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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Artificial Intelligence and Theology: Can Different Doctrines Have Different Outcomes?

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**Abstract**
This article focuses on how different theological perspectives may influence AI acceptance in diverse faith communities. It highlights differences between Western and Eastern Christian traditions, suggesting that the historical emphasis on intellect in Western Christianity might make it more open to AI, though challenges in church integration are acknowledged. Global examples of AI assimilation in religious practices, from a robotic Buddhist preacher to a blessing-delivering robot in a German church, are discussed. The article argues that theological doctrines shape AI perspectives, influencing ethics and raising profound questions about human identity. The ongoing debate questions whether AI threatens theology or fosters enriching dialogue. The article suggests, through historical parallels and the dynamic interplay of theological doctrines and technology, that the relationship between AI and theology could evolve into constructive engagement rather than inherent conflict.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Religion, Christianity, Theology

## AI in Religious Practices Around the World

In Kyoto, Japan, a 400-year-old Japanese temple has introduced Mindar, a robot modeled after the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, Kannon Bodhisattva, to preach sermons (Hardingham, 2019). The android, embraced by worshipers, imparts knowledge of a spiritual tradition spanning over 2,500 years.

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Similarly, the Longquan Monastery in Beijing, known for its tech-friendly approach, employs a 2-foot robotic monk who chants mantras and answers faith-related queries, attracting intrigued visitors (Sherwood, 2017).

The integration of AI and religion extends beyond Buddhism. In 2017, Germany's protestant church in Hesse and Nassau marked the Protestant Reformation's 500th anniversary by developing BlessU-2, a robot capable of "blessing" parishioners. Constructed from an ATM and equipped with a touchscreen, arms, and a face, it communicated in seven languages, offering various prayers to over 10,000 people. Despite some negative responses, many saw potential in the robot's ability to showcase human creativity, enhance religious services, and expand the influence of religious institutions (Heilweil, 2019; The New Arab, 2019).

Even in Catholicism, AI leaves a significant mark. Gabriele Trovato created Santo, a statue-like robot resembling small saints' figurines, designed to assist the elderly. Placed in a Catholic church in Poland, Santo provided comfort to people of all ages. Roman Catholic priest Loys de Saint Chamas, interacting with Santo's prototype, sees robots as potentially increasing access to religious information, drawing parallels with historical shifts like the invention of the printing press and the Catholic Church's embrace of television (Heilweil, 2019).

As similar prototypes emerge in Judaism, it raises the natural question of whether AI can enrich religion and, conversely, if major religions can adapt to the profound challenges that AI poses to traditional notions of spirituality. The world's major religions are faced with the task of taking a stance in this evolving intersection of technology and spirituality.

### *Religious Doctrines and Approaches to AI*

The exploration of profound issues prompts us to question how religious doctrines shape the perspectives of spiritual leaders and believers regarding AI's role in spiritual guidance. An illustrative example emerges from the Buddhist tradition, where the belief in the soul extends to all entities, including robots—a notable departure from the stance of many other world religions. This inclination towards integrating faith with AI within Buddhism suggests a distinctive approach, albeit not a direct causal link to the technological advancements in the Eastern region. Nevertheless, it stands as a significant factor worthy of study, revealing a unique intersection of spirituality and technological innovation.

### *Theological Foundations and AI Categories*

Before proceeding toward the intersection of theological foundations and AI categories, it is crucial to elucidate a couple of key points. Firstly, artificial intelligence (AI) can be broadly divided into two categories: Narrow AI and Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). The prevalent "Weak AI/Narrow AI" currently in use is task-based, specifically designed to assist humans in particular jobs. This type of AI operates through code, acting as an intelligent intermediary that accelerates task completion while accumulating data on its interactions. On the contrary, AGI aspires to imbue machines with the capacity to comprehend the world akin to humans, encompassing a broad range of intricate tasks. The realization of AGI, when it occurs, would necessitate a reevaluation of human-associated qualities such as consciousness, purpose, intelligence, and the soul – essentially, personhood – sparking debates on these profound matters.

Secondly, the debate on personhood, particularly within contemporary Christianity and Judaism, traces its origins to the theological concept of *Imago Dei*, meaning "image of God" in Latin. The biblical Genesis asserts, "God created mankind in his own image," implying a unique connection between humans and their divine Creator. However, a pivotal question arises: What if the divine image equates to consciousness? If the characteristics of future AGI robots are deemed indicative of consciousness, doctrines not aligning consciousness with Imago Dei may resist granting religious rights to robots. Consequently, the approach of each doctrine to the Imago Dei concept holds the potential to shape its stance on the role of robots within its religious framework.

A recurring theme in discussions about AI is the belief that intelligence represents the zenith of human achievement. Elon Musk, in endeavors like the neurolink project, equates the advancement of humanity with the enhancement of intelligence and cognitive capacity through AI. A comparative analysis of theological traditions highlights a discernible contrast between Western Christianity, predominantly Catholic, and its Eastern Orthodox counterpart in their valuation of intellect. The Western tradition places higher esteem on intellect, a sentiment reflected in philosophy, education, and reasoning, especially influenced by Aristotelian models from the high Middle Ages onward. This emphasis on reason has played a pivotal role in the development of Western theology and culture, as evidenced in the positive-cataphatic theology propagated by figures like Thomas Aquinas in the West.

In contrast, Eastern Orthodox theology, according to influential theologian Vladimir Lossky, emphasizes the apophatic way, asserting that God is beyond all existence. This theological stance places greater emphasis on mystical experience than on dialectical discourse, diverging from the Western tradition. Examples from church life further illustrate these distinctions, such as the prevalence of argumentation and reasoning in Western Catholic theology compared to the fewer

instances in the Eastern tradition, where the apophatic way tends to guide theological exploration. The age at which an infant can receive Holy Communion also differs between traditions, reflecting varying perspectives on intellect, development, and spiritual participation.

These theological disparities may significantly influence how faith communities and the cultures under the influence of these traditions approach AGI. Speculatively, the acceptance of AI in church life may differ based on these doctrinal variations, with potential implications for incorporating technology into ecclesiastical and daily communal practices. Whether the West, with its high regard for intellect, would readily embrace AI or exhibit reservations due to its unique association with human nature, or if the East, emphasizing the intellect in salvation, would approach technology cautiously, remains a matter for history to reveal.

### *Philosophical Underpinnings and Cultural Impacts*

Philosophy, education, and reason, though not absolute prerequisites for the knowledge of God, have significantly shaped theological development in both Western and Eastern traditions. The dominance of Aristotelian models in Western thought, particularly from the high Middle Ages onward, has played a central role in elevating reason within Western theology and culture, as evidenced by the influence of positive-cataphatic theology (Otten, 2016).

This Western perspective posits that faith, guided by philosophy and the Bible, leads to a logical conception of revelation. Conversely, in the Eastern Orthodox Church kataphatic theology has not held a similarly central role. As discussed previously, the apophatic way is deemed safest, emphasizing that God transcends all existing entities. Here, mystical experience takes precedence over the outcomes of dialectical discourse (Lossky, 1957; Metallinos, 2011).

The impact of these theological differences is evident in the church life of both traditions. In the West, Catholic theology has a long-standing tradition of employing argumentation and reasoning to elucidate Christian principles, while in the East, such examples are rarer. When present, they may result from Western influence, imitation, or occur on an ad hoc basis. Eastern theological discourse tends to lack the exhaustive and systematic examination found in Western treatises.

Another illustrative example lies in the practice of Holy Communion. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, an infant can receive communion immediately after baptism, contrasting with Western Christianity, where a child must reach the age of 12 for their first communion. These distinctions underscore the varied approaches in the cultural and theological aspects of church life between the two traditions.

### *Potential Impacts on Faith Communities and Cultures*

These distinctions between Western and Eastern theological perspectives could significantly influence how faith communities and the corresponding cultures embrace Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) (Chatzivasileiou et al., 2024). It is plausible to assume that AI integration might find a more receptive environment in church life, with fewer reservations about incorporating this technology into daily ecclesiastical activities. Conversely, in the East, where intellect holds a vital role in the confession of salvation, there could be a natural hesitancy towards adopting any technology, especially one that aims to replace personal human engagement (Efthymiou et al., 2023).

On the flip side, an argument can be made that the West's elevated emphasis on intellect might pose challenges in accepting AI in ecclesiastical and everyday life. Acceptance could imply that intellect is not exclusive to humans, potentially challenging the unique quality attached to the Christian understanding of human nature. These speculations, however, remain theoretical, and only history will unveil the true outcome of this ongoing debate. The dynamic interplay between theological doctrines and technological advancements continues to shape the evolving relationship between faith, culture, and artificial intelligence.

## Impact of Theological Doctrines on AI Development and Ethics

The intersection of AI and theology prompts fascinating questions on how various theological doctrines might shape the trajectory of development, application, and ethical considerations in the realm of AI. Although AI is a human-created tool, its application is subject to diverse perspectives from various theological viewpoints. The infusion of AI into religious settings triggers nuanced theological and ethical reflections, questioning conventional concepts and eliciting apprehensions about the potential impact on theological principles and ethical standards. This raises questions about the balance between technological convenience and authentic human engagement, notably evident in religious counselling where AI's limitations come to the forefront (Martin, 2023). The following discussions explore how distinct theological doctrines may contribute to moulding outcomes within the context of AI.

### *Anthropology and Human Dignity*

Different theological traditions hold varying perspectives on human value and identity, influencing attitudes towards AI. Some emphasize human uniqueness, viewing AI as secondary, while others see AI as an extension of human capabilities. These beliefs profoundly shape ethical considerations in AI, impacting decisions in design, implementation, and regulation. Anthropology and human dignity underpin the understanding of the unique value attributed to the human species, advocating for

respectful treatment and the opportunity for individuals to fulfil their potential. This concept, rooted in philosophical knowledge, serves as the foundation for universal human rights, transcending cultural differences and providing a normative framework that safeguards the intrinsic value of every individual, emphasizing a shared human identity (Kuçuradi, 2019).

### *Creation Stewardship*

Creation stewardship, rooted in theological doctrines, shapes perspectives on AI use. Some advocate for responsible AI to steward resources and promote environmental sustainability, while others stress ethical dominion over technology. These theological outlooks contribute to responsible AI practices, influencing environmental sustainability and ethical technology use. Recognizing our interconnectedness with creation, irrespective of religious beliefs, is a universal truth. As stewards of the Earth, we bear a dual responsibility – ensuring proper creation functioning (dominion) and caring for the environment (stewardship) (Efthymiou & Efthymiou, 2023). This commitment, guided by responsibility and compassion, aligns with preserving and providing for all of humanity, underscoring sustainability and mindful interaction with our natural world (Hyneman & Shore, 2013).

### *Ethics and Morality*

In the development of AI, ethical considerations are deeply influenced by diverse theological doctrines. These doctrines guide the moral principles shaping decisions, autonomy levels, and responsibilities of intelligent systems. The practical implications of these ethical principles extend to fields like healthcare, finance, and criminal justice, influencing decisions about fairness, justice, and the greater good (Vousinas et al., 2022). As AI becomes more integral to society, incorporating moral considerations into its development is essential. An interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from computer science, social sciences, philosophy, ethics, and theology, aims to create a comprehensive framework for moral AI. Moral theologians contribute crucial expertise, bridging the gap between moral intuitions and technical development. This collaboration ensures the responsible integration of ethical considerations into AI development, aligning it with human morality (Graves, 2022).

### *Sin and Redemption*

Theological doctrines on sin and redemption guide discussions about ethical considerations in AI development. Addressing biases and ensuring accountability, these considerations shape AI systems aligned with justice and the common good. As our technological society advances, questions about human identity emerge with the rise of superintelligence. Despite AI's recent impact on theology, the doctrine of sin provides a foundation for exploration. The concept of imago Dei underscores the

distinction between human thought and AI. Ethical concerns emphasize the intersection of theology and AI, urging responsible implementation in this evolving landscape (McKenzie, 2021).

### *Interfaith Perspectives*

Different religious traditions offer diverse perspectives on AI, making interfaith dialogue essential for addressing shared ethical challenges in AI development. Collaborative efforts among adherents of various theological doctrines contribute to a more inclusive and globally resonant approach to AI. Interfaith perspectives, exemplified by initiatives like interreligious dialogue, are vital for fostering harmonious coexistence and mutual understanding while minimizing biases. Over the last thirty years, diverse outcomes have emerged from such efforts. Pope Francis recognizes interreligious dialogue as a sign of the times, stressing its importance for respectful encounters among religious leaders. Recently, he voiced concerns about the ethical implications of AI, emphasizing the need for responsible development. AI's transformative potential in interreligious dialogue is seen as promising for fostering understanding among different faith communities (Jacoba, 2023).

## Is Artificial Intelligence a Threat to Theology?

The growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on human existence sparks contemplation about its potential impact on theology. As AI progresses, there is a dual perspective on whether it poses a threat to theological beliefs or becomes a catalyst for enriching dialogue. The roots of this debate can be traced back to historical philosophical notions, such as Hobbes's reduction of the human body and mind to mechanical components. The advent of AI, with its computational abilities, raises questions about the fundamental nature of humanity and its spiritual dimensions. Some envision AI as a means to enhance human capabilities, while others caution about the risks of surpassing human intelligence. This interplay between AI and theology echoes historical conflicts between science and religion, yet history suggests that such conflicts are not inevitable but rather avenues for potential dialogue and enrichment (Spencer, 2023).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the integration of AI into religious practices worldwide presents a fascinating intersection of technology, spirituality, and culture. From robot preachers in Japanese temples to AI-powered blessings in German churches, and even robotic assistants in Catholic churches, major religions grapple with the potential of AI to enhance or challenge traditional beliefs. The varying approaches of Buddhism, Christianity, and other faiths to the concept of the soul and personhood about AI showcase the rich tapestry of theological doctrines. Additionally, the distinct theological

foundations, philosophical underpinnings, and cultural impacts in Western and Eastern traditions offer insights into potential acceptance or resistance to AI in ecclesiastical settings. The exploration of AI's impact on theology reveals profound implications for ethical considerations, the understanding of human dignity, and the concept of sin and redemption. Moreover, interfaith perspectives emphasize the importance of collaborative efforts in shaping a globally resonant approach to AI development. As the ongoing debate on whether AI poses a threat to theology unfolds, history suggests that the dynamic interplay between theological doctrines and technological advancements may lead to an enriching dialogue rather than a predetermined conflict.

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