

The Concept of Human as Imago Dei from the Habatahon Perspective: Implications for Character Education

Mariska Sinaga¹, Riris Johanna Siagian¹

¹ Sekolah Tinggi Teologi HKBP, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the concept of human as *imago Dei* from the Habatahon perspective and its implications for character education and Christian religious education. This qualitative study employs a theology of religions perspective. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 35 members of HKBP Dolok Ulu Resort Bombongan, in-depth interviews with 10 key informants, and literature analysis. The findings show that the Toba Batak understanding of human creation parallels Christian faith: *Mulajadi na Bolon* is understood as the Creator, and humans consist of body, soul, and spirit/*tondi/sahala*. *Sahala* is understood as an energy of superior spirituality, quality, and character originating from *Mulajadi na Bolon*. As *imago Dei*, humans are responsible for realizing divine values in relationships with the Creator, others, and the cosmos. This understanding is relevant as a foundation for character education and Christian religious education, especially in cultivating human dignity, ecological responsibility, morality, and loving relationships. Consequently, education should integrate cognitive, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions through teaching, Bible study, preaching, fellowship, seminars, discussion groups, and spiritual guidance. Thus, the concept of *imago Dei* from the Habatahon perspective offers theoretical and practical contributions to developing education rooted in faith and cultural values.

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Corresponding Author:

Mariska Sinaga

Sekolah Tinggi Teologi HKBP, Indonesia; mariskasng@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of human creation as *imago Dei* is not only a matter of Christian faith, but can also be found in Batak religious literature. The Bible states that God took the initiative to create man in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27). In the Batak context, the Creator known through Jesus Christ is called *Mulajadi na Bolon*. This similarity shows that Toba's understanding of human origins is parallel to the understanding of the Christian faith (Siagian, 2023).

In Batak cosmology, *Mulajadi na Bolon* is understood as the Creator of the sky, the earth, and the entire cosmos. The world is understood as a unity of three continents, namely the upper, middle, and lower continents, with *Mulajadi na Bolon* dwelling on it. The creation of man occurred on the initiative of the Creator, not solely the efforts of humans. Therefore, there is a similarity in the creation process between the Christian faith and the Batak belief, namely that the Creator took the initiative to create and give life (Siagian, 2023).

The question of "who is a human being?" has long been a concern of philosophy. Descartes, the pioneer of rationalism, views human beings as consisting of the body and mind/consciousness; the soul and the body are in an equal relationship, although they remain different. The body and soul are understood to come from the Creator who has adjusted the two since the beginning (Poedjawijatna, 1997). In the Batak understanding, humans have three elements that affect their existence, namely the body, the soul, and *the sahala*. Therefore, efforts are needed to find a common ground between the Batak understanding, philosophy, and Christianity about the nature of man (Siagian, 2016, 2021).

The Batak religious literature collected by Warneck contains *the dialogue between Sileangleang Mandi and Mulajadi na Bolon*. After going around to the lower level of the *kayangan* and finding no life, *Sileangleang Mandi* asked *Mulajadi na Bolon* if He intended to create inhabitants below. *Mulajadi na Bolon* replied that He would create humans to inhabit it, then create *Batara Guru*, *Soripada*, and *Mangala Bulan* (Siagian, 2023). This narrative shows that the Batak tradition has its own understanding of human creation that needs to be in dialogue with the Christian faith.

Man as *imago Dei* should be able to embody and reflect divine values since creation, especially through a true relationship with the Creator and fellow creatures. However, various corruptions in the world show that humans often fail to reflect divine values because they do not obey the Creator's commands. Sin has damaged the *imago Dei*, although it has not completely revoked that identity (Manurung, 2023; Sinaga, 2023). Humans are still called to maintain creation and uphold justice as God's representatives on earth (Moltmann, 1997).

Much has been done on the *imago Dei*, for example in relation to human dignity, human rights, and ecological responsibility (Behr, 2013; Manurung, 2023; Sinaga, 2023). Similarly, Habatahon theology has addressed man, *sahala*, and creation as a *familia Dei* (Siagian, 2016, 2021, 2023). However, the integration between the concept of *imago Dei* from the perspective of Habatahon and its implications for character education and Christian religious education is still limited. Therefore, this study offers novelty by linking Habatahon theology, human philosophy, and educational praxis.

This study aims to analyze the concept of human beings as *imago Dei* from the perspective of Habatahon and its implications for character education and Christian religious education. The method used is qualitative research from the perspective of Theology of Religions, with data collection through questionnaires to 35 congregations of HKBP Dolok Ulu Resort Bombongan, in-depth interviews with 10 key informants, and literature analysis. The data were analyzed thematically and conclusions were drawn. Thus, this research is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of education rooted in faith and cultural values (Siagian, 2021; Siagian et al., 2021).

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method from the perspective of Theology of Religions. Data were collected through questionnaires to 35 members of HKBP Dolok Ulu Resort Bombongan and in-depth interviews with 10 key informants to explore their understanding of the concept of human beings as *imago Dei* from the perspective of Habatahon. In addition, data was obtained through a literature study of relevant Batak theological, philosophical, and cultural literature. Field data and literature were analyzed thematically by comparing, grouping, and interpreting information according to the focus of the research, then conclusions were drawn to formulate the implications of the concept for character education and Christian religious education.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Man as *Imago Dei* in the Perspective of Habatahon and Philosophy

In Batak cosmology, *Mulajadi na Bolon* is understood as the Creator of the sky, the earth, and all its contents. The world is seen as a unity of three continents—up, middle, and bottom—with *Mulajadi na Bolon* as the center of the entire energy of the cosmos. The creation of man occurred on the initiative of the Creator, not because of man's own efforts. This understanding is in line with the Christian faith which affirms that God took the initiative to create man in His image and likeness (Siagian, 2023).

Philosophy has also long grappled with human nature. Descartes viewed human beings as composed of the body and mind/consciousness, with the soul and body being in an equal relationship albeit different. Plato saw the soul as superior to the body, while Aristotle rejected the radical separation and understood the soul as a form that moves matter. Thomas Aquinas then modified Aristotle's thought to be in harmony with Christian teachings, especially the belief that the soul remains eternal and returns to the Creator (B et al., 2018; Poedjawijatna, 1997).

In the Batak understanding, human beings consist of body, soul, and *sahala*. *Tondi* or *sahala* does not come from humans, but from *Mulajadi na Bolon* as the Supreme God. *Sahala* is understood as the radiance of the divine presence in humans, so that humans have a living spirit and are able to do the will of the Creator. *Tondi* refers to the soul and the subtle breath of life, while the body is a material element that can be seen and touched. The two are inseparable in human life (Siagian, 2016, 2021).

The Bible affirms that man was created as *imago Dei*. The Hebrew words *tselem* and *demut* indicate that man is in the image and resemblance to God, although the image is not limited to physical form. *Imago Dei* is more focused on the soul, free will, intellect, and man's ability to reflect God's attributes. God formed man from the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life, so that man becomes a living being that has earthly and divine dimensions at the same time (Manurung, 2023; Moltmann, 1997; Sinaga, 2023).

Thus, the Habatahon and Christian perspectives meet at several points: human beings are composed of body and spirit/soul, receive life from the Creator, and are responsible for reflecting divine values. In contrast, the Batak tradition emphasizes *sahala* as the energy of superior spirituality, while Christianity emphasizes the redemptive work of Christ as the restoration of *imago Dei* damaged by sin. Nevertheless, both affirm that human beings have high dignity and moral responsibility towards the Creator and fellow creatures (Behr, 2013; Cortez, 2016; Fergusson, 2014).

Sahala as Spirituality, Quality, and Superior Character

Sahala is defined as superior spiritual energy, superior quality, and superior character. The word "spirituality" is rooted in the word "spirit" which means spirit, soul, spirit, and relates to sacred things. In ecclesiastical terminology, spiritual means the quality of human devotion to God. Therefore, *sahala* contains religious values and is always related to divine things. *Sahala* is inseparable from the inner life and continuous spiritual practice (Siagian, 2016, 2021).

Sahala is closely related to *tondi*, spirit, soul, and body. In the Batak sentence "*Ditongos do tondi i—sahala i tu hasiangan on, asa martondi-ngolu jolma i,*" *sahala* is given by God so that the human spirit and soul bring life. *Tondi* refers to the soul and breath of life that cannot be seen, while the body is a crude element that is material. *Sahala* comes from the sacred world, namely from *Mulajadi na Bolon*, so its presence in humans points to the presence of God (Siagian, 2016).

Batak people who have superior character are described as individuals who are strong in God (*mardebata na togu*), spirituality (*martondi na mangolu*), obey laws and rules (*siula patik dohot uhum*), visionary (*marpanatapan tu jolo*), be an advisor (*guru panungkunan*), have integrity (*sada hata dohot pangalaho*), testify (*sitindangi*), listening with the heart (*manangihon sian nasa roha*), trustworthy (*haposan*), and sincere (*uli rohana*). These characters aim to build a better life and become tangible manifestations of *sahala* in daily actions (Siagian, 2021; Siagian et al., 2021).

In Christianity, humans have been given *logos from the beginning*, which is the knowledge and word of God in them. Humans have the seed of the word (*logos spermatikos*), so that all creation has God's goodness and order. Therefore, humans have the face of God (*imago Dei*) which is expressed in daily actions and thought processes. This concept is parallel to *sahala* as a divine impulse that enables humans to act in a superior and responsible manner (Moltmann, 1997; Siagian et al., 2021).

Sin has corrupted the *imago Dei*, but it has not completely revoked that identity. Man still has the ability to reflect the attributes of God, even though that ability has been wounded. The restoration of the *imago Dei* only occurs through Christ's redemptive work on the cross and His resurrection. The Holy Spirit leads man to be continually renewed until the coming of Christ. Thus, the *sahala* as a superior character needs to be understood in the light of God's grace and restoration (Cortez, 2016; Fergusson, 2014; Manurung, 2023).

Implications for Character Education and Christian Education

The concept of human beings as *imago Dei* from the perspective of Habatahon has important implications for character education. Education must not stop at the cognitive aspect, but must integrate spiritual, moral, and social dimensions. Students need to be helped to understand that they have divine dignity, intellect, conscience, and responsibility to reflect the attributes of God. Thus, character education is a process of growing a whole human being, not just intellectually intelligent (Behr, 2013; Manurung, 2023).

The church has run a variety of ministries to help the congregation understand their self-worth as *imago Dei*, such as Bible teaching, Bible study (*Patanakhon Hata ni Debata*), sermons, and *weekly partangiang* or fellowship. However, the results of field research show that the congregation still needs additional services, such as seminars, age-appropriate discussion groups, educational programs, spiritual guidance, and explanations of doctrines in simple language as well as real-life examples. This need shows that Christian religious education must be contextual and participatory (field research results, 2025).

In Batak culture-based character education, *sahala values* can be a reference. Superior characters such as *mardebata na togu*, *martondi na mangolu*, *siula patik dohot uhum*, *sada hata dohot pangalaho*, and *uli rohana* can be translated into indicators of learning: obedient to worship, have a living spirituality, obey rules, have integrity, and sincerity. These values are in line with the goals of national education that emphasizes faith, piety, and noble morals. Therefore, character education can be rooted in local wisdom without abandoning universal values (Siagian, 2021; Siagian et al., 2021).

The concept of *imago Dei* also demands education that fosters ecological responsibility. Humans are called to nurture and care for the cosmos as their dwelling place, not to exploit it without limits. The Batak tradition teaches respect for the earth as the mother who gives life, while the Bible affirms that humans are mandated to cultivate and maintain creation. Education, both in schools and churches, needs to instill awareness that destroying nature means destroying relationships with the Creator and fellow creatures (Moltmann, 1997; Sinaga, 2023).

Thus, the implications of the concept of *imago Dei* from the perspective of Habatahon for character education and Christian religious education are holistic and transformative. Education needs to help students understand their identity as the image of God, bring the *sahala* to life as a superior character, and realize it in a relationship with God, others, and nature. This approach requires integration between theology, culture, and educational praxis. Ultimately, education rooted in faith and cultural values will form a person who has faith, character, and responsibility (Siagian, 2021; Siagian et al., 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

The concept of human beings as *imago Dei* in the perspective of Habatahon shows parallels with the understanding of the Christian faith and philosophy. *Mulajadi na Bolon* is understood as the Creator who took the initiative to create humans, and humans consist of body, soul, and spirit or *tondi* and *sahala*. *Sahala* is interpreted as the energy of superior spirituality, superior qualities, and superior

character that comes from *Mulajadi na Bolon*. As *imago Dei*, man has a high dignity and is responsible for embodying divine values in relation to the Creator, fellow human beings, and the entire cosmos. Sin has corrupted *the imago Dei*, but it has not completely revoked that identity, since its restoration takes place through Christ's redemptive work and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

The implications of this study confirm that character education and Christian religious education need to be holistic, that is, not only developing cognitive aspects, but also spiritual, moral, and social. Sahala values such as *mardebata na togu*, *martondi na mangolu*, *siula patik dohot uhum*, *sada hata dohot pangalaho*, and *uli rohana* can be the basis for the formation of the character of students who are faithful, have integrity, and responsibility. Education also needs to foster ecological awareness as a form of human responsibility as the image of God to maintain creation. Thus, the concept of *imago Dei* from the perspective of Habatahon makes a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of education rooted in the values of faith, culture, and local wisdom.

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