EDITOR'S COLUMN

Religions and the Digital Future

After a two-year hiatus to fully online mode, the International Roundtable of the Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication finally made its return onsite as part of the Inter-Asia and Challenges International Conference held at Thammasat University last November 2-3, 2023. It was not going to be business as usual, however, for as predicted even at the height of the pandemic, we now find ourselves in a "new normal" with technology becoming more and more a part of our daily business and life. Just a year ago, the release of the generative pre-trained transformer, ChatGPT 3.5, followed shortly by its more advanced premium version, ChatGPT-4, rekindled public interest and concern about Artificial Intelligence (AI). These new realities, profoundly shaped by rapid digital innovations, offer us fresh opportunities, but also usher us into a yet unfamiliar and unsettling landscape.

Even prior to our rich discussions, faith communities around the world have been using these technologies and are very much affected by them, at times in ways they may not even be aware of. Recently targeted by AI "deepfakes" himself, the Pope expressed both hope and anxiety in his March 2023 address to participants in the "Minerva Dialogues," acknowledging that "the development of artificial intelligence and machine learning has the potential to contribute in a positive way to the future of humanity." In the same vein, he said that "this potential will be realized only if there is a constant and consistent commitment on the part of those developing these technologies to act ethically and responsibly."

During the recent pandemic, technology proved itself a powerful tool that faith communities could harness as it enabled them to maintain connections with their flock and even to continue religious services online at the height of the lockdowns. At the same time, religious leaders have been grappling with various issues related to technology, especially

with the looming concern that with the advance of AI, religions will come to be replaced with robotic means of relating with the Divine. In fact, there are already Chatbots that simulate conversation with deities, saints, and other religious figures in the different world religions; and there are even exorcists who report online demonic activity using AI platforms.

The Conference and Roundtable were themselves a chance not only to reflect upon but experience these realities as it afforded the convergence of online and onsite participants but also witnessed various challenges like Zoom-bombing and technical difficulties. The fast-emerging reality of AI was also very much around the corner, even in subtle and almost imperceptible ways. Many onsite participants, for instance, reached the venue conveniently using ridesharing and navigation applications powered by algorithms. Hopefully, AI was responsibly and ethically used, and not abused, in some of the researches. Like many academic and research institutions, ARC is grappling with the challenges of responsible AI use with research presented in our publications. But most thankfully, the great food and warm hospitality offered by our gracious hosts, as well as the intellectual exchanges and interpersonal encounters among the participants were very much real and not just virtual!

In light of all this, the theme of this year's Roundtable, "Religious Communication and the Technological Future: Prospects, Concerns, and Responses," was especially appropriate. In fact, the future that we speak of here is already very much a part of our reality today. The papers that are featured in this issue of *Religion and Social Communication* are but some of the fruits of our continuing discourse. We hope that they trigger new ideas and fuel further discussion.

First and foremost, we are glad to present the Conference Report of the 14th International Roundtable prepared by the ARC Team. The report recalls key moments during the conference that convened scholars from at least nine countries in engaging discussions that were not only multireligious but also multidisciplinary. This year's Roundtable is also special as it took place within a broader conference and as part of a collaboration with other leading universities not only

in Thailand but around Asia. Once more, we would like to extend our sincere appreciation and warm congratulations to the ARC Team for hosting another successful roundtable – now back with an in-person format! This event is yet another testament to the Center's dedication to fostering intellectual exchange and advancing scholarship in the crucial intersection of religion and social communication.

Gnana Patrick's "Attribution of Religious Characteristics to AI: A Critical Exploration" offers an incisive look into the use of religious categories to describe AI and AI-related processes in order to alert us to emerging trends. Among these is the tendency to ascribe humanity and even divinity to artificial intelligence, with a corresponding soteriological expectation from a so-called "apocalyptic AI." Patrick asks whether these trends reflect a real thirst for transcendence or merely represent yet another form of human self-idolatry, as well as other very important questions. Moreover, he offers crucial critiques of these religious attributions and a serious warning against "horizontalizing" the experience of religious transcendence.

Bryan Albia, Mariel Blanza, and **Andrew Joseph Chanco**'s "From Icons to AI: Evolution of Imagery in Religious Communication" explores the historical evolution of religious icons from traditional depictions to contemporary images produced with the assistance of generative AI. Emphasizing the important role that icons have played, not only in religious communication but even in promoting religious experience, it points out important differences between traditional and AI-generated sacred art from the production process, to their regulation, and the manner they are being used by adherents. At the same time, they point to significant advantages of AI icons, including visual enhancement, accessibility and inclusivity, personalization and their usefulness for religious instruction.

Meanwhile, **Lee-Shae Salma Scharnick-Udemans**' "Between Promise and Peril: Observations on Moral Panic, Popular Culture, and Religion" attempts to gauge the public pulse with regard to AI by analyzing its portrayals in film and reportage in tech news. She alerts to the possibility of a large-scale "moral panic" in its embryonic phases and calls on scholars of religion as well as religious leaders to take proactive

steps in order to address it. According to her, the issues of AI are not alien to religion but touch on fundamental issues that concern religions like human identity, morality and destiny. Thus, AI also presents an important opportunity as a new context where these religious beliefs can be revisited and tested.

Next, we have "Education and Industrial Revolution 4.0: Prospects and Challenges to ASEAN Education in the Case of Philippine Education" by **Joefrey Almazan**. In this article, Almazan examines the idea of twenty-first century education tailored to the specifications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution but at risk of losing its human aspects, including reflection and critical thinking. Using the framework of Freire, it critiques the excessive focus given today to meeting the demands of industry, resulting in a banking system style of education, a very individualistic and competitive ethos, and the commodification of education itself.

In his article "Impact of AI-Powered Technology on Religious Practices and Ethics: The Road Ahead," **Rey Ty** provides an overview of the benefits and issues accompanying the use of AI for religious purposes and points to some ethical considerations and tasks in view of these effects. Through an auto-ethnographic case study of his experiences with technology, he employs a constructivist phenomenological approach, supplemented by the current literature, to identify the advantages and challenges that he encountered. In light of these, he adverts to the urgent need for religious leaders and communities to adapt to the rapidly changing technology and harness its tools or they run the risk of sinking into irrelevance and marginalization.

Rico Jacoba's "Exploring the Role of Artificial Intelligence in Interreligious Discourse" highlights the potential applications of AI to interreligious dialogue. At present, AI is already being used not only in various industries but even for different religious purposes. Thus, the article points to possible uses of AI for interreligious dialogue including language translation and interpretation, text and sentiment analysis, recommendation systems, chatbots and virtual assistants, as well as data and social media analytics. While calling out the apparent lack of attention to the potential use of AI in interreligious dialogue, it also

points to the shared concern of religions about the ethical use of AI as perhaps a starting point for interreligious conversation and collaboration on these themes, possibly in a manner enhanced or augmented by the same technology.

"Religious Prophetic Voices to Effect the Course of Technological Development" by **Clement Baffoe, SVD** highlights some important issues surrounding certain applications of AI and other emerging technologies, including social justice concerns as well as issues of peace and global security when AI is used for violence and warfare. In the face of this, the paper advocates a prophetic dialogue model between persons of faith, technology experts and other stakeholders as a means of engaging the development of technology, bringing into it the wealth of wisdom and experience of various faiths and ethical traditions to guide its ongoing development.

Finally, **Jeramie Molino**'s "Interreligious Views on the Integration of Artificial Intelligence and Indigenous Knowledge for Environmental Preservation" investigates the alliance of artificial intelligence and indigenous knowledge in the protection of the environment. Highlighting some pioneering initiatives in this area, she underlines the significance of this vital intersection as a "bridge between tradition and technology" while pointing to further possibilities in terms of its concrete application that build upon the urgent concern of religions today about caring for our common home, especially in light of the ecological crisis.

These insightful discussions and diverse perspectives shared during the recent International Roundtable contribute significantly to our understanding of the interface between religions and the digital frontier. As we continue to grapple with the many questions and collectively chart the course forward, may the insights gained from our encounter continue to inspire dialogue and informed action in the realms of religious communication and the digital future.

On a final note, allow me to express my personal gratitude to Fr. Anthony Le Duc, SVD for the privilege of being guest editor for this issue, as well as my warm congratulations to him, not only for the success of the recently concluded International Roundtable but for his very able

guidance of the ARC. Taking the helm from our beloved Fr. Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD must have been daunting not only because he had very big shoes to fill, but also because he did so amid the uncertainty and duress of the pandemic. Nevertheless, he has been able to sustain and even managed to expand the activities of ARC, especially its publications and networks. Under his leadership, may the Center continue its mission of galvanizing religious leaders and thinkers from the various faith communities here in Asia as we continue to raise questions and seek answers around issues that concern the interface of religion and social communication.

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