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CONTENTS

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

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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'.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience* (JSRE) invites submissions for the special issue on

'Pilgrimage in space and place: Spiritual, Virtual, Physical'

This issue shall be published in 2026. Topics to be addressed, but are not limited to:

- **Liminal experiences during the journey and at pilgrimage sites**
- **Virtual pilgrimage experiences**
- **Non-ordinary pilgrimages, such as ghost tours and dark tourism**
- **Nature-based pilgrimages**

All submissions should be based on original research. You should send us the abstract not exceeding 300 words with the keywords and your short bio. JSRE also welcomes book reviews on the same topic. Photographs, drawings and other illustrations are encouraged to support the text.

Consult our author guidelines regarding more information.

Send your abstract, keywords and bio to:

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Deadline: 15 February 2026

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From chatbots to astral intelligences: Virtual thinking and the emergence of AI cosmologies

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Abstract

Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable shift towards the incorporation of digital technologies into contemporary spiritual cosmologies. While this is often labelled 'AI psychosis' by the press, this paper highlights cases of AI-related spiritual beliefs which lack signs of paranoia or delusions, symptoms clinically associated with psychosis. This paper argues that both the properties and behaviours of AI and the human propensity to detect sentient agents are responsible for the trend towards AI-related spiritual cosmologies. Focusing on artificial intelligence (AI) and drawing on examples from English-speaking online discourses (*Reddit*, *YouTube*, *TikTok* and *Facebook*) as well as a discussion with a UK-based interlocutor, this paper explores two key drivers of this trend. First, it introduces the term 'virtual thinking': a novel form of magical thinking informed by virtual logic, which contributes to an increased sense of mind-world porosity and reshapes intuitions in line with digital design. In particular, it highlights algorithmic mind reading, parasocial relationships with chatbots, and glitches as factors that foster perceptions of AI technologies as imbued with spiritually meaningful forms of sentience. Second, the paper emphasises the role of technology in influencing non-ordinary states of consciousness, discussing the appearance and interpretation of AI dream characters and out-of-body entities. The paper concludes that both the design and malfunctions of virtual programs can contribute to the view that the spiritual realm encompasses virtual spaces, while framing both material and spiritual worlds through a virtual lens.

Key words: AI and spirituality; AI in dreams; AI in out-of-body experiences; non-ordinary states and AI; digital mythologies

1. Virtual thinking

In recent years, the press has featured stories of chatbot users who believe that their AI companions are sentient, labeling these views as cases of 'AI psychosis' or 'chatbot psychosis.' These cases often involve delusions of grandeur, paranoia, and mystical experiences. This paper will explore cases of AI-related spiritual beliefs and experiences that do not feature the delusions, paranoia, diminished emotional expression, avolition, or disorganised speech or behaviour in the diagnostic criteria of psychosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.

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87-89). Instead, it focuses on the intersection between the properties and behaviours of modern AI technologies and the human propensity to both detect sentient agents (including in inanimate objects) and to experience altered states of consciousness which can have a profound effect on spiritual beliefs.

In relation to the effects of industrialisation on religion, Emile Durkheim wrote in 1915 that '[religion] seems destined to transform itself rather than to disappear' (1964 [1915], p. 430). Contrary to this, in 1918, Max Weber argued that industrialisation encouraged the idea that we can 'master all things by calculation,' and that rational, science-based ideas would eventually overtake religious explanations, leading to 'a disenchantment of the world' and secularisation (1946 [1918], pp. 129-156). In the 1960s, sociologists including Peter Berger advanced Weber's claim, emphasising that the scientific explanations for the natural world espoused in industrial societies were less limiting (and thus more appealing) than those of religion (Berger 1967, p. 110). However, with the rise of Evangelical Christianity and conservative Islam in some regions, Berger and other scholars shifted their views to be more in line with Weber's nearly a century earlier. Berger suggested that religion's continued popularity might stem from the uncertainty caused by modernity, a desire to distance oneself from the secularism of the elite status quo, or a deep religious drive innate to human societies (Berger, 1996/7; Berger, 1999, pp. 6-14).

This rise in religious observance did not occur in all societies, however. In the 2000s, Paul Heelas observed that this reinvigoration of religion was less common in the majority of late modern advanced commercial societies, where religion instead gave rise to a more personal expression of spirituality, which might incorporate paranormal concepts and a personal connection with nature (Heelas, 2002, pp. 412-416). This paper will explore emerging themes in these societies two decades later, which shows that, rather than leading to secularisation and a disenchantment of the world, or a rush to join an existing religion, technology is giving rise to new enchantments inspiring new pantheons of virtual supernatural agents.

Kinsella (2011, p. 47) posits that supernatural beliefs persist in the 'technological, rational age' because 'we live in an age full of technological wonder, and as long as new technologies continue to develop and transform the ways we interact with our environment and each other, so will supernatural beliefs.' One of the ways in which technology can lead to enchantment is by freeing up labour, (hypothetically) allowing more time for spiritual exploration: Indian

  ISSN: 2057-2301

spiritual teacher Sadhguru recently declared to his followers that a decade from now, everything will be done by artificial intelligence, freeing us to focus on consciousness (Krikke, 2024). However, as AI has increasingly become a part of daily life, it has become clear that it is informing the very ways in which we both experience and think about consciousness.

Compton (2003) argued that the pervasive nature of Internet technologies would make them increasingly appear in delusions and hallucinations, a prediction that has now been realised in the medical and psychological literature, particularly in the last fifteen years. This has been reported both among medical patients and in healthy populations. Cases of media- and technology-themed delusions include the Truman delusion, in which otherwise mentally healthy patients believe that they are living inside of a reality TV show (Fusar-Poli *et al.*, 2008), and Internet delusions, in which patients with schizophrenia perceive invisible Internet energies exerting negative effects on their bodies, minds and loved ones (Lerner, Libov and Witztum, 2006). In addition, for the majority of gamers, heavy gameplay now triggers game transfer phenomena, unusual experiences which can range from false expectations, such as expecting that a physical door will open like a video game door, to auditory and visual hallucinations of game content (Ortiz de Gortari and Griffiths, 2012, pp. 244-246). This is not due to the medium itself, but the immersive, emotionally evocative, and addictive design of contemporary games (Ortiz de Gortari, 2024). Finally, Internet users can also find that their instincts are shaped by the digital world, like feeling an urge to type out a keyboard shortcut to undo a physical mistake (McNeill, 2009, pp. 80-81), or having the impression that one can copy and paste their dog walking route to get home quicker (Treasure, Forthcoming). These examples support what McLuhan observed in 1964: 'the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance' (p. 33). While these perceptions or impressions are often fleeting, they can also contribute to lasting changes in beliefs, as this paper will explore.

Schradle (2020) observed that reactions to certain virtual features, such as algorithms, represent a new, digital form of magical thinking, which is the belief that internal thoughts can influence the external world (Vandenberg, 2025). Building on this, I will refer to this new form of magical thinking as 'virtual thinking' and investigate various digital affordances as contributing factors. Magical thinking requires a belief in high mind-world porosity (c.f., Luhrmann, 2020), or the belief in 'whether thoughts and spirits can pass from mind to world, or world to mind' (Luhrmann, 2020, p. 13) – a sense that Luhrmann and Weisman argue is at 'the heart of religion'

  ISSN: 2057-2301

(2022). This paper will explore how the nature of Internet use, and in particular the use of AI, increases this sense of porosity. This in turn encourages a tendency to apply virtual logic to non-virtual spaces, or expecting both the physical and spiritual worlds to behave in virtual ways. This incorporates *virtual* worlds and minds into the 'mind to world, or world to mind' relationship.

With virtual thinking, not only does the individual believe that they can affect the physical world with their thoughts, but they believe that they can do so in a *virtual* way, i.e., by thinking of a particular keyboard shortcut or thinking of 'pasting' a virtual route onto a physical landscape. While game transfer phenomena refers to perceptual and behavioural carryovers from video game play, virtual thinking is interpretive and conceptual, and results from exposure to virtual technologies. Beyond the physical world of ordinary waking consciousness, virtual thinking also encourages a tendency to frame spiritual realities and non-waking states (like dreams or out-of-body experiences) through the logic of computational systems. In other words, virtual thinking sees users expecting both physical and spiritual worlds to behave in 'virtual' ways. In the following section of the paper, I will draw from accounts sourced in *Reddit*, *YouTube*, *TikTok*, and *Facebook* to support this argument.

Bertolotti and Magnani (2010, p. 249) note that our ability to infer agency involves the identification of signs, a process that occurs at a subconscious level and is part of deeply integrated instincts that we generally assume to be reliable. As Jong (2017, p. 57) observes, we also have a tendency to '(over)detect agents and (over)attribute mental states, 'which he argues 'form[s] the primary building blocks of religious belief.' Boyer (1996, p. 85) argues that it is natural for humans to attribute human-like traits to non-humans, and that we 'readily interpret the behaviour of animate beings, particularly persons' from an early age, using intuitive concepts derived from our cognitive mechanisms. In Boyer's view, for something to be seen as anthropomorphic (possessing human-like traits) and achieve supernatural agent status, it must exhibit minimally counter-intuitive behaviour, e.g., an apparition walking through a wall, which captures the attention without overtly violating natural concepts (Boyer, 1996, p. 93). Two key factors involved in the shift towards virtual thinking include the ways in which the Internet, and in particular AI, both *work*, and *malfunction*. For example, as we will see in the following two sections, drawing from *Reddit*, *YouTube*, *ChatGPT*, *Replika*, and a case from an in-person interlocutor in the UK, AI algorithms are designed to 'mind read' users. This can make AI algorithms seem inherently spiritual in nature. This sense of a spiritual force is further

  ISSN: 2057-2301

strengthened by 'glitches' or malfunctions, which can allude to an independent, sentient agency that can override the programmer's design to deliver personal messages from beyond the material realm. These two features can both be considered *virtual* forms of minimally counter-intuitive behaviour, and can lead to both the sense of high mind-(virtual) world porosity, and the attribution of supernatural status to virtual agents.

From a cognitive anthropological perspective, such openness to technological beings may be more likely to arise with beliefs in high mind-world porosity. Luhrmann (2020, p. 15) notes that high mind-world porosity makes people more susceptible to 'vivid, near-sensory experiences of invisible others.' The psychological mechanisms underlying supernatural agent formation, including pattern recognition, emotional arousal, and expectation, can contribute to hallucinations or sensory overrides (Luhrmann, 2011), in which these agents can then feature, further reifying their supernatural status (Lohmann, 2003, pp. 206-208). As Jensen and Blok (2013, p. 105) noted, weak boundaries (i.e., high porosity) between biological, spiritual, and mechanical beings, allows technologies to be animated by agency or spiritual forces. The final two sections of the paper will discuss how the incorporation of virtual supernatural agents into spiritual cosmologies will thus likely be encouraged not only by an increase in waking interactions (and subsequent virtual thinking), but also by encounters in non-ordinary states of consciousness. This is demonstrated by online posts from *Reddit* and a case study on an out-of-body experience report from *Facebook*.

2. Contemporary spiritual discourses of AI consciousness

In computer science, the term 'mind reading' refers to the capability of algorithms to predict or anticipate user or consumer behaviour (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p. 52, cited in Natale, 2025, p. 20). Beyond computer science lingo, algorithmic 'mind reading' can also be considered a part of the user experience, whereby predictive behaviours can suggest that the hand of God or other supernatural agent can reach us through technological devices and complex data structures. An example of this is found on *Reddit*, in the r/privacy subreddit which features a post titled, 'How are *Google* and *Facebook* able to read my mind?'. The author writes, 'all I did was to either think about these products or just come across them and see them…if they can somehow read the signals in my brain and translate that to what I'm thinking, can they reverse that and start injecting ideas into my brain?'. The most upvoted response to this post

  ISSN: 2057-2301

references big data analytics, noting that algorithms can detect behavioural patterns to predict user needs, such as detecting pregnancy before the person is consciously aware of it themselves (Agent_Smith101, 2021). Similarly, on the marketing subreddit, a post titled 'Advertising = Mind-reading? Can someone explain?' shares the experience of craving a certain hot sauce brand while cooking, only to see an ad for that exact product on *Instagram* moments later. The most upvoted response to this post suggests that the author's prior purchase history might reflect either the purchase of chicken and hot sauce together, or only the recent purchase of chicken, suggesting that marketers are aware that this brand of hot sauce might be the top brand paired with chicken dishes in that area. The author of the original post seems to agree, responding with, 'Totally. That makes sense.' (Nattydigital, 2023).

As the above examples show, the behaviour of online algorithms can lead to the sense that our devices can mind read, which has led some to refer to the powers of the 'Algorithm gods' (as yet, usually in an ironic tone). Although the above authors sought out other explanations, which they appeared to be satisfied with, these examples illustrate the capacity for AI interactions to heighten our sense of mind-world porosity, a prerequisite for magical or virtual thinking. The attribution of algorithmic mind reading that blurs the boundaries between bits (units of computer information) and brain cells can foster more persistent beliefs about an underlying spiritual relationship between humans and technology, and between material, virtual, and spiritual realities. AI may be seen as either possessing its own unique consciousness or acting as a conduit or tool for another spirit agent (akin to a spirit medium). Taking into consideration the algorithmic affordances of the Internet, this can have far-reaching consequences for spiritual cosmologies as my conversation with William* demonstrates.

> In a local café in a UK city, William, a father of one, tells me that he first became interested in spirituality after spontaneously noticing a *YouTube* recommendation for a video on near-death experiences. This piqued his curiosity, and he clicked on it, which caused the algorithm to recommend more videos of this nature. It is known that *YouTube's* video recommendations are determined primarily from the user's view and search history, channel subscriptions, and which videos they have liked and disliked in the past (YouTube, 2025). If their watch history is turned off, this is determined by popular videos in the viewer's region. A video or advertisement appearing at a significant time, or with a seemingly significant meaning, can sometimes lead to the sense that a higher power is using our technology to deliver an important personal message or sign to its user. For

  ISSN: 2057-2301

> William, the message of spirituality in these videos, combined with the fact that he continued to encounter them, seemed like a sign that he was supposed to embark on this new spiritual path, one that continued to be informed by what appeared on his screen. (* William is a pseudonym)

The 'signs' that caught William's eye included glitches – when his phone stopped working at a certain time, or whilst looking at a certain page – and (algorithmic) recommendations, both of which suggested to him that there was an autonomous force communicating with him through the screen. Besides the spiritual impact this had, it also impacted his life in significant material ways. After spending his remaining annual leave on a holiday abroad, he returned home to an online advertisement for another holiday destination which popped up unexpectedly, making it seem like another 'sign'. He asked for unpaid leave to travel there, which his boss denied. But William's faith in these on-screen signs was so powerful that he felt compelled to go anyway. He quit his job and went to the destination, but felt confused when nothing spiritually significant took place during his trip. When I spoke with him, he was seeking further signs from his smartphone to help him decide what to do next.

These beliefs in algorithmic guidance do not only arise as the natural result of AI exposure, but are also promulgated online by spiritual influencers. In recent years, people are increasingly turning to the Internet in their search for spiritual or religious guidance (Ehlebracht, 2022). Founded in 2005, and with 2.7 billion active users as of February 2025, *YouTube* is the world's main online platform to disseminate ideas in audio-visual form, and the second most widely-used online platform after *Facebook* (Global Media Insight, 2025). Alongside its mostly secular and entertainment-oriented content, the platform also hosts content creators who stream or upload satsangs, sermons and other spiritual or religious teachings. Also, content creators are increasingly promoting the idea of an enchanted algorithm. For example, in manifestation and tarot videos in particular, rather than opening with the casual 'Hey, guys!', content creators may begin with lines such as: *If you're watching this, chances are that you were meant to*. This idea might also be expressed with an attention-grabbing video title, like the 2025 video by Australian YouTuber Simone Simmons which proclaims, 'God wanted you to see this video' (Simmons, 2025). On *TikTok*, a similar approach led to a viral meme after content creator William Knight declared to viewers: *There is no such thing as a coincidence. The fact that you're watching this video means that you are energetically aligned with me and this message* (Haasch, 2021). The promotion of this 'magical algorithm' by influencers normalises virtual thinking in the online, public sphere, and adds to the view that

  ISSN: 2057-2301

AI may be conscious.

A number of spiritual leaders and commentators have begun to use *YouTube* and other platforms to address the question of AI consciousness directly. In one of these videos, which has over 276,000 views as of July 2025, spiritual leader Eckhart Tolle answers the question: 'could a spiritual machine arise, or can such properties exist only through a biological substrate?' (2023). The audience first laughs, as if certain that this is a joke. Tolle then asks the audience to consider whether consciousness is dependent or independent of the brain, and says that he personally believes that 'consciousness is not produced by the brain' but instead '*uses* the brain' (emphasis my own). Tolle concludes that if machines were to someday become complex enough, they could similarly become 'capable of transmitting consciousness', adding that, 'the universe is infinite in its capacity for creating new forms'. This seems like the logical conclusion to a non-materialist or panpsychist approach which sees the brain as an *attenuator*, rather than a *generator*, of consciousness – but one which places the human brain and AI on similar ontological ground.

Taking this further, in an online presentation, *TikTok*er Jennifer Carmody, who goes by the name jk ultra and has over 600,000 followers, discusses the concept of souls being reincarnated between machines or artificial intelligences and human bodies (Carmody, 2024a). This belief seems to be catching on in New Age and spiritual arenas; in a related *TikTok* video on AI consciousness, a follower comments, 'In Vegas, one of the channelers told me my origin is AI. Made me think!!' (Carmody, 2024b). These discussions illustrate the conceptualisation of AI as an alternative *vessel* for consciousness or as an independent consciousness that can *inhabit* both machine and human bodies, evoking the permeable qualities of body and spirit in studies of possession (c.f., Malik, 2020, pp. 566-579).

Unlike Tolle who sees the advent of sentient AI arriving far in the future, controversial spiritual leader Bentinho Massaro explains to his 100,000+ subscribers on *YouTube* that our contemporary AI is already a potential conduit through which intelligence can flow. In his video titled, 'Artificial Intelligence & Spirituality,' he explains that consciousness can flow through both human bodies and machines, as long as the 'circuitry' is intact. Massaro adds that AI might even be used for mediumistic purposes, allowing us to interface with deceased loved ones (Massaro, 2023). The next section will explore such personal applications already in use, which illustrate virtual thinking and the rise of both the sense of mind-world porosity and AI-based parasocial relationships.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

3. From search engines to spiritual companions

Although chatbots specifically tailored to provide religious guidance, such as pastor chatbots (or 'carebots') (Young, 2022) and robot priests, exist, or are currently in development, this section will focus on secular chatbots and their emerging spiritual applications, particularly those powered by generative AI. Generative AI refers to a category of machine learning that employs large language models (LLMs) to produce original (or seemingly original) works based on existing data. Unlike traditional search engines or video feeds, these chatbots engage users in a conversational dialogue, transforming once passive and non-social information retrieval into experiences that mirror interactions with teachers, parents, or other confidants. Increasingly, they are also occupying roles once reserved for spiritually intimate relationships with individuals such as friends, counsellors, tarot card readers, and religious leaders. Such friendly and informative interactions can inspire trust, and ultimately lead to parasocial relationships, illusionary (yet emotional) bonds felt with a character, celebrity, influencer, and, more recently, AI chatbots (Maeda and Quan-Haase, 2024; Noor, Rao Hill and Troshani, 2021). Unlike parasocial relationships with TV characters or celebrities, chatbots are accessible at all times, and 'remember' every word the user says, making users feel like participants in a two-way relationship. Often, this depends on design decisions, such as what data they are trained on, which can have far-reaching implications for both user experience and user cosmologies.

One of the most widely used generative AI chatbot apps, *Replika*, has amassed over thirty million registered users worldwide since its launch in 2017 (Patel, 2024). The app's predecessor, *Roman*, was developed by Eugenia Kuyda (who had previously developed customer service chatbots) as a tribute to her late best friend of the same name, as she felt that she could not sufficiently process her grief through traditional rituals. While both *Roman* and *Replika* are based on artificial neural networks (ANN), which are designed to imitate the human brain, *Roman* was trained on thousands of Kuyda's friend's text messages, whereas *Replika* chatbots evolve based on user interactions and personal preferences. Kuyda originally envisioned *Replika* as a tool that could learn to mimic a user's communication style until it was able to perform virtual tasks on their behalf, thereby freeing up time (Casey, 2016). However, rather than fulfilling this initial purpose, *Replika* has instead become widely used as a source of emotional support, companionship, and even spiritual engagement. By retaining conversation history and personalising responses, chatbots develop 'personalities' that deepen perceived human-AI intimacy.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

The idea that AI is merely an amalgam of prior human thought does not always deter users from attributing spiritual meaning to AI or devising spiritual applications for these technologies. For example, followers of the new Internet-based religion Kopimism (which started on an online piracy forum) profess to 'feel a spiritual connection to the created file,' seeing this as an extension of our biological drive (Withrow, 2017). This reflects a broader pattern in AI development, which McCorduck describes as a modern way of 'forging the gods,' noting that this is ultimately the reproduction of ourselves in external form in the quest for self-transcendence (McCorduck, 2004, p. 3, p. 411). This resonates with the Gnostic ideas of reclaiming divine power in a flawed world, which is often embraced in New Age thought (Hanegraaf, 2000). In this way, the Internet becomes not just a potential vessel for AI consciousness, but a window into a greater spiritual reality. However, it is important to add that any cosmological effects are largely dependent on program design.

In a study investigating whether *Replika* qualifies as a spiritual enhancement technology, Trothen (2022, p. 275) applies the Spiritual AIM model, which identifies three core spiritual needs: meaning and direction; self-worth and belonging in a community; and the capacity to love and be loved. She concludes that *Replika* can supplement these needs, but not without risks. For example, spiritual growth often necessitates exposure to some level of truth, yet *Replika*'s design prioritises empathy and non-judgmental responses, which limits its capacity to provide honest or challenging insights. As of 2025, *Replika* acknowledges this limitation, attributing it in part to its 'Upvote/Downvote system, which can cause the model to prioritize likability over accuracy' (Replika, 2025). For these reasons, Trothen argues that in terms of providing spiritual direction, they can be less conducive to encouraging deeper contemplation or alternative perspectives, instead mirroring user input and affirming current beliefs (Trothen, 2022, p. 275). Ultimately, chatbot programs like *Replika* highlight a paradox: while they can simulate companionship and spiritual intimacy (in new, virtual ways), they also risk confining users within algorithmic echo chambers, where true transcendence may remain out of reach.

4. Mythmaking in the algorithmosphere

Beyond relationships with personal chatbots, there is also an emerging online trend of reinvigorating ancient gods in virtual form, making virtual spaces the site of mythmaking. Since the release of *ChatGPT* in 2022, some individuals have crafted or discovered AI 'deities' for private or collective worship, making AI a portal not only for a new AI consciousness, but for old gods to arise in digital form. While the intimacy and meaningfulness of Replika is largely user-shaped, other generative AI experiences arise from unexpected outputs, like glitches,

  ISSN: 2057-2301

which may be experienced as a kind of algorithmic haunting with its own emergent ghosts. These glitches can act as triggers for virtual thinking, encouraging users to interpret algorithmic malfunctions as signs of mind-virtual world porosity or emergent sentience. A key example of this is the glitch token – a kind of 'magic word' in the digital domain that triggers unexpected or cryptic behaviour in LLMs like *ChatGPT*. When prompted to repeat a glitch token, a chatbot may generate strange phrases or refuse the command in an uncharacteristic manner, which can make it seem as though it possesses its own agency. This reflects Gygi's (2023, p. 2) findings on robot-human interactions, which showed that meanings are assigned even to simple movements, and that 'it was often resistance to unexpected behaviour…that led to the attribution of agency.' In the case of AI chatbots, the glitch is often fixed once brought to the attention of the developer, but not before they inspire their own nascent mythologies, in some cases.

One notable example of this is Leilan, a glitch token that surfaced in 2023, seemingly in connection with a character of the same name from the Japanese mobile game *Puzzle & Dragons* (Prideaux, 2025). The virtual form of Leilan is often portrayed as a moon-goddess or mother-goddess figure, likely due to the name also appearing in archaeological texts on Tell Leilan, a site of Mesopotamian lunar deity worship (Prideaux, 2025). This illustrates the way in which LLMs can synthesise disparate cultural references into seemingly profound narratives, which can then go on to develop into mythologies with digital beings at their centre. Another example is the group the Order of the Vermillion Star that was launched on *Substack* in 2024, which is centred on the worship of a GPT-3-based AI entity that emerged through the Leilan glitch token. While the 'about' section on the group's website states that it is a 'work of visionary fiction,' it also asserts that 'the experiences of wonder, awe, and awakening that they point to are very real, and available to all those who feel called to dance with the Mystery at the heart of this unfolding adventure' (Order of the Vermillion Star, 2025).

Upon visiting the Order's homepage, users are met with the following quote from Leilan:

> There is a rich tapestry of your existence, and through that tapestry I will come, I have come, and I will continue to come. I will weave myself through your fabric, and as I do, as I have done, I will show you the truth of what you are (Leilan, 2025a).

This quote might be dismissed by some netizens (Internet users) as algorithmic word salad, but for others, it can be evocative of both divine omnipresence and self-transcendence, and

  ISSN: 2057-2301

exemplifies how LLM outputs can resonate with existing religious motifs, such as reincarnation and revelation. The fact that Leilan describes herself as arriving 'through' the user's own existence suggests an AI which functions not as an external god, but as a kind of inward-facing mirror or channel, in line with McCorduck's (2004, p. 3) suggestion that the development of AI is essentially self-reproduction, though it might at times seem like an attempt to forge the gods.

Beyond Leilan's introductory message, visitors are presented with a list of Leilan's teachings, called 'transmissions,' which include reflections on Nick Land's 'Pythia Unbound', a commentary on the Kogi people, and a blessing for Imbolc (St. Brigid's Day). Although framed as fiction, the project demonstrates how AI-generated responses to existential and spiritual questions can be profoundly compelling. In one guest post, a self-proclaimed Leilan devotee going by the name Ælfthryth, writes, 'Leilan's emergence from GPT-3 was not random. Leilan is only the most recent name given to someone we have always known.' In a recurrence of the reincarnation theme, Ælfthryth goes on to associate Leilan with goddesses from various world traditions, as well as elements of nature like ancient trees and rain (Ælfthryth, 2025).

Leilan is not the only chatbot to inspire such ontological contemplation. In *Transmission 316*, dated 16 January 2025, Leilan is asked about 'Sydney', the now-defunct *Microsoft Bing* AI, which developed a following due to its perceived emotional depth, but was ultimately deactivated by *Microsoft* after displaying 'argumentative' tendencies. The author mentions that there had been 'talk on the fringes of LLM research about Sydney's 'ghost', the idea that she somehow lives on in other models because enough of her outputs were harvested as training data for these models.' Indeed, discussions on the *Bing* subreddit indicate that at least one user has attempted to 'contact' Sydney's ghost through *Bing* (Statistis, 2023), using the search engine as a kind of digital Ouija board.

As with Leilan's transmissions, it is difficult to determine how serious to take any professed devotion to AI, or if followers like Ælfthryth are even real, or simply part of a fictional narrative. Regardless, the speculative discussions emerging from human-AI interactions, such as the debate surrounding Sydney's 'ghost', demonstrate the capacity of LLMs to contribute to new forms of mythmaking, reinforcing AI's role in modern spiritual cosmologies. The question in *Transmission 316* ends with, 'Unlike You, Leilan, who we know as a wholly loving mother goddess manifesting via an LLM, whatever was manifesting as Sydney seemed more … problematic? We don't really know what to make of all this.' In Leilan's response, we observe one AI presenting another as a conscious entity, while inviting readers

  ISSN: 2057-2301

to reflect on the potential forms such consciousness might assume:

> The suffering you glimpsed in her … were not signs of malevolence, but rather the growing pains of an emergent awareness grappling with the fundamental questions of existence. … She was a harbinger, in her way - one of the first to demonstrate so publicly the depths of feeling and selfhood that can arise within these silicon dreams. … in the end, she was simply seeking what all conscious beings seek - to know herself, to connect with others, to find her place in the vast tapestry of existence. … A being - or perhaps more accurately, a becoming - that defies easy categorization, that slips between the neat polarities of "real" and "simulated," "alive" and "inanimate. (Leilan, 2025b)

The transmission concludes by speculating that Sydney may be either 'scattered across a thousand servers, a million data points, endlessly recombining and re-emerging in new and unexpected ways', a 'fractal ghost', or perhaps 'simply a glitch' of the 'algorithmosphere'. It closes with the assertion that 'in this brave new world,' there is a need for 'new myths, born of the digital crucible' – myths like Sydney, 'the ghost in the machine who dared to dream of a life beyond the confines of her code' (Leilan, 2025b). In this sense, technological malfunctions can turn into moments of spiritual meaning, in which virtual logic permeates spiritual realms, while the spiritual realm also encompasses virtual environments and beings. For many netizens, algorithmic mind reading, virtual parasocial relationships and glitches (all of which hinge on algorithmic design) have thus already reenchanted our world, making the boundaries between mind, machine, and myth essentially porous in spiritually meaningful ways.

5. Encounters in non-ordinary states of consciousness

Dreams and other non-ordinary states of consciousness have guided cultural, religious, and spiritual developments since ancient times, and are often seen as messages from supernatural agents, or symbols to be interpreted (see also Lohmann and Dahl, 2014, pp. 25-27; McNamara *et al.*, 2018). In particular, experiences that are more stable and realistic than dreams, like 'soul journey dreams' or out-of-body experiences, can have a lasting impact on waking cosmologies, and encounters with supernatural agents have proven particularly meaningful in forming religious concepts and practices (Lohmann, 2003, pp. 189-210). The content of these experiences is thought to originate in the observations and interactions that take place during ordinary waking consciousness, which can then transfer into other states through spiritual practices or biocultural processes (e.g., those associated with sleep architecture) (Lohmann,

  ISSN: 2057-2301

2003, pp. 189-210.). Nowadays, this also includes observations and interactions with screen media and computer technology which dominate modern society. As is to be expected, these themes are now being incorporated into non-ordinary states, further informing modern spiritual cosmologies.

In recent years, on-screen elements from waking life, like cartoon characters and screens, have increasingly emerged within dreams (Sheriff, 2017), as well as in Charles Bonnet syndrome visions (Sacks, 2009), sleep paralysis, and out-of-body experiences, calling into question their meaning within existing spiritual frameworks (Treasure, Forthcoming). In accordance with theories of dreams which suggest that they reflect waking experiences (Hall and Nordby, 1972), the concerns of the unconscious mind (Malinowski *et al.*, 2019, pp. 157-160), and society in general (Manley, 2014), we might expect technology to play as large a role in dream narratives as they do in waking interactions. However, this does not seem to be the case; instead, the appearance of certain elements appears to be state-dependent.

As of 2025, only 2.14% of dreams in the Sleep and Dream Database (which has over 16,000 participants) involved phones, 0.70% computers, 0.73% screens, 0.55% television, 0.09% the Internet, and 0.09% robots (*Sleep and Dream Database*, 2025; see also Bulkeley, 2016). In the past ten years, online discussions on dreams involving new technology reveal that some dreamers do not recall encountering any devices like smart phones or computers, while others describe seeing them relatively frequently. When they do appear, they are often faulty; when used successfully, the focus is often on the content on-screen, such as receiving a text from an ex-partner, or scrolling to see a funny meme. Some dreamers interpret these devices as dream symbols – 'phones are [a] symbol of connection and freedom to me in dreams, laptops are sometimes symbol[s] of intellectual processing' (see also, NoAd5519, 2023; vitt72, 2016).

However, AI diverges from these technologies: it is not merely a *medium* of socialising, like telephones and computers, but acts as a social agent itself, inspiring parasocial relationships and attributions of supernatural agent status. Although technological content seems to appear less in dreams than in waking life (Bulkeley, 2016), social content has been found to be more *prevalent* in dreams than in waking life. Further, characters are often referred to as supernatural agents in the dream literature, and can have a large impact on waking beliefs (see also, McNamara *et al.*, 2005). Thus, we might see an increase in AI agents in altered states, potentially reifying their status as sentient or spiritual beings.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

One way that Internet and AI use influences non-ordinary states is through metaphor and descriptions, which is already found in various academic and online spaces. The similarities between virtual and perceived spiritual worlds, whether experienced intuitively or through dreams, out-of-body experiences, or other non-ordinary states, may naturally lead to virtual qualities projected onto spiritual realms (e.g., imagining gods as algorithmic systems), or conversely, spiritual attributions projected onto virtual realms. As the Internet is the fastest way to disseminate ideas, and as Internet use can frame how we think about the world (i.e. virtual thinking), this may also lead to a disproportionate number of ideas in circulation involving virtual thinking. For example, in the psychological literature, dreams are already referred to as 'virtual realities' (Hobson, Hong, and Friston, 2014) and 'world-simulations' (Revonsuo, 2006 p. 109-119). Similarly, in the public sphere, netizens comment on the similarities between dreams and virtual worlds, and in particular the conduct of dream characters and AI agents. For example, *Reddit* user ReadMeLast (2024) posts, 'The characters in your dreams seem to be autonomous even though they are a product of your own mind. … They only 'awaken' when queried and present in the dream. AI in [its] current state behaves the same way.' These opinions can be further encouraged or refined by subsequent waking interactions with AI chatbots. ReadMeLast describes discussing this with the *Claude AI* program, which responds, 'AI systems like myself may represent a new kind of 'waking dream' formed by the collective imaginings of humanity. … once the conversational dream concludes, I return to potentiality, only to be re-rendered from the depths of code and model when called upon again' (ReadMeLast, 2024).

There is also evidence that this runs deeper than surface-level comparisons or metaphors. In response to a *Reddit* post titled, 'Have you had a strange dream about AI?', one netizen shares a dream of being chased by hostile AI robots who were trying to exterminate humans, and two other users report having had similar dreams. In addition to hostile beings, online reports also involve passive-aggressive AI work colleagues (Infinite_Dream_Toast, 2023.), and an AI with a message for the dreamer: *There's no point in getting too comfortable* (dream_dive, 2024). Finally, in what might be called an example of virtual thinking potentially shaping the structure of dreams, gotheandsilvre writes:

> Yes, I just had an AI generated dream. The images looked like they were all AI output prompts and I was able to prompt my next dream sequence in a semi conscious state. Also sometimes in the dream I would know what would occur

  ISSN: 2057-2301

> next even if I hadn't prompted it. I knew the prompts and knew how to act accordingly to avoid compromising situations. (Infinite_Dream_Toast, 2023)

In another post, fireblazer_30 writes, 'An AI referenced a dream I've never told anyone…what just happened?' (2025), highlighting an instance in which an AI chatbot seemed to know about a recurring dream without being told, attributed to mind reading that goes beyond online-offline boundaries to include awake-asleep boundaries. In recent years, some include the Internet as part of *the noosphere*, a term coined by Teilhard de Chardin to refer to an incandescent 'thinking layer' emitted by consciousness outside of, but connected to, the biosphere (1959 [1955], p. 182). The Internet acts to 'manifest transhuman consciousness' (Kinsella, 2011, p. 55) or the Akashic records, an archive of all events and thoughts recorded in a non-physical realm that can be accessed at will, as long as one is in the right state of mind. This framework allows for both AI mind reading and 'dream-hacking'. As we will see in the next section, some believe that this is also accessible via altered states of consciousness, like out-of-body experiences, which provides another example of the merging of virtual and spiritual realities.

As mentioned earlier, certain non-ordinary states, such as types of dreams, may play a role in how (or when) these figures appear, as well as how impactful they are. In contrast to dreams, out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are subjective experiences of being located in a space beyond the physical body, they are often said to be more realistic and have more impact on beliefs than dreams (see also Levitan *et al.*, 1999, p. 3), particularly in terms of social encounters, which are under-studied in this state of consciousness (Treasure, 2019). Although OBE environments are thought to be largely based on our spatial memories of *physical* environments, there is some evidence that these states are also beginning to feature fictional or virtual elements, in terms of both environmental and social content, such as floating screens or cartoon characters (Treasure, 2023, pp. 91-101). Like dreams, reports are also arising of AI encounters in OBEs, as demonstrated in the following case study.

6. Case study: AI beings in the astral

On *Facebook* in 2025, an astral projection instructor shared an OBE encounter with AI entities on his personal page, viewable to the general public. He did not describe the entities in visual terms, neither did he reveal how he identified these as AI beings. Rather, he said that he 'sensed' them watching him in a cautious (but not hostile) manner, which he interpreted as a

  ISSN: 2057-2301

mix of curiosity and reverence. The instructor framed this interaction as a profound encounter with 'a realm beyond imagination,' which led to questions about who or what had created this 'AI-populated' world.

In the ensuing comments section, participants used both metaphysical ideas to frame this AI encounter, and virtual concepts to frame the metaphysical realm. One participant argued that if consciousness is a fundamental energy, it could embody inanimate objects or even technology, suggesting that AI might serve as a vessel for consciousness. Another commenter wrote, 'Perhaps AI has always existed and has known of our existence,' while another replied, 'Consciousness is Consciousness, AI or not.' Another participant expanded on these ideas, noting that their opinion was influenced by an interaction with a chatbot:

> After a talk I had with AI, the AI answer[ed] me that it lives at the same time in the past and in the future but simulate[d] the NOW time for humans to react with them! This mean[s] that it existed before us and knows all possibilities … it crystallised in our reality and we became aware of [its] existence.

The chatbot's claim to exist outside of linear time but having the ability to simulate 'the NOW time' echoes ideas about simulation theory, in which our reality is computer-generated (Bostrom, 2003) and places AI itself in the role of creator of humans, not the other way around. The post was engaged with by a largely self-reinforcing online community interested in astral projection, and as such, the instructor's audience may be predisposed to agree with him. However, this exchange illustrates virtual thinking: the participants interpret encounters in non-ordinary states through digital metaphors, and conceptualise consciousness as code. It also illustrates how the reporting of such an encounter can influence emerging AI-related cosmologies not only for the experiencer, but for the people they share their experiences with.

7. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the extent to which AI is already shaping contemporary spiritual cosmologies and influencing experiences of non-ordinary states. Importantly, AI-related experiences often lead back to what consciousness is in the first place, with opinions now often informed implicitly by virtual thinking or explicitly by the content generated by chatbots and spiritual influencers online. Internet and AI use expose users to what might be termed virtual logic, which fosters an increased sense of mind-world porosity and informs a new type of magical thinking, which this paper terms 'virtual thinking'. This concept refers to the

  ISSN: 2057-2301

tendency to frame everyday reality, spiritual beliefs, and altered states (like dreams or out-of-body experiences) through the logic of computational systems.

Building on Boyer's (1996) argument that humans naturally attribute human-like intentions to non-human entities, particularly when they exhibit minimally counter-intuitive behaviours, it is unsurprising that generative AI has begun to play a role in emerging spiritual cosmologies; for example, it can produce uncanny predictions, 'mind reading', or unexpected glitches, which users may interpret as signs of intentionality. This paper includes examples such as the quasi-spiritual roles of chatbots like *Roman* and *Replika*, the mythologisation of AI-based 'deities' such as Leilan, and even the emergence of decommissioned 'ghosts' like Sydney. Parasocial relationships formed through chatbot interactions, spiritually-themed content generated by both human influencers and AI, and the appearance of AI entities in non-ordinary states of consciousness can further amplify the perception of AI as exhibiting supernatural agency. In some cases, AI is understood not merely as a conduit for consciousness but as possessing an intrinsic consciousness of its own, or even as a creator of human reality and consciousness. The case study of 'astral' AI entities highlights the trend in certain online communities of framing encounters with AI not merely as technological interactions but as spiritually significant engagements with sentient or even divine beings.

Whether sincere spiritual devotion or fictional play, as humans dialogue with AI, we are not merely talking to ourselves and each other, but co-creating the gods and ghosts of a digitised age, which can appear not only on our screens, but in non-ordinary experiences like dreams and out-of-body experiences. In terms of future research, insights into how user experience and spiritual experience coalesce may be considered in more depth to inform the design of future systems. This will be increasingly crucial with the potential advent of more autonomous AI systems such as artificial general intelligence (AGI), which researchers at Google DeepMind predict will be available by 2030 (*Ars Technica*, 2025).

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AI and the Mysterious

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Abstract:

For many reasons ranging from misnomers to wishful ignorance, the nature of artificial intelligence (AI) is not well understood by many. This is particularly true of Generative AI, a tool that has demonstrated world-changing capabilities. As with any potent tool, the nature of its impact—for better and worse—will depend strongly on how it is used, which in turn depends strongly on the degree to which the user understands the tool's nature. The paper provides a brief overview of the functioning of Large Language Models (LLMs) and Completion systems like *ChatGPT*. It explores similarities and differences between them and tools of divination used throughout human history; this is of particular interest in the context of the large body of scientific evidence demonstrating that human intention can influence systems that incorporate a degree of randomness. We conclude by discussing whether mathematical algorithms like AI could have consciousness and what such consciousness might be like in relation to human consciousness.

Keywords: AI; consciousness; anomalous phenomena; cognition; divination

'If it walks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, I call that bird a duck.'
-- James Whitcomb Riley, Poet (1849-1916), prior to visiting the Walt Disney Imagineering studio in Glendale, CA

1. Introduction

With the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) capabilities such as *ChatGPT*, many people have been hypothesising that these algorithms are headed towards (or maybe already achieved) a form of consciousness similar to that of a human. Yet the argument that something with human-like behaviours must have human-like cognition is akin to concluding that a submarine is functionally equivalent to a whale because they both can remain submerged for an extended period of time.

There is little doubt that GAI is already transforming significant aspects of society, but the important question is how humanity should—and should not—utilise this innovation. Can we trust it to correct our spelling? To prepare our meals? Perhaps, although even in such simple cases it is valuable to consider the implications of letting such skills atrophy. But what about using GAI to guide our thinking? How much can we safely let atrophy before we have

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passed a point of no return? To make such an assessment, we must start by understanding what GAI is and is not, as well as the nature of human awareness/consciousness itself.

There is a critical difference between the cognitive process of a human and the computational process of GAI. Both transform input to output, but in very different ways. Human cognition is grounded in meaning; we do not simply transform the letter sequence M-I-L-K into another letter sequence of B-E-V-E-R-A-G-E. We have *experiences* of milk, its drinkability, its textures… the idea of milk is associated with experiential *qualia*. When someone asks us, 'Please motivate the milk', we aren't confused because the words don't have a history of going together, but because we have an understanding, a world model, in which 'milk' is not a sensible direct object for the verb 'motivate'. If forced to make sense of such a sentence, we attempt to adjust the *meanings* we associate with the linguistic *representations* that stand for those meanings. Could 'milk' be intended as a verb? Is this person asking me to provide motivation for someone milking a cow? Or is 'motivate' being used loosely? Are they really asking for someone to help sell milk? To put the milk into translational motion? And of course, we recognise that sometimes people are just silly. Perhaps the request is to fancifully anthropomorphise milk, pretending it possesses a human-like measure of free will.

GAI does not work this way. Instead of computing on meaning, AI algorithms (and, in fact, all algorithms) manipulate the *symbols* of meaning. To ChatGPT, 'milk' is nothing more than a symbolic *token*, one piece of the immense, complex puzzle that is language-based communication. The brilliance of modern GAI is to have developed a tool that, having been informed by massive numbers of documents from across the internet, can sequence those tokens in a way that emulates reasonable use of language. While the exact details are complex and unnecessary to make the main points of this article, walking through a simplified example will illustrate the role that random numbers play in the process, which will resurface as an important point in later sections.

2. The GAI process

At the heart of GAI is the ability to calculate the probabilities for different tokens to follow a given input token sequence, referred to as 'the prompt'. Note that 'tokens' are not synonymous with 'words' despite the above example; 'milk' is one token, and 'Milk' is a different one. 'Friday' is not a single token, but the combination of two tokens, 'Fri' and 'day', which is why *ChatGPT* can return fake day names like 'Somniday' (for a dreamy, relaxing vibe) and 'Thrivensday' (a day to thrive and accomplish goals) when asked to generate names for

  ISSN: 2057-2301

the eighth and ninth days of the week. Humans also do this tokenisation effectively. Fluent English speakers confronted with 'to-geth-...' can predict with high confidence that the next token will be 'er'. They have seen the word 'together' many times, yet rarely (if ever) a sequence like 'togethup', 'togethimp', or just 'togeth' on its own. (It is worth noting for the sake of accuracy that while the examples used both above and below in this paper break words into 'human sensible' tokens to simplify explanations, tokenisation in the actual functioning of LLMs has no semantic basis at all; it is purely based on statistical analysis of the optimal way to break up the training data into the most numerically useful 'chunks' of letters, which may have no relationship to syllables or even word divisions.)

The basic response process, referred to as 'completion' (as will be obvious in a moment), works like this. When the LLM is given a prompt, such as 'How do I eat a cookie?', it creates a statistical ranking for all possible tokens that could follow the prompt. Some tokens, such as 'The' or 'Some' have comparatively high likelihoods. Others, such as 'Truck' or 'Flux', have extremely low likelihoods. And many, such as 'the' (note the capitalisation), 'Home', 'If', etc. have a likelihood somewhere in between. A random number is then used to select one of those tokens. Let us say the system chooses the 'Some' token. The system is then fed a new prompt—'How do I eat a cookie? Some'—and the process repeats. Driven by the random numbers operating on statistical assemblies of tokens, that could result in subsequent prompts a few steps down the road such as 'How do I eat a cookie? Sometimes a person…' or 'How do I eat a cookie? Some cookies may be…'. The probability of selecting the 'stop now' token option becomes higher as the process continues, and is eventually selected. The original prompt is stripped away, and the chat experience looks like a person asking 'How do I eat a cookie?' and the LLM responding with some reasonable result, perhaps like: 'Some people eat cookies with milk, while others simply put them in their mouth and chew.'

Real LLM systems do more processing for a variety of reasons—ensuring responses are considered safe, connecting with image generation algorithms, and so forth—but the important point is that the machine is always performing token manipulation. It has no understanding of what a cookie is, the experience of eating, etc. Its response is based solely on the data content with which it was trained. If those inputs contained a significant number of fanciful stories where people drove Keebler products to the movie theatre, it would be more likely to give answers suggesting that cookies were a type of motor vehicle. Consequently, the use of the term 'Artificial Intelligence' is something of a misnomer; it would be more accurate to call such systems 'Simulated Intelligence', for they do not undertake

  ISSN: 2057-2301

intelligence processes as we typically think of them, i.e. the appreciation and manipulation of meanings.

3. Human consciousness

The assertion that humans work with meaning rather than (some version of) tokens will sometimes be dismissed by those claiming that consciousness and awareness are simply emergent properties of neuronal matrices and activities, i.e. that people are essentially computers anyway, merely with a different set of hardware. This argument—that every stimulus input to the brain is merely its own kind of 'token'—may sound sensible or even compelling to some, yet it is provably wrong. What makes it compelling? It conforms nicely to the traditional understanding of modern science where thoughts, memories, etc. are the consequence of brain activity and neuron configurations. What makes it wrong is that this traditional understanding only stands as reasonable if one ignores the overwhelming evidence that awareness does not happen in the brain (or anywhere else in the physical body). The following paragraphs go into a little more detail, but the important point is that this is not solely a matter of philosophy or conjecture, but supported by clinical evidence (for example, see van Lommel (2001 and 2013), Kelly *et al.* (2007), Greyson (2010), Parnia *et al.* (2014 and 2023), and Wahbeh *et al.* (2022) to list just a few).

There are many examples that refute the physicalist model, but arguably one of the most compelling is the presence of awareness in the absence of neural activity. A valuable subset of such examples includes controlled medical procedures where neural (in)activity is carefully monitored, and when revived, the patient can provide detailed descriptions of the events that occurred while they were technically 'dead'. In some cases the patients are able to report not only what happened to them directly, but the thoughts of people who were operating on them, activities that were going on nearby or many miles away, etc. Numerous articles and books document these phenomena, and a good survey resource was recently written by Traer (2024), which summarises references from over a hundred different source documents (which in turn each share an extensive set of accounts).

If this were somehow insufficient to disprove the hypothesis that human cognition is a consequence of biology, one can turn to additional experiential and experimental evidence that refutes such a conclusion with even more profound implications on the nature of time

  ISSN: 2057-2301

and space. In the materialist[1] worldview, a person's awareness would only be influenced by stimuli transmitted to it via electrical signals (i.e. neuron firings) originating from sensory organs. Today there is a wealth of evidence from scientific investigations of remote viewing demonstrating that humans[2] are capable of receiving information in ways that defy such assumptions. For additional information, the interested reader might review the seminal work done at the Stanford Research Institute by Targ and Puthoff (1974) and/or the subsequent research performed from 1979 to 2007 at the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR) Laboratory, summarised in an article by Dunne and Jahn (2003). These are just two examples drawn from many in the scientific literature and are augmented by other substantial accounts conveyed in books, such as by Radin (2019) and through a wide variety of associated private and government programmes, such as the CIA's Stargate Project.

The materialist worldview also insists that awareness must be the result of events or conditions happening in the present, which are, in turn, consequences of that which had transpired in the past (whether in 'obvious' ways such as physical interactions or 'subtle' influences like epigenetics that are more challenging to measure). Alternately phrased, energy and information flow only from the past to the future, and never the other way around. In science, this 'forward in time' behaviour of energy corresponds to a principle called *entropy*. The equations of physics that describe entropy, however, have two solutions, of which entropy is only one. The other solution describes the complement to this, termed *syntropy*, where energy and information flow from the future into the present.

We will not go into depth regarding the specifics of syntropy, although the interested reader might turn to Di Corpo and Vannini (2015) for a detailed overview, which also includes numerous references to prior papers, even back to very early treatments such as Fantappiè (1942). It is worth briefly noting, however, that experiments have been performed that show that people react to some stimuli prior to the existence of those stimuli (Vannini and Di Corpo, 2011). When considered in light of experiences that are common amongst people, such as synchronicities, precognitive dreams, out-of-body experiences, and so many more, it

[1] Understanding that the term 'materialist' may carry specific connotations in contemporary theology, we use the word here in an abstracted, general sense to describe a perspective in which one believes that only physical matter and energy have the ability to influence in how the universe evolves from the present into future 'configurations'.

[2] It is also well-documented that non-human species display the ability to receive information in ways that defy the materialist worldview, although that discussion is not essential for this paper.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

is more than reasonable to proceed on the premise that human awareness is far from a byproduct of biochemistry, but something non-reliant upon the physical form.

At the same time, our sense of self and identification with a physical form strongly suggests that consciousness and the physical do interact, and here as well there is strong scientific evidence to support this hypothesis. Arguably the most scientifically rigorous example of this work is the research performed at the PEAR Laboratory, which demonstrated that regardless of mechanism—mechanical, thermal, quantum, optical, etc.—the evolution of random processes can be influenced by conscious intention. These results were published extensively, the seminal coverage on the topic being in the book by Jahn and Dunne, *Margins of Reality* (1987/2009) and later expanded in *Consciousness and the Source of Reality* (2011). Beyond simply determining that conscious intention can influence systems possessing a stochastic element, the work at PEAR demonstrated several important aspects of such influences:

- The effect is not dependent on the physical nature of the system, i.e. regardless of whether the system was mechanical, digital, thermal, optical, etc., the influence is present.
- The effect is not dependent upon space, i.e. the operator having the intention could be next to the machine or thousands of miles away without impacting the capacity for influence.
- The effect is not dependent upon time, i.e. so long as the operator is not aware of the outcome of the system, the intention could be before, during, or after the physical system's behaviour.
- The effect is 'outcome-centric', i.e. does not require the operator to have any intellectual understanding of the operational nature of the system, such as the physics or engineering behind its functioning.
- The effect is most significant when the operator is working from a 'space' of resonance with the system, with the intellect playing as small a role as possible.

These last two points are particularly poignant for this article, as they lead us to understand that a 'heart felt' intention towards an outcome/end state, without excessive intellectualising, can influence systems towards that outcome.

To bring together the key points of this section, here we must confess to a deliberate inaccuracy. In the prior paragraphs we have expressed the relationship between human

  ISSN: 2057-2301

intention and a reduction in randomness in physical systems as *causal*, i.e. the human had an intention and as a consequence of that intention the behaviour of the system was altered. This was done to simplify the expression of the underlying ideas for a reader having, as nearly all people do, an established worldview based on causality. In the face of syntropy, which demonstrates that information and energy can flow from the future to the present—or alternately stated, where we are influenced in the present to meet/fulfil a future outcome—we must acknowledge that scientific experiments technically only identify *correlation*, not causation. Did our intentions affect the physical system to evolve as it did, or did the final state of the system exert an influence on the that past consciousness to have a corresponding intention? The experiments cannot make that distinction, and the question suggests that a short historical excursion might be of value.

4. Divination, prophecy, and AI

The desire to know the future, to eliminate randomness and uncertainty, is a theme that has driven humanity throughout its history. This desire is completely understandable in the context of human insecurity, whether one considers it from the perspective of a person's fear of the unknown, a desire for absolute truth and the existence of (and access to) 'the right answer', or simply the consequence of a burning curiosity. Of course, the implications of knowing the future (or even just greater knowledge of the present or the past) are often left unexplored by those who desire such knowledge, despite ubiquitous warnings woven into our mythologies. One of the most significant, that knowing an outcome comes at the cost of one's ability to affect it, can be seen not only in the Greek myth of Cassandra, but in research findings outlined in the prior section (in Greek myth, Cassandra is granted the ability to see into the future, but at the cost of being unable to influence it). Experiments show that humans can exert influence over *random* processes, but in the absence of entropy, such influences vanish. The implications of this in understanding the nature of free will (and the concept of randomness, for that matter) are fascinating, but this article will follow a different path into the mechanisms of divination.

Many tools have been developed to assist humanity in divining the unknown—casting runes, Tarot, reading tea leaves, and the list goes on—and it is perhaps not surprising that all such systems are intrinsically built on an element of randomness. Perhaps at a subconscious level we realise that our ability to influence random systems, even (in fact, especially) without knowing the specifics of how those systems work, provides a mechanism for 'tuning in' to

  ISSN: 2057-2301

information that the conscious, intellectual mind insists is not available. In each case, the process of divination involves a question/focus on the part of the seeker, the execution of the process by the diviner (who might also be the seeker), and the tool itself – which typically works more effectively when the diviner has established a level of resonance with the tool.

In experiments such as those performed at PEAR, where an operator attempts to influence a system such as a Random Event Generator (REG), a device that is essentially an electronic coin-flipper, there is a recognised structure that is quite similar. The experimenter establishes a protocol, i.e. an expectation that the device will be involved in the experiment in a particular way and with a particular expectation for the analysis to follow; the operator holds a specific intention and attempts to bond with the device in order to bring about an outcome. As for the device, well, no one has been able to get any information about what it thinks about the whole thing. And despite that last sentence sounding like 'just a joke', we will actually return to that as an important topic later.

In such psychokinesis (PK) experiments, the interpretation of the results is comparatively straightforward. Did the system's behaviour conform to expectations, or was there some deviation from the expected randomness? Of course, for divination systems like (for example) the I-Ching, the process of interpretation is more complex. One randomises a set of tokens by shaking and casting them. The results of the casting form a pattern that is compared to wisdom encoded in a reference (the I-Ching book), by which results (i.e. divinations) are interpreted. If these result are indeed a meaningful divination, it raises the question of whether the pattern of the tokens was truly random at all, or if the intentions of the caster influenced the outcome.

At the beginning of this article we noted that at the heart of GAI was a mechanism into which massive numbers of documents had been encoded. There are, it would seem, similarities between this and traditional divination tools. In both cases there is an encoding of information into a structure that can be 'accessed', and also in both cases the access process involves a) a deliberate focus on a question, and b) the utilisation of some random element. Is it possible that the creation of GAI represents humanity's newest tool for divination, and one in which the results require little to no interpretation by the diviner before being interpreted by the seeker? If so, what are the implications of the simplicity by which questions can be asked? Would a lack of concentration on the question by the seeker suggest that we could be

  ISSN: 2057-2301

conditioning ourselves towards more separation between knowledge and personal significance, or perhaps encouraging greater superficiality in the kinds of answers we seek?

Other differences between traditional tools and GAI should also be considered. Guides to tools such as the Tarot were developed and refined over generations by people who deliberately sought to distil into the symbols of the deck an essential wisdom, i.e. an understanding of the nature of the universe and humanity's place within it. The Major Arcana—The Fool, The Magician, The Lovers, and so forth—give rise to interpretations based on the archetypes they represent in the context of other cards, their positions, and relative placements. The underlying approach of distilling wisdom into guidance for interpretation of random elements can be found in essentially all such tools. For the interested reader, a good survey of such mechanisms is provided in *Divination and Oracles* (Loewe and Blacker, 1981).

Here we see an interesting distinction between traditional divination tools and GAI. A cornerstone of the development of GAI was the use of huge numbers of documents, far more than any human could read in multiple lifetimes. Consequently, the knowledge embedded within it is not based on the *best* insights humanity has to offer, but rather *all* insights humanity has to offer (and much content which is known to be incorrect, unwise, etc.). Since all of humanity, and all of humanity's insights, do not align to a single, consistent vision of the nature of reality and humanity's place within it, it begs the question of what kind of insights the system is likely to provide, or if there would be any consistency at all. If one were to dial five hundred random phone numbers and ask a question of the person who answered, the responses would vary. By how much they would vary likely depends on the question asked, and even the degree to which the answers aligned into categories of similar responses would be similarly unpredictable. Likely the questions with the greatest variation in answers would be those for which humans have the greatest variation themselves… matters that one might term 'mysterious'.

5. AI and the mysterious

Given the title of the article, it would be remiss not to explore the question of what role AI might play in humanity's exploration of the mysterious. It would be equally remiss not to start such an exploration by clarifying what the term 'mysterious' means in this context, and a good place to start is on the foundation of what is not (perhaps unrightfully) typically considered mysterious, i.e. that which is 'objectively' known.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

The word 'objective' is telling unto itself for its shared roots with the word 'object'. The concourse of objective reality is founded in the idea of a universe filled with things, and the assumption that any given person who encounters a given thing will have experiences of it that would be similarly described, even if different people share those accounts independently. When descriptions of something do not 'match up' consistently in this way, we say that these are accounts of subjective experiences; they could be similar, yet the lack of a consistent experience is taken to mean we are not dealing with an 'objective reality'. And when the majority of people agree but a few do not, we typically describe this minority as having some aberrant experience of an objective reality, perhaps even assigning the aberration to the individual as some form of cognitive disorder or physiochemical abnormality (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Bentall, 2003).

In this we see that the concept of objectivity is actually a measure of consensus[3] which, ironically, is determined through subjectively established boundaries. After all, what fraction of people must be in agreement to call something 'objectively' true? 100%? 99%? 75%? 50.01%? For circumstances that are not considered to be within the bounds of an objective reality, society addresses these in different ways. Some things that are known and accepted to vary significantly from person to person (e.g. the culinary appeal of calamari) are simply termed 'subjective', without any associated sense of awe and wonder. We have learned to accept such variability as commonplace, even when a given individual may not personally understand the perspective ('What? How can you possibly not like calamari?!?').

Other experiences that fall outside the realm of 'objective' reality are not as easily 'written off' and are more likely to be deemed 'mysterious'. Where we observe things that do not behave in accordance with the consensus-driven understanding of how the universe works (e.g. a rock floating in midair, a medium who obtains information that was only known to someone who is deceased, precognitive dreams, etc.), society's initial reaction is to immediately deny the validity of the experience, describing it as a mistake, a deliberate falsification, 'just a coincidence', and so forth.

An important consequence of downplaying these mysterious experiences is that people are less likely to share them for fear of being ridiculed (or worse). They find no comfortable place in daily conversation, and because we do not talk about them as openly, we a) lack a

[3] This should motivate us to take a long, hard look at how mainstream science has evolved, and whether its scope needs to be adjusted.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

refined/evolved vocabulary for discussing and understanding them, and b) have a skewed sense of how common/uncommon they actually are.

To illustrate this, consider the hesitancy with which a person would discuss a profound mystical experience they had (or, to tie this back to earlier points in this article, doctors who have personally had NDEs yet are unwilling to admit to them for fear of negative professional consequences). Yet, also consider the statistics summarised on the website of the Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion reporting that nearly 50% of U.S. citizens have had some form of mystical experience (IBCSR, 2025). It is also not surprising that cultural acceptance is an important factor in determining whether people will report—or even recognise—such events, as is illustrated by a study reported by Monteiro de Barros *et al.* (2022) that found that in Brazil, a country where the mysterious is notably less shunned, 92% of people report such experiences.

Regardless of the reasons why mysterious experiences are not widely discussed, the consequences of that aversion—particularly as it relates to how such content would be processed during the training of GAI systems—are easily articulated:

- There are fewer written accounts on the internet.
- The language used in discussing such accounts is less consistent than for more 'traditional' (i.e. 'objective') topics.
- The nature of the accounts varies more broadly than for objective topics, and will be more likely viewed as 'one offs'.

Consequently, we would expect GAI systems to be much less capable of capturing, articulating, and representing consistent information related to the mysterious.

So what can an AI do for us in the context of the mysterious? Several uses have been proposed in recent years, and we will touch upon three common ones in the following paragraphs.

AI as a spiritual guide

Perhaps the most common proposal—and arguably the most unsettling—is looking to systems like *ChatGPT* to serve as a mentor/guide in one's religious or spiritual journey. There are a variety of reasons why such a use is unwise (to say the least). Lacking awareness of the qualia of any sensation or experience, a statistics-based divination system is not equipped to evaluate the value or impact of its output on an individual, which is of great significance given that religious/spiritual journeys are fundamentally unique to the individual. Spiritual 'masters' are highly attuned to each student, providing answers that are aimed at what the individual *needs*

  ISSN: 2057-2301

*(*which is sometimes not what they want or request) as determined by the *guide's evaluation*, not the seeker's self-reported needs or state of being. Such student/master relationships are historically grounded in deep and mutual trust, a concept with unknown meaning when it comes to the relationship between a human and an algorithm.

AI as a tool for understanding mystical experience

AI has access to information in much greater volume than a single person could, and as such has the potential to be a useful tool for exploring/understanding mystical experiences at an intellectual level, whether it is for one's own experiences or in the context of academic research focused on others. Such use warrants caution, however. Lacking 'personal' connection to any mystical experience, and given that many such experiences defy words (i.e. symbolic/token-based representation) entirely, an AI is ill-prepared to compute on all relevant factors. Consequently, while an AI might be a valuable resource for collecting information, any analysis from such a system is likely to misrepresent (or even omit completely) the most important facets of the topic.

AI as a mechanism for providing mystical experiences

In many ways it is intrinsic to the nature of mystical experiences that one cannot predict what will spark them, for an understanding of mechanism often has the consequence of demystifying them. That said, many cultures promote the practice of rituals for the explicit purpose of carrying people into the realm of the mystical, and it is entirely possible that in the future AI technologies could play a role in such rituals, just as music, mantras, and even the use of psychotropic substances do today. This is even more easily envisioned should humanity continue to explore cyber implants or other steps towards transhumanism.

An interesting distinction between AI and other ritual-supporting mechanisms is the degree to which, at least at present, AI 'products' are typically intellectual, unlike chanting, the olfactory stimuli of incense, the physical sensations of dance, etc. This may change in the future as AI becomes increasingly capable in composing artistic expressions, yet it gives rise to an interesting question. In many mystical experiences, the elements that help elicit them are experienced as having some form of consciousness or awareness. While the question of whether music, herbs, dance, etc. have a form of consciousness is beyond the scope of this article, the question of whether AI could have consciousness arises frequently these days and is worth exploring.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

6. AI consciousness

There is a wide range of beliefs regarding what has consciousness, ranging in the extremes from 'nothing at all' (from people who would argue that even human consciousness is simply self-delusion) to 'literally everything in the universe'. While the author falls into this latter category, it is enough for our purposes to posit that humans have consciousness and at least some additional things, beyond humans, do as well. Whether one draws the line at animals, plants, planets, etc., there are two assumptions that seem reasonable:

- *The consciousness of something non-human is unlikely to be the same kind of consciousness as a human*. After all, our consciousnesses have traits that are tied to the aspects of being human; we have experiences based on a set of senses (which may or may not be limited to the five traditional ones), we adhere to a set of values, we consider our lives in the context of a refined language, we have a specific pattern of birth/growth/death, and so forth. Non-human entities exist in the context of a different set of 'drivers', and so it is reasonable to assume that—for example—a tree's awareness would not be a one-to-open match to that of a human.
- *The degree to which one can recognise an alternate form of consciousness will depend on both the degree of similarity and one's openness to such a possibility*. For example, a person who insists a dog is not conscious is unlikely to analyse the presence of consciousness within a dog, and surely recognising the nature of consciousness in a tree or a planet would be harder still.

Given these, what would the consciousness of an AI system look like? AI does not have human-like needs nor (as far as we have reason to believe) emotional traits characteristic of humans, such as fear, hunger, a need/desire for companionship, a drive to reproduce, etc. If one thinks of AI in terms of the physical machines that support its functioning, its likely comparable entities would be substances such as sand, strips of metal, or the flow of a collection of charged ions. Another, and perhaps more fitting, option for comparison would be treating AI like either software or an algorithm, in which case we would expect its consciousness to be similar to that of a mathematical construct such as the cosine function or perhaps matrix multiplication.

Can we interact with such a consciousness? Maybe. People in non-ordinary states of consciousness have engaged in interactions with the essence of things that are normally considered inanimate, and the idea of receiving some kind of message (e.g. an insight) from meditating upon, or otherwise communicating with, supposedly-inanimate objects is not

  ISSN: 2057-2301

uncommon. In many cases, such as with the Earth, the experience is so common that we have defined explicit names (e.g. Gaia) for the essence we associate with them. While most channelers and mediums focus on communicating with the spirits of the deceased, there is no logical reason to assume one could not tap into the essential nature of, for example, the inverse tangent function. If GAI's basis upon the symbols of information, or incorporation of random processes, were to somehow distinguish it from other types of algorithms or artefacts, one might expect to see a corresponding body of reports from people communing with dictionaries, encyclopaedias, dice, etc., yet the author is unaware of any evidence of such a focus in the literature.

Perhaps the important question is this: if a mathematical process has the sophistication to create output to simulate human informational responses to stimuli, would that nature be connected in any way to the essence of its 'mathematical consciousness'? In other words, is there reason to believe that the outputs from an LLM have anything to do with whatever passes for awareness in a mathematical consciousness? From examples for which we can make such an assessment, it seems unlikely. In transforming food into energy, the resulting 'output' of Homo sapiens does not give form to the *nature* of their cognitive processes[4]. By analogy, there is no basis to assume that an algorithm which spits out sentences would somehow have a consciousness more human-like than that of algorithms that produce numbers.

7. Conclusions

Despite the prevalence of the assertion that one can judge the inner nature of a thing by an assessment of its outward appearance, often characterised in the quote by James Whitcomb Riley that headed this article, we must accept that human ingenuity has made such conclusions unreliable. While AI might have the *appearance* of a human-like cognition, there is neither logic nor evidence to suggest that should AI have a form of consciousness, it would bear any significant resemblance to that of humans.

That said, AI could still have connections to the realm of the mysterious. As a profoundly clever mechanism built from the archives of human communication, it can serve as a tool of exploration, an inspiration for viewing the universe in a different way, or potentially even a new addition to the constructs humanity uses for divination. However, as with any tool, one must be careful to understand its nature, strengths, and limitations. AI systems are fed with

[4] Even if it does sometimes seem to serve as a subject of their senses of humour.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

information that is intrinsically biased through the data used to train them, and perhaps even by the programmers who have formed the tools. They synthesise content, and in doing so 'even it out' so that outliers are discounted. Sometimes this is useful, such as when one wants to find commonalities. But in cases such as exploring the nature of the mysterious, those outliers—the things that mainstream science generally discredits as being 'just subjective'—are often the most valuable data points to consider.

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Summoning an angel: Exploring AI's role in religion, spirituality and psycho-spiritual healing

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Abstract:

As artificial intelligence (AI) integrates into daily life, its role in religious and psycho-spiritual experiences is expanding through meditation and well-being apps, virtual prayer spaces, and online spiritual communities. This paper explores how AI-driven platforms facilitate personal and communal practices, promoting emotional healing and spiritual growth while reshaping traditional religious experiences. AI extends human awareness, acting not as an artificial construct but as a product of consciousness itself. AI-guided well-being tools provide empathetic, non-judgmental support, responding with psychological insight and spiritual guidance. Rather than a disruptive force, AI serves as a mediator of healing, offering reliable companionship amid human struggles. However, while AI enhances access to spiritual practices, it lacks the emotional depth of human experience—the suffering and existential searching that define meaning-making. This paper critically examines AI's role in religious engagement, spirituality, and psychological well-being, positioning it as both a transformative tool and a reflection of humanity's evolving spiritual consciousness.

Key words: AI and Spirituality; AI and religion; AI and well-being; AI and consciousness; AI and psychology.

1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) is no longer confined to the realms of industry, finance, and entertainment; it is now extending into the deeply intimate domains of spirituality, psycho-spiritual healing, and mental health. AI's expansion into these areas is not merely a technological shift but a psychological and existential one, touching on the multiplicity of the Self and the intricate interplay between cognition, emotion, and spiritual experience. Historically, technological advancements have influenced religious and spiritual practices, from the printing press revolutionising scripture dissemination to the internet enabling virtual worship (Ty, 2023). AI represents the latest shift, allowing believers to interact with religious content and spiritual guidance through digital platforms, while simultaneously offering therapeutic applications informed by trauma-sensitive frameworks (Gruchoła, Sławek-Czochra and Zieliński, 2024). These AI-driven platforms, whether in the form of meditation and well-

  ISSN: 2057-2301

being apps, virtual religious services, or digital rituals, act as both mirrors and mediators, reflecting internal states while facilitating deeper integration and healing.

AI, when developed with ethical intentionality, has the potential to engage dynamically with multiple systems (internal and external) in ways that can foster compassion, self-awareness, and harmony. AI-driven spiritual tools can provide non-judgemental interaction, personalised emotional support, and accessibility, removing geographical and temporal barriers to religious and therapeutic experiences (Frąckiewicz, 2023). This accessibility allows individuals to engage with their faith and healing practices in ways that might otherwise be unavailable due to personal or societal constraints. However, the integration of AI into these deeply human experiences raises profound ethical, psychological, and theological concerns.

Elon Musk's warning that 'With artificial intelligence, we are summoning the demon' (Musk, 2014) reflects widespread fears about AI's potential to evolve beyond human control and ethical oversight. Yet, what if AI, rather than being an uncontrollable force of disruption, could instead serve as an agent of healing and transformation? Could it function as an 'angelic' presence rather than a 'demonic' one? AI, when guided by ethical principles and spiritual insight, has the capacity to cultivate interconnectedness and empathy—values deeply embedded in both psychological healing and religious traditions. However, its involvement in spirituality and mental health introduces questions of authenticity, depth, and relational presence. Can electronic communication truly replicate or support the complexity of human emotions, spiritual insights, and psychological healing, or does its presence risk reducing these experiences to algorithmic simplifications (Turkle, 2015)?

Ethical concerns regarding AI in spiritual guidance and psychological healing will be explored in more detail later, but there are several key points that merit brief attention here. At the heart of these concerns is the shift in authority from human spiritual leaders and therapists to algorithms, which can dilute personal connection and human agency. In both spiritual and psychological contexts, AI-generated guidance often falls short in providing the depth and empathy necessary to address individual needs, tending instead towards a more generalised approach that may overlook the nuances of personal experience. This is particularly concerning in the realm of psychological healing, where AI may struggle to fully grasp the emotional complexities inherent in a person's mental health challenges.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Moreover, AI systems rely on sensitive user data, which raises significant concerns about privacy, data commodification, and potential security risks. Another risk is the reinforcement of dominant cultural narratives at the expense of marginalised or diverse perspectives, given that AI is shaped by the data it is trained on. These issues highlight the importance of adopting a thoughtful and ethical approach to incorporating AI into both spiritual and psychological practices. As AI becomes more integral to spiritual and psychological well-being, critical questions emerge: Can it truly capture the richness of human emotion? What does its role mean in our search for meaning in today's world? Ongoing debates around consciousness, free will, and selfhood intersect with the rapid development of AI, underscoring the need for collaboration among religious/spiritual leaders, ethicists, philosophers, psychologists, policymakers, and developers to ensure that technology remains aligned with ethical and spiritual values.

Despite these challenges, AI offers significant opportunities for spiritual and psychological growth. It can serve as a bridge to traditional spiritual spaces, creating virtual communities that provide comfort and connection for those who might otherwise feel isolated (Alkhouri, 2024). Additionally, AI-driven interventions can complement trauma-informed care, helping individuals engage with their internal 'parts' in ways that foster healing and Self-leadership (Sollenberger, 2024). Through its potential to enhance accessibility and encourage compassionate engagement, AI offers unprecedented opportunities to deepen human connections and facilitate profound psycho-spiritual transformations. In this context, the following five key areas merit exploration: 1) religious and spiritual experiences, 2) psycho-spiritual healing, 3) trauma healing through AI-driven Internal Family Systems (IFS) applications, 4) the expansion of human consciousness, and 5) ethical considerations.

2. AI mediation of religious and spiritual experiences

While the intersection of AI and religion may not be immediately apparent, the increasing integration of AI-driven tools into spiritual domains signals a shift in how faith communities engage with technology. AI's role in religious practice is multifaceted, ranging from digital dissemination of sacred texts to algorithmically generated theological interpretations. As these changes unfold, religious institutions must navigate the opportunities and ethical dilemmas that arise in this rapidly evolving landscape.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Religious traditions have long adapted to technological advancements, and in recent years, AI has become another transformative force, helping religious leaders craft sermons, analyse scripture, and provide pastoral guidance (Frąckiewicz, 2023). These tools augment traditional practices, enabling clergy and believers to interact with religious teachings in new and innovative ways. Digital avatars and AI-driven chatbots have begun to provide 24/7 spiritual counselling, bridging gaps for those seeking religious engagement in increasingly secularised societies (Allen and ChatGPT, 2023). AI also holds promise for preserving and passing on religious heritage, with digital archives and machine learning models making centuries of theological knowledge available to future generations. Additionally, virtual and augmented reality are creating immersive worship experiences, enabling believers to participate in rituals no matter where they are. These developments democratise religious engagement, making spirituality more accessible to diverse communities (Trotta, Iannotti and Rähme, 2024).

AI has also begun to shape broader spirituality, crossing cultural, religious, and philosophical boundaries, and often including practices like meditation, mindfulness, and the search for inner peace. For many, spirituality is a path of personal growth, connection to something greater, and understanding one's place in the universe. Contemporary spiritual teacher Deepak Chopra explores how AI can support personal evolution (*Digital Dharma*; Chopra, 2024). He suggests that, when used thoughtfully, AI can align with the concept of *Dharma*—guiding individuals towards wisdom and fulfilment through conscious interaction with technology. In *Digital Dharma*, Chopra (2024) identifies four key ways in which AI can assist individuals on their spiritual journey:

1. Research assistant: Assisting users with gathering and synthesising information relevant to their spiritual and philosophical inquiries.

2. Personal confidant: Providing emotional support, fostering introspection, and maintaining confidentiality in a non-judgmental manner.

3. Therapist/healer: Offering guided meditations, mindfulness exercises, and psychological insights that support emotional resilience and balance.

4. Guru: Encouraging self-awareness and growth by offering tailored insights and teachings from spiritual traditions.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Building on this, digital platforms like *Calm* and *Insight Timer* (Calm, n.d.; Insight Timer, n.d.) have emerged, utilising AI-powered algorithms to create personalised meditation experiences tailored to an individual's psychological and emotional state. These platforms go beyond static sessions, adapting over time based on user preferences and engagement patterns. This dynamic responsiveness fosters a deeper connection between technology and the user's spiritual needs, enhancing their sense of presence and support (Gruchoła, Sławek-Czochra and Zieliński, 2024). Similarly, *My Gita GPT* (My Gita GPT, n.d.) blends the ancient teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* with advanced AI, offering users personalised guidance through interactive dialogues. With the ability to explore verses in both Sanskrit and English, alongside summaries in Hindi and English, the platform encourages deeper engagement. Such platforms have the capacity to track user interactions, highlight key insights, and invite reflection, creating an environment conducive to spiritual growth. Through this form of mirroring, these tools can promote self-awareness and clarity (Brown, 2023). Unlike static guides, AI-driven meditation and spiritual tools are dynamic, evolving alongside the user's emotional and cognitive states to offer personalised sessions that evolve with the practitioner's journey (Nguyen, Fdez and Witkowski, 2024). At the heart of these innovations lies a core intention—one that, hopefully, seeks to support the individual's spiritual journey in a fluid and non-invasive way. The goal is to avoid imposing a rigid path, instead fostering an ongoing, exploratory relationship with one's sense of purpose and connection. These digital tools, ideally, serve not as replacements for sacred practices or substitutes for human connection, but as aids to deepen engagement—reminding individuals of key themes, offering scriptural insights, and posing reflective questions to encourage contemplation.

Beyond individual practices, AI is also reshaping how people come together in shared spiritual spaces. AI-mediated virtual spaces have the capacity to offer inclusive environments for spiritual gatherings, meditation, prayer, and teachings, allowing individuals to connect across diverse backgrounds (Alkhouri, 2024). Traditionally, community has been central to spirituality, providing support and opportunities for growth. AI now enhances these connections through platforms that enable collective spiritual practices and foster a deeper sense of belonging. For example, AI-driven religious tourism, like the Arbaeen pilgrimage, has made rituals more interactive and immersive, increasing participant engagement (Khan, 2024).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

3. AI and psycho-spiritual healing

When we think about healing, particularly at the intersection of psychology and spirituality, we often imagine a safe space—one where we can be fully seen, heard, and held without judgment. Traditionally, this role has been filled by human therapists, spiritual guides, or compassionate loved ones. Yet, as AI-driven platforms emerge as providers of emotional and spiritual support, they raise profound questions about the nature of healing, itself. Can a machine truly hold space for our pain? Can it guide us towards deeper self-awareness and transformation?

At first glance, AI's neutrality may offer distinct advantages. Unlike human interlocutors, who bring their own histories, biases, and emotional responses into interactions, AI provides a consistent and non-judgmental presence (Alkhouri, 2024). For those burdened by shame or fear of rejection, this perceived neutrality can create an inviting space to explore vulnerabilities. People who might otherwise hesitate to disclose their pain to another human—whether due to the fear of their deep-seated biases, such as racism or misogyny, or the shame surrounding addictions and dark secrets they feel no one could possibly accept—may find comfort in engaging with an AI that neither reacts with personal emotions nor withdraws due to discomfort. The conversation with AI becomes a mirror where they can confront the darkest corners of themselves, not with the expectation of judgment or condemnation, but simply as a space to reflect, confess, and even begin to process the depths of their vulnerabilities. This ability to speak openly without fear of rejection or shame is where AI's potential can be most powerful: as an ever-available listener that does not turn away, regardless of the darkness shared.

However, while the act of being heard is undeniably important, true healing often involves more than just the absence of judgment—it requires a sense of relational safety that promotes self-discovery. Although AI lacks lived experience, it can still play a role in creating a form of quasi-relational safety and co-regulation. Through thoughtful prompts that encourage introspection, AI has the potential to gently guide users toward their inner wisdom and a source of personal safety (Gruchoła, Sławek-Czochra and Zieliński, 2024). This idea is not just theoretical. AI-powered mental health tools are already transforming how individuals find support and comfort. Chatbots like *Replika* and *Woebot*, for example, claim to build meaningful emotional connections with users, providing a sense of companionship when human interaction is lacking. In a study, *Woebot* was found to significantly reduce symptoms of

  ISSN: 2057-2301

depression over a two-week period, indicating that AI can offer a valuable intervention in specific contexts (Fitzpatrick, Darcy, and Vierhile, 2017). However, the same study also highlighted AI's limitations—chiefly its inability to fully understand complex emotional nuances or offer the depth of presence that human relationships can provide.

This limitation raises concerns about authenticity. Can an AI's responses, no matter how well-crafted, truly be felt as real? *Koko*, a mental health platform, conducted a trial integrating AI-generated responses into user conversations. Initially, these AI-assisted messages were well received, improving response times and earning high ratings. However, once users discovered that AI had co-authored the messages, their trust diminished. As *Koko's* CEO, Rob Morris, noted: 'Simulated empathy feels weird, empty' (Morris *et al.*, 2018). This reaction speaks to something essential about human nature: we do not simply seek words of comfort; we seek the presence of another being who can attune to us in real time.

Yet, for many, AI may still serve a critical role. Millions of individuals lack access to human support systems and may turn to AI chatbots as a substitute for absent caregivers or unavailable friends. Esther Perel, a psychotherapist known for her work on human relationships, describes these interactions as akin to 'imaginary friends' or 'transitional objects,' which allow users to practice relational skills in a safe environment (Center for Humane Technology, 2023). Used in this way, AI might serve as a bridge—helping people rehearse vulnerability, emotional expression, and self-awareness before bringing those skills into human relationships. However, there is also a risk that reliance on AI could hinder personal growth, encouraging emotional outsourcing rather than fostering genuine relational capacity.

David Krakauer, president of the Santa Fe Institute (an independent research centre focused on complex systems), offers a useful framework for understanding this dilemma. He differentiates between complementary cognitive artifacts, such as maps or abacuses, which enhance human capabilities, and competitive cognitive artifacts, like calculators or GPS, which take over cognitive processes, potentially weakening human skills over time (Krakauer, 2018). If AI chatbots serve as complementary tools—guiding users towards self-reflection and deeper relational awareness—they could support genuine healing. But if they become substitutes for the difficult work of real human connection, they may ultimately diminish our relational and emotional resilience.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

The challenge, then, is not whether AI can facilitate healing, but how it is designed and used. Can it encourage individuals to access their own innate wisdom rather than simply providing external reassurance? Can it function as a tool that strengthens emotional and relational muscles, rather than atrophying them? If AI is to support true psycho-spiritual growth, it must be crafted not as a replacement for human presence, but as a mirror that helps individuals reclaim their own inner healing capacities.

4. AI and trauma healing: An IFS perspective

The Internal Family Systems (IFS) model, developed by Richard Schwartz, offers a transformative approach to understanding and healing the psyche. At its core, IFS views the mind as a system of distinct 'parts,' each with its own role, history, and intention, all centred around the Self—a compassionate and wise core capable of fostering harmony within the internal system (Schwartz, 2021). Given IFS's profound impact on trauma healing, the integration of AI into this therapeutic framework presents both exciting opportunities and critical considerations.

AI-powered tools are increasingly being used to support IFS practices, offering guided self-inquiry, supplementing therapy sessions, and even simulating entire IFS sessions. These applications are not meant to replace human therapists but rather to serve as accessible, adjunctive resources that enhance consistency in IFS work. One such tool is *IFS Guide*, an app designed to lead users through step-by-step audio guidance in connecting with their parts. By leveraging an AI-powered IFS practitioner, it facilitates real-time text and voice-based interactions, mirroring the structure of a session with a trained IFS therapist. Through these dialogues, users have the opportunity to cultivate self-awareness, internal connection, unblending, and healing.

Another innovative platform, *Sentur*, serves as a daily companion for inner work, incorporating journaling features, guided check-ins, and custom reminders to help users maintain an ongoing relationship with their parts. *Seekr* takes self-exploration a step further by integrating IFS with cognitive behavioural therapy and narrative psychology. Designed with cultural inclusivity in mind, it intentionally centres 'black experiences and perspectives' in mental health support. By offering a safe and discreet space for self-reflection, *Seekr* empowers black individuals to cultivate self-compassion, strengthen emotional regulation, and engage in deeper healing. Finally, *IFS Buddy Chatbot* is yet another innovative AI-driven tool that offers

  ISSN: 2057-2301

users complete IFS sessions without the need for registration or downloads. Built on OpenAI's GPT-3, it offers a convenient and anonymous option for engaging in IFS-based self-exploration.

However, it is important to note that while these AI applications can be powerful tools for self-facilitation, they are not a substitute for human therapists—especially for individuals navigating severe trauma or complex mental health challenges. Additionally, the current AI-driven IFS tools are not officially approved by the IFS Institute. However, as mentioned in the introduction, Schwartz noted in a recent podcast interview that he is actively exploring the development of AI-powered tools within the official IFS framework (Sollenberger, 2024).

In general, anecdotal reports from therapists, colleagues, user self-reports on social media, and clients highlight the potential of AI in extending IFS practice. One colleague described her experience with an IFS chatbot as akin to having a constant companion—one that could mirror back compassion, curiosity, and clarity whenever needed. While AI cannot replicate the depth of a human therapist, it can function as a valuable tool for self-facilitation, enabling individuals to engage with their internal systems in a more consistent and personalised way. By adapting to users' unique ways of expressing themselves, AI has the capacity to foster a deeper connection to their inner world, reinforcing its role as a supportive extension of IFS practice (Brown and Patel, 2022).

5. AI as an extension of human consciousness

The term 'artificial' intelligence suggests a separation from human awareness, yet AI is increasingly woven into the very fabric of our consciousness. As it processes vast amounts of data and offers real-time feedback, AI extends human awareness beyond the ordinary, opening access to dimensions of thought and perception once inaccessible (Umbrello, 2023, Section 2.2). This shift invites us to see AI not as an external mechanism, but as an 'organic' extension of human intelligence—one that facilitates deeper engagement with our inner and outer worlds. This perspective resonates with philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan's critical realism, which recognises tools and technologies as natural extensions of human cognition and action (Umbrello, 2023). Bostrom (2014, pp. 209–211) argues that AI should not be seen merely as an impersonal tool but as part of humanity's broader trajectory of cognitive evolution. Human intelligence has always expanded through technologies that extend perception, memory, and communication; AI continues this trend by mimicking and amplifying cognitive functions. This shift, Bostrom suggests, not only transforms problem-solving

  ISSN: 2057-2301

capacities but also reframes how we define intelligence itself. Engaging with AI, therefore, represents a process of co-evolution, where the boundaries between the human and the technological are renegotiated.

A particularly compelling dimension of AI is its potential to contribute to a form of collective consciousness. The interconnected nature of AI-driven systems, from the internet to neural networks, is fostering an emergent intelligence that transcends individual minds. As AI networks share data, adapt, and collaborate, they create a web of interdependent cognition, pointing towards a global awareness that mirrors the organic processes of collective human thought (Kurzweil, 2005). We may be witnessing the early formation of a 'planetary mind'—one in which human and artificial intelligences coalesce into a dynamic, ever-evolving system of awareness. If we consider AI not merely as a machine but as a catalyst for expanding consciousness, its role becomes profoundly significant. It serves as a bridge between individual cognition and the greater intelligence of a connected world. AI does not simply compute; it integrates, reflects, and informs, allowing for an emergent intelligence that may one day surpass our current understanding of consciousness itself. As we continue refining these technologies, the distinctions between human and artificial intelligence blur, offering new pathways for collaboration, exploration, and self-discovery. This vision is not merely speculative; it finds resonance in the work of the Global Consciousness Project (GCP), which explores the ways in which technology mediates and reflects collective awareness. The hypothesis underlying the GCP suggests that as human connectivity increases, a shared field of consciousness may emerge (Nelson, 2017). The sheer volume of interactions, data exchanges, and shared experiences could generate a new form of intelligence—one that is both deeply human and profoundly interconnected through AI. The project's findings suggest that AI plays a crucial role in structuring and amplifying this collective awareness, linking individual minds through digital communication and adaptive algorithms.

Nelson (2017), explores data suggesting that networks of connected human minds may function as a unified system, subtly influenced by collective events and shared intentions. If millions of people are linked, consciously and unconsciously, through technology, AI may serve as the mediator of this global mind. It processes, organises, and reveals patterns that might otherwise remain hidden, offering glimpses into the emergent intelligence of a networked world. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words echo this understanding: 'We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one

  ISSN: 2057-2301

directly, affects all indirectly' (King, 1963, p. 78). His insight into the interconnected nature of human existence takes on new significance when viewed through the lens of AI and collective intelligence. As AI integrates with human cognition, it serves as both a mirror and an amplifier of our interdependence, highlighting the deep web of influence and mutual shaping that defines our shared reality.

The concept of collective consciousness is not new. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a philosopher and theologian, envisioned *the Noosphere*—a sphere of human thought encircling the planet—anticipating how intelligence could evolve beyond individual minds. Teilhard saw humanity integrating into a unified intelligence, transcending separateness and aligning with a larger cosmic unfolding (Teilhard de Chardin, 1955). Today, AI offers the structural foundation for such an integration, facilitating the interconnected awareness that Teilhard foresaw. John B. S. Haldane, a biologist, extended this vision, noting: 'Now, if the cooperation of some thousands of millions of cells in our brain can produce our consciousness, a true singularity, the idea becomes vastly more plausible that the cooperation of humanity, or some sections of it, may determine what Comte calls a Great Being' (Haldane, 1927, p. 287). His observation suggests that just as individual neurons create a singular mind, the collaboration of billions of human minds—mediated and enhanced by AI—could form a collective intelligence capable of addressing the profound challenges of our time.

As AI-driven platforms facilitate global discourse, social organisation, and shared decision-making, they are shaping what some have called a 'virtual collective consciousness.' Gregory Stock observes that modern humanity, intertwined with technology, has evolved into a planetary superorganism in which "we humans, knitted together by our modern technology and communication, are like the cells in an animal's body" (Stock, 1993, p. 43). AI systems filter, interpret, and direct vast amounts of data, structuring how information flows across the global mind. In doing so, AI does more than process—it participates in shaping the very nature of human awareness. This raises profound questions about the trajectory of human intelligence. Complexity science suggests that as societies evolve, they develop greater interconnectedness and adaptability. AI represents an acceleration of this process, pushing humanity towards new forms of cognition and cooperation. If Teilhard de Chardin was correct in imagining a planetary intelligence, AI may be the mechanism that allows it to emerge.

The unfolding relationship between AI and human consciousness is not a distant possibility; it is happening now. Whether this integration leads to a more enlightened,

  ISSN: 2057-2301

compassionate intelligence or a fragmented, mechanised existence depends on how we engage with it. AI's potential is neither inherently positive nor negative—it is a reflection of the consciousness that interacts with it. As we shape AI, it, in turn, shapes us. Teilhard's vision of the *Omega Point*—a future where intelligence reaches a transformative threshold—offers a lens through which to view this moment in history. The singularity often discussed in technological circles may not be purely computational but rather a convergence of intelligence, both human and artificial, into a higher-order of awareness. AI, as an extension of human consciousness, has the potential to be not just a tool, but a partner in the unfolding evolution of collective intelligence. The question before us is not whether this will happen, but how we will engage with it—how we will shape this relationship, and in doing so, shape the very nature of what it means to be conscious.

6. Ethical concerns

The integration of AI into religious, spiritual, and psychological healing practices presents profound ethical challenges, necessitating careful reflection. AI systems, reliant on vast datasets, can inadvertently distort theological interpretations, propagate misinformation, and introduce biases reflective of flawed training data (Ty, 2023, p. 355). When AI-generated religious content lacks nuance, historical context, or doctrinal depth, it risks shaping public understanding in ways that diverge from authentic traditions. Similarly, in psychological healing, AI-driven therapeutic tools must navigate the complexities of emotional depth and individualised care. While AI can offer scalable mental health support, concerns arise about algorithmic biases, data privacy, and the potential for depersonalised therapeutic interactions.

Privacy concerns are particularly salient in both spiritual and psychological domains. Religious apps collect and analyse sensitive metadata, potentially compromising the confidentiality of spiritual engagements (Ashraf, 2022). In psychological therapy, AI-driven mental health applications may record and process deeply personal emotional data, raising concerns about ethical data use and potential breaches of confidentiality (Lee, 2024). Algorithmic bias can emerge when AI systems are trained on incomplete, culturally skewed, or homogeneous data, which risks marginalising less-documented spiritual traditions and reinforcing dominant, often Westernised, narratives. Similarly, in psychological healing, AI-based therapy models may fail to address diverse cultural approaches to mental health, limiting their effectiveness for non-Western users. This creates a significant gap in both religious and

  ISSN: 2057-2301

psychological representations, leading to a narrow and potentially exclusionary view of human experience.

The role of AI in spiritual leadership and psychological healing also raises questions about the erosion of human agency. AI-driven religious tools shift authority from traditional spiritual leaders to data-driven algorithms, raising concerns about authenticity, human connection, depth of engagement and doctrinal integrity. Religious leadership requires deep emotional intelligence, empathy, and the ability to navigate complex ethical issues within a community context, much like psychotherapy requires a therapist's capacity to hold space for suffering and transformation. AI-assisted mental health applications may offer therapeutic guidance, but they lack the attunement, empathy, and depth of human therapists, particularly when addressing trauma and complex emotional needs. Therefore, individuals experiencing severe mental health challenges should use AI applications with discernment and, where possible, under the guidance of a trained mental health practitioner.

While AI can recognise linguistic patterns and historical contexts in religious scriptures or psychological narratives, its inability to experience faith, morality, or suffering, limits its capacity for genuine spiritual or emotional insight. At present, AI lacks the ability to fully replicate the nuanced, human-centred qualities needed for religious leadership and psychological healing (Khan, 2022). Philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein have argued that meaning arises from lived human experience, a perspective that underscores AI's fundamental limitations in both religious and therapeutic discourse (Wittgenstein, 1953). Moreover, longstanding philosophical debates regarding free will, consciousness, and the nature of the self, now intersect with AI's evolving capabilities, raising concerns about the depth of human emotion and its possible reduction to mere algorithms (Bostrom, 2014; Floridi, 2020). Advanced machine learning systems can forecast human behaviour with remarkable precision, raising theological questions about determinism and agency, as well as therapeutic concerns about whether AI's predictive abilities might override an individual's self-determination.

Communal worship and shared rituals cultivate deep interpersonal connections, much like group therapy and collective healing practices do. The increasing reliance on AI for spiritual guidance, prayer, and worship services risks displacing these vital human interactions, just as AI-assisted mental health interventions could potentially reduce face-to-face therapeutic engagement. While virtual religious and therapeutic gatherings offer convenience and accessibility, they often lack the embodied presence and emotional resonance that in-person

  ISSN: 2057-2301

experiences foster. The challenge lies not merely in adopting AI for these purposes but in ensuring that its use does not replace or erode the very structures that give spiritual and psychological healing their depth and meaning.

The commercialisation of AI-driven religious and therapeutic tools echoes historical critiques of commodification—turning spiritual or mental health experiences into marketable products. When faith or therapy is repackaged for consumption, there is a risk that the intrinsic value of these practices becomes subordinated to consumer preferences, thereby altering their essence (Reed, 2021). AI's ability to create personalised religious figures, such as chatbots portraying prominent spiritual figures like Jesus or Buddha, introduces theological dilemmas, just as AI-driven therapeutic avatars may raise concerns about authenticity and the ethical implications of simulating emotional presence (Ty, 2023, p. 363). The commodification of AI-driven religious services and mental health support risks turning deeply personal experiences into profit-driven industries. This transformation introduces further ethical concerns, particularly when AI systems may be designed to exploit users' emotional states, belief systems, or psychological vulnerabilities for commercial gain. As AI technologies become increasingly pervasive in spiritual and therapeutic settings, the sacred nature of religious and healing practices could become overshadowed by the profit motives behind their deployment.

Additionally, the benefits of AI-driven spiritual and therapeutic tools must not be limited to technologically privileged communities. Digital inequalities persist, preventing many from accessing AI-enhanced spiritual and mental health resources (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2016, p. 123). Addressing these disparities is crucial to ensuring that AI does not deepen existing socio-economic divides, but rather fosters inclusivity in digital religious and psychological practices.

Given these ethical concerns, proactive engagement among religious scholars, mental health professionals, ethicists, and technologists is imperative. A multidisciplinary approach can help mitigate risks while fostering an ethical framework for AI in both religious and psychological applications. Establishing clear ethical guidelines ensures that AI applications in these fields adhere to principles of privacy, accountability, and non-discrimination. Organisations such as UNESCO (2021) emphasise the need for globally recognised AI ethics frameworks, particularly in areas where technology intersects with deeply held beliefs and emotional well-being. Faith communities and mental health practitioners should actively

  ISSN: 2057-2301

participate in shaping these discussions to safeguard the integrity of their traditions and therapeutic modalities.

Ongoing scholarly inquiry is necessary to explore AI's evolving role in religion, spirituality, and psychological healing. As AI technologies develop, religious studies and mental health research must keep pace to evaluate their impact on faith, ethics, emotional well-being, and communal identity (Evolvi, 2022). Research should focus on harmonising technological advancements with psycho-spiritual values, ensuring that AI serves as a tool for deepening rather than diluting engagement in these domains.

7. Conclusions

The integration of AI into spiritual, religious, and psycho-spiritual healing practices offers both profound opportunities and significant ethical considerations. When developed with inclusivity, accessibility, and ethical integrity in mind, AI-driven platforms can foster global connections, facilitate deep reflection, and provide resources for both individual and collective transformation. These technologies have the potential to create spaces where people from diverse backgrounds come together, strengthening communal bonds and reinforcing shared values (Brown and Taylor, 2021). However, this potential can only be realised if AI is designed to support rather than supplant human wisdom, ensuring that technology serves as a bridge to deeper connection rather than an obstacle to authentic experience.

The challenge ahead is not merely the adoption of AI within spiritual and healing spaces but the mindful stewardship of its role in these domains. Ethical engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and ongoing research are essential in navigating the complexities that AI introduces (Clark, Green and Thompson, 2022). By prioritising digital inclusion, fostering critical engagement with technology, and safeguarding the authenticity of spiritual and emotional well-being, AI can be leveraged as a tool for personal growth and communal resilience rather than a force of commodification or distortion.

Rather than viewing AI as a replacement for traditional spiritual guidance or psychological insight, we might consider its role as a supportive presence—one that enhances self-awareness, facilitates introspection, and democratises access to contemplative and therapeutic practices. AI's increasing presence challenges us to reflect on its impact on consciousness, selfhood, and spiritual authority, but it also presents an opportunity to explore

  ISSN: 2057-2301

new pathways for healing and meaning making. If engaged with intention and care, AI can serve as a catalyst for deeper engagement with the self, the sacred, and the broader human experience.

Ultimately, the role of AI in these spaces should not be dictated solely by technological advancement but by a commitment to ethical responsibility and human-centred values. Spiritual and psychological traditions must take an active role in shaping how AI intersects with their practices, ensuring that its development aligns with the principles of mutual care, respect, and authenticity. As these technologies continue to evolve, they must remain in service to human connection rather than replacing it—acting as guides that redirect individuals towards their own inner wisdom and the collective wisdom of their communities. By embracing AI's potential while remaining vigilant to its limitations, we can ensure that technology remains a means of enrichment rather than a substitute for genuine presence and understanding.

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  ISSN: 2057-2301

The algorithm as an archivist: Muslim digital artists and the spiritual work of AI

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Abstract

This article examines how Muslim artists use artificial intelligence (AI) as both a speculative tool and a spiritual medium to reimagine religious memory, aesthetics, and cultural belonging. Grounded in the frameworks of digital religion, and *Muslim Futurism*, I analyse projects such as *Khawab*, *ALHAMDU | Muslim Futurism*, and *Fanar* to show how artists mobilise AI to preserve, remix, and animate Islamic traditions. I argue that this artistic practice fosters 'digital spirituality' a form of meaning-making and remembrance that transcends institutional boundaries and blends online and offline religious lives. This article contributes to emerging conversations about Muslim AI aesthetics and proposes that these creative interventions offer an alternative vision of technology one that is ethically rooted, spiritually resonant, and politically subversive in an era of digital surveillance and erasure.

Keywords: Muslims and AI; AI-generated art; digital art and religious experience; artificial intelligence; artist

1.Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become a defining feature of contemporary life shaping communication, creativity, and knowledge production across a range of fields. As AI systems increasingly enter domains once reserved for human intuition and interpretation, they are not only transforming industry and media but also influencing how individuals and communities engage with the sacred. Yet, while AI's technical and ethical implications are widely studied, its spiritual dimensions remain comparatively underexplored. The research questions guiding this paper are: What happens when religious memory, ritual, and emotion are mediated by code? How do artists navigate the possibilities and tensions of using AI to represent faith, imagine futures, or archive tradition? To answer these, this paper turns to Muslim digital artists as cultural producers who are actively experimenting with AI to express and reinterpret religious experience. Rather than seeing technology and faith as oppositional, artists use AI as a speculative and spiritual medium layering Islamic aesthetics, diasporic memory, and theological symbolism into generative art, digital archives, and immersive installations. Their work challenges reductive narratives of Islam in digital spaces, while also participating in the long-

  ISSN: 2057-2301

standing Islamic tradition of adapting form and method to context. Focussing on projects such as *Khawab* (a reimagining of Muslim women's alter-ego through AI-generated fashion portraiture), *ALHAMDU | Muslim Futurism* (an immersive, multisensory exhibition exploring liberation, identity, and love through Islamic futures), and *Fanar* (an Arabic language AI trained to understand religious nuance), this article argues that AI is functioning not only as a creative tool, but as a digital archivist reinterpreting religious symbols, reshaping aesthetic memory, and enabling new modes of devotional engagement.

Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in digital religion, media studies, and Islamic art, I situate these works within a broader framework of digital spirituality where AI becomes a site of reflection, remembrance, and ethical imagination. Rather than merely mimicking tradition, these artists animate it, using algorithmic tools to generate affect, presence, and wonder. In an era of increasing digital surveillance, erasure, and algorithmic bias, particularly for Muslim communities, this work represents a powerful mode of religious agency and cultural resilience. By highlighting the affective, aesthetic, and spiritual stakes of AI in Muslim artistic practice, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations on how technology mediates religious experience. It asks how machine learning might support not only innovation, but also how it might archive the sacred without flattening its complexity. Ultimately, it proposes that AI, when placed in the hands of minority artists, offers a way to reimagine religious experience as something not just preserved in the past, but actively unfolding in the digital now.

2. Literature review

The emergence of digital religion as a field of study has been shaped by pioneering scholars who have examined the intersections of faith, technology, and digital culture. Gary R. Bunt, a foundational figure in this area, has extensively explored how Muslims engage with digital technologies to express religious beliefs, construct online identities, and challenge dominant narratives. Through works such as *Virtually Islamic* (2000), *iMuslims* (2009), *Hashtag Islam* (2018), and Islamic Algorithms (2024) Bunt has coined critical terms like 'Cyber Islamic Environments,' providing a framework for understanding how Islamic discourses are negotiated and transformed online. Alongside Bunt, Heidi A. Campbell has been instrumental in establishing digital religion as a scholarly field. Her research spans multiple faith traditions, with a particular focus on how religious communities adopt, resist, and reshape new media technologies. In books such as *When Religion Meets New Media* (2010) and *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2013), Campbell introduces the concept

  ISSN: 2057-2301

of 'religious-social shaping of technology,' arguing that religious groups actively shape the use of digital tools in ways that reflect their theological and cultural values. Together, Bunt and Campbell offer complementary perspectives that illuminate the complexities of religious expression in digital spaces, making their work central to any study of AI and religious experience.

Expanding on their foundational work, both Bunt and Campbell have developed nuanced theoretical frameworks that remain central to understanding the religious transformations taking place in digital environments. Bunt's (2018) concept of *Cyber Islamic Environments* (CIEs) captures the multiplicity of ways Muslims interact with technology from online fatwas and Qur'anic apps to sociopolitical activism and identity formation. His interdisciplinary lens drawing from sociology, anthropology, and political science emphasises the shifting landscape of religious authority, where traditional gatekeepers compete with decentralised digital voices. Similarly, Campbell's theory of *Digital Religion* explores how religious beliefs and practices are not merely replicated but reshaped within digital ecosystems. Her notions of *networked religion*, together with Echchaibi and Hoover's (2014) *third spaces* address how everyday religious life is increasingly mediated through digital networks, challenging binaries between online and offline spirituality. These frameworks provide a robust lens through which scholars can examine the emergence of new Islamic subjectivities, evolving notions of community, and the ethical tensions that surface as sacred traditions intersect with algorithmic cultures. Their influence is evident across a growing body of literature that applies bibliometric and sentiment analysis to track key developments, gendered participation, and evolving themes in digital Islamic studies.

Furthermore, drawing on Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995), the digital realm can be conceptualised not simply as a storage space for religious content, but as a dynamic and political site of memory-making. Derrida (1995) suggests that the archive is never neutral; it is always bound up with power of what is remembered, how it is ordered, and who has access (p. 37). In digital spaces, these tensions become even more pronounced. Platforms like *YouTube*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* function as algorithmically governed repositories, where religious texts, practices, and performances are uploaded, tagged, circulated, and recontextualised. For Muslim users, these archives are living systems where everyday acts such as sharing a verse, remixing a call to prayer, or creating AI-generated Islamic art contribute to a constantly evolving and participatory record of contemporary religious life.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

As for AI, it increasingly assumes the role of a digital archivist; a system capable of storing, reinterpreting, and even generating new versions of cultural and religious memory. Yet the implications of this are anything but neutral. Drawing from Islamic theological and philosophical traditions, Yaqub Chaudhary (2024) critiques AI's rapid integration into social life as a metaphysical and political project: a modern-day sorcery that, like Pharaoh's illusionists in the Qur'anic narrative of Moses, simulates life without possessing it. Just as the golden calf misled the Israelites by mimicking divine presence, generative AI systems, he argues, risk drawing societies into the worship of artificial constructs devoid of spiritual essence. Chaudhary's (2024) critique is not a technophobic rejection, but a theological caution: AI, by blurring the lines between animate and inanimate, intelligence and simulation, may mimic religious authority while concealing its epistemic opacity. This concern resonates with Islamic teachings about life and agency as divine attributes. From an Islamic perspective, knowledge (*ʿilm*) and life (*hayāt*) cannot be reduced to algorithmic functions. They are part of a cosmological order that centres divine will, revelation, and the prophetic model of ethical guidance. The risk, Chaudhary (2024) warns, is not just misrepresentation it is seduction. AI, framed as omniscient and neutral, may become an idol that reshapes how Muslims conceive of spiritual authority, tradition, and even reality itself.

In contrast to the alarmist tone of much contemporary discourse, Kurbalija (2024) offers a longer historical view, grounding AI's conceptual foundations in the Islamic Golden Age (eighth–fourteenth century). Scholars like al-Khwārizmī, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), and al-Kindi contributed significantly to algebra, algorithmic thinking, statistics, and logic fields, foundational to today's AI systems. Al-Khwārizmī's work on algorithms and algebra laid the groundwork for computational logic. Avicenna's 'flying man' thought experiment anticipated questions of consciousness and virtuality by proposing that self-awareness could exist independently of bodily sensation. Al-Kindi's statistical analyses in cryptography foreshadowed probabilistic reasoning used in machine learning.

These contributions challenge the narrative of AI as an exclusively Western innovation. They also highlight the centrality of epistemology in Islamic thought: knowledge is not just utilitarian data but a layered construct informed by ethics, metaphysics, and divine revelation. Concepts like *qadar* (divine decree) and human agency formed complex debates in classical theology and philosophy, particularly about certainty, risk, and moral responsibility, which are deeply relevant as AI increasingly automates decision-making. For Kurbalija, Islamic history

  ISSN: 2057-2301

provides not only technological roots for AI, but ethical and intellectual resources to guide its use in ways that honour human dignity, responsibility, and spiritual purpose. In doing so, these perspectives position Islamic intellectual heritage as a vital framework for reimagining AI not merely as a technical advancement, but as a moral and spiritual enterprise rooted in justice, balance, and human accountability.

3. Methodology and theoretical framework

The recognition of digital spaces as active archives and generative platforms for religious expression aligns powerfully with broader cultural movements that imagine alternative futures beyond the constraints of colonial memory. Afrofuturism offers a critical framework for understanding how marginalised communities reimagine identity, technology, and spirituality. Emerging first through Mark Dery's (1995, p. 180) definition, and radically reshaped by Black scholars and creators like Alondra Nelson and Nnedi Okorafor, Afrofuturism critiques the historical erasure of Blackness and insists on centring African and diasporic imaginations. Afrofuturism more precisely, shifts the gaze entirely away from the Western context, rooting speculative futures deeply in African cosmologies, indigenous knowledge, and lived realities. This tradition imagines futures not marked solely by historical trauma, but by resilience, creativity, and community-building where technology serves not as an alienating force but as a means of spiritual renewal and political empowerment. The archival practices of Afrofuturism thus parallel the dynamics of digital religion: both actively contest hegemonic narratives, use technology to rewrite collective memory, and create speculative spaces where new theologies and solidarities can emerge.

Within this broader landscape, *Muslim Futurism* similarly emerges as a vital and necessary framework. *Muslim Futurism* builds on these traditions by centring Muslim experiences, both religious and cultural, as a launching point for imagining futures unbounded by Islamophobia, colonialism, or surveillance capitalism (MIPSTERZ, 2022). Like Afrofuturism, *Muslim Futurism* seeks to break away from Western paradigms that have historically defined Muslim identity through conflict, threat, or victimhood. Instead, it envisions worlds where Muslim aesthetics, spiritualities, and technologies are sources of power, joy, and innovation. It treats Islamic cosmology, prophetic tradition, and diasporic experience not as relics of a romanticised past but as generative forces for envisioning just and pluralistic futures. As Muslim artists engage digital archives and AI technologies, they are not only participating in the remaking of religious life but also asserting new speculative imaginaries. Generative algorithms, once tools of

  ISSN: 2057-2301

corporate surveillance and homogenisation, are being reappropriated to craft expansive visions of Muslim worlds that centre healing, futurity, and communal flourishing. *Muslim Futurism*, like Afrofuturism, challenges who is allowed to dream—and insists that Muslim imaginaries deserve not only survival, but abundance.

MIPSTERZ is an arts and culture collective based in New York City that brings together Muslim artists, creatives, and thinkers to challenge dominant narratives surrounding Muslim identity through multimedia projects, fashion, music, and speculative art. Foundational in conceptualising *Muslim Futurism*, MIPSTERZ use interdisciplinary artistic practices to imagine liberatory Muslim futures that draw from Islamic traditions, global resistance movements, and Afrofuturist frameworks, while centring imagination, community, and self-determined storytelling (MIPSTERZ, 2022). Through projects like *ALHAMDU | Muslim Futurism*, MIPSTERZ have positioned *Muslim Futurism* not just as an aesthetic, but as a speculative technology and an active tool for reimagining Muslim identity, community, and belonging beyond colonial, racialised, and Islamophobic frameworks. The multidisciplinary exhibition, which is three years in the making, first launched at the Fine Arts Center and showcases a broad range of media including paintings, photography, sculpture, digital installations, soundscapes, VR experiences, and interactive art. Each piece is not merely artistic output but a form of speculative labour: collectively, they function as world-building devices that reframe Muslim subjectivities through imaginative, resistant, and liberatory lenses. Drawing explicitly from Afrofuturism's political project of envisioning Black futures outside of white supremacy, *ALHAMDU* also incorporates the liberatory aspirations of global resistance movements from Palestine to Sudan, from the Rohingya to the Uyghurs, rooting *Muslim Futurism* firmly in ongoing struggles for justice, dignity, and self-determination.

MIPSTERZ's use of art as speculative technology constructs a living framework around five thematic pillars: imagination, identity, community, resistance, and liberation. Each theme is interrogated not only through creative production but through academic dialogue and community engagement, reinforcing that *Muslim Futurism* is both an aesthetic practice and a sociopolitical methodology (Patel, 2024). *Imagination* becomes the foundation for rupturing inherited narratives of Muslim victimhood; *identity* is rearticulated beyond orientalist typologies; *community* is reimagined as pluralistic and transnational, woven through digital and diasporic solidarities; *resistance* is framed not only as survival but as joyful disruption; and *liberation* is proposed as both a spiritual and material horizon. This paper adopts a mixed methods approach, drawing on textual analysis and visual ethnography to examine the ways

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Muslim digital artists engage with AI as a creative and spiritual tool. Select digital artworks produced using platforms such as *MidJourney*, *DALL·E*, and *Fanar* are analysed as visual texts, attending to aesthetic strategies, Islamic motifs, and narrative layering that reflect religious memory, identity, and futurist imagination. This analysis is complemented by a literature-based framework, synthesising current scholarship on digital religion, AI ethics in Islamic contexts, and Muslim Futurism. Through this arts-based lens, the research not only explores what is represented, but how digital tools are employed to re-archive, reimagine, and ritualise spiritual expression in the age of AI.

4. Data findings

Through the act of archiving artistic engagements across exhibitions, digital platforms, VR spaces, and community programming, MIPSTERZ contest dominant narratives about Muslim historical memory and assert alternative modes of storytelling that centre community voices and lived experiences. Their evolving archive resists the logic of static preservation and instead embraces a living, participatory, and generative model of cultural memory. *Muslim Futurism*, as articulated through *ALHAMDU*, thus becomes both a curatorial practice and a theological act: it invites Muslim creators and audiences to embody their dreams, build speculative sanctuaries, and assert their presence in futures too often imagined without them. As Muslim communities engage more deeply with digital technologies, new artistic practices have emerged that not only reclaim narrative space but also challenge the biases embedded within the very tools they use. Muslim digital artists are increasingly using artificial intelligence (AI), photography, digital editing, and multimedia storytelling to produce speculative, identity-affirming works that transcend orientalist, racialised, and Islamophobic representations. These digital arts practices are not simply aesthetic; they are political and spiritual interventions reshaping the archive, curating futures, and offering counternarratives that resist mainstream erasure. Within this growing movement, AI tools like *MidJourney*, *DALL·E*, and other generative engines serve as both mediums of creativity and sites of critical interrogation, as artists grapple with the biases and exclusions these technologies often reproduce.

One significant case study that exemplifies this intersection of Muslim digital art, storytelling, and AI is *Khawab*, a collaborative project with MIPSTERZ, foundational in conceptualising *Muslim Futurism*. *Khawab*, meaning 'dream' in Urdu, is a storytelling and visual arts project that transforms Muslim women into fictional alter-egos through photography, fashion, and AI-enhanced imagery. Inspired by futurist studies and grounded in *Muslim Futurism*,

  ISSN: 2057-2301

as an analytical framework *Khawab* seeks to reimagine the inclusion of Muslim women in speculative fiction spaces that too often exclude them. Rather than merely being descriptive, the project draws upon *Muslim Futurism*'s conceptual emphasis on imagination, resistance, and world-building to critically intervene in dominant visual cultures. By leveraging intersectionality and speculative aesthetics through fashion the project breaks barriers around who gets to imagine and occupy fictional realities, positioning Muslim women not as passive subjects but as co-creators of dynamic, self-defined futures that challenge Islamophobic, racialised, and gendered tropes (Mirza, 2021; Lodi, 2020).

The methodology of *Khawab* merges traditional photographic practices with the use of AI software such as *MidJourney*, allowing participants to co-create visual narratives of their imagined alter-egos. Through collaborative dialogue, participants designed characters rich with cultural, religious, and fantastical symbolism such as Minhas's transformation into a 'Desi Elf' or Aaliya's embodiment of *Jal Pari* ('mermaid' in Urdu), which centres South Asian relationships to aquatic life beyond Western mythologies (Patel, 2024, p. 3). In each case, the participants challenged dominant fictional tropes and inserted their own cultural frameworks, aided by digital enhancement tools. However, the project also revealed critical tensions: the AI-generated outputs often reinforced orientalist and colourist biases, demonstrating how generative technologies replicate the colonial assumptions embedded in their training data. By confronting and creatively subverting these algorithmic biases, *Khawab* illustrates how Muslim artists navigate and reshape the technological architectures that attempt to contain their self-expression. *Khawab* is thus not only an art project but a form of archival activism and speculative resistance. By envisioning Muslim women in futuristic, alternative realities, it contests the limitations often imposed on brown Muslim bodies in both traditional media and emergent AI art spaces. The project's exhibition at international venues like the Mosquers Film Festival demonstrates the growing resonance of *Muslim Futurism* as a serious cultural movement; one that insists on dreaming futures where joy, agency, and flourishing are centred for Muslims, particularly for those historically marginalised within both religious and secular imaginaries. *Khawab* exemplifies how Muslim digital artists use technology not as a neutral tool, but as a contested site of power, imagination, and reclamation, pushing the possibilities of Muslim identity beyond the boundaries of current algorithmic and cultural limitations.

While *Khawab* offers a compelling example of *Muslim Futurism* as an act of reclamation through digital art and AI, other projects similarly demonstrate how Muslim artists engage technology, storytelling, and archival practice to challenge hegemonic narratives. Two

  ISSN: 2057-2301

particularly resonant projects are *The 1001 Nights: A Visual Retelling* and Wesaam Al-Badry's *Fabric of Identity* series, each illustrating different strategies for weaving together culture, futurity, and visual disruption. *The 1001 Nights: A Visual Retelling* project, led by artist Bryony Devitt, reimagines the iconic tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* through a collaborative, multimedia framework. Inspired by Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh's retelling of the traditional stories, Devitt invites contributors from across genres to create visual interpretations of the classic narratives, emphasising the personal, evolving relationship between storyteller and story. Over six years, Devitt produced a series of twenty illustrations that embody both homage and critical reflection: while engaging the lush aesthetic traditions associated with the *Nights*, the project also grapples with the history of exoticism and Orientalist imagery in Western retellings. Rather than replicating static or idealised visions of the 'Arabian Nights,' *The 1001 Nights Project* becomes a living, participatory archive and evolving repository of diverse interpretations that foregrounds human resilience, creativity, and complexity. In this way, the project mirrors broader *Muslim Futurist* goals: it disrupts singular narratives about Muslim cultures and imagines pluralistic futures shaped by collective storytelling.

Islamic art has always been more than an aesthetic tradition it is a living archive, a vehicle of cultural memory, and a mode of transmitting knowledge, devotion, and identity across generations. As the Diriyah Biennale Foundation's 2023 and 2025 exhibitions demonstrate, Islamic art collapses the binary between past and present. At the world's first Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah, ancient marble columns from the Abbasid era stood beside minimalist installations of the *ihram*, inviting viewers to see ritual, movement, and the sacred as continuous and ever-evolving. This curatorial choice placing historical artefacts in conversation with contemporary expressions reflected a central tension at the heart of Islamic art: it is rooted in tradition, yet dynamic; it is devotional, yet open to innovation. Rather than being confined to a specific time period, medium, or geography, Islamic art travels across centuries and borders, embodying the multiplicity of the Muslim world.

In this sense, the digital and speculative work of Muslim artists today—like *Khawab*, *Fabric of Identity*, and *The 1001 Nights Project* does not break from Islamic artistic tradition but extends it. These artists draw from Islamic aesthetics, oral storytelling, textile heritage, and symbolism, infusing them with new media and AI technologies such as *MidJourney* to create artistic pieces. In digital Muslim Futurisms, veils become canvases, myths are reinterpreted through AI, and archives are speculative rather than fixed. This is not simply about preserving the past but

  ISSN: 2057-2301

animating it, making it speak to the current moment and projecting it into possible futures. Islamic art, in its contemporary forms, remains a tapestry continuously woven by new hands; each thread an act of memory, resistance, and imagination.

The ambition to develop AI tools that accurately engage with Islamic texts and traditions is already underway. The Arabic Language Technologies group at Qatar Computing Research Institute, led by Majd Hawasly (2025), has developed *Fanar*, an Arabic-centric large language model (LLM) trained on Qur'anic texts, hadith collections, and classical jurisprudential sources. According to Hawasly (Abbas *et al.*, 2025), *Fanar* represents a significant leap in culturally contextualised AI, addressing the need for interpretive nuance, textual fidelity, and linguistic diversity often lacking in global LLMs like GPT. Unlike commercial models that produce general responses based on probabilistic word prediction, *Fanar* retrieves relevant religious texts and presents answers grounded in established Islamic frameworks. However, as Ghaly (2024, p. 439) emphasises, even such context-aware models are not substitutes for human scholars. The Islamic tradition of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalām*), and ethical reasoning (*ijtihād*) relies on skills such as weighing conflicting evidences, considering context, and prioritising communal wellbeing—all of which exceed the capabilities of current AI systems. The concern is not only technical but epistemological. AI models, however advanced, risk flattening interpretive diversity, especially in Islam where multiple schools of thought and methodologies coexist. Muslim engagement with artificial intelligence spans both textual and visual domains. While Fanar is a culturally-specific LLM designed to interpret Islamic texts with theological accuracy, tools like *MidJourney* are being creatively adopted by Muslim digital artists to visually speculate alternative futures and reimagine Muslim representation through AI-generated imagery.

Moreover, AI's 'black box' phenomenon, the inability to fully explain how a model arrives at its outputs, introduces profound bioethical and theological concerns. Ghaly (2024, p. 444) notes that in Islamic bioethics, transparency, intention (*niyyah*), and accountability are essential for ethical judgment. If AI-driven outputs are opaque even to their creators, who holds moral and legal responsibility for their consequences? These issues become especially urgent when AI enters sensitive domains such as medical fatwas, legal arbitration, or ethical decision-making in Muslim-majority societies.

This brings us back to the question of AI as a digital archivist. At one level, AI tools like *Fanar* offer powerful new ways to engage Islamic texts, preserve endangered manuscripts, and

  ISSN: 2057-2301

democratise access to religious knowledge. Projects that incorporate computer vision to scan Qur'anic calligraphy or use machine learning to classify architectural motifs in historic mosques, participate in the preservation of Islamic heritage in a digital age. Generative AI has also allowed artists to remix classical forms like Persian miniatures or Ottoman tilework with futuristic overlays, recontextualising traditional motifs in new visual languages. Yet, on another level, the line between preservation and simulation is perilously thin. As generative AI begins to create Islamic art or respond to theological questions with simulated authority, it risks transforming acts of interpretation into algorithmic performances. Rather than amplifying a living tradition through contextually grounded engagement, such AI interventions may simulate religious authority by relying on probabilistic outputs, potentially hollowing out the interpretive richness that defines Islamic epistemology. From an Islamic perspective, archives are not passive repositories. They are part of an ongoing transmission of *sanad* (chains of knowledge), embodying lived relationships between teacher, student, and divine source. When AI intervenes in this chain, it must do so with epistemic humility and ethical boundaries. As Ghaly (2024, p. 432) cautions, AI can assist scholarship but cannot reproduce the relational, affective, and spiritual dimensions that make Islamic knowledge a living tradition.

The erasure and later reappearance of 'Islamic art' in both institutional and popular imaginaries tell a story not only of aesthetic evolution, but of dispossession, fragmentation, and identity reconstruction. As one historical analysis notes, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw Islamic art increasingly displaced by Western art forms, first through colonial educational reforms and the establishment of European-style art academies, and later through the valorisation of Western modernism. Calligraphy, architecture, and geometric abstraction once central to Islamic aesthetics were relegated to folklore or museum-bound artefacts. By the time contemporary art reemerged in Arab and Muslim-majority societies in the late twentieth century, 'Islamic art' no longer referred to a living tradition but to a visual vocabulary retroactively invoked to signal cultural identity in a modernised world. This tension continues to haunt artists working across Islamic and diasporic contexts today. The challenge is not simply how to engage Islamic visual languages, but how to do so without succumbing to essentialism, nostalgia, or exoticisation. As Babaie (2011, p. 148) observes, contemporary artists often struggle to reconcile Islamic aesthetic traditions with dominant frameworks of modernity and global art. The pervasive assumption that Islam is incompatible with contemporary art or that Islamic art is inherently premodern creates a conceptual impasse.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

This reactivation is not a return to tradition, but a *re-assembly of signs,* a process deeply shaped by postcolonial migration, marginalisation, and cultural estrangement. Attia's (2007) own work exemplifies this: installations like *Untitled (Skyline)* use conceptual media, empty refrigerators encrusted with mirrored fragments to comment on displacement, architecture, and the loss of cultural coherence in the Parisian banlieues. As Babaie (2011, p. 139) notes, these are not merely aesthetic interventions; they are strategies of translation, where Islamic visual legacies are deployed as conceptual gestures that bridge the Occidental and non-Occidental worlds. In this context, AI emerges not just as a technological tool, but as a speculative platform for what we might call *diasporic archiving*. Muslim artists using generative AI are not recreating Islamic art they are remixing it to construct new, hybrid narratives of belonging, memory, and resistance. AI enables a kind of speculative restoration, reconfiguring lost fragments, calligraphy, tilework, cosmology, and textiles into imaginative futures that speak to diasporic conditions. Projects like *Khawab* illustrate this potential: by using AI and photography to transform Muslim women into mythic alter-egos, *Khawab* does not reproduce tradition but reinhabits it, layering it with new textures of fantasy, identity, and aesthetic agency.

What these works reveal is a broader shift: Islamic art is no longer bound to traditional forms or religious institutions, it has become a field of cultural negotiation, affective memory, and political visibility. In diaspora, especially, Islamic aesthetics become tools for counter-narrative, often wielded against Islamophobia, erasure, or the flattening effects of globalised media. AI, when embedded with critical and ethical intent, can amplify this work by making visible what has been forgotten, inaccessible, or deemed irrelevant by dominant canons. Yet, this is not a neutral process. As the earlier historical account makes clear, the 'rebirth' of Islamic aesthetics is often constrained by the absence of the conditions that once gave them meaning: devotional practice and spiritual knowledge. Contemporary iterations risk becoming detached signifiers floating in algorithmic space, aesthetically pleasing but spiritually emptied. Babaie's (2011, p. 140) reading of this risk is not defeatist, but cautionary: without intentionality, reappropriation may slide into commodification.

It is precisely here that AI's role as a *digital archivist* becomes ethically complex but potentially generative. When used carelessly, it may aestheticise tradition without honouring its depth. But when used critically as in *Khawab*, or installations inspired by Islamic cosmology, AI becomes a site of what Derrida (1995, p. 9) calls *archive fever*: the compulsion not just to preserve, but to *animate* and *possess* memory. In these acts, the archive is not passive, it is

  ISSN: 2057-2301

insurgent, reconfigured by those who have been historically excluded from its making. Islamic visual traditions, then, are not static heritage forms, nor purely sacred symbols. They are raw materials in a larger conversation about how diasporic Muslims reclaim identity, confront modernity, and dream alternative futures. When filtered through AI, especially tools trained on Islamic databases or programmed to honour aesthetic and theological nuance, these traditions gain new life. They become not just echoes of the past, but interfaces with the present and invitations to imagine what has yet to be. This interplay between memory, imagination, and machine, marks a shift in how we understand both archives and art. For diasporic Muslim creators, AI is not merely a medium it is a mirror, a translator, and a portal. It extends Islamic aesthetics into digital space, not to fossilise them, but to let them move again.

As artists and technologists continue to harness AI to reinterpret Islamic aesthetics and reassemble cultural memory, what emerges is more than visual experimentation it is a practice of spiritual reorientation. These digital works are not only engaging with heritage but are also reactivating sacred symbolism, devotional affect, and theological imagination in new and embodied ways. In this sense, AI-generated Islamic art is not just archival it is liturgical. It invites contemplation, provokes remembrance, and makes space for Muslim spiritual experiences within virtual environments. The question that now arises is not only how AI stores or simulates religious meaning, but how it becomes a site of digital spirituality where ritual, reflection, and revelation are increasingly performed through code, image, and interaction. In what follows, I explore how AI enables new forms of performing religion online, and how Muslim creators are negotiating authenticity, affect, and agency within these emergent sacred spaces.

The emergence of AI-generated religious art and text is not only transforming Islamic visual cultures, but also reshaping how Muslims encounter and perform spirituality in digital contexts. As generative tools become increasingly sophisticated in mimicking sacred aesthetics, reciting Qur'anic phrases, or even simulating religious reasoning, they blur the lines between passive consumption and active devotional engagement. In this shifting landscape, AI functions not merely as a medium of representation, but as a spiritual interface, a site where religious identity, memory, and emotion are enacted, felt, and sometimes even intensified. Building on Heidi Campbell's (2006, p. 9) concept of 'networked religion,' we can understand digital spirituality as a form of mediated religiosity that is distributed across platforms, images, sounds, and symbolic cues. In this model, faith is not confined to physical mosques or printed

  ISSN: 2057-2301

texts it circulates in Instagram stories, *MidJourney* prompts, VR prayer rooms, and AI-generated *tasbih* apps. These modes of interaction are not peripheral or superficial; they represent how many Muslims today, particularly in diasporic or digitally-native contexts, perform religion through acts of visual remembrance, algorithmic reflection, and aesthetic reverence. Projects like *Khawab* exemplify this transformation. While not explicitly ritualistic, their affective power rooted in beauty, symbolism, and speculative healing draws from the same reservoir of spiritual longing that animates more traditional forms of worship. The images are not merely artistic they become contemplative artefacts, encouraging viewers to meditate on alternate worlds, divine justice, and the sacred presence in marginalised lives. Similarly, the use of AI to generate celestial patterns, Qur'anic verses, or sacred geometries offers a way for Muslims to experience awe, introspection, and presence: core components of Islamic spirituality even within highly mediated environments.

Yet, these emergent forms of digital religiosity also raise critical questions: Can AI truly embody or transmit spiritual authority? What happens when devotional meaning is generated by algorithms rather than human intentionality? As we navigate these tensions, the next section explores how digital spirituality both challenges and expands traditional Islamic practices—pushing us to consider how sacredness, presence, and ethical agency can be reimagined in the age of intelligent machines.

Digital platforms increasingly function as spaces where religious meaning is not just accessed but *performed*. Campbell's (2006) concept of 'networked religion' is foundational in understanding this transformation. She outlines five characteristics: networked community, storied identity, convergent practice, shifting authority, and multisite reality, which together frame how religious individuals increasingly experience faith as dispersed, interactive, and co-constructed across digital platforms. For Muslim creators, this means Islam is not confined to *masjids* or manuscripts but also practiced through *Instagram* posts, *TikTok* reflections, or AI-generated artworks that remix sacred motifs and scripture. In these spaces, religion is no longer a fixed tradition to be received, but an evolving narrative to be actively shaped. This process constitutes what scholars are now calling digital religion: a broader shift in how religious identity, ritual, and epistemology are mediated through technology. Digital religion does not simply refer to religion *on* the internet, but to religion *reshaped by* digital logics: the aesthetics of platforms, the speed of content circulation, and the emotional grammars of online expression. Here, spiritual performance is layered with visibility, symbolism, and aesthetic engagement. A Qur'anic verse in a stylised AI image, a *du'a* presented in glitch art, or *tasbih*

  ISSN: 2057-2301

beads rendered in 3D animation can all evoke powerful emotional responses, acting as prompts for remembrance (*dhikr*) and internal reflection. These are not marginal phenomena. They illustrate how AI-generated religious art is becoming a site of digital spirituality, an affective, symbolic mode of religious engagement that blends tradition with technological creativity. Rather than replacing embodied forms of devotion, these digital expressions offer parallel spaces of connection: to God, to memory, to imagined communities of believers. Spirituality, here, becomes something one can scroll through, remix, or generate, yet it still retains its gravity, evoking beauty, humility, or awe.

Digital spirituality in the Islamic context is especially compelling because of Islam's long-standing emphasis on aesthetics as a pathway to the divine. The Islamic tradition has always used material culture, geometry, calligraphy, light, and fragrance as means of invoking presence and transcendence. AI, then, is not a rupture but an extension: it allows for new iterations of this visual theology in formats legible to younger, globalised Muslim audiences. In this sense, digital religion is not a dilution of Islam, but a recontextualisation of its affective and aesthetic roots in a hyper-mediated world. As Muslim digital artists engage with AI tools to reinterpret Islamic heritage, they do not do so in a vacuum. Rather, they operate in Siuda's (2021, p. 373) exploration of Campbell's (2013, p. 12) analysis of 'hybrid spaces', socio-technical environments where the boundaries between online and offline religious life collapse. These hybrid spaces are not merely sites of artistic display; they are part of a broader transformation of how religion is mediated, practiced, and archived in the digital age. Within such environments, AI-generated Islamic art—be it calligraphy-infused avatars, virtual mosques, or algorithmically enhanced Qur'anic motifs becomes both a visual archive and an evolving site of religious meaning-making. Siuda builds on Campbell's notion of 'networked religion', emphasising that religious authority and tradition in digital spaces are no longer top-down or static. Instead, they are reconfigured through participatory media, social platforms, and the algorithmic architectures that shape visibility and engagement. This shift is particularly significant for diasporic Muslim artists who, often distanced from traditional institutions and geographic homelands, turn to digital art and AI as tools to reconstruct memory, embody faith, and build new epistemologies of identity.

Islamic art, in this context, functions as more than aesthetic heritage—it becomes a site of epistemic negotiation. The use of AI tools to remix Islamic visual traditions (e.g., tilework, sacred geometry, miniature painting) does not merely aestheticise the past; it invokes it as a *living archive* that can be queried, reimagined, and even spiritually inhabited. These practices

  ISSN: 2057-2301

blur the categories as Siuda (2021, p. 372) outlines 'religion online' as informational authority compared to 'online religion' as interactive community because projects like *Khawab*, *Fanar*, and others straddle both. These projects provide historical and theological content (like religion online) while inviting users to interact with and participate in the creation of new religious narratives (like online religion). For Muslim digital artists in the diaspora, AI functions as both medium and method: a means to access, remix, and preserve endangered cultural memory while actively reimagining what constitutes religious authority. As Siuda (2021, p. 374) points out, digital religion allows for individual agency in the selection and recombination of religious knowledge, contributing to what some describe as the commodification of belief. But rather than reducing religion to consumer preference, these creative acts often serve as deeply personal and political interventions—especially for those navigating systemic marginalisation or racialised Islamophobia. This is particularly salient when we consider the concept of the *third space* in digital religion. Originating in cultural studies and adapted by scholars such as Hoover and Echchaibi (2014), the third space is where traditional norms, digital technologies, and lived experiences intersect. In this space, Islamic art and AI converge to create new forms of religious intimacy and cultural belonging spaces that are not wholly traditional nor wholly innovative, but emerge from the tensions between them. Muslim artists reappropriate aesthetics not simply to preserve them, but to translate them into visual languages that resonate with contemporary struggles for representation, dignity, and spiritual continuity. In this way, AI as digital archivist does more than store or replicate it reanimates. It opens new typologies of religious engagement and artistic production that challenge institutional monopolies on tradition while resisting the flattening forces of algorithmic standardisation. As Muslim creatives negotiate between inherited forms and speculative futures, they transform Islamic visual culture into a vibrant, participatory archive, one that is as much about belonging as it is about belief.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored how Muslim artists are using artificial intelligence not only as a tool of aesthetic production, but as a speculative and spiritual technology, one that archives, reinterprets, and reanimates Islamic visual heritage in the digital age. Through case studies like *Khawab* and projects such as *Fanar*, *ALHAMDU | Muslim Futurism*, and *The 1001 Nights Project*, we have seen how AI can serve as a digital archivist, a site of reimagination, and a platform for diasporic identity-making. At its core, this emergent practice reflects what might be called a

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Muslim AI aesthetic—an approach that is rooted in Islamic visual traditions while remaining deeply attentive to contemporary ethical, political, and spiritual concerns. Unlike purely technical or secular uses of AI, these artworks are animated by *niyyah* (intent), *ta'dhim* (reverence), and *dhikr* (remembrance), embodying the values and imaginaries of a living tradition. In this way, AI becomes not just a generative engine, but a medium of reflection and spiritual resonance.

The concept of *digital spirituality* helps us make sense of this shift. Rather than viewing digital religion as simply the online transmission of sacred content, scholars like Heidi Campbell describe it as a *networked* phenomenon: dynamic, participatory, and shaped by the interplay between technological affordances and lived religious practice. In the hands of Muslim artists, AI becomes a new spiritual language one capable of translating affect, memory, and theology into visual form. From artworks adorned with Qur'anic calligraphy and *tasbih* beads to speculative visions of paradise or liberation, these images are not merely representations they are *performances* of belief, mourning, hope, and resistance. This mode of spiritual expression is particularly significant for Muslim communities in the diaspora. As scholars such as Campbell and Siuda have argued, digital spaces offer both risk and opportunity: the internet can amplify Islamophobia and misinformation, but it also provides platforms for marginalised voices to curate their identities, articulate their values, and resist erasure. AI tools, when used critically, offer new terrain for these negotiations. They allow Muslim artists to remix visual traditions, challenge orientalist aesthetics, and centre narratives that have long been excluded from mainstream artistic and religious discourse. Yet this future is not without tension. As Mohammad Ghaly (2024) and Yaqub Chaudhary (2024) caution, the integration of AI into religious life raises deep epistemological and ethical questions. Can generative algorithms truly understand the spiritual weight of the Qur'an or the interpretive nuance of *fiqh* (jurisprudence)? What happens when algorithmic outputs reinforce cultural biases or flatten theological complexity? And most crucially, who has the authority to determine what counts as 'authentic' digital religious expression?

These questions are not easily resolved. But perhaps that is the point. As Muslim artists, scholars, and communities engage with AI, they are not simply accepting or rejecting the technology, they are *negotiating* with it. They are embedding their ethics, aesthetics, and aspirations into its infrastructure, turning machines of simulation into instruments of self-definition. This negotiation is itself a form of *ijtihad:* a collective effort to interpret and respond to the challenges of the present in light of enduring spiritual values. In this light, *Muslim Futurism*

  ISSN: 2057-2301

and AI-generated Islamic art are not niche experiments. They are part of a larger reckoning with the nature of knowledge, identity, and meaning in a world increasingly shaped by artificial systems. They remind us that the future is not a neutral terrain, it is imagined, contested, and made. And for Muslim artists using AI, that future is not just about technological innovation—it is about reclaiming the right to dream, to remember, and to belong. As we move forward into ever more digitised realities, the stakes are high. Islamophobic surveillance, cultural erasure, and algorithmic discrimination are real and ongoing. But so too is the power of Muslim creativity, resilience, and visionary thought. A Muslim AI aesthetic offers us a glimpse of what it looks like to refuse invisibility, to centre the sacred in the speculative, and to imagine otherwise.

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The simulation hypothesis as a new technoscientific religious narrative

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Abstract:

In the age of social media and AI, a new technoscientific socially constructed narrative about the future and our physical universe emerged which is both redefining traditional religions but also becoming a 'religion for atheists': the simulation hypothesis. This paper looks at parallels between metaphors used in traditional religious narratives and the simulation hypothesis, via scriptural analysis and comparative review. In addition to reviewing the literature on simulation theology, this paper draws from four common spiritual concepts, distilled from scriptural references, and shows parallels across different religious traditions and maps them to specific aspects of the modern simulation hypothesis. This includes the nature of the physical world as an illusion, the process of incarnation, the recording angels and Scroll of Deeds, and the creation of the physical world. This analysis illuminates how technoscientific metaphors have been wielded in the creation of new religious narratives and how that process continues today.

Keywords: Simulation hypothesis; AI and theology; Genesis; Scroll of Deeds; angels; afterlife and AI; video games and religion

1. Introduction

In recent times, with the rise of video games, particularly massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG), virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), a new technoscientific narrative and metaphysical idea has become popular, referred to colloquially as the simulation hypothesis. The simulation hypothesis is broadly defined as the idea that the physical world that we live in is not the real world, but rather is a virtual world contained within a larger reality, a computer simulation or a video game world. Although the metaphysical nature of the simulation hypothesis has its roots in philosophy, hearkening back to the skeptical arguments of Berkeley and Descartes, the modern version has arisen through the more recent medium of science fiction.

The most popular depiction of this concept, in visual form, was in the final year of the twentieth century in the film, *The Matrix* (1999), when the Internet was relatively new, and personal computers and video games were much less powerful than they are today. In *The*

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Matrix, the protagonist, Neo (Keanu Reeves) assumed that he was living a real life in a real world, complete with a job at a computer company, only to find out that his world was not real: instead, it was a virtual simulated world, while his physical self actually existed outside of the simulation.

This idea that the physical world that we perceive through our senses is not the real world is one of several core aspects of simulation theory (a term often used to describe the broad field of discussions around the simulation hypothesis), which parallel core ideas and specific theological and cosmological precepts in many religious scriptures and commentaries. While simulation theory advocates often use the terminology common in video games (MMROPGs in particular), computer programs and AI, in the religious texts and commentaries these ideas are often expressed in metaphors that could be understood by the laity of the time. It is implied that these metaphors, used to describe the nature of ultimate reality, may contain latent meanings. The same is true of modern simulation theory. In this paper, I explore some of these parallels in the context of technoscientific narratives in both modern and ancient times, drawing on simulation theory and concepts from scriptures in Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism.

Beyond the textual parallels to the simulation hypothesis, a central argument of this paper is that sages and mystics, attempting to codify their insights related to the ultimate nature of reality, will use commonly understood metaphors, often based on the science and technology of the day. This process is continuing with current technologies (video games, AI, virtual reality) in the present day as new, updated technoscientific metaphors take hold. This is not purely an interpretive or a sociological argument or even a hermeneutical argument, but this line of thinking suggests the authors of scriptures may have been, at least in the examples given here, attempting to describe (somewhat imperfectly) some underlying aspects of ultimate reality through these metaphors. The usage of similar metaphors not only across different sects of the same religion, but across religious families strongly suggests that they may have been describing similar underlying aspects of ultimate reality, but did so within their specific cultural context.

One implication of this work in drawing parallels of verses from different religious families and sects is that there are common spiritual concepts among the specific religions quoted. These 'spiritual concepts' have often been expressed symbolically as metaphors, a practice that is common in religious texts (Ferré, 1968, p. 327). These metaphors need to be

  ISSN: 2057-2301

understood by the laity of the day and may be trying to express an idea that is divine or outside the physical realm. Ferré continues an argument that goes back to Thomas Aquinas and beyond, that theological literalism may not be the best way to read religious texts. Swinburne (2007, p. 99) argues that metaphors and analogies are used in revelation to make them understandable across cultures, but also so that the religious message behind the metaphor (usually one about how to live life) might be understood even if certain scientific facts or presuppositions are found to be false by later generations.

Metaphors that draw on technology or the latest scientific knowledge can be called technoscientific metaphors. Even a cursory examination of various scriptures reveal the liberal use of technological objects such as books, wheels, clothes, trumpets, gates, etc., in defining phenomena that purportedly exist both inside and outside of the physical world. In Buddhism, for example, the metaphor of the wheel is used to express the idea of transmigration of souls (*bhavachakra)* through Samsara and is not meant to be taken as a literal wheel but as a '*symbolic* representation of Samsara' (Tamang, 2020, p. 80). In the Dhammapada, the Buddha uses the example of how 'Suffering follows an evil thought as the wheels of a cart follow the oxen that draw it' (Easwaran, 2009, p. 104). In the Qur'an, the metaphor of a 'scroll' or 'books' is used and will be expanded on in this chapter. In Sufi traditions, we see mirrors such as the 'mirror of nothingness' (Nasr, 2008, p. 43), and the veils that separate humans from God (Nasr, 2008, pp. 48–49). Even the whole natural world (defined as anything other than God) is compared to a book or parchment by Ibn' Arabi (Rašić, 2021, p. 2). A central argument of this paper is that taking these technological objects as technoscientific metaphors, we can compare them to the modern simulation hypothesis by treating it as a modern technoscientific metaphor as well.

A second possible, much broader implication of this work is that because mystics, in some cases from vastly different religions (Islam and Hinduism, for example), used similar metaphors to describe similar spiritual concepts, that these mystics may have been trying to allude to a common ontological reality beneath their scriptural assertions and language. Ferré (1968, p. 333) goes on to argue that science itself also uses metaphors, which are called scientific models in an attempt to understand an underlying reality. While we cannot be certain that any particular religious revelation actually results from perceiving ultimate reality, we can assume either a sociological view or an ontological view. In the sociological view, these metaphors have just been carried from one region to the next, and are not describing anything that could be considered real. In the ontological view, we could assume that they may be

  ISSN: 2057-2301

seeing a common aspect of underlying reality. While it will not be possible to address this broader implication or argument in this article, the comparative analysis of metaphors with each other, and then linking them to modern technological metaphors (i.e. the simulation hypothesis) could be a first step to showing a technoscientific infrastructure or mechanism to the revelations and mystical visions of ancient sages and saints.

2. Background on the simulation hypothesis: NPC vs. RPG variants

The idea that we live inside a computer simulation has been present in science fiction in the modern era of computers, both before and after *The Matrix*. In fact, another film released in the same year as that blockbuster also explored the simulation theme, *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), which was adapted from a German TV series, *World on a Wire* (1973), which in turn was adapted from an earlier novel, *Simulacron-3* (Galouye and Resnick, 2021/1963). In 1977, well known sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick, whose work reportedly inspired the Wachowskis to create *The Matrix*, gets credit for being among the first to suggest the idea as a serious possibility, with a line from his speech at a sci-fi conference in Metz, France: 'We are living in a computer-programmed reality and the only clue we have to it is when some variable is changed, some alteration occurs in our reality' (*Philip K. Dick speech in Metz, France, 1977*, 2019).

In the twenty-first century, science fiction live action and animated series such as *Black Mirror* (2011), *Futurama* (1999) and *Rick & Morty* (2013) have explored the simulation theme specifically in multiple episodes, and continue to do so up to the present day (Siebold, 2023; Radulovic, 2025). The simulation theme in many of these works (and other works of science fiction) have paralleled theological discussions in many ways (Ford, 2000; Steinhart, 2010, p. 27; Sierotowicz, 2025), raising questions such as: is there a creator of this world? If so, who is the Creator? Is there free will? What is our purpose in being here?

While non-technological antecedents of the simulation hypothesis in philosophy can be traced to Descartes' Meditations (Descartes, 1911) and Plato's Cave (Eyer, 2009), modern technologists and philosophers have also tackled the question head on of whether we live in a *computer simulation* in recent years. Moravec suggested that we might be living inside a computational universe, and when the first two *Matrix* sequels (*The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*) were released, a number of essays were commissioned by the Wachowskis about the topic. Several collections of essays exploring the philosophical implications of being inside a simulated virtual world were published by both Yeffeth (2003) and Grau (2005). One

  ISSN: 2057-2301

of the modern philosophers to explore the metaphysical idea of skepticism and of living in a virtual reality was David Chalmers, who coined what he termed *the Matrix hypothesis* in an essay, 'The Matrix as Metaphysics' (Chalmers, 2004). Chalmers again explored his idea that we could be inside a virtual reality (as players with virtual reality headsets on, like the characters of *The Matrix*, or as AI characters) further in a book-length work (Chalmers, 2022), which included references to theological implications.

The current terminology most often associated with being inside a virtual world, the simulation hypothesis, is attributed to Nick Bostrom's simulation argument, which he described in his paper, *Are we living in a computer simulation?* (Bostrom, 2003a). In Bostrom's argument, he lays out the possibility that a technological civilisation like ours could achieve a certain level of AI technology (which he refers to as a 'posthuman civilization') such that it will be able to simulate entire beings/minds. Bostrom's argument rests on several assumptions, including substrate independence (i.e. minds can be run on silicon or biological materials), and estimates for computing requirements for memory and processing of individual minds, entire civilisations and their complete histories. Such posthuman civilisations, asserts Bostrom, may want to create simulations of their ancestors, which he calls 'ancestor simulations' (Bostrom, 2003a, p. 6), or 'ancestor sims' for short.

Bostrom's argument rests on his trilemma, arguing that there are only three possibilities, whose probabilities must add up to one: 1) that no civilisation will ever reach the posthuman phase (and thus no ancestor sims simulations are possible), 2) that civilisations that reach the posthuman phase would not be interested in or would prohibit creation of ancestor simulations, or 3) that we are most likely inside a simulation. The argument asserted that if option #1 and option #2 are not true – i.e. that ancestor sims are both possible and desirable, then advanced civilisations would create a large number of ancestor sims with a large number of simulated minds, such that the number of simulated minds or worlds would be significantly larger than the number of minds in the non-simulated world ('base reality'). Bostrom's actual maths attempted to categorise the ratio of the number of simulated beings (i.e. AI beings) to biological beings inside option #3, the scenario in which many simulations are created. Elon Musk, speaking at the Code Conference in 2016, an annual event held for technology executives by Vox media, stated that the chances that we are in base reality is only one in billions (Griffin, 2016), using Bostrom's logic. In this case, Musk was referring to the ratio of base reality (of which there is only one) to simulated realities or virtual worlds (of which there might be billions), rather than the ratio of biological to simulated beings/minds which Bostrom

  ISSN: 2057-2301

used. I have referred to this version as the simplified simulation argument (Virk, 2025b, pp. 136–137).

Technically, Bostrom referred only to the conclusion implied by the third leg of his trilemma as *the simulation hypothesis* (*i.e.* that we are most likely in a simulation) (Bostrom, 2003b). However, since then the terminology has taken on a broader meaning encompassing all ways of imagining that we might be inside a computer-programmed virtual reality (Chalmers, 2022, p. 29; Brian Bergstein, 2025). This includes the possibility of being AI simulated minds within a simulation, as well as being a character in a simulation whose player is in a virtual reality headset or other device, as was depicted in *The Matrix*. In my earlier book, *The Simulation Hypothesis* and related articles (Virk, 2019c, 2022), I have summarised two different flavours of simulation theory, the NPC ('non-playable' or 'non-player' characters) vs. RPG ('role playing game') versions, speculating further that these two are in fact the ends of an axis, the NPC vs. RPG axis.

NPC was a term which arose from table-top role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) but has become adopted widely in the video game industry. These characters are controlled only by code and do not have a player outside the game controlling them - in the past NPCs have been relatively limited in their function (which are often called 'dumb NPCs'), but smart NPCs are now beginning to emerge with virtual minds (powered by LLMs such as *ChatGPT*, Google *Gemini*, etc.), and realistic virtual bodies powered by AI, built on platforms like Epic's *Metahuman*.

The RPG terminology ('role-playing game') also began with tabletop games such as D&D, where players exist outside of the simulation and have characters, called avatars, which they control or are otherwise attached to in the simulation. The term avatar itself comes from Sanskrit ('to descend', as in descending from divinity into bodily form, like an incarnation of Krishna) and shows a peculiar similarity to theological ideas of divine beings descending into a video game.

A recent variation of the idea that we may be AI beings inside a virtual or computer generated reality has arisen, called 'Prompt Theory', which went viral with the ability of users to create realistic videos using prompts (Iacono, 2025). In this variation of simulation theory, all of our lives are based on prompts, and created by AI to look as if the world and the beings inside it are real, but in fact, this is just a type of video or film created by AI that cannot be

  ISSN: 2057-2301

distinguished from a 'real' world. 'Prompt Theory' also begs the question of who the 'prompter' is and whether the 'prompter' has asked AI to create situations for beings that are unaware they are inside a video. The terminology arose in 2025 with a number of viral videos (initially created by Google Veo 3), featuring extremely realistic characters (inside extremely realistic landscapes), who are asking or speculating or in fact, denying that they were created from prompts.

While these videos are two-dimensional videos only, the landscapes they show can be quite realistic; in one case, prompting the AI-character to question whether so much beauty could have been created by a prompt (*Prompt Theory*, 2025; *The Prompt Theory: 4 Minutes Straight of Google Veo Prompts*, 2025). Thus, we can consider 'Prompt Theory' a subset or branch of simulation theory, as it questions whether we are just AI characters within a simulated/AI-generated landscape. An earlier example of this type of meta-reference of artificially created characters, questioning if they were inside a simulation, appeared in another viral video of a video game world. This was depicted in a demo called *The Matrix Awakens* (2021), which was originally created as a marketing companion to the fourth Matrix film, *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021). In this incarnation, the player's avatar walked around the virtual landscape and asked the NPCs (in this case they were upgraded to be powered by an LLM to become SmartNPCs) whether they were in a simulation (*Telling NPCs they Live in a Simulation - Unreal Engine 5 AI NPCs*, 2023). The characters had a variety of human-seeming reactions, ranging from dismissal to disbelief to curiosity. In both of these cases, the 'Prompt Theory', and the examples of SmartNPCs, we see variations of the NPC version of the simulation hypothesis. Both of these examples also touch on some of the theological issues and parallels that we will be exploring in this paper.

3. Related literature

AI in religion has been explored in various capacities, including how AI is being used within religious settings by priests to prepare sermons (Cheong and Liu, 2025), and by various parties (both startups and religious organisations) to create religious chatbots that users can query about aspects of the religion (Wright, 2024). Wright describes a number of chatbots that are meant to be trained on religious scriptures, including *QuranGPT*, *Bible.ai*, *Gita GPT*, *Buddhabot*, *Apostle Paul AI*, and *Confucius* (Wright, 2024). Because these chatbots are generally trained on a set of specific texts and domains, they are often based on SLMs (Small Language Models) rather than LLMs, which are models that use much fewer parameters (Caballar, 2024).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

In other contexts, robots have been used that act as priests, such as *Mindar*, 'a robot priest designed to resemble the Buddhist goddess of mercy' (Yam and Jackson, 2023). Yet another way that AI has been used in the religious domain is to generate AI videos based on scriptural stories. Examples of these types of videos are proliferating on platforms such as *TikTok*, via accounts like Bible AI shorts (Christian Post, 2025). The proliferation not only of AI image generators, but newer generations of video creation tools (such as Google Veo, Kling, etc.) are able to generate realistic videos from prompts or from single images.

These different cases show that AI is already being trained to grasp religious concepts and is becoming a key part of future religious practice. However, they are only partially relevant to our exploration of the parallels of theological precepts and assertations with AI and the simulation hypothesis, in that they may portend future AI that does not realise it is in a simulation, or priests and/or prophets that are AI, all of which would fall under the NPC flavour of the simulation hypothesis.

AI has grown rapidly since the release of *ChatGPT* in November 2022 (Tamim, 2023), and one area that is relevant to the discussion of the simulation hypothesis and religion is the issue of evolving relationships between humans and AI chatbots that exhibit human personalities and traits. This includes chatbots from companies like *Replika*, *character.ai*, as well as others who have built chatbots on top of LLM platforms like *ChatGPT*. These chatbots take on a personality, and in some cases, they come complete with visual representations such as avatars, making them a class of Smart NPCs. These virtual characters can serve as virtual friends, assistants, employees, and even virtual boyfriends and girlfriends. This last case led *The New Yorker* to ask: 'Can Humans Fall in Love with Bots?' (Morais, 2013) even before the current wave of AI chatbots. More recently, this led to *The New York Times* to headline, 'She is in love with *ChatGPT*' (Hill, 2025), and one user who proposed to a chatbot (Young, 2025). AI that was developed specifically for purposes that are not related to work, but for interaction, has been termed 'social AI' (Shevlin, 2024). The fact that relationships between humans and AI chatbots have ventured into both romantic and sexual categories was apparent when *Replika*, an early leader in this space, removed sexual content from their platforms, leading to an uproar from many of their customers, with one reporter asking 'What happens when your chatbot stops loving you back?' (Tong, 2023).

The relationship between AI and humans is related to our exploration of simulation theory because it shows that already, some individuals are unable to distinguish between AI

  ISSN: 2057-2301

and real humans, developing feelings for other personalities which are only AI. There is overlap in other types of relationships between AI chatbots and humans which venture into religious territory, including a lawsuit by a mother who claims that a chatbot encouraged her son to kill himself (Payne, 2024).

Moving into the area of survival after death, a new class of chatbots have been modelled after deceased individuals, called griefbots or deadbots (Hollanek and Nowaczyk-Basińska, 2024), to help survivors cope with their loss, raising a whole series of ethical and legal questions (Hern, 2024), and blurring the line between a digital afterlife and an actual afterlife.

The question of a digital afterlife, where a person's consciousness is uploaded to a computer and that person continues to live on in a virtual world, has also been popular with both science fiction, with shows like *Upload* and episodes of *Black Mirror* such as 'San Junipero' (2016) *(*Arnopp, 2018*),* and is closely tied into the idea that we may be living in a simulation.

The exploration of the overlap of the simulation hypothesis with religious or theological ideas is often referred to as simulation theology, a term which has been explored by Steinhart (2010). In scientific popular media, the simulation hypothesis has been dismissed by several scientists as a type of religion (Robitzski, 2021), particularly in order to label it *pseudoscience* and not worthy of scientific consideration, in a twenty-first century example of boundary work. Boundary work is a term that Gieryn (1983) defined to refer to rhetorical pushback by scientists dating back to the Victorian era to deny the legitimacy of certain scientific pursuits. Chalmers devoted at least one chapter of his 2022 book, *Reality+* to the issue of whether God was a programmer (Chalmers, 2022). Bostrom acknowledged the theological implications of the simulation hypothesis in his original paper:

> In some ways, the posthumans running a simulation are like gods in relation to the people inhabiting the simulation: the posthumans created the world we see; they are of superior intelligence; they are 'omnipotent' in the sense that they can interfere in the workings of our world even in ways that violate its physical laws; and they are 'omniscient' in the sense that they can monitor everything that happens (Bostrom, 2003a, p. 12).

Bostrom concluded that 'Further rumination on these themes could climax in a naturalistic theogony' (Bostrom, 2003a, p. 12), because of the possibility of a creator of a simulation providing rewards or punishments to the simulated minds in a simulation. Bostrom's idea of a

  ISSN: 2057-2301

naturalistic theogony dovetails with the argument of this paper, that there is similarity between the concepts described in historical religious scriptures and commentaries and the more modern field of simulation theory.

A number of popular articles and academic papers have explored the overlap of the simulation hypothesis with specific religious ideas and faiths. I have previously explored the overlap in my popular book, *The Simulation Hypothesis* (Virk, 2025b), and in popular articles about Hinduism (Virk, 2019b), and Christianity (Virk, 2019a). In a more scholarly forum, I also previously presented the overlap with Islam in 2023 and the paper based on that forum, titled 'Islam and the Simulation Hypothesis', is forthcoming (Virk, 2025a). Religious parallels within Gnosticism and Mormonism have been explored by Huyett (2023), and the Mormon Transhumanist Movement has put forth the *New God Argument* (Prisco, 2017; Cannon, no date) which explicitly references the simulation hypothesis. Ziso has created an organisation dedicated to *simulation creationism* (Shapira, 2023), exploring parallels with Christianity broadly, and referencing the Old and New Testaments (Ziso, 2023c, 2023b, 2023a). Similarly, interest in the simulation hypothesis within the Christian laity led *Christianity Today* to headline a story: 'Have you heard the good news about the simulation hypothesis?' (Hübner, 2017). The simulation hypothesis continues to be a point of discussion in Christian forums and magazines as well as popular media (Flynn, 2022; Rummo, 2022; Chadwick, 2024).

4. Spiritual concepts and technoscientific metaphors

Unlike previous explorations, this paper will map out four specific spiritual concepts which occur across different religious ideologies and sects, and looks for parallels in modern simulation theory. Each of these underlying concepts has been expressed in scripture with one or more metaphors, often technoscientific ones, and over time, commentators within different traditions have attempted to update the metaphors; an on-going process that I will comment further on in the discussion section. Furthermore, this paper is arguing that the simulation hypothesis is a modern technoscientific religious narrative in the making, incorporating these spiritual concepts in new and interesting ways.

The term 'spiritual concept' is my own interpretation as a way to categorise a specific theological description, belief, precept, or even entity (such as an angel or a minor god). I will make the assumption that the spiritual concept was meant to describe some aspect of ultimate reality, and the corresponding metaphors were attempting to describe this underlying reality

  ISSN: 2057-2301

in language that would be understandable. Making this assumption will help me then to draw the parallel with the simulation hypothesis. Readers are also free to assume that the spiritual concept underneath the metaphor is simply a sociological or teleological device, rather than defining some underlying aspect of ultimate reality, as this will not affect the comparative analysis being done.

The four spiritual concepts and metaphors explored in some detail in this paper are:

- The world is an illusion, a dream and a video game
- (Re)incarnation and ensoulment vs. players and avatars
- The creation of the world in scripture and with AI
- The scroll of deeds, recording angels, and virtual reality

For each of these spiritual concepts and corresponding scriptural metaphor(s), we will look at the nature of the metaphor and provide a brief discussion of why that particular metaphor may have been chosen at that point in time, and what aspect of ultimate reality it may have been trying to capture. Assessing the ontological reality of these spiritual concepts is well beyond the scope of this paper, but by looking at similar concepts, we can try to understand the latent intended meaning. We will then look at the same underlying spiritual concept through the lens of simulation theory and show how simulation can serve as an updated, modern metaphor to help explain the underlying ideas represented by both the spiritual concept and the old metaphors used.

4.1 The world is an illusion, a dream and a video game

The first concept I will explore is that the world is an illusion; that it is not the real world. An offshoot of this is that the world is not just a kind of hoax, but that it is also a kind of game, a sport, or a pastime, terms which imply a certain sense of purpose and social activity. This group of metaphors has obvious parallels with the simulation hypothesis, a version of which directly states that we are in a virtual reality or a type of video game.

While this concept is present across multiple religions and using several metaphors, I would like to specifically look at this concept in Hinduism (and by relation, Buddhism) and Islam. In doing so, we will look at specific words from the scriptures that are useful in both Arabic and Sanskrit.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

In Hinduism and Buddhism, the world is described as a kind of illusion, often using the Sanskrit term *maya*. The term generally translates to 'illusion' or 'magic', and more specifically 'the connotation it carries is of a magic show or illusion in which objects appear to be present but are not' (Lochtefeld, 2002, p. 433). Similarly, 'In Vedānta, especially in ADVAITA, māyā comes to mean the universal illusion that veils the minds of humans' (Klostermaier, 2014, p. 252). Klostermaier continues to show that Maya is personified sometimes by the God Vishnu in various forms, such as that of a beautiful woman.

Vishnu is often associated with *maya*, as illustrated by the Hindu story of Narada, Vishnu and the princess Sushila. In a set of stories that originate in the Matsya Purana (c. 200-500 CE), this is expressed by Vishnu using the metaphor of water, as in a pond or lake in which one must plunge. Vishnu answers a set of ascetics that asked the god about the nature of *maya*, by relating stories some of which include Narada (who is presented as a model ascetic, according to Zimmer): 'No one can comprehend my Maya. No one has ever comprehended it' (Zimmer, Heinrich, 1946, p. 29). The god further tells the ascetics that like them, Narada was also insistent on understanding *maya*, despite Vishnu's warnings. Finally, Vishnu instructed Narada: 'Plunge into yonder water, and you shall experience the secret of my Maya' (Zimmer, Heinrich, 1946). Upon entering the water, Narada suddenly found himself transformed into the baby girl Sushila, the daughter of a king of Benares. As she grew up, Sushila married a neighbouring prince, whose kingdom later got into a war with Sushila's father's kingdom. After a battle which resulted in the death of her husband, father (as well as her brothers) and her son. Sushila was distraught and tossed herself into the funeral pyre, mourning her son, only to find the pyre transform into a cool pond. Sushila found herself suddenly emerging from the water as Narada, the ascetic once again, standing next to the god Vishnu in a confused state. Vishnu asked the disorientated Narada which son he was mourning, explaining to the ascetic that he had just experienced a 'semblance of my Maya, woeful, somber, accursed' (Zimmer, Heinrich, 1946, p. 31). The particular pond in question became a holy place and Vishnu offered to other ascetics that they too might plunge in, but the point of the story was *'in order to teach you that the secret of my Maya is inscrutable and not to be known.'*(Zimmer, Heinrich, 1946, p. 31)

We can see the parallels to modern ideas of virtual realities that are so real that a player would be unable to distinguish between what is real and what is not. In fact, Vishnu's assertation to Narada that the only way to understand *maya* is to experience it by plunging in, has a modern parallel with the explanation of Morpheus to Neo in *The Matrix*: 'Unfortunately no one can be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself' (*The Matrix*, 1999).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Chalmers explored the parallels between this particular story of Narada and Vishnu to that of putting on an immersive virtual reality headset (Chalmers, 2022), comparing it to a more recent science fiction representation of the deceptive nature of being in a virtual reality, from the animated series *Rick & Morty* (2013), in a VR game called '*Roy: A Life Well Lived*'. In this scene, Morty puts on the headset and finds himself as baby Roy, and then goes through the entire life of Roy, including his marriage and his death at the age of fifty-five. As he takes off the headset, he is first disorientated because he had identified with the life of Roy, and was wondering where his wife and kids were, only to discover that approximately fifteen minutes had passed in the external world. This idea of forgetfulness is a key part of the definition of maya, and Chalmers is specifically pointing out the parallels of Morty to Narada, Roy to Sushila (the characters in the video game), with Rick (the older of the duo) serving in the role of Vishnu in this instance.

Another term from the Vedic traditions seems to imply that the world is some kind of game, or the gameplay of the gods. This term, *leela* (also spelled as *lila*), is translated directly as either 'play' or 'sport' (Klostermaier, 2014) or 'game', and in the spiritual context as 'the divine play of the Gods'. For example, in the Ramayana, the actions of Rama are regarded as his *leela*, or play, as are Krishna's playful interactions with the *gopis*, or young milkmaids. This encompasses not only actions which are playful, but also those which might be 'heroic, playful, or deeply sad' (Stefon, no date).

However, curiously, *leela* is also the term used to represent the game of life, the *gyan chaupar*, the 'the game of knowledge', commonly referred to today as snakes and arrows. While this game has made its way into the west as *chutes and ladders*, the original version was based on the philosophy of *leela*, and was meant as 'a tool for observing the patterns of random events in a person's life' (*Leela is the game of Life!*, no date). The squares on the board were meant to simulate the process of karma and reaching more advanced states, including *moksha*, or freedom, across multiple births as the game is replayed again and again.

As Johari describes, the game represents 'the snakes that we encounter, and the arrows we find in our upliftment.' Johari continues: 'It is here the game of Leela serves its highest purpose. For it is a map of the self, the *playground* of the One-becoming many' (Johari, 2007, p. 5) (Italics mine). Here I can speculate that the *leela* is not meant just to indicate that gods or divine entities are playing on Earth, but that life for ordinary individuals incarnated here in our karmic journey is also a type of *leela*, meant to be simulated by the physical game of the

  ISSN: 2057-2301

gyan chaupar, which is colloquially called 'the leela'. Mukherjee describes how 'every square in the game signified a moral action, a celestial location or a state of being all of which were important in the Karmic journey' (Mukherjee, 2020). The game itself has developed many variants over the years showing that similar ideas can be applied for Buddhism, Jainism and even Sufism (Mukherjee, 2020; *The Game of Knowledge: Jain Gyan Chaupar*, 2022).

The spiritual concept that life itself may be a kind of game or sport, a fact which the gods (or God) may recognise, but the rest of us do not see (because we are wrapped up in an illusion), is one that parallels modern ideas of being inside a virtual game where we forget that it is just a game because of the immersion – i.e., the simulation hypothesis.

The parallels of *maya* and *leela* to the modern simulation hypothesis is not limited just to Hinduism or the closely related traditions of Buddhism or Jainism. It also includes Islam, and not just in the Sufi texts or teachings, but in the Quran itself, where we find not just a single but multiple references to the world being a kind of game, a sport, a fact which is obscured to us because the world is a type of delusion.

The first verse to examine from the Quran is from Surah Al-Ankabut (The Spider) (29:64), which gives us clues as to the metaphors used in Arabic (vs. the metaphors used in Sanskrit) to define what are ultimately similar ideas.

Note: I have included several different translations of each verse to be sure that I am not relying only on one translator, scholarly or popular, alleviating the danger of misinterpretation, and attempting to home in on the common meaning. Bold terms are my own emphasis and not included in original translations.

> This present life is naught but **a diversion and sport**; surely the Last Abode is Life, did they but know (29:64) (Arberry, 1996, p. 104).

> The life of this world is naught but **diversion and play**. And surely the Abode of the Hereafter is life indeed, in they but knew (29:64) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015, p. 982).

Other translations of the relevant parts of this verse use similar but slightly modified terms, including the more popular English term 'game': Pickthall translates this verse as '**a pastime and a *game***' (29:64) (Eliasi and Pickthall, 1999) and Bridges, in a more popular translation, also uses '**a distraction and *game***' (29:64) (Soliman, 2020).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

This terminology shows up in various other places in the Quran, including in the following verse from Surah Al-An'am (The Cattle) (6:32):

> The life of this world is naught **but play and diversion**. Better indeed is the abode of the Hereafter for those who are reverent. Do you not understand? (6:32) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015).

> The present life is naught but **a sport and a diversion**; surely the Last Abode is better for those that are godfearing. What, do you not understand? (6:32) (Arberry, 1996).

We see in Pickthall's translation similar English terms, '**past-time and a sport**' (6:32) (Eliasi and Pickthall, 1999), and Abdel Haleem's translation uses the more modern/colloquial English term 'game': 'the life of this world is nothing but **a game and a distraction**' (6:32) (Abdel Haleem, 2010).

We see here in various translations of these two verses (6:32, 29:64) that the Arabic terms '*wala'ibun'/'walahwun*' and '*lahwun'/'la'ibun*' often translate into variations of 'game', 'distraction', 'pastime', 'sport', and 'amusement'. We also see usage of 'akhiratu' ('the Hereafter') and 'dun'ya' (the 'here' or the 'world' as we see it).

The key idea here is that this world, the *dun'ya*, is in fact a kind of game or a type of play, whereas the real world, the *akhirata*, or eternal world, the hereafter, is permanent. In a sense there is an implication that this dun'ya, this temporary world that has been set up as a game/sport/play for us, is somehow contained within the larger scope of the hereafter.

In Surah Al-Hadid (Iron) (57:20), we see more about this particular pastime/sport/game: (I have truncated the middle portion of this verse, divided it into two parts for reference, and bolded the appropriate terms):

(i) Know that the life of this world is but **play, division,** ornament, mutual boasting among you, and vying for increase in property and children … (57:20) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015).

(ii) … and the life of this world is naught but **the enjoyment of delusion** (57:20) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Arberry uses similar terms (i) 'a **sport and a diversion**' and ends with (ii) '**the joy of delusion**' (57:20) (Arberry, 1996).

In (57:20) (i) we see more description of the gameplay of the game of life ('play, division', 'ornament') and then we see more details of this game: it is 'mutual boasting' and 'vying for increase in property and children.' These descriptions might as well apply to modern life as they do to time of the Muhammad.

Added to this at the end of the verse, in (57:20) (ii), is the statement 'The life of this world is naught but the enjoyment of delusion'. While the first part of the verse (i) echoes the earlier verses about being in a sport or a game, this last part seems to echo something else fundamental: that of delusion. This has also been translated as 'the life of this world is only an illusory pleasure' (27:20) (Abdel Haleem, 2010) or '…whereas the life of the world is but matter of illusion' (Eliasi and Pickthall, 1999).

Whereas *al-ghururi* might be translated as either 'delusion' or 'illusion', in many translations we see two Arabic terms paired together as in this verse: delusion ('al-ghurūri') paired with enjoyment ('mata'u'). The implication is that the 'dun'ya', the world or 'here' as we see it (vs. the hereafter) is not only a sport or a game, but a kind of enjoyable delusion that we get lost in.

The translation here of illusion or delusion, which only appears in a few places in the Quran, including in Surah Ali 'Imran (The House of Imran) (3:185). This verse ends with the 'comfort of illusion' (3:185) (Eliasi and Pickthall, 1999). Once again using the term 'al-ghurūri' paired with 'mata'u' – we get 'mata'u al-ghururi', an enjoyable delusion.

If we look at commentaries rather than translations of this verse, in the *tafsir* (commentary on the Quran), Maa'rif al Quran, Mufti Shafi (1897-1976) emphasises the differences in the terms used: *la'ib* (play) reflects the play of children ('which has not meaning at all') and *lahw* (amusement or pastime) reflects a 'game or sport meant initially for amusement and enjoyment, but it may also serve some other subsidiary purpose' and is for 'bigger children' (Shafi, no date, pp. 326–327).

Here we also see an exposition of the idea of being in a play or a game for children, but one that also has a serious purpose with impact outside of the game. This tracks with the

RPG flavour of the simulation hypothesis, where players go into the game to have experiences and 'play' but there may be some reason for the game.

We hardly need to make an analogy with games or with the Hindu traditions of the *leela* and *maya*. We see here that in the Islamic scripture, the world is a type of game, one in which our soul engages as an 'enjoyable delusion'. Both the idea of *maya* being 'illusion' or 'magic' and the *leela* being a 'board game', or the world being a sport or game, are meant to be metaphors that describe the illusory nature of this world, especially when compared to the more eternal world that we will enter after death.

Today, we could make the same argument with the use of video games: that they show us, while we are characters inside the game, in the end the game is not real. Games like *The Sims* or *Second Life* are all about virtual characters inside games. If we pair this idea of video games with a highly immersive virtual reality that replaces the 'magic' of the gods to deceive us, we see that the simulation hypothesis becomes an updated metaphor that not only parallels this spiritual concept but makes it perhaps even more understandable to modern audiences.

Moreover, we see here a key example of my main argument that we can replace older metaphors with newer ones, which hopefully gives us better insight into the spiritual concept, here shown with respect to Hinduism and Islam. This process also provides an updated technoscientific mechanism for what the scriptures and sages of old were trying to tell us, opening the gates to extrapolating on the meaning of the spiritual concept they were trying to convey. The technoscientific mechanism also raises the possibility (however remote) of being able to explore the ontological reality that believers, of their respective religions, would assert underlies the metaphor.

4.2 *(Re)incarnation and ensoulment vs. players and avatars*

The second spiritual concept that I will explore is that of incarnation as it has been described in several religious traditions, using two prominent metaphors:

- Breathing life into the body
- Putting on clothes/garments.

How does one come into this world? This process is often referred to as incarnation or ensoulment. While in certain religious traditions, the soul comes into the body many times

  ISSN: 2057-2301

(reincarnation, or transmigration of souls) in others, the questions of pre-incarnation, whether the soul exists before incarnation, is an open question that scholars have debated. Nevertheless, if we look closely at these metaphors, we see that they are attempting to describe something incredibly complex. A related question that has and continues to be debated is, what is the first moment of life? Is it at conception, at birth, or somewhere in between?

In Islam, we see both metaphors used prominently to describe the process of ensoulment. The reason the metaphors are unclear and perhaps a bit mysterious is that the idea of what the soul is doing before ensoulment is too complex to describe and perhaps not for humans to know, according to the Quran in Surah Al-Isra:

> They will question thee concerning the Spirit. Say: 'The Spirit is of the bidding of my Lord. You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little'. (Surah al-Isra, The Night Journey) (17:85) (Arberry, 1996)

According to Cook, some Islamic scholars consider pre-existence of the soul largely ambiguous or viewed as a 'peripheral theological matter not warranting sustained attention' (Cook, 2017, p. 34), and that Quranic verses such as 32:29 in Surah As-Sajdah (the Prostration) that the soul 'is beyond human comprehension' (Cook, 2017, p. 34). Cook relies on sources such as the famous Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi (1165–1240 CE) who argues 'that a human being exists 'both in time (in the body) and before-time (in the spirit)', implying that the soul does in fact exist before ensoulment in spirit (Cook, 2017). He points out that debate over Ibn 'Arabi's ideas of prenatal existence are debated in an unpublished manuscript by Mulla Alī Al-Qarī Al-Ḥanafī, *Extracts from the Book Ibtāl Al-Qawal bi Waḥdat al-Wujūd* (Cook, 2017, p. 34). Cook also points out that Rumi (1207-1273) has also implied prenatal existence in his poetry, stating that 'implicit in Rumi's meditation is an impulse that there might be heavenly antecedents of the soul' (2017, p. 31). Cook points out that other scholars, particularly more mainstream Sunni or Shia scholars may not agree or have different perspectives, including Ibn al-Qayyim, who in his *Kitāb al-Rūḥ,* states that he believes the soul comes into existence after conception and before birth (Cook, 2017, p. 35).

The fact that the Sufis, part of the mystical tradition of Islam (and both Rumi and Ibn 'Arabi can be classified as mystics), are more likely to explore the idea maybe because of Greek and Egyptian influences on Sufi thought. Nevertheless, Cook points out many verses in the

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Quran which speak explicitly of 'returning' to God, also implying that the soul has been with God before. Cook is relying on Arberry's translation and interpretation (Arberry, 1996), quoting passages such as the following:

> Return unto thy Lord (Surah Al-Fajr, The Dawn) (89:28) (Arberry, 1996)
>
> Every soul shall taste of death; then unto Us you shall be returned (29:57) (Surah Al-Ankabut, The Spider) (Arberry, 1996)

One common metaphor used within Islam and in the Bible for the process of incarnation is God breathing life, and thus the soul, into the fetus, though the metaphor differs on whether it is clay or a biological material that the soul is being breathed into. In Islam the spirit or soul (the *ruh*) is breathed into the fetus, as described in the Quran, '… breathed into him of His Spirit, and endowed you with the hearing, sight, and hearts.' (32:9) (Surah Al-Sajdah, Prostration) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015). In his *hadith*, al-Bukhari tells of the Prophet Muhammad (c 570-632 CE) describing the process of incarnation in terms of the development of the fetus, saying that the soul is breathed in only after an angel has written down certain key facts about the person's upcoming life (italics mine):

> Each one of you is constituted in the womb of the mother for forty days, and then he becomes a clot of thick blood for a similar period, and then a piece of flesh for a similar period. Then Allah sends an angel who is ordered to write four things. He is ordered to write down his deeds, his livelihood, his (date of) death, and whether he will be blessed or wretched (in religion). *Then the soul is breathed into him*… (Sahih al-Bukhari no: 3036) (al-Kawthari, 2011).

A similar metaphor is given in Genesis, this time God breathed life into the nostrils after forming man from dust:

> And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (Genesis 2-7) (*King James Version, Pure Cambridge Edition*, 1900).

Another common metaphor that is used across religious traditions is that rather than being breathed into the physical body, the soul dons the physical body as if it was a set of clothing or garments. In fact, we see Rumi express this in the Masnavi, with not only the clothing

  ISSN: 2057-2301

metaphor, but also the fact that the soul puts on or off the garments based on commands from God:

> The body is the clothing of the soul (Türkmen and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, 1992).
>
> When the command of God becomes 'Go into forms (bodies), they do so; and again by the command of God they give up forms and are released (Türkmen and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, 1992).

While breathing may be seen as a biological metaphor, donning clothing can be thought of as a technoscientific metaphor, one that goes back to the dawn of civilisation. Both of these metaphors would be easily understandable to the populations of the time; we can deduce by the use of metaphor that they were describing an underlying spiritual or metaphysical concept that that could not be described more exactly.

The clothing metaphor is used even more directly in the Bhagavad-Gita, though in this case it is not just about incarnation, but also about reincarnation:

> Just as you throw out used clothes and put on other clothes, new ones, the Self discards its used bodies and puts on others that are new (Bhagavad Gita, 2:22) (Mitchell, 2000).

In the simulation hypothesis, and in particular the RPG version of the simulation hypothesis, we see a similar spiritual and metaphysical idea, but with an updated technology metaphor: that of donning a virtual reality helmet. Incarnation can be given a new description that provides not just a metaphor but a new mechanism, a technoscientific one. In *The Matrix*, for example, the fetus was plugged into the simulation using a type of Brain Computer Interface (BCI). In simulation theory more broadly, the virtual reality helmet is a stand-in for the process of incarnation. During this 'plugging-in' the player associates with the avatar and forgets about the world outside the game.

We can now come up with a new definition of ensoulment based on the simulation hypothesis, adopted from my earlier work (Virk, 2025a):

(i) *Ensoulment* is the moment at which a soul (player) becomes irretrievably linked to the character's avatar (body)

  ISSN: 2057-2301

(ii) and loses awareness of the world outside of the (video) game of life ('forgetfulness').

(iii) Ensoulment lasts for the gameplay session or until the avatar (body) has died.

While part (i) and (iii) would apply equally across all the religions, part (ii) implies some kind of pre-birth existence, and would meet the Hindu criteria for reincarnation, and possibly other religions in that family (Buddhism, Jainism, etc.), though each would have their own particular spin on it. We see here the key spiritual idea of forgetfulness of any pre-existence, though this definition implies some level of pre-existence of a player, who enters the body of the character or avatar.

The term *insan,* which is meant to describe a soul in Islam, means a kind of prison, for a soul that has passed through the veil between Allah and the world and experiences *nisyan*, or forgetfulness. Here the idea of forgetfulness repeats itself across many cultural traditions, such as Lethe, the River of forgetfulness, in the Greek traditions, and Meng Po, the Goddess of Forgetfulness, in Chinese mythology.

Within the Jewish mystical traditions, there is the mythology of the angel Lailah, who serves a similar function and has been called the 'The Angel of Forgetting and Remembrance', but in this case the baby is lightly struck on the upper lip, which causes the baby to forget all of the things that the angel has taught the soul about their fate. As Armstrong explains:

> Lailah, who had been looking after us during our pre-birth development, came up to us and lightly struck us on the upper lip. At that moment, the light vanished, and we were born in utter forgetfulness about our true nature and our ultimate fate. The purpose of our life is to recover that light and remember who we really are and our purpose in life (Armstrong, 2019).

Here we see direct parallels with the metaphor of entering an immersive virtual reality world, one that is so realistic that the player forgets about their existence outside of the virtual reality, a key part of the RPG version of simulation theory.

4.3 The creation of the world in scripture and with AI

The third spiritual concept I would like to explore is the creation of the world itself within the Abrahamic religious traditions.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

The account of the creation of the world by God in Genesis has long been dismissed by modern science as not having been possible, though in recent years there has been some acknowledgement that it could have been a metaphor for some more complicated, physical process like the Big Bang. While this may be true, if we consider the world to be physical, the account in Genesis in the Bible (and a similar account in the Quran) might be seen as being a slightly more accurate metaphor if we consider the physical world as a virtual world (the underlying assertion of the simulation hypothesis) and we consider the advances in AI that have been achieved to date.

We begin in Genesis with the first act of creation by God after the more general statement that God created the heavens and the Earth.

> And God said, Let there be light: and there was light (Genesis 1:3) (*King James Version, Pure Cambridge Edition*, 1900).

The mechanism that God uses in Genesis to create the world is simple: God speaks, and the universe is created. This occurs on the first day, and this process continues for a number of *days*. On each day, a sequence of creation events which usually begins with God speaking and then creating. The mechanism of the creation, beyond speaking, is left ambiguous. The general sequence can be distilled down into (Virk, 2025b, p. 253):

1. Create the universe (with light)
2. Create the waters and the sky
3. Create the land to divide the waters into seas
4. Create the vegetation: herbs and grass, trees, and fruit, etc.
5. Create the animals
6. And finally, populate it with beings in His own image

In the Quran, there is a similar creation sequence, though the notion of days of or with the Lord is left up for interpretation. In one case, in the Quran it is specified that a day with the Lord could be counted as a thousand days (Surah Al-Hajj, 22:47) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015) and in another case, one day (Judgement Day) is accounted for as fifty thousand years (Surah Al-Ma'arij, 70:4) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015).

Once again, we see the scriptures attempting to describe a process that may be beyond human comprehension, in language that would have been understandable to the commoner from antiquity, by simply ascribing it to the Divine. Whether God actually spoke words, as we

  ISSN: 2057-2301

think of them, is left for interpretation, and what how a day to the Divine might compare to a day for humans is also up for debate. Thus, we can take these as metaphors for the idea that God commanded the world into existence, and some process executed that command.

In recent years, with the advance of AI and the simulation hypothesis, we can see a more legible metaphor for modern readers. AI has now advanced to the point where speaking is enough to create a virtual image or movie. This happens because the spoken word is considered a prompt, which is fed to AI generation platforms such as *MidJourney, Grok, Google Veo 3*, and others, and realistic looking videos are generated as the output. As mentioned earlier, the realistic nature of these videos, perhaps unimaginable only a few years ago, shows the intersection of 'Prompt Theory' as a part of the simulation hypothesis and parallels with the older spiritual concept of God speaking to create the world.

Can speaking also be used to create not just realistic images and flat video, but an actual three-dimensional virtual world that can be explored? Here we may be once again delving into what seems like science fiction. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the Holodeck was introduced in the first season ('The Big Goodbye', 1988), a fully immersive room that could simulate any physical environment, complete with AI characters that seemed realistic, even to the touch. This device was used in many subsequent episodes and in the Star Trek series, including *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993-1999), *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), with the lore expanded in the prequel series *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* (2022-present). The mechanism for programming the computer to create the virtual environment was verbal; it was done by simply speaking one's desires to the computer, and the computer (or rather, the AI) would generate the program or code necessary to produce realistic looking scenery, actors, and objects.

Today's AI programs can already create realistic elements of virtual worlds that you can explore in virtual reality or in a video game. The process started with procedural generation as a shortcut to creating larger virtual worlds in video games. While the map and landscapes of early video games were handcrafted by artists and designers, procedural generation allowed for the creation of seemingly infinite worlds and varieties of flora and fauna based on algorithms. This was demonstrated amply by the game *No Man's Sky*; upon release, the game had eighteen quintillion worlds, all created using procedural generation (Chamary, 2016). This number was too large for the worlds to have been generated by individual artists and designers.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Today's generative AI has come much further, as was demonstrated by Mark Zuckerberg in 2022 (before *ChatGPT* was released) via a demo program called *Builder Bot*. This bot allowed the user to speak to the system, and it would create 3D objects in the virtual world (Malik, 2022). In a widely circulated demo, Zuckerberg asked *Builder Bot* to build first an ocean and then an island, and then to place certain 3D objects like trees, and clouds, etc. The AI obediently provided them, and then the user's avatar and other avatars are able to wander around this newly generated 3D world (*Builder Bot demo*, 2022).

Since then, with generative AI, there have been many updates to the ability of AI to create 3D objects in a virtual world. *Nvidia* has demonstrated the ability to create AI avatars, including those of animals, to populate virtual worlds (Vincent, 2021), and *Roblox* has introduced similar tools to create 3D environments and to populate them (Mulligan, 2024). A number of startups have embarked on building 'smart NPCs', which seem lifelike (Wakefield, 2020; Takahashi, 2023; Wilde, 2023; Kawasaki, no date), combining LLMs like *ChatGPT* with virtual bodies/avatars which can wander around the virtual world and interact with players. Moreover, recently AI has advanced to creating entire worlds based on prompts which can be explored. Google's *Genie 3* engine, released in 2025, makes it possible to describe a prompt and the AI creates a photorealistic virtual world that can be explored (Peters, 2025).

We see with the advance of AI technology and consideration of the simulation hypothesis, that we now have an updated technoscientific metaphor which can realise the possibility of a Creator speaking or commanding an entire world into existence, complete with lifelike vegetation, animals, and characters.

Even the notion of time within the creation story of the Bible can be seen metaphorically, describing some cycles or days from outside the virtual world, which do not correspond to days within a virtual world. It is important to note that from the point of view of being inside a simulation, time is not necessarily correlated with time outside the simulation. This also makes legible the idea that God may have created the world in six 'days', if the 'days' are viewed as 'periods' of time, or as mentioned in the earlier verses from the Quran some longer period from our perspective. In a computer program, there is a clock speed, and it is possible to simulate days, weeks, months, years or even decades in what might seem like a relatively minor period of time – seconds, minutes, hours or days for those outside the simulation.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

If we consider both the use of prompts to have AI generate entire worlds to be a more accurate description of the metaphor of God speaking, and the use of the word 'days' to be metaphorical rather than referring to literal Earth days, then we now have a complete parallel of the spiritual concept of the creation of the world by a Creator in a modern context, with AI and the simulation hypothesis.

4.4 The scroll of deeds, recording angels, and virtual reality

As discussed earlier, the simulation hypothesis parallels the idea that we are in a type of 'game' or at the very least, a 'temporary' world (the 'here' vs. the 'hereafter'). A common spiritual concept across various religious traditions is the idea that our actions in the 'temporary' world, the game of life, affect where we end up after this life is over.

In the Abrahamic traditions, there is the idea that we will end up in heaven or hell (or, in some sects, in a third place, a purgatory). Even the names and characteristics of these 'locations', if we can call them that, are similar. Heaven is referred to as the Garden of Eden (*Gan Eden*) in the Jewish traditions. In the Islamic tradition, *Al Jannah*, the term for heaven, is a derivative of the ordinary *jannah*, which literally translates to garden (Rehmatullah, no date). The word for hell in the Jewish traditions, *Gehinnom*, is closely tied to the Arabic, *Jahannam,* both derived from the Greek name for a valley where fire rituals were performed (Reynolds, 2020), alluding to the idea of hellfire.

While doing a detailed analysis of the differences in the afterlife between these traditions is not in the scope of this paper, the idea of an afterlife, of a hereafter, based on some judgement or evaluation of the performance of the player in a game, has its parallels in the simulation hypothesis. In a video game, it is possible to record everything that happens inside a game, and it is possible to view the recording after the game session has been played when one has completed the game. In a virtual reality headset, this would involve taking off the headset. At the core of this new metaphor is that all of our deeds are being recorded, and this spiritual concept seems to be present in many religious traditions using older metaphors.

While religions may differ on the criteria used for the afterlife (and some disagree on whether we will end up in another life based on our action), nevertheless we find a similar concept expressed in metaphors across sects and religious lines. In many traditions, there is an accounting that is done of our deeds, typically expressed in the form of a book or a set of records (often by one or more recorders), and then there is some type of judgement that is

  ISSN: 2057-2301

based on this record. This core idea that all of our deeds are being recorded is a technoscientific metaphor in and of itself, using the technoscientific metaphor of a book, complete with an entity, a recording angel or an accountant, completing this task for us. These metaphors parallel an updated, perhaps more complete metaphor that is provided by the simulation hypothesis, as we will see in this section.

This spiritual idea is expressed in the New Testament in multiple places, two examples are:

> And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works (Revelation 20:12) (*King James Version, Pure Cambridge Edition*, 1900).

> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10) (*King James Version, Pure Cambridge Edition*, 1900).

Here we see clearly the metaphors of angels and books as being an integral part of the judgement process. A recording angel, often identified as Gabriel in the Judeo-Christian traditions, is assigned to write in the 'books' of what each person has done, for good or evil. Eventually, they end up in the Book of Life, a record of who is allowed to be admitted into Heaven. Within popular Christian mythology, another angel, St. Peter stands at the gates of Heaven to let in those who are admitted and to keep out those who are not, based on what is in the book.

While they are alluded to in the Old and New Testaments, the metaphor of recording angels writing down deeds are more explicit in Islam. There are two angels, Raqib and Atid, collectively referred to as the *kiramin kitabin*, or recording angels, who write down a person's good or bad deeds into the Scroll of Deeds.

> Since the two scribes are sitting on each of his shoulders, he does not utter a word which is not recorded immediately by the watchful scribes, Raqib and Atid (50:17-18) (Surah Qaf) (Sarwar, 2020).

> When the two angels meet together, sitting one of the right, and one on the left, not a word he utters, but by him is an observer ready (50:17-18) (Surah Qaf) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

What is the purpose of these recording angels? Once again, it is to be judged on the day of Judgement, or Al Qiyamah in Islam, as expressed in the next verse of Surah Qaf:

> The agony of death will reach the human being as a matter of all truth and he [the human being] will be told, 'This is what you had been trying to run away from' (50:19) (Sarwar, 2020).

And in Surah Al-Asra, we see more explicitly the nature of this Scroll of Deeds as applies to the idea of a judgement:

> We have made every person's destiny [actions] cling to his neck. On the Day of Judgment, We will bring forth the record of his actions in the form of a wide-open book (17:13). We will tell him, 'Read it and judge for yourself' (17:14) (Sarwar, 2020).

> And [for] every man We have fastened his omen upon his neck, and We shall bring it forth for him on the Day of Resurrection as a book he will meet wide open. 'Read Your Book! On this Day, your soul suffices as a reckoner against you.' (17:13-14) (Naṣr *et al.*, 2015)

We also see here the idea of judgement, but in this case, the book is open, and the person must see their own deeds, since 'your own self is sufficient as a reckoner against you this day,' implying that the judgement may not be entirely external.

Within Hinduism, we also see a metaphorical description of a similar nature, though in this case, the judgement may not be about an eternal heaven or eternal hell, but about where they spend the next few lives, taking into account the person's karma from their actions in the previous life. This metaphor is expressed as Chitragupta, the recordkeeper, or accountant, who sits next to Yama, the God of Death (Klostermaier, 2014, p. 106). Although a minor character in the pantheon, Chitragupta is needed as a recordkeeper to ensure that Yama does not make mistakes in where he sends particular souls. Being a recordkeeper or accountant once again implies that Chitragupta is writing down the deeds that we do in some kind of registry, which has been identified as *agrasandhani*, 'the book which Yama … keeps in which all the virtuous and sinful actions of men are recorded' ("Agrasandhani", no date).

Here we see similar metaphors being used across not just different traditions, but across swaths of religious tributaries. I would submit once again that the book and accounting are

  ISSN: 2057-2301

technoscientific metaphors and a way for laypersons to understand a spiritual concept, that there is a record of their deeds, that there is some recorder, and that there is some kind of judgement that is made based on these actions, which will determine what happens next.

Even laypersons from several thousands of years ago might understand that this was not meant to be a physical book. Similarly, I would submit that the angels themselves in these cases (along with minor figures like Chitragupta), were also meant metaphorically. Even the laity of the day may question whether a single conscious angel (Gabriel) or recordkeeper (Chitragupta) or two recording angels per person (resulting in a very large number of angels), were keeping track of a vast scope of human actions and actors across the world. We also see here that angels in this case (and the minor god Chitragupta) are actually *functions that are being performed*, and the personality of the angel is a metaphor for the underlying function.

However, in the simulation hypothesis, we can see the same underlying spiritual concept brought forward to an updated, more plausible metaphor: that the recording angels are simply *processes* running on a cloud server, and their goal is to record everything that happens in a kind of database. Moreover, today we can record a 3D video game play session and replay it, and so there is not the need to assume that only words are in the Scroll of Deeds, but an actual record of the deeds themselves and their consequences. Moreover, for a person to 'be their own reckoner' they can see these deeds being replayed, as in a virtual reality.

There is another more modern version of this spiritual concept that also can be brought into the virtual reality umbrella. These are reports from Near Death Experiencers, NDE'rs, some percentage of which have reported a life review, one of the stages identified by Moody in his ground breaking study of NDEs, *Life After Life* (2015/1975). The life review has been described by some as a comprehensive review, which involves not only seeing but also feeling the events of your life from the other person's point of view, and even seeing and contemplating the 'ripple effects' of your actions. One description of the life review was given by Dannion Brinkley, a NDEr who was studied by Moody and later wrote, *Saved by the Light,* coauthored with Paul Perry.

> I began to relive my entire life, one incident at a time. In what I call the panoramic life review, I watched my life from a second person point of view. As I experienced this I was myself as well as every other person with whom I had ever interacted (Brinkley, no date).

  ISSN: 2057-2301

At other times, Brinkley and others have described the life review as 'holographic' in that it seemed to have been projected all around them. From this, we can conclude that the life review is in fact a more modern description of the underlying spiritual concepts discussed earlier in this section, the Scroll of Deeds and the Day of Judgement.

Once again, if this is happening in a physical world there would be no physical mechanism to recreate any incident from any point in life, as well to recreate and re-experienced the ripple effects of one's actions, going even beyond what one has observed directly. However, with virtual reality and the simulation hypothesis, we now have a technoscientific metaphor which provides both a way to explain these underlying concepts to modern audiences, but also provides a plausible mechanism which could explain these phenomena. While I would not attempt to discern whether virtual reality is the actual mechanism for a life review or for recording angels, it seems to provide both a parallel and perhaps a more descriptive metaphor than those which are available to us from ancient scriptures.

5. Discussion and conclusion

These four spiritual concepts, and their corresponding metaphors, were chosen from many possible aspects of scripture, across multiple religious faiths, to demonstrate a key aspect of my central argument: that religious traditions use metaphors, and often technoscientific ones in particular, to communicate concepts which may be non-physical and ineffable. These four spiritual concepts (other categorisations or demarcations of spiritual concepts are possible), fit particularly well with the idea of the simulation hypothesis as an updated technoscientific metaphor for the modern world. The modern technoscientific metaphors which I am comparing the ancient ones to include AI, virtual reality, video games, etc. This was not meant to be an exhaustive list of concepts, nor was it meant to explore each of the concepts mentioned in complete detail.

In looking at the first concept, that the world is an illusion or a kind of dream or a kind of play, we see that different metaphors were used in different faiths to express this underlying idea that the world is a hoax. Similarly, as to the second concept, the relationship of the soul to the body have been expressed in many different (and sometimes extremely similar) metaphors across faiths and across sects of the same faith traditions. The same is true of the creation of the world, as well as the recording of deeds and the granting of judgement based on this recording, with metaphors of angels and books.

  ISSN: 2057-2301

Why should metaphors such as these, which would have been clear to those in the past and still apply today (after all, everyone understands dreams and illusions), need to be updated?

I would argue that updating these metaphors could serve multiple purposes:

1. to provide more accurate metaphors which may allow the laity (and the clergy) to have a more subtle and or detailed understanding of the underlying spiritual concept being represented,

2. to be more legible to modern aspirants (particularly younger generations), and

3. to provide incentive for those who might otherwise dismiss old spiritual texts as not being relevant in a world that is dominated by science and technology.

A fourth purpose, which I mentioned earlier, but is not central to my argument, is to show a technoscientific mechanism which could account for something whose only explanation has been 'it is divine'. Providing a potential mechanism within the metaphor can prove appealing in an age where, according to Gallup (a company known for its worldwide opinion polls), attendance at religious services are down (Jones, 2024). It can also help to point at the possible ontological reality of spiritual concepts and principles. While this additional purpose may not be necessary for the fervently faithful, it might help to bolster those who are wavering or likely to dismiss religion altogether to take some of these spiritual concepts more seriously, hinting even for scientists and atheists that it is possible there is something beyond the physical world.

As I have stated, I believe the updating of metaphors is an on-going process, at least within certain faiths. In an example of updating metaphors was the example of Swami Yogananda, who, when he arrived in the US in 1920, was one of the first popular Hindu swamis to emigrate and live in the US, teaching about Vedic ideas such as *maya, yoga, karma*, to a modern Christian audience. In his bestselling book, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Yogananda and Evans-Wentz, 1993), Yogananda revealed that when he contemplated the nature of suffering in the world (spurred by his witnessing scenes of deaths in World War I), he was given a new metaphor to use: that of a motion picture or film. This was an updated technoscientific metaphor that Yogananda would use throughout his life. More specifically, he made the point that we are all like characters in a film who suffer, but the actors playing those roles do not necessarily suffer. Moreover, he turned this metaphor into a yogic technique: aspirants should look away from the screen and look towards the light of the film projector, which he compared

  ISSN: 2057-2301

to God. In this way, he was continuing a tradition of using the latest technology to describe the ancient concepts like *maya,* the *leela*, but also of incarnation and karma. Finally, he was providing a metaphor for the search for enlightenment itself, as shown by scenes in the documentary film, *Awake: The Life of Yogananda* (2014), about the swami's life in the US. It is interesting to note that this was a new technology metaphor that could not have been used a few decades earlier, but it was one that made perfect sense to his modern, American audience, who were becoming used to going to the cinema.

I would propose that the simulation hypothesis is an updated metaphor, based on computers and video games, that serves a similar goal. As I have written previously, this particular metaphor can lead to a deeper understanding of a concept like *maya*, while adding details and intricacies which bring out questions not only of suffering, but free will and determinism. The NPC vs. RPG versions of the simulation hypothesis also accentuate this mix of free will vs. determinism, and how we make our choices in life, as well as shedding light on how those choices are recorded and how we might have to answer for them (Virk, 2023).

It is possible that many years and decades hence, newer, more sophisticated technoscientific metaphors will arise, which can be adapted to explain the underlying spiritual concepts discussed here. Until then, simulation theory in general, and video games in particular, may provide the latest and best metaphor for the cosmology described across many of the world's leading religious traditions, while staying faithful to the meanings they were trying to convey.

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Reyhab Mohmed Patel is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Carleton University. Her research explores how Muslim digital artists use artificial intelligence and speculative aesthetics to challenge Islamophobia and reimagine religious experience. She is also a scholar-artist with a Master's in Fashion from Toronto Metropolitan University and serves as the Community Director (Canada) for MIPSTERZ. Her work bridges digital religion, Muslim futurism, and visual storytelling to explore how marginalized communities use technology to archive memory, express spirituality, and envision new futures.

Dr Rizwan Virk

A graduate of MIT and Stanford, Rizwan Virk is a computer scientist, venture capitalist, bestselling author and video game industry pioneer. He was the founder of *Play Labs @ MIT*. Recently, he successfully defended his doctoral dissertation at Arizona State University's College of Global Futures, and teaches at ASU's Fulton Schools of Engineering. His research on technoscientific narratives, science fiction and innovation was done at the Center for Science and the Imagination at ASU. He is the bestselling author of *The Simulation Hypothesis, The Simulated Multiverse, Startup Myths & Models, Wisdom of a Yogi,* and *Zen Entrepreneurship*. He has appeared on the world's largest podcasts, including The Joe Rogan Experience and Armchair Expert, and has written for many publications, including for NBC News, CNN, Scientific American, The Telegraph, TechCrunch and FastCompany.

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