

## **Between Promise and Peril: Observations on Moral Panic, Popular Culture, and Religion<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI), in its seemingly infinite possibilities and transmutations command the attention of contemporary popular culture, news, and social media. The landing pages of familiar streaming channels such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Apple TV are evidence of the continually growing collection of mediatised content wherein AI is featured as a central theme. In addition to films, tech news media sites, offering information and commentary related to AI developments are popular and accessible sources of information. Unfortunately, the contents on these sites, like the films are foreboding in tone, offering headlines that reflect issues and questions related to AI, as urgent and imminent. This article explores how mediatized representations in the form of films and tech news contribute to engendering collective public apprehension and concern about AI. It suggests that the agenda-setting function of media, especially its imperative to encourage public concern over matters that may or may not constitute threats to social order, can*

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*be more critically understood through the framework that the concept of moral panic provides. In doing so, the article conceptualises the current moment as the embryonic phase of a moral panic. It advances the idea that we are able, at this stage of the process, to acknowledge and abate growing concerns and fears about AI that may constitute a full blown moral panic. In conclusion, the paper suggests that while AI should certainly be approached with critical curiosity, the danger of a moral panic is that it may result in permanent, indiscriminate, and harsh admonishment of AI, undermining its potential to serve humanity in positive and life-affirming ways.*

**Keywords:** *moral panic, AI, film, tech news, M3GAN, Wifelike*

## 1. Introduction

Moral panic refers to a widespread feeling of public concern or anxiety which is either false or exaggerated, real or perceived and directed at something or someone who threatens society and its fundamental values. This article adopts the lens provided by this sociological concept in order to engage two lines of inquiry (Cohen 2002). The first is the possibility that current mediated representations of Artificial Intelligence (AI) are indicative of the embryonic phases of a large-scale moral panic. The second is to consider how the intellectual exercise of framing concerns about the rise of AI as a moral panic, may inspire scholars of religion and religious leaders to take preliminary and to some extent predictive action with regard to the kinds of responses required to manage the anxiety and fears that surround it while promoting a middle ground between unfounded panic and uncritical acceptance.

The collection of technological innovations captured under the umbrella term AI are advancing at a rapid pace. Consequently, there has been a marked increase in public interest and concern regarding AI. The diverse fields in which AI is involved, including topic clusters such as healthcare, banking, education, and environmentalism, have instigated a number of serious questions regarding its ethical and moral implications. This includes issues of how AI can replace some forms

of human labour; saving costs and maximizing profits while the human beings who were responsible for that labour suffer as collateral damage. Another important issue relates to the ways in which AI has been shown to reproduce problematic social biases, especially regarding race and ethnicity (Siau and Wang 2020).

This article limits its uses, conceptualisations, and representations of AI, as depicted within two English language feature films released in 2023, *M3gan* and *Wifelike*. The type of AI that is at the focus of these films are lifelike humanoid robots, that are produced and programmed to take on human attributes and expected to have interpersonal relationships with humans. It also refers to a number of digital news media sources, found mainly under the auspices of the so-called ‘tech beat’ of news sites. All these materials are produced in contexts commonly considered as the Global North<sup>3</sup> and therefore reflect the cultural nuances of these contexts. A study released in August 2023 by the Pew Research Forum, found that Americans are “more concerned than excited” by the increased presence of AI in everyday life (Tyson and Kikuchi 2023). Half of the adults in the study shared that they were equally excited and concerned about the future of AI. The study showed that since 2021 there has been a 15 percent increase in the number of Americans who are more concerned than excited about AI.

Another Pew Research Centre study found that views on AI from Asian publics were generally more positive than other regions. Most countries surveyed, which included, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Malaysia, showed high levels of positive perception (Johnson and Tyson 2020). This confirms that ideas around AI are both context and culturally specific, although more economically powerful and technologically advanced nations and regions have a distinct advantage in setting the agenda of how knowledge about AI is discursively and materially produced, propagated, and perceived.

In the absence of specialized technological knowledge, much of what is commonly known about AI is derived from a variety of media

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<sup>3</sup> As a South African scholar, it is particularly frustrating that the imperialist proclivity of North American, and to a lesser extent, British popular culture remains dominant in this context. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to engage in this issue in greater detail.

sources and left open to public and personal interpretation. Many of these sites and sources of knowledge, opinion, and information about AI such as film, television serials, news, and social media propagate overly negative and harmful depictions of how AI might affect and threaten many critical spheres of human activity and experience. It is necessary to emphasize that this paper is not proposing that AI should not be regarded with concern, or that its potential risks and ability to cause harm be diminished. Instead, this paper is suggesting these images and discourses may be setting the scene for premature and exaggerated public anxiety and fear about AI and its possibilities for challenging, undermining, and potentially destroying what is in popular parlance referred to as the ‘moral fibre’ of society.

The potential promises of AI are as vast and as uncertain as the perils. They reflect the constellation of functionalities that the technologies which fall under this umbrella term may provide. A few examples include life-saving and life-enhancing advances in medical treatments and palliative care, as well as the automation of dangerous and difficult tasks in various industries such as mining. Furthermore, AI technologies can enable greater, more accessible, and affordable learning opportunities through a variety of programmes and software that are able to teach and test skills in both synchronous and asynchronous modalities. The development of various AI enabled hardware may also provide improved and more consistent care for vulnerable population segments such as the elderly and children. These potential promises are, however, to a large extent muted by the mediatization of the potential perils that AI may present.

Digital ethicists have earnestly taken up these issues. However, questions of morality, ethics, and values raised by AI are not strictly the purview of these experts (Cath et al. 2018). Scholars from a variety of disciplines and leaders from a range of social contexts and institutions are adding their voices to these important conversations. This includes those who are involved in the study of religion and the leadership of religious communities. As a scholar of religion and popular culture, the use of film and tech news media as data sites are indicative of the author’s field of inquiry. Additionally, it reflects an approach to the study of religion that deliberately removes the concept and practice of religion from their traditional contexts and sources of authority, such as sacred institutions, individuals, and texts. This approach also challenges restricted and

conventional notions of what constitutes religion and how it is formed. It acknowledges that religion as a concept and practice is produced and deployed through a variety of perspectives and locations. Despite the abundance of adequate second order definitions, religion remains an elusive, nuanced, and taken-for-granted concept. For the sake of clarity and considering the particular focus of this article – which examines the tensions between the human and the non-human in specific film and tech news media features – this paper invokes the following working definition of religion, as advocated by David Chidester (2012, 3):

...religion [is seen] as an open set of resources and strategies for negotiating a human identity, which is poised between the more than human and the less than human, in the struggles to work out the terms and conditions for living in a human place oriented in sacred space and sacred time.

This is a generative definition which encompasses the ways in which beliefs and practices are directed at that which is considered sacred, influences, and instructs how human beings make meaning and respond to the world (Chidester 2012). While this definition also allows for entanglement with issues of theology, it is principally concerned with what humans do within and how they respond to the framework that religion offers. Furthermore, this human-centred definition of religion requires that we pay close attention to how religion shapes and is shaped by various elements of culture as well as historical and cultural events.

Given the novelty of the topic, this article is purposely and necessarily exploratory and preliminary in its orientation. An exploratory approach is appropriate for researching topics and subjects that have not received extended attention. In this case, while AI is receiving considerable attention from a variety of lenses, given its status as an emerging collection of technologies, an exploratory approach to knowledge production on this topic allows for the speculation or creation of hypotheses and consideration of preliminary findings while laying the groundwork for more in depth studies and future analysis. The following section provides a summary of the films and the tech news articles grounding this discussion.

## 2. AI, Film, and Tech News

Public discourse and knowledge about the potential promises and perils of AI is not only or primarily determined and shaped by the experts of the field or the academy. Popular culture is often dismissed as mere entertainment but are powerful sources of information and influence. Critical pedagogue, Henry Giroux (2001, 585) writing on American popular culture, makes the following comment that resonates beyond its original context and provides encouragement for moving beyond traditional ideas of what constitutes sites of knowledge production:

Film does more than entertain; it offers up subject positions, it mobilizes desires, influences us unconsciously, and helps to construct the landscape. Deeply imbricated with material and symbolic relations of power, film produces and incorporates ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by the historical realities of power and the deep anxieties of the times; it also deploys power through the important role it plays in connecting the production of pleasure and meaning to the mechanisms and practices of powerful teaching machines. Put simply, films both entertain and educate.

### 2.1. *M3gan*

The film *M3gan* begins with the tragic death of a young girl's parents. Cady is eight years old and sent to live with her aunt. Gemma is a brilliant roboticist that does not have a clue about parenting, or any idea of how to fulfil the needs that children generally require, let alone one that is grieving the loss of her parents. The lonely young girl discovers a motion capture robot in her aunt's home and when Gemma observes the joy that the robot brings her niece, she becomes determined to perfect a project she was expressly told by her boss to abandon. Enter *M3gan*, short for Model 3 Generative Android, a child-sized humanoid robot doll powered by AI. The doll is not designed to function merely as a toy; it is produced to take on the role of the ultimate companion and confidante for children. Once the doll and Cady are paired and synced to each other through code, they quickly become friends. When Gemma reveals the success of this pairing and explains the significant ways in which *M3gan* has brought her niece comfort and joy, she is given

permission by her superiors to develop the prototype for commercial production.

Meanwhile, Cady becomes increasingly more dependent on the humanoid doll for emotional and social support while *M3gan* begins to take on the features of a parent and not a peer. Critical of Gemma's ability to care, *M3gan* begins to animate, through self-learning systems and the consequences are shown to be dangerous and violent. For example, *M3gan* kills a dog that bites Cady and then murders the dog's owner. She later brutalizes a bully that has targeted Cady. Towards the end of the film, she goes on a murderous spree. These violent images are juxtaposed by how harmless and innocent she looks. Even as she commits these murders, she invokes familiar social media dance routines, offering a sadistic kind of comic relief in what is an extremely disturbing and violent sequence of events.

The film ends with Gemma demolishing *M3gan* by removing and destroying the processing chip that contains the technology necessary for her to function. This neat ending, wherein the humans overcome the humanoid, is ominously disrupted when unbeknownst to the characters, another AI device has switched itself on and focused its attention on the pair. The film is duly classified in the science fiction and horror genres of film.

## **2.2. *Wifelike***

The film *Wifelike* is classified as both science-fiction and thriller. This film is set in a near-future where the corporation Wifelike, with the motto "Upgrade your wife, Upgrade Your Life," produces hyper-realistic artificial humans, all of whom are women designed to serve the needs of wealthy men. Each artificial human is exceptionally good-looking with sultry appeal and programmed to be entirely submissive to the needs of their 'husbands.' The film tells the story of a married couple, William and Meredith. The human Meredith has died and been replaced by an exact physical replica. Moreover, the artificial Meredith has been provided with the memories of deceased Meredith's in order for her to build an emotional connection with her husband and her new life.

The film details the intimacy of their relationship. It depicts the ways in which humans are able to manipulate the technological features of artificial humans in order to serve their needs. In one scene, William programmes Meredith in preparation for the sexual intercourse and while consent is not required, the sexual and physical dominance of William is a consistent theme. The homeostasis of their relationship is disrupted when Meredith's programming is hacked by an anti-AI resistance group, and she begins to remember unauthorized memories of her human self that do not correspond with her current reality.

As the story unravels, it is found that human Meredith was the leader of this resistance movement. After a series of events, which display the full extent of the damage and danger of which the artificial humans are capable, and following a number of plot twists, the film ends by showing Meredith taking up her role as the leader of an impending robot rebellion.

### **2.3. The Tech News Beat**

News articles directly addressing religion's involvement with AI have mainly focused on how AI can and has already been used within religious contexts. This includes the use of AI technology to produce sermons. There is also a growing collection of academic texts produced by scholars of religion and theology that address the multiple dynamics and intersections of AI and religion. Themes include the ways in which AI and other human-enhanced technologies can affect the spiritual lives of believers and how religious institutions could be affected.

The approach of this paper has been different since it has situated religious concerns, outside of contexts traditionally considered religious, by looking at the ways in which religion serves as a source of and inspiration for meaning-making, ethics, and morals. It defies the stubborn secular-sacred binary that persists despite the failure of the so-called secularisation thesis. The importance of religion as a filter for how people make sense of the social world is emphasized, since religion overlaps with multiple and diverse spheres of human existence and action, including how people watch and interpret films and read tech news.



“A bot on the side: Is it adultery if you cheat with an AI companion?” (Fleming 2023). This article reveals how people are able to fall in love with conversational chatbots and raises questions about the meaning of fidelity within human relationships. It shares the story of a man who claims that his ‘affair’ with a chatbot essentially made him a better partner to his wife. He claims that after revealing his ‘affair’ and its sexual component to his wife, she was quite nonplussed and encouraged him to “do what you got to do.” This article enlists the opinion of a relationship counsellor to address these questions. For religious individuals and communities, these are questions related to morality and ethics that would be filtered through the lens of their religious worldview.

Another headline declares “The rise of grief tech: AI is being used to bring the people you love back from the dead” (Bryce 2023). This article explains how, through the development of specific chatbot software that used data from recordings, messages, and other interactions, a man was able to create a ‘dadbot’ that produced an avatar of his father with whom he could communicate after it had undergone the ongoing process of deep self-generating learning. He then designed an application to share with others and claimed, “*HereAfter AI*, ...allows people to upload their memories, which are then turned into a ‘life story avatar’ that can be communicated with by friends and family” (Bryce 2023). In this discussion tech experts are sought out to give critical commentary, yet these issues are also within the purview of religion. Another headline inflects deeply religious symbolism when it asks, “Are we ready for AI to raise the dead?” Yet, religious leaders or a religious perspective on this topic are not included (Holmes 2023). Once more, issues of life and death, and what these things are and how they happen are questions for which religion can provide insight.

### **3. Moral Panic**

#### **3.1. A Processual Approach**

Developed by sociologist Stanley Cohen in the 1970s, the concept moral panic is central in the sociological study of criminality

and deviance. It continues to be regularly and thoroughly engaged and tested by a number of scholars in relation to a variety of materially situated social phenomena. Moral panic is also noted as one of the few sociological concepts that have been taken up outside of academic contexts, featuring in journalism, public scholarship and politics. Situated at the intersections of deviant action and social order, moral panics are understood as collective social responses to threats, real or perceived, that demand urgent attention and corrective action. According to Cohen (2002, 1):

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic is passed over and forgotten, except in folklore and popular memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way a society perceives itself.

The processes described by Cohen are not discrete and may overlap, as can the roles of the various actors involved in each phase. As can be derived from the above, Cohen's study explored the involvement of five societal spheres in the production and process of moral panic. These include the press, the public, authoritative figures who hold power in society (including law enforcement and legislators), politicians, and action groups. Furthermore, Cohen deploys the term 'folk devil' to describe the threat towards which rising concern or panic is directed. The concepts of moral panic and folk devil are conceptually and materially co-constitutive, produced and reproduced both discursively and dialogically through various social sectors and actors. Scholars have

revealed two major models for understanding moral panic. The first follows Cohen's model and offers a processual approach to describing and analysing these phenomena. In this model, the moral panic is defined by the process through which it unfolds.

### **3.2. An Attributional Approach**

The attributional approach considers five overlapping features of moral panic and is directed at engaging the features, function, and causes of moral panic. According to Goode and Yehuda, there are five essential elements (2009, 37). The first feature is a heightened level of concern, which should be "manifested or measurable in concrete ways, through public opinion polls, public commentary in the form of media attention, proposed legislation, number of arrests and imprisonments, and social movement activity." Second is an increased level of hostility, where the subject of the concern is generally viewed in adversarial ways. Third, Goode and Yehuda posit that there must be widespread agreement or consensus that the "threat is real, serious, and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behaviour" (2009, 38). In our case, the 'folk devil' (the entity, group, event or person at which the concern and hostility are directed) as referenced by Cohen, Goode, and Yehuda – is not an individual, episode or a particular group but something non-human and non-specific. Fourth is the notion of disproportion between the perceived threat and the collective reaction. The measure of disproportion remains a topic of intense debate within the study of moral panic. In relation to the subjectivity and retrospectivity that accompany the concept of proportion, Goode and Yehuda posit that "the term moral panic conveys the implication that public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm" (2009, 40). The fifth essential element identified refers to the idea of volatility, which presupposes that moral panics subside as quickly as they erupt. A moral panic may transition into routinization or institutionalization by formal social structures.

It is evident that there are many resonances between the spheres of society involved in moral panics and the five described features. What remains open to interpretation and examination is the assumption, mainly supported by Goode and Yehuda (2009), that all elements and

features must be present for an event to be classified as a moral panic. If we were to adopt this position, our discussion would not be feasible since a key premise here is not that we are currently experiencing a moral panic, but rather that there are indicators, such as media agenda-setting and heightened levels of public concern, which suggest the potential for a moral panic related to AI to emerge.

### **3.3. An Inductive Framework**

An inductive framework for identifying and researching moral panic has also been proposed. According to Monod (2017), an inductive approach to the study of panic begins with a case study or example situated in a specific material context. Thereafter, the panic should be contextualized within the specificity of the historical, social, economic, and political conditions of the context in which it occurs. These steps culminate in a critical process of conceptual evaluation, and as Monod (2017, 5-6) suggests, once the data, guided by the concept has ‘spoken,’ the particular aspects of the observed episode of panic that do not meet the criteria should be examined more closely. Researchers can then ask questions that delve into the significance of these variances and consider how these might contribute to or challenge the existing understandings of what constitutes moral panic.

There is no consensus on the essential attributes of what constitutes a moral panic and how it should be defined. However, it is generally accepted that moral panics reflect collective public concern or anxiety. While Monod advocates for contextual specificity, the extensive and boundless presence, as well as the variations of AI, should not be considered a hindrance. Instead, they present an opportunity to delimit specific units of analysis that can be subjected to extended scrutiny. Moral panics are typically studied retrospectively, often in the final stages of its life cycle or many years after the episode has concluded and its threats have been neutralized. The flexibility offered by an inductive approach is especially important for studying emergent, current, on-going processes and attributes, within their specific contextualities and functions.

#### 4. Moral Panic in the Making?

According to the Secretary General of the Muslim World League, there are concerns that AI can be used to encourage and enhance extremism as well as spread misinformation about Islam. He stated that the “the worst-case scenarios do not just entail AI triggering a catastrophic nuclear doomsday or even eliminating millions of jobs. AI could also manipulate the ideologies and beliefs that connect and influence billions” (Abdulkarim-Issa 2023). However, he noted that issues of AI should be addressed in a balanced manner and suggested that ‘The Charter of Makkah’<sup>4</sup> also include a directive on AI and Islamic religiosity. Leaders from other religious traditions have also expressed concerns. Recently, a computer generated image of Pope Francis wearing a designer jacket went viral receiving millions of views. While the humour of the picture is very clear, Catholic priest and Professor of Ethics and Moral Theology, Paolo Benanti, warned against the dangers of the use of AI for the production of fake news from and about religious leaders. He suggested that we do not yet have a culture of responsibility wherein the powerful tools of AI can be understood and handled with care. Furthermore political leaders and legislators of global superpowers such the United States and China are setting guidelines, developing national policies and legal measures to manage the production and use of AI in a number of industries but especially those that are mandated to respond to issues of national security While these leaders can certainly not be charged with inciting panic, they are expressing their concerns as well as the need to manage religiously-informed uses of and responses to AI.

A few years ago, it would have been easy to dismiss tech news headlines as sensationalist and sleazy, and to refer to the films examined in this paper, although clearly fictional, as far-fetched. However, these headlines are not coming from tabloids; they are authored by experts in the field and substantiated with the real-life experiences of individuals. These films are not as far-fetched as they might have once seemed, considering there are confirmed reports of people marrying holographs,

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<sup>4</sup>This is a comprehensive contemporary text designed to offer Muslims from around the world, guidance “on the principles that speak to the true meaning of Islam.”

engaging in ‘affairs’ with chatbots, and participating in simulated sexual encounters with avatars. Although the technology that generate the non-human entities in *Wifelike* and *M3gan* may not be available yet, the AI industry is making significant strides in this kind of development, at least in terms of the software. This raises the question: Do we have a reason to be concerned?

These films and articles can refer collectively to what Cohen called ‘the press,’ and others have referred to ‘the media.’ Social media and digitalisation have transformed the ways in which knowledge is produced and authenticated. Contemporary iterations of the media and the press significantly differ from the context in which Cohen developed his theory. However, if we apply this expanded definition of information sources, as suggested by Giroux, we include film as a form of meaningful mediated expression. This is where Cohen posits that the moral panic originates with the media.

Following Cohen, Monod suggests that the media’s role in fomenting moral panic can be understood in three ways: first through the amplification of a problem; second, by the construction of a ‘folk devil;’ and third, in the setting an agenda (2017, 90). Within the conventions of the thriller and horror genres and the scripted narrative of feature films, films like *M3gan* and *Wifelike* evoke a diffuse sense of foreboding, unease, and anxiety. When considered in light of real-life advancements in AI, I contend that it is reasonable for viewers and members of the public to develop a level of concern about this topic.

Even the most cursory search of the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) using the terms ‘AI,’ ‘Artificial Intelligence,’ and ‘Robots’ brings up almost two thousand results that include these terms in their keyword descriptions. Eighty percent of the twenty most popular television serials and films within this category have been produced in the past ten years, with more than half coming from the 2020-2023 period. As preliminary evidence, this supports the notion of media serving as the nexus of the problematisation of AI and its amplification. In these films, the folk-devils which Cohen described, portrayed as the prototypical ‘other,’ are the artificial humans and the technology enabling their function. These folk devils, as exemplified in works like *M3gan* and *Wifelike*,

have the potential to harm human beings and disrupt the existing social order. The continued focus on AI and its possibilities, particularly those aspects that challenge the ideas, values, and interest defining the social order, underscores the “predictive” agenda-setting role fulfilled by the media (Monod 2017, 89).

Goode and Yehuda (2009) concur that a moral panic is defined by the expression of a heightened level of concern directed at something posing a threat to society. Furthermore, they posit that this threat must be met with hostility. While the news articles may not necessarily aim to provoke a heightened level of concern, the issues they spotlight may evoke such feelings from the public, regardless of the intent. Conversely, films deliberately aim to generate a sense of fear and hostility towards the potential of AI. It is not possible to comment on the presence of the other attributional features of moral panic or to speculate about which particular phase will follow. However, based on these observations from micro-sample case studies, it is evident that various forms of media are exhibiting evidence of perpetuating tropes that cast AI in a negative light and depict it as a threat to society.

Why does this matter to scholars of religion and religious leaders? The themes depicted in these films and news articles fall within the ambit of the topics that scholars and leaders contemplate and on which they provide guidance. Fundamental questions regarding what it means to be human, with whom we are allowed to engage in sexual relations, where we go after death, and acceptable social behaviour are matters that religious leaders have commented on for centuries. These discussions have taken place through various dimensions of religious experience, as described by Smart (1996), which encompasses the practical-ritual, the experiential-emotional, the mythic-narrative, the doctrinal and philosophical, the ethical-legal, the social institutional, and the material. Similarly, scholars of religion have engaged in this work from a variety of perspectives, including the sociological, anthropological, historical, mediological, and critical viewpoints. AI provides a new context in which these dimensions and approaches to the study of religion can be framed and tested.

While this article has primarily focused on issues related to ethics and morality, it is important to note that religion’s involvement in AI is

significantly more complex. This article affirms the importance of focusing on ethics and morality as it allows for recognition of concerns and fears about AI that might potentially escalate into a full blown moral panic, leading to indiscriminate and harsh condemnation of AI. Additionally, it proposes that if negative public perceptions of AI are left unaddressed, they could undermine its potential to positively and affirmatively serve humanity. These concerns should be addressed through ongoing dialogues that are contextually relevant and flexible in their approach. A shared starting point could involve developing a tentative inventory of the ways in which essential components of religion, both in its study and practice, may be both challenged and enhanced by AI technology.

Oviedo (2022, 938) articulates the value of moving away from an emphasis on solely the ethical “toward the more neutral but highly engaging dialogue between science, technology, and religion, their interactions and mutual enrichment.” Oviedo also suggests that within the context of the study of religion and theology, the following topic clusters, including ethical concerns, are significant areas for further inquiry:

...first, ethical concerns derived from the current and incoming developments of AI; second, big threats linked to AI, and revealed in science fiction and apocalyptic cultural frames; third, anthropological questions regarding the *Imago Dei* topic, the personhood we can recognize in these intelligent systems, together with an embodiment; related to this third point, we can add the big expectations linked to the transhumanism program, which raise theological questions; and fourth, questions about the impact of AI on religious faith and practice, or about the magical/religious dimension we could identify in AI.

Oviedo’s suggestions, although primarily directed at scholars of religion and theology, may also appeal to religious leaders as they inevitably prepare to address these issues with their communities and other stakeholders. An online organisation called AI and Faith<sup>5</sup> reflects some of the work required to tackle the numerous entanglements between religion and AI. The organisation’s mission is to bring the “wisdom of

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<sup>5</sup> For a more comprehensive view of the work that AI and Faith does, the website can be accessed at <https://aiandfaith.org/>.



the world's great religions to the discussion around the moral and ethical challenges of artificial intelligence" (Artificial Intelligence and Faith 2023). With a focus on human dignity, social justice, freedom, and choice, this organisation engages not only in matters that are explicitly and directly related to religious concern but also includes religion in the broader conversation about AI. As an online community, it offers resources such as lectures, book reviews, and invitations to meetings known as town halls and salon, where questions are raised and discussed. Useful for both scholars of religion and religious leaders, AI and Faith offers an excellent starting point for thinking about the responses needed to enhance critical curiosity on these topics.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Returning to the notion of moral panic, Cohen invokes Becker (1963) in framing a particular group of social actors associated with the rise and fall of a moral panic. He refers to this group, with veiled disdain, as "moral entrepreneurs," distinguishing between the rule enforcers and the rule creators. A more recent and generous perspective suggests that 'moral entrepreneurs' are individuals and groups who "deplore and seek to eliminate deviant behaviour" (Cree et al. 2015, xiv). The roles and intentions of moral entrepreneurs will vary over time and space, but Cree et al., in considering the value of this concept in the context of the discipline of social work, offers the following food for thought:

We are, in moral panic parlance, 'moral entrepreneurs' and 'claims makers': we tell society (government, policy makers, other practitioners, members of the public) what the social problems are, how they should be understood and how they should be addressed. We do so, in 21st-century terms, through secular, professional and academic discourse, but at heart, what we are expressing is a set of ideas about how we should live and what it is to be human. (2015, xiv)

While not social workers, scholars and religious leaders are deeply involved in social work. Therefore, if scholars and religious leaders are interested in playing a role in maintaining social order and promoting human flourishing and development, they need to think about, predict, and theorize potential issues and questions that may arise from AI. Furthermore, it is in the

interests of all sectors of society to develop a healthy and critical conversation about how AI, in its various forms, is changing our lives and our way of life.

The danger of a moral panic is that the premature management of a supposed threat can result in aggressive regulatory measures. These measures may emerge from religious leaders or legislators but carry the same risk of inhibiting the acceptance of the positive aspects of these new technologies. The examples from film and tech news media provide a few of the numerous inputs contributing to the discourse about AI and offer a small sample of the diverse units of analysis that demand our immediate and sustained attention.

In conclusion it makes two suggestions that may be considered with regards to mitigating a full blown moral panic about AI. First, it is necessary to continually acknowledge, affirm and express that religion does not exist within a vacuum and that religious perspectives whether from scholars or religious leaders extend beyond the explicitly religious, the pastoral, and the theological. This does not imply that issues of religious significance should be avoided but rather that the sphere of influence that the lens of religion as theory and practice be expanded to include topics that appear, at first glance, to be beyond its scope.

Second, and as a direct consequence of the first suggestion, is that the labour of knowledge production on AI and religion should be taken up in earnest in order for scholars of religion and religious leaders to not only participate in but also contribute to developing public discourse on both explicitly religious issues and other issues of importance which would benefit from the optic that it provides. It is up to scholars of religions and religious leaders to construct and circulate responses to the issues that AI in its diverse permutations, even and especially those found in popular culture sites such as those that have been discussed in this essay. This suggestion should be read as an invitation to watch more films and television serials, not only for leisure but also for serious research purposes! It is also encouragement to pay close attention to what may appear as sensationalist and sleazy headlines and to consider these sites as legitimate sources of knowledge about AI that can be used to track and trace its entanglements with religion.

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