

CHAPTER IX

Communicating with God in the AI Era: Spirituality and Technological Transformation

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Abstract

This article explores the correlation between advances in digital technology and artificial intelligence and changes in spirituality and religion. Its primary focus is how contemporary technological advances, particularly AI, have revolutionized how individuals articulate, engage in, and assert their religious beliefs. The article explores new prospects, such as the accessibility of religious practices through digital platforms, alongside emerging challenges related to ethical dilemmas and the authenticity of spiritual encounters in cyberspace. It is imperative to establish a multidisciplinary discourse and ethical framework for AI to ensure that technology flourishes and enhances the spiritual aspect of human existence rather than eroding it. The deduction drawn is that, with the right vision and intelligence, technological advancement can serve as a conduit to more profound significance, provided human values are upheld.

Keywords: Digital Spirituality, Religion and Technology, AI Ethics, Artificial Intelligence and Religion, Technology and Spiritual Values

Introduction

Advances in artificial intelligence, a branch of human engineering technology, have ushered in many changes in how humans communicate and interact with their environment. A significant domain of human existence that is greatly affected by the influence of AI relates to spirituality and attempts to establish a connection with the divine. To what extent do AI technologies affect the bond between humans and God? Is AI able to help or hinder communication with the divine? These questions have assumed a high degree of relevance in the current age. According to Schwarz (Schwarz, 2019), theologians in the Catholic tradition affirm that technology can revolutionize the way humans establish a relationship with God. Schwarz further underlines that, throughout history, every significant

advance in communication technology, from the advent of written language to the introduction of printing and the internet, has fundamentally reconfigured humanity's spiritual habits.

However, according to Herzfeld (Herzfeld, 2022), there is an optimistic view that AI has the potential to enhance communication with God. The utilization of AI extends to the analysis of religious texts, assistance in contemplative prayer, and creation divinely inspired music. Herzfeld asserts that despite not having a soul, AI can be a conversational partner in pursuing spiritual significance. On the contrary, (Havens, 2021) warns against over-reliance on technology, as it can blur the boundary between man and machine, consequently reducing the human capacity to connect with the Divine.

Havens points out that features such as AI-generated voices can give rise to the illusion of living beings where there are none, leading to potential deception and spiritual harm. This predicament places humanity in a paradoxical position, torn between their sophisticated creations and the search for spiritual meaning in an ever-narrowing sphere of technological progress. The advent of AI has brought about a revolution that spans both spiritual and technological fields. Hence, an important question arises: To what extent can technological advancements contribute to exploring spirituality, especially in a relationship with God?

The Catholic Church's perspective on the correlation between technology and faith has gradually transformed throughout history. In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of technological progress in harmony with the remaking of humanity and nature. (Francis, 2015). He warns that the absence of ethics and spirituality in technology can create a disconnect between the individual and fundamental truth and meaning. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis subtly references the influence of digital technology on introspection and seclusion, both of which play an essential role in building a relationship with the Divine. He further encouraged the devout to utilize technology wisely to facilitate encounters with the Divine. (Francis, 2015).

From a technical standpoint, researchers in the field of artificial intelligence are currently investigating the potential application of AI to provide support in matters related to spirituality and religion. In a comprehensive analysis conducted by Molina et al., the utilization of AI chatbots to facilitate discussions of a religious or spiritual nature was explored, resulting in a combination of favorable and unfavorable outcomes (Molina, 2022). In a similar vein, Chung et al. direct their focus to using AI to scrutinize biblical texts, thereby demonstrating the inherent

possibilities as well as the obstacles encountered when using AI to garner theological insights (Chung, H. et al., 2021)

The ethical confusion surrounding the development and utilization of AI has been a topic of concern within religious institutions. Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, the venerable leader of the Pontifical Academy for Life, has expressed the belief that AI should be developed and utilized to actively promote human dignity and the overall well-being of individuals rather than being used for manipulation or exploitation. (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020) To ensure that advances in AI are aligned with evangelical and humanistic values, it advocates open dialog and collaboration between scientists, philosophers, and theologians.

Conflicting perspectives do not simply characterize the interaction between faith and technological progress. Instead, this interconnection presents the possibility of establishing mutually beneficial connections. This scholarly article examines the intersection of humanity and the divine in the age of artificial intelligence, delving into the potential influence and assistance that technological progress can provide in pursuing spiritual significance. Reflecting on the spiritual principles underlying every technological breakthrough allows us to restore connection with the divine.

Literature Review

Spiritual Dimension In The Digital Age

Miller and Baker (2019) state that the advent of digital technology has facilitated many opportunities for individuals to express and engage in spiritual practices. One such avenue is using digital technology to express spiritual self-expression, allowing individuals to convey their deepest spiritual sentiments. In addition, digital technology has created spiritual communities, fostering connections and interactions among like-minded individuals. Furthermore, digital platforms and resources have become easily accessible, providing individuals with a wealth of spirituality-related information.

In their work titled *Spirituality in the Digital Age: Navigating the Intersection of Technology and the Sacred*, Miller and Baker delve into an analysis of paradigm shifts in the search for spiritual significance in the context of the contemporary technological age. The book explains the profound influence of social media, digital platforms, and technological advancements on spiritual encounters.

However, The Religion in the Digital Age (2019) report from the Pew Research Center shows a trend that participation in traditional religious practices has declined while interest in seeking spiritual meaning through online media has increased, providing an empirical database to understand this change. (Pew Research Center, 2019). The survey by Pew Research Center (2019) found that in recent years, the use of digital technologies for spiritual purposes has increased. 72% of American adults have used digital technology for purposes such as searching for spiritual information, praying or meditating online, or accessing online religious services. (Pew Research Center, 2019).

According to research by Heidi Campbell in 2018, the rise of digital technology has brought about various religious practices and expressions in the spiritual dimension. For example, there is now a presence of spiritual and religious communities on social media platforms, the utilization of digital applications for meditation and prayer, and new rituals and traditions involving technology. (Campbell, 2018). Campbell (2018) explains that while there are concerns regarding the potential negative impact of technology on spirituality, such as distraction and alienation, digital technologies also facilitate new avenues for connectivity and participation in the sacred. This research examines how individuals from the millennial and Z generations manifest their spiritual identity and commitment through digital media. (Campbell, 2018).

Digital Spirituality: AI Challenges And Hopes For The Church

The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technology has revolutionized various aspects of human existence, including the way individuals engage with matters of religious significance. Schwarz (2019) asserts that AI presents new opportunities and obstacles to expressing the Christian faith. On the one hand, AI has been used for tasks such as analyzing congregation-related data, automating sermons, and creating digital religious music and artwork. (Schwarz, 2019). On the other hand, increased reliance on technology can blur the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Havens, 2021).

According to theologian and philosopher of technology Noreen Herzfeld (2022), AI has the potential to enhance spirituality in unprecedented ways (Herzfeld, 2022). For example, interactive chatbots and voice assistants can serve as partners for dialog during contemplation and the search for significance. Nevertheless, Herzfeld (2022) also warns against the risk of reductionism and manipulation that may arise from excessive AI personification (Herzfeld, 2022).

Research by Hernandez (2021) in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Artificial Intelligence suggests that careful user interface design can foster a profoundly contemplative experience in conjunction with AI. (Hernández, 2021). However, the challenge lies in designing AI systems that adhere to ethical boundaries and do not replace the role of human spiritual leaders.

According to Christopher Ben Simpson (2020), a theologian of the Lutheran faith, the tendency to regard AI as human, and even go so far as to worship it, carries the danger of hiding a theological understanding of true humanity. He warns that AI should continue to be regarded as a tool created by humans, not as an equal conversation partner in matters of faith and divinity. (Simpson, 2020). In a similar vein, Pope Francis, in his Catholic perspective on the moral principles of AI, asserted that technological progress must be accompanied by the recovery of human essence rather than alienating humans from evangelical principles. (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020). According to the Pope, technology should be directed at the service of human dignity rather than being driven solely by the pursuit of profit.

From a pragmatic perspective, there are several examples of utilizing Artificial Intelligence for spiritual benefit. These include applying machine learning techniques to research sacred texts (Chung et al., 2021), generating hymns and reflective melodies based on AI, and developing prayer and meditation apps that adapt to user preferences.

Nevertheless, detractors such as Mangis (2020) warn against the potential entrapment of younger generations in a shallow spirituality dictated solely by algorithms and the logic of the digital marketplace. The wisdom and discernment of leaders and theologians must be exercised to ensure that the advancement of AI is harmoniously aligned with the strengthening of genuine and deep Christian principles (Mangis, 2020). In light of digital technology, individuals have many new ways to manifest and implement their beliefs. These include:

1. Accessibility to spiritual information and resources: Digital technology has made spiritual information and resources more accessible than ever. Today, individuals not only can obtain information about different religions and spiritualities, but they can also avail of resources that facilitate the application of their beliefs in their daily lives.
2. Formation of spiritual communities: With the help of digital technology, individuals can build fresh spiritual communities or connect with like-minded individuals within their existing spiritual communities. This can lead

to increased connectedness among individuals with the same spiritual values.

3. Although digital technology presents many prospects for humanity to articulate and engage in its spirituality, it also entails certain obstacles worth considering. These challenges include, but are not limited to:
4. Technology Addiction: Overutilization of digital technology has the potential to adversely affect the mental and spiritual well-being of individuals, resulting in technology addiction.
5. Disinformation: The spread of false information, which includes misleading content relating to religion and spirituality, can be facilitated through digital technology. Such dissemination can lead to confusion and misunderstanding of religion and spirituality.
6. Social isolation: Over-reliance on digital technology can trigger social isolation, where individuals may experience a profound separation from others, including their spiritual community.

Technology And Its Impact on Human Existence

The impact of modern technological advancements on the human world is profound. A thorough understanding of the changes in human behavior, culture, and daily life can be gained by examining literature that explores the relationship between technology and humanity. In her work, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (2015), Sherry Turkle explores how the evolution of technology has changed communication and interpersonal connections. In particular, the book explores the influence of digital technologies, especially mobile devices, on human conversation and interaction dynamics. This prompts significant questions about the quality and depth of social engagement in this digital age. (Turkle, 2015).

In his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), Nicholas Carr explores the neurological implications of digital technology and its impact on cognitive processes and information processing. Carr explains how the internet has changed reading habits, response patterns to information, and cognitive concentration. The book outlines the potential of technological advancements to shape the structure of the human mind. Consequently, it raises concerns about the lasting consequences of this transformation on human existence and intelligence (Carr, 2010).

These two literary compositions offer profound insights into the ubiquity of technology in our daily lives and the essence of human existence. By examining changes in social dynamics and investigating their impact on neurological aspects, this body of literature raises significant questions regarding how we, as individuals, engage with technology and how it shapes and defines the purpose of our existence in an ever-interconnected global setting.

Ethical Considerations in AI and Spirituality

Examining the literature allows for a deeper understanding of the complicated relationship between artificial intelligence and human spiritual values when discussing ethical factors relating to integrating AI and spirituality. In her work *Artificial Intelligence: A Guide to Human Thought*, Melanie Mitchell (2020) delves into the ethical dilemmas that arise due to the advances made in artificial intelligence. The book explores the philosophical and ethical implications of advances in AI, prompting contemplation of how the utilization of AI may affect human morality (Mitchell, 2020).

In their article, *A Unified Framework of Five Principles for AI in Society*, Floridi and Cowls (2019) extensively explore the ethical hurdles in applying AI technologies in spirituality and religion. The article presents a set of five principles that summarize ethical guidelines to ensure that advances in AI uphold ethical values and human spirituality. (Floridi & Cowls, 2019). These two sources offer a comprehensive perspective on the ethical considerations surrounding merging AI and spirituality. Spanning from philosophical viewpoints to practical guidance, this literature guides readers in contemplating the ethical impacts and obligations given the accelerated development of AI technologies regarding spiritual and moral values in contemporary society.

Discussion

A New Paradigm of Spiritual Communication

We are witnessing new advances in how humans communicate with elements of spirituality, including their interactions with the divine, during a time characterized by technological advances, especially in artificial intelligence. This new framework exemplifies a profound metamorphosis in the dynamics of spiritual communication and illustrates how technology is taking on an intermediary role between individuals and their spiritual source. (Hutchings, 2011).

The rise of digital platforms and social media has played an essential role in shaping this new framework. Today, people feel more comfortable exchanging and seeking spiritual encounters through cyberspace. Research conducted by Alarcon (2021) revealed that social media provides a space for spiritual communities where individuals can engage in conversations, share experiences, and seek inspiration from each other. (Alarcon et al., 2021).. As a result, spiritual communication facilitates connections between individuals seeking purpose and fulfillment from different corners of the world.

In addition, virtual assistants and artificial intelligence technologies are changing how individuals engage in spiritual communication. These technological innovations have the potential to assist individuals in their meditation practices, recite prayers, and even provide customized spiritual content that meets their specific needs. (Hutchings, 2011). Despite being a subject of controversy, the utilization of artificial intelligence technologies in a spiritual context signifies the ability of individuals to adapt and embrace technological advancements to augment their spiritual encounters (Hutchings, 2019).

However, this paradigm shift raises significant ethical concerns. How can we ensure that the fundamental values of spiritual experience are not replaced by technology when using it for spiritual communication? The study by Floridi and Cows (2019) addresses the ethical dilemmas when combining AI technology with spiritual principles. (Floridi & Cows, 2019). It is important to remember that technology should not replace spiritual communication. Instead, technology should enhance and facilitate greater access to the sacred element (Hutchings, 2011). In this context, it is suggested that the emerging paradigm of spiritual communication not only presents new possibilities but also challenges established conventions. Spiritual communication now extends to the interconnected digital realm and is no longer limited to rituals or physical places of worship (Campbell & La Pastina, 2010). Consequently, this article helps us understand how technological advancements, especially artificial intelligence, infiltrate and change how humans engage with their spiritual dimension.

The Challenge of Searching For Meaning In The Digital Age

In the age of contemporary technology, the quest for significance faces several challenges, signaling a significant change in how individuals embark on their spiritual journey. This age, driven by technological advancements, especially artificial intelligence (AI), has complicated human efforts to establish spiritual

connections and find meaning in their lives. The ubiquitous presence of information poses formidable difficulties. Due to the ease with which information can be accessed today, individuals often contend with large amounts of complicated and diverse data. The search for personal meaning can be difficult as online information is often heterogeneous and contradictory. As a result, determining the clarity and accuracy of the digital information vortex is a real challenge.

In their publication titled *Spirituality in the Digital Age: Navigating the Intersection of Technology and the Sacred* (2019), Miller and Baker underscore the transformation in how humans pursue spiritual significance. They emphasize how social media and digital platforms have spawned an environment where spiritual experiences are often distorted by irrelevant or overly profitable content. This difficulty exemplifies how technology can hinder the search for authentic meaning.

In addition, essential concerns arise from the relationship between dependence on technology and the decline of direct experience. In pursuing meaning, one may be entangled in a virtual world without directly engaging with physical reality. As a result, an imbalance arises that inhibits the search for meaning through direct experiences, such as interacting with others in the real world or contemplating nature. The impact of digital social pressure is an additional hurdle. If one frequently compares their life to the lives of others on social media, it can lead to unrealistic expectations or uncertainty regarding one's principles. Adhering to digital social standards can obscure the pursuit of pure meaning.

Developing digital literacy and ethics in technology utilization is essential to address these issues. Extensive education on using technology in spirituality can facilitate individuals in organizing information, evaluating truth, and maintaining a balance between the digital world and reality. Notably, the difficulties faced in pursuing significance in the contemporary era are technical, philosophical, and ethical. This shift in the meaning-seeking paradigm allows us to investigate how humans can use technology to enhance, rather than hinder, their pursuit of meaning and spiritual connection.

The Influence of Technological Transformation On Religious Experience

In the age of artificial intelligence and the transformative nature of technology, the focal point of discourse revolves around spirituality and the advancement of religious life. This discussion aims to shed light on the impact of technological change on religious experience, delving deeply into the changes it brings to religious practice and the spiritual connections people forge. A comprehensive examination of this subject matter can be found in this subsection.

Technology has played an essential role in increasing accessibility to religious activities. Through online platforms and religious apps, individuals can engage with spiritual resources, participate in prayers, and listen to sermons regardless of location or time constraints. This newfound convenience allows for a more adaptable religious experience, which can be customized to meet the needs of each individual.

However, religious encounters in the digital realm present certain obstacles. As Miller and Baker (2019) explain in their publication *Spirituality in the Digital Age: Navigating the Intersection of Technology and the Sacred*, religious experiences through screens often lack the physical presence and visceral intensity experienced during conventional religious gatherings. As a result, they raise questions regarding the extent to which technology can facilitate religious engagement. The advent of virtual reality further contributes to this transformation. Through virtual reality experiences, one can participate in religious ceremonies, embark on virtual pilgrimages, or engage in meditation practices while simulating a sense of physical presence. Nevertheless, ethical concerns regarding the authenticity of these experiences remain.

Another part of this transformation is religious chatbots and virtual assistants that help people in their daily religious practices. While they can offer help and guidance, some concerns using these technologies can replace religion's intimate and personal aspects. However, technological advances also provide opportunities to build religious communities worldwide. Discussion forums, online religious classes, and cross-cultural exchange of thoughts can help one better understand their faith. Let us talk about how technological change can affect one's religious life. Considering how much technology can help people on their spiritual journey without compromising their religious values and meanings is essential.

While digital technologies have expanded the accessibility of religious practices, there is concern among some researchers that an over-reliance on

technology in spiritual contexts may lead to reducing religion to a commodity rather than a fully realized way of life. It is said that a consumeristic approach to religion may undermine deep meaning and authentic dedication. In addition, Campbell (2018) examined how digital technology is reshaping the religious mindset of millennials. His research revealed that online participatory culture promotes the importance of values such as personal autonomy, creativity, and openness in digital spirituality, which may conflict with the teachings of traditional religious institutions. (Campbell, 2018)

From an ethical standpoint, Floridi and Cowls (2019) warn about the potential for manipulation through interface design that deliberately fosters addiction. They propose that ethical principles of artificial intelligence should be applied to protect the spiritual dimension of individuals. AI deployment in a religious context should prioritize the dignity and well-being of users. Overall, while the transformation of technology in religious experiences brings new possibilities, it is not without challenges. It requires deep reflection from religious leaders and theologians to ensure that essential spiritual values are not compromised in favor of digital efficiency and convenience. (Floridi & Cowls, 2019).

Ethical Use of Technology In The Context Of Spirituality

The topic The Ethical Use of Technology in the Context of Spirituality explores the profound implications of how technology, particularly artificial intelligence, can affect one's religious experiences and practices. The ethical dimension of this debate is significant because of the potential for technology to enhance spiritual experiences or have a negative impact. To begin with, using technology in religious contexts raises moral concerns regarding data security and privacy. How can we ensure that information shared by individuals is not misused or accessed without consent when they disclose their spiritual experiences or personal religious information? Establishing rules and transparency in managing religious data to protect individuals' privacy is crucial. In addition, the moral aspects of the capacity of artificial intelligence technologies to understand and respond to human emotions must be considered.

If AI is used to support religious practices or offer spiritual guidance, the extent to which technology can replace the role of human spiritual counsel or mentors should be considered. Floridi and Cowls (2019) outline moral principles in their work A Five-Principle Integrated Framework for AI in Society that can guide

the use of AI technologies, including their application in spirituality. (Floridi & Cows, 2019)

Utilizing technology for virtual religious ceremonies or online worship also raises ethical issues in religious practice. How can technology maintain the sacred aspect and spiritual presence in online experiences while upholding religious meaning and values? In addition, creating or replicating spiritual entities through technology raises ethical dilemmas. This includes the development of religious chatbots or artificial intelligence entities that function as religious teachers. The question of how far we can trust technology-mediated spiritual interactions arises due to the inherent ambiguity between technology and spiritual presence.

To address these ethical issues, it is imperative for religious communities and authorities to actively participate in the establishment of clear moral standards for the use of technology in the context of spirituality. By profoundly understanding ethical principles and spiritual values, individuals will have a solid foundation to guide technological advancements aligned with humanity's spiritual goals. It has been emphatically asserted that ethical utilization of technology is essential. By adopting an ethical approach, technology can enhance human spiritual experiences without compromising the fundamental values of religious practice.

Conclusion

Advances in digital technology and artificial intelligence have triggered significant transformations in many aspects of human existence. Spirituality and religion are some of the most affected areas. The rise of digital technologies has revolutionized the way individuals express and engage in religious practices. Social media platforms and digital forums have facilitated the formation of virtual faith communities that transcend geographical boundaries. Through these online platforms, individuals from diverse backgrounds can connect, exchange spiritual experiences, engage in discussions related to religious beliefs, and support each other in their respective spiritual journeys. In addition, digital applications have expanded the accessibility of religious resources, including scriptures, sermons, educational materials, and more.

In addition, sensory technologies and wearables have enabled the monitoring and quantifying various aspects of spiritual practices, including meditation, contemplation, and worship. This data can enhance self-understanding and guide an individual's spiritual development. Adopting virtual reality and related

technologies has also introduced new experiences, such as virtual visits to sacred sites and participation in religious rituals. However, integrating technology in religion and spirituality has its challenges. Excessive use of technology can disrupt the balance of one's spiritual life. Moreover, designing digital interfaces that optimize attachment and prolonged use risks reducing religion to a mere consumable product rather than a way of life.

Privacy and security issues of religious data also require serious consideration, given the sensitive nature of information shared on digital spiritual platforms. In the absence of a comprehensive ethical and legal framework, the personal data of religious believers becomes vulnerable to abuse. It is imperative to remain vigilant regarding the potential for manipulation or exploitation through the irresponsible use of technology. From a theological standpoint, integrating artificial intelligence and digital technology raises profound questions regarding the relationship between humanity and the Divine. Can artificial intelligence and virtual reality indeed provide genuine divine experiences, or do they blur the boundaries of the sacred? How can we ensure that technology remains a tool, not a substitute for essential elements of human spirituality?

To address these challenges, fostering dialog and cooperation among various stakeholders, including technologists, scientists, religious leaders, philosophers, and spiritual practitioners is imperative. Ethical principles, such as transparency, privacy, fairness, and humanity, must be upheld in developing and applying religion-related technologies. In addition, spiritual discernment is essential to ensure that individuals are not ensnared in pursuing superficial and pseudo-meanings determined solely by algorithmic logic.

Looking to the future, digital technology and artificial intelligence are expected to merge with the diverse dimensions of human existence increasingly. Churches and religious institutions should carefully anticipate these changes by maintaining a cautious yet open-minded approach. When used responsibly and in a way that upholds human dignity, technological advancements in religious life can yield real benefits rather than being driven solely by narrow interests or exploitative profit motives. Instead of approaching technology with suspicion, it should be regarded as a tool to support humanity's spiritual progress, provided ethical values and religious principles are upheld. Technological advancement should be accompanied by the simultaneous strengthening of profound human values to prevent humanity from becoming detached from the divine. With such vision and wisdom, humanity's spiritual trajectory in the age of digital technology

and artificial intelligence can be directed toward humanity's collective well-being and proper development.

In conclusion, the contemporary era faces an inevitable and rapidly advancing technological transformation that requires a sensible and thoughtful approach from all parties, including religious stakeholders. It is imperative to assess challenges and opportunities in a balanced manner. By fostering open dialogue and building a solid ethical framework, the essence of human nature can continue to evolve and flourish in the new socio-technical context. The basic principles of spirituality, such as compassion, justice, truth, and humanity, must always be protected, even amidst the rapid pace of technological change. As a result, the progress of human civilization in the digital age does not want to lead to spiritual alienation. Instead, technology can be a conduit to more profound significance, accompanied by intelligence and wisdom.

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