

# Attribution of Religious Characteristics to AI: A Critical Exploration

Gnana Patrick<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Today we find a number of attributions of religious characteristics to AI. In usages like “apocalyptic AI,” “homo deus,” “AI as Imago Dei,” “virtual immortality,” etc., we find religious characteristics being attributed to AI related processes. It would do well to critically analyse such attributes from the perspective of religious studies to understand their impact upon the dynamics of religions. One such core dynamic, acknowledged invariably in religious and theological studies, is that of the experience of “transcendence.” Several studies on religious transcendence analyse its “vertical” and “horizontal” aspects down through historical epochs. The modern era, in particular, is understood to have induced various shades of immanentism, along with an inability to transcendence. This paper studies some selected religious attributes made to AI and analyse their impact upon the experience of transcendence today.*

**Keywords:** *apocalyptic AI, homo deus, virtual immortality, AI as Imago Dei, transcendence*

## 1. Religion and AI

I approach religion from the perspective of religious studies, a discipline which itself has undergone significant changes from the time of its inception. Religious studies had its origin in comparative studies of religion, undertaken by scholars like Max Müller, Mircea Eliade, and by several other ethnographers. Beginning with comparing beliefs and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Gnana Patrick* is a former Professor and Head of the Department of Christian Studies at the University of Madras. He was also a Chairperson of the School of Philosophy and Religious Thought and Dean-Research of the above University.

practices of different religions across continents, the comparative studies identified invariant constants that underlay the manifest beliefs and practices. Accordingly, the experience of the sacred, the holy, the mystery, sacred space-time, etc., was understood to be the essence of religions practised or believed by human beings. Going beyond mere comparisons, these studies focused upon the commonalities of religions. Intoning a non-judgmental phenomenological approach, these studies endeavoured to analyse the manifest dimensions of religions. Going deeper in this phenomenological tradition, Jean-Luc Marion understood religions to be “saturated phenomena” which overwhelm our consciousness beyond our intentionality. In Marion’s understanding, experiences of disclosures or revelation become meaningful.

In this terrain of disclosures, we have many religions which get shaped up historically with articulation of beliefs and enshrinement of system of rituals. I understand them to be instances of experiences of interfacing or encounters between the here and now and the hereafter, history and mystery, immanence and transcendence, temporality and eternity, etc. They occur at creative sites or liminal moments of “betwixt and between,” embodying an individual or collective’s deeper experiences of “looking forwardness,” hope, aspirations for freedom in sociality, agility in mental health, and dynamism in cultural creativity. This understanding refuses to instrumentalise religions. I take this understanding of religion to undergird my exploration here of the religious characteristics being attributed to AI.

Interfacing religion with AI takes place in multiple ways today. Marco Ventura, a professor of law and religion in the University of Siena, makes a distinction between three ways by which AI and religion could be related: 1) AI in religion, 2) Religion in AI, and 3) Religion of AI.<sup>2</sup> First, AI in religion is the use of AI by believers, as they use the internet, as an instrument to augment their beliefs and practices; second, religion in AI, on the other hand, is the role religion plays, as an external agent, in the origin and development of AI; and third, religion of AI treats AI itself as a form of religion, as a quasi-religious or para-religious phenomenon. It is predominantly with the second and the third ways of relating religion to

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Marco Ventura, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BfstFlyQhc>

AI that I am concerned with in this essay. What kind of religious attributes are being made to AI today while dwelling upon aspects of “religion in AI” and “religion of AI”? Whether such attributes apply to religion and AI with identical or different meanings? What is the possible impact of such attribution upon the dynamics of religion, especially its central dynamic of mediating transcendence? – are the questions being discussed here.

## 2. Attributing Religious Words/Phrases and Concepts to AI

One finds today, especially in the Euro-North American west, usage of words and concepts like “apocalyptic AI,”<sup>3</sup> “apocalyptic salvation,” “blessed by algorithms,”<sup>4</sup> “a heavenly realm to inhabit,”<sup>5</sup> “incarnational features of AI,”<sup>6</sup> “AI as Imago Dei,”<sup>7</sup> “technological salvation,” “cyberspace salvation,” “technological priesthood,” “virtual immortality,” “Cog and Image of God,” “homo deus,” “immortal mind created by AI,” “heavenly spaces created by AI,” “sacred cyberspace,” “God-like omnipresence,” “transcendent virtual reality,” “transcendent new world created by AI,” “transcendent heavenly future,” “virtual paradise,” “transcendent engineering,” “becoming gods,” “mystery of transhumanism,” “Christ-code in God’s mind,” “virtual apotheosis,” etc. These are some I could identify, and there could be many more. In addition, there are also associations like “Christian Transhumanist Association” and “Order of the Cosmic Engineers” making connections between religion and AI.

One would do well to undertake a descriptive and analytic phenomenological study of these usages, more extensively, so as to arrive

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Beth Singler, “‘Blessed by the Algorithm’: Theistic Conceptions of Artificial Intelligence in Online Discourse,” *AI & Soc* 35 (2020): 945–955, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-020-00968-2>

<sup>5</sup> Robert Geraci, *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Marius Dorobantu, “Artificial Intelligence and Religion: Recent Advances and Future Directions,” *Zygon* 57, no. 4 (December 2022): 984-999.

<sup>7</sup> Dorobantu, “Artificial Intelligence and Religion: Recent Advances and Future Directions.”

at certain conclusions on the interface of religion and AI. However, I would like to do only a sample study here, to see the emerging trends. I would like to analyse the following phrases: “apocalyptic AI,” “homo Deus,” “immortality predicated on AI,” “omniscient AI,” and the theological concept of “Imago Dei” as applied to AI.

## 2.1. “Apocalyptic AI”

Robert Geraci, authoring a book in the year 2010 on “apocalyptic AI,” contributed much to the debate on “apocalyptic AI.” He calls it a “movement in popular science books that integrates religious categories of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions with scientific predictions based upon current technological developments.”<sup>8</sup> He paraphrases the characteristics of the Judeo-Christian apocalypse to be a projection of a dualistic view of the world and application of it to the temporal world with a sense of alienation which can be resolved only through establishment of a radically transcendent new world that will abolish the dualism and reinstate the original condition. He sees that this Judeo-Christian apocalypse reappears in AI. Apocalyptic AI, he says, “divides the world into categories of good and bad, isomorphic with those of knowledge/ignorance, machine/biology and virtual world/physical world.”<sup>9</sup> He finds the AI theorists locating human beings on the side of limitations due to the “human body’s limited intellectual powers and inevitable death.”<sup>10</sup> And he observes that the “apocalyptic AI promises to resolve the problems of dualism and alienation in a radically transcendent future”<sup>11</sup> where human beings forsake their biological bodies in favour of virtual bodies to inhabit an omnipresent and “morally meaningful cyberspace.”<sup>12</sup>

Geraci goes on to observe that the apocalyptic AI promises the “transcendent heavenly future”<sup>13</sup> in two phases, corresponding to the biblical apocalyptic vision (first, a millennial reign of Jesus Christ when peace and justice will reign, and the second, establishment of the eternal realm of goodness in the post-dissolution period). Accordingly, “AI will

---

<sup>8</sup> Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Geraci, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Geraci, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Geraci, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Geraci, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Geraci, 31.

create a ‘paradise on Earth’ before the transcendent Mind escapes the earthly matter in an expanding cyberspace of immortality, intellect, moral goodness, and meaningful computation. This second stage, the Age of the Mind, will inevitably succeed the first stage of the apocalypse, the age of Robotics.”<sup>14</sup> While during the first stage, with the preponderance of machine learning and robotics, a transhuman “paradise” will emerge, during the second stage, i.e., the age of the mind, “physical reality will lose relevance as it is alchemically transmuted into cyberspace.”<sup>15</sup> At this stage, according to apocalyptic AI advocates, “we will jump from computer to computer, living in cyberspace with whatever virtual bodies we choose.”<sup>16</sup> This will be the techno-salvation and the “world of the future will be a transcendent digital world.”<sup>17</sup>

A similar exploration, but a more basic one, was to be found in an earlier publication of David Noble under the title *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* in the year 1997. The aim of this book, in the words of the author, was

to demonstrate that the present enchantment with things technological – the very measure of modern enlightenment – is rooted in religious myths and ancient imaginings. Although today’s technologists, in their sober pursuit of utility, power, and profit, seem to set society’s standard for rationality, they are driven also by distant dreams, spiritual yearnings for supernatural redemption. However dazzling and daunting their display of worldly wisdom, their true inspiration lies elsewhere, in an enduring, other-worldly quest for transcendence and salvation.<sup>18</sup>

Noble clearly associated the impulse, especially as found in the West, for technological innovation with the motivation derived from the Christian belief in the supernatural redemption of humanity. This was typically evident, according to him, in the United States where the popular

---

<sup>14</sup> Geraci, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Geraci, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Geraci, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Geraci names them as Hans Moravec, Kevin Warwick, Marvin Minsky, Ray Kurzweil and Hugo de Garis. Geraci, 1.

<sup>18</sup> David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 10.

enchantment with technological advancement went hand in hand with the popular evangelical expectation of Jesus Christ's second coming.<sup>19</sup> Belief in a new creation at the second coming of Jesus Christ, according to him, impelled them to imagine a new future, a technologically innovated future which redeemed them from the limitations of human body and finite-hood. These religious roots of technology, according to him, could be traced a thousand years back to the Western consciousness when the "useful arts first became implicated in the Christian project of redemption."<sup>20</sup> This was the road to the recovery of mankind's lost divinity and the evolving technology progressively got associated with the Christian idea of the transcendent redemption. For Noble, Western technology and religion were two sides of the same phenomenon. It was the Christian religion that was at the root of the technological evolution, because, only in Christianity, according to him, there was a promise of bridging the duality between these worldly limitations and the other-worldly redemption.<sup>21</sup> Christian theologians nurtured these religious motivations by dwelling upon humanity's need to reclaim the original status of creation, a God-likeness, that was lost due to the Fall. Further on, from the middle of the twelfth century, "there emerged from within the monastic world a radically renewed millenarian conception of Christian history, a dynamic and teleological sense of time which would profoundly excite Christian expectation and accelerate the technological development that was now bound up with it."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, we see scholars of religion and technology speaking about a religiously rooted teleological aspiration of humanity for a transcendental future to be achieved by AI in a manner of the Christian belief in apocalypse.

## 2.2. "Homo Deus"

Yuval Noah Harari, in his book entitled *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, makes projections about the future of humanity, using phrases and words drawn from religions. Going by the relatively

---

<sup>19</sup> Noble, *The Religion of Technology*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Noble, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Noble, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Noble, 28.

faster progress made by humanity during the modern era, Harari predicts the great strides humanity will take in technological advances, particularly in the field of AI, and enter into a transhuman phase in the near future. And, when transhumanism advances with the aid of AI, which according to him is already occurring, human beings will transit from being *homo sapiens* to the stage of *homo deus* – from being sentient beings to “divine” beings, i.e. gods. Tracing the trajectory of human civilizational progress, Harari observes that we are indeed marching towards the status of divine beings: “... having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles, we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods, and turn *Homo sapiens* into *Homo deus*.”<sup>23</sup> It can take place, according to him, through any one of the following paths: biological engineering, cyborg engineering, and the engineering of non-organic beings.<sup>24</sup>

Harari locates his usage of the term “gods” as used in a Romanist or Hindu milieu of gods, wherein the divine beings called gods do various functions in a “supernatural” manner. We have a god for war (mars), god for rain (*varun*), god for wind (*maruthi*), etc. who control and direct these elements with a “supernatural” power. Human beings too, with the aid of AI, can become like these gods, empowered to control and direct various aspects of life by their overwhelming knowledge and power. Becoming gods or obtaining divine status, for him, is gaining the ability to perform great feats as gods perform in myths. It is a transition in terms of expanding the powers in unimaginable proportions.

Humans have already, according to him, acquired an appreciable level of power which traditionally had been attributed to the gods. He cites, for example, a myth from the Igbo people of Nigeria, wherein the creator god Chukwu intended to make humans immortal by instructing them to sprinkle ashes on the dead body so that they would come back to life. The god sent this message through a dog, which dallied on the way and then a sheep which wrongly reported to bury the dead, and thereby making death permanent. After narrating this, Harari exclaims, if only there were to be Twitter at that time, the creator god would have reached

---

<sup>23</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (UK: Harvill Secker, 2016), 28.

<sup>24</sup> Harari, *Homo Deus*, 45.

the message at the right time in the right way!<sup>25</sup> A Twitter facility already is way ahead in obtaining powers greater than the traditional gods!

His best-selling books, however, place before a large following, a mythical narrative of data-religion, and predict that even by the twenty-first century, humans will obtain the status of gods. When they so become, being a human will become irrelevant or pointless.

### 2.3. “Immortality”

As could be surmised from the foregoing sections, immortality is an important topic for the AI narrative. David Noble observes that “[A]rtificial Intelligence advocates wax eloquent about the possibilities of machine-based immortality and resurrection.”<sup>26</sup> Harari is very vocal on this subject. In his words:

Having secured unprecedented levels of prosperity, health and harmony, and given our past record and our current values, humanity’s next targets are likely to be immortality, happiness and divinity. Having reduced mortality from starvation, disease and violence, we will now aim to overcome old age and even death itself. Having saved people from abject misery, we will now aim to make them positively happy.<sup>27</sup>

When he speaks of “overcoming old age and death itself,” it sounds as if he means an immortality meant for this bodily life as well. But he would clarify in other places that immortality is more in terms of virtual immortality with virtual “bodies.”

One can notice in the AI related literature by other authors too similar claims emphasizing the immortality of the mind. Noble, for example, points out to the “quest for the immortal mind”<sup>28</sup> existing among the pioneers of AI. This quest is associated very much with the transhumanist movement, speaking about a transcendent second life. Geraci observes that the advocates of AI take the “expanding cyberspace

---

<sup>25</sup> Harari, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Noble, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Harari, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Noble, 220.



of immortality, intellect, moral goodness, and meaningful computation” as the characteristics of the Age of the Mind, which is the second stage of the apocalypse.<sup>29</sup> And he mentions that Hans Moravec, one of the pioneers of apocalyptic AI, too speaks clearly of “virtual immortality.”<sup>30</sup> He also points out that many Second Life residents “accept apocalyptic visions of transcendent heaven and individual immortality.”<sup>31</sup>

Beth Singlar, a researcher on religion and science, quoting yet another scholar, quips, “Who will pray for heavenly cures, when the cures already exist on earth? Who will die hoping a reprieve from the gods, when science offers immortality? With the defeat of death, science and technology will have finally triumphed over superstition.”<sup>32</sup>

We see thus the concept of “immortality” being spoken in AI related literature in equivocal terms, some speaking of virtual immortality and others immortality per se, leaving a lot of ambiguity as regards its meaning.

#### 2.4. “Imago Dei”

“Imago Dei” is yet another important Christian theological concept being integrated with AI related literature. Marius Dorobantu, a scholar exploring AI and religion, observes that “...the Imago Dei debate is perhaps the one where the influence of AI is most noticeable. The case of Imago Dei is particularly interesting because of its openness and high stakes.”<sup>33</sup> Drawing upon Noreen Herzfeld’s categories of interpretation of the Imago Dei as substantive, functional and relational, Beth Singlar finds similar categories applicable to AI – Imago Dei interface. A substantive application, according to her, would look for a substantive similarity between humans as Imago Dei and the AI, say for example, the ability to reason; a functional application would, for example, look at the “dominion function” of humans and the AI powered robots; and, a relational aspect would look into the question whether the AI can hold

<sup>29</sup> Geraci, *Apocalyptic AI*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Geraci, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Geraci, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Beth Singlar, “An Introduction to Artificial Intelligence and Religion for the Religious Studies Scholar,” *Implicit Religion* 20, no. 3 (2018): 220.

<sup>33</sup> Dorobantu, 989.

a relationship with God as human could or whether AI is a person or non-person, capable or otherwise of relationship.

Further on, Noreen Herzfeld and Anne Foerst observe that our attempt to create AI is an implicit attempt to realise or actualise what is unique in human beings as created in the image of God. For Herzfeld, “[B]y trying to create AI in our own image, *imago hominis*, we unconsciously struggle to capture in machines what we think make us distinctive and in the image of God.”<sup>34</sup> But, Foerst takes *Imago Dei* as a divine mandate for stewardship or a divine call to perform as per the *Imago Dei*. Karen O’Donnell, a theologian, too finds it meaningful to understand AI performatively in relation to the concept of *Imago Dei*.

An implicit discussion in relating AI to *Imago Dei* is whether AI, in its specific or general form, can be considered a person, analogous to the human person. There are those who accord the status of personhood to AI because of its abilities for reasoning and intelligence. Dorobantu cites an interesting study by Rajesh Sampath in this regard:

Philosopher Rajesh Sampath (Sampath 2018) tries to imagine how the Christian faith might be reinterpreted through the eyes of a hypothetical intelligent robot. Such a robot might understandably explore whether it, too, could be said to embody the image of God. The AI would therefore search for ways to interpret the New Testament and the core dogmas of the Christian faith as if they were written for and about robots. One way could be to think of Christ, the divine Logos, in terms of a software program and Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection as akin to the program switching itself between ON and OFF. The pre-existence of the Logos would be understood simply as the eternal existence of the “Christ code” in God’s mind. Could the Christ software program be born through an Immaculate Conception? Sure, if the latter is interpreted as the fact that the code was revealed at a particular moment in history when humans were culturally incapable of producing something like this.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> As paraphrased by Dorobantu, 991 .

<sup>35</sup> Dorobantu, 987.

Religious attributions to AI could become highly imaginative! Dorobantu, though disagreeing with Sampath's approach, concludes with a question why should the robot's interpretation be discarded outright in favour of the established human-centred account?

But there are others who deny the possibility of treating the AI as persons, because AI can never obtain the likeness of human subjectivity which goes with not merely consciousness but also a life of interiority and subjectivity.

## **2.5. "Omniscience of God" and "Omniscient AI"**

Omniscience is a characteristic attributed to a monotheist God from the very ancient past. God, as the all-knowing singular divine person, is believed to create, protect, and lead every creature to the ultimate goal of life. The omniscient God is also believed to be omnipotent, both attributes mutually inherent in the Godhead.

Today the "AI narrative" speaks about the possibility of the AI becoming omniscient and omnipotent. As Noble notes, "the architects of virtual reality and cyberspace, exult in their expectation of God-like omnipresence and disembodied perfection."<sup>36</sup> It is being said that when AI becomes more aware of human beings than what they are capable of themselves, it obtains the transhumanist level of singularity and thereby acquires omniscience as well as omnipotence. It can even take over the human world as a super being, controlling and directing.

## **3. Discussion**

### **3.1. Apocalyptic AI: Furthering Ourselves?**

As we have seen above, the religion of technology, expounded by authors like David F. Noble, Robert Geracia, and others privileges the apocalyptic AI. Drawing upon the Judeo-Christian heritage of apocalyptic theology/religious belief, these authors think that the origin of technology leading all the way up to the emergence of AI,

---

<sup>36</sup> Noble, 12.

has to do with the Christian motivation to overcome the alienation, including death (loss of immortality), suffered by the Fall of human beings from the original state of being created in the image and likeness of God. Starting with the birth of modern technology, say for example that of calculus by Francis Bacon, Western scientific discoveries are treated by these authors as the outcome of the religiously motivated endeavour to overcome the consequences of the Fall so as to get back the original status of immortality, omniscience, omnipotence, and the like. Geraci combines the body-soul dualism, originated in Greek thought, but integrated subsequently in Christian theology, to explain the continuing sense of alienation from the Fall being experienced in the ongoing struggles between good and evil, light and darkness, etc. And he considers the apocalyptic thinking and the technology of AI to do with the struggle to transcend this body-soul dualism to experience a transhumanist future of unimaginable potentials. Interestingly, Geraci and Noble take the apocalyptic AI as a sublime instance of transcendence which human beings wish for in a context of radical historical crisis of limitations.

But the question is whether this is a transcendence born out of the faith in God the radical other, or born ultimately out of faith in human itself, by way of an extension of human capabilities. The data religion Harari speaks of, for example, points to a religion of the latter kind. It is religion of the Romanist and Hindu gods, performing feats of varied activities which the AI enabled algorithms will be able to do. Ultimately, the latter variety ensures unimaginable furtherance of ourselves rather than even a simple encounter of God, the radical other; of human enclosures rather than transcendence; of reflecting on us with the aid of gigantic precision mirrors mounted on satellites rather than transformed by the power of faith.

The religion of Technology might also lead to a kind of idolatry. Jean Luc Marion the French philosopher-theologian makes a distinction between icon and idol. For him an icon mediates our gaze itself, but an idol fixes our gaze within itself or upon itself. It could be that AI, as portrayed by some of the enthusiasts, presents itself as an idol. For example, the phrase “Machine God” is typical of an attribute resembling an idol.

### 3.2. Immortality in a Sense of Extending?

Immortality has been a concept prevalent in philosophy and theology for a long time. Needless to remind ourselves of Plato's "secular" philosophical take on immortality, when he spoke of "the immortality of the soul," the perfect Idea. Indian classical philosophy speaks of the transmigration of the "*atman*" (soul) from one body to another, until it gets released from the cycles of rebirths, and according to theistic Indian traditions like Vaishnavism and Shaivism, the soul is to be freed from the cycles of rebirths to obtain "*moksha*." The Christian tradition speaks of the immortality of the soul of each human person, which, after the death of one's physical body, goes through various post-death stages, and finally obtains eternal life, a new resurrected life, as Jesus Christ obtained.

What is meant in the religious traditions as immortality is a different experiential reality. It is immortal in the sense of undergoing a transformation of life occasioned by the divine grace reckoned in terms of an intervention from the ultimately transcendental other. The religious semantics of immortality points to a goal, accorded as a gracious gift from God. And this gift is experienced only within the matrix of faith. The immortality of the AI narrative, on the other hand, is a matter of extension in time of this life, to be experienced empirically, without any need of religious faith.

It is the predicament of human beings that we lack necessary linguistic codes to represent what we actually mean by something. Accordingly, the immortality spoken of in the AI narrative, though characteristically different from the religious semantics, goes with the same linguistic code of "immortality" and, by verging on the religious border, is playing upon a concerted ambiguity being caused. More than anything, the impact of such ambiguous discourse seems to temporalise the aspect of transcendence implied in the religious discourse of immortality. As Yorick Wilks comments, Yuval Harari is "trading off meaning and significance for full knowledge and control."<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Yorick Wilks, "AI and Religious Beliefs' with Yorick Wilks," YouTube, May 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25LIRUXCi5g>

The Western culture, throbbing with power or endeavouring historically to overcome death, right from the ancient Greek philosophers, say, Plato to St. Paul's "death where is your sting," and informed by the Christian vision of telos, tend to live in a matrix of expectation to win over death and it comes easy to them to imagine AI in terms of immortality, winning over death, becoming gods, etc. On the other hand, the Eastern culture, embodied and historical, integrate AI based robots in their day-to-day environment (take the example of Japan), discoursing less on immortality and apotheosis. We find thus a radical difference in the narratives.

### **3.3. Homo Deus: Becoming Gods or Approaching God?**

Predicting the advent of "homo deus" in the age of AI is perhaps the tallest claim in relating religion to AI. As per the tradition of faith, and that too Christian faith, one can never be totally certain about reaching God, leave alone "becoming" god. A strong apophatic content of Christian faith shuns such presumptuous God-talks.

As we noted earlier, Harari clarifies that the gods he speaks of is more of the performative gods of the Roman or Hindu religions and therefore not the transcendent God believed in the Judeo-Christian tradition. But the clarification does not explain why AI should be attributed any divine characteristics at all in the first place. Even if it is a manner of comparing with the gods of myths, stories, legends, etc., why at all it occurs to him to relate AI with gods and divinity is not clear.

These questions become meaningful when looking at the fact that religions are also informed by deep mysticism which dissuade people from naming or "capturing" the divine. This manner of approaching the divine, and not pronouncing upon it with certainty, is a salient element of religions around the world, whether they are of the popular or classical type. As Denys the Areopagite, an early Christian theologian to propose a mystical theology, observes, "the purpose of religious engagement is a striving 'upwards as much as you can toward union with him (sic) who is beyond all being and knowledge.'"<sup>38</sup> The core dynamic of religion is more of a "striving" than a cognitive capturing.

---

<sup>38</sup> Michael Scott, *Religious Language* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 15.

It strikes us boldly when we look around and realise that the Eastern mind does not endeavour to depict AI in such religious terms. Religion is a sphere, according to Durkheim, set apart as the sacred space from the ordinary sphere of life. Even if such Durkheimian demarcation of spheres seems outdated, and that religion is a unique realm, an experience of *sui generis* nature needs to be acknowledged if one wishes to understand or participate in religion. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, religious studies today awaken us to this fact.

It therefore can well be surmised that it is a product of the cognitive aspect of the Christian religious symbolic substratum of the Western consciousness that comes out in such predictions of Harari.

### **3.4. Imago Dei: Ontological or Relational?**

Relating the Christian theological anthropology of “Imago Dei,” viz., that humans are created in the image of God, with technology and very specifically with AI, has been a practice among Western scholars for some time now. As mentioned above, this relationship dwells upon two basic dimensions: one, treating AI as manifestation of an aspect in the ontology of being human, created in the image of God; and second, treating AI itself as yet another being, side by side with humans, carrying the image of God. As regards the first dimension, we see again two type of approaches: one, treating AI positively as blossoming of an embedded trait in the essence of human nature made in the image of God as well as treating it as a result of the human endeavour to redeem the original status of the created human nature. The latter of these two tends to project a disembodied virtual mind or the age of the mind as the original form of being human. The second approach treats AI as a form of corruption of the Imago Dei, verging on idolatry. The way AI is being used in military fields to annihilate other human beings or to use it for evil designs are cited as evidence to argue for the negative character of AI. While that being so, the second dimension of the relationship between AI and the Imago Dei goes forth to claim that new beings like robots and cyborgs, propelled by AI, are themselves worthy of being addressed as Imago Dei because of the sublime functions of reasoning including moral reasoning, self-reflecting, inferring, learning, creating, imagining, etc., which humans are wont to do.

In this regard the intervention made by Anne Foerst is relevant: she situates her discussion on the Imago Dei within a two-fold approach to the concept. One is a Cartesian approach which postulates an objective reality out there and looks for substantive qualities ontologically given to humans and AI for a relationship. This approach goes also with a dualism or binary substance-accident, essence-existence, real-actual, this worldly – other worldly, etc., and endeavour to overcome the dualism by achieving a manner of redemption or reconciliation. Second is a symbolic approach which takes Imago Dei as a narrative about reality, wherein the narratives of humans and AI as Imago Dei do not contradict one another but only enrich each other. I find Forest's symbolic approach more appealing because, first of all, it overcomes the Cartesian dualism between objective and subjective realities. Secondly, it is informed of the contemporary realisations on knowledge-making. And thirdly, it does not antagonise AI but treats it as a "theological" narrative of Imago Dei, though technological, along with the narrative of being human, without disintegrating the realism of being human. It also lends space for mutual interrogations and corrections.

### **3.5. Omniscience**

Attributing omniscience to AI along with the omniscient God in a non-problematic manner suffers again from Cartesian dualism. The latter, as has been pointed out by postmodern thinkers, assumes a parallel reality out there to which our epistemological experiences of perception, inference, judgements, etc., correspond. Such dualist thinking has been seriously questioned today by non-dualist, stand-point epistemologies. We approach reality from our own locations, perspectives, and horizons of understanding, and we generate discourses which are called forms of knowledge in a field-specific manner.

### **3.6. Uniqueness of Religious Language**

In the context of analysing the usage of religious attributes to AI, it is relevant to take a look at the nature of religious language. Religious language, like any other, is a field-specific symbolic activity of understanding. The discourses generated through the medium of religious language have their own contexts, horizons of understanding,



and area of operation. What is formulated within a particular field cannot be replicated exactly in another field. What could be attempted will always remain analogical, partly same and partly different. Accordingly, the attributes taken from religious domain and applied to the field of technology, particularly with reference to AI, will always remain partly the same and partly different. This aspect is not well appreciated by some scholars interested in speaking of AI in religious idioms. They, first of all, tease out religious idioms in a non-problematic way, without even bothering about the way things are discussed within the religious studies field, and apply it to AI with apparently identical meanings.

As Dan Striver observes, “[I]n order to discern the meaning of words ... it is best to see how they are actually used, rather than trying arbitrarily and theoretically to come up with a definition.”<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein’s reflections on the philosophy of language are pertinent here:

Many philosophical problems, he believed, were due to the failure to follow this maxim. For instance, a philosopher tries to find some common essence behind the various uses of “to be,” and thus metaphysics, the study of the nature of “being,” is born. In fact, this is a wrenching of words out of their living use and creates unnecessary and insoluble problems. We put cramps in words, he suggested, which can only be solved by returning words to the stream of life, or as he also put it picturesquely, by showing “the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.”<sup>40</sup>

Knowing in AI is not identical with religious knowing. Justin Martyr, at the point of martyrdom, answered to the ruler who asked him whether he thought he would enter heaven when martyred, saying, “I do not think, but I know.” Knowing for him was deep faith, formed out of a decision, a will to believe, rather than a cogito (Descartes). It was this manner of knowing which inhered in a thick experience of faith in a transcendent God in the Christian faith tradition. Going further down a few centuries, Augustine of Hippo instructed Christians to “believe

---

<sup>39</sup> Dan R. Striver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language – Sign, Symbol, and Story* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 60.

<sup>40</sup> Striver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language*, 60.

that you (one) may understand” (*crede ut intelligas*) and further down a millennium, Saint Anselm of Canterbury spoke of theology as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*), by which these Christian thinkers, in spite of their deep yearning for understanding God in an intelligent way, spoke of faith as a precondition for such a knowing; in other ways, faith brings in the quest to understand. We therefore have a tradition of faith-intelligence integration as part of the experience of a transcendental reality called God. Fragmenting this integration by hiking intelligence and extolling it with religious attributes is not the same as religious experience per se, but, on the other hand, a manner of confounding the narratives on finitude, materiality, technology, and cerebral cognition with those of the infinite, spiritual, and transcendental.

### **3.7 . AI as a Religious Phenomenon?**

Can AI, though born out of the historical developments of technology over the centuries, be taken as a singular phenomenon in itself, unprecedented and enormously new? The unparalleled gigantic feats it can achieve in computation, the ability it possesses to go into the generally unseen dimensions of human life (say for example, diagnosing a disease by referring to millions of previous records which a single human mind can never achieve!), the unimaginable apogee of perspective it can provide on the cosmos – all these and many more amazing capabilities of AI enthrall us. Furthermore, the kind of qualitative changes it can bring about for life on earth, say for example, a different type of human life to be lived alongside robots intimate the advent of a different experience of life. What promises to emerge is a great power of creativity and an amazing story of life. Can all these be taken as a manifestation, or the disclosure of the religiousness deeply embedded in the pulsations of life on earth? Can the Heideggerian view of technology as a different manifestation of being not prod us to think further that AI has taken us to a point of manifestation of the divine? And does not the tendency of human mind to attribute religious characteristics to AI tell us something of the inherent nature of AI? These are very potent questions that can be discussed today.

However, it is also tempering our spirit when we realise that AI can also serve the cause of evil and negative forces of life. There are those who doomsay even of a moment when AI propelled robotic regimes

can annihilate human beings on earth. Leave alone such an outright intimidation, AI is already found to be playing negative roles in our present day life. The extensive deceptions it can induce in electoral processes and produce skewed results, the villainous targeting of vulnerable identities, imputing evil designs into online interactions, etc. caution us of the impending danger. They moderate our soaring spirit flying on the wings of AI.

#### **4. Some Critical Observations**

The few words/phrases we have looked at and discussed in the foregoing section lead me to make certain critical observations on their usages:

1. They are used, as some of the scholars mentioned above have identified, predominantly in the writings, especially fictional writings, of North American pop cultures.
2. Most of these usages are drawn from Christian faith tradition, especially from the biblical traditions.
3. Their usage is vibrant especially among the evangelical Christians of North America.
4. There is a Christian-centred, and that too Euro-American Christian approach to AI in these usages. As Geraci points out, there is a deep connection between the Christian theological vision centred on the journey of the soul and the progress of AI towards a disembodied age of the Mind. This connection becomes more apparent when contrasted with the way the East takes to AI more performatively by producing imaginative robots to become part and parcel of their life. One does not find here the Western preoccupation with the future age of the Mind, but an engagement with the present in terms of the AI. The observations of Dorobantu are in place here:

It is not accidental that computer science in the West (e.g., in the United States) has been historically more interested in disembodied AI, while in the East (e.g., in Japan), the focus is noticeably more on robotics. According to Geraci, this peculiar difference can be traced back to particularities in the religious traditions in which the two cultures are rooted. Eastern religions, for example, do not share the strong Western tabu for the ontological distinction between artificial and natural. Instead, these categories are blurred in East Asian cosmologies, where it is possible to see robots as participating “in a fundamental sanctity of the natural world”. The Western preference for disembodied AI over humanoid robots could be similarly explained through the prism of Christian eschatology. Although the latter never excludes the body, the emphasis is always on the salvation of the soul, which restarts its existence in a transfigured body. An unconscious connection should not be ruled out between this vision and some transhumanists’ dream of uploading their minds into a computer simulation, where they could take up not one but multiple transfigured avatars of their choice.<sup>41</sup>

5. These usages do not seem to be informed of the developments taking place in understanding the meaning of biblical texts or any concept in Christian faith tradition. For example, the hermeneutical realisations in biblical interpretation guide in a big way biblical understanding within Christian community today. Unfortunately, the users of biblical imageries in AI literature or AI related imaginations go with archaic understandings and, that too, literal understandings of biblical imageries.
6. There is an outdated epistemological approach of correspondence theory undergirding most of the usages.
7. There is a soul-body dualism, informed very much by the Cartesian dualism with a privileging of logocentrism.

---

<sup>41</sup> Dorobantu, 994.

8. These usages do not seem to take into consideration the views of other religions, especially the Eastern religions, on doctrines like “salvation,” “immortality,” “transcendence,” “sense of time,” “moral wellbeing,” etc. By limiting the resonances of these usages to the Western hemisphere, they work on a one-sided view of the history of the development of technology. As David Noble openly argues, according to them, technology is solely a product of the Christian west, because, as he says, it is only in Christianity an attempt is made seriously to bridge the gap between the binaries like soul-body, earthly life-heavenly life, present-future, etc. It neglects therefore not only the polygenesis of technology, but also limits the religion-based predictions on AI to the Western hemisphere.
  
9. The Christian centric thinking of AI finds unfettered imaginations, which are highly rooted in particular traditions. For example, as Dorobantu narrates, there are scholars speculating about the dilemma of God while creating human beings in God’s image:

The recurrent idea in discussions about *imago Dei* and the simulation hypothesis is that by trying to create AI, we are in a somewhat analogous position to God’s work at our own creation. Humanity’s ultimate dream is to build strong AI, robots endowed with consciousness, volition, and freedom, just like us. However, in attempting to create an entity that is simultaneously pre-programmed and free, we might be able to glimpse God’s dilemma when making us: how can you create an entity that is free when you are responsible for every ingredient, instruction, and process that goes into it?. The similarity between the two stories goes further. It is unclear how we could even measure whether our creation is conscious.<sup>42</sup>

All these observations are not to refuse to admire the great positivity of AI technology, but only to plead to not mangle religious faith with algorithms.

---

<sup>42</sup>Dorobantu, 995.

## 5. Transcendence

Speaking of humans being replaced by robots or humans entering a phase of transhumanism even to become gods smacks of a horizontalising of the experience of transcendence, a process that has been set in right from the time of modernity. Transcendence is a category of experience identified with religions in general. Scholars of religions speak of the vertical and the horizontal aspects of transcendence. While the vertical aspect is generated through strong beliefs in transcendental goals, like obtaining salvation of souls after this worldly life or being oriented towards heavenly life, etc., the horizontal aspect is said to be seen in believing and working for historical goals, going beyond the temporal moments. Secular philosophers have also spoken about the phenomenology of the transcendental self which undergirds multiple outward manifestations.

History is never solely of any one type of transcendence. The vertical and horizontal dimensions keep merged. But when it is pulled towards extremes, they endanger either fanaticism or anthropocentric immanentism. I am afraid the latter seems to be happening more in attributing religious characteristics to AI.

Yorick Wilks, a professor of AI, speaking about religious beliefs and AI, brings together cybernetics, AI, pantheism, pan-psychism, scientology, romanticism, transhumanism, eugenics, social Darwinism, atheism, and Gnosticism.<sup>43</sup> He brings up all these phenomena to argue that they all seem to share a trace of what could be called immanentism as against the religious experience of transcendence. It is necessary to take Wilks' observation seriously.

---

<sup>43</sup> Wilks, “ ‘AI and Religious Beliefs’ with Yorick Wilks.”

## REFERENCES

- David, Noble F. *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1997.
- Dorobantu, Marius. "Artificial Intelligence and Religion: Recent Advances and Future Directions," *Zygon* 57, no. 4 (December 2022): 984-999.
- Foerst, Anne. "Robots and Theology." 2009. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273886034>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Artificial Intelligence: Walking the Boundary." 2005. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/22957558>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Cog, a Humanoid Robot, and the Question of the Image of God." 2003 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/22958607>.
- Geraci, Robert. *Apocalyptic AI: Visions of Heaven in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence, and Virtual Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*. UK: Harvill Secker, 2015.
- Herzfeld, Noreen. *The Artifice of Intelligence: Divine and Human Relationship in a Robotic Age*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023.
- Herzfeld, Noreen, ed. *Religion and the New Technologies*. Basel: MDPI, 2017.
- Scott, Michael. *Religious Language*. New York: Palgrave, 2013.
- Singlar, Beth. "An Introduction to Artificial Intelligence and Religion for the Religious Studies Scholar." *Implicit Religion* 20, no. 3 (2018): 215-231. Doi:10.1558/imre.35901.
- Striver, Dan R. *The Philosophy of Religious Language – Signs, Symbols, and Story*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.
- Wilks, Yorick. "AI and Religious Beliefs' with Yorick Wilks." YouTube, May 13, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25LIRUXCi5g>