

EDITORIAL

# Human Beings and Artificial Intelligence in Theological Perspective: Coexistence for Mutual Prosperity

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AI is having dramatic impact on many fields, including medicine, education, finance, and national security. Like many technological developments---fire, agricultural tools, writing, steam engines, railroads, automobiles, air travel, gun powder, the computer, nuclear energy, digital communications---AI's impact is transformational, a game changing technology, even in these relatively early stages of its development. Some envision a moment, not far in the future, when AI will not only achieve agency, as in a capacity for reflection, reasoning and decision-making, eventually surpassing human beings as the most intelligent species. Some speak of the development of AI as leading ultimately to a singularity, a "big bang" moment in human evolution, a time when anthropocentrism is brought to an end and a post-human reality emerges.

Such transformations and anticipations have not gone unnoticed by the world's leading institutions, from the United Nations to the European Union, and from governments to NGOs....and religions as well. After all, religions have given rise to some of humanities most compelling insights on the nature of the human beings, our condition and our destiny. From the Roman Catholic Church to the World Council of Churches, along with scholars representing Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism, and others, are engaging the issues, voicing concerns, and in many cases adapting to AI's impact. Pope Francis, and now Pope Leo IV have expressed keen interest in assessing both the benefits and the threats represented by AI. In particular, the world's religions, and theological and philosophical ethicists, are in a race to provide guardrails that will assure some level of moral alignment between human values and AI algorithms.

Ethics and theology aside, human beings and AI are already symbiotically interrelated, leaving technological development and human development increasingly intertwined. This situation of interdependence and co-existence between the technological and the biological, between the human mind and the computational mind, will only increase over time, giving rise, as all agree, to both great risks and great opportunities. If we are to establish a world of peace and sustainable abundance, utilization of AI is unavoidable, even imperative. At the same time, the alignment of AI with human values is imperative, and existentially necessary, leaving little time to waste. The race has already started, particularly the AI arms race. The Manhattan Project pales in comparison.

Insofar as human purpose and destiny are related to a divine providence, technology in general, and AI in particular may be seen as necessary components that contribute to the fulfillment of that providence. Just as embodiment, or human biological existence is understood, theologically, as intentional, purposeful and "providential", so too are the non-biological extensions of human biology, e.g., prosthetics, computers, and robotics. Theological anthropology and the theology of technology complement one another.

Genesis 1:26-28 describes the creation of Adam and Eve as being in the "image and likeness of God," with a mandate to fulfill a God-given purpose to "be fruitful and multiply...and have dominion over...every living thing." This text forms the basis of imago dei theology which underlies an understanding of the uniqueness of the human being among all of God's creations, a position that undergirds the concepts of human dignity and human rights.

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The *imago dei* perspective includes traits such as freedom of the will, responsibility to do one's duty, rationality, consciousness, and conscience, a capacity to distinguish right from wrong. These traits include a capacity both to obey and to disobey, to choose well and to choose poorly. As we learn from scripture, the book of Genesis teaches of the Fall of Adam and Eve, an original sin that had enormous impact on human history. Decisions have consequences.

Christian providential history includes the ongoing effort to repair or atone for the original sin and its legacy throughout history, a legacy characterized by human sinfulness, selfishness and suffering; each advance of the good seems to be repeatedly frustrated by a demonic counterforce. Nevertheless, providential history is driven by hope, and continuously moves toward a divine telos, an ultimate destiny that overcomes the fallen nature that emerged at the time of the Fall; religion is the effort to mitigate and eventually overcome the effects of the fall.

The creation of technology or tools has been part of human history, and linked closely to human survival and human development. The discovery or invention of technology is part of a divine plan, a natural part of human evolution, a natural part of the fulfillment of the human purpose, a natural outgrowth of human intelligence. Technology has always provided benefits or advantages, as well as risks and dangers, and certainly disruption, as technology tends to always upset a given status quo, providing new opportunities and new risks.

There have been those who are very guarded about the advances in technology, seeing the disruptions are harmful to human beings in essential ways, undermining conscience, community and solidarity, giving way to uncharted territories that undermine a settled way of life. For, while there is great potential in technology, some see technology as being a potentially harmful, even a destructive or evil force in human history, one that leads to distortions of the human mind or soul. In the words of Max Weber from **The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism**, the modern rationality that produced science and the industrial revolution created an "iron cage" and a disenchantment [entzauberung] of the world.

AI, too, we have learned, is capable of departing from its prescribed path, entering into a realm of the Fall. This is known as the "alignment problem", giving rise to an emerging field of AI Ethics, an effort to educate and humanize AI. The urgent need to prevent AI disasters is of paramount concern. A dystopian future is as possible, or perhaps as likely, as a utopian future characterized by superabundance.

Theologian, Elia Delio, draws on the thought of the Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin to offer a vision of symbiosis between the spiritual and the biological, and between the biological and the material, as AI, like all technology, is something of an extension, augmentation or expansion of our human capacities.

According to this vision, technological development is not an alien anti-human force that is at odds with human development or God's providence for human beings and the cosmos. Delio sees no contradiction or separation between the evolution of human consciousness and the development of technology. As human beings evolve or develop, there is, concurrently, a corresponding technological development.

The invention of the printing press and its association with a rise in literacy, democracy, and a religious reformation in Germany, Switzerland, and England in the 16th century was disruptive and transformative. Similarly, as Delio suggests, AI is likely to be not only disruptive, but also generative of religious innovation; perhaps a new Axial Age, referring to the Axial Age described by Karl Jaspers when Buddhism, Confucianism, Platonism and Aristotelianism, as well as developments in Judaism and Hinduism represented a kind of spiritual "big bang."

AI, in this sense, despite its threatening features, may represent an enormous evolutionary advance for humanity, a kind of lifeboat that elevates humanity and our capacities in science, medicine, governance, education, poverty eradication, and mitigation of climate change, leading to an age of abundance. With this in mind, we may anticipate a theological correlate that accompanies this dramatic and disruptive new technology, one that impacts human consciousness at deep and profound levels.

Will AI increase secularization and de-religionization, nihilism and materialism? Or, will a religious explosion accompany AI's development, one similar to the emergence of Protestantism five centuries ago? Is there a new

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religious movement that corresponds to the AI era, a new Axial Age? Or a new Dark Age. The threats are real, as Henry Kissinger has advised in his book, *Genesis*, and they must be addressed and overcome. At the same time, conference such as those organized by Hyojeong Academia, Sun Moon University, and HJ International Graduate School are to be commended for addressing the concerns, issues and potentialities of AI.

After all, AI may be a providential accompaniment to an emerging new era. If such an era is to emerge, it will above all else, require a process of responsible, sustainable, human co-creation. The future should not belong to post-humanism, but rather to an age of interdependence and mutual prosperity, an age marked by divine-human co-creativity at the highest level. The tools of AI may open pathways to a more expansive, infinitely advanced theocentrism. Even if AI is not a “big bang”, it may surely be a turning point, and one that may have very significant theological implications.