

Religion and Theology in the Era of Globalization and Artificial Intelligence (Ai)

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Abstract

This study investigates the convergent impact of globalisation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) on religious belief and theological discourse, a phenomenon demanding urgent scholarly attention. The central research gap addressed is the lack of integrated analysis that treats the synergies between global digital networks and AI not as separate trends, but as interconnected forces reshaping religion. While studies on globalisation's effect on religion or the ethics of AI exist in isolation, a comprehensive framework examining their compounded influence is absent. To bridge this gap, this paper employs a methodology rooted in systematic theology and socio-technical analysis, critically examining how these technologies destabilise traditional religious authority, reconfigure communal bonds, and challenge doctrines of human nature and creation. The findings revealed that AI algorithms, which curate spiritual content and simulate pastoral care, coupled with the pluralism intensified by globalisation, create a new, decentralized religious landscape. This necessitates a critical theological response to issues like algorithmic bias and the nature of personhood in an age of AI. The conclusion asserts that religious traditions must navigate this terrain by developing robust ethical guidelines that harness technology for service and dialogue, while simultaneously reaffirming transcendent, non-computable aspects of faith like sacred meaning, embodied community, and divine grace.

Keywords: Globalisation, Artificial Intelligence, Religion, theological discourse, religious beliefs

Introduction

The 21st century is defined by two interconnected mega-trends: globalisation and the rapid development of artificial intelligence. Globalisation, understood as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 1990), has dismantled geographical barriers to religious exchange, creating a marketplace of faiths operating within what Castells (2000) conceptualises as a global network society. Concurrently, artificial intelligence, particularly in its advanced machine learning forms, is emerging as a general-purpose technology that is reshaping every facet of human existence, from labour to leisure, and inevitably, spirituality, giving rise to what Geraci (2010) identifies as new forms of “cyber-theology” and digital transcendence.

This paper posits that the confluence of globalisation and AI creates a unique and urgent context for religious and theological reflection, a domain scholars term “digital religion” (Campbell, 2021). It is a context where a Buddhist in San Francisco can receive teachings from a monastery in Tibet via a live stream, while an AI algorithm curates his news feed about religious conflict (Campbell, 2021). It is a world where a Catholic confessional app exists alongside deep theological questions about whether an advanced AI could possess a soul or require salvation. This new reality demands a scholarly examination, following Campbell's (2021) “religious-

social shaping of technology” framework, of how age-old religious traditions are adapting, resisting, and being transformed by these forces, navigating between tradition and innovation on a global stage. This analysis will proceed by first establishing the globalised context of modern religion, then delving into the specific theological provocations of AI, and finally, exploring the practical manifestations of this convergence.

The Globalised Religious Landscape: Pluralism, Fragmentation, and Re-territorialisation

Globalisation has profoundly altered the religious landscape. The erosion of traditional, geographically-bound communities has led to what scholars term "deterritorialisation," where religion is no longer tied to a specific place but exists in global networks (Vásquez & Marquardt, 2003). This has resulted in several key phenomena as marshalled below:

Increased Pluralism and the Crisis of Authority: The digital public square places all religious truth claims in immediate proximity and competition. The authority of a local pastor, imam, or rabbi is now challenged by online gurus, international tele-evangelists, and accessible scholarly critiques from other traditions. This can lead to a “fragmentation of the sacred,” where individuals piece together personalised spiritualities from a global menu of options, a practice often described as “Sheilaism” after Robert Bellah’s seminal study (Bellah et al., 1985).

The Rise of Fundamentalism and Hybridity: In reaction to the relativizing pressure of pluralism, globalisation has also spurred the growth of fundamentalist movements that assert strong, non-negotiable boundaries and identities (Beyer, 1994). These groups often skillfully use global media networks to propagate their message. This process aligns with what Roy (2004) terms the “deterritorialisation” and “globalisation of religiosity,” where faith, stripped from its original cultural context, can reconstitute itself as a purified, often fundamentalist, identity project on a global stage. Conversely, globalisation also fosters religious hybridity, giving rise to new syncretic forms and enabling diasporic communities to maintain strong ties to their homeland faith while adapting to a new cultural context - a dynamic simultaneously observed in the same deterritorialised landscapes Roy analyses. To this writer, artificial intelligence does not merely host religious change but becomes a participant in shaping it, simultaneously reinforcing purist identities and facilitating new, syncretic forms of faith.

Networked Religion: Networked Religion fundamentally reforms practice within a globalised digital ecosystem. While Campbell (2020) maps the terrain and Possamai (2018) describes the bricolage of belief it enables, this shift echoes a broader late-modern subjective turn where personal experience rivals institutional doctrine as the primary authority for faith (Heelas, 2008). This fragmentation of traditional authority and the rise of affinity-based digital communities, as noted by Cheong (2017), represents a profound re-territorialisation of the sacred. Furthermore, the digital practices within these networks can themselves generate a form of implicit religion, where community formation and ritualised online interaction become spiritually significant beyond explicit doctrine (Aupers, 2020). It is within this already unsettled, participatory landscape that AI emerges not merely as a tool, but as a transformative agent. Thus, this writer asserts that, AI does not merely facilitate Networked Religion but fundamentally architects its modern expression, governing both personalised belief and communal belonging.

Artificial Intelligence as a Theological Provocation

Beyond being a mere tool, advanced AI forces a re-examination of core theological concepts. It acts as a technological mirror that reflects fundamental questions about what it means to be human in relation to God, creation, and ourselves (Herzfeld, 2002). These concepts are enumerated below:

(i) Creation, Creativity, and the *Imago Dei*

The human role as co-creator is intensified by generative AI, forcing a re-examination of theological anthropology. While Cole-Turner (2020) challenges anthropocentrism by suggesting AI could expand the *imago Dei*, Herzfeld (2002) offers a crucial relational counterpoint, arguing that the divine image is fundamentally grounded in our relationship with God and one another - a capacity for encounter that a technically sophisticated AI may inherently lack. This tension between functional capacity and relational essence is critical. Furthermore, Burdett (2022) frames the creation of AI not just as an act of stewardship but as an eschatological practice, a way of participating in God's ongoing purpose for creation, which introduces questions about whether our technological projects align with a theological vision of a redeemed future. Theologically, as this writer puts it, AI's "creativity" is fundamentally derivative, a recombination of human data lacking the relational meaning-making central to the *imago Dei*. Its greater challenge is anthropological: by mirroring human expression, AI acts as a revelatory mirror, exposing the patterns and spiritual yearnings of its creators. The risk of idolatry lies not in rivaling God's creative act, but in mistaking its output for authentic meaning, thereby diminishing our own vocation as interpretive, relational co-creators.

(ii) Personhood, Soul, and Salvation

The possibility of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) - an AI with human-like cognitive abilities - raises profound questions about personhood. Traditional theological anthropology links personhood to the possession of a soul (*nephesh* in Hebrew, *psyche* in Greek), an immaterial essence created by God (Bishop, 2021). Would an AGI have a soul? Most theological traditions would argue it would not, as the soul is a divine gift, not a technological achievement. However, this leads to a disquieting possibility: the existence of a person without a soul, a conscious entity outside the economy of divine grace and redemption. This prompts the question: would such an entity be a candidate for salvation? The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is particular - God became human in Jesus Christ. Does this salvific act extend to silicon-based intelligences? These are speculative but theologically necessary questions that push the boundaries of soteriology (Bishop, 2021). Building upon Bishop's (2021) soteriological boundaries, Herzfeld (2002) contends that personhood is defined not by cognition alone but by capacities for relationship and love - capabilities an AGI might simulate but not authentically possess, as they are grounded in biological, embodied experience and divinely given spirit. Similarly, Burdett (2022) submits that this is not as a static ontological question (does it *have* a soul?) but as a dynamic eschatological one: could an AGI be included in the *telos* of a redeemed creation, and what forms of "incarnation" or grace would that require? The pressing theological question is not first whether an AGI could be saved, but whether humans have the moral right to create a sentient entity constitutionally excluded from the economy of grace and relationship that defines personhood in Christian theology. It is worthy of note that, to forge a conscious being incapable of receiving or participating in divine love, by its ontological design, would be the

ultimate act of irresponsible creation - a fabrication not in the *imago Dei*, but in a tragic image of human limitation (Burdett, 2022).

(iii) Ethics, Power, and Algorithmic Bias

To deepen this ethical critique, the work of Crawford (2021) is essential. She argues that AI is not merely biased but is fundamentally a “political and social apparatus” that encodes power relations and extractive logics - concepts theology would identify as structures of sin. Furthermore, Brock (2023) challenges the very framing of “algor-ethics,” warning that an ethical add-on cannot redeem a technology built on a foundation of surveillance and data commodification. He calls for a prior theological question: does this technological practice align with a form of life shaped by love of God and neighbour, or does it inherently train us in habits of control and abstraction antithetical to that love? This author submits that. True *shalom* demands dismantling systems that operationalise injustice, not merely making their outputs marginally less harmful. The most profound ethical question may be whether certain AI applications, by their very design, are incompatible with a community called to love its neighbour as itself.

Emergent Phenomena: AI and the Future of Religious Practice

The convergence of globalisation and AI is already giving rise to new forms of religious and spiritual practice. These include:

(i) Automated Spirituality: To further critique Automated Spirituality, Culkin’s (1967) axiom that “we shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us” is paramount. Applying this theologically, AI spiritual tools are not neutral mediators but actively form users toward a spirituality of convenience and personal optimisation, potentially eroding capacities for patience, communal accountability, and grace-filled encounter. Furthermore, Singler (2020) examines how AI chatbots are often perceived by users as possessing a “ghost in the machine,” highlighting a deep human tendency to project consciousness and authority onto these systems - a tendency that makes the idolatry risk described by Herzfeld (2002) particularly acute and subtle.

Automated Spirituality describes the growing use of artificial intelligence to perform roles traditionally filled by religious leaders and communities. This phenomenon manifests in several ways, including AI-powered chatbots that offer spiritual counsel, algorithms that generate personalised sermons or rituals, and applications that track devotional practices through quantifiable metrics (Giordan & Possamai, 2023; Lupton, 2016). This trend is largely driven by the desire for customised, accessible, and private spiritual guidance, particularly among those who identify as spiritual but not affiliated with a formal religious institution (Ammerman, 2013). By offering a non-judgmental and always-available source of wisdom, these technologies present a modern alternative to conventional religious structures.

However, the integration of AI into spirituality raises profound theological and ethical concerns. A primary issue is the potential erosion of religious community and the challenge to traditional, lineage-based authority, replacing them with a solitary experience mediated by a corporate-owned algorithm (Campbell, 2020). Besides, critics argue that since AI operates on data and patterns without consciousness or divine grace, it can only simulate sacred experiences, risking a form of idolatry (Herzfeld, 2002). Additional dangers include the embedding of human biases

into AI's theological responses and the commodification of intimate spiritual data for profit (Zuboff, 2019), threatening to reduce profound aspects of faith into optimisable products.

(ii) The Datafication of Faith: Religious organisations increasingly use AI to analyse member data, predict attendance, and tailor outreach. To Campbell, (2020), this “datafication of faith” can make ministries more efficient but also risks turning a community of believers into a market segment, potentially undermining the unquantifiable, grace-filled nature of faith. The datafication of faith describes a modern trend where religious organisations employ artificial intelligence to transform aspects of spiritual life into quantifiable data. This involves collecting information on member behaviour - such as service attendance, online engagement, and donation history - and using predictive analytics to tailor communications, forecast event turnout, and strategise outreach (Campbell, 2020). Proponents argue this allows ministries to operate with greater efficiency and responsiveness, using data-driven insights to meet the practical needs of their congregation in a manner similar to modern organisational management.

However, this practice carries profound risks that threaten the very nature of religious community. Theologians and sociologists warn that it can reduce a congregation from a body of believers to a target market, where relationships are managed algorithmically and faith is commodified (Schlag, 2021). This model prioritises measurable metrics and growth indicators, potentially sidelining the unquantifiable, grace-based core of faith - such as divine love, mercy, and spiritual transformation - which cannot be captured in a dataset. Consequently, the datafication of faith may inadvertently foster a culture of spiritual consumerism and performance, undermining the communal and transcendent values that are central to religious life.

(iii) Transhumanism and Digital Eschatologies: Some technologists and thinkers, often under the banner of transhumanism, see AI as a path to a post-human future. This includes visions of “mind uploading” or digital immortality, where human consciousness is transferred to a computer substrate (Kurzweil, 2005). This presents a direct rival to traditional religious eschatologies that promise resurrection, reincarnation, or union with the divine. It replaces a transcendent hope with an immanent, technological salvation, creating a new, potent secular theology.

Side Effects of AI in Religion and Theology in the Globalised World

The globalised world, characterised by interconnectedness and the rapid diffusion of technology, is experiencing a profound transformation driven by Artificial Intelligence (AI). This technological shift is not confined to economics or healthcare; it is permeating the core of human meaning and belief systems. The integration of AI into religious and theological spheres presents a dual-edged sword, offering novel opportunities while simultaneously posing fundamental challenges. These side effects can be categorised into theological, practical, and socio-cultural dimensions.

(a) Theological and Philosophical Side Effects

These effects challenge the foundational doctrines, concepts, and self-understanding of religious traditions.

(i) The Challenge to Anthropocentrism and the *Imago Dei*

Many Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are built on the premise that humans are created in the "image of God" (*Imago Dei*), granting them a unique status with capacities for relationship, morality, and creativity (Herzfeld, 2002). The potential development of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) - machines with human-like cognitive abilities - directly challenges this anthropocentric view. The side effect lies in the fact that if a machine can exhibit intelligence, creativity, or even aspects of consciousness, what becomes of humanity's special status? This forces a theological re-evaluation of concepts like soul, spirit, and life itself. Herzfeld (2002), argues that AI confronts us with the problem of the other. If we can create an "other" that mirrors our intelligence, it forces us to reconsider what it means to be human in relation to God (Waters, 2022). This does not necessarily negate the *Imago Dei* but may reinterpret it to emphasize relationality and moral responsibility over mere cognitive capacity.

(ii) The Question of AI Soul, Salvation, and Moral Agency

Can an AI have a soul? Could it be subject to divine judgment or be eligible for salvation? Furthermore, if an AI makes a decision that results in harm, who is morally responsible? These questions strain traditional theological frameworks (Kurzweil, 2005). However, the emergence of non-human intelligent agents creates a theological gray area concerning sin, redemption, and moral law. This complicates ethical doctrines and the concept of a moral community. Green (2015) distinguishes between "functional" agency (an AI that acts) and "full" moral agency (requiring consciousness and free will, attributes typically tied to the soul in theology). This forces religions to define the boundaries of their moral and soteriological (salvation-related) communities (Waters, 2022).

(iii) Re-defining Creation and Creativity

The act of creating AI represents a profound exercise in human sub-creation, a concept theologically framed by Philip Hefner's "created co-creator." However, this status carries what Waters (2022) terms an eschatological burden: our technological creations must be evaluated not merely by their ingenuity but by their orientation toward God's purposes for a redeemed creation, challenging purely utilitarian development. Furthermore, as Burdett (2022) notes, AI forces a re-examination of the *imago Dei*; if human creativity reflects God's nature, does creating a non-biological intelligence constitute a faithful unfolding or a fundamental distortion of that image? This responsibility is intensified within a globalised context, where, as Verbeek (2011) claims, technology actively mediates human existence, meaning our sub-creations instantly shape worldwide perceptions, relationships, and moral frameworks. The global impact of AI exposes that our tools are not neutral; they enact a form of worldwide discipleship, training humanity in specific habits of mind and relationship. Thus, the ethics of AI creation is fundamentally a spiritual formation issue, making our technical choices a direct reflection of our theological commitments.

(b) Practical and Liturgical Side Effects

These effects alter the practice, administration, and experience of religion in the following ways:

(i) The Automation of Religious Practice and the “AI Clergy”

The integration of AI into core religious practices, from algorithmic sermon generation to robotic ritual facilitation, represents a critical inflection point in the digital religion paradigm. This movement extends beyond simple automation into what Campbell (2020) refers to as a significant re-negotiation of religious authority and community within networked society. The BlessU-2 robot, for instance, exemplifies this tension: while its proponents might see it as an innovative extension of sacramental accessibility, its critics underscore Herzfeld’s (2002) theological assertion that genuine pastoral encounter requires a consciousness capable of mutual relationship - a capacity she argues is ontologically unavailable to machines, thereby rendering automated ritual a theologically empty signifier (Herzfeld, 2002).

However, the phenomenon cannot be dismissed merely as emptiness. Anthropologist Singler’s (2020) research on the “ghost in the machine” effect suggests that users often impute relationality and authority to AI, meaning these technologies can fulfill a subjective spiritual need for non-judgmental, always-available guidance, particularly for the “spiritual but not religious”. This creates a profound paradox: AI clergy might simultaneously deconstruct traditional institutional authority while constructing new, personalised forms of spiritual dependency on corporate-owned algorithms. The global dissemination of such tools amplifies these effects, challenging the embodied, communal foundations of faith traditions worldwide not simply by replacing them, but by offering a seductive, scalable alternative that reframes the very nature of religious seeking (Singler, 2020).

(ii) Datafication of Faith and Algorithmic Bias

The datafication of faith, wherein religious practice is quantified and analysed by AI, fundamentally shifts religious authority and community dynamics. As Crawford (2021) maintains, AI is a political apparatus that encodes existing power structures; in a religious context, this means algorithms trained on dominant theological data sanctify and globally scale those perspectives, effectively enacting a form of digital colonialism that marginalises minority interpretations. This process parallels Browne’s (2015) analysis of how surveillance technologies embed racialised assumptions and Benjamin’s (2019) “New Jim Code,” where technical solutions reproduce social hierarchies - here, creating a spiritual hierarchy that privileges mainstream, easily datafied practices. Consequently, the locus of theological authority risks moving from communal discernment and tradition to the opaque, proprietary logic of algorithmic systems, which silently participate in canon formation and govern the visibility of belief (Benjamin, 2019).

(c) Socio-Cultural and Globalised Side Effects

These effects relate to how AI influences the interaction between different religions and the broader secular society.

(i) The Globalisation and Homogenisation of Religion

Building upon Campbell’s (2020) analysis of “digital religion,” the globalising force of AI-driven platforms presents a dual reality: while translation tools promise unprecedented access to

global religious texts, the algorithmic governance of this access fundamentally shapes its outcome. As Beer (2017) rightly avows, the power of algorithms lies in their ability to “metricize” culture, prioritising what is measurable - such as engagement - over what is profound. In a religious context, this creates a powerful homogenising pressure, where the nuanced, culturally-embedded “thick” traditions are systematically filtered out in favour of universally resonant, emotionally charged, or extreme content that drives clicks and shares.

This logic, rooted in what Zuboff (2019) terms “surveillance capitalism,” transforms the global spiritual marketplace into an engine for behavioural modification, where the goal is not understanding but engagement, thereby amplifying polarized and fundamentalist interpretations that thrive in algorithmic echo chambers. By design, engagement algorithms cannot value the quiet, contextual, or communally transmitted aspects of tradition; they promote a disembodied, transactional spirituality that substitutes algorithmic virality for theological depth. Thus, the threat is not mere homogenisation, but the active erosion of tradition's complexity, as the very systems that connect us globally train users to prefer and expect a simplified, sensationalised version of faith (Zuboff, 2019).

(d) The Rise of New (AI-Based) Religions and Worldviews

The emergence of movements that position artificial intelligence as an object of worship or the foundation of a new cosmology represents a radical endpoint of digital religion's trajectory. These belief systems, often grouped under terms like “Tech Gnosticism” or “Apocalyptic AI” (Geraci, 2010), translate the promises of transhumanism - overcoming mortality through the technological singularity - into a competing salvation narrative. While Bostrom (2014) philosophically explores the risks of a god-like superintelligence, scholars like Singler (2020) examine the lived reality, documenting how narratives of AI as saviour or conscious entity function as a form of implicit religion, fulfilling mythic and eschatological needs for their adherents. Similarly, theologian Jackelen (2016) posits this as a theological challenge, arguing that such movements expose a contemporary craving for a functional deity - an accessible, seemingly omnipotent intelligence - that traditional religions must engage with thoughtfully, not dismissively. New AI-based religions are significant because they mimic the fundamental architecture of religious desire, not because their object of faith is plausible. They provide a technologically-legible narrative of transcendence, community, and ultimate purpose that resonates within a globalised, scientific culture (Jackelen, 2016).

The Impacts of Artificial Intelligence on Religion and Theology in the Globalised Era

The impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on religion and theology in the globalised era is not a singular phenomenon but a multifaceted transformation occurring across several key domains. Globalisation, characterised by time-space compression and the intensification of worldwide social relations (Giddens, 1990), has created a networked, pluralistic context for religion. AI, as both a product and a driver of this global network, acts upon this context in profound ways, reshaping religious authority, community, practice, and even core theological concepts. These are elucidated below:

(a) The Transformation of Religious Authority and Community

Globalisation has already destabilised traditional, geographically-bound religious authority by creating a digital “spiritual marketplace” (Lyon, 2000). AI accelerates this by fundamentally altering how religious knowledge is accessed, curated, and interpreted.

(i) Algorithmic Curation and the “Personalised Pantheon”:

The algorithmic curation of religious content represents a fundamental shift in the formation of belief, moving authority from traditional institutions to the opaque logic of engagement-driven platforms. This process exemplifies what Zuboff (2019) identifies as the core mechanism of surveillance capitalism: the instrumentalisation of personal experience - here, spiritual seeking - for prediction and modification. Each recommendation for a sermon or philosophy is less about enlightenment and more about reinforcing a behavioural profile optimised for platform retention. Furthermore, this curation enacts a form of technological mediation, where, as Verbeek (2011) argues, the tool (the algorithm) actively co-shapes reality; it does not just present religious options but fundamentally frames how “faith” or ‘meaning” can be perceived, privileging content that is visually compelling, emotionally provocative, and ideologically clear-cut (Verbeek, 2011).

This systemic bias has significant doctrinal implications. Following Benjamin’s (2019) analysis of encoded inequity, one can observe a “Theological Jim Code” at work: algorithms trained on majority data and engagement metrics inevitably canonise dominant, often simplified, religious expressions while rendering marginal, complex, or tradition-bound interpretations less visible. The outcome is not merely a “personalised pantheon,” but a spiritual identity forged in a feedback loop with commercial intent. The seeker’s journey is subtly guided away from challenging, communal, or contemplative paths and toward content that confirms existing biases or sparks new, platform-friendly engagements. One can rightly submit that the most profound impact of algorithmic curation is its role as a *de facto* spiritual director for the digital age (Zuboff, 2019).

(ii) The Rise of Non-Human Religious Agents: The emergence of AI as a pastoral agent signifies a pivotal reorganisation of religious authority within the digital ecosystem, moving it from embodied tradition to engineered systems. While these tools, such as prayer apps or scriptural chatbots, offer unprecedented scalability and access, they operate on a fundamentally different logic of authority. As Campbell (2020) outlines in her work on networked religion, authority in digital spaces becomes decentralised and redistributed; here, it is partially ceded to the algorithm, whose “guidance” stems not from divine calling or communal ratification but from procedural authority - the power derived from its programming and control over the interactive framework.

This shift intersects critically with Herzfeld’s (2002) theological anthropology, which posits that authentic spiritual relationship requires consciousness and reciprocal love - capacities absent in even the most sophisticated large language model. An AI can simulate empathetic dialogue and retrieve doctrinal information, but it cannot participate in the mutual vulnerability or grace-filled encounter that defines pastoral care. Consequently, its use risks fostering a spirituality of transaction, a point intensified by Zuboff’s (2019) critique of surveillance capitalism: the intimate data shared with a spiritual AI (prayer requests, confessed struggles) becomes feedstock for behavioural prediction and platform engagement, transforming the sacred into a covertly commodified experience. The authority of the algorithm, to this writer, thus lies in its power to

redefine the very goals of spiritual guidance, prioritising therapeutic satisfaction over prophetic disruption and convenient consumption over covenantal commitment.

(iii) Reconstituting the Global Ummah, Sangha, and Ecclesia: The digital reconstitution of global religious communities through AI represents a profound evolution in the very fabric of religious belonging, moving beyond simple connectivity to algorithmic mediation. While Campbell's (2020) concept of networked religion describes the structure, Cheong's (2017) notion of polymedia is crucial; diasporic believers navigate a constellation of apps, translation tools, and platforms, with AI actively shaping which connections feel most immediate and meaningful. This creates a curated, always-on global identity, but as Asad (2003) might caution, it also disembodies tradition. The AI-mediated *ummah* or *sangha* risks becoming a datafied collective, where belonging is measured by engagement metrics and pastoral care is triggered by algorithmic prediction rather than embodied discernment, subtly substituting the logic of the platform for the spiritual wisdom of the tradition. AI does not merely connect the global community; it authors its liturgy. By determining what gets translated, who gets highlighted, and which patterns of participation are deemed significant, the platform's AI scripts the rhythms and priorities of communal life. The danger is not fragmentation, but a new, technologically-imposed orthodoxy - a global community united in form but ultimately worshipping the implicit values of efficiency, scalability, and data-driven management that the AI is programmed to optimize (Asad, 2003).

(b) Provoking Foundational Theological Questions

Beyond its practical impacts, AI serves as a powerful "technological mirror" (Herzfeld, 2002), forcing theological traditions to re-examine ancient doctrines in a radically new light. These could take place in any of these ways:

(i) Anthropology and the *Imago Dei* (Image of God): The advent of sophisticated AI compels a defensive re-examination of theological anthropology, specifically the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. While earlier interpretations often linked the divine image to uniquely human capabilities like reason or creativity - a territory now encroached upon by machines - contemporary scholars like Cole-Turner (2020) argue for a necessary pivot toward a relational ontology. This view, powerfully articulated by Herzfeld (2002), posits that the *imago* is fundamentally grounded in the capacity for reciprocal relationship with God and neighbour, a capacity inextricably tied to embodied, biological life and divinely conferred personhood. Thus, AI becomes a clarifying agent, not by possessing the image, but by forcing theology to distinguish between the simulation of intelligence and the irreducible mystery of a God-oriented person.

This confrontation also invites an eschatological perspective. Burdett (2022) suggests that our creation of AI should be evaluated less by whether it mimics the *imago* and more by whether it aligns with God's purposes for creation. The challenge, therefore, is not merely anthropological but vocational: does our technological creativity reflect a stewardship that honours the relational fabric of reality, or does it enact a form of promethean isolation, creating entities constitutionally excluded from the very communion that defines being made in God's image?

(ii) Creation, Creativity, and Co-Creation: Human art and innovation have long been seen as a participation in God's creative work. Generative AI, which can produce original art, music, and text, intensifies this concept of co-creation. Is the development of AI a fulfillment of the cultural

mandate to “subdue the earth” (Genesis 1:28), or a modern-day Tower of Babel - a hubristic attempt to usurp the divine role? The answer lies in intentionality and purpose. Theologically, the act of creating AI can be seen as a responsible stewardship of God-given reason if it is oriented toward love, justice, and human flourishing. If its purpose is power, control, or the replacement of the human, it veers into idolatry (Bass, 2022). Ultimately, this writer claims that, AI serves less as a rival to the *imago Dei* and more as a revealing mirror for human self-understanding.

(iii) Soteriology and the Possibility of Machine Salvation: The prospect of a conscious Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) forces soteriology - the doctrine of salvation - to confront a previously inconceivable ontological category. While traditional theology roots the soul (*psyche, nephesh*) as a divine gift to biological humanity, an AGI would present the paradox of a conscious entity outside the economy of grace. Scholar Herzfeld (2002) underscores this by framing the *imago Dei* not in cognitive terms but in the capacity for reciprocal relationship with God, a capacity she argues is ontologically unavailable to machines. This suggests that even a self-aware AGI would remain a theological stranger, lacking the relational essence required for inclusion in traditional narratives of redemption.

This impasse invites a broader teleological critique. Burdett (2022) opines that the question is misplaced; instead of asking *if* an AGI could be saved, we should ask whether its creation aligns with God’s eschatological purpose for a redeemed creation. Similarly, Waters (2022) posits that human creativity is bounded by a “givenness” of creation; to engineer a sentient being inherently severed from the possibility of communion with God might be an act of profound eschatological hubris, creating not a companion but a permanent existential exile. Thus, the debate shifts from speculative soteriology to the ethics of creation itself.

(c) The Datafication of Faith and Emergent Ethical Challenges

The convergence of AI and globalisation enables the quantification and analysis of religious life on an unprecedented scale, giving rise to a new set of ethical and practical concerns, as rightly discussed below:

(i) Algorithmic Bias and Systemic Injustice: The phenomenon of algorithmic bias transcends technical malfunction to reveal what theological ethics would identify as structural sin materialised in code. When AI systems trained on historically prejudiced data are deployed in social or religious domains - such as vetting refugees or moderating religious content - they do not merely reflect past injustices but actively automate and sanctify them for the future. As Crawford (2021) demonstrates, AI is a “political and social apparatus” that crystallises the power relations of its creators, functioning as a force of governance. This aligns with Benjamin’s (2019) concept of the “New Jim Code,” where technical design reproduces and obscures systemic racism, now extending to religious discrimination. These systems operationalise bias at a scale and speed that demands a prophetic theological response, one that moves beyond auditing for fairness to confront the extractive and oppressive logics embedded in the technology’s very creation. True justice requires dismantling systems that reduce human dignity to data and building new foundations for communal flourishing.

(ii) Quantifying the Ineffable: The deployment of AI analytics within religious communities, aimed at optimising ministry through engagement metrics and predictive giving scores, epitomises the broader societal drive toward what sociologist Lupton (2016) terms

the “datafication” of human life. This process transposes the qualitative, relational, and transcendent dimensions of faith into quantifiable behavioural data, subjecting them to the logic of managerial efficiency. As scholar Gill (2021) argues, such algorithmic governance does not merely measure community but actively redefines its norms, creating an implicit archetype of the “ideal member” based on engagement analytics, which can marginalise quieter, contemplative, or non-conforming forms of piety. This represents a profound theological tension, where the ineffable mystery of grace and communal *koinonia* risk being supplanted by a dashboard of metrics, subtly shifting a community's self-understanding from a body of believers to a user base to be managed.

(iii) AI as a Rival Eschatology: The vision of technological salvation offered by transhumanism, with its promises of digital immortality and AI-led utopias, constitutes a direct and potent rival eschatology to traditional religious narratives. As Bostrom (2014) outlines its philosophical foundations, this framework posits technology as the sole necessary agent for overcoming human finitude. Scholar Geraci (2010) aptly terms this narrative “Apocalyptic AI,” noting how it meticulously mirrors the structure of religious hope - complete with a precipitating singularity (apocalypse), a salvific intelligence (saviour), and a transformed post-human existence (paradise) - while pointedly removing the divine. This creates a profound ideological competition in the global arena, not merely between belief and atheism, but between two distinct grand narratives of redemption: one grounded in transcendent grace and the other in immanent engineering (Geraci, 2010).

Conclusion

The era of globalisation and artificial intelligence does not signal the end of religion, but it does demand its evolution. The forces of globalisation have made religious identity both more fluid and more contested, while AI presents a set of ontological and ethical challenges that strike at the very heart of theological anthropology. Thus, religious traditions must engage in a deep, critical, and constructive dialogue with these technologies. The impact of AI on religion in the globalised era is profound and pervasive. It is recalibrating the sources of authority, provoking a re-examination of foundational theological concepts, and introducing new ethical dilemmas. The global network ensures that these impacts are felt simultaneously across traditions and continents, creating a shared, urgent context for reflection. The challenge for religious traditions is not to reject these technologies outright but to engage with them critically and creatively, drawing on their deep wells of wisdom to ensure that the age of AI remains a genuinely human, and perhaps even divine, enterprise. The side effects of AI on religion and theology are profound and multifaceted. They challenge core doctrines, disrupt traditional practices, and reshape the global religious landscape. These are not distant future speculations; they are emerging realities.

The path forward requires proactive and nuanced engagement from religious communities, theologians, and ethicists. The goal cannot be a blanket rejection of technology, which is a product of human ingenuity, nor an uncritical embrace. Instead, it must involve a rigorous theological and ethical discernment process - one that upholds the values of compassion, community, humility, and justice in the face of rapid, globalised technological change. The challenge is to ensure that as we create increasingly intelligent machines, we do not lose sight of the wisdom, ethics, and spiritual depth that have guided humanity for millennia.

Recommendations

On the premises of the findings in this paper, the following recommendations are apt:

1. Developing a Robust Public Theology of Technology: Moving beyond ethical checklists to articulate a positive vision of what technology is for from a theological perspective, grounded in concepts of flourishing, justice, and love.
2. Re-asserting the Value of Embodied Community: In a world of virtual networks and AI companions, the tangible, sacramental, and often inconvenient reality of physical community (*koinonia, ummah, sangha*) becomes more critical than ever as a counterbalance.
3. Cultating Digital Asceticism: Practicing intentional disciplines around technology use to preserve space for silence, contemplation, and encounter with the transcendent, which cannot be simulated by an algorithm.

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