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**ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND RELIGION:
BETWEEN SLAVERY AND THE PATH TO SALVATION**

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Abstract: The people of the XXI century seem to search for salvation in the hands of technology such as artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, internet of things etc. There is an increasing trust in the capacity of artificial intelligence to transform and transcend life and death. Unfortunately, post-humanist technologies aimed to liberate humans from all existential burdens and dilemmas challenge the liberation and salvation itself. One big question that arises in the minds of modern Christians is: Where is the hand of God in the world conquered by technology? The current paper explores the specificity of using Artificial intelligence for religious and spiritual needs and activities, focusing on the implication and limitations of AI tools in religious life. The main questions that our study addresses are: Which aspects of religious life are and may be impacted by Artificial Intelligence? What are the main limitations of AI-tools regarding individuals' spiritual needs? Can conversational AI-agents redefine the relationship with the priest? The analysis revealed that artificial intelligence needs to be addressed as a tool. It is neither ultimate doom nor the way to salvation. The wisdom of human beings has the power to liberate themselves from all the slaveries, including technology. The salvation brought by repentance and forgiveness can only be revealed through religious and spiritual development.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, Christian theology, digital theology, counseling

1. Introduction

Nowadays, artificial intelligence has become part of public and private life. The connection between the ground of the digital world and human values is a new subject to explore by researchers in social sciences. Bringing together the algorithmic thinking of machine learning and the deepest existential issues for human beings may open new understanding of the present and future challenges related to artificial intelligence impact in our societies. Some of the newest areas of investigation are related to machine ethics, conversational AI agents, computational theology, AI-based psychotherapy etc. All of these topics emphasize the complexity of the interaction between human and artificial beings and raises many questions about the functions, limits and impact of AI in individuals' and collective lives. There is already an important body of research about a new dimension of human personality: the digital personality - a part of human identity built through intensive interaction with the digital world. Going further with the interaction between individuals and conversational AI agents, the debate about the emotional, social and moral identity, but also about the deepest human fears, hopes and spiritual dimensions of existence.

The last years of research in the digital theology and anthropology of religion revealed a real tension between different conceptualisations of life perspectives: TO BE (anthropology), TO BELIEVE (religion) and TO THINK or LIVE (values of religious life) (Rampazzo 1996). The Christian perspective fits into the last binomial category (thinking-living) a series of Christian behaviours and contents that the modern world easily absorbs in the vertigo of contemporary human knowledge currents. In the face of a "digital arms race" (Hansen 2022, 125) in which the general and intimate design of social and private education is being re-proposed to human society, we see the whole of religious culture reforming its foundations. We have sufficient coherent analysis in accordance with the method of analytical diagnosis to accept as true the conclusion: „The development of communication technologies and the technological world related to Artificial Intelligence stimulates concerns about human beings and their situation in the world. Existential anxieties and a lack of control over the dynamics of new reality for individuals fascinated by advances in the field of Artificial Intelligence” (Frunză 2023, 81).

Last period also brought many new artificial intelligence products, from ChatGPT, Apple's Siri, humanoid robots such as Pepper or Mindar, whose impact increased both in personal life and professional one. (Dignum 2018, 1; Tan 2020, 280). The AI tools gain more and more autonomy and intelligence due to its huge capacity to learn and improve itself, which puts us in the situation to pay more attention to the

psychological and moral and educational implications of these systems. In a world where AI and robots will take over many human activities, one important question for priests, philosophers, educators, psychologists is whether a robot could replace human relations (Larson 2021). In other worlds, can and will AI systems be mentors, therapists, confessors having human-centered values, empathy, grace and charisma?

The current study explores the specificity of using Artificial intelligence for religious and spiritual needs and activities, focusing on the implication and limitations of AI tools in religious life. The main questions that our study addresses are: Which aspects of religious life are and may be impacted by Artificial Intelligence? What are the main limitations of AI-tools regarding individuals' spiritual needs? Can conversational AI-agents redefine the relationship with the priest or pastoral counselor and the representation of the relations with God? To answer these questions, we analyzed the research literature from the last five years in the field, but we also included some relevant studies from the field of ethics, psychotherapy, computer science, communication studies etc.

2. Artificial intelligence – the potential impact and limitation regarding religious life

Religion is one of the most present dimensions in individuals and communities' lives. Religious life and spirituality is a matter of deep personal and profound human experiences infused with meaning and significance. Nowadays, Artificial Intelligence also became part of everyday experience, interfering also in the religious life of contemporary individuals and communities. If we analyze the last year's trends relating to everyday religious life, we can observe a trend to use statistical algorithms to create a perfect life and to transform that perfection into an ideology, forgetting that perfection is only the attribute of the Creation. On the other hand, statistical algorithms may be successfully used to realize a pastoral diagnosis or to discern patterns (philocalic, post-patristic or syncretic-ecumenical, for example) in the broad construction of theological sources (Dorobanțu 2022, 984), but this only redefines theories of theology, transforming them into computational theology and opens up possible developments of some branches of theological thought - sometimes proposed as religious thought. Thus we can develop complex systems for knowing Scripture or the sources of revelation of any theological thought or create a model of pastoral intervention using inputs from artificial intelligence. We are in fact talking about what Big Data analytics specialists (Mayer and Ramge 2018) promote, namely that harnessing information can improve the way we mine and leverage it for the benefit of companies or political and even religious communities. As other scholars, theologians

and social pedagogy specialists, need to pay attention to this aspect in order to better understand the trends in the practices and values that can influence models of cognitive influence in a dynamic online-offline environment. There are many open questions related to the influence of Artificial Intelligence on pastoral care: is there AI capable of proposing a viable pastoral model of a community or an effective model of pastoral care for people struggling with addictions? Is AI capable of building communication strategies and an effective dialogue based on Christian principles in risk situations? Will AI-tools be easier to access than a patristic model to gain understanding over the most meaningful existential issues? Is there any possibility for AI to propose a model of forgiveness and penance without denying the Tradition? Experiments made in the small spaces of dialogue with students (in theology and psychology) show us that AI can generate a substantial theorizing framework but cannot generate the humanity through which the pastoral act is necessarily imposed. Are we dealing with a cultural Arianism, a struggle against the Incarnation of Christ, in the case of Christianity? It is certain that the way specialists spoke years ago of the creation of a "glass cage" (Carr 2014, 59) correctly interpreted the transformation of a society into a glass society, fragile, too much inclined towards the technologization of solutions and affected by the disappearance of empathy as a form of inter-human religiosity. We are dealing with an illusion of morality through information at the expense of morality through co-formation. It is not clear whether the quantitative increase in the amount of information available to modern man is directly proportional to its educational-moral effectiveness and whether information is not rather a dangerous ideologization of social ethics and its distinctions - medical, educational or simply informal ethics. We can accept as viable a possible model of intra-parish or intra-community communication in which AI can help us see ourselves better or even communicate our religious needs more carefully and improve the communication system within our parishes or communities, but in this equation the value of the priest and Tradition remains essential.

3. Identity in a world defined by artificial intelligence

Artificial Intelligence proposed a new vision about human knowledge and even about conscience through interdisciplinarity and by building new meta-sciences which are able to understand the character of inter-human knowledge but also of how humans can build metaphysical models of communication in otherwise classical creative spaces (Von Neumann and Kurzweil 2012, 116-125). Of the great challenges of recent years related to the interference of artificial intelligence with religious life is the diminishment of religiosity and the development of religiosity as a

sentiment without essence. One of the most challenging aspects of using AI tools is that it may also help the manipulation of religiosity, turning even the intimate act of believing into propaganda (Ellul 2008). In the midst of any manipulation we have a news that must be hyperbolized and then filled with religious meaning (in the case of the religious) but a religiosity devoid of analytical reception, devoid of mystical or ascetic foundation in the sense of knowledge. Artificial intelligence can take the command of social emotions and can direct the reactions ,using huge amounts of data to predict and influence human behavior. We have at hand the experience of centuries of analysis and ministry. Are they enough? Can the religious moral as a root remain the basis, even for the four contemporary ethics of Artificial Intelligence: computational ethics, ethics of informatics, machine learning ethics, global ethics? (Pana 2006, 255-256)? Beyond the technical and conceptual challenges that arise from such questions, we need to understand that religious empathy and sympathy cannot be replaced. The religious memory of human existence is built on many profound religious grounds that cannot be destroyed. The new moral knowledge of AI can generate new prototypes or conceptual models of thinking and behavior, but all of them are remaining subsumed to the basic religious and psychological taxonomies. AI cannot replace the human touch in the process of religious communication due to the fact that all humanity-based values are conditioned by the cultural ethos” (Postman 2023). When analyzing the religious phenomenon, there is a need to understand the cultural traditions, rituals and internal processes, to contextualize the communication, which an artificial agent is not capable of recognising easily. Despite the analysis which always indicates the capitulation of the culture in front of technologies, the cultural and implicitly the religious dimension of human communication needs to keep the symbolist nature of interaction. Moreover, personal and cultural identity cannot survive in a world dominated only by virtual identities.

The spiritual dimension of spiritual development cannot be reduced to an interaction with technology. The effort of spiritual care and education is already embedded in the cultural context of human being-society and its finality is both related to community and family. If we need to stick to the rigorous religious formation, we need to remain on the path of creating situations of authentic communion in real communities. We cannot educate people by isolating them and encouraging them to interact mainly with chatbots or living in virtual worlds. Building upon the theories of spiritual coaching, there are some essential principles that need to be addressed in order to essentially contribute to human spiritual needs development. Those principles are incompatible with Artificial intelligence attributes because they possess the importance of putting the person in relation to other persons, the value of interactions in solving internal

conflicts, the value of human potential activated in social contexts in order to discover his own resources and the utility of building experiential learning situations for meaningful adaptation (Floridi 2009). Therefore the main question that arises in the context of AI-agents becoming more and more autonome and skillful in imitating human beings is: can humanity and the soul be absent from the individual process of spiritual development? Can an individual who seeks for completion (even though in a secularized and laic world) avoid the effigy of religious nature from his own human essence? With all the evolution of AI, we consider that only religion is able to contribute to human specific sensitivity and spiritual formation through specific means such as preaching, confession, rituals, dialogue, means that cannot be canceled by online interactions. The whole Tradition, history and experience of religious communication in responding to individual and social crises is a valuable asset for education and moral formation in any community. The rituals and religious practices will always constitute on hand means to cultivate discipline and to empower persons to find the path to building a meaningful life full of virtues. A digital tool will never be able to offer the meaning and significance of Believing.

Despite the continuity of technological evolution through history, religious anthropology identifies the need to promote the real religious values in a world more and more dominated by false values promoted by excessive attention given to technological trends. There are also authors that emphasize the fact that AI will soon replace the most intelligent minds and that human genius is in danger of disappearance in the face of supermachines (Larsson 2022). When those super intelligent machines will become smarter than we are, we will still have the human personality which can be surprisingly complex and unpredictable. Moreover, from a religious point of view, there is no machine to replace man's resemblance to God because humans are created in the image of God in their moral, spiritual and intellectual nature. The Imago Dei problem was already discussed in the recent literature regarding future trans and post-humanism. For some authors the conceptualisation of imago Dei as rationality and relational capacity will be difficult to extend through the inclusion of trans and post humans (Peters et al. 2018, 25) but there is still an open subject. For other authors the imago Dei problem is a clear one and is a characteristic given only to humans that lies in the human being's capacity to transcend themselves, the others and the time (Padgett 2005, 580). Another argument on this topic is given by Van Huyssteen (2006) who concludes that only human beings can build a personal relationship with God, so none of the robots in the future can have this attribute.

4. Spiritual life between the priest and the AI-agent

There are scholars that introduced the idea of future AI-agents equipped with moral and humanistic values, super-intelligent digital entities which may take over some of the clergy practices or counseling attributes (Fossa 2018, 117). The future is already here if we take into account the online spirituality and counseling content which is very present in peoples' lives (Tan 2020, 281). Moreover, according to Young (2019, 481), we can expect the artificial intelligent systems to become more and more involved in spiritual life by performing clergy's practices such as writing sermons, pastoral care, theological research etc.

Regarding the artificial intelligence systems, Etzioni and Etzioni (2017, 409) promoted the idea that they already have a very autonomous functioning that will evolve into some very intelligent machines with active minds able to show a form of volition and even to make moral decisions. Despite those predictions, the main question remains: will AI systems replace the most fundamental human acts- human deep connection and the unique human capacity to feel the feelings of another human being rooted in the neurobiology of mirror neurons and in thousands of years of history of human stories rooted in our collective memory?

In 2019 W. Young proposed in his paper *The Robot Reverend: Automation and Clergy* a study on digital clergy and the digitization of clergy. It is an interesting position about the relation of the Clergy with Artificial Intelligence, but also about the possibility that AI-agents can take over some of the functions of spiritual education. The conclusion is that spiritual guidance, navigating the perilous estuary of everyday life, is far beyond the competence of any AI structure. Regarding Christian religion, there is an important introduction on AI and Christianity made by Coghill (2023, 604-619) and a whole volume of research in the field of postdigital theologies related to technology, faith and practices (Savin-Baden and Reader 2022). Both scholars discuss how postdigital human spirituality can be proposed or captured as the subject of research in the interaction with Artificial Intelligence.

The relationship between the priests as confessor and pastoral care counselor is a complex and profoundly educative relationship. An AI conversational agent can make cognitive decisions like a human but it is questionable whether it can address true spiritual and emotional needs. Moreover, it is questionable if those artificial systems can assess specific needs and can respond adequately due to specific life circumstances, life history of the individual, ethical dilemma etc. Even though artificial intelligent agents are able to provide spiritual information and even to write sermons or offer simple advice according to different religious perspectives, they may not be able to handle the uncertainty and

complexity of human real life experiences and to adapt to all the variables human related. Or the spiritual and psychological problems are strongly related to an individual's values and life trajectory which is only accessible to another human being, through compassion, empathy and God's will. For example, if we ask Chat GPT or other AI agent to advise us on how to handle families' difficult relations, according to Bible's principles, it will compute a general response, based on its database of information. It will not be able to deeply understand our internal and spiritual struggle, which often we cannot bring it into consciousness without the guidance of the priest or confessor (DeBaets 2012). There are, of course, some conversational AI-agents able to ask questions and be a partner of conversation, but they are also based on some algorithmic paths and the main part of human interaction is missing- the kindness and profound connection between human souls: the communion. In other words, artificial intelligence will give us some theoretical answers and knowledge, even from sacred texts, but it will not be able to shape the character and to build faith and spiritual resilience. On the other hand, the contemporary individuals are integrating the digital world into their identity and using more and more conversational AI agents for gaining understanding over the medical, psychological and spiritual problems. Even though people are using already chatbots as "digital therapists," their impact and implications are still a matter of discussion (Shatte et al. 2019, 1438). Building on the insights offered by the few studies investigating the interaction of human-AI in psychotherapy (Fiske et al. 2020, 207-219) with conversational AI-agents, we will extrapolate the problem to the religious and spiritual interventions. Some important topics of debate may include the pastoral and confessional relationship, self-understanding, religious identity, the relations of the individual with the sacraments etc. First, as Sedlakova and Trachsel (2023, 6) stated, artificial intelligence should be understood as a new artifact with an still unknown impact on the human minds, interactions, epistemic field, individual and collective behaviours. Going further, AI is still an artifact, between a tool and an active agent, but it cannot fully take the role of a priest or a pastoral counselor. Of course, the systematic interaction with and AI tools or agents may cause changes of values or life concepts and even the perspectives about the role of the pastoral counselors or priests, but the interaction with a digital priest or counselor is profoundly artificial and different. There are some scholars arguing for the authenticity of this relation due to the strong anthropomorphic features of AI chat-boots mainly (Sedlakova and Trachsel 2023), but we consider that those agents are only able to mimic conversation and they don't really pose a human theory of mind and emotional intelligence. If we adopt Brandom's pragmatic theory (2011) which emphasizes the conditions of discursive practice in communication,

we can conclude that artificial intelligence tools cannot be a partner in authentic interaction because it cannot be a social, dialectic and normative agent, even though it simulates to do so. The main argument for this perspective is that AI does not understand experiential concepts, does not have intentionality and does not understand the moral implications of human experiences. For example, if we ask a *digital priest* (chatbot) to guide us in a particular spiritual dilemma, it will offer different descriptions, perspectives and general actions, but it cannot connect to our deepest spiritual struggle and the life context we are in. Moreover, the supreme argument is that AI does not possess the favor and grace with which the priest was endowed by God. When it comes to complex processes such as forgiveness through the sacrament of forgiveness, the presence of the charisma of the confessor cannot be limited and the person in soul decolonization seeks peace by building a dialogue, not a technical monologue. In recent years all sorts of forms of confession have been proposed: on the phone, on the computer or simply through the anonymity of online social networks and behind the screens (Katzner 2016). Man is in search of a virtual identity (Măruță 2023) without the definition of which he will not be able to assume the future. We believe, in the wake of our analysis, that it will not benefit the human being to dehumanize it through robotisation or to extirpate the image of God from knowledge. The resemblance to Him is a matter of faith, but the presence in its ontology of the stamp of religion cannot be forgotten. Only by the grace of God, the priest can offer forgiveness and may guide the person to become a moral personality living and cultivating virtues. If we take the case of the Confession, the Artificial Intelligence is limited and cannot act in a complex manner required by Canonics.

The opacity of an AI-algorithm is obvious in the face of the complexity of souls matters, virtues and vices- it cannot relate to the depth of the faith and the relation with God and with the sacraments. Therefore, on religion and spiritual matters, AI remains a simple tool of information, but it cannot significantly contribute to the formation of the human character and it cannot promote true repentance. At the same time, AI-agents operate with third person knowledge. They do not have a first-perspective approach which is only derived from the human experience. The priest, the pastoral counselor is by himself immersed in a life full of temptations and sins, which gives him the experientially understanding of christians' emotions, behaviors, actions. Spiritual growth needs a human hand to keep every person on the right path to salvation.

5. Conclusion

In the present article, we discussed the implications of using Artificial Intelligence for religious and spiritual life. We claim that even though AI agents have human-like conversational attributes, they are only artifacts which pose important ethical, psychological and epistemic problems. Of course, AI development cannot be stopped, but it is necessary to better understand its role in human spiritual life and to better define the purpose of integrating AI in religious practices. AI can help Christians gain information about their religion, the Christian tradition, religious practices etc, but cannot and will not mediate the relationship with God. The spiritual guidance through pastoral care and confession is the prerogative of the priest.

When we speak of the limitation of AI in terms of the human factor from the perspective of religious anthropology in religious communities we are not referring to the impossibility linked to ritual but to the empathy that transforms the act of formative syncretism into an act of confessional identity. You can learn answers to questions through AI but you cannot receive the forgiveness needed to change your life after salvation. Because the human-God effort often passes through the charisma of the one who helps human understanding of God's will. It is a *meth-odou* (journey with) in which the human asks for divine help to understand the full meaning of God-likeness. The hope and the future of humanity depends on the human being's capacity to connect present and future technologies with religious morality, humanistic values and ethics.

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