

**ICONIC DIGNITY:
NATURE, GRACE, AND VIRTUE IN THE THEOLOGIES
OF JOHN WESLEY AND THOMAS AQUINAS
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ABSTRACT

This study argues that a comparison of human nature, divine grace, and theological virtue in the theologies of John Wesley and Thomas Aquinas provides resources for constructing iconic dignity as a vital theological perspective. Iconic dignity names a radiant-yet-reflected human worth rooted in the image of God, whose grace empowers response, transformation, and virtuous participation in God's loving essence. The dissertation responds to the absence of a focused analysis of nature, grace, and virtue in Wesley-Aquinas studies—a nascent field with only three major publications (on historical-moral theology, Christian perfection, and pneumatology). The project's contributions to theological reflection and practice have become especially clear in our current context of social-existential fragmentation and bigotry.

Iconic dignity begins with an intuitional methodology and proceeds with textual analysis, critically comparative construction, and practical contributions. These methods characterize iconic dignity as participatory, incarnational, relational, dynamic, encompassing, transformational, and loving. These characteristics embrace our inter/personal nature, our development in grace, and our work with God toward virtuous flourishing.

The dissertation's explanatory power and generative potential capacitates constructive doctrinal reflection and practical embodiments of iconic dignity.

After detailing “iconicity” and “dignity,” the theological comparison of Wesley and Aquinas traces general contours of their shared theological anthropology. As embodiments of God's image, humans possess intellect, will, and volitional liberty, which together establish our moral capacity. This holistic anthropology is then analyzed with respect to human acts, their relation to *habitus* (Aquinas) and tempers (Wesley), and sin (actual and original). Following a constructive exploration of iconic dignity and ecological stewardship, the study shifts to grace. Close stereoscopic reading reveals the congruity of grace's nature, divisions, and dynamics for Wesley and Aquinas.

Throughout, the constructive comparison illustrates the strength of iconic dignity's theological perspective. Wesley and Aquinas are shown to be similar enough to *converse* but different enough to *contribute*: to one another, out of their shared theological departures and destinations; and to *our* practical-theological conversations, including a repudiation of total depravity, an embrace of universal grace, joint ecological stewardship, radical hospitality, and ongoing Methodist-Catholic ecumenical dialogues.

Still, many opportunities remain for developing iconic dignity in practice. First, more research is needed on the means of grace and the nature and exercise of theological virtue for Wesley and Aquinas. Second, future research should focus on additional topics like ecclesiology, moral virtue, sociality, and an expansion beyond Wesley and Aquinas. Finally, the need remains for further study into practices of iconic dignity, including the development of stereoscopic reading for local congregations and communities.