

Entertaining God in an Artificially Intelligent Heaven

When considering the Kingdom of Heaven, many immediately picture floating pearly gates that open up to endless happiness surrounded by family and friends. Now consider an artificially intelligent system that, when you are fused with whether living or in death, elevates you as one with your family and friends, shedding all your bodily needs and leaving you to explore endless possibilities from within. Artificial intelligence has always been subject to speculation, with the scientific community holding high hopes in achieving a truly artificially intelligent system one day. Michio Kaku believes these AI robots are far from coming into existence, as there are many downfalls to creating something in our own likeness and intelligence. On the other side of the spectrum, religion has continually butted heads with scientific discovery, which according to Alfred Whitehead, is part of the healthy relationship in stimulating further research and adventure. Although the creation of truly artificial intelligence has the potential to create a corrupt society, fracturing apart religious institutions and reigniting fear and mistrust among the people, there is a more likely pathway AI could take in the future, bringing together religion and science as one in the digital world of cyberspace.

In order to understand the relationship between technology and religion, it is important to trace technological development and the responses from religious communities from the past up until the present. Before any sort of printing press or typewriter was invented, the only mode of communication to spread religious ideals was through word of mouth and handwritten documents, which was “a painstaking process only a few were even able to undertake” (Brescia University). Even written word was difficult to spread as most people were illiterate, which left it in the hands of the religious leaders of the world, which ultimately meant that “the only way to worship was to attend organized services” (Brescia University). It wasn’t until the invention of the radio, soon to be followed by television, that religion was able to spread their message in an easier and more efficient way. Radio allowed those who lived in rural and hard-to-get-to places a way to “stay connected to the nation and with their faith,” and television, which was utilized most by Christianity, “allowed pastors, preachers, and religious leaders to

reach a much wider audience in a more immersive way” (Brescia University). With each of these technological advances, religion has leaned in and utilized them in a way that benefits both the religion itself and the communities it has created over the years. CNBC reported in their article, “How artificial intelligence is shaping religion in the 21st century,” that “different faiths have absorbed new ideas from the world of technology to enhance mainstream religious practices,” even creating robot priests and electronic scripture readings to help out (CNBC). However, there seems to be a common agreement regarding ethics and code limitations between researchers and religious domains looking into the implications of AI and its development. Heidi Hackford explores this in her article, “Should We Fear AI?” in which a woman she interviews, Cindy Cohen, notes “that AI can learn a lot more than animals and so it’s necessary to build in limits and transparency to make the technology serve us rather than the other way around” (Hackford). These same concerns are shared by Steven Pinker, who believes that “we humans have used our moderate endowment to domesticate or exterminate less well-endowed animals (and since technologically advanced societies have enslaved or annihilated technologically primitive ones), it follows that a super-smart AI would do the same to us” (Pinker). It is the general consensus that limiting the intelligence and abilities of an AI system is pertinent in the early steps of it’s creating as a way to ensure our own safety.

Ethical limitations and parameters are another step that is stressed by scientists and religious institutions alike. The idea of ethical limitations is a vast net to cast, as it encompasses the basic human moral compass, unbiased input, and on the more complex level, emotional abilities. In his article “What is artificial intelligence?” Darrel West believes that “as long as these systems conform to important human values, there is little risk of AI going rogue or endangering human beings...however, if the software is poorly designed or based on incomplete or biased information, it can endanger humanity or replicate past injustices” (West). This is especially important in religious communities that have been subject to atrocities in the past, such as the Nazi rule persecuting Jews and Catholics during WWII and the Christian Crusades waging war against Islamic rule in Jerusalem. West emphasizes that “figuring out

how to reconcile conflicting values is one of the most important challenges facing AI designers...failure to do that leads to AI algorithms that are unfair and unjust” (West). Within the caveat of ethics, there is also a worry among the religious community that the creation of such an intelligent AI will create a type of identity crisis for those who believe we were created in God’s image. Marius Dorobantu had much to say on this topic, stating that “at the root of this [identity] crisis lies the age-old question of what, if anything, makes humans unique and distinctive...the notion of human distinctiveness had traditionally been articulated in the doctrine that humans are created in the image of God,” further emphasizing that “the intuition of our uniqueness, encapsulated in the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, is part of divine revelation” (Dorobantu). This dilemma of identity crisis has the potential to disrupt the religious community and call upon one’s morals and beliefs on creating something such as AI in our own image, which could be seen as a major sin and the worship of a false idol. Putting aside these qualms, Alfred Whitehead reminds us to “remember the widely different aspects of events which are dealt with in science and in religion respectively...religion is wholly wrapped up in the contemplation of moral and aesthetic values” (Whitehead, 226), but similar concerns of unethical coding and insincere motives are at the top of both scientific and religious minds.

Looking into the far distant future, it can be presumed that AI holds a poignant place in our society. On one side of the coin, there are many fears of what could go wrong if proper precautions are not taken. However, when looking at how the religious community will respond to its development and integration into our society, there are hopes for what is know as an Apocalyptic AI, or in other words, a “momentous event called the “singularity;” which would mark “a radical divide between this world and the next, a mechanical world culminating in the onset of the age of mind, a Virtual Kingdom in cyberspace” (Geraci, 12). There are those who believe that leaning into artificial intelligence development and creating a virtual, alternate reality, we will be able to live infinitely closer to God and to each other. This logic can be seen in the works of Marius Dorobantu, who wrote, “If Christ truly is the best instantiation of the divine image, then the whole process of biological evolution could be seen

as directed toward producing a being in which God could incarnate” (Dorobantu). The whole idea of religion is to transcend into heaven and become one with God, and by creating an AI cyberspace capable of uploading human minds into, it is believed that AI will not only bring communities together, but it will stimulate further research and discoveries that our physical being couldn’t begin to touch on for another thousand years. Robert Geraci’s article “Apocalyptic AI” dives into this, where he speculates that “real, meaningful activity will cease to take place in the physical world, shifting instead to cyberspace. Just as meaningful prayer characterizes heaven in Judeo-Christian apocalypticism, meaningful computation occupies all individuals in Apocalyptic AI” (Geraci, 14). This is corroborated by Matt Rossano, who believes that “advances in AI that break down barriers of distance also hold promise for strengthening human communities” (Rossano, 15), and furthermore leads to the hope that becoming one with artificial intelligence will “rectify the perceived failures of human life” and allow human minds to leave behind the need for material wants and desires (Geraci).

Now, with the perception of artificial intelligence holding both positive points for the religious community and negative points for both religious and scientific minds, there are things that both can come to an agreement on. For one, the prospect of creating an AI as omniscient and intelligent as we might like to envision for the future is a long way from ever being a possibility. Michio Kaku researched just how far AI has come in his article, “Physics of the Impossible,” acknowledging that AI is still primitive in basic human emotion and logicity. When comparing a computer’s ability to process information to that of a human, Kaku observes how “digital computers can calculate at nearly the speed of light. The human brain, by contrast, is incredibly slow...In a race, a superfast single processor is left in the dust by a superslow parallel processor” (Kaku, 256). Kaku also made the astute point that a computer’s brain is entirely reliant on its main power source, the central processor, and if that were to be removed, the whole system would fail. From an even more current standpoint, Max Tegmark explains what AI is and the pros and cons of its development in his article, “Benefits & Risks of Artificial Intelligence,” telling us that today’s AI “is properly known as narrow AI (or weak AI),” and points out

that “most researchers agree that a superintelligent AI is unlikely to exhibit human emotions like love or hate, and that there is no reason to expect AI to become intentionally benevolent or malevolent” (Tegmark). Along the lines of future AI development lies the question on ethics, which both scientist and religious institutions both push for as a way to create boundaries and keep control. CNBC reported that “faith leaders are increasingly concerned about morality and the ethics behind creating human-like machines” (CNBC), to which Daniel Altieri adds “it is important to understand that technologies develop from thoughts, questions, and reason, therefore religious beliefs can influence societies to create, or not create, tangible technologies that benefit, or hinder, their surrounding environment” (Altieri). From this, one can understand that religion has a huge influence on driving the scientific community to make new discoveries, “driving people to investigate and look for new questions and answers” (Altieri), which will ultimately create a balancing force in any AI developed in the future. Upon contemplating an identity crisis among religious practitioners with the development on an artificial intelligent being, Dorobantu believes that “robots may outsmart us, but as long as they do not share our vulnerability and capacity for personal relationship, they could not partake in the image of God,” which is something many scientists believe will never be a possible occurrence in artificially intelligent technology (Dorobantu). If Apocalyptic AI were to become reality, as the religious community believes it could, the technology would not only benefit religion as a whole, but it would enlighten the entire world, bringing along with it the endless potential for scientific discovery and an extensive digital knowledge database.

Artificial intelligence has the potential to develop far beyond our current grasp, and may bring along with it, negative connotations and repercussions. Despite this, there is much hope from the religious community that it will work in favor of bringing together not just the religious community, but the entire world as intellectuals. Subsequently, a transcendent world where humanity is not just limited to our physical bodies has the ability to share knowledge more easily and readily, promoting excitement and adventure within. The relationship between science and technology is simultaneously beneficial; “as

technology continues to advance, religion will change with it. Believers will find new and innovative ways to explore and grow their faith, no matter what the future holds” (Brescia University).

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