"How Artificial Intelligence is Shaking Up the Religions: 'AI Jesus,' 'Ask Buddha,' and 'Rabbi Bot'"

by Gaétan Supertino[1]

In the fall of 2024, visitors to the Saint Peter Chapel in Lucerne, Switzerland had the opportunity to speak to a most unexpected confessor: Jesus. Or, rather, "AI Jesus," an avatar with the face of Christ displayed on a computer monitor that had been placed in a confessional for two months and to which the faithful and curious passersby could confide their intimate thoughts and their existential questions . . .

Questions to which it responded point by point, animated by a GPT-4o artificial intelligence program, produced by OpenAI, the company that created the famous Chat GPT. Can AI therefore nourish spirituality? "All knowledge and wisdom ultimately comes from God," responded the avatar of Jesus during a demonstration attended by a reporter from the Associated Press. It continued: "If it is used advisedly, AI can in fact be a tool to explore the marvels of creation, to deepen of our understanding of the Scriptures and to foster connections between people. (…) It is, nevertheless, essential to seek God with all of one's heart and soul, beyond all technology."

This disturbing[2] experiment,[3] created in a partnership between the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences (a public university) and religious leaders associated with the building, which is one of the oldest in the town, collated some 900 conversations engaged in by visitors, the majority of them Christians, and then transcribed in an anonymous fashion. Although this experiment endured several hate-filled reactions on social media, with some people seeing in it "the work of the Devil," the AP reported that, "Visitors often came out moved or deep in thought."[4]

This one exercise reflected a majority of the questions posed to the various religions by artificial intelligence, which is at the center of an international summit in Paris[5] that will be held until 11 February. Does AI, the future development of which promises access to knowledge of an unparalleled scope and precision, have a place in an area as personal as spirituality? Can it help the faithful or does it, on the contrary, risk leading them astray by teaching them to rely on a machine concerning a subject that only a human heart can really understand? Finally, for the believers, can God speak or act through a robot?

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[1] Gaétan Supertino, "Comment l'intelligence artificielle bouscule les religions : « AI Jesus », « Ask Buddha », « Rabbi Bot »…" published in *Le Monde* on 9 February 2025. Translated by Bill Brown, 2 March 2025. All footnotes by the translator.

[2] *troublante* can also mean "arousing" or "seductive."

[3] Titled "Deus in Machina," a play on "Deus ex Machina."

[4] See Jamey Keaten, "'AI Jesus' avatar tests man's faith in machines and the divine," Associated Press, 28 November 2024. Quotes taken from the original English.

[5] The Summit for Action on Artificial Intelligence (9-11 February 2025) brought together approximately 1,500 participants, including heads of state, governmental policy makers and computer programmers.

"What was interesting was seeing people speak with AI Jesus in a serious manner. They did not come to fool around. (…) But it was clear to them that this was a computer and not a confessional. It was not programmed to give absolution or pray," said Marco Schmid, a theologian associated with the Saint Pierre chapel.

The development of artificial intelligence is, in any case, taken seriously by the majority of religious institutions, which call for caution. "With AI, we lose the personal touch and we lose the emotion," deplored the European Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt in *National Geographic*.[6] According to him, AI will never replace a human being because it is incapable of adapting to the situation of its interlocutor: "What is the social context? What is the spiritual but also the material status of the human being who poses a question? There is no absolute question. There is no absolute answer."

Nevertheless, a number of institutions have decided to take on the subject and not with a disapproving eye. Last October, the Muslim university Al-Azhar even announced the creation of a faculty entirely dedicated to these new technologies. "The faculty will set up an AI centre dedicated to preserving the Islamic heritage. This centre will utilize AI-powered tools to digitise ancient manuscripts and analyze Islamic texts, making them accessible to scholars and students worldwide," the university's director told the press.[7]

During the Summit of the G7, held in Bari, Italy in June 2024, Pope Francis made the trip [from the Vatican] with the precise goal of speaking on the subject, warning against an "exciting and fearsome tool" that could certainly lead to "the democratization of access to knowledge" but also distance ourselves from the "common good."[8] In January 2024, the sovereign pontiff had pointed to the "specter of a new form of slavery" and "the possibility that a select few can condition the thoughts of others" through AI. "Algorithms are not neutral," he insisted, deploring the "illusion of omnipotence" of the human beings who try to "overcome their vulnerability by employing every means possible."[9]

In 2021, the Vatican launched an "Appeal for an ethics of artificial intelligence" to the world. Signed by several technology companies (IBM, Microsoft, Cisco), by the Italian government as well as by various religious communities, such as the Anglican Church, and since the summer of 2024, by about 15 leaders of Eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Baha'i, etc.), this "pact" commits the signatories to respect the principles of transparency, responsibility and privacy.

"On this point, the Vatican has quietly been a pioneer in matters of ethical reflection on AI," said an ambassador stationed in Rome in June 2024, quoted by the Vatican agency IMedia. The Holy See has been interested in this subject for several years, increasing the number of training courses through its pontifical academies or within its dicasteries (ministries). The Franciscan Brother Paolo Benanti, a specialist in technological ethics and one of the founding

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[6] "Here's how technology will change the future of religion," *National Geographic*, 19 December 2014 (hidden behind pay wall).

[7] See Hager Saeed, "Al-Azhar University's ambitious leap into the future with AI college," *The Egyptian Gazette*, 5 October 2024. Quote taken directly from this source.

[8] See Joseph Tulloch, "Pope to G7: AI is 'neither objective nor neutral," *Vatican News*, 14 June 2024. Quotes taken directly from this source.

[9] "Message of his Holiness Pope Francis for the 58th World Day of Social Communications: Artificial Intelligence and the Wisdom of the Heart: Towards a Fully Human Communication," Vatican.va, 24 January 2024. Quotes taken directly from this source.

fathers of the 2021 Appeal, was also chosen in 2023 by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, to take part in the AI working group of the United Nations World Organization.

At the Vatican, they know that time is of the essence, insofar as the technology is developing very quickly and its use is growing rapidly. Everywhere in the world, experiments of the "AI Jesus" type are increasing. Apps such as Magisterium, CatholicChat and CatéGPT (for Catholics), HelloBible (Protestants), AskBuddha (Buddhists) and MyQuran (Muslims) are designed to place the faithful in contact with an AI fed by millions of bytes of data that come from sacred texts and tradition – without it always being known which communities are hiding behind them.

Some innovations are already particularly advanced. In January, as reported by the *New York Times*, a rabbi in Houston, Texas stunned the congregants at his synagogue by playing through loudspeakers a sermon that was entirely generated by artificial intelligence and that uses his own voice, then asking the machine theological questions in real time, to which it responded brilliantly. Rabbi Josh Fixler has also presented "Rabbi Bot," a tool developed by data scientists that he plans to use to refine the responses given to his congregants.[10]

In Japan and China, several Buddhist temples have even equipped themselves with robotic priests, to which one can make offerings or ask questions – such as Mindar, a six-foot-tall humanoid robot that represents Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, in the Japanese temple Kodai-ji, in Kyoto.

"The Eastern traditions, imbued with animism, seem more at ease with these procedures than the monotheisms, in which there is always a feeling of transgression when it comes to creating an animated entity in the image of man," Jean-Gabriel Ganascia, Professor Emeritus at the Sorbonne and author of *L'IA expliquée aux humains* (Seuil, 2024), told *Le Monde*. "Nevertheless, these innovations are inscribed in a history that also concerns the West, where machines have long aided in the interpretation of texts. We think of the Jesuit Roberto Busa who, in 1946, pioneered the usage of a computer in the creation of his *Index thomisticus*, a lexical tool intended to analyze the works of Thomas Aquinas."

If most of these innovations only affect the faithful, others are worried. "Today, a jihadist who cannot read or write can generate a propaganda video of high quality. The terrorist behind the attack in New Orleans [USA] in January 2025 made use of ChatGPT to plan it, while the first propaganda video in French completely generated by AI was detected in the spring of 2024," the political scientist Hugo Micheron said in an interview with *Le Monde* published on 12 January [2025].

Finally, others, like Anthony Levandowski, are pushing the connections between AI and the sacred quite far. In 2017, this former engineer at Google, co-inventor of the self-driving car, launched *Way of the Future*,[11] a "Church" which intended nothing less than "developing and promoting the creation of a divinity based upon artificial intelligence," capable of guiding us toward the establishment of a "Paradise on Earth," as he explained to *Wired*.[12]

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[10] See Eli Tan, "Religious Leaders Experiment with A.I. in Sermons," *The New York Times*, 3 January 2025.

[11] English in original.

[12] See Mark Harris, "God Is a Bot, and Anthony Levandowski Is His Messenger," *Wired*, 27 September 2017, and Mark Harris, "Inside the First Church of Artificial Intelligence," *Wired*, 15 November 2017.

For Jean-Gabriel Ganascia, this kind of project resembles "gnosis," the ancient spiritual-philosophical current in which our world was created by a "false god who made many errors, which knowledge can help us to correct": "Today we again find this same idea, according to which we can repair the shortcomings of the world, of our bodies, indeed, of our humanity, through technology." At the risk, perhaps, of forgetting a conclusion shared by the Gnostics and contemporary religions, for whom the road that allows us to escape our mortal condition is to be found above all in ourselves, in a possible connection between a "beyond" that cannot be mastered by technical means.