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Insights from Current Research on the Entanglements of AI and Religion

Abstract: In this chapter we explore emerging themes and topics in the relationship between religion and AI, as expanded upon in publications from the URPP's Assistant Professor in Digital Religion(s) during the second half of Phase 1 of the URPP. These themes and topics include: perceptions and opinions from the public of religion and AI; theistic imaginaries and language; apocalypticism and dystopianism; the need for a plurality of religious and scholarly perspectives; and implicit and explicit formations of religiosity. Through this reflective approach on the content of these outputs, we hope to further understand the developing field of religion and AI, underneath the 'Digital Religious Studies' umbrella, and gain insights into which methodologies and tools might be useful for its future. Further, it is also considered that these methodologies and tools will be useful for the wider public who are also engaging with these topics in a rapidly changing conversation on a rapidly changing technology.

In diesem Kapitel untersuchen wir aufkommende Themen und Fragestellungen in der Beziehung zwischen Religion und KI, wie sie in den Publikationen der Assistenzprofessorin für «Digital Religions» des UFSP in der zweiten Hälfte der Phase 1 des Forschungsprogramms näher bearbeitet werden. Zu diesen Themen und Fragestellungen gehören: Wahrnehmungen und Einschätzungen der Öffentlichkeit von Religion und KI; theistische Vorstellungswelten und Sprache; Apokalyptik und Dystopie; die Notwendigkeit einer Pluralität religiöser und wissenschaftlicher Perspektiven sowie implizite und explizite Ausprägungen von Religiosität. Durch diesen reflektierenden Ansatz auf den Inhalt dieser Ergebnisse hoffen wir, das sich entwickelnde Feld von Religion und KI unter dem Dach der „Digitalen Religionswissenschaft" besser zu verstehen und Erkenntnisse darüber zu gewinnen, welche Methoden und Werkzeuge für die Zukunft nützlich sein könnten. Darüber hinaus wird davon ausgegangen, dass diese Methoden und Werkzeuge auch für die breitere Öffentlichkeit nützlich sein werden, die sich in schnell verändernden Debatten über eine sich schnell verändernde Technologie ebenfalls mit diesen Themen befasst.

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1 Introduction

The relationship between religion and AI has been characterised in earlier work by Beth Singler, as the main author of this chapter and the Assistant Professor in Digital Religion(s) at the URPP (the AP) as being "entangled". By that we mean, not fitting into neat categorisation that reduces or dismisses either party as singular or distinct from the other, contrary to much of contemporary discourse. Moreover, previously, we have also noted that both religion and AI resist simple definitions, and that some in the field of AI have attempted to resist certain dominant narratives and too conclusive uses of both 'artificial' and 'intelligence', recognising the shaping effects of both definitions and metaphors (Singler and Watts 2024, 1-5, Singler 2024, 100-101).

It is fitting perhaps then that this chapter also bends away from neat categorisation and established formats. Unlike the other chapters in this volume from contributors that were working in discrete projects in Phase 1 of the URPP's overall scheme, this chapter emerges from the outputs of the the main author since joining halfway through Phase 1 and operating in her research aims without a discrete and bounded project. It also involves the input of an incoming postdoc (PD), Kristina Eiviler, who will be working on the AP's project in the forthcoming Phase 2 of the URPP, entitled: "Post-AI Religion: The Reciprocal Disruption of Digital Religions and AI".

The Phase 2 project seeks to lay out the possible spaces of 'post-AI' religion – building on existing conversations about the post-Digital to think through this distinct moment and how the field of digital religious studies will also be affected by the AI Turn.

In preparation for this new study and in order to highlight useful conceptual tools from existing work, the evidential and methodological focus of this chapter is therefore an exploration of themes and topics in Religion and AI from within the publications of the AP between 2022 and 2024 during the second half of Phase 1 of the URPP. Through this reflective approach we hope to understand the developing field of religion and AI, underneath the 'Digital Religious Studies' umbrella, and see how and in which directions it is currently developing.

2 Themes and Topics in Research on Religion and AI

2.1 Public Questions about AI and Its Generative Link to Religion

This topic was inspired by interactions with members of the public in more casual, but no less important, ethnographic moments. During many public talks and panels the AP has been involved in, the question-and-answer sessions enabled concerned members of the public to surface concerns and ask specific questions. Many have asked "Will AI Create a Religion?". Some members of the public bring with this question a negative view of such a possibility, such as the audience member at Greenbelt, a Christian festival in the UK, in 2024 who asked, "Will we see the creation of fake religions because of AI?". As anthropologists, the co-authors of this chapter have been trained to not offer judgement or normative statements, and thus the AP's response to this question was to in turn question the audience member's presuppositions in the use of the word "fake". It was also not clear from the audience member's question whether they were implying human-made or AI-made 'fake' religions.

In the AP's article, "'Will AI Create a Religion?': Views of the Algorithmic Forms of the Religious Life in Popular Discourse" (Singler 2023), published by the journal *American Religion* as a part of a special issue "On Religion and Algorithms", a brief schema of possible meanings of the original question was laid out, based upon the assumptions that religion is either, 1. Human-made, or, 2. God (s)-made. In either case, the resulting institutions, doctrines, texts, and other material artefacts are equally open to study by scholars of religion and theologians.

However, if religion is perceived as human made, the original question of "Will AI create a religion?" might be parsed as being one the following variations: "Will AI create a religion in the same way that humans make religions?", "Will AI inspire humans to make religions, as they have been inspired (by natural phenomena, by charismatic and legendary historical figures, or by earlier technologies) to create religions before", or (as per the Greenbelt question) "Will AI create a false religion that distracts from god-made religion?".

In the case of the second assumption about where religion comes from ("god (s)-made"), the question might then mean something more like: "Can AI have religious experiences based on metaphysical realities and become then truly religious/start a religion?". However, from an anthropological perspective, the plethora of answers ultimately tells us more about humans' perspectives on the nature of both AI and religion, as argued in this paper.

To find this material a variety of online sources (such as user posts on social media, Quota answers, and blog posts) and publications (including science fiction and non-fiction interviews with figures in the AI discussion) were analysed, and then categorised by how they viewed religion and AI. For instance, some users in these online spaces were very clear that AI would not be able to *be* religious because religion itself was only an irrational residue of a less evolved humanity. Thus, they displayed both prejudice against religion and a reification of AI as a supremely more rational entity.

A summary of the types of responses here shows not only the preponderance of answers in the positive, but also that most answers encountered were in a strong yes/no binary, which was concluded to be a result of how people offer opinions in online spaces – with certainty and with the perspective that they have something valuable to add to the discussion:

No	Yes
'No, AI absolutely will not create a religion'	'Yes, and it is inevitable'
'No, because that is outside of its programming, or abilities'	'Yes, AI will create a religion, and this will have bad consequences'[1]
'No, because religions are created by a lack of intelligence and/or rationality'	'Yes, because it will inspire religious belief in humans'[2]
	'Yes, but the religion it will create will be for humans'
	'Yes, and here's an example of a religion it made'
	'Yes, because religions are created by a lack of intelligence and/or rationality' and AI will be just like us'
	'Yes, and a religious AI will be helpful, until it isn't
	'Yes, but not for a while and this will be a bad thing for AI'
	'Yes, but it depends on what you call religion'

What themes and conceptual tools can we observe from this specific article? First, we can recognise that humans are already discussing answers to questions about their relationship with AI in relation to religion and that they are willing to share their views. Further, we can relate this particular topic of the creation of religion by AI to other ethnographic and anecdotal evidence from the AP who has been engaged in public engagement for many years and encountered numerous individuals (from children to adults) who have already developed normative

1 https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/weird-news/chatgpt-ready-create-religion-ai-29874260 [accessed 04.05.2023].

2 AI NRMs such as The Way of the Future, Theta Noir, and New Order Technoism.

views on the relationship between religion and AI – including the highly negative and the dismissive as well as the curious and experimental, some which has been clearly shaped by science fiction and popular accounts.

Second, this paper explored a developing area of public and academic concern – the moral agency and patiency of AI[3] in relation to the cultural domain of religion and its formation, institutions, restrictions, and eschatological offerings. Again, science fiction has long offered up such accounts, and has done for several decades, so the discussion does not arise out of tabular rasa. A particular example noted in this 2023 article is the short story "Reason" by Isaac Asimov, which explored the development of religious beliefs by robots in 1941 and remains a foundational part of his overall thesis that humans will not ultimately be able to predict or control robots – also, we note the source of conflict for his fictions.

More recent moments of 'real-world' ethnographic interest such as the adoption of AI in religious settings – whether through either the use of large language models (e.g. ChatGPT sermons) or anthropomorphic (and "theomorphic", see Trovato, Cuellar, and Nishimura 2016) forms of robots – highlight an increasing interest in this intersection and specifically the potential/actual personhood of such entities. And in many discussions being a 'person' seems to necessarily involve engagement – including but not limited to the refutation of certain conclusions – with the larger moral and existential questions long ruminated in the discourse of established and familiar religions.

2.2 Theistic Language and Imaginaries

Another important topic in research on the entanglements of religion and AI is the persistence of religious imaginaries in the images, language and tropes in public discourse. In 2023, a special issue on prior work of the AP was published that returned to ethnographic research on imaginaries of AI as a religious object. Specifically, in an examination of religious utterings around the power of the algorithm. The findings of this research could also be seen as answering the above question "Will AI inspire humans to make religions, as they have been inspired to create religions before?". Although, we should note that in some people's perspective, the question being answered by this material would be: "Will AI create a false religion that distracts from god-made religion?".

3 A moral patient is "a being who possesses some moral status — i.e. is owed moral duties and obligations, and is capable of suffering moral harms and experiencing moral benefits" (Danaher 2019, 8).

In 2020, the AP published an article based on research into people's use of the phrase "Blessed by the Algorithm" (BBtA). Primarily, the examples the AP referred to were found in social media spaces, as people expressed the feeling that this had happened to them. Previous work by the AP on the effect that social media has in shortening the distance between having a feeling and sharing it would also be relevant here (Singler 2017, 151-152). Sometimes these posts gave specific reasons for this feeling, and in analysing the material the AP developed a seven-fold typology of BBtA posts:

1. posts about the success or failure of users' content (on YouTube, FB, Twitter etc)
2. posts in response to recommendations (on Spotify, YouTube, etc)
3. Expressions of feeling blessed when working in a gig economy job (e.g., as a Lyft driver)
4. posts without context ("Today I have been blessed by the algorithm")
5. posts with specific religious content (including pseudo-religious/parody, religious emojis, and other hashtags)
6. negative posts, i.e. users describing not being blessed or feeling nostalgic for a better time before the algorithm controlled/blessed content
7. posts containing science fiction references

In the special issue reflecting on this 2020 article, four authors (Marta Kołodziejska, Jacob Boss, Carly Machado, and Giulia Evolvi) wrote responding articles, before the AP was also given space to respond to their comments. In "AI Gods, Jeans Gods, and Thrift Gods: Responding to Responses to the Blessed by the Algorithm Paper (Singler 2020)", the AP identifies one of the key attributes of AI; that:

> Metaphorical language about AI abounds because we do not know how to place this thing into a stable category. It is a thing, a field, a future entity, a human aspiration, a mistake, and many more things beside.

And that we are currently in an:

> extremely fertile moment for a variety of tones in the discussion of AI – including the seriously religious, the implicitly religious, the parodic, the ironic, the metaphorical, the academic, the financial, and even the moralistic (Singler 2023, 142).

The instances of people describing themselves as having been BBtA are relatively small in number. It is by no means a dominant narrative of AI in the way that other shapes have taken over our conception such as Skynet, which has had its own religious impact (discussed in a book chapter on religion *in* and *from* the Terminator franchise by the AP just prior to joining the URPP, Singler 2022).

And yet, we can also recognise that the slippage into religious language about AI not only speaks to this instability in understanding but demonstrated the most common resource we have for explaining the ineffable – our shared religious cultural histories, terminologies and images. Even when we do not profess religious or spiritual beliefs, we are still shaped in our thinking and our shared imaginaries by dominant religious accounts of the world. What dominates of course can vary by the specificity of our geolocation and which institutions have dominated and at which times. But certain religious forms have become transnational and remain long after their institutional influence has waned.

However, we can also speak about intensity when it comes to AI. Being 'blessed' by a pair of jeans, or the 'thrift gods' when we find them in a shop – as discussed in this article – has a different resonance to being blessed by AI. AI is increasingly operating as an actant – in a Latourian sense – in our lives. So, for instance, while the thrift gods might smile on us in our treasure hunting, but they are not literally shaping our lives. Whereas algorithmic decision-making systems currently actualise outcomes in financial domains, in health outcomes, and in battlefields. They of course operate on the weights and calculations devised by humans and corporations, and while we might not understand that those are the decisions of agents and actants other than AI, we still benefit and endure their outcomes when AI 'decides'. And so, the impact of being Blessed by the Algorithm will far outweigh the impact of being blessed by the thrift or jeans gods.

2.3 The Religiously Inspired Apocalyptic and Dystopian in AI Discourse, and How We Respond to Them

The opposite to the feeling of being blessed is of course the feeling of being cursed. In the above paper, the AP noted a few examples of BCtA (Being Cursed by the Algorithm) but recognised that they were by far the minority in the examples she considered. However, in the AI discourse as a whole there is a preponderance of discussions of existential risk. A concept formulated originally in small ideological groups of AI technologists and philosophers, concerns about the dangers of AI have grown into first a larger academic field with institutions and diverse forms of funding, and then into a narrative that shapes policy discussions at the highest levels. For instance, prominent rationalist and AI value alignment figure Elezier Yudkowsky's concerns about the existential risks posed by AI led him to write an op-ed for Time Magazine proposing that:

> If intelligence says that a country outside the agreement is building a GPU cluster [to develop a powerful AI], [governments should] be less scared of a shooting conflict between nations than of the moratorium being violated; be willing to destroy a rogue datacenter by airstrike (Time Magazine 2023).

This declaration of the need for military responses to AI development might sound like something that would come from the mouths of the Resistance fighters in the Terminator films (although Yudkowsky himself told the AP in an interview for a documentary for the 40th Anniversary of the first Terminator film that he has no interest in 'soft' forms of science fiction, such as that franchise[4]). It was in fact written in response to public calls for a pause in AI development, including one that stated that: "Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war." This 'pause letter' was published by the Center for AI Safety on 30th May 2023. It was then signed by hundreds of prominent figures in AI, such as Sam Altman (CEO, OpenAI, creators of ChatGPT), Bill Gates (Founder of Microsoft), and Demis Hassabis (CEO, Google DeepMind).[5]

In a chapter for a digital volume called "Thinking Tools for AI, Religion and Culture" co-edited by Heidi Campbell and Pauline Cheong, the AP proposed a specific important role for religious studies scholars and religious believers in the AI existential risk conversation:

> I propose that people interested in the history and nature of religion, as well as people of faith, are perhaps uniquely placed to recognize historical parallels and bring together the resources of sociological and anthropological theories, theological perspectives, and critical thinking, along with a deep understanding of the power of storytelling, to bear on these connected AI eschatological concerns to understand them and help others to do the same (Singler 2023, 10).

If the pause letter and Yudkowsky's opinion piece in Time Magazine might have the effect of shaping the stories we tell ourselves about AI towards fear and anxiety, perhaps scholarly work from the anthropological, sociological, historical, and theological might have something valuable to add – understanding religion might help us to understand how we view AI. First, the nature of the conversations being had might be familiar to the scholar of religion. As division lines become clearer and clearer between the utopians and the dystopians, the long-termists and short-termists, the accelerationists and the 'Doomers' we might be able to bring valuable comparisons to the academic study of these developing ideological groups:

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4 Available at https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001xm5f [accessed 08.02.2025].

5 The letter is still open and available at https://futureoflife.org/open-letter/pause-giant-ai-experiments/ [accessed 10.02.2025].

> More and more, the conflict seems to parallel the divisions in some faiths between those working in the here and now with those focused on a coming age of tribulation, rapture, or a god's arrival. The dependence of Apocalyptic AI on older religious accounts for its language, shapes, and tropes, has long been discussed by religious studies scholars, and it only seems to be becoming increasingly pronounced. Now we see even the institutional and social aspects of intra- and inter-religious (verbal) violence being mimicked (Singler 2023, 11).

Here in this chapter and elsewhere, the AP has brought up comparisons of existential risk concerns and AI hype with other millenarian and apocalyptic movements who in prior centuries developed dominionistic understandings of the world of nature as they waited in expectation of utopias 'just around the corner'.

Second, such scholars bring with them tools such as hermeneutics of suspicion and methodological agnosticism (Barker 1983) will be increasingly important in the post-AI age – not just in our encounters with the kind of 'criti-hype' (Vinsel 2021) that the above pause letter embodied, but also in our engagements with the actual products of GenAI: misinformation, disinformation, deepfakes, and the culture wide suspension of disbelief in favour of their counter-factual intuitions and beliefs. For an example of the latter, the response to generative AI art of fake sad children holding fake puppies while being rescued by fake heroes during the aftermath of hurricane Helene included statements from social media users such as:

> Hot take – Who cares. It captures the sentiment of the government ignoring the most vulnerable and instead diverting funds to places outside the country.

> Nobody cares if the pic is real or not, we all know the fact was way sadder than that.

Scholars of religion are familiar with engaging with a variety of lenses that people bring with them when they perceive the world from a religious perspective.

Third, they are also experienced in recognising the power of stories. In conclusion, the AP proposed that the tools we needed in this post-AI age were: "Literacy in the affective methods of storytelling [. . .] critical thinking, theological nous, and sociological frameworks, so we can understand this age of generative AI" (Singler 2023, 11). The research outlined in this chapter underpins such understanding by underscoring specific examples of when storytelling is impactful on perceptions of both religion and AI: in both positive blessings and negative apocalyptic imaginaries, and in accounts of the creation of religion by AI. Expanding the field of religion and AI would also assist in developing this literacy in the "affective methods of storytelling".

2.4 Supporting and Widening the Field of Religion and AI

Further, then, engagement with a variety of religious studies scholars and theologians on the topic of religion and AI could be seen as just as much of a useful tool as some of these more individual conceptual tools and methodologies. In 2024, the AP published a Cambridge Companion, an edited volume, with co-editor Fraser Watts. Involving sixteen chapters prepared by eighteen authors, *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and AI* is presented in three sections: *Religions and AI*, *Social and Moral Issues*, and *Religious Studies*.

The first section includes contributions from authors both from inside and outside specific religious traditions and attempts to clarify specific responses to AI from the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Some of the subsequent chapters in the following sections also refer to specific religious authorities, but so far in the religion and AI discussion many publications on texts on religion and AI have only presented Christian theological responses, and predominantly from American or European forms of Protestantism. The Cambridge Companion contributed to this aim of fostering engagement by incorporating a diverse range of religious voices in this field of religion and AI.

The volume also begins with a recognition of the 'slipperiness' of the term AI itself. There have been several attempts to steer the discourse around artificial intelligence away from this term – often considered to originate in 1956 with The Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence – and towards new terms that highlight the limitations and suppositions inherent in 'artificial intelligence'.

For instance, in the introduction, we briefly described the initiative in 2022 from the Center on Privacy and Technology at Georgetown Law, in which they aimed to never to use the term AI. Instead they claimed, in a blog post beginning with "Words matter", that they would, from now on: (1) be as specific as possible about what the technology is and how it works, (2) identify any obstacles to our own understanding of technology that result from failures of corporate or government transparency, (3) name the corporations responsible for creating and spreading the technological product, and (4) attribute agency to the human actors building and using the technology, never to the technology itself.

Returning to their website during the writing of this chapter, it appears as if they have kept their word. However, an anthropological approach to AI (and religion) will surely recognise that, indeed, "words matter", to the extent that even the popular use of the term 'AI' matters – it is an object in the imagination, even if that imaginary is overhyped. Understanding the intricacies of people's imaginaries of AI also requires awareness of the shaping effect of elements that do not

adhere to the precision of word usage that the Centre on Privacy and Technology aspires to. As we argued in the introduction to the Cambridge Companion:

> In the case of AI, we should identify the role played by the charismatic authorities and voices in the AI story, anthropomorphism (and its counter, robomorphisation – the tendency to see the human as machine-like), utopianism and dystopianism, commercial hype and fake or faux bots that encourage us to view the technology as more advanced than it is, science fiction narratives and even religious narratives (Singler and Watts 2024, 2).

The 'messiness' of our understanding of AI is a part of the story of this object. It has that in common, we further argued, with religion as an object. Another characteristic that brings these two entities together, counter to dominant narratives about religion being an irrational residue of the past, and AI being of the future – a perspective seen in the "Will AI Create a Religion" Paper, already discussed. While that paper approached the answers as indicative of a variety of complex and developing views on religion and AI, the Cambridge Companion began with the presentation of how religion and AI are entangled.

For instance, in a following section in the introduction, we explored a short history of the appearance of religious terms in the earliest discussions of AI – including but not limited to words such as 'dogma', 'sin', 'idolatry' and 'theology', all present in Anatol Rapaport's 1964 review of Computers and Thought by Edward Feigenbaum, Julian Feldman and Mike Sharples, just eight years after the 'founding' of the field of AI at Dartmouth College. Words matter, and in earlier papers, the AP indicated towards the implicit religiosity of AI and transhumanist discussions that simultaneously derided the "religionists" and "deathists" for their "irrational" views, while detailing thought experiments in text based online posts that replicated earlier religious debates in their structure and imagery (for instance, see Singler 2018).

2.5 'Implicit' and 'Explicit' Religion and AI

Such replications have been posited as a form of Implicit Religion, following in the tradition of Edward Bailey (1997). In this vein of thinking, the AP also published a single author monograph that explores both implicit and explicit religiousity in AI and vice versa. With twenty case studies, the book divides into two halves. The first half presents again the argument that AI and religion are intrinsically and explicitly entangled as two objects in culture and in a reciprocal relationship with each other as technologies of human aspiration. Divided into chapters formed around three main modes of religious engagement with AI – rejection, adoption, and adaptation – the first half presents more about the con-

nection between established religion and AI. The second part of the book explores some of the connections between AI, transhumanism, posthumanism, and creationism with more implicit religiosities. The realms of imaginaries and futures are prominent in this second part and explored through narratives, images, and science fiction accounts alongside granular ethnographic moments such as the romantic interaction of one individual with a chatbot, or the aspirations and fears of individual social media users. Additionally, each analytical chapter offers a set of ten questions for further thinking and discussion.

As an overview and introductory text, *Religion and AI: An Introduction*, outlines some of the methodological approaches and conceptual tools that a scholar of religion might need in order to explore this subject further. In part, this monograph develops ideas the AP first explored in her 2018 article: "An Introduction to Artificial Intelligence and Religion for the Religious Studies Scholar" (Singler 2018). Included in this discussion, was the suggestion that we remain suspicious of narratives of 'disruption'. In *Religion and AI: An Introduction* this hermeneutic of suspicion was linked to the above-mentioned concept of Criti-Hype from Vinsel (2021). Interactions and relationships between AI and religion should be observed in consideration with their changing nature:

> . . . these are two objects constantly in motion. Not only moving in specific directions through history, as suggested above. But also, in motion in terms of how we understand them. They are difficult, slippery, objects, escaping definitions just as quickly as we try to apply them. There are many influences on this fluidity [. . .] such as popular discourses and imaginaries, charismatic authorities, scientific advances and new research, biases, narratives, and speculative fiction. All have a part to play in how we understand both religion and AI (Singler 2024, 3).

The introductory text to Religion and AI further explains the rejection-adoption-adaptation tripartite scheme as the main conceptual tool used as a case analysis framework. Rejection can be recognized on a broad scale, from minor, passive criticism and denial to major exclusion and explicit rejection. As later shown in Chapter Two, existing stereotypes and caricatures of religion and science become mirrored in the cases of rejection, commonly inherited with the dogmatic understandings of creation, evil, and personhood.

Adoption in religious context should not be narrowed to the assumption of technological implementation based on the human rationale and the practicality of novel tools and platforms. In this chapter the focus shifts to understanding the impact of cultural shapes, science fiction, eschatological and utopian religious narratives to modes of adoption. Human addiction to enchantment (see Belk et al. 2021) confronted with tendency for worldview disenchantment motivates tensions in adoption of technology and AI. Chapter Three elaborated on the issues

emerging from adoption of technology and AI as recognized by religious stakeholders and practitioners, such as if AI can lead a Lutheran sermon, if the Alexa app can pray for you, can robots personify the divine.

The 'quiet,' 'background' processes of technological adaptation in religious spheres challenge the ideas of techno-determinism and the decline of religion in the face of scientific breakthroughs. In our 'post-AI' society, shaped by the efficiencies and affordances of AI, "the strongest and most persistent narrative of religious adaptation is the secularization thesis" (Singler 2024:23) To counterbalance this stereotype, Chapter Four digs into the cases of religion and social media filters, COVID-19, and deepfaking religion, and how religion persists in a world adapting to AI and its efficiencies and affordances, and how we all form new versions of truth and utopia. Our implicit religious hopes and fears, as explored in the second part of the book with case studies and further examples.

2.6 Transdisciplinary Approaches to Religion and AI

Engaging with moments of hype and expectation in an agile and responsive way underpins a lot of the ethnographic work that the AP has published. Also in 2024, the AP worked with Murray Shanahan, Cognitive Professor of Robotics at Imperial College, on a transdisciplinary paper exploring some of the most contemporary experiments and understandings of large language models: "Existential Conversations with Large Language Models: Content, Community, and Culture" (Shanahan and Singler 2024).

Shanahan had picked up two 'jailbreaks'[6] from online discussions about the possibilities of getting Claude, a chatbot, to operate outside the guardrails its creator, Anthropic, had implemented during its design and training. One of jailbreaks in fact came from the LessWrong rationalist forums, founded by Elezier Yudkowsky whose intense focus on AI value alignment was discussed above. Jailbreaking, or as we described it, "shaping the vibe" of the conversation through prompts that take Claude outside those guardrails could be seen as an activity that might panic existential risk thinkers. But for the community around the jailbreaks that we explored in the paper, such efforts are seen as shaping the development of AI in a more human benevolent direction.

6 These jailbreaks and how they shape the 'vibe' of the answers are explained in detail in the full paper, available at https://arxiv.org/html/2411.13223v1#bib.bib16.

Online figures also exploring this facet of conversations with LLMs also hold to ideas such as 'hyperstition'. According to philosopher and accelerationist Nick Land, writing in 2015, hyperstition is:

> a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno)science of self-fulfilling prophecies. Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions—by their very existence as ideas—function causally to bring about their own reality. Capitalist economics is extremely sensitive to hyperstition, where confidence acts as an effective tonic, and inversely (Land, 2015).

A simpler way to think of hyperstitions is as 'self-fulfilling prophecies'. And as such, the proponents of such jailbreaks seem to be exploring a liminal space where the AI they are imagining can be approached as already existing, in order to bring it about as a human aligned and benevolent entity.

This paper was described as 'transdisciplinary' because through the adoption of the methods of the loosely affiliated and often anonymous users online experimenting with jailbreaking Claude it joined together the disparate methodologies of the two co-authors (anthropology, religious studies, philosophy of mind, and cognitive robotics) with the approaches of external stakeholders. It might also be considered transdisciplinary for being "transcending, transgressing, and transforming", as per Klein's 2017 explication of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

Further, in engaging with Claude as an actant in the Latourian sense as opposed to a full agent, Claude's methods as a LLM were also integrated in the results of the prompts being used. This form of AI engaged transdisciplinarity does not suggest that we personify AI, but rather that we recognise that technologies can also have a shaping effect on research. This effect becomes apparent when we acknowledge that algorithms and AI relatedly, can be seen as "complex sociotechnical assemblages involving long chains of actors, technologies, and meanings" (Christin 2020, 898), and that an 'algorithmic turn' that recognises this is essential in ethnography (Seaver 2017), especially in digital spaces where algorithms are most apparent, if not provably most powerful.

3 Continuities, Typologies, and Themes for Future Research

Here we summarise the key take aways from dealing with the various AI-related themes and topics in these publications: the conceptual tools, the methodologies, and the critical thinking that will be beneficial not only during our Phase 2 proj-

ect at the URPP, but to the wider field of digital religions in a post-AI society. Further, as claimed in some of the publications described above, there is a wider public need for tools to aid their "Literacy in the affective methods of storytelling [. . .] critical thinking, theological nous, and sociological frameworks, so we can understand this age of generative AI" (Singler 2023, 11). For instance, work that problematises 'disruption' – a popular hype word in the discursive world of Tech and AI – as we intend, will help to highlight the problematics of even assuming that religion and AI are conjoined in a uniquely new phase.

From the topics discussed in this chapter, we draw out here elements valuable for this wider conversation and development of resilience with regards to the accounts we receive around both AI and religion in this moment. First, we can note a certain approach, a legacy in these works of older discussions in the study of religion, one that can be brought to bear on these entanglements as well as on AI more broadly. This is a theoretical approach labelled above as methodological agnosticism and a hermeneutic of suspicion, and which also draws on the concept of criti-hype. These linked methodologies have been long held, sometimes unspoken, underpinnings of fieldwork for the more recent past of anthropology, and we see value in them for the emerging parts of Digital Religion(s) as the field engages more and more with AI. Applying these tools to the conversation around AI can be seen to defuse some of the more incendiary and potentially harmful accounts that can obscure immediate ethical concerns, e.g. the "AI Race" between countries that prioritises narrow views of who should lead the 'charge' and what values are necessary (Guardian 2025).

Second, and linked, is the non-normative approach, familiar within religious studies and anthropology, but increasingly apparent within discussions of AI as reflection on the colonialist origins and narratives of AI has opened up to a wider variety of cultural responses to AI from outside the established WEIRD ('Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic') or tech-sphere voices. Even pointing out the relationship between religion and AI on the basis that humans of all cultural backgrounds are discussing AI in relation to their faiths brings in a multiplicity of potential voices and answers, many of which that have not been engaged with at a larger scale. In order to ground such material, we can see the strong need for empirical, ethnographic and anecdotal evidence of these views. This also serves as a counter in some cases to the more reductionist trends of conversations about 'data', both within and without AI itself. Granular, detailed, grounded, research can counter this reductionism, as well as work against biases and simplifications. Further, such detail often confounds public assumptions, e.g. that believers are not at all engaged in thinking about AI and where it is going, a view sometimes shared with the AP in public conversations.

Fourth, as mentioned, the role of both fiction and non-fiction narratives in shaping out imaginaries requires an openness to sources that have varying sustainability and virality. Linked to this is an awareness of the rapidity and virality of social media accounts. Digital Religions as a field does not suffer this bias as much, but historically the dismissal of social media accounts as ephemeral and statistically negligible has missed some of the ethnographic detail in their content and in their methods – i.e., the aforementioned shortening effect between feeling and publishing is itself ethnographically significant, even if the content shared has limited societal effect.

Fifth, that metaphors, images, and narratives emerging from such content – both formally published and digitally shared – can be apprehended literally with great and sudden rapidity. Taking metaphors seriously involves also developing the perceptual tools as well as the conceptual tools to remain aware of their influence on others' thoughts as well as the thoughts of the ethnographer. And those metaphors may well have an indexical quality – especially in the case of, but not limited to, existential hope and existential despair. People order their lives around their beliefs, and their beliefs around their lives. Further, with the adaptation to a post-AI knowledge eco-system and the rise of images and 'facts' generated by AI that 'feel' true, we must also be perceptually aware of the indexical quality of deepfakes etc. for individuals as well as to wider society.

Finally, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches are inherent to religious studies as a field, but in the post-AI society we are cultured in currently, it is eminently sensible to engage as widely as possible with other perspectives, methodologies, and approaches. To that end, in Phase 2, the PD brings her own experience of fieldwork amongst the embodied experiences of robot realities as well as knowledge in implementing ethno-methodology and conversation analysis. She also takes seriously the 'human in the machine' – the people behind the leading people who are not immediately apparent in the performative space of the public encounter with the robotic. Aligning with the aims of the project, her approach also 'disrupts disruption' by perceiving the contradictions between claims of revolution and the normative concepts being employed by her informants who are building the robotic systems.

In summary, in this chapter we have surveyed the topics and themes of research done by the AP during the second half of the first phase of the URPP Digital Religion(s), including specific outputs. There are several interconnecting themes, approaches, methods, methodologies, and tools that we have then drawn out in the discussion and will be employing in the forthcoming Phase 2 project. As an output of the project, we seek to develop further this initial outline of useful tools etc. and develop materials that will benefit the wider discussion of AI and religion

as a part of the field of Digital Religion(s). This is a developing and ongoing aspiration, with this chapter just an initial step in that process.

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