BOOK REVIEWS

Yuval Noah Harari. *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI.* **New York, Random House, 2024, 492 pp. Hardback. ISBN: 978-0-593-73681-4.**

Yuval Noah Harari's *Nexus A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI* offers a forceful warning against the advent of artificial intelligence dominated networks. He asserts that because computers have developed the ability to pursue goals and make decisions, this introduces a fundamental change in our information networks (p. 204). Such networks not only imitate and surpass human intelligence but rather have the potential for creating a whole new reality: new political structures, economic models, and cultural norms (p. 219). Harari sees this as the end of human-dominated history, and calls the reader to greater awareness and responsibility, as we move into an era were we might become an increasingly powerless minority vis-à-vis artificial intelligence.

In many ways, Harari's work is both eye opening and foreboding. He supplies the reader with compelling historical evidence to demonstrate the way information is created, manipulated, and controlled, and how this bears significant personal, social, and cultural impact. His rhetoric is compelling enough to unsettle and motivate the reader to retain a sense of agency vis-à-vis information networks. The key question is, where can this robust human agency come from in the face of the mounting influence of AI? His examples that raise this question most powerfully are those that demonstrate violence and injustice done against persons with the help of information networks, such as Facebook's role in the genocide against the Rohingya in Myanmar, or the AI surveillance network policing and imprisoning women in Iran who remove their hijabs (p. 195f; p. 245f). Reading these and similar examples in the book, one wonders about the moral compass of human agents involved, while Harari focuses on the agency of computers.

One challenging aspect of *Nexus* is its disposition toward a faith-based audience or readership. Harari's otherwise thoughtful and engaging analysis of information networks carries an especially antagonistic tone when it

comes to religion throughout the book, but most consistently in Part I, in which Harari seeks to make the case that information is not necessarily truth, and information can be shaped and manipulated to impact culture. For Harari, one such information manipulating cultural force is religion. This is regrettable and serves to alienate the faith-based reader, who would otherwise benefit from the eye-opening analysis of computer networks especially in the later chapters of the book, Parts II and III. Without agreeing to or ascribing to religious belief or compromising his world-view, Harari might have shifted his tone in these moments throughout the book to a more neutral one and carried his audience along. As this faith-based reviewer assesses it, the most compelling and valuable parts of *Nexus* are Part II and III, while Part I is mostly off-putting in its hostility toward religion.

Harari's critical reflections on religion and information networks within a religious context serve as cautionary for him, casting these as examples of weakness, error, or naïveté. For the faith-based reader, there is however good opportunity here to both dialogue and self-reflect on the perspectives of the author. For example, Harari's treatment of the Bible, from both the Jewish and Chrisitan perspective is thought provoking insofar as he shows the historical development of the Biblical canon, but he takes a broad leap when it comes to the Church's use of these texts to assert its own power: "That's how the belief in a supposedly infallible superhuman technology like the New Testament led to the rise of an extremely powerful but fallible human institution like the Catholic Church that crushed all opposing views as 'erroneous' while allowing no one to question its own views" (p. 90). As compared to the serious and thoughtful view later in the book, moments like this read antagonistic, hostile, and even out of place.

Harari spends significant focus on the Catholic Church, casting it as a system with a weak self-correcting mechanism, a system that claims infallibility that cannot admit institutional mistakes (p. 106). Harari's use of the term infallibility merits significant nuance; he applies it to the Bible, to the Church as a whole and somewhat more appropriately to the Pope reaching on faith and morals. While he is in the ballpark of the theological understanding of this term, he expands it well beyond normative Catholic use. Harari and the Catholic Church do not mean the same thing when using the term infallible. In this same vein, it would enrich Harari's reflection to consider a broader ecclesiology than his present focus on the Church as the guardian of the deposit of faith. This is his main lens for understanding the

Church as an institution, distilling it to system of power that exerts control with and around information. With this critical and myopic view Harari misses significant context. He misses the context of worship, fellowship, pastoral care, and service that round out the deposit of faith. Significantly, he also misses the morally formative value of religion, Catholic or otherwise, which is a connection that could have offered strong support for his later advocacy of human agency in the book. It is precisely religious systems that can have the positive moral impact on individual human agency that he is seeking to lift up as a response to AI. In the study of systems and networks, Harari could have produced and entirely different and profoundly hopeful picture if he would have for example centered his assessment of religions not as institutions that manipulate information but as living communities that come together with shared values to worship, serve, heal, guide, form, and reconcile.

Taking one example from this broader view, Harari does not take into consideration the liturgy as one profound information system within religious practice. Imagining the way communication unfolds and how information is conveyed in the liturgy would have appropriately re-contextualized the Biblical text in the worshipping community (as opposed to volumes guarded and manipulated by the Church) as well as debunked his assessment of the Church resisting self-correction. The mere history the development and reform of liturgical rites, and how these emerged from, functioned in, and had impact on worshipping communities is a history of self-correction and change. More broadly, any praxis-oriented aspect of the life of the Church, whether religious education and catechesis, pastoral care, commitment to works of justice, and especially, moral formation, could provide a similar lens. There is more than one way to envision the Church as a network and a system, and many of these lenses are deeply contextual and therefore living and evolving. For other authors with greater hospitality to a faith-based approach, this would be a worthwhile direction for further exploration.

Harari offers an important and helpful point: information networks are about both truth and order (p. 68). There is both a factual and relational aspect of information networks; they communicate content and also connect people around this content. Harari emphatically asserts this, warning the reader that if we only focus on the truth, our view remains naïve. We ought not miss the social impact of information networks. For Harari, this twofold distinction of truth and order are important as he heads into his

reflections on AI in later chapters. From the perspective of the Christian reader, this twofold distinction resonates deeply with the basic theological understanding of divine revelation, whereby God's self communication is both content and relationship—it informs and forms at the same time. This could become a rich dialogue point and invites the reader into Harari's concerns about AI from a place of theological depth and familiarity. Along with Harari, faith-based readers wonder about the relational-social impact of AI and computer networks. As Harari advocates for human agency, religion comes in with the conviction that sound moral formation can and should mitigate the impact of viral social media trends that advocate harm or violence. Morality retains commitment to the universality of human dignity, something that Harari explores instead by way of deontology and utilitarianism (p. 278f). Because for Harari religion is inherently problematic, there is a lost opportunity here to explore morality and moral agency as part of his analysis.

Daniella Zsupan-Jerome
Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, Collegeville, MN USA