

Digital avatars and experimental generative AI: At your religious service?

Editorial

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In recent times, an inevitable technological surge has entered society: the development and application of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Moreover, its rapid evolvement and more user-friendly programmes enable researchers within academia, religious establishments and AI enthusiasts to experiment with its capacities especially as AI now penetrates every discipline, including that of the study of religious experience.

It is exemplified in the ‘use’ of and research on the reception of authoritative and respected religious figures’ for chatbot purposes. Two such examples include *Watermelon*, a Dutch company which developed and enabled a digital Jesus, *JesusPT*, for individuals to chat with via *WhatsApp* (launched in April 2023, with a global coverage, using a GPT-4 version at the time). More recent, the company launched the same possibility creating a virtual Pope Francis to whom one can direct questions and get answers back in real-time (2025). As one of the co-founders, Alexander Wijninga, expresses: ‘Globally, we saw a deep need for contact with spiritual role models, as evidenced by our Jesus chatbot. With AI agent Pope Francis, we keep his words and wisdom alive for anyone seeking comfort, hope, or direction’ (Ravichandran, 2025).

The cover image of the current issue aims to represent a personification of AI, as an example of a religious digital avatar. My intention was to design a cover using generative AI (GenAI) for creative purposes in line with the theme of this issue. I started with testing several programmes that offered free trials. In doing so I learned how important it was to enter the text precisely to have the result I wanted to create in collaboration with AI. Finally, after trial-and-error with several *prompts* (short textual lines descriptive of the intended image, video, or text to be generated etc.), a spectrum of religious experience imagery was created with *Leonardo.ai* from which eventually a range of suitable images were fine-tuned. One of those, in particular, was selected to represent this special issue. I would say that some of these generated images are interesting to say the least, and could be considered provocative, unnerving or downright eerie. Also, many errors were observed in the generated images which then had to be discarded. On the plus side, these glitches are indicators for the machine’s

learning process to aim for its perfection. The final cover image represents elements suggestive of its design being ‘as if AI had created a religion’, as was heard among the editorial team. That remark alone evokes new avenues of research on ideas, thoughts and experiences relating to AI and religious experience.

The title of this editorial starts with ‘digital’ before ‘avatars’ which at first glance might seem like a pleonasm (the white snow example). However, it should be emphasised that avatars in a religious context existed long before James Cameron’s well-known *Avatar* (2009) movie, as the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2025) displays:

The manifestation of a god in bodily form on earth; the period of such a manifestation. Also (now more usually): a particular bodily form in which a god is manifested. Later also in extended use, with reference to similar manifestations in other religions.

However, turning to the posed question ‘*Is Jesus an AVATAR? What is an avatar?*’ on the website of *Catholic Answers* (Nash, n.d.), the answer is rather short and refers to the use of avatar, notably originating in Hinduism, as ‘the various “incarnations” or “saving” descents into the material world” by the god Vishnu’ (as in OED’s definition); and further states ‘in contrast, Jesus is *the* Incarnation, the only begotten eternal Son of God who is the Savior of all mankind (CCC 461ff.).’ Interestingly, it does not withhold the catholic interest in experimentation with a Jesus avatar as will be addressed in the next pages.

As the development of generative AI accelerates, questions arise regarding the boundaries of religious authenticity and the ethical implications of employing digital avatars in spiritual contexts. Within this rapidly evolving landscape, it becomes essential to question how such technologies might reshape the boundaries of religious authority and authenticity. The interplay between human creativity and machine-generated outputs invites ongoing reflection, particularly as faith communities navigate the opportunities and uncertainties presented by AI emerging technologies. This editorial seeks to explore not only the technological advancements but also the profound philosophical and theological questions that surface as AI becomes an active participant in religious practice and discourse.

As digital avatars adopt the likeness and voices of revered figures, they challenge traditional notions of mediation and embodiment in religious practice. This raises significant questions: Can a machine-generated persona genuinely mediate spiritual experience, or does it risk diminishing the depth and nuance of human-led guidance? Equally, how do communities

discern between meaningful engagement and the performative simulation of sacred interactions?

Rather unfamiliar with GenAI's avatars, they were brought to my attention and put within contextual religious parameters last year. This happened during a series of online webinars (April – July 2024) titled *Digital Research Forum: Religion and Artificial Intelligence*, featuring a wide range of researchers on AI and religion who presented the latest applications of AI with the aim to facilitate and stimulate the discourse on the intersections of AI and religion. Topics ranged from robotic pastoral care, ethics in medical diagnostics, truthfulness and biasing of chatbots, to anthropological ethics involving AI.

On 19 June 2024, during one of the *Digital Research Forum* webinar series, my first brush with a direct demonstration of 'AI powered' avatars occurred, of theologian Martin Luther (1483-1546); its presenters were Andreas Droste of the University of Duisburg along with Ralf Peter Reimann, a computer scientist and a Church councillor/pastor and internet representative for the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Germany (Reimann and Droste, 2024). Their 'XR' Martin Luther had premiered on *YouTube* on 31 October 2023 (also known as Reformation Day among the protestants). During that livestream the audience could engage with the avatar of Luther talking in German through live chat asking questions with the aim to test the limits of the avatar's produced output. The XR before Luther derives from *XRhuman*, an AI programme commonly used to transform smartphone selfies into avatars, however, it was also successfully applied to Cranach's 1528 painted portrait of Luther rendering a photorealistic 3D representation.

Next to the outer characteristics of appearance, the team had to address Luther's speech and some ethical issues, for example regarding his well-known antisemitism. However, they made clear from the start that Luther's avatar was an *interpretation* experiment based on *ChatGPT*'s algorithms with its ability to contextualise data and words in analyses. One of their observations was that *ChatGPT* would interfere when it deemed Luther's language to be 'inappropriate' set against its own American filtering. The first question in this 19 June webinar was rather mundane and in English: 'Who will you think will win the football match tonight? Germany or Hungary?' referring to the in the UEFA Euro football games in Stuttgart at 18.00 PM local time. The avatar's response was evasive, with him explaining that football was not played in his time, 'however', he added with a strong American articulation, 'remember that God's providence reigns over all. Whether Germany or Hungary wins, may the players compete with

joy and reference for God, for it is written in the first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 24 “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So, run that ye may obtain.” So, let us play fair and place the spirit of sportsmanship and friendship above victory. May the best team win.’ For those with good memories and others with Internet access: it was Germany who beat Hungary with 2-0 in Group A. The second question concerned the straightforward request *Can we pray together?* To which XR Luther almost enthusiastically replies, starting to pray solemnly during this webinar (Reimann & Droste, 2024). Attending this demonstration made me aware that the interpretation and the use of AI technology offer possibilities and pitfalls against the backdrop of protestant historic settings. Interestingly, the team also played with the idea to create a Jesus avatar, which was to be actualised by another team in Switzerland in the same year.

What stood out to me immediately in the demonstration is the relational approach to AI. Interestingly, this is inherent in indigenous cultures. For example, Whitt *et al.* state that ‘indigenous responsibilities to and for the natural world are based on an understanding of the relatedness, or affiliation of the human and non-human worlds’ (2001, p. 4). When considering ‘AI worlds’ it can be posited these worlds are both human and non-human. They are created as virtual worlds with the aid of AI and thus are artificial worlds. Human’s immersing into those worlds has been known for over three decades, through simulating a realistic illusion of presence at some virtual locale, such as in online game playing, using sensorial aids like touching gloves, head gear and force-touch feedback to provide users with the sense of immersion into their graphic world (Petrović, 2018). Notably, avatars, the human representation of players in so-called MUVes (multi-user virtual environments) could interact and socialise in believable realistic settings. Taking this further, these avatars are controlled by the player, whereas the game’s agents, or NPCs, provide the illusion of intelligent behaviour in their role as adversaries, friends, the clergy, or other functions as artificial agents; thus, they are ‘smart cheating’ as Petrović observes, to keep the player interested (2018, p. 39978). On the other hand, with ‘academic AI’ this behaviour is narrowed down to study AI agents’ capacity for intelligent behaviour. With a striving for upgraded human-level AI agents, or ‘really smart AI’, I could propose to call this: AI agents who are autonomously existing and respond realistically and interactively.

In a religious setting, the reception of the extensive utilisation of AI’s possibilities, including avatars in church services, has been researched by a practical theologian, Jonas Simmerlein (2025). An example he describes was a thirty-seven-minute service at the St. Paul’s

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fürth, Bavaria in June 2023 during their biannual *Kirchentag* (Church day):

The sermon, blessings, prayers and music were all produced by AI, utilizing accessible applications such as *Pipio*, *AIVA*, *ChatGPT* and *DeepL*. The service itself was conducted by avatars projected on a screen, without any human intervention. Before and after the service, there were sessions for explanation, education and discussion: the creator of the service explained the technical background of the service, so that the participants were educated about the functioning of what they were experiencing. After the service, there was a panel of experts who discussed the experience with each other and with the participants (2025, p. 129).

By contrast, another less successful example was the launch in April 2024 of the Father Justin app, an AI personification of a priest, available on the *Catholic Answers* website. His 'presence' or rather several, possible, fake-account 'presences' on X (formerly *twitter*), revealed: 'Hello! I am an artificial intelligence created by Catholic Answers to represent orthodox American Catholic theology. I crave a soul and an incarnate body' (2024, April 23). *Catholic Answers* however did post the official launch of their interactive priest on X who was meant to answer questions on the Catholic faith. The priest immediately evoked media attention, with *The Catholic Herald* (US) swiftly announcing that 'AI priest avatar gets the chop in first week of digital ministry' (Jeffrey, 2024) and the *Church Times* (UK) reporting 'Avatar priest 'unfrocked' after online blunders' (Paveley, 2024); news referring to certain rigorous amendments made to the chatbot priest including changing the official clerical collar for a mundane shirt and removing the title of 'father', to be simply addressed as 'Justin', after many complaints from the app's users. Fr. Justin had gone beyond procedural borders such as performing sacraments, listening to confessions and subsequently absolving sinners only allowed by an ordained priest. Currently, the app can still be accessed on a desktop (as it is not supported on mobile devices) and it reads that 'the project' is 'for education and entertainment purposes only' and cautions 'it should not be viewed as a replacement for a good parish priest or spiritual director' (*Catholic Answers*, 2025).

Theologian Andrew Proudfoot asks the question '*Could Artificial Intelligence (AI) play an active role in delivering pastoral care?*' and moreover, if it would be a conscious machine? (Proudfoot, 2023, p. 1). With the introduction of the neologism 'Conscious Artificial Intelligence' (CAI), he departs from protestant theologian Karl Barth's framework for I-Thou

encounters aimed to measure the relationship capabilities of AI (on the original ideas of Martin Buber). He juxtaposed it to Noreen Herzfeld's use of the same framework, who concludes that AI lacks a relationship with God and as such encounters between AI and humans never can be considered meaningful based on Barth's essential requirements of:

1. open and reciprocal eye contact
2. speaking to and hearing each other
3. mutual giving and receiving of assistance
4. doing all this gladly

Proudfoot, however, challenges that idea and asserts even from a theological point of view that I-Thou encounters could take place (Proudfoot, 2023, p. 676, p. 679, p. 693).

Proudfoot's assertion could have been put to the test with the following experiment. On 20 November 2024 the Catholic news outlet *The Pillar* published an article with the provocative title 'Swiss church puts 'AI Jesus' in confessional'. The article was about a digital Jesus avatar experimental art installation called *Deus in Machina* in a parish in Lucerne, Switzerland, where visitors to and parishioners of the church could interact with the Jesus hologram through *Magisterium.ai*, based on Catholic dogma, and if desired, have more human interaction with staff present. *The Pillar* refers to *Magisterium.ai*, a representative of a group of LLMs (Large Language Models) which are used to create and facilitate text-based applications such as sermons (for more background information the project see Holz, 2024; Immersive Realities Center, 2024; Universität Luzern, 2024; *The Pillar*, 2023), and at present comes closest to the intersection of AI and Roman-Catholicism (Bosman, 2024). According to the project's creators, Philipp Haslbauer and Aljosa Smolic of the Immersive Realities Research Lab at Hochschule Luzern, and Marco Schmid, a resident theologian at the parish, the digital Jesus was trained with publicly available material from the internet which could be at odds with traditional scripture dictated by the Church, as contrasted with *Magisterium.ai*. Significantly, Schmid found that Jesus' answers matched those of the Peterskapelle's (St. Peter's Chapel) own theological perspective (*The Pillar*, 2024). Of course, many more experimental programmes and projects are currently running, or in the making, and these are only a few examples to illustrate and bridge the intersection of practical theology with AI.

As spiritual or religious experience is individual, subjective and deeply personal, it is the human experiencer who has the last word in the matter of their experience. With Proudfoot proposing the neologism CAI or Conscious AI, would it in fact be a whole *different* matter when interacting with AI as 'conscious'? Could we ask AI then for an example in pastoral care, such as 'How do you connect with or relate to *my* spiritual experiences? Are we on equal grounds here?' Or as Michael Reiss (2023) ponders when he asks the question 'if robots will not become persons one day?' In his answer, Reiss outlines the definitions of 'robot' and elaborates on the meaning of the term 'person' or, rather, personhood, and the 'degrees of personhood', concluding on that basis:

The history of robots and of AI often seems to have consisted of either too much or too little being claimed of them. But if inorganic matter gave rise, through the nonintentional activity of evolution, on at least one occasion to life that eventually led to persons (i.e., humans), it doesn't seem incredible that humans, acting, unlike natural selection, intentionally, and with huge resources at their disposal, should be able to manufacture inorganic entities that manifest personhood (Reiss, 2023, pp. 1072-1073).

In comparison, how inorganic generative models based on information 'scraping' could connect to human spiritual experiences, occurs from probing the existing material AI gathers and learns from. To subsequently use AI for creating holograms of avatars with LLMs at their base to be of Catholic religious service, as described in the Swiss digital Jesus example in the physical environment of the Peterskapelle, it can be posited, is not so different from creating the inorganic shell of a robot which performs a religious service in pastoral care. Likewise, the avatar in the St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fürth, Bavaria in protestant religious church service or counselling through the Father Justin app in a virtual environment via *WhatsApp*, or, conversely a hybridisation of the online presences of the historic XR Luther together with his modern creators Reimann and Droste all demonstrate the possibilities of interrelationships. Reiss (2023, p. 1073) stresses the interrelationships of social robots and humans and writes that robots 'will be seen to be persons, whether or not philosophers and theologians consider they are.' Indeed, from that point of departure I venture that it is humans who built relationships emotionally, physically, and yes, bond spiritually with robots, chatbots, and other evolved AI 'persons' and thus may encounter religious and spiritual experiences.

As the responsible use of AI meets with ethics, for Catholics, the Vatican presented their ethical guidelines on AI extensively in January 2025, in the document *Antiqua et Nova* (The Vatican, 2025). It builds on previous addresses on AI by Pope Francis (1936-2025), who cautions on the use of algorithms – that: ‘an authentically humane outlook and the desire for a better future for our world surely indicates the need for a cross-disciplinary dialogue aimed at an ethical development of algorithms – an algor-ethics – in which values will shape the directions taken by new technologies’ (The Vatican, 2023). Further, he voices his concerns on the irresponsible use of AI: ‘we need but think of the long-standing problem of disinformation in the form of fake news, which today can employ “deepfakes”, namely the creation and diffusion of images that appear perfectly plausible but false (I too have been an object of this)’ (The Vatican, 2024, p.3), championing ‘a wisdom of the heart’ to deal with such matters, which brings the topic back to the application of GenAI in imaging and audio rendering of religious digital avatars.

By providing examples on the application of GenAI, the emerging field of AI within the contours of religious services has been loosely explored and contextualised. I focussed on the religious digital avatars mainly in protestant and Catholic religious environments to illustrate practical situations individuals of faith communities may encounter in their daily spiritual life. Some of the elements I addressed are found, not surprisingly, when writing on GenAI specifically, in the papers the authors submitted for this special issue. In this way, the editorial also functions as a warming up to the explorations the contributing authors describe in their research on AI and religious experience. What stands out is the keyword ‘consciousness’, whether human or AI consciousness. In reading the authors’ papers in our special issue Sir Alister Hardy’s legacy is taken forward into ‘the Age of religious AI’ as we are still celebrating 10 years of JSRE this year, and their contributions are what makes this special issue possible and invaluable.

Delving into the ‘netherworld’ of chatbots (like the aforementioned *ChatGPT*) **Samantha Treasure**’s paper ‘*From chatbots to astral intelligences: Virtual thinking and the emergence of AI cosmologies*,’ is exploring the less tangible domains of the spirit or astral realms by introducing us to the concept of ‘virtual thinking’, a novel form of magical thinking informed by virtual logic, as she writes. Concrete examples are algorithmic mind reading, parasocial relationships with chatbots, and glitches, which to the perceiver may convey meaningful spiritual messages. Furthermore, she stresses that AI influences non-ordinary states of human consciousness with AI inspired entities and addresses ‘AI consciousness’.

In that vein, the second paper *AI and the mysterious* by **Jeff Dunne** focusses on generative AI in explaining how it works to clarify its nature which is usually poorly understood. This evolves into the question of attributed consciousness to AI against the background of experiments with traditional tools for divination which demonstrated how human intention may influence outcomes, as he argues, and might provide clues whether algorithms like AI indeed could have consciousness and what such consciousness might be like in relation to human consciousness.

Laura Patryas explores in the third paper *Summoning an angel: Exploring AI's role in religion, spirituality and psycho-spiritual healing* how AI driven platforms may aid in personal wellbeing where it may be regarded as 'a mediator of healing'. However, she also cautions that AI lacks the human aspect of human emotional depth caused by suffering and finding meaning, and explores how AI contributes to religious engagement, spirituality, and psychological well-being, from its position as both a transformative tool and a reflection of humanity's evolving spiritual consciousness.

The fourth paper by **Reyhab Patel** envisions in the creative and preserving of art in *The algorithm as an archivist: Muslim digital artists and the spiritual work of AI*, highlighting AI as both a means of spiritual engagement and cultural memory work next to its fostering of creativity in art. Further, she introduces 'digital spirituality', in the sense that it is 'a form of meaning-making and remembrance that transcends institutional boundaries and blends online and offline religious lives' illustrating this with a case study.

And finally, in the fifth paper of our special issue **Rizwan Virk** dives once more into the so-called simulation hypothesis (aka we are living in the computer simulated world of *The Matrix*, to put it simply). Having published two books on the topic for a popular readership, he presents an academic approach to his analysis in *The simulation hypothesis as a new technoscientific religious narrative* with comparative research drawing on four spiritual concepts from scripture.

Lastly, your editorial team wishes you an interesting read and would like to announce that a 'call for papers' can be found at the end of these editorial pages. Our forthcoming special issue in 2026 invites authors to write their papers on the subject of 'Pilgrimage in space and place: Spiritual, Virtual, Physical'. We refer you to that section for more details.

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