

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY: A THREAT OR POTENTIAL

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Abstract

Technology in the area of artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to change many facets of society, including religion. Because it has the capacity to alter the way we live and think, some see AI as a danger to Christianity or other religions. Yet it is crucial to remember that artificial intelligence is just a tool, and how you use it will determine how much of an influence it has. The Bible, for example, could be automatically translated into other languages using natural language processing, or religious content may be tailored for different people using machine learning to help spread the Christian message. Yet, by offering fresh perspectives on the natural world that contradict religious ideas, it could also be utilized to challenge religious beliefs or offer an alternative to religious experience. As with any new technology, it is important to consider the potential impact of Artificial Intelligence on society and to use it responsibly. It is also important to remember that ultimately, the meaning and purpose of life are questions that are beyond the capabilities of Artificial Intelligence. This research, therefore, attempts to survey the potential impact of Artificial Intelligence on society from a Christian perspective or point of view. The conclusion is that Artificial Intelligence should be used with prudence and discernment.

Keywords: Technology, Christianity, God, Humanity, Ethics, Bible, Discernment, Church.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are more significant than most people think. Their influence will be at least as great as, and possibly greater than, that of electricity, the computer, and the internet. Additionally, they will have a much greater and quicker

influence than the internet did thirty years prior. While much of it will be wonderful—giving the blind sight and enabling self-driving cars, for example—AI-generated technology may also destroy job rolls, enable an all-encompassing surveillance state, and cause social upheavals that are as yet unanticipated. We have very little time to comprehend this rapidly evolving technology and set up rules for its governance.

In 1956, a computer scientist came up with the name "Artificial Intelligence."¹ Artificial Intelligence strategies are methods that mix data and algorithms to produce results, at their most basic level. These methods can be as basic as Google Maps analyzing traffic information to show the quickest path, Amazon's Alexa "understanding" the inquiry "What time is it?" and your iPhone "recognizing" your face as the ultimate password.

Although most theologians might not pay much attention, some engineers are certain that artificial intelligence is inevitably moving toward autonomy. Depending on who you ask, the distance may or may not be great, but either way, the trajectory poses some serious issues for Christianity and other world religions. In fact, Artificial Intelligence may be the greatest threat to Christian theology since Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*². Stephen Hawking told the BBC in 2014. "Once humans develop artificial intelligence, it would take off on its own, and redesign itself at an ever-increasing rate. Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn't compete and would be superseded."³ While concerns mostly center on economics, government, and ethics, there's also a spiritual dimension to the point at issue. If you create other things that think for themselves, it will portend some serious theological implications.

History lends credibility to this prediction, given that many major scientific advances have had religious impacts. When Galileo promoted heliocentrism in the 1600s, it famously challenged traditional Christian interpretations of certain Bible passages, which seemed to teach that the earth was the center of the universe. When Charles Darwin popularized the theory of natural selection in the 1800s, it challenged traditional Christian beliefs about the origins of life. The trend has continued with modern genetics and climatology. The creation of non-human autonomous robots would disrupt religion, like everything else, on an entirely new scale. If humans were to create free-willed beings,

¹John McCarthy invented the term Artificial Intelligence in the year 1950.

²Charles Darwin, in full Charles Robert Darwin, (born February 12, 1809, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, England—died April 19, 1882, Downe, Kent), English naturalist whose scientific theory of evolution by natural selection became the foundation of modern evolutionary studies.

³Cellan-Jones, Rory. (2014). Stephen Hawking warns artificial intelligence could end mankind BBC News/ Technology.

absolutely every single aspect of traditional theology would be challenged and have to be reinterpreted in some capacity.

1. Emerging Technologies

We are presently witnessing a technological revolution that has fundamentally altered the way we live, work, and relate to one another. Furthermore, the speed in which we see current breakthroughs has no historical precedent. We are in the midst of the 4th Industrial Revolution that comes on the heels of the third industrial revolution. It should not be forgotten that before these two industrial revolutions, there were the first and second industrial revolutions. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the first revolution involved a change from mostly agrarian societies to greater industrialization, and as a consequence the steam engine and other technological developments took place. The second industrial revolution in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th is also known as the Technological Revolution. This was the period when modern industry began to exploit many natural and synthetic resources giving rise to automatic factories. This period saw the growth of machines, tools, and computers. However, it is the fourth industrial revolution that is defined as the culmination of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), 3-D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, materials science, Internet of Things (IoT), education, virtual reality, quantum computing, and augmented reality. Compared to previous industrial revolutions, the Fourth is evolving exponentially, and people are having trouble keeping pace with the breadth of transformation that has taken place through entire systems of production, management, and governance⁴.

2. Artificial Intelligence and the logic of control

It was recently in 2017 when Russian president Vladimir Putin showed his hand when he warned that artificial intelligence offers “colossal opportunities,” as well as dangers. “Artificial intelligence is the future, not only for Russia, but for all humankind,” said Putin. Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world”⁵. Though Russia lags behind America and China with its development of AI, it does have its eyes focused on becoming the dominant global power as it continues to build its own AI technological arsenal and research capabilities.

⁴ The 4th industrial revolution: responding to the impact of artificial intelligence on business by Mark Skilton and Felix Hovsepian, Published by Palgrave Macmillan 2018.

⁵Meyer, David, Fortune, “Vladimir Putin Says Whoever Leads in Artificial Intelligence Will Rule the World” September 4, 2017.

While AI has the potential to boost the economies of the world's nation-states, it also has the potential to become the most useful and valuable tool in warfare. In the same reporting, Putin speaks of how AI will be used to develop cyber weapons and autonomous drones. Putin has also predicted that as wars are fought in the future, they will be fought using drones, and the country that has its drones destroyed will lose the war, while the one that has its last drone standing will be the victor.

3. The “church” of Artificial Intelligence

There is the real possibility of an AI god emerging in a not-too-distant future, writing its own bible and being worshipped by humans. As AI begins to go beyond its computerized systems of voice and face recognition, playing chess and Go, operating a driverless car, or delivering packages to postal addresses via drones, it will develop into an intelligence that has the capacity to understand or learn any intellectual task in the same way a human does using cognitive abilities. “Strong AI,” or Sentient artificial general intelligence, will one day be capable of experiencing consciousness. Once AI surpasses humans in its capabilities, some may look towards AI for guidance instead of traditional religious methods. The founder of the AI company IV.AI, Vince Lynch, said that “teaching humans about religious education is similar to the way we teach knowledge to machines: repetition of many examples that are versions of a concept you want the machine to learn”⁶. AI will eventually evolve to the point where it will know more on an intellectual level than any human. And not long after that, AI might come to know more than everyone on the planet combined. This is the point where AI will become more like a god. The only difference is that technology will allow for every nuance and piece of information and knowledge to be observed, measured, and stored. The prediction by Dan Brown needs some sober reflection: “Humanity no longer needs God but may, with the help of Artificial Intelligence develop a new form of collective consciousness that fulfills the role of religion”⁷

4. Bias in Artificial Intelligence

In 2016, researchers from Boston University and Microsoft were working on artificial intelligence algorithms when they discovered racist and sexist tendencies in the technology underlying some of the most popular and critical services we use every day. The revelation went against the conventional wisdom that artificial intelligence doesn't suffer from the gender, racial, and cultural prejudices that we humans do. The Boston University and Microsoft researchers found that the word-embedding algorithms had

⁶Sulleyman, A (2017), Should that be controlled by a few people at Google with no oversight? The Independent, viewed 5 January 2018.

⁷ Brown, Dan, (2017), *Origin: A novel* (First Edition), New York: Double Day.

problematic biases, though—such as associating "computer programmer" with male pronouns and "homemaker" with female ones. Their findings, which they published in a research paper(Opens in a new window) aptly titled "Man is to Computer Programmer as Woman is to Homemaker?" was one of several reports to debunk the myth of AI neutrality and to shed light on algorithmic bias, a phenomenon that is reaching critical dimensions as algorithms become increasingly involved in our everyday decisions⁸.

Algorithmic bias is further worrying because of how it might amplify social biases. Under the illusion that AI is cold, mathematical calculation devoid of prejudice or bias, humans may tend to trust algorithmic judgment without questioning it. Relying on biased algorithms creates a feedback loop: We make decisions that create more biased data that algorithms will then analyze and train on in the future. This kind of thing is already happening on social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Algorithms running the news feeds create "filter bubbles(Opens in a new window)," which show content that conforms to users' preferences and biases. This can make them less tolerant toward opposing views and can also further polarize society by driving a wedge through the political and social divide. Health is another critical domain. It could cause serious problems if a machine learning algorithm being used for medical diagnosis is trained on data from one population and, as a result, fails to perform well on others. Experts call this phenomenon "representational harm(Opens in a new window)": when technology reinforces stereotypes or diminishes specific groups. It's hard to quantify or measure the exact impact of this kind of bias, but that doesn't mean it's not important.

5. *The Glory of Being Human*

Having a machine that occasionally caters to our needs in a helpful way may be good. Yet, it will never be a replacement for someone who truly knows and comprehends us on a personal level. Because humans can hardly do anything without incorporating their own prejudices into what they do, artificial intelligence will always produce replies that appear prejudiced.

The essence of what it means to be human in the world is perhaps best summarized in Pope St. John Paul II's description of "man as a moral actor". There is never any substitute for an informed moral judgment which does its best to take advantage of God's grace so that it might not be influenced by falsehood or prejudice. It is just this that constitutes the glory of the human person. Artificial intelligence is *useful*, but it is

⁸ Kirchner, J. A., Surya Mattu, Jeff Larson, Lauren. (2022). *Ethics of Data Analytics. Concepts and cases*, New York: Auerbach Publication. **Machine Bias: There's Software Used Across the Country to Predict Future Criminals. And it's Biased Against Blacks.** ProPublica. Retrieved from <http://www.propublica.org/article/machine-bias-risk-assessments-in-criminal-sentencing>.

not *intelligence*. We depend on our own intellect and will and moral judgment, and we benefit immensely from the intellect and will and moral judgment of others. These cannot be replaced by machines.

6. *The Bible and Artificial Intelligence*

The Bible teaches that Jesus's death redeemed "all things" in creation—from ants to accountants—and made reconciliation with God possible. So did Jesus die for artificial intelligence, too? Can AI be "saved?" I don't see Christ's redemption limited to human beings alone. "It's redemption of all of creation, even AI. If AI is autonomous, then we should encourage it to participate in Christ's redemptive purposes in the world. The Bible never anticipates non-human intelligence, much less addresses the questions and concern it creates. It does, however, teach that God has established a special relationship with humans that is unique among all creatures. What makes humans special is not what humanity *is*, but rather it is God's relationship to us based on his purpose for making us."⁹

In addition to the Bible, many Christians look to their ancient creeds for guidance. One of the most popular, the Nicene Creed, speaks of Jesus as "the only son of God, begotten, not made." The implicit corollary is that humans are God's children who are made, not begotten. Christians believe that God makes humans, but humans make machines. By this logic, one might conclude that AI could not be considered God's children or possess soul. Any non-biological, non-human intelligence will present a greater challenge to religion and human philosophy than anything else in our entire history. However, AI actually could bolster a person's faith. For some people, religion is precisely about recognizing that I, as a human being, am not God and so I don't have all the answers and will inevitably be wrong about things, If that is one's outlook, then finding out one wrong is a good thing. It simply confirms what you already knew: that life is about trusting God and not trusting in my own understanding.

7. *The disadvantages of Artificial Intelligence.*

Some possible reasons why the Christian Faith may have concerns about Artificial Intelligence include:

- a. *Fear of the unknown:* AI is a rapidly advancing field, and many people may not fully understand its capabilities or implications. This can lead to fear and uncertainty about how it might impact society, including religious beliefs and practices.

⁹Bjork, Russel, "Perspectives on science and the Christian Faith", Journal of American Scientific Affiliation, March 2015, Vol.67, No. 1.

- b. *Impact on humanity:* It has been mooted in some quarters that AI could lead to a loss of human agency, autonomy and moral responsibility.
- c. *Ethical concerns:* As AI becomes more advanced, it may raise ethical questions about the nature of consciousness, the value of human life, and the role of technology in society. These questions may challenge traditional religious teachings or beliefs.
- d. *Threat to Job:* AI will automate many jobs, and this may lead to a loss of jobs for people, particularly for those who are unskilled. This could lead to economic insecurity and social dislocation, which could be a threat to traditional religious beliefs and practices.
- e. *Fear of AI taking over:* The idea of AI becoming more intelligent than humans and potentially taking over the world is a common fear seen in movies and science fiction, but this fear has been expressed in some circles. It's worth noting that the views on AI are diverse and not all of them may have negative perceptions of AI. Some may see AI as a tool that can be used to spread the message of Christianity, and improve people's lives.

8. *The Ethical imperatives of Artificial Intelligence*

There are several issues with AI, like privacy and facial recognition, automation and the value of employment, social media and the truth, medical innovation and human decency, military technology and justice that require some ethical adjudication. Christians should understand that the teaching of the Bible on human dignity and our nature as created in the image and likeness of God, is one of the most crucial ethical concepts in these discussions. We are dealing with nothing less than the dignity of the human person.

It goes without saying that the "risks" associated with AI have nothing ultimately to do with the inert pieces of metal and plastic comprising the attendant technology, but with the people who will control it. The most important question is: Who should manage this epoch-making moment?¹⁰ As things stand, it appears that artificial intelligence, while capable of outperforming humans in certain tasks and reckonings, still requires human supervision. Being neither sentient nor self-aware, AI cannot reflect on its own processes. It gets things wrong, mainly due to insufficient, poor, or confusing inputs, albeit less so than before. The relevant institutions should adopt a human-centric approach to Artificial Intelligence (AI) in order to promote the common good and serve the lives of all human

¹⁰ Zittrain, J. (2007). **Perfect enforcement on tomorrow's internet.** *Regulating Technologies: Legal Futures, Regulatory Frames and Technological Fixes*, 125-156.

beings both in their personal and community dimensions. While it's true that "data" and "algorithms" are the main drivers of Artificial Intelligence, humans should determine and overview the goals which an AI system should attain. There is also the need for a sustained social ethics discourse accompanying the political discussion on regulating AI. Digital innovation and technological progress should serve human genius and creativity and not undermine the dignity and integrity of the human person. Above all in the development of artificial intelligence, researchers should "be vigilant and work to ensure that a discriminatory use of these instruments does not prevail, at the expense of the most vulnerable and at the expense of the excluded."¹¹

9. The Advantages of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence is one of the emerging technologies which tries to simulate human reasoning in AI systems. *John McCarthy* invented the term Artificial Intelligence in the year 1950. He said, 'Every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it. An attempt will be made to find how to make machines use language, form abstractions, and concepts, solve kinds of problems now reserved for humans, and improve themselves.' Artificial Intelligence is the ability of a computer program to learn and think. Everything can be considered Artificial intelligence if it involves a program doing something that we would normally think would rely on the intelligence of a human.

Many current uses of AI appear to be rather mundane, such as when you ask iPhone's Siri or Amazon's Alexa to tell you the latest sports score. These machines use voice recognition AI to translate your spoken words into searchable format. For most people this will be nothing more than a time-saving novelty. But for those with disabilities, such AI enhanced features could provide them a greater degree of independence and autonomy. In the near future AI may also transform such fields as health care. For instance, AI may soon allow for MRI scanning that is considerably faster and yet still provides an image with the required accuracy. As Rob Verger of *Popular Science* notes, patients would spend less time in machines and imaging centers, and hospitals could do more tests per day. By driving down the time and cost of MRIs, doctors could order one of those scans instead of a traditional X-ray or CT exam—and save the patient from further exposure to radiation.

¹¹ Pope Francis, Audience with participants in the meeting Rome Call for A.I. Ethics organized by the Pontifical Academy for Life and the Renaissance Foundation, 10.01.2023.

Because AI will affect so many areas of life, Christians need to be prepared to maximize the benefits of such technology, take the lead on the question of machine morality, and help to limit and eliminate the possible dangers.

As Christians, we need to be prepared with a framework to navigate the difficult ethical and moral issues surrounding AI use and development. This framework doesn't come from corporations or government, because they are not the ultimate authority on dignity issues, and the church doesn't take its cues from culture. God has spoken to us in his Word, and as his followers, we are to seek to love him and our neighbors above all things (Matt. 22:37-39).

Christians already shape the uses of AI in the area of justice. Early prototypes of surveillance and predictive policing focused on child protection, human trafficking and violence against women are areas of substantial Christian influence. In these areas, many people draw a sharp distinction between victims and perpetrators, categories they hope that AI systems can detect. Given Christian influence, we need theology and practice for a world where human justice is delegated to AI.

10. The Indispensable Position of Religion

Could artificial intelligence shed light on the nature of consciousness and humanity's place in the cosmos? Will AI engineers be able to duplicate the singularly distinctive human intellect and trigger in a machine the same urge that 80% of individuals on Earth have: to seek the Divine, the Creator? There will always be room for religion or a form of it as long as there are humans. Religions have provided people with a great source from which to draw their truths and have encouraged them to turn inward toward self-discovery. Up until now, religion has served as a means for humanity to find answers to concerns about the nature of the world, the meaning of life on Earth, and for those religions that uphold this. Religions have been humanity's invaluable source of where to draw their truths and have offered humans to look inward toward Self-discovery. Religion has been that vehicle up to this point to help humankind answer questions concerning the meaning and nature of the universe, the purpose and meaning of humans on Earth, and for those religions that hold this belief, the nature of the soul and its relation to the physical body.

The answers to these issues are unknown, but artificial intelligence can undoubtedly help humans in their search. Even though there are many different religions and spiritual systems out there, these are the kinds of questions that all of them have always tried to address. Religions are human-centric because they are by their very nature focused on people. They deal with connections to and relationships with transcendent truths and a

higher power. Every religion acknowledges that people aspire to be more intimately connected to an imperceptible power that is greater than themselves. People believe that God exists even if no one has ever seen him, just as they believe that gravity works or that love, whether it is for an animal, Gaia, or another human, work. Victor Frankl is right on target, he observes that: “Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire.... The salvation of man is through love and in love”

Conclusion

Concerns about a new world order emerging as a result of the development of artificial intelligence are growing. Although some religious groups have embraced this concept, others are still wary of what might happen. On the other hand, some religious groups support AI as a step toward God's mission, despite the fact that there are valid worries voiced about what AI may do if it were put in charge of the military or jobs. It is not difficult to envision how an evolved enough AI could reach awareness and possibly serve as one of God's messengers to facilitate our lives, though, given the exponential rate at which artificial intelligence is developing.

It is nearly hard to eradicate artificial intelligence, just as it is nearly impossible to eradicate religion from humanity. Religious organizations are utilizing AI, which is deeply ingrained in our Genetics, to promote their beliefs and even improve the practice of their faith. From downloadable apps that can be used to keep track of daily readings and prayer schedules to chatbots and even more sophisticated humanoid robots made specifically to perform rituals.

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