

Image of God and Human Dignity in Islam and Christianity: From Discourses of Likeness to the Logic of Divine Unity

Abstract

This article offers a comparative theological analysis of how Islam and Christianity speak about humanity “in the image” of God, and what this implies for divine unity and human dignity. On the Islamic side, it examines the hadith “God created Adam in His image” within the framework of *tawhīd*, showing that a strictly unitary concept of God makes it difficult to give a robust account of mankind as a reflection of God without either reducing “image” language to thin metaphor or drifting toward problematic corporealism (*mujassimah*). On the Christian side, it argues that Trinitarian theology, which confesses God as one in essence and three in persons, can coherently affirm humanity as a genuine reflection of God’s unity-in-Triunity while firmly rejecting any notion that God possesses a physical body. The study traces how Islamic and Christian discourses handle the tension between likeness and transcendence, and contends that Christian Triunity provides a more logically adequate framework for understanding the human person as a reflection of divine unity. Finally, it explores the implications of these differing accounts for human dignity, the critique of corporealist theology, and the theological grounding of the unity of humankind.

Key Words:

- Image of God, Imago Dei, Created in His image (hadith), Tawhid and divine unity, Trinity and Triunity, Islamic theological anthropology, Christian theological anthropology, Anthropomorphism and corporealism (*mujassimah*), Ibn Taymiyya and divine attributes, Human dignity and *karāmat al-insān*, Unity of humankind, Comparative theology (Islam–

Christianity), Divine likeness and transcendence, Unity-in-Triunity (Trinitarian unity),
Human reflection of God.

Introduction: Image Language and the Question of Divine Unity

Both Islam and Christianity use the language of “image” and “likeness” to speak about the relation between God and humanity. The Qur’ānic honor of the “children of Adam”¹ and the hadith “God created Adam in His image”² suggest a special status for humankind in Islamic discourse, while the biblical affirmation that humanity is created “in the image and likeness of God”³ (*imago Dei*) stands at the heart of Christian theological anthropology. Yet these overlapping idioms are embedded in very different accounts of divine unity.

Islam insists on *tawhīd* as absolute unicity: God is numerically one, indivisible, without partners or internal plurality. Christianity equally affirms divine unity, but understands God’s oneness as one simple essence subsisting in three really distinct persons, distinguished solely by their relations of origin: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴ This difference is not merely verbal. It shapes what it can mean to say that humanity reflects God. Under strict *tawhīd*, any deep correspondence between divine being and human nature risks compromising God’s unique

¹ Qur’an 17:70. Quotations from the Qur’an follow *The Qur’an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

² Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Isti’dhān, no. 6227; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Kitāb al-Birr wa-l-Ṣila, no. 2841, in *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, n.d.). See also Sunnah.com, “Saḥīḥ Muslim 2841,” accessed 23 July 2026, [sunnah.com/muslim:2841]. (also numbered 2612 in some editions). English translation adapted from *The Translation of the Meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1997). See also Livnat Holtzman, “Anthropomorphism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Leiden: Brill, online).

³ Genesis 1:26–27 (National Council of Churches. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989., unless otherwise noted). See also John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), esp. chs. 3–5.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, qq. 27–32 (on the divine processions and relations) and q. 29, a. 4 (on the divine persons as subsistent relations), Blackfriars ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964–81). See also Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chs. 4–6.

unicity; under Triunity, unity itself is understood as one simple essence really articulated in subsistent relations, making the relational structure of human existence an intelligible, analogical reflection of God's own life.

The central claim of this article is that Islamic use of "image" language raises a structural difficulty: Muslims cannot say that humans "look like God," and mainstream theology rejects corporealism, yet Islamic sources still speak of humanity "in His image" in a way that calls for clarification. By contrast, Christian Trinitarian theology can affirm that humanity truly reflects God's unity and relationality without implying that God is a body or that humans share God's essence. This comparative analysis unfolds in four major steps. First, it examines Islamic image language and the challenge of corporealism. Second, it explores Christian Triunity and the *imago Dei*. Third, it evaluates the theological coherence of each framework in accounting for human reflection of God and human dignity.

1. Islamic Image Language and the Challenge of Corporealism

1.1 Tawhīd and strict divine unicity

Islamic theology is defined by the doctrine of *tawhīd*, which asserts God's absolute oneness. Classical formulations stress that God is a single, indivisible being who neither begets nor is begotten, and that any suggestion of plurality in the divine reality constitutes *shirk* (association). This unitarian concept of unity is both spiritually powerful and philosophically precise: it safeguards divine uniqueness against any hint of composition or internal differentiation.⁵

⁵ Qur'an 112 (Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ); 4:48, 4:116 (on *shirk*). See also Tim Winter, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Within this framework, talk of humanity reflecting God must proceed with extreme caution. If God's unity is understood exclusively as numerical singularity and undifferentiated essence, then there is very little conceptual room for correspondence between divine being and human nature beyond moral obedience or functional representation. Humanity can be honored, commanded, and guided, but cannot share in or mirror anything of God's inner life without threatening *tawḥīd*. This creates a tension when Islamic sources speak of "image" and "likeness" in relation to God and mankind.

1.2 The hadith "God created Adam in His image"

The hadith "Verily, God created Adam in His image" (*inna Allāha khalaqa Ādama 'alā ṣūratihī*) is a focal point of this tension.⁶ The report has been transmitted in different formulations, and its interpretations have varied among scholars. Some, seeking to protect transcendence, argue that the pronoun "his" refers to Adam himself or to the human species: God created Adam in the image God had chosen for him, not in a divine image. Others, especially in Ḥanbalī and later Salafī circles, insist that the pronoun refers to God, while affirming that God has an "image" (*ṣūra*) in a manner befitting His majesty and unlike any created form.⁷

These latter readings emphasize that God's "image" is not a body and cannot be imagined; nonetheless, they maintain that the hadith indicates a real relation of likeness. At this point, the question you pose becomes acute: if Muslims cannot say that we "look like God" and reject any corporeal similarity, what is the theological content of "His image"? If "image" is reduced to a

⁶ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 6227; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 2841 (see n. 2 above). On the two principal lines of interpretation, see Yahyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī. *Al-Minhāj bi-Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj*. commentary on Kitāb al-Birr, (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, n.d.); and Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism*, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science 73 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Bayān Talbīs al-Jahmiyya*; discussed in Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (short form; cf. n. 6). See also Wesley Williams, "Aspects of the Creed of Imam Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal: A Study of Anthropomorphism in Early Islamic Discourse," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002).

bare metaphor—meaning nothing more than God’s bestowal of certain capacities or moral status—then the strong language of the hadith seems overstated. If “image” is taken more literally, the danger of corporealism looms.⁸

Qur’an 2:30–31 offers a functional yet theologically suggestive account of human distinctiveness that invites comparison with the biblical *imago Dei* without explicitly articulating it. The designation of Adam as *khalīfa* (vicegerent) establishes a divinely appointed role on earth, indicating responsibility, stewardship, and a mediated form of authority under God. This is further deepened in 2:31, where Adam is taught “the names of all things,” a motif that signals capacities such as rationality, linguistic articulation, and epistemic awareness—features often associated in Christian theology with the image of God. While the Qur’anic text refrains from metaphysical language such as “image” or “likeness,” the combined emphasis on vocation and knowledge functions analogously, grounding human uniqueness in divinely bestowed attributes. At the same time, these verses reinforce a robust Islamic theology of God’s own attributes: the act of teaching presupposes that God is eternally knowing and speaking, while the commissioning of Adam reflects divine will and purpose. Thus, rather than presenting God as an abstract or featureless unity, the passage coherently supports the classical Islamic affirmation of a living, knowing, willing, and communicative God, whose attributes are reflected analogically—though not ontologically—in humanity’s created role.

1.3 Mujassimah and the problem of a “bodily” God

⁸ For the broader classical debate over the reality and interpretation of divine attributes, see Richard M. Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Mu‘tazila in the Classical Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978).

The history of Islamic theology includes currents that embrace a more concrete reading of divine attributes, sometimes referred to as *mujassimah* (corporealists). Mujassimah tendencies interpret references to God's "hand," "face," or "image" in ways that imply a kind of body or spatial form, even if they attempt to qualify this as "befitting" God. Mainstream Sunni theology, particularly Ash'ari and Māturīdī traditions, has consistently rejected this direction as incompatible with true transcendence and *tawhīd*, arguing that God is not a body, not contained in space, and not subject to physical limitation.⁹

The controversy over corporealism illustrates the fault line created by the image hadith. On one side, strict transcendence leads to interpretations that evacuate "image" of robust content. On the other, attempts to retain a strong sense of image and likeness risk attributing bodily form to God. This article suggests that, within a strictly unitary concept of God, it is difficult to articulate how mankind genuinely reflects God without either dissolving "image" into metaphor or sliding toward *mujassim* theology, which most Muslims themselves find unacceptable.

2. Christian Trinitarian Unity and the *Imago Dei*

2.1 Unity and Triunity: logic and coherence

Christian theology is equally committed to divine unity, yet it understands this unity as one simple essence (ousia) subsisting in three really distinct persons (hypostases), distinguished not by any division of essence but solely by their relations of origin: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is not a denial of unity but its deepening. Unity here does not mean numerical solitude but a

⁹ Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2015). See also Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes* (short form; cf. n. 8).

single essence, will, and act of being that is really and eternally articulated in three subsistent relations.¹⁰

From a logical standpoint, this Triunity allows unity to be conceived in terms of the real relations of origin internal to the one simple essence, rather than mere arithmetic. Following the classical psychological analogy, the Father's eternal act of self-knowledge generates the Word, and the mutual love of Father and Son spirates the Holy Spirit, so that God's unity is not bare numerical solitude but a single essence really productive of two processions and three subsistent relations. This has direct implications for anthropology: if the one God is eternally relational and personal, then human relational and personal existence can be understood as a reflection of God's own being, without implying equality of essence or corporeality.¹¹

It is important to be precise about which doctrine of the Trinity grounds this argument. The claim advanced here rests on the classical Latin and Thomistic account—*una substantia, tres personæ*, in which the divine persons are subsistent relations within one numerically simple essence—not on the modern “social Trinitarian” model, which pictures God as a community, family, or society of three centers of consciousness united by interpersonal love. On the classical account, human dignity and unity can be grounded coherently precisely because God's essence remains strictly and numerically one even as it subsists in three real relations; the social model, by contrast, has been criticized by theologians working within the classical tradition for risking a plurality of divine wills or minds that verges on tritheism, and for reading modern ideals of relational

¹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes theologicae* 31 (the Fifth Theological Oration), in *Sources Chrétiennes* 250; Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto* 18.45, in *Sources Chrétiennes* 17bis. See also Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chs. 13–14.

¹¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* IX.2.2–12.18; XV.27.50, in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 50, 50A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968). See also Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 27, aa. 1–5; Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, ch. 4 (short form; cf. n. 4).

community back into the doctrine of God.¹² The present study accordingly builds its case for human dignity on divine simplicity and the real relations of origin—not on an analogy between the Trinity and a human family or social community.

2.2 Human beings as image and reflection of the Triune God

The biblical claim that humanity is created “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26–27)¹³ has been central to Christian reflection on the human person. Patristic and medieval theologians explored the *imago Dei* in terms of rationality, freedom, and spiritual capacity; more recent theology has emphasized relational and ethical dimensions, seeing the image as oriented toward the knowledge and love of God, exercised in relation to others.¹⁴

In a Trinitarian frame, the *imago Dei* is often understood as the creaturely reflection of God’s triune life: human beings are called to the knowledge and love of God and neighbor, exercised in a manner that analogically mirrors the eternal relations of origin within God. Crucially, Christian theology denies that God has a physical body in His eternal divine nature; image language refers to personal, spiritual, and moral correspondence, not to corporeal similarity. Thus, when Christians say that humanity reflects God, they speak about the reflection of the Triune God’s one simple essence articulated in three subsistent relations, not about humans “looking like” a bodily deity.¹⁵

¹² On the classical Latin/Thomistic account, see Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (short form; cf. n. 4). For the critique of social Trinitarianism from within the classical tradition, see Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 957 (2000): 432–445; and Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

¹³ See n. 3 above.

¹⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate* XIV.4.6–19.25; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 93, aa. 4–9. See also Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

¹⁵ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny* (short form; cf. n. 3), esp. ch. 4 on the non-corporeal nature of the divine image.

In this sense, Christian theology can speak of Jesus Christ as the unique and definitive image of God, whereas Islamic theology, committed to God's absolute transcendence, does not recognize any divine image in a comparable sense. As Paul confesses of Christ, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" *Col 1 : 15*,¹⁶ and speaks of "the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" *2 Cor 4 : 4*.¹⁷

2.3 Unity in God, unity in mankind

Christian faith also links the unity of the human race to the *imago Dei*: all human beings, regardless of distinction, share this created reflection of God's life. The unity of humankind is not grounded in sharing God's essence but in sharing a common creaturely vocation and dignity rooted in God's creative purpose. Because the divine essence, while strictly and numerically one, subsists in three really distinct relations, human unity can be understood as unity-in-diversity, an interplay of individuality and relation that still points back to the one Triune God, whose unity of essence grounds the unity of the human race.¹⁸

This account preserves divine transcendence, rejects corporealism, and yet explains why human beings across cultures manifest a capacity for personal relation, moral responsibility, and communal life that has theological significance. In other words, the Christian doctrine of Trinity allows "image" to mean more than metaphor while still maintaining a clear Creator–creature distinction and non-bodily divine being.

3. Comparative Evaluation: Image, Logic, and Theological Coherence

¹⁶ Colossians 1:15 (NRSV). Greek text in *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Nestle-Aland).

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:4 (NRSV).

¹⁸ See Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny* (short form; cf. n. 3), chs. 6–7, on the unity of the human race in the image of God.

3.1 What “image” can mean under strict *tawhīd*

Under strict *tawhīd*, the concept of God’s unity leaves little space for speaking of humanity as reflecting God in a rich ontological or relational sense. The more rigorously one insists on absolute, undifferentiated divine singularity, the more difficult it becomes to claim that human nature, with its plurality, relationships, and inner life, in any way mirrors God’s own being. Islamic theology can affirm that humans bear moral responsibility, receive revelation, and are honored among creatures, but it struggles to provide a coherent account of “His image” that is more than functional or metaphorical.¹⁹

The hadith “God created Adam in His image” thus finds itself constrained: either the pronoun is redirected away from God, or “image” is interpreted in ways that preserving *tawhīd* but thin out the sense of reflection. Where attempts are made to retain a stronger sense of image, the risk of corporealism leads most Muslim theologians to reiterate that God is unlike creation in every respect, effectively neutralizing the potential of image language for a robust anthropology.

3.2 What “image” can mean under Triunity

In contrast, Christian Trinitarian theology allows “image” language to carry significant anthropological weight without compromising divine transcendence. Because unity in God is understood as one essence subsisting in three really distinct relations, human relational existence can be seen as an analogical reflection of God’s life. The plurality of human persons, the depth of interpersonal relation, and the moral call to love all find an analogical prototype in the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit.²⁰

¹⁹ See Winter, *Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (short form; cf. n. 5).

²⁰ See Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (short form; cf. n. 4), ch. 6, “The Person.”

This does not entail that humans share God's essence or that God is a body. Rather, it recognizes that the human capacity for relation and moral responsibility is grounded in a God whose one essence is really articulated in three subsistent relations. Thus, when Christians speak of humanity in God's image, they mean that human beings reflect, in finite creaturely form, the one simple essence of the Triune God as it subsists in three really distinct relations. The concept of Trinity gives logical content to "image" beyond metaphor while retaining a clear distinction between Creator and creature.

3.3 Corporealism versus personal reflection

The divergence between mujassimah tendencies and Trinitarian anthropology further clarifies the comparative landscape. Islamic corporealists, by attributing bodily form or spatiality to God, attempt to give concrete content to image language, but at the cost of undermining divine transcendence and *tawhīd*. Mainstream Muslim theology rightly rejects such views, insisting that God is not a body and cannot be likened to created forms.²¹

Christian theology, by contrast, maintains a non-bodily understanding of God's eternal nature while still affirming significant human reflection of God. It locates reflection in personal, relational, and moral dimensions rather than in physical shape. The Triune God does not "have a body," yet humanity reflects God's unity and relationality. From this perspective, Christianity adheres to unity at a deeper logical level, understanding unity as a single essence really articulated in three subsistent relations, and thereby offers a more coherent explanation of why humanity can be said to reflect God.²²

²¹ See Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī* (short form; cf. n. 9); Frank, *Beings and Their Attributes* (short form; cf. n. 8).

²² See Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (short form; cf. n. 10); Emery, *Trinitarian Theology* (short form; cf. n. 4).

4. Human Dignity and the Unity of Humankind

The differing theological accounts of divine unity and image have direct implications for human dignity and the unity of humankind. In Islam, Qur'ānic texts affirm that God has honored humanity and granted humans a special position among creatures, which supports a strong notion of inherent dignity. Yet the difficulty of articulating a deep reflection of God in human nature under strict *tawḥīd* means that this dignity tends to be grounded more in God's external bestowal of honor and moral responsibility than in any likeness to God's inner being.²³

In Christianity, the *imago Dei* is often taken as the foundational basis for human dignity: every person bears a created reflection of God, and this cannot be erased by social status, ethnicity, or sin.²⁴ Because God's one essence really subsists in three distinct persons, human dignity is tied to participation in a relational form of life that analogically mirrors the processions and relations constituting God's own triune essence. This offers a powerful theological grounding for human rights, resistance to dehumanization, and the affirmation of the unity of humankind.

From the comparative viewpoint developed here, Christian Trinitarian anthropology provides a more coherent and fruitful framework for understanding the human person as a reflection of God and for grounding human dignity in that reflection. Islam's commitment to strict unicity and rejection of corporealism preserves transcendence but struggles to integrate image language into a fully developed theology of human reflection without internal tension.

²³ Qur'an 17:70 (see n.1 above). See also Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁴ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny* (short form; cf. n. 3), chs. 8–9, on the theological grounding of human dignity and rights.

Conclusion: Toward a Coherent Theology of God's Reflection in Humanity

This article has argued that the way Islam and Christianity speak of humanity “in the image” of God is inseparable from their respective doctrines of divine unity. In Islam, *tawhīd* as absolute unicity, combined with the rejection of corporealism, places severe constraints on what it can mean to say that humanity reflects God, particularly in light of the hadith “God created Adam in His image.” The resulting tension pushes interpretations either toward metaphorical weakening of “image” or toward *mujassim* views that most Muslims find theologically unacceptable.

Christian Trinitarian theology, while equally committed to divine unity, understands that unity as one simple essence subsisting in three really distinct persons, allowing human relational and personal existence to be seen as a real, non-corporeal reflection of God's own life. The doctrine of the Trinity thus provides an internally coherent framework in which humanity can be said to reflect God's unity and love, grounding human dignity and the unity of humankind in a way that aligns with the observable structure of human existence.²⁵

This comparative analysis does not resolve all doctrinal disagreements, but it does suggest that a coherent theology of God's reflection in humanity is more readily available within Christian Triunity than within a strictly unitary conception of God. For Christian–Muslim dialogue, the argument invites deeper discussion of how divine unity is best understood if we take seriously both the scriptural language of “image” and the anthropological reality of human relational life. It also points to the importance of grounding human dignity not only in divine command but in a

²⁵ See Emery, *Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (short form; cf. n. 4); Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (short form; cf. n. 10).

meaningful reflection of the divine being—one that avoids corporealism while affirming the profound connection between God and mankind.

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