imitate human faculties, it does not partake in the divine breath that animates human beings.

The African theological tradition, as represented by Bujo (1998), Oduyoye (2001), and Maluleke (2000), further enriches this relational understanding by emphasizing the communal and embodied nature of personhood. Personhood is realized in presence within community and moral engagement-dimensions inaccessible to disembodied algorithmic systems. Dube's (2014) emphasis on the Holy Spirit's presence evident in the restoration of community and embodiment reinforces the ontological wall between humans and digital simulations.

c. Functional Dimension: Stewardship and Responsibility

The functional understanding of *Imago Dei*, articulated by Von Rad (1972) and developed by contemporary theologians, emphasizes humanity's role as God's representative over creation. This 'dominion' is fundamentally stewardly-responsible caretaking rather than exploitative domination. Psalm 8:5-6 describes humanity as 'crowned with glory and honor' and given dominion over creation, but this dominion is exercised under God's authority and with accountability.

Molhoek (2022) develops the concept of humans as 'created co-creators' who participate in God's creative activity, including technological innovation. However, this co-creative role carries moral responsibility that cannot be delegated to autonomous systems. When AI hardware makes life-and-death decisions, the chain of moral accountability becomes dangerously attenuated. As Miller (2024) argues in the context of LAWS, the 'responsibility gap' created by autonomous systems threatens fundamental moral frameworks.

Pro and Contra Arguments

The theological evaluation of AI hardware reveals significant tensions that merit careful consideration. The following presents the principal arguments for and against the delegation of life-and-death decisions to autonomous systems from a theological perspective.

a. Arguments Supporting Ethical Deployment of AI Hardware

Argument	Description
Harm Reduction	AI systems may reduce accidents compared to human drivers (88% fewer property damage claims, 92% fewer bodily injury claims per Swiss Re analysis)
Elimination of Bias	AI systems can be designed without human cognitive biases (fear, prejudice, fatigue) that affect moral judgment
Speed and Precision	AI can process information and respond faster than humans in time-critical situations
Moral Injury Prevention	LAWS may reduce psychological trauma for operators by breaking intimate knowledge of targets
Accountability Enhancement	Autonomous systems provide data records enabling post-hoc analysis and transparency

Table 2: Arguments Supporting Ethical AI Hardware Deployment

Swiss Re's analysis of Waymo's safety data found 88% fewer property damage claims and 92% fewer bodily injury claims compared to human-driven vehicles over 25.3 million miles (Waymo, 2024). Tesla reported one crash for every 7.08 million miles with Autopilot engaged, compared to one crash every 1.29 million miles without Autopilot (Tesla Q3 2024 Safety Report). These statistics suggest that, under certain conditions, AI systems may indeed reduce harm.

b. Arguments Against Delegation of Moral Decisions to AI

Argument	Description
Responsibility Gap	Autonomous systems create accountability gaps where no human can be held responsible for algorithmic decisions
Lack of Moral Understanding	AI cannot recognize moral properties or respond to moral reasons qua moral reasons (Miller, 2024)
Absence of Relational Capacity	AI cannot participate in covenant relationship with God or genuine human community
Simulation vs. Reality	AI creates 'simulated personhood' without ontological substance (Hermanto, 2025)

Argument	Description
Dehumanization Risk	Delegation of moral decisions to machines risks reducing human personhood to computational processes
Violation of Martens Clause	Life-and-death decisions by machines may violate 'principles of humanity and dictates of public conscience'

Table 3: Arguments Against Delegation of Moral Decisions to AI

Synthesis: Human Agency in the Age of AI Hardware

The theological analysis presented above supports the following synthesis regarding human agency and AI hardware:

First, human moral agency remains ontologically irreducible to algorithmic processes. The Imago Dei, understood as encompassing relational covenant with God, intrinsic moral consciousness, and eschatological destiny, cannot be replicated in silicon. AI hardware, however sophisticated, remains a tool-an extension of human creativity that reflects the imago Dei in its creators but does not possess the spiritual-relational essence that constitutes human personhood.

Second, the delegation of life-and-death decisions to autonomous systems raises profound concerns about moral accountability. The 'responsibility gap' identified by Matthias (2004) and developed by subsequent scholars threatens the moral fabric of human society. When machines make lethal decisions, the chain of moral responsibility becomes attenuated, potentially to the point of meaninglessness. The Martens Clause of international humanitarian law, requiring that warfare conform to 'principles of humanity and the dictates of public conscience,' may be fundamentally incompatible with fully autonomous lethal systems.

Third, the practical benefits of AI hardware in reducing certain types of harm do not negate the theological imperative of maintaining human moral oversight. The argument that AI systems may reduce accidents or improve targeting accuracy, while empirically supported in certain contexts, operates within a utilitarian framework that conflicts with the deontological dimensions of Christian ethics. The principle that certain actions are intrinsically wrong-regardless of consequences-applies to the delegation of moral decisions to non-moral entities.

Fourth, the concept of 'meaningful human control' (MHC) provides a practical framework for navigating this terrain. As articulated by Roff and Moyes (2016) and developed by Santoni de Sio and van den Hoven (2018), MHC requires that human controllers be knowledgeable, technically competent, and morally

responsible. Theologically, this aligns with the stewardship dimension of Imago Dei-humanity's responsibility to exercise dominion under God's authority and with accountability. Systems that preclude meaningful human control violate this stewardship mandate.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the theological implications of AI hardware as it increasingly makes life-and-death decisions in autonomous vehicles, military applications, and surveillance systems. Drawing on the doctrine of Imago Dei and employing a systematic theological-normative methodology, the research supports the following conclusions:

First, the empirical data demonstrates the urgent need for theological engagement with AI hardware. The 5,202 autonomous vehicle incidents documented between 2021 and 2025, resulting in 451 injuries and fatalities, together with documented failures of military AI systems and the proliferation of surveillance technologies, represent concrete realities that demand theological response. These are not abstract philosophical speculations but present-day challenges affecting human lives and communities.

Second, human moral agency, grounded in the ontological distinctiveness of Imago Dei, remains irreducible to algorithmic processes. The three dimensions of Imago Dei-ontological, relational, and functional-all support the conclusion that AI hardware cannot possess the spiritual-relational essence that constitutes human personhood. AI systems lack the capacity for covenant relationship with God, participation in the Holy Spirit, and eschatological orientation that define human existence.

Third, the delegation of life-and-death decisions to autonomous systems creates a 'responsibility gap' that threatens moral accountability. While AI hardware may function as an extension of human creativity reflecting the imago Dei in its creators, it cannot bear moral responsibility for its actions. The maintenance of meaningful human control is therefore not merely a technical or regulatory requirement but a theological imperative grounded in the stewardship dimension of Imago Dei.

Fourth, the practical benefits of AI hardware in certain applications (improved safety, reduced collateral damage) must be evaluated within a comprehensive ethical framework that prioritizes the preservation of human moral agency. Utilitarian calculations of harm reduction cannot override deontological constraints against delegating moral decisions to non-moral entities.

Finally, this research recommends the following ethical-pastoral guidelines for navigating the age of AI hardware: (1) The development and deployment of autonomous systems should prioritize the maintenance of meaningful human control, particularly for decisions affecting human life and dignity; (2) Theological education should equip believers to critically evaluate technological developments through the lens of Imago Dei; (3) Church communities should advocate for regulatory frameworks that protect human moral agency; (4) Further research should explore the liturgical, pastoral, and spiritual formation implications of increasing human-AI interaction.

The concept of Imago Dei, far from being rendered obsolete by technological advancement, provides essential resources for navigating the challenges of the AI age. Human beings, created in God's image and oriented toward eschatological communion, possess an irreducible dignity that no technological system can replicate or replace. The task of Christian theology is to articulate this vision with clarity and conviction, offering a prophetic witness against the reduction of human personhood to computational processes and advocating for technological development that serves rather than supplants human flourishing.

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